

# SISTERHOOD, SOLIDARITY AND SHIFTING THE POWER



**“...the mainstream will not automatically become feminist because feminism is mainstream”.**

Minna Salami, MsAfropolitan

GLOBAL FUND FOR  
**WOMEN**  
Champions for Equality.

**We are seeing a renaissance in feminism and women's rights, with a worldwide surge in activism and unprecedented attention from the mainstream media. For more and more people, feminism is no longer peripheral, but popular – to the extent that many brands and celebrities are aligning themselves with the cause.**

Historically, feminism has been associated with the needs and aspirations of white, middle class women in the global North. Is this wave of feminism any different? Has the movement made progress in recognising and representing the diversity of women's experiences? Has it achieved the level of solidarity it needs to resist the well-organised, well-resourced backlash that threatens to undermine its progress? Or is the popularity, commercialisation and celebritisation of the cause distracting us from the real challenges and threatening to crowd out the work of grassroots organisations who will ultimately drive change?

To mark its arrival in the UK, **Global Fund for Women UK** – first established in the United States over 30 years ago as a funder, fundraiser and advocate for women's rights – wanted to explore if and how we can create greater solidarity in the global movement, while recognising its diversity and challenging its inequalities.

We interviewed 19 people active in the international movement in the UK and globally about what solidarity means to them; the challenges we face in building greater solidarity; and what we can do to overcome these issues.

**Here is what we found.**

*"Ideas around liberation are contagious"*

# SOLIDARITY IN A GLOBAL MOVEMENT

The current resurgence demonstrates that the women's rights movement is truly global. While #metoo has dominated the headlines in the US and UK, the Ni Una Menos movement has seen millions of women protest against gender-based violence in Latin America. In South Africa, thousands of women took to the streets with a similar message, and an estimated five million women in South India formed a 'Women's Wall' asserting women's rights to enter religious spaces.

The parallels between these actions and movements illustrate a degree of innate 'solidarity'. Protests draw inspiration and strength from each other, aided by social media, and traditional news media. In fact, Ni Una Menos ('Not one [woman] less') in Latin America can be seen as a precursor to #metoo. As one interviewee described it: "ideas around liberation are contagious".

Women around the world have also demonstrated solidarity in other ways. For example, protests erupted globally after two women were killed in gender-based violence: Jyoti Singh Pandey, who died from horrific sexual violence on a bus in India, and Marielle Franco, an activist assassinated in Brazil.

The widespread response to those individual cases illustrates how women everywhere are, to some extent, vulnerable to the same abuses.

"Solidarity for me is not sympathy alone," said Musimbi Kanyoro, President and CEO of Global

Fund for Women. "It means taking that issue and illustrating that it can be found elsewhere. Then you end up being in solidarity with all those people made vulnerable by those issues".

Some of the people we spoke to feel that, in recent years, the movement has gone further than previous waves of feminism in recognising diverse experiences and inequalities, and in supporting different groups to represent their own interests.

**"There's a growing awareness of...women's rights at different levels - not just the kind of 'Lean In', corporate levels, equal pay work. There are more and more conversations that, rightly so, look at the intersectionality of it all. Not just feminism and women's rights for the most privileged women in the world."**

Maryam Pasha, Director and Curator, TEDxLondon

Nevertheless, it is clear there is still a long way to go.







# Obstacles to

# GREATER SOLIDARITY

## Diversity of experience and the ongoing marginalisation of many

Some of the 19 interviewees questioned whether solidarity is really achievable in such a diverse movement. It is certainly the case that there are many complex, entrenched barriers.

In most countries, regardless of levels of income or poverty, there remains a large proportion of women who are so socially and economically marginalised that their ability to self-organise is severely constrained. Engaging in global processes is a struggle for these women, not only due to a lack of time and resources, but also because of the difficulties in finding common ground among such diverse groups, even at a local level – let alone on a larger scale.

For Tulika Srivastava of Women's Fund Asia, this is a major concern.

**“Who was participating in these [international and regional] spaces? Those who could speak English, those who had the ability to travel. All of those pieces around class, around caste, all function to make certain regional and international spaces pretty exclusive”.**

Women's rights organisations facing the most acute challenges, for example, those under greatest attack or operating in severe crises, are often the least able to benefit from offers of help - they are too busy resisting and surviving.

**“They're in such a chaotic context of repression, violence and threat...it becomes really difficult to be supportive without putting more on them. Even with some of the traditional strategies that we would use, like doing articles and statements, there were so many divisions and fault lines that it became really hard to do”.**

Cindy Clark, Association of Women's Rights in Development [AWID]

**“There is solidarity, but when you are facing such a brutal conflict, priorities are different ... we are working in an emergency so we don't have much time for theory - even though theory is very important for the feminist movement”.**

Maria Al Abdeh, Women Now for Development.

There are also generational differences and disagreements on strategies and tactics. Some, for example, are uncomfortable with the 'naming and shaming' that is central to #metoo, as it is a tactic that has been used against them in the past. Social media has aided the spread of recent movements, but such forms of communication only reach a limited subsection of society and bring their own challenges.

Creating greater solidarity in the movement therefore requires deliberate action to overcome barriers. Talking about the challenges of overcoming the cultural, linguistic and many other obstacles to engaging small organisations in regional dialogues, Tulika said:

**“The framework needs to expand and change to include [their] experience. And [this] is the only way that we can actually build solidarity and authentic movements across boundaries... I think women's funds have the capacity and have the role to undertake building of these critical spaces, building of these critical voices, building of these solidarities...and building of the difficult conversations”.**

## North-South power dynamics within the movement

**“There is a power dynamic [between North and South], and let's be clear about that”**

Tulika Srivastava, Women's Fund Asia.

One of the key issues in improving solidarity is addressing the prejudices and misconceptions that surround Southern feminism and women's rights activism.



**“Historically there has been a sense that a white, global North can give advice and help, money and support to (a) less endowed, less capable, black global South. Within it, of course, there’s the positioning of African women as less educated, less eloquent, less capable of analysing their situations or leading change. That’s a really outdated stereotype and also proven to never have been true anyway. This viewpoint is slowly shifting, I think, though it still needs some challenging”.**

Jessica Horn, African Women’s Development Fund

There has been a tendency to assume that feminism is a concept created and led from the Northern hemisphere. While some agree that the origin of the term may come from the North, the assumption that the women’s rights movement is led from the North, and that others lag behind, is both unhelpful and untrue. Many of those we spoke to complained that there is often a patronising and undifferentiated view of the agency, education and cultural experiences of women in developing countries and poorer communities. This belies a reality where many of the world’s leading activists are from the South and many Southern hemisphere countries have exceeded their Northern counterparts in, for example, the representation of women in politics.

## The role of international NGOs and mainstream development

**“A lot of the power has rested in international NGOs that have the power to convene and have been resourced as a result of being in the Global North.”**

Geeta Misra, Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA)

International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) based in the global North have always benefited from greater resources, power and profile when compared to those in the global South. In recent years, many have shifted their focus to issues relating to the well-being of women and girls, gender equality and women’s rights, making these ‘themes’ more prominent in their strategies, programmes and fundraising.

It is difficult to determine how much money has been raised by INGOs around the women and girls ‘theme’, but it is clear that INGOs are capturing more than the lion’s share of resources at the expense of smaller women’s rights organisations in the South. A 2016 study by the OECD Development Assistance

Committee found that, of the US\$35.5 billion that donors gave to support gender equality in 2014, around US\$10 billion went to civil society organisations but only 8% of that went directly to CSOs in developing countries – leaving 92% for international NGOs. This inequality has only grown in recent years, with the amount of support going to organisations in the developing world declining since 2012, while funding to INGOs has increased.

This is despite the fact that women’s rights organisations are widely acknowledged to be key to driving the legislative, policy and behavioural changes crucial to achieving sustainable and systemic change.

While capturing most of the funding, INGOs are criticised for not engaging effectively with established local women’s rights organisations, preferring instead to establish their own separate programmes:

**“Quite often, when INGOs go to Africa they don’t connect with women’s organisations already working on the same issues. They come with their own project and very often there is duplication of projects being done by local organisations. It is much easier for INGOs to access resources, whereas small local NGOs struggle...because of the criteria most donors have to access funding. It is time for INGOs to work together in partnership with local NGOs to carry out projects which would benefit each other, but also have tangible outcomes”.**

Rainatou Sow, Make Every Woman Count

We were told during our research that international organisations will often make use of stories from local women’s rights organisations in their fundraising and communications, without clearly acknowledging their source or the relationship that exists between the organisations. One women’s rights organisation said that when they share stories these are sometimes published without their permission as fundraising material for the INGO. There was general consensus among our interviewees that these stories were often simplified for the purpose of fundraising, in ways that perpetuate prejudices that women in the global South are victims rather than agents of change. This creates a double injustice. These stories do not generate funding for the women and organisations who own them and, by writing them out of the picture, they also make it harder for local women’s rights organisations to build their credibility with potential donors.



Compared to INGOs, the models and approaches used by women's funds promise more benefits for the local women's rights organisations who are their partners. However, those we spoke to emphasised the need to remain alert to the risks of undermining partners by coopting their stories, misrepresenting their work or overstaying their welcome as an intermediary for funding.

## Funders

Funders have a role in promoting solidarity and inclusivity by funding a breadth of organisations in a way that strengthens their capacity to lead change.

According to those working with philanthropic foundations and individuals, there is growing interest in women's rights, linked in part to mainstream coverage of #metoo. However, it is not clear whether that interest has translated into more funding available to grassroots organisations in the South. Most of the Southern organisations we spoke to had not felt the impact of any interest or increased funding from new sources.

Despite some lively current debates over the inequalities inherent in the relationship between funders and those they fund, growing awareness of intersectional approaches and an increasing interest in funding 'movement building', the views of our interviewees would suggest that there is a tendency

for funders to reinforce rather than challenge assumptions about the capacity of Southern organisations. Many interviewees noted that there was a continuing preference for funding to flow through Northern organisations, such as INGOs, embassies or big consultancies, despite the fact that they are more costly, tend to be dominated by more privileged groups and are often not noted for their inclusiveness.

There is also a tendency to concentrate funding in larger, high-profile organisations in both the North and South, avoiding smaller, more innovative ventures that represent under-represented communities. Our interviewees reported that their experience has been that funders typically focus on what they want to fund, and impose their priorities, rather than placing what women's rights organisations need at the centre of their decisions.

## The Backlash

The rise of the women's rights movement in recent years has generated a backlash that is international, well-organised and well-funded. The ascent of the 'gender ideology' movement, together with the rise of populist right wing governments and fundamentalism is putting gains at risk and making women's rights organisations work harder, in an ever more hostile environment. This makes solidarity all the more important – but no easier to achieve.

How can we create

# GREATER SOLIDARITY?

**“The issue is often that you have white Western feminists looking at their movement as a separate movement to women in India or the Congo or wherever it might be, so the approach taken is just so ‘othering’ and differencing. If they were to look at it as their colleagues in the movement then you just go with a different approach and you would be more intentional in making sure the money to build movements is used accurately and conscientiously”.**

Minna Salami, MsAfropolitan

Our interviewees emphasised three steps that are necessary to create greater solidarity.

## 1. Commit to an inclusive movement – and recognise that this takes work

- Power dynamics will not be addressed by dismissing certain voices; by assuming that well intentioned support is always helpful or wanted; or by simply acknowledging inequalities - “continuously checking your privilege”, as one interviewee put it. Rather, it is about consciously recognising that everyone has an equal contribution to make, and that solidarity is most effective if built on mutual understanding and sensitivity to the needs of those we want to support. It is also about acknowledging that often those women who are most in need of solidarity have the least capacity to respond to offers of support, or their context is so sensitive that the risks of external actors making the situation worse is too great.
- Individuals and organisations can maximise their contribution by finding the most legitimate way to leverage the power they have. For example, by challenging the policies of their government, or the behaviours of companies and other actors based in their country that have a negative impact on women elsewhere.
- Finally, we need to encourage an atmosphere where the response to criticism is not the withdrawal of support. Getting it wrong shouldn’t mean giving up.

## 2. Shift the power and challenge prejudices

- INGOs need to end their complicity in practices that disempower women’s rights organisations and pay much greater attention to addressing the power dynamic that exists.. Actions that crowd out local organisations or rob them of their agency are counter-intuitive to achieving social justice.
- Funders need to be more willing to listen and learn from those they seek to fund. They must understand that their vision of how to help is not always the best way. The ongoing debate in the philanthropy world about how to rebalance unequal power dynamics needs to move from aspiration to action. The pervasive belief that large, Northern organisations led by white, middle class people (usually men) are more reliable partners than small, Southern-based, women-led organisations, needs to be challenged. So does the notion that leadership, knowledge, innovation and success are concentrated in the North.
- Women’s groups collectively need to invest in demonstrating the impact that women’s rights activists and grassroots activism has in generating change. This evidence is vital to unlocking greater resources. For example, the very few cross-country comparative studies that exist demonstrate that women’s rights organisations have a decisive role in changing policy and behaviour. The fact that so little time has been invested in this area indicates that their roles and contributions are still not taken seriously.





- Finally, the celebrityisation and commercialisation of feminism and women’s rights shouldn’t blind us to the fact that some women remain more ‘acceptable’ to the mainstream than others. We need to push back on this, rather than submit to the pressure to present the most palatable picture of feminism.

### **3. Increase connectivity and collectivism – and recognise the role of women’s funds**

- We need to find more and better ways to share stories about, and to connect women’s rights activists around the world. In our research, a number of Southern-based feminists saw collective negotiation of formal frameworks and convenings as central to creating solidarity between women’s rights organisations.

Exchanges and virtual networks can also enable activists to learn from each other and work together. There is clearly a greater role for technology, though finding ways to ensure it does not replicate existing inequalities remains a challenge.

- Recognise the role that all women’s funds – national, regional and international – play in tackling these issues. Their model provides exciting opportunities: to directly fund grassroots, women-led organisations; to strengthen movements by fostering collective learning and strategising; and to gather, verify and amplify evidence of impact, which will increase the flow of funding to Southern-based activists and organisations championing the rights of women.

About

# GLOBAL FUND FOR WOMEN UK

Women's funds, like Global Fund for Women UK, operate in a unique space as funder, fundraiser and advocate for women's human rights.

Their funder approach is based on trust and the belief that women themselves are best placed to solve the problems they face.

Their fundraising amplifies the voices of women as agents of change and builds a sense of solidarity through a shared commitment to feminist activism.

Their advocacy seeks to emphasise and evidence the role of strong women's movements in creating lasting shifts in power, opportunity, law and culture. This is a foundation for long term, systemic and transformational change – and the prerequisite for a world where all women are strong, safe, powerful and heard. No exceptions.

[www.globalfundforwomen.org.uk](http://www.globalfundforwomen.org.uk)

Srijanshi Mahila Samuha



Thanks to all those who have contributed, including: Cindy Clark (AWID), Musimbi Kanyoro (Global Fund for Women), Amina Doherty (Global Fund for Women), Leila Hessini (Global Fund for Women), Jessica Horn (AWDF), Pontso Mafethe (freelance consultant), Minna Salami (MsAfropolitan), Rainatou Sow (Make Every Woman Count), Julie Broome (Ariadne), Emilienne De León (Prospera), Tulika Srivastava (Women's Fund Asia), Geetanjali Misra (CREA), Maria Al Abdeh (Women Now for Development), Evangeline Dan-Yusuf (SheNation), Sevi Simavi (Global Fund for Women UK), Radha Wickremasinghe (Sigrid Rausing Trust), Maryam Pasha (X Equals/TEDxLondon), Kamrun Nahar (Naripokkho) & Alisha Miranda (I.G. Advisors).

**Claire Hickson**, Trio Policy

**Rebecca Hanshaw**, Global Fund for Women UK









[www.globalfundforwomen.org.uk](http://www.globalfundforwomen.org.uk)

Global Fund for Women UK is a registered charity (charity number 1160840). It is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (company number 08104550), whose registered office is at 19 Cookridge Street, Leeds LS2 3AG.

Cover photo: Sadaf Hasan