

The gender factor – How women’s organisations further sustainable social change

By Angelika Arutyunova, Manager of *Where is the Money for Women’s Rights*, Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID)



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Development strategies of the past decade have increasingly recognised the connection between women and children’s well-being and gender equality to the overall well-being of communities, societies, and economies. The MDGs launched in 2000 and the World Bank’s “Gender Equality as Smart Economics” plan published in 2007 are notable examples.

At the same time, research demonstrates that women’s rights and gender equality issues still lag far behind others in receiving financial support. Despite

this, women’s rights movements’ unique approaches, contributions and impact on development goals, gender equality, and sustainability have been remarkable. Some of their most outstanding contributions include helping to break the culture of silence around rape and violence; furthering understanding of gender and collecting gender specific data; and helping construct new institutional arrangements and mechanisms to advance equality such as gender budgets and police stations for women, among others.

Women’s organisations are also at the forefront of analysing and responding to challenges presented by the current context for advancing social change. For example, AWID’s next International Forum on Women & Development, to take place April 19-22, 2012 in Istanbul, Turkey, will convene close to 2,000 women’s rights activists and allies to strategise on “Transforming Economic Power to Advance Women’s Rights and Justice.” Forum participants will bring together their rich and diverse experiences of surviving in, critically questioning and advancing alternatives to dimensions of the global economic order that have contributed to the recent crisis.

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Women’s movements have demonstrated great capacity to build individual and collective forms of empowerment to advocate for and create sustained change at multiple levels – grassroots, local, national, regional, transnational – beyond what policy shifts or support to individuals alone can do. It is this agility, as well as the strength gained through strategic partnerships – with national governments, other women’s rights organisations/networks and with other movements – that make women’s rights organisations well-positioned to address a variety of development challenges.

That the holistic approaches used by women’s movements, taking complexity and diversity into account, have not attracted significant support from various funding agencies requires explanation. This may be partially linked to the fact that many donors continue to support more traditional methods of advancing women’s empowerment such as micro-credit, gender mainstreaming, and quota systems, to name a few. However, these methods tend to focus on the individual as the key driver of change in contrast to the approaches of women’s movements that view individual problems as related to systemic ones and seek to address economic, social and political rights more broadly.

Such inattention to women’s rights is not a new phenomenon and cannot be fully attributed to funding reductions as a result of the most recent financial crisis. In fact, the emergence of specialised women’s funds such as Mama Cash in the Netherlands and the Global Fund for Women in the US began as early as the 1980s in response to larger foundations’ seeming apathy towards women’s rights work. Since then, women’s funds have expanded to include close to 40 funds worldwide, brought together under the umbrella of the International Network of Women’s Funds (INWF) and the Women’s Funding Network (WFN), which comprises 165 members with over 130 of them being US-based women’s funds. While such funds play a unique and important role in supporting women’s rights organising, it is crucial that funding agencies of all sectors and sizes and with differing priorities understand how women’s rights are related to their work and how to use a gender lens in their programmes and grantmaking.

To ensure sustainable development and to fulfil the MDGs, it is time to move beyond simply recognising the importance of achieving gender equality and women’s rights. The research done by AWID, among others, demonstrates that social change and development agendas significantly advance when funding is allocated specifically to women and for women’s rights advancement.

AWID is funded by EFC members Sigrid Rausing Trust, Mama Cash and the Global Fund for Women, among others.

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