



# Hey Funders: Here's What Young Feminist Leaders Need from You!

## Webinar Brief

Young feminists are on the frontlines addressing crises in human rights, democracy, equitable development, climate and conflict across the globe. Powerful stakeholders such as donors, INGOs and UN agencies endorse the future-oriented strategy of investing in young people's activism. Yet women- and youth-led organizations receive only a fraction of development aid and philanthropic funding.<sup>1</sup> In addition, young activists with intersecting, marginalized identities face even greater barriers to accessing financial resources that are already limited. There is a disconnect between how young feminists are envisioning, organizing and implementing their critical work, the value funders place on this work in theory, and the actual resources reaching young, grassroots activists.

At the Women Deliver conference in July 2023,<sup>2</sup> five young feminist leaders shared their experiences and recommendations for how funders can best support their work. Funders responded with lessons learned from trying to make their resources accessible to grassroots, young, feminist changemakers. In February 2024, all the players in that dynamic dialogue reconvened. More than 150 participants tuned in to the online discussion summarized below.

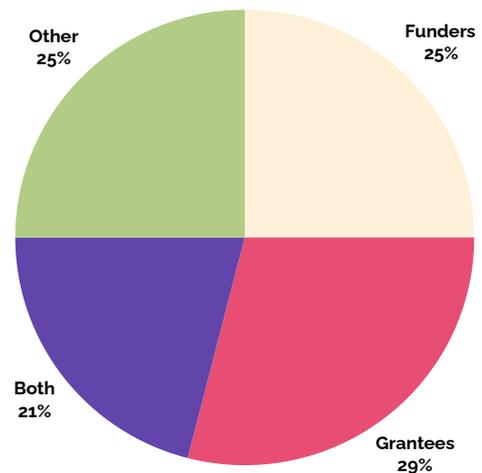
<sup>1</sup> Dolker, Tenzin. (2022). *Where is the money for feminist organizing?* AWID.  
<sup>2</sup> The panel at Women Deliver was organized by American Jewish World Service, Girls First Fund, and WomenStrong International. The webinar was organized by these organizations and the Alliance for Feminist Movements.

### Speakers

- **Johanna Agustín Federico**, Mujeres Sociopolíticas Mamá Tingó
- **Saratou Bako Bagassa**, Cellule Nigérienne des Jeunes Filles Leaders
- **Rut Curruchich**, Women's Justice Initiative
- **Rubi Rubi**, Feminist Approach to Technology
- **Paola Saldivias-Mendez**, Visionaria Peru
- **Dr. Susan M. Blaustein**, Women Strong International
- **Sarah Green**, American Jewish World Service
- **Fanta K. Toure**, Girls First Fund

**Moderated by: Sachini Perera**, Realising Sexual and Reproductive Justice (RESURJ) and the Alliance for Feminist Movements

### Webinar Audience



## What are the barriers young feminists face?

### Overly complex application processes:

Information about available funding often does not reach the grassroots level. Many youth-led feminist organizations do not have staff with the time and mandate to identify funding opportunities. Further, complex proposals may not be within the skill set of young, grassroots leaders. Rubi Rubi is a participant-turned-staff-member with India's Feminist Approach to Technology (FAT). She explained that FAT is growing, but still does not have capacity for lengthy grant proposals. *"We don't have the background and education [for] working [on] processes [like] log frames as a grassroots association."*

### Inflexible policies:

Even when funders succeed in getting funds to grassroots feminist organizations, those resources often come with stringent use and reporting requirements that do not take into account the existing efforts of the organizations, resulting in additional reporting work, rigid monitoring frameworks, and other donor-imposed strictures that are not only onerous but also out of sync with the nature and pace of grassroots social change. Paola Saldivias-Méndez of Visionaria Peru described the case of an intergenerational dialogue supported by local education authorities that sought to bring together girls, mothers, fathers, fellow civil society organizations, teachers and local authorities. Ultimately, lack of donor flexibility resulted in reduced participation by adolescent girls and their families.

“The complicated processes we have to follow make it very difficult to share what we actually want to do.

-Rubi Rubi, FAT, India”

The young participants and their mothers asked the organization to cover their transportation costs. Despite savings from having obtained the venue for the event free of charge, the donor did not authorize the reallocation of funds to transportation. This resulted in underrepresentation of both the students and their families at the dialogue.

### Unrealistic requirements:

Several panelists recounted renouncing much-needed funding when it became impossible to reconcile funder demands with organizational values and community needs. Saratou Bako Bagassa detailed how Cellule Nigérienne des Jeunes Filles Leaders (CNJFL) was selected to receive a grant, then asked to reduce their activity budget twice, down to a third of the original size. This would have severely affected program outcomes. In the end CNJFL opted out of the grant, as trust with the funder had been broken and the reduced budget could not serve the agreed upon vision.

### Failure to grasp local political context:

At times, donor requirements stem from an effort to bridge the gap between international and local. However, panelists noted that funders' intentions sometimes do not correspond with realities on the ground, particularly when it comes to feminist, political work. Some Visionaria Peru donors required partnership with local counterparts. These counterparts tended to be traditional entities and even local governments. While this expectation of locally sourced funding may make sense from the outside, when organizations working in traditional communities identify themselves as feminist, it can be difficult to identify other partners and counterparts on the ground.

“Donors come and ask us to do very specific things...that don't match with our political vision, and it compromises our ability to address specific needs on the ground.

-Johanna Agustín Federico,  
MSPMT, Dominican Republic”

### Risks to safety and security:

Some young activists on the panel face serious risks to their personal safety as a result of their political advocacy and the way they challenge regressive policies and norms. These include death threats, break-ins, doxing, and a barrage of targeted hateful rhetoric. They described the toll on their mental health as well as their ability to work effectively. Grassroots young feminists called for resources from funders to support their mental health and physical safety.

Rut Curruchich of Guatemala's Women's Justice Initiative expressed concern for how sensitive information is safeguarded when donors do not fully comprehend the risk of disclosing participants. *"There are systems for donors that are established but...we work with a lot of sensitive information and we are very respectful and sometimes they ask for this in a way [that] violates our processes."*

### Imposed measures of success:

Many funders approach grantmaking through a technical lens, expecting predictable, easily quantifiable outcomes that can be reported in short timeframes. This approach is antithetical to the transformative, sustainable changes young feminists are working towards. Rubi of FAT explained, *"In India, there is a tendency to not fully recognize the day-to-day challenges girls face, including violence, harassment, [and restricted] mobility. Many funders want to see the number of young girls and adolescents reached through programming: 'just show us the numbers.' Women taking leadership can't be addressed by just showing numbers, neglecting women and girls' day-to-day challenges."*

Visionaria Peru's Saldivias-Mendez concurred, *"As donors, you need to have this openness to understand that the work we do is complex and cannot be [fully captured] in a simple report."*

“  
Build trust and be transparent.  
Say what you can deliver.  
  
-Saratou Bako Bagassa, CNJFL,  
Niger  
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## What are the solutions that work?

### Flexible, long-term funding:

The young feminist panelists called for **trusting relationships** with funders that include open communication and respect for their time and expert knowledge of their lived realities. In philanthropy, one of the ways trust manifests is through flexible, long-term funding. Flexible funding allows organizations to be nimble and responsive. Flexibility can also help organizations strengthen themselves according to their own internal analyses, rather than funder-defined deficits.

India's Rubi described how long-term, flexible funding enabled FAT's transformation into a decentralized, girl-led model. She said, *"[This] was only possible because of flexible funding for training and learning processes for our internal leaders and participants."* Saldivias-Mendez called for *"flexibility...as diverse as the organizations themselves."*

Panelists agreed on the need for longer timeframes for funding, both to see results and to establish trust. Johanna Agustin Federico of the Dominican Republic's Mujeres Sociopolíticas Mamá Tingó (MSPMT) said, *"Agencies like to set deadlines to obtain results from a project, but sometimes you need more time than one or two years."*

In their responses, the funders endorsed the need for sustained support. They noted the ways in which many funders shifted to flexible funding, at least temporarily, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which shows that it is indeed possible.

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We need more experiences that can be of mutual benefit and that allow us to be more flexible and trust. For us, trust is very important because we have more than 10 years [of experience] working in the community and we know the impact of our work. We hope that this is respected.  
  
-Rut Curruchich, Women's Justice Initiative,  
Guatemala  
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### **Hiring local, feminist staff:**

Hiring local feminist staff embeds knowledge and expertise. According to Sarah Green of American Jewish World Service (AJWS), *"Our grantmaking and accompaniment work is done by our colleagues that are from the places and based in the places [where we are supporting social change]. They are from the movements...and have close relationships with the people in them. This helps us understand how to better support [partners]. ...There are so many touch points along the way that we don't limit ourselves [to] reporting."*

### **Funders in a supporting role:**

AJWS's Green went on to emphasize the need to rebalance the power dynamics between donors and implementers. Funders want to solve problems, but they often forget that the work is already happening on the ground. Fanta Toure of Girls First Fund reminded the audience, *"Capacity is subjective...It is always important to remember where expertise lies, and it is non-negotiable."* In other words, as a field, we tend to devalue the expertise of young, grassroots feminists from the Global South, despite their essential expertise and contextual knowledge. Funders on the panel agreed that quality funding should also provide accompaniment to build skills and fill gaps that implementing organizations themselves identify and prioritize.

### **Language justice:**

In another example of when funders need to defer to grassroots partners, Guatemala's Curruchich explained how language justice is a unifying theme across all the work of the Women's Justice Initiative. *"We work towards making sure all of our processes are in Maya K'iche'...Our language is adapted to the communities we work with. Because of this, when a donor asks for communication material, we ask to be part of the process, as we are the ones that know the context best so that we can be more careful [to] make sure [language] is respectful and doesn't victimize."*

### **The power to define success:**

Curruchich also called for *"a process of learning not just focused on results that are qualitative and quantitative, [but] to be able to measure impact to see women not just as numbers but as agents that also have their own lives."*

Susan Blaustein further detailed how WomenStrong International measures success by asking, *"What do our partners want to learn about their effectiveness, and can we...create different tools and methods [to] figure out best what to do?"*

### **Funder self-reflection:**

Girls First Fund's Toure called for funders to *"deconstruct the practices that can be a hindrance [in order] to understand where they come from."* In addition to looking at their staffing, grantmaking and administrative processes, Toure called on funders to resource the inclusion of people excluded by typical processes. This also necessitates examining the role of intermediaries between grassroots actors and global decision-makers and funders.

### **Local stakeholders in global decision-making:**

Moderator Sachini Perera of RESURJ and the Alliance for Feminist Movements acknowledged how conversations around funding can themselves be arenas for exclusion, recognizing that the resources and mandate to participate in funding conversations often excludes grassroots movements and organizations. She urged funders to dedicate resources to bringing grassroots stakeholders into those spaces. Girls First Fund's Toure affirmed a commitment to advocacy, one that is shared by AJWS, *"We do our best to raise our partners' visibility to get them on global platforms like this one where they can share their solutions and approaches."*

**“ We need trust to guide us in our work [along with] our own humility, sense of our limits and appropriate role in the funding ecosystem. ”**

**-Susan Blaustein, WomenStrong International**

**Care not extraction:**

In closing, Toure urged us to “remember that it is people doing the work.” Flexibility, and centering the humanity of individual activists, allowed funding to flow to MSPMT in the Dominican Republic to address the security and mental health needs of its staff, essential conditions for them to continue their fight against racism, sexism and homophobia. Agustin Federico summed up, “For us it is important that donors... take into consideration [our] integrity and the strategies that can...allow us to continue our work... from a perspective of care and protection, so that we feel accompanied. We propose...funds from philanthropy...more aligned with our needs [for] security...and to put mental health and care at the center.”



**Webinar recording** (Choose English, Spanish or French; Passcode: 0+\$ke.x2)

