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Resourcing Feminist Movements Well Delivers Progress on Gender Equality Goals

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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.

1. Overview

Our work at Mama Cash – the first international women’s fund – shows us that strong, autonomous and cohesive feminist movements are crucial for advancing gender justice. Led by women, girls, trans and intersex activists, feminist organising drives intersectional change by addressing the root causes of oppression, including efforts to end gender-based violence, address the climate crisis and strengthen democracy globally. Around the world, these communities are on the frontlines for just economies and healthy communities, fighting for the rights of all people to live safely and with dignity. The urgency to adequately resource the full diversity of these movements has never been greater.

Over the last decade, we have seen a growing number of governments prioritise and formalise their commitment to gender equality, including the adoption of feminist foreign policies, and commitments towards achieving SDG5, where structural issues such as legal discrimination, decision-making on sexual and reproductive rights and low levels of political participation continue to impede progress.

It is abundantly clear that many governments and philanthropic funders are committed to using their resources and voices to shift the needle for gender equality, with a growing and vocal cadre of funders who see the critical role played by feminist movements in securing lasting change and address the structural drivers of inequality. Resourcing these organisations with dedicated and accessible resources is a critical step in delivering ambitious policy goals including the SDGs. So, why are funders still struggling to bridge the gap between intent and practice regarding resourcing for gender equality and women’s rights?

2. What does the current system look like?

Despite the crucial role of feminist movements and organisations in advancing progress towards multiple development goals, OECD data shows that average annual commitments to support women’s rights organisations and movements, and government institutions dropped to USD 631 million in 2021-2022, from USD 891 million in 2019-2020; and excluding funding committed to government institutions, this amount was just USD \$453 million in 2022, around 1% of total ODA dedicated to gender equality and women’s empowerment. This marks a decrease in the total volume of funding to women’s rights organisations from the previous year alongside a drop in overall ODA for gender equality – which accounts for only half of overall development assistance. Within philanthropy, the Human Rights Funders Network’s (HRFN) 2019 Advancing Human Rights report found that just under one-quarter (23%, or \$929 million) of human rights funding supported women and girls and that this represented between just 0.62% to 1.8% of foundation giving. In addition, if we take a step back and assess *how* money moves, for decades, the way the funding system is set up means most financial resources move to and via large organisations, governments, or stays within development agencies themselves.

3. What is needed to change this?

The disconnect between rhetoric and action is not primarily from a lack of resources or political will. Rather, the ways in which funding moves in this system, that is the modalities of funding, warrant review and changes to bridge the gap between intent and practice. Why direct funding needs to reach these organisations is increasingly clear, yet we continue to hear about the challenges that funders encounter in the how: how to design and implement programmes that succeed in providing sustained and direct funding to reach those movements. Together with the Association for Women's Rights in Development ([AWID](#)), we published the report [Moving More Money to the Drivers of Change](#), which provides concrete existing models to support funders put their intent and commitment into practice, focusing on real-world case profiles to show how modalities of funding do or do not work toward the goal of more robustly resourcing feminist movements.

4. Here is what Mama Cash has done

Mama Cash has provided over €140 million in funding to feminist movements worldwide over the past forty years. Across these four decades, we have always been intentional about addressing power dynamics in our funding flows. Working in collaboration with our partners, we are constantly developing new and innovative ways to ensure that we move more and better money directly to feminist movements and organisations. We are not in this alone, but part of a growing ecosystem of women's and feminist funds, whose collective efforts to influence the global flow of ODA and philanthropic giving have resulted in shifting control of resources to Global South feminist movements.

Over the last decades, we have invested in a strong, allied, and resilient feminist funding ecosystem. The 1995 Beijing conference crystallised Mama Cash's global approach. Mama Cash and [Global Fund for Women](#) shifted to support the emergence of national and regional funds, just three years before the International Network of Women's Funds, [Prospera](#), was launched. Since then, we have supported the efforts of our peer funds to push pioneering funding models, such as the [Leading from the South](#) initiative, which paved the way for unprecedented collaborations and direct funding of civil society in the Global South, including the CAD \$300M [Equality Fund](#) in 2018 and the AUD \$10M Amplify-Invest-Reach (AIR) partnership between the Australian government and [four Asia Pacific women's funds](#) in 2022. Through collaborative advocacy efforts with feminist allies, we have helped unlock new funding for feminist environmental justice organisations through the [Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action](#) (GAGGA), a ground-breaking consortium led by Global South feminists that has bridged the silos separating gender equality funding from climate finance.

Around the world, Mama Cash and our peer funds continue to strengthen our funding portfolios, adapt grantmaking approaches to be more participatory, and develop strategic partnerships to move

money. And it's working: according to the [OECD](#), partnering with women's funds is one of the most effective ways for donors to get resources to local women's rights organisations and movements. HRFN's [Trust Gap report](#) found that women's funds and feminist funds are a leader in providing flexible grantmaking to movements in the Global South.

5. What can philanthropy do to support?

Philanthropic funders have a critical role to play in advancing global goals on gender equality and women's rights. By acknowledging their position of power within the system and their potential role in perpetuating inequalities, there is great potential for philanthropy to push back against the status quo when it comes to funding gender equality. This requires redefining traditional concepts of risk, rebalancing power internally and imagining radical and effective ways to redistribute capital and wealth so that it reaches the feminist movements and movements that remain structurally underfunded.

First and foremost, this means recognising that the infrastructure to support feminist movements exists and is constantly adapting to respond to the context and needs of civil society. Philanthropic funders can learn from and partner with women's and feminist funds, advocacy networks and movement strengthening organisations; trusted, proven and effective mechanisms that have the capacity to absorb new funding and direct it to those driving change. Some philanthropists are leading the way: between 2020-2022, Mackenzie Scott gifted [\\$170 million](#) to women's funds and the membership network Prospera.

Addressing the funding gap requires bold action and innovative thinking. Unbound by the same constraints as government funding, philanthropic funders can seize the opportunity to direct money to the movements, issue areas and geographies that remain overlooked in ODA. They can look to adapting their portfolios and grantmaking approaches and shift towards trust-based funding, providing core, flexible, predictable and multi-year funding to the feminist organisations working across different issues and contexts to address the most urgent challenges we are facing today.

Critically, philanthropy can choose to support the beginning and the building of movements. Stories of positive impact often begin with taking change on an idea, a leader or an opportunity. Our partners tell us that with seed funding, something new can begin. This is where funders can choose to redefine conceptions of risk and fund bravely, matching the courage of activists by assessing their perceptions of risk against the timescales and flexibility needed for organisations to deliver.

One thing is certain: we can't talk about meeting gender equality targets without talking about feminist movements. And we can't address the funding gap without providing meaningful support to the feminist movements on the frontlines. If governments and philanthropic funders are serious about delivering on their promises and the much-needed outcomes for gender equality, they should be honest and realistic about the investment needed. Together we must move beyond

political gestures, hold our institutions accountable, and direct accessible and impactful funding to the organisations at the forefront of advancing gender equality and human rights.