

**United Nations**  
**Division for the Advancement of Women**  
**Expert Group Meeting on financing for gender equality**  
**and the empowerment of women**  
**Oslo, Norway**  
**4-7 September 2007**

**FINANCING FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN:  
THE CRITICAL ROLE OF AUTONOMOUS WOMEN'S FUNDS IN  
STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS**

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## Introduction

Over the past decade, international commitments to gender equality, equity and women's empowerment have been reaffirmed in different UN Conferences, including those contained in the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action (BPFA). The world's leaders have agreed to take these commitments forward in the Millennium Declaration and to set targets for the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Beijing+10 review process coincided with the ICPD+10 and MDG+5 review, offering an opportunity for greater coherence and focus on gender equality, equity and the empowerment of women in all areas. The Beijing +10 review process was about accountability for the delivery on existing commitments and concrete steps forward to ensure gender equality, equity and women's empowerment, in all areas.

The decade following the adoption of the Beijing PFA witnessed many changes in the African continent, including the development of regional declarations and mechanisms on gender and development.<sup>1</sup> The advances achieved in democracy and peace fronts at the national level have contributed to positive change at the regional level. The creation of the African Union (AU), which is committed to the principle of gender equality and equity, provides further opportunities for increased participation of women in national, sub regional and regional decision-making. The AU Commission was formed on a 50/50 gender parity basis. The first Speaker of the AU Pan-African Parliament (PAP) is a woman and at least one in every five national members of the PAP is a woman. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa has been adopted. In 2004, African Heads of State adopted a Solemn Opountne in22ds em Stateie3.7( The rilitec0)000g00diw[ne in 202Rights of

## **A commentary on the African Women's movement**

African women, especially those living in rural communities and the urban poor, still face daunting challenges. Women's limited access to productive resources including land, water, energy, credit, means of communication, education and training, health and adequately remunerated employment has contributed to the situation wherein more African women live in absolute and relative poverty today than 10 years ago. The cumulative effects of HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria, food insecurity, low economic productivity, low levels of education and the upsurge of sexual violence have left African women and girls vulnerable and with considerable challenges. Women are the most exposed to HIV/AIDS infection due to extreme poverty and their responsibility in caring for infected and affected persons. Even in countries where overall HIV prevalence is low or has been reduced, the number of infected and affected women is still on the rise. Women and girls continue to be seriously affected by gender-specific violations of their human, sexual and reproductive rights. Indeed, situations of armed conflict take the heaviest toll on women and have become increasingly marked by rape and other forms of sexual violence of which they are victims. Women and girls continue to risk death from maternal mortality with 1 in every 16 pregnancies in Sub-Saharan Africa resulting in death.

The issues highlighted above have been affecting African women for many years. Whilst it has to be acknowledged that some gains have been made in various sectors, it needs to be noted that these gains (and some of them have been quite significant) have been mostly through the efforts of non-governmental organizations and social movements led by women or with women as critical actors. African women in particular have contributed towards the development of the continent in all spheres. They have done this through organizations, coalitions, associations, unions, faith-based networks, local, national and regional networks and through mixed/mainstream institutions. Through activities ranging from consciousness raising, advocacy and campaigns, to research and analysis, they have contributed to what is referred to here as a Movement – a movement for social justice, equality and empowerment for women.

Whilst the African Women's Movement is not ideologically homogenous, there is often consensus on priorities which affect the lives of African women such as poverty, illiteracy,

### **1. Lack of institutional capacity**

Most organizations believe that lack of adequate financial resources is responsible for lack of institutional capacity. A key lesson that has been learnt is that in many organizations, commitment to the cause of the project is not enough to sustain strong and effective leadership – most organizations simply do not have adequate resources to build their capacity and be sustainable in the long term.

### **2. Unstable financial resource base**

Following on closely from the above, almost all the organizations which constitute what is known as the African Women's Movement have problems of sustainability because their growth and development can not be adequately resourced. It has become clear in this new millennium, that the role of civil society organizations on the African continent is indispensable. Women's organizations in particular have made significant gains and contributions. Therefore, the issue of access to funding for strategic initiatives in Africa is vital if all the gains that have been made by the African women's movement in the 80s and 90s are to be sustained.

Those organizations that work at a community level usually receive funding from communal efforts such as local fundraisers, dances, concerts, support from churches, philanthropists and once in a while, the corporate sector. The larger organizations working at a national, sub-regional and regional level receive at least 80% of their funding (often more) from sources outside of their communities, mainly international private foundations, church affiliated agencies, international NGOs and funds channelled via local embassies from various donor governments. This means that the work of these organizations is mostly dependent on external sources of funding.

### **3. Uncoordinated donor strategies**

Women's organizations also believe that donor strategies in the region have not helped



corporate and social sectors, it is important that attention be paid to the quality of leadership, which is needed. Non-governmental organizations, with the appropriate capacity, have the ability to provide the necessary conceptual, analytical and practical tools for emerging leaders. Women's organizations in particular have the potential to produce well-grounded leaders, through their many awareness raising, self-esteem, inter-generational and capacity building programs. If these organizations are weak, the opportunities are wasted.

The implications of women being excluded from decision-making are serious. It means if women do not have a voice where key decisions which affect their lives are made, then their capacity for full development and equality is severely limited. Women's involvement in decision-making contributes to redefining political priorities, placing new issues on the political agenda which reflect and address women's gender-specific concerns, values and experiences, and provides new perspectives on mainstream political issues. Without the active participation of women and the inclusion of their perspectives at all levels of decision-making, the goals of good governance and inclusive, transparent democratic processes can not be achieved.

The above challenges point to the fact that whilst there has always been a women's movement in Africa, the organizations and institutions which constitute the movement, are weak, and this will ultimately have a negative impact on their strategic agenda. It is no secret that organizations working within the women's movement exist on a grant-by-grant basis. In spite of the quantity and quality of work that has been done by women's organizations in many areas, there are still inadequate resources to facilitate urgently required initiatives. Donor support from the international community has been ongoing but it has had its limitations due to budgetary constraints and changing priorities.

activism. They have also been referred to as 'the fundraising wing of the women's movement'<sup>6</sup>.

2. They bring a refreshing value system to the field of philanthropy which promotes social justice, non-discrimination, accountability, creating opportunities, providing access to resources, and building the leadership capacities of women.
3. Women's Funds, albeit to varying degrees, invest in the building of women's movements, and in supporting all aspects of institutional and organisational development. Capacity building for grantees is therefore a big part of the work of Women's Funds.
4. The funding priorities and agendas of Women's Funds are shaped by their grantee constituencies. Women's Funds tend to focus on grantmaking programs/issues which women in their communities have determined is a priority.
5. Women's Funds are closely linked to the communities they serve. The founders, board members and staff are from the women's movement, and bring their unique experience and insights to bear on shaping goals and priorities for the Funds. The profile of board and staff members of Women's Funds would typically include activists, donors, policy makers, academics, financial management experts, fundraisers, development practitioners and opinion leaders.
6. Women's Funds are usually established as Public Foundations. This means that they have to look to the public for support. Very few Women's Funds have endowments which would make them permanently sustainable and even those who do have endowments do not have the kind of capital that can make them totally independent of additional sources of funding. As a result, Women's Funds find creative ways of mobilising resources through a variety of techniques and from several sources. Fundraising strategies usually include raising money from individuals, corporate fundraising, approaching a diverse range of institutional funders, investments in real estate, Diaspora fundraising, endowments, social enterprises, special events and campaigns etc<sup>7</sup>.

Women's Funds can also be described as local grantmakers and high-activist organisations.<sup>8</sup>

contexts, while at the same time providing viable opportunities garnered from years of experience and engagement.

Women's Funds can play a key role in promoting links and good will between governments, the private sector, NGOs and community-based initiatives. These connections can add value to grantmaking. By providing opportunities to address the very structures and systems which breed inequality, poor governance, uneven distribution of resources, and abuses of fundamental human rights, there can be maximum returns on the grantmaking investment.

### **The African Women's Development Fund**

The African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) is the first Africa-wide Women's Fund in Africa. *The vision* of AWDF is for African women to live in a world in which there is social justice, equality and respect for women's human rights. To this end, *our mission* is to mobilise financial resources to support initiatives for transformation led by African women at local, national and international levels. The Fund was set up by three African Women who have been active in various institutions within and outside Africa, and who have a track record of successful empowerment interventions, which have helped strengthen the African Women's Movement. AWDF's objectives are to raise money and make grants for the support of non-profit African women's organizations working for social justice, equality and peace. AWDF plays four key roles as follows:

- a) Fundraising within and outside Africa
- b) Grant-making on an Africa-wide basis,
- c) Communication and advocacy, with a focus on the work, needs and achievements of African women's organisations,
- d) Providing technical assistance to strengthen grantee organizations.

### **AWDF Grantmaking priorities**

AWDF awards grants to African women's organizations working in the following thematic areas  
- Women's Human Rights, Economic Empowerment, Political Participation, Peace-Building, Health and Reproductive



making. Increasingly, AWDF has been supporting larger organisations and networks across the continents. Through a combination of grantmaking support for women's practical needs and funding for more strategic levels of mobilising, organising and advocacy, AWDF has made a significant contribution towards strengthening the African women's movement. Since we started awarding grants in October 2001, we have funded over 400 women's organisations in 41 African countries with over U\$5m.

### **What are our indicators of success at AWDF?**

Our indicators of success as a Women's Fund are tied to our strategic goals and mission. These are some of the ways in which we measure our success:

The enhanced capacity of our grantee organizations

Our ability to support marginalized women's groups in deprived rural and urban areas, which larger donors are unable to do.

Our willingness to provide additional support to grantees beyond funding, through our Capacity Building Unit.

An effective grantee outreach and learning program which takes us into many countries across the continent, and which provides us with an opportunity to not only learn from grantees, but to enable them network amongst themselves.

Our capacity to convene African women's organizations around thematic concerns and develop plans of action<sup>8</sup>.

An increased awareness of the rights of wo

currently under implementation (2006-2009) AWDF is moving beyond conventional institutional funding to focus on the following:

- Ø An international Endowment Campaign (November 2007-October 2009)
- Ø Individual donors within and outside Africa
- Ø The private sector in Africa
- Ø Africans in the Diaspora
- Ø Investments (i.e. Real Estate, stocks, etc)
- Ø Bi-laterals
- Ø Social Enterprises (A clothing shop for women, a women's production company, etc)

### **Key challenges facing women's funds**

1. A major challenge that AWDF faces, and it is certainly the same for other Women's Funds, is that we receive many more proposals than we are able to respond to. For us as a Women's Fund, this means turning down proposals from our colleagues within the women's movement. We know them. We know they are doing credible work. Yet we simply cannot afford to fund all of them, and so some have to be turned away.

2. Another challenge that many Women's Funds face is that they are not well known, since most of them are relatively new. Most of them are quite small, and are not household names, compared with the much larger, well known international NGOs/donors. This raises questions of capacity, credibility, assumptions about professionalism, etc. In many instances, Northern based international NGOs position themselves as gatekeepers, since they have the capacity to attract large sums of money from a variety of sources. This makes it difficult for local organisations to grow and expand. A rather worrying trend in this regard is large, international NGOs setting up local versions of themselves, and competing with local organisations for financial resources and political space. Even though it is claimed that these country offices are staffed with local people and they sometimes have local boards, the fact still remains that they report to a centralised structure based in the North, and local organisations can not compete with their household brands, the salaries they can offer professionals, and the amount of resources they have to invest in institutional capacity building.

3. There is also the challenge of scale. The grants that local Women's Funds are able to give are quite small, compared with what larger international funders can give. This inhibits growth of both the Women's Funds and their grantees.

4. Another challenge is the need for sustainability. As public foundations, we are only able to award grants effectively if we receive adequate support for not only grantmaking, but the programmatic and administrative costs of running a grantmaking organisation. This makes raising unrestricted income an ongoing challenge, since this is usually not the kind of funding you can get from traditional donors. In addition, one of the things that can make a grantmaking institution truly sustainable is an endowment which can be in the form of invested capital or a

significant, unrestricted working reserve. Whilst many donors agree with this, very few are willing to commit resources to the building of endowments for long-term sustainability.<sup>9</sup>

5. We work in a climate of deep cynicism and ambivalence towards the role of non-profits in our communities, which often makes it difficult to mobilise resources locally. We have to work hard to gain and keep the trust of people locally.

### **Recommendations for future action**

1. Women need more money. Serious money not trickles here and there. Where is the political will to put serious money on the table for women? The business of promoting and protecting women's rights is unfinished business across the world. We need to increase the amount of funding available for women.
2. It is recommended that donors should invest more in movement building. The process of social change needs long-term investments. Donors should be willing to invest long-term, so that social movements can grow, learn evolve, and hopefully, sustain themselves. The women's movement needs considerable investments and sustaining at local, national, regional and global levels. There should be funding for movement-building activities as well as support for organisations and projects.
3. Donors interested in women's rights and gender equality should endeavour to work in true partnership with their partners and avoid illogical interpretations of donor policies which tend to end up undermining the hard work of women in their communities. A specific example I will give here is the way in which women's organisations are now losing out on funding because their programs *'only focus on women and do not include men'*<sup>10</sup>.
4. Donors need to invest significantly in local philanthropic institutions such as Women's Funds. Women's Funds have a core mission and mandate to provide funding for women's rights work, they are not engaged in fundraising and grantmaking as an add-on, this is their *raison d'être*. If Women's Funds have more resources, they in turn will be able to develop more proactive grantmaking portfolios.
5. It is recommended that there should be a mapping of Women's Funds located in the global south and Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>11</sup> This mapping exercise will help do three things:
  - a) Add to existing knowledge and literature on latest philanthropic trends.
  - b) Provide an entry point for the scaling up of existing Women's Funds.

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<sup>9</sup> In 2005, the Ford Foundation started the Ford International Initiative to Strengthen Philanthropy (FIISP). This involved bringing together 19 foundations from across the world, all of them Ford Foundation grantees, to work together on scaling up local philanthropic initiatives. As a result of this initiative, AWDF has received a lead gift of U\$3m from The Ford Foundation. AWDF is planning to leverage this gift to an endowment goal of U\$15m.

<sup>10</sup> This example of how current trends are driving resources away from women's organizations was raised in interviews featured in the AWID report.

<sup>11</sup> Some of this information already exists and can be found through the INWF secretariat or the Global Fund for Women ([www.globalfundforwomen.org](http://www.globalfundforwomen.org)).

- c) Help determine where additional Women's Funds need to be encouraged to emerge.
6. It is strongly recommended that donors not begin creating Women's Funds themselves, it is advised that they take their lead from the women's movements concerned. If there is not enough perceived ownership and leadership from women themselves, the efforts will flounder, even with the best of intentions. It is also not advisable for donors to push women's organisations and networks into performing grantmaking functions which are usually not a part of their mandate, as has been the case in several parts of Africa. This moves these organisations away from their core mission into service providers on behalf of donors
  7. The various institutional, individual and corporate donors to the women's movement should be encouraged to develop and adopt what I will call a ***Sustainability Compact***. This compact will work towards the goal of making women's organisations sustainable, in holistic terms, beyond donor funding. It is not enough for donors to ask the question '*how will you make yourselves sustainable?*', donors need to be able to articulate what they can do to make their partners sustainable.<sup>12</sup> Specific strategies that can be examined under such a compact would include long-term funding, multi-year funding, unrestricted funding, capacity building for broad-based fundraising initiatives, endowments, cash reserves, investments, funding for social enterprises, etc.
  8. Donors supporting women's rights work and gender equality need to do more to support the architecture and infrastructure of the women's movement at all levels. As mentioned above, a focus on project-specific funding undermines the work of organisations committed to social change. There should be more funding available for institutional capacity building, leadership development, transition planning, sabbaticals for leaders, inter-generational organising, conserving the legacies of women's rights activists, etc.
  9. Donor funding and policies should be structured in ways which allow local women's organisations and networks access funding directly and not exclusively through Northern-based institutions. This is not to say Northern NGOs should not receive funding to work in the South, the point here is that they should not be the only means through which Southern organisations can access resources.
  10. One of the most difficult places to mobilise resources from for women's rights work has