

FUNDING FEMINISM: WHAT THE MOVEMENT NEEDS RIGHT NOW

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In this essay, Tamanna, who has been fundraising for the feminist movement for almost a decade and co-leads a grassroots feminist organisation in India, articulates the challenges that grassroots feminist organisations face - not just with regards to lack of funding, but with how the funding works. She lays bare the struggles, the unhelpful patterns, and the blindspots of the philanthropic landscape currently funding the feminist movement, and also celebrates progressive shifts and rays of hope emerging in global philanthropy. The article aspires to provide very clear solutions - at the micro and macro levels - for philanthropy to truly enable and empower the feminist movement.

Introduction

The feminist movement right now needs feminist funders. What I mean by that is this: the feminist movement needs funders that believe deeply in human rights and personal freedoms; that can demonstrate the courage to fund organisations speaking truth to power and face the risks that come with that; that have an intersectional lens and insist that feminist funding must consider the impact of climate change, wars, genocides, racism, casteism, communalism, and capitalism; that choose trust-based philanthropy because trust is essential for healing and collectivising; that find ways to fund long-term and with flexibility because they understand the winding, fluid, snowballing, unpredictable, and multiplying character of a movement; that recognise their position of power and privilege and for that reason choose to tread with softness and gentleness; that listen deeply and carefully to what their grantee partners are sharing and experiencing and mould their funding accordingly; that create relationships with their grantee partners that are foregrounded upon equality, equity, dignity, and mutual respect. It's a high bar that I have articulated, but the vision must be high, and we can take small steps toward it, and every step is a win for feminism.

Yes, feminist organisations need funding, this is true. However, the inverse and deeper truth is that we all need feminist organisations quite desperately and existentially at the moment. In the midst of the varied, intersectional, layered, complex, and mounting global challenges we are facing, we simply do not have the option of leaving our grassroots, community led, local feminist organisations under-resourced and abandoned. We have to resource feminist organisations and resource them in the way that actually works. Let's talk about what that means in the most everyday, practical, straightforward ways.

Systems and Processes

Firstly, we need to simplify processes for feminist organisations to receive and maintain funding - not remove processes, just reasonably simplify them. All processes need to be simplified - from applying for funding, to compliance checks, to reporting, to renewal of

grants, and finally, to closure of grants. I have experienced the best and the worst and would like to share both. Let's start with the worst so that we can move toward hope.

There are funding institutions currently that require organisations to submit 40 page proposals for a one year grant, make multiple presentations of their projects to convince multiple levels of decision-makers, submit monthly reports for a small size grant, enter the same data on three different platforms, make organisation go through a complete re-application process for renewals, become concerningly obsessive about measuring the slightest mindset shift enabled by the organisation, and withdraw their grants within days worth of notice. Putting aside the magnitude of stress this causes to the managements and fundraising teams of grassroots organisations, there is a much larger, much more concerning structural contradiction and paradox to consider here: we want to resource and fund local, community-led, grassroots organisations that are working at the frontlines and implementing projects directly with the last-mile stakeholder, and yet we expect them to demonstrate the managerial, accounting, administrative, fundraising, and funder management capacities of a large, established, financially secure, well-resourced institution. How?

On the other hand, there are rays of hope. I have also experienced funders that have simplified application processes including some that have made it entirely interview and/ or field visit based which is much easier for a grassroots organisation whose primary focus is the field. In terms of reporting, there are funders who only require annual or half-yearly reports and some that also provide the option of verbal reporting; there are also funders that have put together very creative questionnaires for reporting that take less than an hour, are majorly multiple choice based, and provoke self-reflection and learning for the organisation as well. Renewals for some funders is automatic or requires a smaller, shorter process than application and that is demonstrative of the trust the organisation has rightfully earned. Finally, when the time comes for the grant to wind down, there are funders that inform a year or two in advance thereby giving organisations enough time to prepare not just financially, but also mentally. There are excellent steps, progressive steps, feminist steps forward in the world of philanthropy.

The Relational

I now want to focus for some time on the relationship between the grant-making and grantee partner - the meetings, the visits, the phone calls, the emails, the whatsapps, and also the extreme absence of all communication. I am referring to the inter-personal and relational space, to how we treat grantee partners when we hold the power of money. Once again, I have experienced the best and the worst. There are calls I see on my phone and there is an instant spike of anxiousness and fear, there have been meetings I have come out of in tears, there have been visits that have left me feeling erased and non-existent, there have been conversations that subtly reinforced that we are inferior because we are financially dependent, there have been encounters that are downright humiliating, and of course there is the other end of the spectrum where there is a complete absence of communication from the financial partner - no responses to mails, whatsapps, calls, requests for meeting, engagement with the proposal or the reports, nothing. How do we deal with all of this? Some of us try to negotiate a little, but for the most part, speaking with utmost honesty, we deal

with a smile, with “I understand”, “thank you”, “whatever is convenient for you”, “yes, absolutely”. We don’t do this because we lack dignity and self-respect or the awareness of the misuse of power, we do it because in every second of every interaction with a funder, we are thinking about the people we support and about our team’s salaries, about all the lives directly and indirectly impacted by the funding. So we swallow, smile, and move.

At the same time, in a parallel reality, one is also experiencing grantmaker-grantee relationships that are on the other extreme, that feel like small revolutions with the sheer beauty they are able to create. There are calls from funders I cannot wait to receive, visits I look forward to, conversations that have made us feel held and safe and left us even more energised, motivated, and empowered to do our work. This happens when funders create relationships with grantee partners that are grounded in equality, equity, mutual respect and trust. For funders embarking in this direction, the sky is the limit. They can become confidantes, co-feminists, and sounding boards of organisations, they can brainstorm solutions and strategies with the organisations, and they can gain much more in-depth access to grassroots realities. They can even step out of the box and create spaces for grassroots organisations to connect with one another and cross-learn; they can create safe spaces for multiple organisations to gather and speak about their challenges and stressors, they can provide tailored trainings and capacity buildings to organisations, they can even open more funding doors for their grantee partners. This is all possible and has been done, IS being done. Apart from how good such relationships feel for both parties, in my experience these funding relationships actually result in much more innovative and creative solutions to the patriarchal problems that the partnership is trying to solve. When feminism is practiced in the micro-interactions, it translates into macro implementation as well. Both realities are possible, and the choice in this regard rests almost entirely with the funding institution.

Accessibility, Intersectionality, Inclusivity

Another set of issues that the philanthropic landscape needs to solve is accessibility, inclusivity, and intersectionality - and yes, this is a feminist concern. There is no doubt that urban organisations that can write/ speak/ present well in English are accessing more funds. Having fundraised for two very different NGOs in India over the last decade, I will bluntly admit that being from the majority community, upper caste, able-bodied, urban based, academically trained, cis-woman, and having a strong grasp over the English language is opening doors for me that will not open for many people without these privileges. While this is not good news for the feminist movement, the good news is that there is a lot that funders can do to change this situation. Funders can select organisations on the basis of conversations and visits rather than written applications because that is where grassroots organisations shine, and this one shift alone would bring a whole new portfolio of organisations to grantmakers. The same goes for reporting - reducing the frequency of reporting, or creating shorter reporting formats, or shifting to more multiple-choice questions, or even considering some amount of verbal reporting, would all be huge steps in the direction of accessibility. Funders can accept documents and sharing in multiple languages, provide additional support for people with disabilities, reduce compliance checks to what is mandatory and essential, listen to the stories on ground rather than requiring elaborate MLE systems, and so on. This will require a certain open-mindedness, a stepping out of comfort

zone, even a certain risk-taking, but it is essential for the feminist movement to move forward in an intersectional and inclusive manner.

Trust

The term “trust-based philanthropy” is frequently heard in more progressive circles, and in others it is simply wiser to not mention it. I feel, in the latter scenario, there is a foundation myth about “trust” that is at play - that trust means the end of accountability, that trust means no compliance check, no reporting, no conversations, no visits, no checks and balances. This is not true. This belief needs to be uprooted from its core. The truth is the exact opposite - trust includes accountability, trust and accountability are intertwined, accountability is an essential part of trust. Funders who fund with trust don't erase accountability, they reframe it and how - they open up options, they introduce flexibility and elasticity into their systems, they diversify their approaches. And is trust ever broken? Yes, rarely, but sometimes it is. It is a situation funders need to plan and strategise for rather than react to. An entire portfolio of organisations are not to be punished for the few that broke trust. Why? Because trust is a brave and conscious political choice, because trust is essential to healing and collectivising, and because there is no feminist movement without trust. Trust is at the heart of the feminist movement - its history, its structure, its core character. Funding feminist movements is going to require funding with trust because without trust, the funding ceases to be feminist at all.

Time

Another factor that the feminist movement is going to need from the philanthropic community is “time”. Patriarchy cannot be addressed, even at a small scale, by achieving a ten point indicator sheet within the financial year. Patriarchy will have to be addressed through healing and recovery and by changing hearts and minds and these, whether we like it or not, are slow processes. Movements, by definition, have to move over a period of time. Movements evolve slowly, in twists and turns, going back and forth, in unpredictable and unanticipated ways, through snowballing and through ripples. We are currently expecting grassroots organisations to somehow overturn this fact of nature and deliver immediate, impossible results, and that too within a global context of increasing authoritarianism, shrinking democracies, advanced capitalism, misogynist backlashes, and multiplying violence. Once again, my question is, how? The only answer is for funding to be long-term and multi-year, and not as a happy announcement at the time of annual renewal, but as a commitment made at the very beginning of the partnership. This does two things - one, it allows movements on ground to brew and evolve, and second, it allows organisation leaders to focus on building teams and movements rather than frantically trying to secure funds round the clock. This does not mean that a particular funding can never wind down. It can. When done well, with planning, with advance notice, and with additional forms of support, winding down of a grant does not disrupt evolving feminist movements.

Flexibility

“Flexibility” is yet another conversation that the philanthropic sector must have within itself. There are questions around the “why” of flexibility, the “how much”, the “measurability” of its impact, and so on. The answers are also in plain sight - in the experiences, stories, lived realities of feminist organisations. In the lives of grassroots organisations, like in the lives of individuals, there are many unanticipated expenses. I’ll share just a few of our experiences at Shakti Shalini because I feel they might really help paint the picture. In 2019 our administration and accounts officer had a major accident and the rest of us had to absorb all admin and accounting work, in 2020 COVID hit, in 2022 we lost our senior most survivor support lead to cancer within five days of diagnosis, in 2024 our offices got flooded. These are just the most major calamities. On top of this, through these years, every now and then a funding commitment either completes its duration, is a short term commitment, or the funder withdraws the grant suddenly, and the organisation is scrambling to fundraise to continue paying salaries to its team members. In the day to day, our shelter home/ community centre, which has been depreciating for more than a decade, throws all sorts of unanticipated repair and maintenance expenses at us; the health, legal, and rehabilitation costs of the survivors we support cannot be predicted beyond a point; and not to mention the various benefits we would like to offer our team for their care and wellbeing. The need for flexible funding is obvious through these examples, because, how else will an organisation absorb these shocks and continue to survive and hope to thrive? There are funders globally that are incorporating flexible funding, it is a welcome shift, a commendable one, and the need of the hour. However, many are still not ready, but they can consider starting small. One doesn’t have to make 100% of the grant flexible, but I would urge grant-makers to consider making a portion, even a small portion, of the grant flexible. It would be an absolute gamechanger in the life of the grantee partner. I am often asked what the value of flexible funding is. The value of flexible funding for a feminist organisation is nothing less and nothing more than the value of oxygen.

And a little more...

There are few final thoughts - these are perhaps for the grant-makers that are already farther down the feminist path. One, grant-makers can consider opening some grants for organisations to experiment with ideas and take risks. We are open to this with for-profit start-ups. Why not with NGOs? Yes, every experiment may not work, but then we’ll know what does not work. On the flipside, an experiment will work and will lead to the most creative, innovative solutions. The second thought is around labour rights, employee benefits, wellbeing, and care of the frontline workers within the NGOs and CSOs and collectives. It is true that leaders of grassroots organisations need to prioritise their frontline workers more. It is also true that the funding institutions need to as well, because organisation leaders need resources to be able to fully care for their teams. Grant-makers can consider ear-marking some funds toward the rights, benefits, wellbeing, and care of frontline workers, and even include it as an activity in the application and reporting processes so as to structurally incentivise and encourage it. When the people at the frontlines are prioritised and taken care of, the feminist movement will grow and thrive.

Conclusion

To conclude, the feminist movement needs intersectional feminist funders that foreground the principles of equity, equality, empathy, care, trust, and respect in all their interactions, processes, approaches, and systems. My general experience is that when funding institutions are led and managed by people who have backgrounds in grassroots feminist work, the grantmaking too becomes feminist. So, we need more feminists in the philanthropic community, in positions of decision-making, and with the power and authority to not only direct where the resources are allocated but how they are allocated and how feminist organisations are treated. Every step in this direction by every funding institution, no matter how small, is a win for the feminist movement.

This essay is part of Better Funding's *Insight* series, which shares practitioner perspectives on how funding can better support grassroots work and movement building.

It sits within a broader collection of content—including case studies, insights, and practices—exploring feminist funding and what the movement is asking of funders today.



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