

**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
IN EASTERN EUROPE**

Kinga Lohmann*

Division for the Advancement of Women
Department of Economic and Social Affairs
United Nations, New York
Fax: (212) 963-3463
daw@un.org
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw>

** The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.*

Introduction

This paper focuses on the assessing the impact of a decrease in financing for women human rights NGOs in Eastern Europe caused by the withdrawal of donors from the region, and also geopolitical changes related to the EU enlargement in 2004. It is based on the experience of women human rights NGOs as well as Eastern European women's network. Finally, based on the analysis, it proposes the recommendations for future action.

How are women's organizations funded and what are the trends in such funding?

A boom in funding by foreign large private and public donors in the nineties in Eastern Europe lasted only for a decade. It was a new region for them after the collapse of a totalitarian regime, and contributing to building NGOs including women's human rights organizations was an evident priority. A sharp withdraw of donors at the beginning of the new century caused an alarming decline in the funding of women's organizations¹. It was a devastating depart that created a serious financial insecurity, and many of women's NGOs were forced to reduce significantly their staff and activities, limit their office space or even close down their organizations. The consequences are even more disastrous since many organizations were relatively young (less than ten years) - being in the stage of promising process of institutional development of their organization - and reducing an experienced staff caused a significantly diminished capacity in fundraising, and, as consequence, their perspective of survival.

A fast withdraw of donors from the middle income countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union created a real threat for young civil society and women's human rights groups which were ill prepared to face new situation with no alternative sources of funding at the country level. Moreover, it affected badly low income Eastern European countries (e.g. Moldova), and they are again somehow forgotten and not included in

which generally makes an impression of Poland being “an anti-feminist state”⁴ . Other challenges arise from some donors’ approach - a stereotyped image of Eastern European and

had also a negative impact on the condition of women's NGOs and financing for women human rights⁶. Since 2003-04 financial situation of women's NGOs has dramatically worsened. It was, among other trends, due to the assumption of international donors (who came to Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall with their 'democratization' agenda) that democratic mechanisms are already in place and guaranteed by EU membership of these countries, and that their civil society is strong enough (what a spectacular result to build a solid civil society from scratch within just 10 years!). Hence, they decided to withdraw from the region. The other assumption was that the NGOs from the countries which would join the EU in 2004 or later would have access to a significant amount of the EU funds. However, for gender equality NGOs, the reality has turned far from what was expected to happen while reading the EU policy papers.

At a country level, there is money from the European Structural Fund available for projects on equal opportunities for women in the labour market but almost no money for other programs e.g. combating gender discrimination in other spheres of life, including serious violations of women's reproductive rights, women's human rights and/or monitoring the implementation of international agreements. Many women's rights NGOs were forced to adopt 'a survival strategy' and to shift towards projects in relation to the labour market. They had to abandon their primary function of "watching" the government and influencing its gender equality legislation and policy, and as a result, the advocacy of women's NGOs became almost invisible in comparison to the period before 2003, and instead of lobbying women's groups returned to "softer" activities such as awareness rising programs.

The other source of funding is the European Commission's (EC) 'calls for proposals'. However, in its extremely competitive environment the Eastern European NGOs with little experience in complicated and lengthy application procedures have unequal chances as compared to more experienced civil society from the 'old' EU. Finally, a lack of 20% (or more) of their own contribution to the EC projects becomes an overwhelming obstacle, taking also into account that Eastern European governments are not used to sharing project costs with the NGO sector. The fact that the EC promotes project partnership, also with NMS' organizations, constitutes for them a better entry point to EU funding: through cooperation with other organizations. However, Eastern European NGOs are very seldom a leading organization and mostly function as project partners. Thus, their role is limited (and so are their funds within the project) but at least there is an advantage of developing their capacity in EC project management and building new partnerships. It is a pity, however, that such new forms of cooperation do not allow financing partners from non-EU countries, which affects seriously some of women's networks operating in CEE/CIS region.

Thus, joining the EU, instead of strengthening a young civil society and "watch dog" women's human rights organizations in the countries where democracy is not yet well grounded, alarmingly weakened the women's movement in Eastern Europe through a disturbing drop in gender equality financing and the scope of cooperation among women in Eastern Europe.

6

What are the challenges?

Although equality between men and women is included as a principle in the Treaty establishing European Community and should be incorporated in all activities, gender equality gradually disappears from the new EU policy papers and financial instruments for 2007-13. Replacing gender equality⁷ with equal opportunities with no emphasis put on gender is a serious threat for women's empowerment. Equal opportunities is too broad term and poses a risk that women's equal opportunities may become marginalized and/or lost completely, as was in case of celebration of the year 2007 as a European Year of Equal Opportunities for All in some of the NMS: gender equality programs were not a priority and received little support from the governing bodies. Another serious concern is the question of gender mainstreaming (see above), and the general notion of "equality" that includes many other forms of discrimination beside gender. This may lead to gender inequalities not being adequately addressed.

Proposals for policy-makers on increasing resources for the women's movement.

Since awareness on gender equality and women's empowerment is more advanced principally among the EU officials, the European Commission should put a "pressure" on NMS governments to increase financial resources for gender equality and women's empowerment in programs financed by the European Structural Funds. Moreover, there should be a requirement of certain percentage to be allocated to women's NGOs.

The

- (a) Fill a funding gap in financing gender equality and women's empowerment programs.
- (b) Introduce women's empowerment and gender equality as a separate thematic area of funding.
- (c) Support institutional and human resources development, and democratic governance of women's NGOs
- (d) Promote funding for 'watch dog' women human rights NGOs, for their monitoring of financing for gender equality and democratic lobbying activities.

2. By the Governments within European Structural Funds

- (a) Monitor mainstreaming of gender perspective in the projects financed by Structural Funds.
- (b) Give more consideration to the proven expertise in gender equality issues in the organizations implementing projects on gender equality.
- (c) Reduce and simplify detailed technical administrative requirements in the application for and implementation of structurally funded projects.
- (d) Build capacity of operating personnel of European Structural Funds responsible for financial and administrative verification of implemented projects.

3. By the Governments within the Norwegian and European Economic Area (EEA) Financial Mechanisms