

WHAT FEMINIST FUNDING IN THE ARAB WORLD LOOKS LIKE



SANDIE HANNA – GRANTEE PARTNER,
OCCUPIED PALESTINE

Feminist activism in the Arab world faces a wide spectrum of challenges

and restrictions that is constructed by the dynamics among the lack of political will that different actors holding funding commitments in the feminist ecosystem have been unapologetically demonstrating; the political and economic agendas of wars, expansionist imperial projects, and authoritarian regimes; in addition to the socially constructed patriarchal norms and laws. This spectrum has led to women and feminist funding being insufficient in terms of amount and frequency; and that some Arab states are so often excluded from funding opportunities, either intentionally or by default. Young feminist activists are also impacted; whether they organise in movements or informally, unregistered groups are rarely eligible to receive funds. This reality sometimes puts pressure on movements or informal groups to register; and that is either a development they can't afford, or don't want to make for many reasons including their resistance to the NGOisation of activism. Resorting

to collaborating with a registered organisation could also carry some challenges; whether it is the emergence of crisis between funding and ownership, or intergenerational communication gaps, or the pressure imposed on unregistered young and girl groups to make compromises in exchange of the benefits they are offered under the structures of registered orgs.

Multilateral and bilateral funders are the mainstream funders, and along that come restrictions, requirements, bureaucracy, threat on ownership, unsustainability, inefficient crisis response and recovery funding during COVID-19, and more. Alas, neo-liberal attitudes are dominantly visible in an asymmetrical relationship between local organisations and unregistered youth / girl groups on one hand, and conventional mainstream funders on the other. It's often a transactional relationship that too often lacks rapport and authentic collaboration. Often, funders demonstrate a gap between their proclaimed feminist values and grant-making practices;

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almost all funding is restricted and there's a decrease in provision of core funding to the benefit of project based funds. Funding is often conditioned with groups and organisations having to sign specific waivers or condemn specific parties/ resistance in their homelands.

When pointing out structures and practices of women and feminist funding, it is almost always inevitable to debate the controversial question on what feminism really means and how it shows up. In a context where the global north is the main source of funds towards gender justice and feminist realities in the Arab world, there's a consistent and constant need to question and hold to account white feminism that is falling short in front of the feminist core principle of the personal being political. It is imperative to acknowledge that while feminism is entrenched in development and humanitarian aid, and yet more importantly to address how structures of that feminism can be efficiently overhauled or dismantled and entirely rebuilt. The claims to "free" and "democratised"

countries and people in the region often end up with women and girls paying the ultimately most expensive price. Capitalist states and systems are often accumulating progressive gains at home- but continue to be progressive except for Arab populations, especially women and girls, impacted by the expansion of Zionist and white supremacist projects. Mainstream feminism often ignores the dynamics and manifestations of the multilayered oppression against women and feminists in the Arab world, and that is loudly reflected in its contribution to the funding ecosystem. Also, whether they are commitments to development or humanitarian aid, many funds towards feminist collectives/ WROs/ youth and girl groups/ social movements in the region have been limited or restricting and exclusionary in a best case scenario.

Therefore, the feminist funding that pours in the Arab world is an imperial white mainstream funding reflecting values of feminism that neither represent us nor encompass

our intersectionality and struggle for social and political liberation. And both funding and feminism in this case intentionally dismiss the complex reality of women and girls living under armed conflict, proxy and civil wars, settler colonialism and more. Within this reality, it is not enough from funders' ends to resource gender commitments at a glass ceiling level, alternatively they should put money, ownership and power directly in the hands of organisations and activists who know best where and how money needs to be distributed.

The model of the Global Resilience Fund challenged the crisis of funding by capitalist feminism, and offered emergency grants that are flexibly distributed according to the needs and priorities set by grantee groups

- an intentional liberation approach that is setting an example. With this being said, there's a critical need for flexible funders to put more resources and attention to the Arab world that is primarily monopolised by capitalist feminism and funding, and use their platforms and power to influence mainstream funding structures and mechanisms. ■

Sandie Hanna is a human rights, anti-imperialist activist and political feminist committed to dismantling the multilayered oppression that young women and girls experience under settler colonialism. She leads arts based community initiatives with adolescent girls to raise awareness about collective liberation, intersectionality, gender justice, political agency and leadership.