



A MISSING BRICK FOR SUSTAINING WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

Flexible Institutional Funding for Local Women's Organizations

Women's Peace & Humanitarian Fund



Spotlight Initiative

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"In Liberia, lip service is given most of the time to the main gender issues. As a result, most women and vulnerable groups rely on local women's organizations who flag their cases and advocate on their behalf. That's why it is so important for institutional funding to be given for local women's organizations to stay alive. Stay alive means having support for recruitment and retention of qualified staff, supporting rental costs and mobility and more. AFFEL is one of the beneficiaries of Institutional Funding that keeps it alive." Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia, WPHF Grantee

Background

On 5 April 2020,¹ the UN Secretary General called for increased investment in online services and civil society organizations. This was followed in October 2020 by a specific call to the international donor community to multiply the amount of funding to local women's organizations working on women, peace, and security (WPS) and humanitarian action by five times over the next decade.² Yet, women's local organizations and their work remain chronically and severely underfunded. The current COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the fact that they are systematically de-prioritized in instances of crisis or conflict while their impact is undeniable.

Institutional (core) funding³ is the missing brick needed to strengthen the efforts and influence of local women's organizations, to consolidate their impact for peace, protection, and gender equality, particularly in spaces where backlash against women's rights threatens their work and very own existence. There is a great urgency to adequately and sustainably fund the broad diversity of feminist movements and their transformative work on the ground.

On 16 March 2021, the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), together with the Spotlight Initiative, organized a virtual event to raise awareness on the critical importance of institutional funding and its essential contribution to the strengthening of local women's organizations and the sustainability of their work to build peace and advance gender equality in fragile and conflict-affected areas. During the event, experts from regional and government institutions, women's rights civil society organizations and UN representatives shared their perspectives and examples on the access and use of institutional funding. This brief aims to further mobilize support for flexible and feminist quality funding⁴ in order to accelerate the impacts of local women's civil society organizations in advancing peace, gender equality and the elimination of violence against women and girls.

The Funding Gap

Despite new funding commitments, the share of funding that is channeled directly to women's

organizations remains strikingly low at only 0.4 percent of bilateral aid to conflict affected contexts⁵. Between 2017 and 2018, 42 percent or USD 48.7 billion of the Official Development Assistance (ODA), totaling USD 153 billion, was focused on gender equality and women's empowerment, and only 1 percent or 198 million of the gender focused ODA was committed to women's rights organizations (WROs).⁶ Although the bilateral allocable aid for gender equality is steadily increasing, the amount of funding directly channeled to local women's rights organizations remains strikingly low.

In the wake of COVID-19, when misogyny, hate speech and rates of violence against women and girls are surging, women's organizations and activists are facing further threats to their survival. These organizations are dependent on flexible funding to continue their operations.

Although the responses around the world have largely been led by Women Rights Organizations⁷, particularly in responding to the spike in SGBV in communities, international, and in some cases, national, actors have rarely handed power and funding over to organizations working on the frontlines of response at grassroots and local levels. In addition, despite the recognized negative impact on women's livelihoods and fundamental human rights, evidence suggests that women are being left out of the decision-making and funding in the COVID-19 humanitarian response.⁸ The lack of funding and support to local women's organizations is manifested in the ongoing pandemic response, as less than 0.1 percent of COVID-19 funding⁹ currently tracked is being channeled to local civil society organizations.¹⁰

Women's organizations described the need for their service delivery, support, and work to increase at the same time as their funding and capacity was being reduced.¹¹ In conflict and crisis settings, local women's organizations feel their existence is at dire risk due to lack of funding, which is exacerbated during COVID-19 with a major part of donors' support being directed away from local organizations to support larger governments' and international organizations' response to COVID-19. A WPHF grantee survey in April

2020 found that 29 percent of the respondents felt their organization's existence was at risk due to the pandemic's effects and limited funding.¹² One year later, a follow-up WPHF survey found that 84 percent of the respondents feel that their organizations' existence is at risk due to lack of programmatic and/or institutional funding for women, peace, and security (WPS) and humanitarian action.¹³

In fact, according to recent research conducted by VOICE, which consulted over 200 feminist organizations across six regions to evaluate the needs and risks of women and girls in the context of COVID-19, **over 70 percent of respondents reported that they had not received new funding or were still waiting.** When asked what kinds of funding they need, the majority of respondents noted wanting opportunities to build donor relationships and support in engaging in advocacy for funding with the UN and other donors. They also noted wanting application and disbursement processes that are easy and simple, not bureaucratic and convoluted.¹⁴

The Importance of Flexible Institutional Funding

Institutional Funding is essential to local women's organizations' survival and their ability to respond to changing circumstances and contexts, to strengthen their organizational capacity and learning, which ultimately enhances their impact.¹⁵ It also "facilitate(s) greater predictability of resources and financial sustainability allowing women's organizations to stay focused on programmatic priorities and plan more effectively," especially when it is flexible and multi-year.¹⁶ This is particularly helpful for local organizations working in complex and changing environments, such as conflict and crisis settings.

As women's organizations' work contributes to peace and security in their communities, offering institutional funding means supporting their existence and mission to widen democratic spaces, enhance accountability and protect human rights and peace. As such, institutional funding has to be considered as a grant in support of an organization's mission, focusing

"The Institutional funding, we received here at Iyali Community Development Association changed our entire world as we could have closed without it, now our entire staff are amazed that someone out there is willing to lift us up with funding and support us continue our grassroots project. The funding impact is like a chain reaction of positive change that boost morale of local women groups" Iyali Community Development Association, WPHF Grantee, Nigeria

on long-term social changes, rather than a specific project. It intentionally delivers resources to feminist groups and movements, allowing them to determine their own needs and recognizing them as the agents and drivers of transformative change.

Institutional funding is multifaceted and constantly evolving based on an organization's needs. It can be used to support an organization with general operations and core costs, such as paying staff salaries and office rent, buying equipment and ICT services, providing psychosocial support and health insurance for staff, putting in place new adaptive strategies and systems, or even raising staff awareness and developing their capacities in technical areas.

Examples of Good Practices of UN Funding Mechanisms

WPHF is a flexible financing mechanism that channels funding to local women's rights organizations in crisis and conflict settings.

- ▶ To ensure funding opportunities are accessible to small and grassroots organizations, the application process is simplified and available in Arabic, French, English and Spanish.
- ▶ Since 2020, and based on feminist civil society organizations' recommendations, funding to local women's organizations was made available through both a programmatic funding stream (*ranging from 30,000 USD to 200,000 USD*) and an institutional funding stream (*ranging from 2,500 USD to 30,000 USD*).
- ▶ Organizations can apply to one or both streams, individually or as a consortium, with formal registration being only mandatory for the lead organization.
- ▶ Flexibility for adaptation to COVID-19 impacts, including absorbing costs related to safe implementation of activities and budget changes due to inflation of prices, was offered to all active grantees to ensure a Do No Harm approach in complex environments.
- ▶ Several Spotlight Initiative programmes have pivoted toward a small grants programme that provides core institutional funding up to 30,000 USD to civil society organizations. The small grants are geared towards funding grassroots organizations and groups traditionally unreached

by funding for ending violence against women and girls.

- ▶ In the Pacific Regional Programme, the Initiative re-programmed 100,000 USD for COVID-19 small grants to 'non-traditional' grassroots and frontline civil society organizations, especially those addressing the social and economic impact of COVID-19 and not yet connected with regional feminist movement spaces.
- ▶ The call was circulated to countries often left out of mainstream funding opportunities and aimed to reduce barriers to accessing funding due to bureaucratic requirements and access to technology for applying online by ensuring languages were accessible, and through other means.

Measuring the Impacts of Institutional Funding

To support women's organizations in defining and reporting their results through institutional funding, WPHF developed guidance based on the needs expressed by its grantees. For example, impact of this funding can be measured through the average number of months during which their organization can continue to sustain itself, the number of staff who have been retained as a result of institutional funding, and the number and type of adaptive strategies, tools or systems that the organization has adopted and implemented to strengthen its organization. Measurements can also include the proportion of staff who have increased their capacity and technical expertise in different areas (including management, resource mobilization, M&E, etc.). This funding is also vital for the well-being of women's rights organizations and activists, for example by ensuring minimum wages and social entitlements. It recognizes their work and expertise and supports them in acquiring more skills and leadership experience.

There are different types and levels of results which need to be captured based on suitable, simplified and utilization-focused indicators and matrixes that do not add an extra burden on women's organizations. Importantly, the design and evaluation process should remain demand-driven and flexible, considering feminist M&E principles to ensure women's organizations' use of the funding is based on their (evolving) needs.

Recommendations

As allies of feminist movements, the donor community should pursue shifting the donor ecosystem and systematically creating avenues for civil society organizations to sustain themselves and their work. Flexible and feminist funding ensures greater women's agency and leadership at the community level, applies an intersectional lens to funding, and redistributes power to communities, allowing local organizations to make decisions about how to address the challenges they face in their own environments and donors to play a more sustainable supporting role.

Systemic and institutional barriers often act as stumbling blocks to fund feminist movements. For instance, despite progress made, the burdensome administrative processes and procedures ultimately prevent small organizations from easily accessing funding. As such, creative and innovative solutions should be sought after to overcome these roadblocks and mainstream flexible funding modalities for women's rights organizations and feminist movements. This includes:

1. **Providing flexibility to civil society organizations grantees/partners to adjust budget lines to adapt to changing contexts, based on their needs and in consultation with them.** For example, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, WPHF allowed grantees, receiving funding under its regular funding cycle, to reallocate budgets to respond to COVID-19 gendered impacts in their communities and/or to cover for operational costs.
2. **Simplifying and adapting institutional funding calls for proposals to enhance access to small, grassroots local women's and youth organizations.** This includes language accessibility,¹⁷ short application documents and revised eligibility requirements. For example, applications under the WPHF-Spotlight Initiative partnership can be presented in different languages.

As the application process requires presenting a proof of legal registration and completing a template, WPHF developed a series of Tip Sheets to assist applicants. Civil society organizations can choose to apply individually or as a consortium. To further support potential grantees, information

sessions are held to guide them through the applications documents. As a result, for 44% of WPHF partner CSOs, the funding received from WPHF is the first funding they have ever received from a UN entity.

In Spotlight Initiative programmes in Grenada and in Jamaica, funding was made more accessible to traditionally left behind groups by including the participation of civil society representatives in the design phase of the calls for proposals.

3. **Funding directly to local women's organizations,** when possible, otherwise partner with larger feminist organizations and women's funds that can build the capacity and channel funding to local or smaller women's organizations.
4. **Fund from a position of trust.** This involves sharing decision-making power and including civil society organizations in defining the agenda and funding priorities. As allies, funders should systematically create avenues for civil society members to voice their needs and inputs to guide and help define the way forward.

For example, WPHF's and Spotlight Initiative's decision-making bodies, such as the Funding Board and National Steering Committees, include feminist international and local civil society organizations as decision-making actors. In fact, in the Spotlight Initiative, civil society representatives make up at least 20% of the National, Regional and Global Steering Committees. Civil society also holds an equal seat at the highest advisory mechanism: the Governing Body. In the WPHF Regular Funding Cycle, local civil society organizations are included in both the design of calls for proposals and the selection of grantees.

5. **Invest more intentionally in a portfolio of small grants to direct institutional funding for national and local women's organizations – without any programmatic requirements.** For instance, under the WPHF-Spotlight Initiative partnership, organizations have the possibility to apply for an independent institutional grant, ranging from 2,500 USD – 30, 000 USD to support their operational costs and respond to their non-programmatic needs.

6. **Combine funding with context specific and customized capacity development in consultation with recipient organizations** and in partnership with local feminist experts who are familiar with the context. For example, as part of the WPHF Global Learning Hub (L-Hub) and Community of Practice (CoP), WPHF provides capacity building and peer exchange webinars, resources and long-term peer learning opportunities to grantees, to strengthen their institutional capabilities. To better respond to needs, WPHF also conducts post-webinar feedback surveys and an annual survey to assess CSOs' learning priorities and to inform the design and planning of future institutional strengthening initiatives.
7. **As allies of feminist movements, funders should pursue internal advocacy work amongst the international donor community to shift the larger funding ecosystem and contribute to moving the money to local women's organizations** as frontline actors of transformational and sustainable peace and gender equality. This funding should not be limited to ad hoc circumstantial support, but rather be fully embedded in a long-term approach to ensure the sustainability of WROs and their work. International feminist non-governmental organizations are developing a wide range of studies and guidelines that donors can rely on while advocating for feminist flexible funding within their institutions.

For instance, in the 2020 report *"Moving more money to the drivers of change,"* AWID, MamaCash and the Count Me In! Consortium shed light on practical pathways and tools for donor organizations to channel funds to feminist movements and organizations in the Global South.

Resources

VOICE, ["We Must Do Better – A Feminist Assessment of The Humanitarian Aid System's Support of Women-And Girl-Led Organizations During the COVID-19 Pandemic"](#). 2020.

AWID, ["Moving Money to the Drivers of Change: How Bilateral and Multilateral Funders Can Resource Feminist Movements"](#) November, 2020.

WPHF, ["Survey on COVID-19 Related Impacts and Needs"](#) . 2020.

WPHF, ["Civil Society Survey on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action"](#). June 2021

Watch here the recording of the event:
<https://youtu.be/xFGXycvdUm8>

Watch perspectives from local women's organizations on flexible institutional funding:
<https://youtu.be/X-m2trkoMwY> (part 1)
<https://youtu.be/NVRdxsASAwE> (part 2)



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Endnotes

¹ The Secretary General Statement on Gender-Based Violence and COVID19, New York, 5 April 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>

² UN Secretary General Annual Report on Women, Peace and Security, October 2020.

³ Institutional or Core funding is a funding that covers an organization's institutional costs. It can be used for staff salaries, rent, communications, IT equipment, operations, capacity building or for any other spending that is not project specific.

⁴ This brief adopts a systemic understanding of the concept of "feminism" which goes beyond the goal of achieving gender equality. In other words, a feminist approach concomitantly aims at dismantling the underlying unequal power structures and economic, epistemic, cultural and social systems that perpetuate the unfair status quo and impede structural changes in favor of gender justice from happening. In turn, AWID's report "Toward A Feminist Funding Ecosystem" provides a comprehensive definition and concrete parameters of what constitutes a balanced and feminist funding ecosystem. The crux of it lies in the fact that "feminist activists themselves have the power to define funding priorities iteratively and in dialogue with funders".

https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/awid_funding_ecosystem_2019_final_eng.pdf

⁵ UN Secretary General Annual Report on Women, Peace and Security, October 2021.

https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2021_827.pdf

⁶ OECD Development Co-Operation Directorate, March 2020. "Aid Focused on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment" GENDERNE.

⁷ UN Women : "COVID-19 and Women's Rights Organizations : Bridging Response Gaps and Demanding a More Just Future", 2021.

⁸ CARE: "Where are the women ? The conspicuous absence of women in COVID-19 response teams and plans, and why we need them", June 2020

⁹ OCHA Financial Tracking System - <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/charter-change-statement-revised-unglobal-humanitarian-response-plan-covid19>

¹⁰ Grand Bargain signatories have committed to ensure that 25 percent of humanitarian funding reaches local and national actors as directly as possible.

¹¹ VOICE: "We must do better : A feminist Assessment of the Humanitarian Aid System's Support for Women- and Girl-led Organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic", 2021, p.16

¹² WPHF: "Survey on COVID-19 related impacts and needs WPHF CSO Partners ", April 2020.

¹³ WPHF: "Civil Society Survey on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action", December 2020.

¹⁴ Aid Focused on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. OECD DAC NETWORK ON GENDER EQUALITY (GENDERNET). 2020

¹⁵ Angelika Arutyunova and Cindy Clark, Watering the Leaves, Starving the Roots, 7 October 2013. Page 25

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ It important to consider and ensure that the calls are screen-reader friendly, that they include voiceover and braille, an ensure they are accessible for people with visual impairments. Moreover, calls for proposals should be made available in local languages.

The Women's Peace & Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) mobilizes critical support for local and grassroots civil society organizations working on women, peace and security and humanitarian action. WPHF is a flexible and rapid financing mechanism supporting quality interventions designed to enhance the capacity of women to prevent conflict, respond to crises and emergencies, and seize key peacebuilding opportunities. Since its launch in 2016, WPHF has funded over 450 civil society organizations in 26 countries working to support women to be a force for crisis response and lasting peace.

The Spotlight Initiative is a global partnership supported by the European Union, which deploys targeted, large-scale investments aimed at eliminating violence against women and girls. WPHF is partnering with the EU-supported Spotlight Initiative to channel quality funding to grassroots women-led and women's rights civil society organizations with a focus on ending violence against women and promoting women's human rights and gender equality in peace, security and humanitarian contexts.

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