



Susana Klein

# Leaders for change: why support women's rights organisations?

Emily Esplen, Womankind Worldwide

**"In a patriarchal society, it is extremely difficult for women to be heard, so it is important that women come together. Unless they act together, no-one is going to hear them. They find security and strength in each other's experiences."**

Bandana Rana, Director of Saathi, Nepal

# Foreword

**“While there is more money out there for women and girls, it is not reaching women's rights organisations.”**

Recent years have seen increasing attention to women and girls from development actors. Powerful institutions such as the World Bank have championed women as ‘agents of change’. For the first time in 2012 the World Bank’s World Development Report focused exclusively on gender equality. Private foundations such as the Gates Foundation and Nike Foundation, bilateral donor agencies including Norway, Sweden, Spain, the Netherlands and the UK, and large international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), have all expanded their focus on women and girls<sup>2</sup>.

This spotlight has acted as an impetus to expand funding commitments on gender equality and women’s rights. However, women’s rights organisations are often unable to tap into these new funding opportunities<sup>3</sup>.

Just 1.3% of all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) screened funds dedicated to gender equality in the 2010 budget went to women’s rights organisations<sup>4</sup> and ministries.

A global survey of 1119 women’s organisations from over 140 countries by the Association of Women’s Rights in

Development (AWID) in 2011 found that only one-tenth of the organisations received funding from bilateral, national governments and INGOs<sup>5</sup>. Only 6.9% received funding from UN Women and only 3% from corporate funds.

So while there is more money out there for women and girls, it is not reaching women’s rights organisations.

This situation makes it difficult for women’s rights organisations to undertake the longer-term structural work essential to shifting gender power relations. It also prevents them from developing their organisational capacity and independent political agenda or strategy. Instead their energy and resources are directed towards delivering short-term projects that often reflect the priorities of donors rather than constituents’ needs, and which are unsustainable in the longer-term<sup>6</sup>.

This brief seeks to increase recognition of the unique and essential roles that women’s rights organisations and movements play in advancing gender equality and women’s rights around the world. It makes the case for increasing funding to southern women’s rights organisations and explores promising donor practices being used to achieve this.

## Why support women’s rights organisations?

**“Supporting women’s rights organisations... to make change and build strong and inclusive social movements is the most effective mechanism for ensuring sustainable change in the lives of women and girls.”**

UK Department for International Development Theory of Change for Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls, 2012<sup>7</sup>

National governments hold ultimate responsibility for promoting and protecting women’s rights. But sustainable change requires governments and donors to work in partnership with the primary stakeholders of efforts to achieve gender

equality and women’s rights – women and women’s rights organisations<sup>8</sup>.

Women’s rights organisations, defined as women-led organisations working to advance gender equality and women’s rights, comprise a huge spectrum and diversity. Some operate primarily at the grassroots level and have a strong connection with communities. Others are active in advocacy and accountability work at national, regional and international levels. Many are self-led organisations – for example, of rural women, farm workers, women living in urban slum areas, domestic workers, migrants, indigenous women, Dalit women, sex workers, disabled women,

2. Alpizar, L., Clark, C., Rosenhek, S. and Vidal, V. 2010. Context and Trends Influencing the Funding Landscape for Gender Equality and Women’s Organizations and Movements, Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID)

3. Ibid

4. Tolmay, S. 2012. Financing For Gender Equality: Rhetoric Versus Real Financial Support, Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID)

5. Pittman, A., Arutyunova, A., Vidal Degiorgis, V and Shaw, A. 2012. 2011 AWID Global Survey: Where is the Money for Women’s Rights, Association of Women’s Rights in Development

6. Castillejo, C. 2011. ‘Building a State that Works for Women: Integrating Gender into Post-Conflict State Building’, Working Paper 107, FRIDE

7. DFID, 2012, How To Note: A Theory of Change for Tackling Violence against Women and Girls

8. Women’s rights organisations are women-led organisations with a strong commitment to gender equality and advancing women’s rights

women living with HIV, lesbians, transwomen.

History has shown that women's rights organisations and movements are a vital catalyst for gender equality and the realisation of women's rights<sup>9</sup>. Over and over again, in all different contexts, women have realised the necessity of organising autonomously in order to raise their concerns and achieve change. Women's rights organisations can empower and mobilise women, including the poorest and most marginalised, to come together to know and claim their rights. Especially in the case of self-led women's organisations, they also have a solid base in the daily realities of women's and girls' lives and the legitimacy to speak on behalf of women and represent their concerns and priorities in a way that mainstream (non-gender focused) organisations lack<sup>10</sup>.

Of course not all women's rights organisations are exemplary. Many lack capacity, for example in areas such as monitoring and evaluation, administration, organisational development, advocacy and fundraising. Some are led by elite women who have little connection to grassroots communities. Some can be quite conservative in their approach, for example promoting agendas focused on traditional gender roles and family reunification.

However, by selecting partners with proven commitment to women's rights, and building their capacity where required, partnerships with women's rights organisations can enable donor agencies and international NGOs to:

- support existing local agendas for women's rights rather than setting agendas from the outside that don't necessarily reflect the priorities of women themselves;
- connect with and support the needs of grassroots women, including those in remote areas who are least able to make their priorities heard<sup>11</sup>;
- draw on women's rights organisations as a source of knowledge and expertise for policy dialogue and decision-making on aid distribution and management;

- ensure that they invest sustainably in those organisations with the ability to tackle root causes of inequality and catalyse long-term shifts in the status quo. This is an intensely political project that needs to be locally driven<sup>12</sup>.

This brief shows why it is so vital to support women's rights organisations. It is based on existing research and evidence from the literature as well as the learning of Womankind's partners and programmes around the world.

#### Creating spaces for women to see themselves and their situation differently

**"By getting together, becoming united, by becoming members [of Sagtagram] we have learnt. When we were by ourselves, there was no unity. Now everyone is together. There are 20 members here: can anyone's husband come here to beat her?"**

Jamuna, a member of Sagtagram, a landless women's organisation in rural Bangladesh<sup>13</sup>

Strong women's organisations and movements play a critical role in creating spaces for women and girls to come together, analyse their situation and how it could be improved, and realise that the injustices they experience are also experienced by others, are structural, and can be challenged<sup>14</sup>.

Research by the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Programme shows that relationships fostered in the spaces created by women's rights organisations often bring about the kind of changes associated with empowerment – growth in self-confidence, acquisition of new capabilities and consciousness about gender injustice, and capacity to act collectively to demand rights<sup>15</sup>. These are an essential precondition to women starting to challenge this injustice in their everyday lives<sup>16</sup>.

Nurturing stronger relationships between women also strengthens their ability to respond to threats and feel safer in their communities<sup>17</sup>. This in turn makes it more likely that women will have the confidence and support necessary to challenge the status quo and respond to the backlash that invariably follows. For example, Womankind

9. Htun, M. and Weldon, L. 2012. 'The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence against Women in Global Perspective, 1975–2005', *American Political Science Review*, Cambridge University Press and the American Political Science Association

10. However it is important to recognise that women's rights organisations are not necessarily representative of all women – they may be led by elite women with little connection to grassroots communities, for example. Care is therefore needed in determining which organisations to partner with.

11. Women's Resource Centre, 2011, *Hidden Value: Demonstrating the Extraordinary Impact of Women's Voluntary and Community Organisations*

12. O'Connell, H., *Forthcoming*, What added value do organisations that are led and managed by women and girls bring to work addressing the rights, needs and priorities of women and girls?, prepared for Comic Relief

13. Kabeer, N. and Huq, L. 2010 *The Power of Relationships: Love and Solidarity in a Landless Women's Organisation in Rural Bangladesh*. *IDS Bulletin*, 41: 79–87

14. O'Connell, H., *Forthcoming*, What added value do organisations that are led and managed by women and girls bring to work addressing the rights, needs and priorities of women and girls?, prepared for Comic Relief

15. *Pathways of Women's Empowerment* (2012) *Empowerment: A Journey Not a Destination*, Brighton: Pathways of Women's Empowerment

16. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and Instituto Promundo, 2010, *Evolving Men: Initial Results of the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES)*

17. Bruce, J. and Hallman, K. 2008. 'Reaching the Girls Left Behind', *Gender and Development*, 16:2, 227–245; The Population Council, 2010, *Girl Centred Programme Design: A Toolkit to Develop, Strengthen and Expand Adolescent Girls Program*

and ActionAid research on women's role in peacebuilding – From the Ground Up – showed that being a member of a women's group helped women have more influence in building peace and offered them a greater degree of protection and support<sup>18</sup>. Having a safe space and social support network is particularly critical for women and girls suffering violence, when it may be a matter of life or death<sup>19</sup>.

### Mobilising women to claim their rights and become advocates for gender justice

**“Women's organisations are unique in their ability to support, mobilise and inspire women and seek to establish long term solutions to the challenges they face.”**

Women's Resource Centre 2011: 10<sup>20</sup>

Central to the strategies of many women's rights organisations is an emphasis on mobilising women to know and claim their rights at all levels: in the home, in the community and from formal state institutions and structures. By acting as an intermediary between formal institutions and communities, they can demystify legal instruments that otherwise seem abstract and out of reach for the majority of women.

For example, in **Uganda**, Isis-Wicce builds the capacity of women survivors of sexual violence to use United Nations resolution 1325 and related resolutions to hold local and national governments accountable. Over 1,000 women have been trained to date and many have gone on to become community and national advocates for women's rights and peace.

Women's civil society activism also provides a platform for women to enter formal politics without having to come up through political parties. Research by FRIDE<sup>21</sup> found that, in **Sierra Leone**, the majority of women parliamentarians and councillors interviewed had gained visibility as civil society leaders before moving into formal political spaces<sup>22</sup>.

In **Afghanistan**, Womankind's partner, the Afghan Women's Resource Centre (AWRC), has been supporting the creation of women's committees in local communities where it is still rare to encounter women in decision-making positions. AWRC supported

a number of women to be involved in committees, two of whom became committee leaders. AWRC supported these women to become committee leaders at the district level. Following their experience and the increased access to politics this gave them, they ran for election in parliament and both won seats<sup>23</sup>.

### Spearheading legal and policy change

**“... Security Council Resolution 1325, achieving 30% of women's representation in parliaments, and many other commitments would never have come to pass without the advocacy of a strong women's movement.”**

Joanne Sandler, Deputy Director, UNIFEM, 2006xvii

As well as the emphasis on consciousness-raising and mobilisation, women's rights organisations and movements are vital in building political will and spearheading constitutional, legal and policy reform in favour of women's rights<sup>24</sup>.

Few of the gains made on women's rights in the last 20 years – the landmark Beijing Platform of Action, the recognition of women's rights as human rights, legislative and policy changes at the national level – would have been achieved without the advocacy of women's rights organisations and movements to raise public awareness and pressure governments for change<sup>26</sup>.

In particular, women's rights organisations and movements have taken the lead in advancing core feminist issues on national and international agendas, such as violence against women and girls. This was powerfully demonstrated by the recent findings of a four-decade research effort in 70 countries, which found that the mobilisation of feminist movements is more important for combating violence against women than the wealth of nations, left-wing political parties, or the number of women politicians.<sup>27</sup>

There are abundant examples of the success of women's rights organisations in lobbying for reform of legal systems and frameworks. In **Bolivia**, when the country's first indigenous President came to power in 2006, women's rights organisations formed

18. Womankind Worldwide, ActionAid UK and the Institute of Development Studies. 2012. From the Ground Up: Women's Roles in Local Peacebuilding in Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sierra Leone

19. O'Connell, H., Forthcoming, What added value do organisations that are led and managed by women and girls bring to work addressing the rights, needs and priorities of women and girls?, prepared for Comic Relief

20. Women's Resource Centre, 2011, Hidden Value: Demonstrating the Extraordinary Impact of Women's Voluntary and Community Organisations

21. [http://www.fride.org/homepage\\_english](http://www.fride.org/homepage_english)

22. Castillejo, C. 2011. 'Building a State that Works for Women: Integrating Gender into Post-Conflict State Building', Working Paper 107, FRIDE

23. Womankind Worldwide, ActionAid UK and the Institute of Development Studies. 2012. From the Ground Up: Women's Roles in Local Peacebuilding in Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sierra Leone

24. Kerr, J, 2007, The Second Fundher Report: Financial Sustainability for Women's Movement Worldwide, Association for Women's Rights in Development

25. UN Women, 2012, Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls, Bangkok, Thailand, 17-20 September 2012

26. Ibid; UN Women, 2011, Progress of the World's Women 2011-2012: In Pursuit of Justice, New York: UN Women

27. Htun, M. and Weldon, L. 2012. 'The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence against Women in Global Perspective, 1975-2005', American Political Science Review, Cambridge University Press and the American Political Science Association

a diverse alliance to lobby for a new constitution that reflected their priorities. They consulted with 30,000 women across the country before drawing up proposals for the Constituent Assembly – the body responsible for overseeing and drafting the constitution. In 2009, Bolivians voted in a new constitution which enshrined the principles of equal opportunity, non-discrimination, equity and affirmative action and gave much greater political rights to women and indigenous peoples<sup>28</sup>.

Other examples of success include the Domestic Violence Legislation in **Ghana**, passed due to mass mobilisation by women's rights coalitions such as "Sisters Keepers" and the National Coalition on Domestic Violence Legislation<sup>29</sup>. Another win was the campaign for ratification and implementation of the **Maputu Protocol**<sup>30</sup> by the NGO coalition Solidarity for African Women's Rights<sup>31</sup>.

Women's rights organisations have often been especially influential in post-conflict contexts, where they can play a key role in the development of new laws and constitutions and lobbying for women's participation in formal peace processes and political settlements. For instance, in **Nepal** the Women's Alliance for Peace, Power, Democracy and the Constituent Assembly were instrumental in securing the one-third quota for women in the parliamentary elections of 2008, as well as in the development of Nepal's National Action Plan on the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

### Holding governments accountable

Women's rights organisations also play a critical accountability role – monitoring implementation of legislation and seeking redress in cases of state negligence<sup>32</sup>.

In **Bangladesh**, for example, while various laws had been passed to address violence against women, they had not been adequately enforced and services remained inadequate. In response, the women's rights organisation Naripokkho implemented a project on Monitoring State Interventions to Combat Violence Against Women, which assessed the process of lodging a complaint,

investigation, prosecution and medical services<sup>34</sup>. The presence of third party observers has made service providers more responsive to the needs of women affected by violence and has led to changes in procedures and training<sup>35</sup>.

### Expertise and innovation

The strong track record of women's rights organisations is a reflection of their specialist gender expertise. Many emerged as a direct response to the injustice or abuse that women experience and so have in-depth understanding of the issues and a direct connection to a constituency of women<sup>36</sup>.

Where resources are limited, it does not therefore make sense to fund the work of mainstream organisations at the expense of women's rights organisations which have strong gendered analysis, are a crucial source of knowledge and innovation on women's rights, and whose existence affirms women's leadership and participation<sup>40</sup>.

Women's rights organisations have pioneered many effective models and mechanisms for advancing women's rights, such as women's police stations and family courts, which are now adopted widely by security sector agencies and international bodies.

They have also pioneered models for advancing gender equality and women's rights at the community level<sup>41</sup>.

In **Zambia**, Womankind's partner, Women for Change (WfC), have developed an innovative model of community mobilisation. Using popular education methodologies, gender analysis and human rights education, WfC's animators live and work with rural communities over many years to promote critical reflection on traditional norms and practices. To ensure the sustainability of the work and to build women's leadership from the local level, WfC support communities to organise themselves into associations, led by women, with resources that are managed by women (the treasurer is always a woman).

Recognising the influential role of traditional leaders as 'custodians of culture', WfC has also established a Traditional Leaders Programme that works with Chiefs and Village Headpersons to re-examine and abolish customs that discriminate against

28. Womankind Worldwide, 2009, CEDAW: The 30 Year Struggle for Equality <http://www.womankind.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/2009-CEDAW-the-Thirty-Year-Struggle-for-Equality.pdf>

29. Manuh, T. The Passage of Domestic Violence Legislation in Ghana. Pathways of Women's Empowerment Available at: <http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/>

30. The Maputo Protocol is the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.

31. See the SOAWR website: <http://www.soawr.org/en/> <http://awid.org/News-Analysis/Friday-Files/African-Women-s-Organizing-for-the-Ratification-and-Implementation-of-the-Maputo-Protocol>

32. Sardenberg, C. (2011) 'What makes domestic violence legislation more effective?' Pathways of Women's Empowerment; Pathways of Women's Empowerment (2012) Empowerment: A journey not a destination

33. Sardenberg, C. (2011) 'What makes domestic violence legislation more effective?' Pathways of Women's Empowerment

34. Ibid

35. Ibid

36. O'Connell, H., Forthcoming, What added value do organisations that are led and managed by women and girls bring to work addressing the rights, needs and priorities of women and girls?, prepared for Comic Relief

37. Pathways of Women's Empowerment (2012) Empowerment: A journey not a destination, Brighton: Pathways of Women's Empowerment, available at: <http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/PathwaysSynthesisReport.pdf>

38. Email correspondence with Jessica Horn, Advisor on: Gender and Development Network, 2012, Guidance on Community Programming on VAWG, Department for International Development

39. AusAID, 2008, Violence against Women in Melanesia and East Timor: Building on Global and Regional Promising Approaches

40. Alpizar, L., Clark, C., Rosenhek, S. and Vidal, V. 2010. Context and Trends Influencing the Funding Landscape for Gender Equality and Women's Organizations and Movements, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) <http://www.awid.org/content/download/109528/1254849/file/5%20%20FundHer%20Research%20Update%202010.pdf>

41. DFID, 2012, How To Note: a practical guide to community programming on violence against women and girls

**“There is no shortage of effective models, but they often take time. Due to underfunding of women's rights organisations globally, many organisations have not had the resources to take this work to scale.”**

women including sexual cleansing, wife inheritance, early marriage, and trafficking. What started as a regional initiative within Zambia led to the launch of the Southern African Development Community Council for Traditional Leaders in 2007 across all of southern Africa.

There is no shortage of effective models, but they often take time. Due to underfunding of women's rights organisations globally<sup>43</sup>, in particular a shortage of funding which commits beyond an annual cycle, many organisations have not had the resources needed to take this work to scale<sup>44</sup>.

### Understanding the context

There is no blueprint for promoting women's rights; what works in one context will not necessarily produce the same results elsewhere and what works for one woman will not necessarily work for another. Women's rights organisations have a fuller understanding of the context – including religious and cultural systems and plural legal orders – than external actors. They also have experience of navigating local and national politics and securing the support of those who wield power<sup>45</sup>.

Many countries have plural legal systems which women engage with depending on their particular situation – for instance, seeking informal dispute mediation on some occasions and on others demanding more punitive measures to seek redress. Women's rights organisations understand this and support women to access justice appropriate to their needs and demands. They also have experience of negotiating plural legal systems to women's advantage and appropriating international human rights standards into local practices<sup>46</sup>.

For example, in **Uganda**, the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA-Uganda) initiated dialogue with local community elders in the Acholi districts of northern Uganda to address sexual and gender-based violence, engaging with a legal-cultural institution made up of traditional leaders. This led to the drafting of principles to guide the elders in their future judgements, drawing on international human rights standards<sup>47</sup>. Women's rights organisations also have experience and legitimacy in tackling forms

of violence and discrimination justified by ideas of 'culture' or 'religion'. For example, in **Nigeria**, women's rights organisations have been at the forefront of defending women facing prosecution under Shari'a law for adultery. This includes the case of Amina Lawal which made international headlines in 2003. A coalition of women's rights organisations launched a successful national and local campaign alongside legal arguments, which resulted in charges against Amina Lawal being dropped<sup>48</sup>. Intervention models developed wholly outside a particular context are unlikely to be as effective and may put women at risk of intimidation and violence due to failure to integrate and address locally-relevant risks and community dynamics.

### Connected to communities

**“Socio-cultural, economic and political processes of change cannot be imposed on society solely through government efforts, but must be brought about through change within society itself. We believe that this can be done most effectively with an efficient and effective network of civil society organizations.”**

Robert Dijksterhuis, Head of the Gender Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, responsible for the MDG3 and FLOW Funds (see below)<sup>49</sup>

Women's rights organisations from or with connections to grassroots urban and rural communities play a unique role in service provision, social norm and behaviour change work, and advocacy. They have regular contact with women in their communities and tend to have well-established community-based networks, which include law enforcement and service providers. Womankind's partner in Tanzania, the Women's Legal Aid Centre (WLAC), uses an innovative approach, training women in refugee camps to become paralegals and provide legal services to other refugees. WLAC have found that women are much more comfortable approaching fellow refugees about violence than using services provided by development and humanitarian organisations. WLAC have also built the capacity of law enforcers to respond to violence against women and girls in the

42. Ibid

43. AWID's Where is the Money for Women's Rights Initiative

44. UN Women, 2012, Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls, Bangkok, Thailand, 17-20 September 2012

45. DFID, 2012, How To Note: a practical guide to community programming on violence against women and girls

46. UN Women, 2011, Progress of the World's Women 2011-2012: In Pursuit of Justice, New York: UN Women

47. Ibid

48. see <http://www.wluml.org/node/1163>

49. Kinoti K. 2011. The Centrality of Investing in Women's Rights Organizations and Leadership: the Launch of the Dutch FLOW Fund, AWID



Sandra Calligaro / Picturank

**“Women’s rights organisations wield broad influence – from grassroots organising to advocacy and accountability work – and are uniquely placed to mobilise women to voice their demands for gender justice.”**

camps, including police, immigration officers, social welfare and community development officers, magistrates and camp settlement officers.

### **Transforming the socio-cultural norms that undermine women’s rights**

Working in partnership with women’s rights organisations is essential for governments, donors and other external actors who wish to promote and support transformations in gender norms. To be effective, social norm and behaviour change work must be led by organisations that have a connection to the community and are able and willing to engage over long periods of time<sup>50</sup>. Women’s rights organisations have a clear advantage over other actors (donors, governments, international NGOs, private sector) in doing this kind of long-term empowerment work.

A good example is the work of Womankind’s partner KMG in Ethiopia, which has implemented a highly effective programme to tackle female genital

mutilation (FGM) in the Kembatta Tembaro Zone of Ethiopia. Over ten years, KMG’s work has led to the abandonment of the annual public FGM ritual and a reduction from 97% to just 5% in people who said they would have their daughters cut. Key to KMG’s success has been their efforts to build rapport with communities and secure the backing of traditional and religious leaders.

Women’s rights organisations wield broad influence – from grassroots organising to advocacy and accountability work – and are uniquely placed to mobilise women to voice their demands for gender justice. This is key to building the kind of collective power needed to bring down the structural barriers to women’s equality. Unlike other development actors whose support for gender equality and women’s rights tends to fluctuate as funding trends shift, women’s rights organisations have a long-term commitment which is essential for this deeper, more systemic work needed to shift gender power structures.

50. UN Women Baseline survey on violence against women and peacebuilding: Liberia 2011

# Challenges facing women's rights organisations

**“Only 28% of women's rights organisations surveyed received core funding in 2010.”**

**“Within women's movements and organizations, the struggle for organizational or personal survival, for retaining autonomy while also having to compromise with changing funding policies, and the backlash, in many locations, against feminist agendas, have all taken a toll.”**

Srilatha Batliwala, Scholar Associate with AWID<sup>51</sup>

Despite their enormous added value, many women's rights organisations are struggling to survive in the current aid environment marked by changed aid modalities, increasing competition for funding, and the heavy demands of the 'results agenda'.

## New funding modalities

**“WROs [women's rights organisations] find themselves in unfair competition with often larger organisations to access funding disbursed through modalities that simply have not been designed to take their agendas, ways of working and perspectives into account.”**

Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay and Rosalind Eyben, Royal Tropical Institute and Pathways of Women's Empowerment, 2011: 42

Research by Pathways of Women's Empowerment and the Royal Tropical Institute on the impact of external funding on women's rights organisations shows how the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) fundamentally shifted the terms of the relationship between women's rights organisations and donors<sup>52</sup>. In particular, direct funding from bi-lateral agencies has been replaced by donor pooling of funds and short-term project-based rather than core funding. Women's rights organisations and donor staff interviewed saw these changes as detrimental to efforts to secure socially transformative outcomes.

Likewise, research carried out by AWID since 2006 has consistently demonstrated the precarious financial position of many women's rights organisations as a result of these changing funding trends.

The most recent survey (2011) revealed that:

- 35% of organisations sampled experienced a significant budget shortfall, with one-fifth of organisations facing the threat of closure;
- Across the sample, women's rights organisations were living month to month and had not secured all of their funding for their current fiscal year;
- There was a general trend of fragmented funding, directed toward project rather than core funding and one year grant cycles rather than multiyear commitments;
- Only 28% of women's rights organisations surveyed received core funding in 2010 (funds to support the functioning of the organisation as a whole, including staff salaries and rents, as opposed to project-specific funding) and nearly half had never received core funding.

In the face of fragmented, short-term funding and small amounts of money, women's rights organisations are often unable to scale up innovative models and approaches and build their organisational and operational capacity for the longer-term<sup>53</sup>.

## Fierce competition for funds

Womankind's partners have raised particular concerns about increasing competition for in-country funding between local NGOs and INGOs that has accompanied the decentralisation of many INGOs. They describe how INGOs often access funds and then “sub-contract” local organisations to deliver the work – treating them as contractors rather than change-makers and innovators. These challenges are most acute for women's rights organisations operating at the local level outside of capital cities. Their work tends to be less visible and they are less well rehearsed in speaking ‘donor language’ and meeting bureaucratic funding requirements than their international counterparts<sup>54</sup>. Perspectives from Womankind's partners are shared below.

51. Batliwala, S., 2008, *Changing their World: Concepts and Practices of Women's Movements*, Toronto: AWID

52. Mukhopadhyay, M. and Eyben, R. 2011. *Rights and Resources: the Effects of External Financing on Organising for Women's Rights*, Royal Tropical Institute and Pathways of Women's Empowerment

53. O'Connell, H., forthcoming, *What added value do organisations that are led and managed by women and girls bring to work addressing the rights, needs and priorities of women and girls?*, prepared for Comic Relief

54. Batliwala, S. (2008) *Changing their World: Concepts and Practices of Women's Movements*, Toronto: AWID--



## Perspectives from Womankind's partners

"INGOs compete for funding, resources and advocacy space in country. The space is getting crowded. Local NGOs find it difficult to compete with better equipped and resourced INGOs for profile and networking opportunities with donors...and therefore funds. They often do not know how to 'play the game' as well."

Womankind partner from Zambia

"INGOs went in after the conflict to implement much needed humanitarian and development work but there does not appear to be any exit strategy now that Sierra Leone is at peace. This is suppressing the burgeoning of an

empowered local civil society sector especially in terms of women's rights organisations. Practice shows that where donors or INGOs are supporting local NGOs to implement women's rights programmes they tend to support mainstream organisations rather than women's rights organisations as they feel they have more organisational capacity. This results in a catch 22 as women's rights organisations will continue to be sidelined if they do not receive support from donors to strengthen."

Womankind partner from Sierra Leone

"This creates a lot of tensions and conflicts, but local organisations lose the fight because they are weaker institutionally and are not as well connected in the funding circles as INGOs. So sometimes you hear INGOs say they are supporting capacity building of local NGOs when in fact they are stifling their growth by competing with them."

Womankind partner from Ethiopia

"There is a real risk of reversals in progress on gender equality unless progressive governments, donors and INGOs continue to support women's rights organisations."

### The results agenda

Increasing emphasis on demonstrating results is a challenge for most development organisations but can be particularly challenging for women's rights organisations because of the structural nature of the changes they are seeking. These changes are complex, take time, and are not easy to measure or quantify – such as transforming entrenched social norms, practices and behaviours.

Many women's rights organisations accept the need to effectively and convincingly document the results of their work. They also recognise that being able to effectively apply M&E frameworks and methods will require developing new skills and capacities, and dedicating staff time to this work<sup>55</sup>. However, research by AWID found that the costs of M&E are rarely factored into project costs. Several organisations interviewed said that the information required of them was so extensive that almost an entire staff person was required for the task, but this cost was not built into their grants<sup>56</sup>.

### Backlash against women's organising

At the same time as negotiating the constraints of external financing, women's rights organisations are operating in a deeply precarious geo-political context, marked by the resurgence of fundamentalisms of all kinds, growing political and social conservatism, and related backlash against women's rights agendas and activism<sup>57</sup>. In the face of such opposition there is a real risk of reversals in progress on gender equality unless progressive governments, donors and INGOs continue to support the women's rights organisations all over the world that are spearheading struggles for equality.

55. Batliwala, S. 2011. Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation for Women's Rights: Twelve Insights for Donors, AWID

56. Ibid

57. See <http://www.awid.org/Our-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms>

“Women’s Funds are increasingly significant players and have a critical role in funding organisations considered too small or risky by the mainstream.”

## Innovative funding models

This brief has demonstrated the powerful roles of women’s rights organisations in advancing gender equality and women’s rights in the face of enormous challenges. In recent years, some donors have begun to recognise and support this vital work. This section highlights effective approaches and provides recommendations for donors.

### Women’s Funds

Women’s Funds are increasingly significant players and have a critical role in funding organisations considered too small or risky by the mainstream<sup>58</sup>. There are a number of well-established women’s funds which are experienced in administering grants to local women’s rights organisations<sup>59</sup> – Mama Cash, the Africa Women’s Development Fund, the Global Fund for Women, the Central American Women’s Fund, the Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights, and the Young Feminist Fund FRIDA. There are major benefits to channelling money through women’s funds, summarised

in the box below. Recognising these benefits, several donors have devolved grant-making through women’s funds. These include the Danish International Development Agency (Danida) which has devolved funds through Africa Women’s Development Fund, and Irish Aid which funds the international women’s fund, Mama Cash. Comic Relief also devolves funding through women’s funds as a strategy to extend the reach of their funds to smaller and medium-sized women’s organisations<sup>60</sup>.

### Special donor funds and budget lines

Special donor funds and budget lines dedicated to advancing women’s rights are also being used by some bi-lateral and multi-lateral agencies. For example, the MDG3 and FLOW Funds set up by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands represented a historic commitment to gender equality and women’s empowerment and have provided

### Women’s Funds<sup>61</sup>

- can provide small, flexible grants;
- can support programme expenses as well as projects so that organisations can cover their core costs;
- are increasingly providing multiyear funding, so that organisations can make long-term, sustainable plans for their work;
- allow simplified grants application, monitoring and reporting processes – for example, accepting applications in any language (as is the case with the Urgent Action Fund) and encouraging participatory evaluation processes;
- have strong links with the grassroots level of civil society so that they are able to reach small, remote and minority organisations; and
- are often in touch with non-mainstream groups that may be focusing on issues considered controversial in some countries, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights;
- enable large grant-makers (e.g. bi-lateral donors) to sub-contract the partnership and administrative workload.

### Added value of the MDG3 Fund<sup>63</sup>

MDG3 Fund is an exemplary funding model in that it:

- targets women’s organisations and supports their role in advancing gender equality: 35 of the 45 MDG3 Fund projects were awarded to women’s organisations
- reaches grassroots women’s rights organisations by funding intermediaries with partnerships and close links to grassroots and local women’s organisations and movements. This makes funding accessible to a wider range and scope of women’s organisations. For example, the International Network of Women’s Funds (INWF) and Central American Women’s Funds (CAWF) received a EUR 1 million grant, of which 80% was channelled to small grassroots organisations supporting young women’s efforts to challenge gender inequalities and discrimination
- supports a mix of well-known women’s organisations in addition to lesser-known and newer organisations
- supports organisations to scale up the organising and rights work that they specialise in
- supports core funding, which is critical for women’s organisations to make deeper and more sustainable impacts
- outsources the administration of the fund, making it a realistic model of bilateral funding.

**“Be aware of the tremendous backlash that women's rights organisations can face.”**

strategic support to women's rights organisations in several countries, including core funding<sup>62</sup>. The box below highlights some of the features of the MDG3 Fund which made it such an innovative funding model – one that could be replicated by other donors wishing to act more comprehensively on stated commitments to women's rights.

## Best practice in funding women's rights organisations

In order to deliver on commitments to gender equality and women's rights, donor agencies should increase support to women's rights organisations. Below we highlight best practice in funding for women's rights organisations and provide key recommendations.

- Provide flexible, multiyear core funding for women's rights organisations. This is crucial for their long-term sustainability, enabling organisations to build up their capacity, protect themselves from external risks and set independent agendas.
- Recognise specialisation amongst women's rights organisations – from meeting practical needs, to attending to women's and girls' strategic (longer-term, structural) interests, to advocacy, research and analysis.
- Develop mechanisms to ensure that funding reaches grassroots women's organisations in provincial capitals and rural and poor urban areas. This could be achieved through scaling up funding to women's funds that have links with grassroots civil society or by considering 'from or reach to grassroots organisations' as a key criteria when making decisions about allocation of funds.
- Ensure funding streams are accessible to women's rights organisations through simplifying grants application, monitoring and reporting processes. The following recommendations are based on Guidance by the DAC Network on Gender Equality<sup>64</sup>:
  - applications should not be expected to be written in perfect English

- applications can be in any language
- application forms are kept simple and short
- evaluations are timed to suit WROs, are participative and meaningful, while being able to capture longer-term change
- extensive evaluations are not imposed – indicators and measuring systems are open for negotiation with WROs
- reporting processes are flexible and not time intensive
- multi-donor funds and harmonised approaches are used
- women's rights organisations' own budgets and plans are used where possible (rather than separate application form) with a simple cover letter.
- Be aware of the tremendous backlash that women's rights organisations can face and support partner organisations to establish appropriate mechanisms to mitigate and respond to it. This may include support for network building and coordination between groups, especially when undertaking advocacy work, to reduce the risk of a particular organisation or individual becoming a target. It should also include systematically integrating protection of women human rights defenders into grants and programmes. Donors might want to consider direct support to funds that support women's human rights defenders such as the Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights <http://urgentactionfund.org/><sup>65</sup>.

58. Mukhopadhyay, M. and Eyben, R. 2011. Rights and Resources: the Effects of External Financing on Organising for Women's Rights, Royal Tropical Institute and Pathways of Women's Empowerment

59. DAC Network on Gender Equality. 2008. Issues Brief 3: 'Innovative Funding for Women's Organisations'

60. O'Connell, H., Forthcoming, What added value do organisations that are led and managed by women and girls bring to work addressing the rights, needs and priorities of women and girls?, prepared for Comic Relief

61. Summary is an extract from DAC Network on Gender Equality. 2008. Issues Brief 3: 'Innovative Funding for Women's Organisations'

62. Mukhopadhyay, M. and Eyben, R. 2011. Rights and Resources: the Effects of External Financing on Organising for Women's Rights, Royal Tropical Institute and Pathways of Women's Empowerment

63. Pittman, A. 2011 The Power of Investing in Women's Rights and Empowerment: A Mid-term Summary, AWID

64. DAC Network on Gender Equality. 2008. Issues Brief 3: 'Innovative Funding for Women's Organisations'

65. For more information on protection and empowerment of women's human rights defenders see:

Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition: [www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org](http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org)

DFID How To Note: A Practical Guide on Community Programming on Violence Against Women and Girls

European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders

# Recommendations

**“Donors need to recognise the importance of women mobilising for their rights as the main driver of gender justice and that failure to support WROs [women’s rights organisations’] agendas will mean donors failing to secure their gender equality objectives.”**

Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay and Rosalind Eyben, Royal Tropical Institute and Pathways of Women’s Empowerment, 2011: 10<sup>66</sup>

**Donors should more generously resource women’s rights organisations, recognising the enormous value of the roles they play in advancing gender equality and women’s rights.**

## Specifically donors should:

1. Embed a commitment to actively supporting women’s rights organisations across development policy, programming and funding.
2. Increase the accessibility of existing funding streams to women’s rights organisations, particularly funds targeted at human rights and civil society organisations, by acting on the recommendations proposed by the DAC Network on Gender Equality outlined above.
3. Increase devolved funding through women’s funds that have strong partnerships with southern women’s rights organisations, including those with strong links with the grassroots level of civil society and those supporting women’s human rights defenders.
4. Consider setting up dedicated funds for southern women’s rights organisations, drawing on the positive aspects of the MDG3 funding model.
5. Place greater emphasis on core funding, where possible on the basis of women’s rights organisation’s own plan and budget, and provide sizable grants. Small amounts of money can stimulate innovation but does not enable vital expansion, scale-up and strengthening of organisational and operational capacity.
6. Develop more effective systems for tracking how much money is spent on gender and women’s rights, and who receives this funding – including how much reaches southern women’s rights organisations, directly and indirectly. This should include institutionalising sex-disaggregated monitoring systems with the capacity to track the amount and type of support to gender equality through development, diplomatic or defence spending, and its impact, and tracking all aid using the DAC gender equality marker.
7. Strengthen agencies’ own understanding of the kinds of quantitative and qualitative indicators and methodologies that are appropriate to capture complex social change towards gender equality.

66. Mukhopadhyay, M. and Eyben, R. 2011. Rights and Resources: the Effects of External Financing on Organising for Women’s Rights, Royal Tropical Institute and Pathways of Women’s Empowerment

We are grateful to Helen O’Connell for her contribution to this briefing.