



Investing well in the right places: **why fund women's funds**

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Women's funds are public foundations that aim to support and fund women-led solutions to the root causes of social injustice. Mama Cash, as the first international women's fund, has played an important and active role in the promotion and support of a growing number of women's funds around the world. We believe that a strong global architecture of women's funds is a key strategy to build powerful, effective and sustainable women's rights movements in all corners of the globe.

Mama Cash's theory of change is that supporting feminist¹ groups and movements is the most effective and lasting route to ending the inequality and injustice experienced by many millions of women, girls and trans*² people around the world.

Our work over thirty years has taught us that:

1. **Collective action** by women, girls and trans* people is what has, is and will continue to change the world so that they and others affected by injustice can exercise their rights.
2. **Women's, girls' and trans* people' rights groups and movements** are effectively organising and empowering women, girls and trans* people to mount this collective action.
3. **Women's funds** are uniquely positioned to get the right resources to these groups and movements to achieve their goals.

An expanding body of external evidence³ confirms the critical role of collective action, women's groups and movements, and women's funds to advancing women's rights and gender equality. However, resources have not yet caught up to this reality.⁴ **More (adequate quantity) and better (appropriate quality) resources are necessary if women's funds are to bring our efforts to scale and ultimately succeed** in supporting social change movements to fully realise women's, girls' and trans* people's rights.

I. Collective action: the driver for women's rights

Shifts in relationships of power among individuals and communities and in wider society are not the product of outsiders bestowing 'empowerment'⁵ nor of isolated individuals working independently to make it so. Rather, relationships of power change as the result of groups of disempowered people coming together to understand and reflect on their conditions (consciousness-raising), and then organising themselves and others to demand change that better serves their interests based on their particular contexts (mobilisation, collective action).⁶

Women, girls and trans* people working together have repeatedly demonstrated this pattern; advances in their rights have been achieved *because* feminist groups and social movements have pushed for them themselves. The largest relevant statistical review ever conducted shows this empirically: data from 70 countries over the course of four decades found that the presence of **independent feminist movements** was **the single most important factor in advancing action** to tackle violence against women – more important than a country’s wealth or the number of women in government.⁷ Mama Cash’s own qualitative research on grantees’ work to end gender-based violence also showed how important self-led groups are in putting otherwise contested and overlooked issues onto political agendas, thereby contributing to changing systems that perpetuate violence.⁸

II. Women’s rights groups and movements: how collective action happens

There is a growing consensus among powerful institutions such as the World Bank,⁹ private foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates¹⁰ and Nike foundations,¹¹ and bilateral donor governments¹² that **support to women’s rights is critical**. The private sector is also publicly recognising the importance of gender equality, as shown by initiatives led by companies such as Coca-Cola (5x20), Gap Inc. (P.A.C.E. programme), Goldman Sachs (10,000 Women) and others.¹³

Independent research and Mama Cash’s own experience have shown that it is women’s rights groups that create and foster the critical collective action needed for women’s rights.^{14, 15} Mama Cash has also learned that *how* women, girls and trans* people organise to take collective action matters. Social change that makes a tangible difference in people’s lives and lasts is led by groups that:

1. Aim for structural change

Social change is more sustainable and has a greater reach when groups address the root causes that maintain injustice rather than only alleviating the symptoms of injustice for those they can currently reach.

2. Focus on under-addressed or contested issues

Concentrating on overlooked issues or those relegated to the margins helps challenge some of the most entrenched injustices, where the strongest resistance to change often operates. This work is critical to changing the heart of unjust, inequitable power relations that marginalise the world’s majority.

3. Are self-led

Social change that is effective and truly empowering is led by people speaking for themselves and representing their own interests. The *process* of change shapes the outcomes.¹⁶

III. Women’s funds: keeping groups and movements alive

Women’s funds exist to support and strengthen women’s rights groups and movements by providing them adequate and appropriate financial and other resources to realise their vision, and to encourage others to join in this work. Women’s funds are uniquely well-placed to do this work¹⁷ for five reasons:

1. Women’s funds are from, of and for the social movements they support

As a result of their emergence from the very movements they seek to support, women’s funds are well-connected to and have an expert understanding of the needs and opportunities of women, girls and trans* people working for human rights in their contexts. Women’s funds are also accountable to feminist and other social movements for these reasons.

2. **Women's funds are innovators**

Women's funds are in many cases the first, main and sometimes only source of support for initiatives conceived of and led by women, girls and trans* people. Women's funds regularly support new and non-mainstream groups, including groups that are not legally registered for practical or political reasons. They do this intentionally to support innovation and because they recognise that change is possible only where people are prepared to take risks to test new and creative strategies. Many women's funds are unique in intentionally funding 'emerging' groups in earlier stages of their development, supporting them to launch and consolidate their efforts over time to become 'established' groups.

Women's funds place a heavy emphasis on learning and adapting. Many design their grantmaking mechanisms to be able to act fast, supporting urgent demonstrations, for example, or providing emergency assistance to activists at risk. Others use peer decision making mechanisms, where decisions about which groups to fund are made by peers in the movement to ensure decisions reflect the most current trends and priorities in those movements. Women's funds' application and reporting procedures are highly accessible, both linguistically and technically, and they help to ensure that emerging or low-capacity groups can reach necessary funding.

3. **Women's funds fund smartly**

Women's funds prioritise **flexible, core support and multi-year funding** to ensure the development of a diversity of strong groups and movements over time because social change is a long-term, non-linear process.¹⁸ As many women's rights groups operate in contexts with high levels of discrimination, political repression and conflict, this support strategy allows groups and movements to determine their own priorities, respond to unexpected opportunities and cover essential operating costs that other funders may be reluctant to fund.¹⁹ Women's funds also facilitate knowledge sharing among movements from different parts of the world, across regions and across issues – something groups say they value and need – and often cannot access from other donors.

4. **Women's funds fund deeply**

Financial resources alone are not sufficient. In addition to direct grants, Mama Cash and many other women's funds provide capacity support to build organisational capacities, fundraising and financial management abilities, alliances and networks to scale up influence and power, and evaluation tools to track impact, learn and adapt. They also support groups to attend convenings and conferences, provide funds to more established groups to provide support to emerging groups, and link groups to individuals and organisations that can provide technical assistance on specific topics such as leadership development or how to conduct an audit. This often enables emerging groups to establish themselves and to eventually secure funding from a wider spectrum of donors.

5. **Women's funds are multipliers**

Women's funds have a long history of catalysing and sustaining powerful and effective women's rights movements²⁰ and are important experts and advocates for how to fund to achieve social change. They do advocacy with local, national and international donors of many types to ensure that more and better resources are devoted to women's, girls' and trans* people's rights. This work is fundamental where there is little history of local philanthropy, and where there is little investment in rights-based work. Women's funds aggregate data about funding to women's rights, and help make visible both the positive impact of increasing resources to women's, girls' and trans* people's movements, as well as the dire scarcity of funding for women's, girls' and trans* people's rights.

IV. Funding women's funds: recommendations

Donors seeking to advance women's rights and gender equality should fund the leading catalyst in securing such social change: collective action by women's rights groups. Because many of these operate at a grassroots level, take on controversial issues, use approaches that may seem risky, are emerging or informal, or do not have the administrative or financial infrastructure to reach what funding is available, donors should also fund the women's funds that are uniquely and best placed to sustain them.

1. Fund both women's rights groups and women's funds

Women's rights groups, organisations and movements are the drivers of collective action by women, girls and trans* people that will secure the social change we seek. They need adequate and appropriate resources to do this work. More funding to women's rights groups, organisations and movements is needed but donors cannot always reach those doing some of the most critical work. Women's funds are the mechanism to do so and should be supported in their own right.

2. Provide more funding

The resources available for groups of women, girls and trans* people to organise, strengthen and grow their movements for collective action are insufficient. One study has found that the median income of over 700 women's rights organisations surveyed from around the world was just 20,000 USD. Almost a quarter of these groups had incomes of 5,000 USD or less. Women's funds vary in scope – from local, national, regional and global funds to those focused on specific issues or populations – but most receive far more requests for funding than they are able to fulfil. These funds have the capacity to absorb and distribute greater funding.²¹ Donors that are serious about advancing women's rights should **substantially and sustainably** increase the resources they dedicate to collective action by women's rights groups and movements, and the women's funds that sustain them.

3. Provide better funding

Women's rights groups, movements and funds are the experts on their needs, and work with a view to the long-term goal of securing rights for all women, girls and trans* people. Their ambitions, strategies and methods, however, may not fit into "standard" or predetermined assessment tools. Donors who want to make a difference should therefore provide funding in the way that facilitates groups, movements and funds doing what they do best. This means using proportional and accessible proposal and report requirements, and providing flexible (can be used for unanticipated opportunities and threats), core (versus project-based, allows groups to determine their own priorities and test new ideas), and longer-term multi-year (to provide stability and an ability to plan ahead and strategise) funding.

NOTES

¹ BRIDGE's Gender and Social Movements report defines Feminisms as "political frameworks and social movements that identify patriarchal power as a fundamental source of injustice and inequality, and hence call to transform gender power relations in all domains. Feminisms are diverse in their origins and expressions, and include analyses and actions around how patriarchal power intersects with other systems of power such as race, class, heterosexuality and ability; and in a range of contexts such as language, the environment, technology, popular culture, and all areas of social, political and economic life." See the [Overview Report](#) (2013).

² To respect their preference, we use the name "trans*," with an asterisk, denoting a placeholder for the "entire range of possible gender identities that fall under the broad definition of trans" (see Global Action for Trans*Equality and American Jewish World Service, (2014) *The State of Intersex and Trans*Organizing*). Mama Cash explicitly supports trans*activism that is guided by feminist perspectives because of our commitment to support work that transforms unequal gender power relations, and an acknowledgement that women's rights movements are questioning the limits of a binary definition of gender and exploring ways to include trans*perspectives.

³ See Horn, J. (2013) *Gender and Social Movements: Overview Report*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

⁴ Arutyunova, A. and Clark, C. (2013) *Watering The Leaves, Starving The Roots: The Status of Financing for Women's Rights Organizing and Gender Equality*. Toronto: Association for Women's Rights in Development.

⁵ Cornwall, A and Edwards, J. (2014) *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development: Changing Women's Lives*. Zed Books.

⁶ Weldon, S.L. (2011) *When Protest Makes Policy: How Social Movements Represent Disadvantaged Groups*. University of Michigan Press.

⁷ Htun, M. and Weldon, S.L. (2012) "The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence against Women in Global Perspective, 1975-2005." *American Political Science Review*. Vol. 106, No. 3: 548-569.

⁸ Mama Cash, (2013) *Who Counts? An Inclusive Vision for Ending Gender-Based Violence*.

⁹ World Bank, (2014) *Voice and Agency: Empowering women and girls for shared prosperity*.

¹⁰ Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, (2014) *Grand Challenge: Putting Women and Girls at the Center of Development*. www.impatientoptimists.org/Posts/2014/10/Grand-Challenge-Putting-Women-and-Girls-at-the-Center-of-Development

¹¹ Nike Foundation, (2005) *Nike Steps Onto a New Field*. <http://news.nike.com/news/nike-foundation-steps-on-to-new-field>

¹² See for example, UK Department for International Development, (2011) *A New Strategic Vision for Women and Girls: Stopping Poverty Before It Starts*; Swedish Development Cooperation, (see Update 23 May 2014) *Gender Equality*. <http://www.sida.se/English/how-we-work/our-fields-of-work/gender-equality/>; see also the papers at OECD (2014) *The MDGs and post-2015 Framework*. <http://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/post-2015.htm>

¹³ See research conducted by Oak Foundation, International Center for Research on Women, Dalberg Global Development Advisors and Witter Ventures, (2014) *The Business Case for Women's Economic Empowerment: An Integrated Approach*.

¹⁴ "Supporting women's rights organisations ... to make change and build strong and inclusive social movements is the most effective mechanism for ensuring sustainable change in the lives of women and girls," UK Department for International Development, 2012, as quoted in Esplen, E. (2013) *Leaders for Change: Why support women's rights organisations?* London: Womankind Worldwide. See also Comic Relief (2012) *Comic Relief Review: What added-value do organisations that are led and managed by women and girls bring to work addressing the rights, needs and priorities of women and girls?*; Bhattacharjya, (2013) *A Tale of Two Movements: How Human Rights Became Women's Rights*, Brighton, BRIDGE, IDS.

¹⁵ For a taste of what our experience has taught us, visit the Mama Cash history website: <http://history.mamacash.org/>

¹⁶ "Building women's and girls' resources, assets and agency is critical to transforming unequal power relations and preventing violence against women and girls" as per Spraos, H. (2011) "UN Women Programme: From Communities to Global Security Institutions: Engaging Women in Building Peace and Security. Baseline Study Haiti," London: Social Development Direct. The following study also recommends that donors should ensure that they are supporting "well anchored and representative" women's rights organisations: Mukhopadhyay, M. and Eyben, R. (2011) *Rights and Resources: the Effects of External Financing for Women's Rights*, Brighton: Pathways of Women's Empowerment.

¹⁷ See also Cornwall, A. (2014) *Women's Empowerment: What Works and Why?* UNU-WIDER.

¹⁸ A good research-based discussion on how to invest well in and evaluate social movements for social change is Masters, B. and Osborn, T. (2010) "Social Movements and Philanthropy: How Foundations Can Support Movement Building." *The Foundation Review*. Vol. 2, No. 2: 11-27; see also Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (2013) *Many Hands, More Impact: Philanthropy's Role in Supporting Movements*.

¹⁹ Miller, Kellea and Caitlin Stanton with Esther Miller, (2012) "5 Principles of Global Feminist Philanthropy," National Council for Responsible Philanthropy.

²⁰ Foundation Center and Women's Funding Network (2009) *Accelerating Change for Women and Girls: The Role of Women's Funds*.

²¹ Arutyunova and Clark, Ibid.