



Solution – or part of the problem?

Reflections on the role of INGOs in women's rights work

As more and more international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) move into women's rights work the need for deeper thought and self-reflection has become increasingly apparent. In this briefing, two women's rights organisations share their views about what they want, and don't want, from INGOs.

1. Introduction

As an increasing number of INGOs move into women's rights work, and register themselves locally, the need for deeper thought and self-reflection has become increasingly apparent. The Gender and Development Network (GADN) asked two leading women's rights organisations to act as a 'critical friend' sharing with GADN members their views about what they want, and don't want, from INGOs. Their responses reflect information that GADN has also gained informally, namely that INGOs are often part of the problem rather than the solution and that they should listen carefully to critical feedback, reassess the way that they use their power and influence, and build and engage in genuine partnerships with shared power.

This briefing outlines the contributions of staff from two prominent women's rights organisations who presented their views to a GADN meeting in July 2019. It concludes with some recommendations from GADN for its members, and other INGOs, calling on them to improve the ways that they work with women's rights organisations and movements.

2. Mwanahamisi Salimu Singano – FEMNET

Mwanahamisi Salimu Singano is a Program Manager at The African Women's Development and Communications Network (FEMNET), based in Nairobi. She presented a powerful picture of the problems that INGOs cause for the women's rights movement, which is summarised below.¹

FEMNET

FEMNET is a pan-African network of women's rights organisations. It facilitates the sharing of information, experiences, ideas and strategies among African women's NGOs and individual activists as a strategy for strengthening women's capacity to participate effectively in the development processes at different levels in Africa. In order to reverse the existing gender inequalities and social injustices against women, FEMNET's programming proceeds from the premise that patriarchy must be dismantled, and societal and people's attitudes on gender must be changed if women are to enjoy their rights fully, lead dignified lives and realize their full potential.

Redressing the balance

To start, in all fairness, INGOs have played a critical role in supporting and nurturing local and regional women's rights organizations, both directly and indirectly. There are many local NGOs/Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Community Based Organizations that were formed out of the ideas generated in meetings convened by INGOs. But, because INGOs have never really had a shortage of praise, it is time to redress the balance with some criticism.

Taking space at small tables

Most INGOs have now opted for localised registration in response to changing international and national contexts, and are now registered as national or local NGOs in the countries they operate. By so doing, they are earning legitimacy to operate in local spaces... and therein lies the manifestation of the bigger problem! By venturing into local spaces formerly occupied by local/national NGOs the INGOs are literally squeezing out the air in spaces that were already too small or too 'shrunk' (as is the case in the increasing shrinking civil society spaces in most of our countries). The space should be big enough for all of us. But the sad truth is that often there is a limited number of people who can fit in a specific room where strategic decisions are being made and often, INGOs are hardly left outside.

With their financial muscles and well-paid human resources, INGOs are consciously and unconsciously taking over the space that used to be occupied by women's rights organisations. And they are loving it – you can actually see the excitement in their reports splashed with big colourful pictures of their staff posing with decision makers! The only time they will desperately look for what they call 'local' organisations is when politics hit hard and decisions are made in favour of the unjust. Then, when things get difficult with the government, we hear calls of 'local CSOs need to take a lead'. This is the sad truth, we have to call it out, or live with it. Well, I have decided to call it out.

Making women's rights organisations invisible

As the private sector continues to threaten INGO's funding and aggressively challenge their dominant positioning as the sole development agents, many INGOs have entered into a new era of what they call 'demonstrating impact'. This literally means claiming and over-branding every little support offered to women's rights organizations and other 'local' organisations, so completely erasing these organisations' sense of agency and visibility.

An African Union (AU) pre-summit consultative meeting provided an example. As usual, INGOs supported a number of women's rights organisations to attend the meeting. What was, however, so saddening was not being able to see the names of those women's rights organisations displayed even on their tables! They all displayed the names of the INGOs that supported them, that is, their placards read that they were on such and such 'INGO delegation'. Their identities were thus merged with, nay, somewhat lost, into that of the respective INGOs that funded them.

That was/is a politically incorrect thing to do, or be pressured to do, especially in a space like the AU. But INGOs, as sub-donors, need those photographs with their logos splashed across events to impress their donors. After all, they are the ones with AU liaison offices and they have paid for flight tickets, accommodation, and per-diem – so, they should demonstrate results, right? Wrong! Bending to the demands of the donor (the INGO in this case) in this specific act completely disempowers the women's rights organisations and reinforces the very same patriarchal and oppressive propensity that denies women the agency to authenticate their space and participation. This tendency sustains the cyclical nature of stagnation and invisibility of women's rights organisations across the continent.

Extracting 'real life' examples – then training about 'real life'

Most INGOs continue to be extractive, turning women's rights organisations into mere case studies and a 'real life experiences' sourcing pool. More often than not, they add that one tokenised speaker from local NGOs in the big conferences to 'demonstrate success' of the big INGO or bring to life its 'agenda'. Meanwhile, they continue to steal/extract local knowledge from women's rights organisations in the name of consultations, then package it in fancy English and organise a big launch of their reports as if the knowledge was theirs. Worse still, they come back to the same women's rights organisations with a long training agenda, to teach them on their actual lived realities! It is bizarre! The fact that the INGOs want to "tell the story of the African woman" using her experiences but without her own voice, presence and ownership is indeed a huge betrayal to the course. In Africa, there is a saying: 'Until the lion learns to narrate the hunt, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter!'

Providing demobilizing forms of funding

Undoubtedly, most women's rights organisations still receive their funding from INGOs. However, INGOs remain obsessed with 'project-ising' women movements, with little evidence of success. Movements in general and women movements in particular are, by their very nature, fluid, dynamic, passion-intensive and flexible – they tend to address injustices as they surface. But INGOs, as donors, demand women's rights organisations and/or movements to have long log-frames and fancy result matrices as requirements for funding. Surely the combination of technology and human wisdom could invent a funding model that works better for women's rights organisations and movements rather than killing their spontaneous agency, turning them into patriarchal, hierarchical organisations implementing linear projects *which are demobilising*.

Most donors now seem to put more emphasis on the 'consortium model' and the inclusivity of consortium members. However, the good intention of funders has exposed women's rights organisations into situations of extreme power imbalance where they find themselves 'unequally yoked' with a diversity of stakeholders with whom they have nothing much in common and forced to co-exist. To be blunt, consortium politics are toxic, but women's rights organisations are in dire need of funding so have little

option but to join the bandwagon, legitimise the process, and deal with the display of power mongering that undermines women's movement building.

Ignoring the well-being of women's rights defenders

When funds are finally accessed, the emphasis is still always on 'output and outcome', with no or little attention to women's rights defender's wellbeing - despite the risk to life that many face. Operational costs are kept far away at the INGO's HQ abroad while women's rights defenders are poorly paid, with minimal or no benefits. INGOs' failure to recognise and fund 'local' operation costs has made it virtually impossible for women's rights organisations to attract and sustain great talents who can deliver those fancy reports required by donors. The emphasis on local *programs* and not local *operations* literally tells women's rights defenders who are doing the actual work that they don't matter, and if they want to matter they should join INGOs and work in those shiny offices with competitive salary packages and benefits.

Necessary evils

The INGOs are what we call the 'necessary evils' - needed in local spaces despite the overall harm they cause locally. As they transform themselves to fit into local contexts and face current global challenges, they really need to do some soul-searching. They ought to invite critical feedback, reassess power dynamics and rework how they use their power and influence to engage in transformative partnerships with shared power. Local and regional women's rights organisations are not INGOs' showcases and spare-parts – they are, or ought to be, counterparts.

3. Fenya Fischler and Isabel Marler- AWID

Fenya Fischler is the Co-Creating Feminist Realities Coordinator at the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) and Isabel Marler is the Advancing Universal Rights and Justice Coordinator. Many of their remarks are reflected in AWID's recent report 'Toward a feminist funding ecosystem' (2019) which can be found on AWID's website.²

Based on consultation with colleagues, and years of experience and research, Fenya and Isabel suggested observations for INGOs wishing to promote women's rights. They argued that feminist movements are direly underfunded.³ In addition they face backlash and the resurgence of fascisms and fundamentalisms - an increasingly well resourced, well connected anti-rights lobby that is embedded in halls of power nationally and internationally – which has led to the criminalisation of human rights work and dissent.⁴ Below are some the issues they propose that INGOs should consider, and questions on which to reflect, when engaging in women's rights work.

AWID

AWID is a global, feminist, membership, movement-support organization. For over 35 years, AWID has been a part of an ecosystem of feminist movements working to achieve gender justice and women's human rights worldwide.⁵ AWID sees feminist movements as driving forces in confronting oppressions, generating alternatives and creating transformative changes. One of their main projects Resourcing Feminist Movements aims to influence funders' policies and practices, deepen and sustain funding for feminist social change, and support movements' needs and strategies.⁶

Expertise

The people who are most impacted are the experts. INGOs should ask themselves, are you best placed to do this work or are there local groups who could better take this on that you can partner with or support to do the work?

Process, accountability through consultation

Be accountable to feminist movements by ensuring that your work and the assumptions behind it are based on meaningful consultation with them. Those most impacted should decide what is necessary. Trust those most affected to do the work. Centring these communities leads to more effective and appropriate responses. Consider who is shaping the research / campaign etc, and make sure that local communities are involved from the beginning. Be aware of power dynamics in the way that you consult and partner. Give time to get processes right from the start.

Being extractive

Ensure that local communities and WRO/Ms are genuine partners, not just sources of material and examples – or used to add the veneer of legitimacy.

Cross movement building and intersectionality

Don't separate women's rights issues (or any issues) into silos. Use an intersectional approach: centre the voices of those most affected and work collaboratively on advocacy across movements. At AWID we work to create spaces for cross-movement dialogue and action (such as our Forum, advocacy caucuses, strategy meetings). In your organisation, if you have different issue/thematic teams, start by bringing those together.

Resources

Think about who is receiving resources? Resources for women's rights work are scarce. Are you eating into this small pot? Where possible, INGOs should provide resources (including financial resources) for WRO/Ms to be able to conduct their core work, not just projects. Pay people for their labour; if your organisation is using the work, expertise or images of people in the local community ensure they are reimbursed. Include this in your fundraising.

Political space

When entering decision making fora consider the space you take up, and how to 'prop the door open'. Can you use your legitimacy at powerful institutions such as the United Nations (UN), or with donors? If you have access and others do not, think about what issues you bring to the conversation and how you can use your access to bring others in. For example, if invited to an event, who can you suggest who is directly affected who should be round the table. Should you give your place to someone else? Could you use ECOSOC status at the UN to bring voices of feminist movements, women human rights defenders, or marginalised groups. Use the power you have in terms of who you partner with and who co-designs projects with you to make choices that promote autonomous feminist movement and don't give power to fundamentalist/patriarchal agendas.⁷

Being Accessible

In working with WRO/Ms ensure that you recognise access needs such as translation and interpretation that allows people to speak in their own languages, any medical or other (dis)ability access, visa requirements, the fact that many people don't have access to credit cards, and other accessibility issues. Consider also the wellbeing of partners by building in enough rest and breaks and acknowledging the costs and burdens of travel.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

As a result of the contributions from FEMNET and AWID, and other discussions, GADN has suggested a short – and far from exhaustive – list of things that our members and other INGOs could consider. It starts with the assumption that change will only be lasting if we work to increase our transformative 'power with' - enabling and working in solidarity with others to challenge injustice as respectful partners in a global women's rights movement.⁸ This will require a more critical look at the way in which INGOs move into and take the space of others often failing to prioritise, acknowledge or pay for the expertise of women's rights organisations and movements - so becoming part of the problem not the solution.

1. **Ask and listen** - start with consideration of how best to support international, national and local WRO/Ms, not with the imperatives of your own organisation. Close the loop – let WRO/Ms know what you will do differently as a result of listening to them, and do it.
2. Consider whose **space** you are taking – especially when moving into national and local decision making or fundraising spaces.
3. Recognise that **process** is important – move beyond consultation to co-creation with WRO/Ms for your research, programmes, advocacy and campaigns.
4. Acknowledge where **expertise** lies – recognising the knowledge of those living the reality and the limits of policy experts.
5. Avoid being **extractive** or seeing 'partners' as useful sources of examples and real life stories to add colour to your report or legitimacy to your panel.
6. Take a back seat – don't put your branding across panels where the intellectual content is coming from others, **create visibility** for WRO/Ms not yourselves.
7. Consciously use any access to power and decision makers that you have, to **facilitate access** for others, while you step back. Ensure the representatives of WRO/M are encouraged to deliver their own messaging, not that of your INGO.
8. Think whether your own bids for funding on women's rights work are **competing** with direct funding to WRO/Ms. Be mindful of your power within consortia and seek to actively redress power imbalances in decision-making.
9. When **funding** WRO/Ms think creatively about how to secure core funding and support intersectional approaches and cross-movement building. Pay women for the work they do to

support your INGO – whether by providing case studies, speaking at meetings, commenting on papers and so on. Ensure that your programme bids and budgets fully fund the work carried out by WROs as part of your shared programme.

10. Recognise the importance of **accessibility** and the well-being of the women within the WRO/Ms with whom you work. Consider for example translation, appropriate provisions for women with visual and hearing impairments, the accessibility of spaces for women with physical disabilities, as well as medical and well-being requirements. Reduce the burdens of travel for WRO/Ms for example by recognising the barriers faced accessing visas, booking flights at convenient times, providing full information about local amenities.

¹ The full contribution is available at <http://udadisi.blogspot.com/2019/07/ingos-suffocate-womens-rights.html>.

² <https://secure.awid.org/en/node/534>

³ <https://www.awid.org/publications/where-money-womens-rights-factsheets>

⁴ <https://www.oursplatform.org/resource/rights-risk-trends-report-2017/>

⁵ <https://www.awid.org/who-we-are>

⁶ <https://www.awid.org/priority-areas/resourcing-feminist-movements>

⁷ <https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/cf-devilisinthedetails-7pointers-eng.pdf> and

https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/final_web_the_devil_is_in_the_details.pdf

⁸ Srilatha Baliwala, 2019. *All About Power: Understanding Social Power and Power Structures*, CREA, <https://reconference.creaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/All-About-Power-Srilatha-Batliwala.pdf>

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The Gender and Development Network (GADN) brings together expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues. Our vision is of a world where social justice and gender equality prevail and where all women and girls are able to realise their rights free from discrimination. Our goal is to ensure that international development policy and practice promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights.

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