

Expert Group Meeting

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‘Beijing +30: Emerging issues and future directions for gender equality and women’s rights’

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Mobilizing resources to realize the vision of the Beijing Platform for Action

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* The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of UN-Women, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations.

I do not want to begin with negativity; however, funding gender equality is a sad story, which has many brave innovations, and twisters and other magical things that the women's human rights movements have undertaken to bring some light to it. There are of course new actors, including High Networth Women coming forward. However, women – as Mama Cash can vouch for – have been coming forward to support women, over many generations.

The history of women's funds, the AWID's Where Is the Money for Women's Rights, the OECD GenderNet report, the World Bank report, the UN-Women report... And I could go on, as all are constantly updated – all of these reaffirm a simple fact that we all know, gender equality is woefully underfunded, it is an afterthought and so on.

We also know that these very limited funds do not go to feminist organisations, whose core mandate is gender equality. In any case, I don't know if it is useful anymore to continue to rake up the 1 per cent story. Despite the work done in the creation of UN-Women, the sustainable resource dream continues to remain a mirage. In fact, the liquidity crisis of the United Nations is compromising the accountability process, by impacting the meetings CEDAW committee will be able to have and should have to fulfil its mandate.

Not only is there a paucity of funds committed to gender equality, the ways in which it is experienced at the national level, these are often divisive and create conflict amongst movement actors.

An example is perhaps the process of writing the alternative CEDAW report, for which a tender was floated by a specialised agency, and awarded to an organisation, that completed the task. Most probably it was a great report. However, the process of writing the alternative report is inherently political – it is about discussions and debates, and priorities, negotiations, disagreements and so on. This action – meant to support civil society organizations, reduced an extremely political process to a technical one – thereby compromising the entire accountability mandate of the process.

So, it is not only how much funding, but also for what and how is it given?

Women's funds – a role strategy that emerged over 40 years ago to respond to the paucity of funding as well as its process – began with the open calls almost as a challenge to the “by invitation only” action taken by most large foundations and funders. However, they have already recognised the limitation of these, and are quickly moving to participatory grant-making, and using other methodologies that enable collaboration instead of competition. They well know, given the funds that they have, they are not able to fund more 30 per cent to 50 per cent of the qualified applications they receive, even though each one of them deserves the grant they are asking for.

To this already complex net, let us also bring in the nervousness of the state regimes where social justice work and resourcing is concerned. So, on one hand we have countries in a financial downward spiral – most often due to extreme corruption of the leadership – now wanting to plug the hole as it were, by taxing every resource coming into the country, even if for social justice, taking resources away from communities that have been wronged by them to begin with. On the other side we have regimes that are restricting the actions of social justice organisations by using laws to control flow of aid and funding to them.

And this is the time, we are facing the greatest challenges in doing our work, whether it is security of women human rights defenders or care and collective well-being.

And before we get into a very strategic conversation with my wonderful panellists, I also want to draw attention to “intermediary” funding, which sometime is strategic, but most often invisibilises the frontline actors, as well creates power paradigms between “givers” and “recipients”. Additionally, there is another piece – implementers become funders. And that is not something we should aspire to! The attention of the implementers should be on the action, and on shared conspiracies and in collaborations and on building and amplifying voices and narratives. Not on partner evaluations, but on collaboration assessments and learning.

We are here to talk about the big picture, but in discussing resourcing, it is critical to understand the role of each actor in delivering the promise of equality and non-discrimination.