

Women's Civil Society Organizations of the Future

Extract from UN Women
Fund for Gender Equality's
Annual Report 2018-2019



Through a research-action initiative, the FGE is generating knowledge on women's organizations – their challenges, needs and promising practices for sustainability and resilience.

Using design methodologies, UN Women and civil society representatives have co-created four solutions. Testing them and learning from the findings will help the FGE better support its key constituency.

Women-led civil society organizations play a pivotal role in advancing gender equality. Yet amid shrinking space for civil society and increased competition for limited funding, they must adapt, innovate and transform the way they operate. This may encompass rethinking their programming, management style, funding models, and mobilization and partnership strategies.

Funded by the Government of Denmark through UN Women's Innovation Unit and in collaboration with the Parsons School of Design, the FGE's research-action initiative explores new support modalities aligned with current and future needs. It aims to address the following question:

How might the FGE and UN Women at large better support women's organizations to stay relevant, and be agile, resilient and sustainable agents of change in ever-changing, complex contexts?



During the workshop we built conditions to promote experimentation. Continuous exploration paired with collective reflection must be integrated in feminist action processes. Opening new spaces, new methodologies, new ways to do and be – all are essential in the creation of alternatives for a more inclusive society.

**Kemly Camacho,
Cooperativa Sulá Batsú, Costa Rica**

Rethinking resource mobilization for more sustainable organizations is critical for women and girls to thrive in the future. The workshop was a great opportunity to step back as women's rights and gender development practitioners and take a look at what the future could hold for feminists.

**Moiyattu Banya,
Girls Empowerment Sierra Leone (GESL)**

In order to be a positive force to promote gender equality, donors need to do more listening and learning. That is why FGE's effort to engage women's rights organizations in free-flowing and creative brainstorming on innovative ways to support in different contexts is so crucial.

**Joanne Sandler,
Gender at Work**



Preliminary analysis has confirmed that the most significant challenge faced by women's civil society organizations is insufficient funding. Other limitations include short project timeframes and difficult operating contexts. Philanthropic entities are the main source of funding, although many organizations generate their own resources. Most organizations are willing to explore alternative programmatic, funding and organizational approaches, such as decentralized and flatter organizational structures, and co-creation with beneficiaries.



More specifically, the research identified:

- Challenges such as competition for funds, dependency on donor funding, donor-driven agendas, project-to-project funding and work overload
- Needs, including to expand networks and space for reflection, experimentation and growth
- Solutions among women’s organizations, such as the diversification of funding sources (e.g., consultancy-based model, selling materials or renting spaces)
- Solutions among donors, such as more accessible funding, application and reporting processes, and diversification of grants, including for organizational effectiveness and for smaller organizations

In a prototyping workshop using design innovation methodologies, practitioners from UN Women, women’s civil society organizations and other experts co-created possible solutions for better support to organizations. Four solutions are being tested.

In Mexico, an inclusive and feminist human resource successful approach will be turned into consultancy services for other civil society organizations by offering step-by-step guidance on a replicable and upscalable model, as an alternative source of income. In Rwanda, a virtual support network for women’s organizations and social entrepreneurs will harness existing resources, knowledge and skills, using a mentorship model. In Viet Nam, an adaptable meeting binder will foster new ways of working and a creative mindset. Globally, a co-created grantmaking modality will challenge the existing donor-grantee relationship and seek to better address organizational challenges.

Exploring Future Scenarios



The FGE places great importance on designing projects and selecting methodologies. This can make a major difference in the results achieved, particularly in challenging us to move away from our usual discourses and awaken our creativity. With the support of researchers from the Parsons School of Design, a "futuring" exercise took 30 practitioners from women's civil society organizations to four fictitious extreme future scenarios, including: a perfect world scenario, an extreme climate crisis scenario, an extreme corporate state and radical information transparency. Here is a snapshot of some of the ideas that emerged with the potential to inspire innovative, forward-looking solutions to organizations' current and future challenges.