



Policy brief

How to partner with feminist movements for transformative change

Emilie Tant and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez
June 2022

Key messages

Funding is political. Real change, in practice, means not being afraid to actively fund feminist activism and work in ways that are political.

Reimagine funding modalities. Donors can show how much they care through the quality and quantity of their funding. This means continuous resourcing in ways that recognise and value the transformative work done by feminist movements.

Decolonise funding objectives. Bring solidarity to grant making by establishing funding objectives through care, trust and dialogue, while acknowledging that change is long-term and not immediately tangible.

Grant makers will build better partnerships when they recognise feminist activism is real work and respond to the needs of activists themselves.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the inspiring participants of ODI's Global Dialogue on *Unlocking feminist activism* for sharing their insights, and bringing their experiences and deep knowledge to the conversation on how advance gender justice. Authors also appreciate the contributions of Carmen León-Himmelstine, Caroline Harper and Emily Subden for helpful comments on earlier drafts. Thank you to Sherry Dixon for typesetting and design, and to Tom Alwyn and Giulia Crossley for their communications support.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge and share our appreciation for all the feminists, activists, women's movements and organisations who are contributing to transformative change all over the world.

About the publication

This publication has been developed with the support of the ALIGN Platform. ALIGN works to create a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – patriarchal gender norms.

About the authors

Emilie Tant is Senior Communications Officer in ODI's Gender Equality and Social Inclusion team. Emilie leads strategic communications and policy work with a focus on feminist social movements and gender norm change through the ALIGN Platform. She holds a MSc in International Relations from the London School of Economics.

Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez is a part-time Research Officer in ODI's Gender Equality and Social Inclusion team, and a PhD candidate in International Development at the University of East Anglia and the University of Copenhagen. She holds an MPhil degree in Development Studies from the University of Oxford, where she was a Weidenfeld-Hoffman Scholar.

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI or our partners.

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

How to cite: Tant, E. and Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, D. (2022) *How to partner with feminist movements for transformative change*. ODI Policy brief. London: ODI (www.odi.org/en/publications/how-to-partner-with-feminist-movements-for-transformative-change).

Introduction

“Women’s activism has and is shaping the world, there is no doubt about that. But it is fragile progress... It is a violent world we continue to live in, and that is a violence that patriarchy uses as a weapon to keep women trapped in inequality.” – Aya Chebbi, Founder and Chair of Nala Feminist Collective

One year on from the Generation Equality Forum in 2021, where \$40 billion was promised to advance gender justice (Forbes, 2021), policy-makers and funders are still a long way from operationalising those commitments and implementing what is required (AWIDa, 2021). While there is a growing base of clear evidence that feminist movements are key drivers of social transformation and gender norm change (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al., 2021; Weldon and Htun, 2013; Weldon, 2004), less than 1% of gender equality funding actually reaches grassroots organisations (AWID, 2021b).

At the Gender Equality Forum (GEF), a Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality was drafted from recommendations put forward by six Action Coalitions. Focusing on the most intractable barriers to gender equality, the plan identifies actions that ‘if implemented and fully funded, can lead to lasting and transformative change’ (GEF, 2021: 14). While a number of commitments have been made by a range of actors to advance this plan in the realms of policy, advocacy and programming, by a fair distance, the lowest number of commitments have been made in terms of financing (UN Women, 2021). New evidence also reveals that financial support for feminist activism is potentially being outstripped by funding that is available to movements which advocate anti-feminist positions. For example, the Global Philanthropy Project (GPP) found that for US groups alone, anti-gender and anti-gender equality movements received \$6.2 billion (GPP, 2020).

Given this context, it is also critical to highlight that many feminist movements depend on volunteerism. While this can be a strength, it also imposes unfair demands on women and other activists as to what can and should be achieved. Often activism is a third job (after in/formal employment and unpaid care work in the home) which compounds into a ‘triple burden’ (MacGregor, 2006). Where actors are remunerated, they tend to operate on a shoestring, and they themselves rely on volunteers to mobilise and work towards ambitious objectives.

In February 2022, ODI and Irish Aid held a Global Dialogue on how social movements are building gender justice. *Unlocking feminist activism* invited inspiring voices from all over the world – including high-level funders and globally renowned activists – to offer new insights on how to advance gender justice by supporting feminist movements in all their rich diversity.

To amplify the core messages that emerged from the Global Dialogue, this ODI Policy brief distils the main takeaways and key evidence to help those working in gender equality to better meet the aspirations and needs of those they aim to support. Partners who seek to advance gender justice will accelerate progress by intentionally channelling resources to feminist social movements – one of the most important historical drivers of change. ODI’s Global Dialogue therefore calls for us to imagine a world in which women’s and gender-expansive peoples’ movements are responsibly resourced, to enable them to grow and develop feasible agendas for change, and to achieve their gender justice aspirations.

The following sub-sections outline the key messages and policy recommendations articulated during ODI’s *Unlocking feminist activism* event, substantiated by recent evidence on women’s movements. Those with deepest roots in feminist civil society shared guidance on what is needed to meet the scale of global gender justice ambitions, falling into three broad categories: 1) how to understand feminist activism, 2) how to evolve funding modalities and 3) how to establish funding objectives.

The personal is political

“We’re also visionary, we’re looking towards a future that is just and real and beautiful.” – Noelene Nabulivou, Executive Director, Diverse Voices and Action (DIVA) for Equality, Fiji

Real change, in practice, means not being afraid to actively fund feminist activism and work in ways that are political.

- Transformative change is not just about supporting women and girls (as important as that is) but, in fact, will always be political. Feminist activism aims to identify, uproot and transform power relations. This, at its heart, is fundamentally political.
- Gender transformative change requires addressing the root causes of inequality. This means confronting the deeper structural and systemic oppressions perpetuated by heteropatriarchy, racism, extractive capitalism, and colonialism, exposed through decades of intersectional feminist scholarship and activism.
- Gender equality is already an internationally accepted political consensus, as evidenced by its place in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Policy-makers need to focus on new, practical and well-funded ways to achieve it, while centring the proven effectiveness of grassroots action.
- International institutional decision-making tends to systemically exclude civil society (FEMNET, 2022; IPPF 2021; León-Himmelstine and Tant, 2021) and undermine feminist expertise. By

being kept out of the room, the demands and work of feminist movements are often rendered invisible in these spaces. Intersectional and intergenerational activism – and the diversity within feminist/women’s movements, needs to be embraced and supported. To this end there is a need to raise the importance of learning from Global South movements, engaging with South-South alliances and trusting young people to lead.

“We’ve done the work ourselves on understanding climate, on understanding economics... So if we’ve done that work, then we want to be taken seriously... And if you won’t take us into the room as a whole, then we wait outside that room, and we will create another room.” – Noelene Nabulivou, Executive Director, DIVA for Equality, Fiji

- Feminist movements are particularly active on the issue of violence and bodily autonomy. Aggressions against women’s and gender expansive peoples’ bodily autonomy and integrity provoke visible resistance, as control over their sexuality and reproductive potential is at the core of patriarchal authority. Yet, the means and resources to counteract this form of patriarchal control are limited. Advancing reproductive justice for all is therefore a useful priority to prevent backsliding, and efforts to support it should take into account the increased risks for those at the intersections of gender, class, race, and increasingly, geography (Guttmacher Institute, 2022). While there has been some progress on reproductive justice and LGBTQI+ rights (ICPD25, 2021), there is still a long way to go.

Funding modalities

“You know there’s so much we want to do, even as feminist funders ourselves, that we cannot do – because the money is not flexible. You cannot innovate with shackles on your hands, you can’t create change if you’re so constrained.”
– Françoise Moudouthe, CEO African Women’s Development Fund, Ghana

Donors can show how much they care through the quality and quantity of their funding, such as through continuous resourcing, and in ways that recognise and value the transformative work done by feminist movements.

- Funding works best when given to feminist organisations as directly as possible. However, donors can also channel much-needed resources through existing women’s funds – such as the African Women’s Development Fund, the Global Fund for Women and feminist funders like Mama Cash, FRIDA and the Doria Feminist Fund. Donors should prioritise those who already have good connections with feminist movements, and proven capacity to partner in innovative and flexible ways.
- Donors are strongly encouraged to move away from one-off and short-term funding because this mode of funding does not always best serve feminist organisations, as it does not cover their administrative, staff or general running costs. It also directs their time and energy towards applying for funding rather than focusing on what they do best.
- Funding models need to recognise and respond to the transversal nature of feminist activism by going beyond women and gender as standalone funding streams. There needs to be funds for feminist activism on issues such as climate and economic injustice, racial equality, LGBTQI+ rights, migrant justice, and so on.
- Donors should not only work with formalised and established feminist organisations, but find ways to partner with emerging and informal groups – who may be less visible, but are doing critical work in their communities often in unconventional and creative ways.

“We want our participation to be recognised.” – Ounaysa Arabi, Founding Member, Noon Feminist Movement, Sudan

- Donors can prioritise flexible, continuous funding for better partnerships. This allows feminist movements to remain autonomous, resilient and responsive in their work, which is considered essential to avoid the ‘NGOization’ and depoliticisation of their activism.
- Movements value modalities that move away from competitive models that pitch feminist groups against each other or encourage them to outbid one another. Donors could instead focus on creating collaborative funding environments, and new modes of collective funding, for movements in national or regional contexts.
- Support can also go beyond funding, specifically: strengthening cooperation between feminist organisations, bidirectional knowledge-sharing, financial mentorship for stakeholders, as well as facilitating intergenerational dialogues.

1 NGOization has been defined as ‘attempts at increased institutionalization and professionalization tailored towards funders’ priorities’ (Sayan and Duygulu, 2022: 420). Others observe that civil-society organizations can end up working towards their own NGOization since the ability to access donor funding requires a particular form of institutionalization and professionalization, and thematic focus (Jad, 2004). For feminist movements, Chakraborty (2021: 1) indicates that the NGOization of feminism, when defined as the ‘depoliticization and co-option of critical feminist movements under neoliberalism’, has led to the erasure of critical social movements.

Funding objectives

“Sometimes the distribution of the resources is tied up to systems, colonial systems with criteria that are kind of looking for results, looking for outcomes for these projects, as if changes were easily visible.” – Ruth Zurbriggen, *Socorristas en Red*, Argentina

Bring solidarity to grant making by establishing funding objectives through care, trust and dialogue.

- Grant makers will have more impact when they recognise and respect activism as real work, and seek to redress its current precarious, voluntary and unpaid nature. Most women do feminist activism on a volunteer basis, experiencing a triple labour burden as a result, while assuming emotional and financial costs, as well as threats to their safety (MacGregor, 2006; León-Himmelstine et al., 2022).
- Partnerships between grant-makers and feminist organisations should better align with their strategies for feminist liberation, responding to the language, needs and objectives of activists themselves. For example, creating funds aiming for ‘empowerment’ may not speak to grassroots feminist goals and can be limiting (León-Himmelstine et al., 2022).
- Funders are encouraged to move away from funding models that focus on short-term results as main indicators for accountability. Strengthen bottom-up led change by understanding it is often a long-term, gradual, intangible process. Just focusing on results obscures how achieving and sustaining gender norm change requires constant work and resources (Harper et al. 2021). Funds, thus, can adopt incremental objectives, based on a wider scope and transformative ambition, over longer time frames – i.e. 10 years or more.
- Partnerships between donors and feminist movements need to be decolonised. This means building relationships based on trust, dialogue, care and self-reflection. Donors will respond more effectively to the needs of their grantee partners when they pay attention to the power relations through which interactions take place. They should aim to move away from hierarchal modes of working by ensuring agendas are not pre-emptively set by donors, and cooperation is not just taking place on ground rules established by the financially powerful – e.g. in languages and time zones of the Global North.²

“You have these relationships with donors... and they say ‘Yes yes yes’, but then they expect you, in terms of the actual way the relationship works, to quickly adjust to a very colonised way of doing things.” – Chernor Bah, Co-Founder and Co-CEO Purposeful, Sierra Leone

2 ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ are increasingly common terms to categorise countries around the world. Often Global North is employed as a substitute for referring to nations that have historically benefitted from colonisation. In using this term, the authors would like to acknowledge current international debates which question whether another generalising and binary framework (Global North-Global South) is productive for reconstituting and challenging global power relations.

- Reconsider strategic donor objectives from a Global South perspective, in ways that displace notions of funding as charity and instead centre transnational solidarity. Think about donor accountability to grantees in terms of how well they are supporting feminist movements, rather than solely grantees accountability to the donor.
- Grant makers should have people in their teams who come from feminist movements. This is key, among other reasons, to avoid blind spots. It also raises attentiveness to intersectional gender inequalities (including addressing indigenous, afrodescendent, LGBTQI+ oppressions).
- Donors must have a full understanding of the context and ecosystem within which movements are operating, by doing their homework before issuing funds. Donor goals should shift towards building power, avoiding duplication of work and providing funding that is fit for purpose, which will strengthen grassroots networks rather than undermine or compromise them.

ODI intends to continue supporting feminist activism and gender justice with the launch of ALIGN's forthcoming *Social movements map*. This tool will highlight leading civil-society groups across the world who are mobilising for gender norm change. By plotting the global landscape of women's rich and diverse social movements, ALIGN hopes to bring together funders, organisations, researchers and policy-makers to work in solidarity with one another. Working across multiple thematic areas, the ALIGN Map is just one step towards sharing learning and knowledge, and elevating recognition of what feminist movements are doing on the ground.

List of participating speakers

Name	Organisation
Hakima Abbas , Co-CEO	Association for Women's Rights in Development(AWID), Global
Ounaysa Arabi , Founding Member	Noon Feminist Movement, Sudan
Chernor Bah , Co-Founder and Co-CEO	Purposeful, Sierra Leone
Aya Chebbi , Chair and Founder	Nala Feminist Collective, pan-African
Zohra Moosa , Executive Director	Mama Cash, Netherlands
Françoise Moudouthe , CEO	African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), pan-African
Noelene Nabulivou , Executive Director	Diverse Voices and Action for Equality, Fiji
Mohammed Naciri , Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific and Special Advisor to the Executive Director	UN Women, United States
Dr Ailbhe Smyth , Feminist & LGBT activist and Chair	Women's Aid, Ireland
Pamela Valenzuela , Spokesperson	<i>Coordinadora Feminista</i> 8M, Chile
Ruth Zurbriggen	<i>Socorristas en Red</i> , Argentina

Recommended resources

- ALIGN Platform** (forthcoming) *Social movements map: feminists mobilising for gender norm change*, ALIGN interactive map (<https://www.alignplatform.org/feminist-social-movements-map-gender-norm-change>).
- COFEM - Coalition of Feminists for Social Change** (2021) *Applying a feminist lens to grantmaking for addressing violence against women and girls: funding for transformative change*, COFEM Handbook (https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Guide-to-Grantmaking_19.10.21.pdf).
- Lever, E., Miller, K., and Staszewska, K.** (2020) *Moving more money to the drivers of change: how bilateral and multilateral funders can resource feminist movements*, AWID and Mama Cash Report with support from Count Me In! consortium (https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/MovingMoreMoney_FINALFINAL.pdf).
- Shake the Table and Bridgespan Group** (2022) *Lighting the way: a report for philanthropy on the power and promise of feminist movements*, Report (<https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/philanthropy/philanthropy-and-feminist-movements>).

References

- AWID – Association for Women’s Rights in Development** (2021a) ‘From US \$40 Billion to US \$2 Billion: unpacking the real numbers behind Generation Equality funding pledges’, Blog (<https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/us-40-billion-us-2-billion-unpacking-real-numbers-behind-generation-equality>).
- AWID** (2021b) *Where is the money for feminist organizing? Data snapshots and a call to action*, AWID Brief (<https://secure.awid.org/en/node/755>).
- Chakraborty, P.** (2021) ‘Rethinking NGOization as postfeminist practice: interstitial intimacies and negotiations of neoliberal subjectivity in violence prevention’, *Frontiers in Sociology* 31 (6) (<https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.654909>).
- FEMNET - African Women’s Development and Communication Network** (2022) *Africa’s First Commission on Status of Women the sixty-sixth session: Nairobi Declaration* (Africa CSW66 Nairobi Declaration) (<https://femnet.org/2022/03/africa-csw-nairobi-declaration/>).
- Forbes** (2021) ‘Over \$40 Billion Pledged To Advance Gender Equality During The Generation Equality Forum’, News article. 3 July 2021 (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/bonniechiu/2021/07/03/over-40-billion-pledged-to-advance-gender-equality-during-the-generation-equality-forum/>).

- GEF - Generation Equality Forum** (2021) *Action Coalitions Global Acceleration Plan*, Paris: UN Women (<https://forum.generationequality.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/UNW%20-%20GAP%20Report%20-%20EN.pdf>).
- GPP - Global Philanthropy Project** (2021) *Meet the moment: a call for progressive philanthropic response to the anti-gender movement*, GPP Report (<https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Meet-the-Moment-2020-English.pdf>).
- Guttmacher Institute** (2022) *Lay of the land: abortion policies and access in the United States*, Guttmacher Institute Map, accessed 28 June 2022 (<https://states.guttmacher.org/policies/>).
- Harper, C., Marcus, R., George, R., et al.** (2020) *Gender, power and progress: how norms change*. ALIGN Report, London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/gender-power-and-progress-how-norms-change>).
- High-Level Commission on the Nairobi Summit ICPD25 Follow-Up** (2021) *No exceptions, no exclusions: realizing sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice for all*, ICPD25 Report, (<https://www.nairobisummiticpd.org/publication/no-exceptions-no-exclusions>).
- IPPF - International Planned Parenthood Federation (East and South East Asia and Oceania Region) et al.** (2021) *Generation Equality Forum: Open Letter to UN Women*, Open letter: 10 September 2021 (<https://eseaor.ippf.org/news/generation-equality-forum-open-letter-un-women>).
- Jad, I.** (2004) 'The NGO-isation of Arab women's movements', *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin* 35(4): 34–42 (<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2004.tb00153.x>).
- Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, D., Harper, C. and George, R.** (2021) *Mobilising for change: how women's social movements are transforming gender norms*, ALIGN Report. London: ODI (<https://www.alignplatform.org/resources/report-mobilising-for-change>).
- León-Himmelstine, C. and Tant, E.** (2021) 'What would an inclusive and fair COP26 have looked like?' ODI Insights, 12 November 2021, London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/insights/what-would-an-inclusive-and-fair-cop26-have-looked-like/>).
- León-Himmelstine, C., George, R. and Tant, E. et al.** (2022) *Global feminist experiences of mobilising for norm change*, ALIGN Briefing, London: ODI (<https://www.alignplatform.org/briefing-global-feminist-experiences-of-mobilising-for-norm-change>).
- MacGregor, S.** (2006) *Beyond mothering earth: ecological citizenship and the politics of care*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Sayan, P. and Duygulu, Ş.** (2022) 'NGOization, politicization and polarization of Roma civil society in Turkey', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 22(3): 419–440 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2022.2046384>).
- UN Women** (2021) *Generation Equality Forum: Action coalitions commitments dashboard*, (accessed 28 June 2022) (<https://commitments.generationequality.org/dashboard/data>).
- Weldon, S.L.** (2004) 'The dimensions and policy impact of feminist civil society: democratic policymaking on violence against women in the fifty US states', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 6(1): 1–28 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1461674032000165914>).

Weldon, S.L. and Htun, M. (2013) 'Feminist mobilisation and progressive policy change: why governments take action to combat violence against women', *Gender & Development* 21(2): 231–247 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.802158>).