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Philanthropy for the Women's Movement, Not Just 'Empowerment'

by Françoise Girard, November 4, 2019

Only women's organizations focused on consciousness-raising, coalition-building, and advocacy can bring the kind of systemic change that women the world over need. The philanthropic community's preoccupation with impact and the short-term projects that deliver measurable outcomes can distract us from what really works.

Abundant data shows that the most effective way for philanthropists to advance women's rights worldwide is to directly invest in the women's movement. This means the provision of long-term, general operating support to women's rights organizations that work collaboratively to transform social, legal, and political systems of patriarchal oppression.

However, while today's philanthropists are increasingly quite vocal about achieving gender equality, many foundations have actually decreased their general operating support for these kinds of women's rights organizations, preferring time-bound, project-specific funding aimed at "women's empowerment." The numbers are stark: According to a study by the Women's Philanthropy Institute and Indiana University's Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, women's and girls' groups received only **1.6 percent** of US-based charitable giving by individuals, foundations, and corporations in 2016. Moreover, Jill A. Irvine has documented that the share of US foundation funding for general operating support to foreign groups that engage in broad-based advocacy for gender equality dropped dramatically between 2002 and 2013, from 30 percent to 15 percent. This trend has severe consequences. Funding for individual projects that "empower women" can actually be counterproductive, as project-based service delivery grants can leave activists without the time and resources to push for broader systemic change.

If we are serious about women's rights, we must directly support the women's organizations that are pushing forward legislation and policy that guarantees sexual and reproductive rights, codifies fair pay, ensures payment of alimony, and tackles domestic violence. We must support the women's movement, not just "empowerment."



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Why “Women’s Empowerment” Projects Aren’t Working

Billions of dollars are spent annually on projects that aim to empower women. These projects are premised on a simple business case, forcefully made by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and its regional counterparts: that investing in the individual capacities of women delivers economic growth, boosts the national GDP, and works to end poverty.

Examining these projects today, one would be hard pressed to recognize the original vision at the core of “women’s empowerment.” In the 1980s, feminist academics and activists from the Global South were deeply dissatisfied with top-down development models that typically ignored the role of women in society and reinforced patriarchal and colonial-era systems. They promoted a different approach to improving welfare, recognizing and emphasizing the potential and capacity of women to change their communities and countries from the ground up, and supporting women’s groups to organize, to transform gender roles, and to redistribute power.

Today’s focus on investing in individual women, however—whether through microloans, entrepreneurship training, livestock, or scholarships—has little to do with the kind of collective action to transform power relations that these Global South feminists had envisioned. By investing in the individual, the burden remains on women to lift themselves and their children out of poverty, while leaving in place the systems of oppression that cause or contribute to this poverty in this first place.

Not surprisingly, these kinds of projects often fail to effect large-scale change. In a study published in 2019, Sophia Friedson-Ridenour describes how the crop yields of women in Northern Ghana’s farming communities continue to be lower than men’s, despite the US government’s “Feed the Future” project, which provides women access to seeds, technology, and training. The project relies on the assumption that placing more resources in women’s hands will be transformative, in and of itself. This assumption is flawed: Patriarchal bias is systemic in communities where men control ploughing services and the kinds of crops that women can grow. The project did not, however, provide support to women to recognize and challenge traditional power dynamics.

Friedson-Ridenour therefore concludes that we must “avoid instrumentalist approaches to women’s empowerment that simply deepen their integration within economic and social systems that continue to subordinate them”:

“We must go farther and find ways of linking empowerment efforts with wider changes to gendered power relations which both structure access to resources and opportunities, and shape what women imagine as possible and desirable for themselves.”

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True Empowerment Is Political

How can we meet Friedson-Ridenour's challenge? Real empowerment begins when women come together and reflect on the social norms that keep them as second-class citizens, a political process grounded in acknowledgement of systemic subordination, and leading to the recognition that women have the power to act together for change. This process of consciousness-raising and mobilization happens within women's movements the world over.

In fact, women's movements are the key, and often the only, factor driving change on women's rights. In a 2012 study, Mala Htun and Laurel Weldon analyzed a 70-country dataset from 1975 to 2005 and found that the autonomous mobilization of women was the crucial factor accounting for domestic policy change on violence against women. A strong women's movement outweighed all other factors that one might otherwise assume to be more statistically predictive, such as national wealth or the political program of government. Similarly, a 2018 study by Alice Kang and Aili Mari Tripp analyzing data from 50 African countries found that legislative reform on women's rights was significantly less likely without action by domestic women's coalitions.

The impact of women's movements is far reaching. Feminist coalitions have produced a seismic shift in how the world thinks about and prioritizes gender equality. From the creation of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 1946 to the negotiations that led to the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, it has always been the mass mobilization of the global women's movement that has pushed governments to include gender equality and women's rights in international agreements and norms, whether in health, education, water and sanitation, or criminal justice reform. As president of the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC), I've participated with feminists from around the world in many of these diplomatic negotiations, and I've seen how easily gender equality falls off the agenda without the women's movement's constant pressure.

What Not to Do

Despite such evidence, many US foundations fund women's groups in ways that actually undermine their work, breeding divisions and decreasing opportunities for coalition building. Funders often balk at supporting a movement whose long and complex struggles seem difficult to measure and quantify. The philanthropic community's increasing preoccupation with demonstrating impact often translates into funding only short-term projects that can deliver quick results and easily measurable outcomes.

However, a variety of studies have shown that short-term project funding harms the women's movement. For example, a field study conducted in 2009 by Dean Chahim and Aseem Prakash demonstrated how project support and stringent reporting requirements had the effect of fracturing, depoliticizing, and ultimately, de-legitimizing Nicaragua's women's movement. By forcing women's organizations to compete with each other for the same project-based funding—rather than encouraging grantees to use the money to collaborate and strategize with fellow movement members—funders actually disincentivized collective action and ruptured partnerships. Moverover, service delivery projects took time away from broader activism, consciousness-raising, and community organizing, thus weakening the movement as a whole. Numerous other researchers have found the same effect, describing how time-bound funding for specific projects has weakened grassroots women's movements in Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Colombia, in Ghana, and in Palestine and Egypt.

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Moreover, when funding is tied to discrete project outcomes, recipients are unable to use that funding for essential “indirect” expenses like rent, accounting software, recruitment, or meetings. The “nonprofit starvation cycle,” a now ubiquitous term coined in the mid-2000s, describes the vicious feedback loop associated with this kind of project-only funding: Nonprofits without the money for indirect expenses are unable to effectively implement their programs, making them less attractive to future potential funders. Women’s rights organizations are particularly vulnerable to “starvation” because essential movement-building activities like hosting convenings or forming advocacy coalitions tend to fall outside the parameters of such project grants.

Funding for the Long-Term

Social change takes time. Women are rarely granted control over their own lives, sexuality, and reproduction without a fight, and setbacks abound. To support true change, funders must accept that the process is gradual, and support it over the long haul. This means providing grassroots and national women’s organizations with flexible long-term operating support, and refraining from harmful stipulations, such as those that prohibit the use of funds for conference participation or convenings.

Spaces where women can collaborate, strategize, and build solidarity across diverse movements are critical for organizations and activists seeking to mobilize and form long-term coalitions on a mass scale. One of IWHC’s first grants to the Argentine women’s movement was to pay rent for an apartment in Buenos Aires to allow activists from across the country to meet each other and engage directly with policymakers on a daily basis. This is exactly the kind of request that many donors would scoff at as unnecessary indirect expenses and operating costs, yet it was this investment that helped lay the foundation for 2019’s “green wave” demonstrations that produced a watershed moment for reproductive rights. Without spaces for women’s groups to collaborate, strategize, and build coalitions, the women’s movement remains fractured and unable to effectively mobilize for change. Yet a 2019 study by Jill A. Irvine and Nicholas Halterman found that US foundation funding for activities that create solidarity and identify issues is low and in decline, with funding for grassroots organizing never reaching more than 5 percent.

The identity of the funder also matters. Support for social movements is most successful when the donor is part of the movement. Women’s funds—philanthropic organizations that fund women’s rights organizations and movements—can effectively play that role. Organizations like IWHC, Mama Cash, MADRE, and the Global Fund for Women foster longstanding relationships with a variety of women’s organizations by supporting them through cycles of defeat and victory toward lasting change. Since the mid-1990s, for example, IWHC has supported Women for Women’s Human Rights (WWHR), whose human rights and consciousness-raising trainings across Turkey laid the ground work for grassroots mobilization, as was the case when thousands of women took to the streets in 2012 to protest the Turkish government’s proposed abortion ban, successfully forcing it to back down.

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At IWHC, we employ a long-term, flexible grant strategy based on the Whitman Institute’s trust-based philanthropy model—a grantmaking model that provides flexible, multi-year core funding and support “beyond the check” through leadership development, advocacy training, and other forms of capacity-building. Trust-based grantmaking relies on long-term relationships and the belief that change must be driven by the community. This high touch model is grounded in mutual trust and allows both the funder and grantee to quickly react to changing political dynamics. This—and the wealth of evidence that points to the unique role of women’s movements—is why we trust our grantees to set their own priorities and agenda, and to develop the strategies that will be most effective for them, their partners, and their communities.

If even a fraction of US foundations acknowledged the critical role of consciousness-raising, coalition-building, and advocacy—and funded accordingly—we could be exponentially closer to achieving women’s rights. Robust evidence and experience from around the world point us in the right direction. Now, it’s time to follow the path.

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