

Commission on the Status of Women  
Fifty-first session  
New York, 26 February – 9 March 2007

Panel

**Financing for gender equality  
and the empowerment of women**

Written statement\*

submitted by

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

First of all I would like to thank the Bureau of the Commission on the Status of Women and the UN Division for the Advancement of Women for their invitation to participate in this panel and share the work that AWID has been doing for the past two and a half years on the issue of funding for women's rights, particularly our work on funding to support the work of women's organizations and movements. I think this panel is particularly important, as it will assist the Bureau and the Division in the identification of issues of priority consideration by the CSW in its next annual session, in 2008.

### **The situation of women's organizations and funding trends**

Over the past ten years, the public awareness of the centrality of gender equality and women's rights for development, peace, environment and other key areas, and the awareness on the scale of women's human rights violations worldwide have grown considerably, but funding for women's organizations to protect and guarantee these rights has not. In 2005, AWID - the Association for Women's Rights in Development, an international feminist membership organization of thousands of gender equality advocates and two hundred of organizations, set out to determine whether funding for women's rights was actually shrinking and, if so, why. Secondly, and more positively, we wanted to find out what opportunities exist to increase the amount of funding for women's organizations globally and to improve access to it.

The research found the current state of most women's rights organizations to be one of 'survival and resistance'. Of hundreds of organizations from all regions that participated in a couple of surveys we did in 2005 and 2006, 47% reported receiving less funding now than they were five years ago or reported receiving about the same amount of funding. We were surprised too to find that women's organizations are, financially, small players in civil society, with about 66% of them having annual expenses under 50,000USD, and more than half of this group, having expenses under 10,000USD per year. Similarly, organizations reported spending more time on fundraising now than in past years, with many having to present proposals for activities that 'fit' with the agenda of the funder rather than a more political agenda for justice, accountability and transformation.

The research work done so far, has identified a number of reasons to explain this downward trend. The most prominent supporters of women's rights groups have traditionally been development aid agencies, large independent foundations and international NGOs (such as Oxfam, Action Aid, etc.). Bilateral and multilateral aid agencies that were once the strongest supporters of women's rights organizations cut back their levels of funding in the last years and are currently directing more funds through national governments rather than to NGOs. Many of these funding agencies have good gender equality policies, but they don't translate them into practice for women's rights and gender equality on the ground. And with growing conservatism in many donor countries, gender equality advocates within these agencies say they face an uphill battle to continue 'making the case for gender equality'. Funding modalities have also changed, being mostly project and short-term funding instead of core support and multi-year grants the most common modalities by many donors.

Among large independent foundations, changes in leadership have led a handful of major foundations to move away from supporting women's movements. This has been in part due to a visible shift towards 'impact and efficiency', which leads foundations to narrow their focus and provide larger grants to fewer, larger

organizations. If we take into consideration that about 35 per cent of organizations surveyed have budgets under 10,000USD per year, they face significant difficulty to access large grants from foundations. There has also been a backlash among some towards 'feminism'. And some said gender has been on the 'chopping block of several foundations' for a while.

Furthermore, international NGOs often struggle with their dual identities as donors and as NGOs with their own advocacy agendas. Some position themselves as strong supporters of women's rights, yet there can be considerable tensions with existing women's rights groups, as in some cases, they can appear more as competitors than as supporters and collaborators.

### **The opportunities**

In what is easy to cast as a bleak landscape, there are important opportunities. Many long-time supporters of women's rights and gender equality, including Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and Sweden – especially development assistance agencies and international NGOs – are revisiting their strategies and realizing that they need stronger connections and better partnerships with women's movements and organizations. A very recent study of 27 donors identified that a key element for the promotion of gender equality in the new aid environment is the support to independent women's organizations and movements.

Also, new governments that are coming onto the funding scene – from Spain, and Turkey to Korea – could, with some investment and collaboration, become important supporters of women's rights groups. Similarly, corporate foundations, family foundations and individual donors are an important growing source of funding for women's rights groups to tap. Meanwhile, the creativity of women themselves trying to mobilize resources to support the work done by women's organizations, generated what are known as women's funds. They are blossoming in different parts of the world and play a key role in reaching out to the large majority of women's organizations with small budgets. In fact, even though they give grants of just \$5,000-10,000, they were cited as the recent number one source of funding by our survey respondents.

And of course, a big opportunity is the fact that hundreds of women's organizations and networks are increasingly learning and engaging on these issues, and strategizing on resource mobilization strategies to build up their financial sustainability, along with allies from within different funding institutions.

### **Four issues suggested for the 2008 CSW agenda:**

Before finishing my presentation, I would like to suggest four key issues that we believe should be included in the agenda of the CSW in 2008, based on the work we have been doing on the issue of funding for women's rights:

- 1. The full integration of gender equality and women's rights in the framework and implementation of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness.** It is shameful that an intergovernmental 21<sup>st</sup> Century declaration does not mention and not even recognizes the centrality of gender equality and women's rights to development. In this light, it is key to discuss and build on different efforts being carried out to influence the whole process of new aid modalities by UNIFEM, the Gendernet of the

OECD, and others, particularly next year that the Ghana meeting on aid effectiveness will be held as well as the review of the FfD conference as well. The allocation of significant resources to women's machineries, ministries, and other structures is key as part of this process.

**2. The importance of ensuring that within aid effectiveness frameworks there are clear mechanisms and significant resources allocated to support the work of civil society organizations, particularly women's organizations and movements.** The principle of accountability, one of the key principles of the aid effectiveness agenda, cannot be built on the basis of weak civil societies with little financial autonomy. And clearly, sustainable development will not be achieved without the full participation of women as key actors of the process.

3. It is hard to hold to account donor governments on how much they actually contribute to gender equality. **It will be important for the CSW to advance discussions and proposals to strengthen tracking and monitoring systems of funding, such as the gender marker.** We don't only need governments to actually use the marker to report on their funding, but we need them to go further than that and provide more information on how the money is being allocated, to which sectors, etc., so that we can have more specific information and not just knowing if funding tracked was for gender as a principal objective or for women in development.

**4. The need to ensure sustained substantial funding for what would be then the recently-created UN Agency for Women.** Because even as hard as we know it would probably be to get governments to agree on creating the so-long needed and shamefully postponed strong, well-resourced, UN Women's Agency. We know it is going to be a difficult struggle to win, but so have been many other struggles that women organizing have won in the UN since its foundation. At AWID, we want to be optimistic and transmit the conviction we share with all our other partners from feminist and women's movements worldwide, that it is time for the UN to raise to the challenge to respond to half of humanity, by creating a global agency to strongly promote and advocate for advancement of women's rights and gender equality, from the very local to the global level. And as part of the discussion around funding for the UN agency, the CSW should discuss of course, the role of the new UN Agency for women in channeling and mobilizing resources to support the work of women's organizations and movements on the ground.

At the end of the day, AWID is certain that without strong, vital and effective women's organizations and networks all over the world, existing women's rights and gender equality achievements could be lost. More to the point, we strongly believe (and evidence supports us) that without strong women's organizations and movements at all levels, very little headway will be made on any of the major global agendas for peace, development, human rights or environment, to name just a few. Thank you.

You can access the full "Where is the money for women's rights report" and other relevant documents and materials in AWID website: [www.awid.org](http://www.awid.org)