ABSTRACT

Drawing on her decades of experience working for leading civil society organisations (CSOs), as well as from her current role consulting internationally for the sector and assisting CSOs to become financially resilient, Ellen Sprenger discusses the key trends affecting women’s rights organisations (WROs) in the Global South. In doing so she outlines how WROs can more effectively raise resources from diverse sources, how to respond to financial uncertainty and how they can more directly impact the strategies of donors. We also learn how Ellen came to focus on this increasingly crucial part of ensuring a sustainable, independent and impactful women’s rights movement.

KEYWORDS

Financial resilience | fundraising | Women’s movement
1 • What are the main trends in financing women’s rights organisations in the Global South?

While there is growing attention for advancing women’s rights and gender justice among funders globally, this does not always translate into funding for women’s rights organisations (WROs). Because WROs are involved in some of the most cutting edge and transformative work, they tend to challenge the status quo, and it takes a special kind of funder to support this work. But there are several other dynamics at play.

Over the past 10 years, roughly 70 countries have instituted restrictive laws on civil society organisations (CSOs), and in one-third of those we’re seeing more restrictions on receiving foreign funding. Activism is being criminalised in a growing number of countries. This puts increased pressure on human rights defenders and their security and safety needs. And in so-called middle-income countries, international funders have reduced levels of funding on the assumption that a growing economy will lead to more equality, including gender justice and women’s rights, and that national-level resources will be sufficient to support this work. I think the AWID website is a great resource on the ever-changing funding landscape from the perspective of women’s human rights.

Overall, WROs are operating in a funding environment in which foreign grants are increasingly hard to secure. Such high dependency on a relatively small group of sources represents a significant risk. In response, organisations are starting to diversify income and revenue generation away from grants. There are WROs building a local support base of individual donors in South Africa, Brazil, Mexico and India. And women’s funds, such as Semillas in Mexico and Elas in Brazil, are real pioneers in this area. Crowdfunding is also becoming more widespread, as well as engagement strategies with corporations. For example, the newly created win-win coalition is all about building cross-sector engagement for the advancement of women’s rights.

We are also seeing a growing emphasis on developing capital assets, such as organisational reserves, real estate, or land to create more financial stability and additional ways of generating income.

Another trend is the creation of so-called hybrid models where there’s a blurring of lines between “doing good” and “making money”. This is reflected in terms like “social enterprise” and “impact investing”. While it is not always possible to monetise women’s rights work, it is important to keep an open mind. Success in this environment requires big strategic thinking and a good dose of creativity and I believe it is possible to come up with models where “social” comes first while at the same time healthy income streams are generated. A growing number of WROs are establishing a corporate entity alongside their original non-profit entity in order to tap into commercial revenue streams.

While grants from a relatively small group of Global North based foundations and governments still represent the vast majority of combined revenues for WROs in the
Global South, this is starting to shift. If you want to build real financial strength, you have to look beyond grants.

2 • How can women’s rights organisations influence donor policies or decisions?

Get creative! When India’s federal government tightened rules governing access to foreign funding, the Manas Foundation saw an opportunity to initiate a public–private partnership that is making New Delhi safer for women. By partnering with the New Delhi municipal government and corporate partners, they were able to train over 200,000 New Delhi-based auto-rickshaw and taxi drivers in preventing sexual harassment and violence against women.

The New Delhi municipal government made the training a requirement for drivers wanting to maintain their licence, while corporate partners provided the necessary funding through their Corporate Social Responsibility programs. All stakeholders involved are learning from each other and conversations about expanding to other urban areas.

While resource mobilisation is not easy, and sometimes downright frustrating, it is not helpful to frame the relationship with funders as “us” versus “them”. The reality is much more nuanced. Many WRO leaders sit on foundation boards or are consulted on strategy issues, and many working in funding agencies have roots in women’s rights movements. Real transformation takes place when CSO leaders and funders come together around shared purpose and figure out how to best move money and power towards rights and justice.

A great example of an organisation that is influencing donor policies and decisions is the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID). By pointing out how little funding goes to WROs and movements, and by developing engagement strategies with allies inside funding institutions, they have, in my estimate, been able to leverage close to US$ 250 million in funding for WROs over the last 10 years.

While strong, mutually advantageous and transformational relationships between CSOs and funders are not always possible, when they do materialise they strengthen the larger ecosystem of advancing rights and justice that can achieve powerful goals beyond the reach of a single entity.

3 • What led you to focus your work on financial resilience in women’s rights organisations?

I have been part of social movements since my teenage years growing up in the Netherlands – but I was impatient, I always felt that we weren’t making progress fast enough. After completing my Masters in Development Studies and spending seven years with Oxfam Novib, I was keen to know what social movements could borrow
from the corporate sector’s emphasis on “getting things done”. So I did my Masters in Business Administration. In a class with two women and 50 men, I was the only “non-profit” type. I felt like an undercover agent and loved it.

At the time, in the early 2000s, many WROs were trying to figure out “the money thing”. Where was the money, and how could we access more of it? When I became the executive director of Mama Cash, an Amsterdam based feminist foundation promoting women’s rights globally, I went through my own steep learning curve around resource mobilisation. I learned a lot from my American peers, whose way of relating to money and approach to fundraising was quite different to that of my peers in Europe. They helped me see money not as a means to an end but as an integral and creative part of realising rights and justice. My focus shifted from raising money to instead establishing relationships with donors and funders around shared purpose, passion and the exchange of ideas, connections and information.

I learned to see how valuable I was to them, as a source of information, inspiration and connections. This paradigm shift made fundraising much less scary and intimidating and a whole lot more interesting. And a whole lot more successful.

After leaving Mama Cash, I started Spring Strategies to support CSOs in realising ambitious goals. Our work on financial resilience soon became our fastest growing programme. Financial resilience is a big issue that keeps many CSO leaders up at night.

We use the term resilience to emphasise the importance of being proactive and dynamic in engaging with the funding landscape. Given that this landscape is constantly changing, and is in many places in a state of disruption, it is important to think and plan ahead. Think about governments that restrict CSOs from receiving foreign grants, or the way aid priorities have become increasingly tied to trade. We believe that those able to find inspiration in this disruption can turn challenging external contexts into real opportunities. And it is exciting to see how CSOs globally are responding to this challenge by creating new financing models.

4 • What can organisations do to better to attract resources?

First, it is important to rethink the relationship with funders. If we feel intimidated or unequal going into a meeting, we might not ask for what we really need, or we might not push back when a funder makes an unfavourable request. The end result is that organisations are left with project funding (rather than core funding) and struggle to stay true to their mission. In our financial resilience work at Spring Strategies, we delve deeply into how to develop more mutual and transformative engagements, with real room for exploration, sharing and co-creation. It’s key to check in with yourself about how you frame the relationship with your funders.
Second, we need to do away with the “overhead myth”. Many funders believe that less overhead is better, as if organisations can tackle huge challenges like human rights violations and climate change without a strong and enabling organisational infrastructure that includes good salaries, excellent technology, persuasive communications, strong financial systems and office spaces that inspire. It’s important to educate funders and negotiate grants that make organisations stronger rather than weaker. At Spring Strategies we encourage people to use the term “Core Mission Support” instead of “Overhead” in order to emphasise that these costs are not an add on, but essential to the success and impact of the organisation.

Third, diversification of funding sources can help organisations weather disruption. While foreign grants will continue to play a big part in financing WROs globally, it is critical to look beyond these grants. Innovation is vital, especially where WROs are positioning themselves for investment capital or impact investment grants, or are building an individual support base.

Fourth, relationships are key. It’s important to really understand the funder and its priorities. Too many groups do not take the time to understand who they are communicating with, and are presenting the same standard proposal to different funders.

Try to approach the relationship-building process in stages. Start with a phone call or an appointment – put out a call to your network to make an introduction if you’re building a new relationship – and use the opportunity to explore what the funder is interested in. Explain in clear and compelling terms why you do the work you do. Invite questions. This process of getting to know one another allows both parties to learn new things that may impact and strengthen the work. And after this meeting, send a short summary of what you discussed and agreed, clarifying parameters before sitting down to write the proposal.

Finally, write funding proposals in a clear and compelling way; include a cover note with a short summary. This makes it easier for funders to understand your work, which in turn raises the chances of a favourable decision.

5 • What are your five top tips for women’s human rights organisations facing financial uncertainty?

1 • Make sure to have a very clear and relevant strategy as an organisation. It should capture why you do what you do and what you are aiming to achieve. Your strategic plan is essentially your proposal to funders; it captures everything you are looking to raise funds for. Having a clear strategic direction makes it a lot easier to raise mission-aligned funding, as opposed to funds for a wide range of projects and activities.

2 • Your website matters - a lot. Research shows that individuals looking to make a financial contribution nearly always check your website and base their final decision on what they
find. You can count on grant-makers checking your website for evidence of purpose and impact - all presented in a clear and compelling way.

3 • Talk to your colleagues and peers about resource mobilisation and share and collaborate wherever you can. Be generous with your information and expect others to do the same. In the end it is about building strong collaborations and movements, not just individual organisations.

4 • Some say “money follows a great idea”. I say money follows a great idea shared in a compelling way. Being inspiring and visible as a thought leader not only helps transform and strengthen the field and movement, it also makes you an attractive player in which to invest resources. So stand out and seek visibility.

5 • And finally, go to the AWID website and learn everything you can about the ever-changing funding landscape. We are very fortunate in the global women’s movement to have a one-stop shop for just about everything you need to know about funding for women’s human rights. And it is available in French, Spanish and English.

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