



FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS
ASIA & PACIFIC

A YEAR OF FEMINIST CRISIS RESPONSE IN AFGHANISTAN

AUGUST 2022

Illustrations by Yalda Yaqubi

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JUST AROUND A YEAR AGO, in August 2021, we at Urgent Action Fund Asia and Pacific, truly understood the reason for our existence. When the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan, throwing its people and financial systems into disarray, we plunged right into the kind of crisis that we were set up for.

As international aid organisations and other non-profits with offices and staff across Afghanistan began security assessments, we were already mobilising money and moving resources needed to evacuate women and non-binary defenders facing most immediate threats. We were one of the first funds to successfully move money directly into the hands of activists and defenders in not just Kabul but other provinces of Afghanistan. And over the following months, we continued to build on our successes, with unwavering support from a trusting network of advisors, partner organisations and the advice and support of UAF A&P's Board and the larger funding ecosystem.

And now a year into offering grants in Afghanistan, we realise it's time to rethink our crisis response, and step back to re-strategise where we can be more effective as a rapid response fund.

In 11 months, from September 2021 to the end of July 2022, we raised over two million US dollars for Afghanistan response alone and disbursed around 2.4mn US dollars, in the form of 523 grants. These grants supported more than two thousand Afghan women and non-binary defenders, their families and communities, ensuring their safety, security and survival during this period.

Along the way, we documented some lessons we learnt. We are hopeful that a collective feminist response, which builds on the crises response we led, will ensure that voices of women, girls and non-binary communities are not drowned out by the Taliban regime.



WHAT DID WE DO?

Recognised Survival as Political Resistance

We collapsed delineation of human rights and humanitarian crises, and blurred binaries that often exist only in the funding world. We realised that our pre-crisis definition of human rights defenders was too narrow and overlooked communities of women and non-binary defenders under direct threat from the Taliban. So we expanded our definition, to encompass defenders working in fields other than civil and political rights activism, to uphold human rights and values. As a result, teachers and journalists, queer and disability activists and indigenous leaders who reached out to us, were supported with security and well-being grants. Survival of defenders is foremost an act of political resistance to oppression.

Listening to them and centering their needs helped us decide how and where to channel funding with urgency and care - a lesson we hope funders returning to support humanitarian aid and redevelopment in Afghanistan will heed. We will continue to advocate for women and non-binary communities to be included in all work and decision-making that affects their lives and livelihoods.

The Changing Nature of Crisis and Our Role

Across 2021, our grant-making figures in Afghanistan showed that the bulk of our support was used for relocation, securing passports and access to safe countries to await asylum, and for expenses incurred to move families to safety. In the initial months of turmoil, only 7% of requests were for living expenses. By early 2022, that tide changed dramatically. 50% of our grant requests by April 2022 sought living expenses support. And the number of grants we were processing month-on-month averaged about 50 requests, with a record 82 grant approvals recorded in February 2022 alone.

Our persistent year-long response was made possible by the networks of solidarity and care forged with our Afghan advisors, their organisations on the ground, and our peer donors. They undertook the risky due-diligence and coordination to ensure funds reached defenders in need, in a timely and safe manner. We also constantly revised processes that were time-consuming or stress-inducing for defenders and communities, even when it took a bigger toll on our small team.

We realised we were fighting unimaginable odds, as request for resources for safe relocation (77%) and supporting living expenses (22%) kept on mounting. Only 1% of total resources we gave out as grants were used for medical care or treatment, or actions to establish a resilience plan, or for wellness & self-care.



Advocating through Feminist Coalitions and Collectives

Going beyond our established mandate of grant-making stretched our small team to its limits, but we worked with feminist coalitions and collectives, such as the Feminist Advocacy for Afghanistan and other peer donor spaces to help defenders convene safely, be seen and heard and receive international solidarity and care. The larger feminist ecosystem that sprung into action was largely self-organised – they mobilised resources to support those stuck in Afghanistan but also to organise overnight evacuations, visas and asylum advocacy. However, by early 2022, we observed that grant requests were rising disproportionately to resources available for supporting Afghanistan.



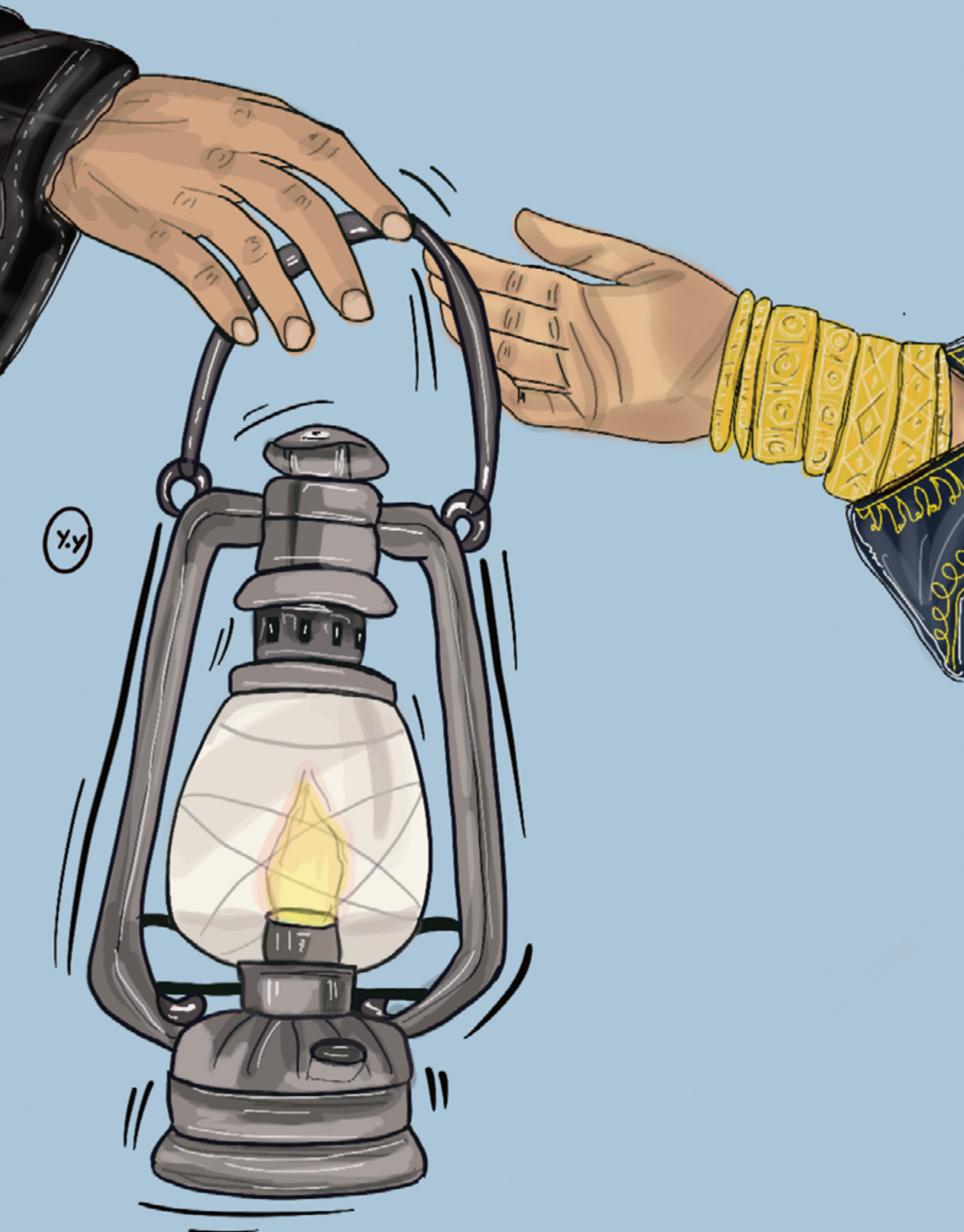
WHAT WE KNOW NOW?

Time to Pass the Baton on

We remain committed to supporting the security and well-being needs of Afghanistan's women and non-binary human rights defenders, and will continue to process grant requests that seek assistance for continuing activism or to secure the resilience of movements. However, we are stepping back from our crisis response mode in Afghanistan.

“We will continue to work with defenders and communities on the ground to review emerging needs”

A year on, the context in Afghanistan has changed. We are cognisant that as a rapid response grantmaker, we discharged our role as first responders to crisis well. It's now time to pass the baton on to international development organisations and aid agencies, and step back from Afghanistan crisis response. We will continue to work with defenders and communities on the ground to review emerging needs and strategise on what role we could play in this changed terrain and context.



Working with Emotional Discomfort

We did not take this decision lightly. UAF A&P recognises the increasing number of women and non-binary defenders who are at risk and need support in Afghanistan - Denying applications takes a huge emotional and psychological toll on our team members, who engage with the lived realities of applicants. However, we are also struggling to match our mandate and the available resources we have, with the needs we are being asked to support.

The overwhelming needs of Afghanistan were front and centred through the last year, but as a regional fund we need to ensure that we have resources to support defenders from all regions of Asia and the Pacific. In times of emotional discomfort and distress, we have relied on our feminist values and transparent communication to offer a realistic picture of our abilities and limitations.

Need for New Livelihood Support and Skills Building

We are heartened that Afghan women and non-binary defenders also realise that living expenses support is not sustainable or a long-term solution. "We don't need to be offered fish, but taught how to fish," remarked a grantee as we sat together virtually to identify ways to continue support to activists and defender communities who were rendered jobless, and with no recourse to educational or economic opportunities. They acknowledge that international support is now needed to help them devise ways to upgrade their existing skills and find new ways of livelihood support.

What We Commit To Do

- From 1 September 2022, we will prioritise our team's capacity and ability to process applications, and prioritise applications that are aligned with our core mandate as a rapid response feminist fund.
- We will continue to advocate for, and raise resources for Afghan women and non-binary human rights defenders by partnering with other feminist funds, and women's funds in our global ecosystem.
- We will continue to design and facilitate convenings to provide safe spaces for Afghan women and non-binary defenders to reflect and ideate on their self and collective care, and path to resilience.
- We will continue to amplify the voices of Afghan women and non-binary defenders to be seen and heard, and narrate their stories of resistance and resilience, and find more global platforms for them to continue feminist advocacy and movement building.



