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Supporting change where it happens

The critical role of feminist movements in achieving feminist alternatives

Women, girls and trans* people working together have repeatedly demonstrated that advances in their rights are achieved because feminist movements have pushed for them themselves.

1. Introduction

The largest global study ever conducted on the rights of women, published in the American Political Science Review in 2012, showed this empirically.[1] Focused on violence against women and conducted across 70 countries over four decades, researchers found that the single most important variable influencing policy action to tackle violence against women was the presence of strong and autonomous feminist movements. This proved more important than all other variables, including the wealth of a country, the number of women in government or whether progressive political parties are in power.

Research from the DFID-funded Pathways of Empowerment programme, a consortium of feminist researchers from institutes around the world anchored at the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton, United Kingdom, similarly found that shifts in women's empowerment are neither the result of outsider efforts nor of individuals working independently; rather there is a clear process of "feminist constituency-building", and this work done by women's movements is both necessary and critical for social change.[2]

What would it take then to ensure support for this most important of variables in advancing action on women's rights – feminist movements? This paper examines feminist movements, how they effect social change, what they need to be strong, women's funds and their fulfilment of this role, and what more is needed to advance women's human rights.

2. What exactly is a feminist movement?

In her 2012 work *Changing Their World: Concepts and Practices of Women's Movements*, AWID Scholar-Associate Srilatha Batliwala defines a movement as "an

organized set of constituents pursuing a common political agenda of change through collective action."[3] She goes on to explain that feminist movements, moreover, have some common features that "many or most other social movements lack", including that women are the majority actors involved, that their agendas and political goals are built from a gendered analysis, and that they are feminist – in ideology and methods, including prioritising women's leadership.[4]

Batliwala makes the case that feminist movements are unique in their methods and approaches, and therefore in their visions, missions and outcomes, precisely because they are as concerned with *how* power is exercised during the process of organising constituents and constituencies (what she calls "the practice of power" – to develop joint political agendas or take collective action, for example) as they are in the outcomes they pursue. Amongst those outcomes is the creation of a world where the organisation, use and abuse of power is ultimately transformed so that women can access their fundamental human rights and freedoms.

Not all feminist movements are the same, of course. Nevertheless, there are some common approaches to how feminists build movements, as Batliwala outlines. Some of these are:

- consciousness and awareness raising amongst constituents
- base-building, or mobilising conscious and aware constituents to organise as groups
- developing and articulating shared political agendas
- organising internally to be able to make decisions and take collective action
- taking collective action
- alliance building with other social movements and constituencies
- reflecting on progress made and process(es) pursued
  regrouping for next steps

Throughout, an attention to power, a commitment to feminist principles and values, and a gendered approach characterise how each stage manifests. The Global Fund for Women outlines similar elements and approaches in their recent infographic.[5]

Feminist movements are noteworthy for their focus on the structural causes of gender inequality and the denial of women's rights, addressing the root causes of disadvantage and discrimination and not just the immediate symptoms. This work distinguishes them from other actors who focus solely or primarily on service delivery, providing life-saving supplies and interventions that are necessary for the advancement of individual women but not sufficient to transform the power relations that leave all women disadvantaged as a social group.

3. How change happens: a case study

The women's rights organisations with which Mama Cash works have just such ambitious political visions: they seek to change the world permanently and for all future women facing the challenges they are currently facing by taking a movement approach. The Namibia Women's Health Network[6] for example was founded in 2008 by 14 women living with HIV to empower women affected by HIV and AIDS. It went on to become a membership-based organisation of over 2000 women across all 14 regions of the country.

One of the issues they decided to work on when they first started was the coerced and forced sterilisation of women living with HIV that had long been common in the country. In its first year, the organisation launched a public campaign on the topic, working with other women's rights organisations in the country to conduct research, document information about the situation, strategize together and build public awareness. Together they also began lobbying the Ministry of Health and Social Services of the Namibian government to change its policy and practice, including the formal advice it provides to hospitals.

When these efforts did not seem to change anything, the Network decided to take a strategic litigation approach, but filing only three cases because that was all they could afford and manage. After a lot of work, including fighting a government appeal, both the High Court and then the Supreme Court ruled in their favour, confirming that the government had wrongly subjected women living with HIV to coercive sterilisation.

This success paved the way for legal action by others who had undergone similar treatment, and significantly, influenced hospital practice from that point on. It also sparked a national conversation about women's sexual and reproductive rights and HIV-related stigma and discrimination. It even prompted investigations on the same issue in seven other countries on the continent.

4. Why are feminist movements important?

The answer to this question is also the answer to the question, *how does social change happen?* According to Batliwala, there are some key ingredients in how feminist movements produce social change: they build women's collective power to become a political force for change; they make women's interests visible to those that do not see them; they train women in the skills they need to effect change such as mobilising and organising others and participating, including as leaders, in social and political arenas; and they sustain change at levels and at a scale that would otherwise not be reached – namely, at the level of the everyday, for everybody.

As Jessica Horn discusses in her report *Gender and Social Movements* for BRIDGE, feminist movements have produced significant impacts on society. These impacts

include profound social norm change (comprising beliefs, attitudes and behaviours) on women's roles and gender equality, such as the idea that women can run for public or political office; legal and policy change like the recognition of marital rape and guidelines on the treatment of domestic workers; changes to how human rights are conceptualized and what they include, effectively bringing about the recognition that what happens in the private sphere is of public concern; and even the ending of wars and advancing peace.[7]

In addition, and as discussed above, Horn notes that feminist movements offer us an additional insight in how they organise through a "gendered politics", which provides "alternative ways of being, seeing and doing that in themselves serve to transform patriarchal power relations."[8] That is, they are as transformative through the *how* of what they do as they are through the *what* that they are pursuing – for example, they explore shared leadership and non-hierarchical ways of decision making.

5. What do movements need to be effective?

Movements need efficient and capable organisations to be effective. As Batliwala very aptly notes organisations "are the primary structures in or through which movement leaders, activists, and members are organized, trained, capacitated, protected, and energized to pursue the transformational agenda of movements."[9]

The organisations that sustain feminist movements are alternately called women's rights organisations (WROs), feminist organisations or women-led organisations. As with feminist movements, they aim to take a gendered and feminist approach, paying attention to social relations of power both in how they operate and in their political missions.

Emily Esplen discusses the myriad ways that WROs create change in her report for Womankind Worldwide, *Leaders for Change*.[10] These include the expertise and innovation that WROs offer, not least because of their deep understandings of the contexts in which they operate; their connection to constituencies and their interests; the space and tools they can provide for awareness raising, organising and mobilisation of constituents; and their leadership on profound legal, policy and social norm change.

In the same report, Esplen also highlights some of the constraints under which WROs operate that hamper their work such as ill-suited funding modalities (short-term, project based funding); lack of recognition of expertise (funding earmarked for 'women's rights' going to INGOs, with WROs being sub-contracted to 'deliver' INGO-designed projects instead of WROs being able to pursue their own political missions and remain autonomous); the simplistic approach of some results-based government programmes (for example, with an emphasis on being able to measure change quantitatively and

after just one year of work); and backlash against women's organising (with women activists being attacked and socially sanctioned for example).

Mama Cash's own work confirms these challenges, and finds in addition that there has also been more effort in recent years across a number of countries to restrict the available space for civil society generally, and women's rights activists specifically, to operate and conduct their work. This has been through two main means: conservative religious ideologies and government regulations, sometimes under the guise or as a result of anti-terror efforts. AWID has done a lot of research on the former (see, for example, their *The Devil is in the Details* report published March 2016) and CIVICUS amongst others on the latter.[11] The restrictions meanwhile affect both basic civil rights and freedoms – to assembly, association, and expression, as CIVICUS highlights – as well as in terms of the means by which people might organise, for example receiving funding from funders outside of their countries.[12]

6. What are women's funds?

As I explain in a recent piece co-written with my colleague Sunny Daly, "Women's funds exist to support and strengthen women's rights groups and movements by providing them adequate and appropriate financial and other resources to realise their vision, and to encourage others to join in this work."[13]

Women's funds are public foundations that mobilise resources (that is, they fundraise) for feminist movements and channel those funds back out to activists through grants. They also work to influence other funders and donors to similarly provide more (read: adequate) and better (read: appropriate, accessible) money to rights-based organisations led by women, girls and sometimes also trans* people. Research by the International Network of Women's Funds tracked through a series of 10 case studies how women's funds in the Global South and East actually influence donors, including private individuals, through the process of mobilising resources itself.[14] As the South Asia Women's Fund puts it, women's funds are the "fundraising arm of the women's movement."[15]

Mama Cash is the oldest international women's fund in the world. In addition to providing grants to feminist groups and movements, it also supports newer women's funds around the world so that there is a strong global architecture of women's funds that can sustain WROs and movements in all corners of the globe.

There are about 45 women's funds operating outside of the United States (while there are several times that many within it!). Some are issue-based: for example, Astraea focuses on LBTQI rights and on racial justice. Some are population-based, like FRIDA, which is focused on feminist activism by girls and young women, or AYNI that addresses indigenous women's efforts. Finally, some have a geographic focus: many women's funds are national, and there are also regional funds such as the African

Women's Development Fund, the Central American Women's Fund and the South Asia Women's Fund. All of these different women's funds coordinate their work and collaborate through the International Network of Women's Funds, a space dedicated to building shared learning about what works to fund WROs and feminist movements.[16]

7. How do women's funds make a difference?

As I outline in the paper I wrote with Sunny, women's funds are uniquely placed to support feminist organisations and movements for several reasons: they are from, of, and for the groups and movements they support; they innovate, regularly supporting new and non-mainstream groups, for example; they fund smartly, prioritizing flexible, core and longer-term support; they fund deeply, providing resources for institutional as well as activist development; and they are multipliers – actively and constantly seeking to mobilise more resources for the work they care about.

Women's funds also collaborate to provide a continuum of funding, as I discuss with Caitlin Stanton of the Urgent Action Fund in last year's CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report.[17] The work that WROs and feminist movements are advancing, and the high profile of the women human rights defenders (WHRDs) who lead that work, inevitably expose them to risk in predictable ways. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situations of human rights defenders, for example, notes that women defenders are targeted by gender-specific threats and violence for their work – both because of the issues they are working on, which are seen as controversial, and because they are women speaking out in public, which goes against the prevailing social norms about how women should behave.[18] Examples of this targeting include rape and other forms of sexual violence and harassment. In addition, it is extremely common for organizations and movements to face backlash as their causes gain currency and traction.[19] It therefore becomes critical, as part of supporting strong autonomous feminist movements, that funding is aligned and responsive to these realities.

We know that women's rights activism is risky because it is challenging deep social codes about gender. We also know that backlash is likely as feminist movements achieve successes. In order to resource resilience, there therefore need to be financing regimes that support both sustainability – the ability to persist and continue the longer-term social change work – *and* responsiveness – the ability to react in the short-term to opportunities and threats.

From over three decades of work supporting feminist movements, Mama Cash and other women's funds know that core (rather than project-based), flexible (rather than strictly 'results-tied') and longer-term (rather than only one- or two-year options) funding is the most vital contribution we can make to sustainability and resilience.[20] This type of funding allows WROs to set their own longer-term priorities, based on their political agendas and expertise about their contexts and constituencies, and facilitates

them reacting and resisting to threats and backlash as well as pursuing opportunities as they arise. However, sometimes additional resources are needed, to seize a moment where more change can be advanced, or to resist an attack. Working collaboratively, women's funds can provide additional support to each other's partners as needs arise.

8. The gaps

Most donors fail to provide *appropriate* funding that meets the needs of WROs and feminist movements. What funding is *available* meanwhile is often not accessible to WROs because the application processes are not designed to learn about their work, but are made complex as donors seek to assess their own impact often on a short-term basis. In addition, WROs do not have the NGO infrastructure to for example conduct the monitoring and evaluation of their work that donors now require, precisely because they have not been funded to develop this part of their work in the past. In addition, the amount of funding available for WROs is grossly *inadequate*.

AWID has been conducting research into this issue through their *Where is the money for women's rights?* programme, and the results are always startling and depressing. In their most recent report, *Watering the leaves, starving the roots*, published in 2013, they again found that the median income of the WROs sampled was US$20,000, while the combined income of 740 WROs was just US$106 million.[21] By way of comparison, they included Save the Children International in the report, which in the same year had an income of US$1.442 billion.

In addition, AWID also found that 42 women's funds had a combined income of just over US$54.5 million, with more than half of the funds reporting individually that they had incomes of less than US$500,000. Thus, the funders that are *accessible* to women's rights organizations and movements, and that are providing *appropriate* funding for them, are not able to provide *adequate* funding to meet their demands because they themselves are under-funded.

AWID also found that the quality of funding was problematic, with almost half of respondents reporting they had never received core funding, and more than half reporting they had never received multi-year funding. The funding that is available meanwhile is project-based and service-oriented, rather than focused on the political and structural change that WROs wanted to prioritise. This again positions WROs, who are actually experts on social change and supporting feminist movements, as sub-contracted service providers instead, misdirecting vital resources and undermining efforts to advance women's rights.

This leads AWID to conclude that the leaves, individual women and girls, receive attention through new health initiatives and other projects, but the roots, the WROs and

autonomous feminist movements that are the most important variable to social change on women's rights, are being starved.

9. Conclusion

Evidence suggests that autonomous feminist movements are the most significant variable influencing whether governments take action on women's rights. Women's rights organisations are the backbone of feminist movements, providing vital space and infrastructure for women to organise for their interests and on their political agendas. The types of funding these organisations need to do their work, which are core, flexible and longer-term funding models, are neither adequately available nor accessible to most WROs.

Women's funds offer a solution to this dilemma, operating as the fundraising arm of the women's movement and located throughout the world. Through collaborative approaches, they are able to provide accessible and appropriate resources to WROs and feminist movements. The available funding itself, however, remains inadequate because women's funds too are not able to access adequate or appropriate resources for their work.

One way forward would be for donors and funders like INGOs, governments, the private sector and philanthropists to invest more and better funds into the WROs and feminist movements that are making the change we seek, as well as the women's funds that support them to thrive. If we really want to achieve feminist alternatives, it is imperative that these funders rethink their approach – by funding the feminist movements that are creating the change we seek.

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The Gender & Development Network (GADN) brings together expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues. Our vision is of a world where social justice and gender equality prevail and where all women and girls are able to realise their rights free from discrimination. Our goal is to ensure that international development policy and practice promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights. Our role is to support our members by sharing information and expertise, to undertake and disseminate research, and to provide expert advice and comment on government policies and projects.

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