

FUNDING NEEDS AND PRIORITIES FOR FEMINIST GROUPS AND COLLECTIVES IN LEBANON

POLICY BRIEF

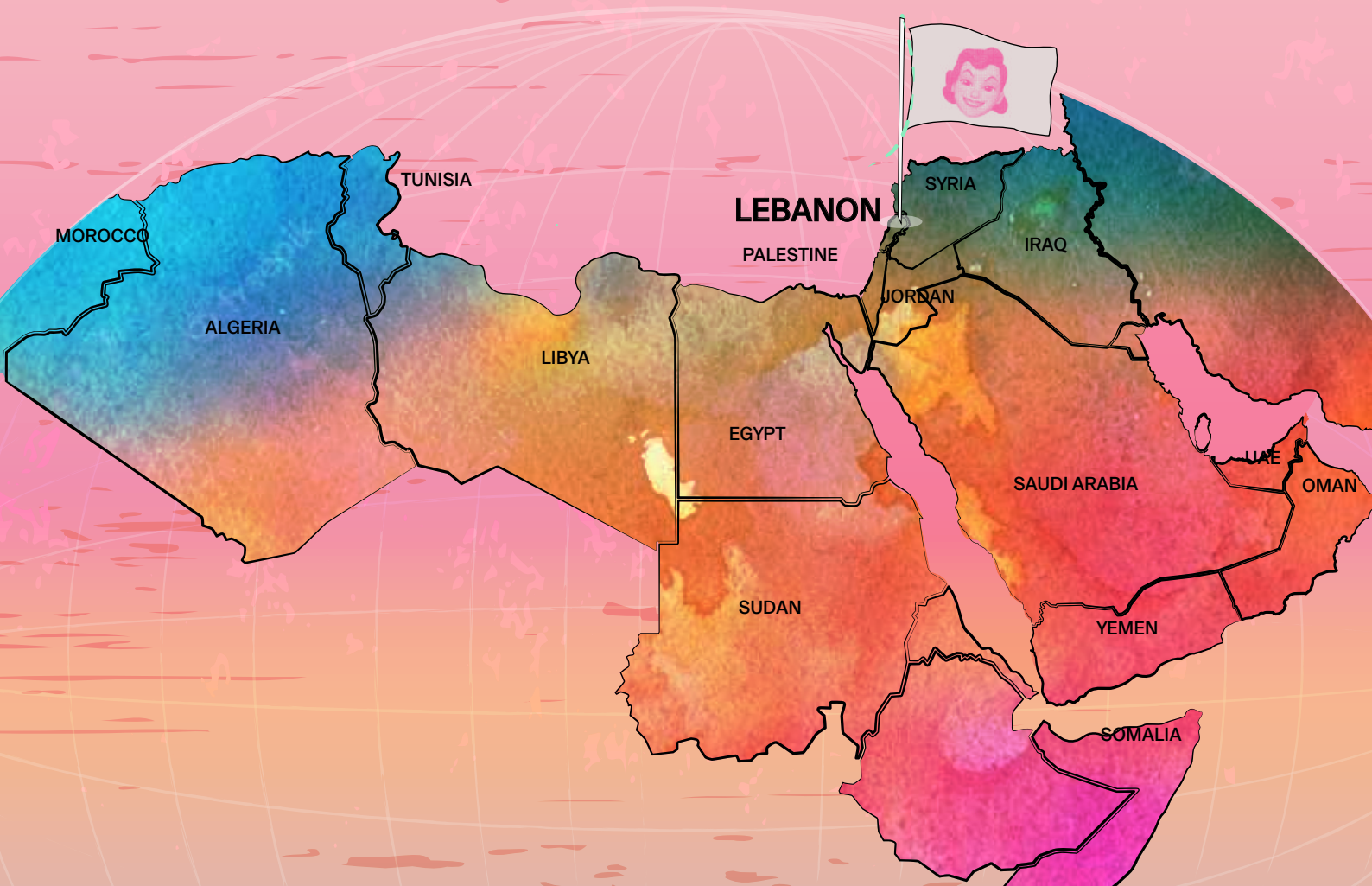
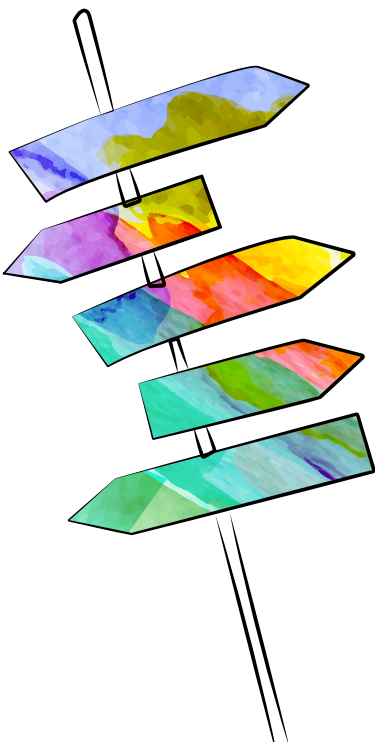


TABLE OF CONTENT

Introduction.....	3
Landscape of funding for feminist groups:	
Sources and strategies	4
Challenges and Funding Needs.....	5
Priorities Brought on by Recent Crises.....	6
Recommendations.....	8



In Lebanon, recent years have brought on tumultuous political and economic conditions that have greatly affected small feminist groups and organizations' activities and funding needs and priorities. In 2019, news of planned taxes brought thousands of residents of the country to the streets in protest of a political class that did not provide its citizens with the conditions or infrastructure to survive the precarity and disenfranchisement they faced daily. The crisis would be further exacerbated with the Beirut Port explosion of August 4, 2020, which caused an estimated 218 deaths. The blast, authorities' negligence which caused it, as well as insufficient governmental response to the losses faced by the population triggered a new wave of protests in 2020. Meanwhile, fallout from the debt crisis sent the currency, pegged since 1997 to the US dollar, into a freefall. Capital controls were imposed on depositors, who could not access foreign currency, majorly affecting their purchasing power and access to their own assets.

Civil society, including feminist groups, were key in mobilizing in the wake of the political turmoil, articulating clear demands and proposals, as well as mobilizing to tend to urgent needs created by the crisis context. However, funding and support from donors may not have necessarily responded to these situations adequately. This policy brief, based on key informant interviews and focus group discussions with experts and activist in feminist mobilization in Lebanon, as well as a larger resulting report, synthesizes funding needs and interest among these groups. Given that feminist donors are in a privileged position to support feminist groups and collectives in such times of difficulty, this policy brief also seeks to provide some guidelines for such funders to better provide resources to groups and collectives with transformative visions of gender justice.



Landscape of funding for feminist groups: Sources and strategies

For decades, different types of organizations for women's rights have coexisted in Lebanon, from groups with a focus on political advocacy and legal reform to collectives based on grassroots engagement and systemic transformation. Both these types of groupings may be of various sizes and levels of formality, and they engage in a range of different activities, from service provision to awareness raising campaigns. For many newer groups, alternative spaces for community-building and social media represent innovative ways to further their agendas, as opposed to traditional office settings (Hyndman-Rizk 2020). Today, the landscape of feminist organization and their activities is nebulous and permeable, with smaller groups disrupting these original lines and carrying out a diverse range of activities while focusing their sights on smaller target populations.

For feminist groups and collectives, obtaining funds entails a myriad of strategies: some actively search for public calls and send applications, other cold call funders to pitch an idea and request funding, usually for projects, and others with sufficient renown and visibility are headhunted by funders who have a specific project in mind. Interviewees from such groups cited social media as a frequent platform they survey for announcements or call for applications. While larger organizations may also build relations with the private sector in order to gain support for the activities, some smaller groups may resort to self-funding or fundraising through crowdfunding or organizing public events. Another strategy mentioned by activists from smaller groups is establishing income-generating activities, such as conducting research for other organizations or opening a café. This was highlighted as an innovative way for organizations to reach self-sustainability, and as a strategy that should be encouraged or supported by donors.

The bulk of funding for feminist organizations in general in Lebanon is international: this can involve UN Agencies such as UNDP or UNFPA, or governments, embassies, multilateral organizations or cooperation agencies from the Global North, particularly Western Europe and North America. While Arab States have also provided funding to civil society organizations, these are usually for conservative or religious causes as well organizations with assistential models such as charities for children or persons with disabilities. Otherwise, a prominent source of funding for smaller groups are feminist donors, such as the Urgent Action Fund, Mediterranean Women's Fund, Equality Fund, or others. Small feminist groups are often selective of sources for their funding, opting for donors that both align with their vision ideologically, as well as are better fitted for their organizational needs (not requiring excessive documentation or causing premature growth and expansion).



Challenges and Funding Needs

In Lebanon, as in other parts of the world, larger and more established organizations tend to collect funds more successfully, as their work aligns more closely with donor agendas and donors themselves are more familiar and trusting of them. Furthermore, these organizations, having been more closely associated with the “NGO-ization” phenomenon, have better capacity and organizational structure to meet with bureaucratic donor requirements and adopt their discourses, language and human rights and development “jargon”, though they risk greater co-optation and loss of radical potential for structural transformation¹.

Access to larger funds, such as those provided by embassies or big, international donors, is usually limited for small groups due to bureaucratic requirements that they cannot or are not willing to meet because of legal or contextual constraints. This can include certain issues such as requiring an ID from a trans person who legally cannot have their documentation match their gender identity, or problems and objections with registering an organization before the state. Some funders may also obligate or train collectives exclusively in becoming registered, which is problematic for some feminist groups. Such requirements or exclusion criteria were mentioned as limiting small groups’ capacity for growth and consolidation, and as impeding investment in their vision or in innovative ways of tackling deep-rooted issues in their respective countries. Feminist donors, however, were recognized as an exception to this trend and as a more reliable and inclusive source of funding due to more lax requirements.

Excessive reporting requirements are also an obstacle for many smaller groups, which are usually working over capacity, with limited time and human resources, and sometimes a lack of understanding of donor criteria. This is especially acute when these groups have multiple funding sources with different reporting requirements, and a lack of professional capacity or trained staff to work on such complex financial and/or accounting tasks. Representatives of collectives and activists frequently lament the lack of availability or sufficiency of core funds that can help them establish themselves or have a sense of stability to work on their plans.

Moreover, funds based on impact can be limiting for groups that are short on resources or aiming for more long-term or hard to quantify results. Finally, rigid financial compliance requirements are challenging for small groups which may need to recur to informal means to cover their needs, or in context of economic instability and financial crisis.

¹Mitri, D. 2015. From Public Space to Office Space: the professionalization/NGO-ization of the feminist movement associations in Lebanon and its impact on mobilization and achieving social change. Beirut: Civil Society Knowledge Centre.



All these obstacles increase competition between groups, which in turn creates divides within civil society and challenges solidarity and feminist movement building. Funds also tend to centralize with organizations based in Beirut, and amongst the circles of well-established activists who have important influence and ability to influence feminist narratives. On a practical scale, relationships with donors are complicated as grants tend to be short-term and inflexible. Although feminist funds tend to offer better terms for financing, power relations still remain, and tensions can still arise when developing projects or making key decisions².

NGO-ization has also brought about additional challenges for the relationship between donors and beneficiaries, as the post-war agenda has normalized the shrinking states' reliance on civil society organization to provide basic services and push for reforms that are its own responsibility. This is particularly true in the case of measures and policies in response to the so-called refugee crisis in Lebanon, where the state, international donors, and local and regional civil society organizations partnered in order to devise and implement strategies to address Lebanese and Syrian people's needs, including issues related to gender such as gender-based violence³. This causes frustrations within feminist organizations and smaller groups, who find themselves in need of additional support in order to promote their feminist agendas, alongside providing the critical support for populations that arise in the context of humanitarian emergencies.


Priorities Brought on by Recent Crises

This phenomenon became especially acute after the multiple crises that began with the economic collapse in 2019, with the increasing recoil of the state in providing services. Such "emergency" situations also result in often changing plans and priorities, such as focusing more on immediate service provision like shelters and in-kind aid, instead of advocacy at the policy level. Emergency contexts also provoke shifts in the methods of work: These can include staff travelling to different areas of the country to meet with target populations to counter increasing costs of transportation or shifting times of activities due to electricity cuts. These adaptations may also be frowned upon by donors who are strict on original plans.

²Moughalian, C. and Zeina Ammar. 2019. *Feminist Movement Building in Lebanon: Challenges and Opportunities*. Beirut: RootsLab.

³Tarabulsi, Y. 2023. "Funding schemes and support towards gender-based violence prevention and sexual and reproductive health in Lebanon: a critical analysis of their impacts on human rights defenders". *Gender & Development* 31(1), 161-178.





The financial collapse and subsequent restrictions on personal capital by the Lebanese state has also brought on many challenges for obtaining funding. Some respondents from small and unregistered groups expressed having no access to larger donors as they require a USD bank account, which is difficult to obtain for many. Some activists who have staff with dual nationalities or trusted connections in other countries may circumvent this by opening an account abroad, but for most, this limits funding to smaller amounts with less requirements, with some only being able to work with cash. With that said, an innovative solution opted for by certain organizations is applying funds jointly with other organizations or groups who have the necessary bank account, which builds solidarity between them and encourages complementarity.

The recent political and historical juncture has also affected funding, as many interviewees reported a decrease in funding, or a mismatch between the flow of funding and increasing needs. While some attributed to gender issues being considered less of a priority by donors in this emergency context, others highlighted the war in Ukraine as a major cause for focus shifting from the Middle East and North Africa region onto Europe in general. Either way, respondents affirmed that this situation created more precarity, but also an increased competition for funds, which undermines feminist movement building and exchange of important information and strategies. Meanwhile, new issues have emerged and been highlighted in this context, such as period poverty, increased violence against women or mental health.

On the other hand, recent public attacks on feminists and on the LGBTQ+ community, coupled with increased sexist, homophobic and transphobic discourses in the public spheres have caused organizations to invest more in their own security and that of their target populations, which may lead to greater expenses, changes in spending plans, or even decreases in activities and visibility that are not always understood or well-received by funders. This is especially the case for groups who work in more conservative areas. In fact, some interviewees even warned of a perceived “donor fatigue”, wherein funding streams have decreased from big donors such as embassies or international cooperation agencies due to these actors not observing “sufficient” impact to continue supporting either feminist organizations or smaller groups’ activities, with this having an exacerbated effect on the latter. Activists lamented that donors believe political mobilization to only take one specific form, that of public protest, instead of taking into account the daily work they carry out or being open to more dynamic definitions.




Recommendations

The multiple crises in Lebanon have created a particular need for donor support to feminist collectives and groups. Feminist funders, thanks to their philanthropic principles and more flexible means of engaging with their beneficiaries, have a unique opportunity to set precedents both in the donor/recipient relationship and in tackling these problems. In order to achieve these goals, the following recommendations are offered for feminist donors to provide support to groups, in a way that furthers their feminist and transformative missions:

1. Offer flexible, sustainable funding to organizations: Allow groups to lay the groundwork, argue for, and freely design their own projects to be funded, based on the priorities and needs they identify for the feminist agenda, with an intersectional approach that considers specific contexts and characteristics. Take into account that immediate service provision may be necessary in order to tend to emergencies, while also reaffirming support to structural issues that existed prior to emergencies and be open to topics that have newly become part of public discourse. Provide opportunities for a continuity in activities and project implementation, so that groups can commit to their long-term vision and bigger picture. Also, allow room for organizations to spend on informal sources that may not provide documentation that corroborates expenditure, given the Global South context and its large informal economies.
2. Support organizational and institutional development: Dedicate resources for groups to strengthen their operational structure, such as through capacity-building, and investing in human and material resources, including through project funds disbursed to feminist groups. Avoid, however, imposing a specific organizational structure (such as NGO registration). Ensure that, through funds, organizations can still provide labor rights and a sense of security for their personnel. Also, encourage, provide guidance and support organizations and groups seeking to design ways to generate their own income, and alert them to additional funding or income generating opportunities that can benefit them.
3. Encourage the creation of partnerships, as well as spaces for knowledge exchange and building alliances: Organize spaces for beneficiaries to learn from each other's activities and encourage within funding announcements that collectives ally with similar groups in order to expand their outreach. Devise innovative funding mechanisms, such as joint applications that can pull on each group's strengths and capacities, as well as pilots such as pooled funding that can create solidarity and support struggling groups during critical moments.





4. Disseminate information and funding announcements: Partner with key actors and identify spaces and fora in order to spread information in regions and sectors that are not conventionally reached by donors, such as rural areas or younger collectives. Present incentives for organizations and groups to expand their reach beyond capitals and give preference to groups that are based in rural or more remote areas.

5. Offer guidance and tools for applying for funding: Develop guidelines that make the application process easier for first-time applicants and organize spaces and platforms for potential applicants to have their doubts and questions addressed. Tend to applicants individually and respond to their specific concerns.

6. Relax reporting requirements: Offer clear and explicit description and examples of required information in expense reporting but allow for reporting to be simple and without excessive technical expertise needed. Moreover, consider that reporting may be complicated by economic and financial restrictions in the country, and supporting documentation may be considered a major risk if found by authorities in contexts of political persecution.

7. Adapt requirements and working methods to each organization: Consider the contexts and specific challenges faced by each group when considering applications or reporting requirements and keep close contact and personalized communications with beneficiaries in order to design processes that are adaptable and fit for their own capacities and specific circumstances. Co-design and define indicators, measurement systems and possible supporting documentation, keeping personalized and close communications channels open at all times.

8. Stand in solidarity and promote beneficiaries while considering the risks of visibility: Amplify, celebrate and share information on the activities and impacts of beneficiaries' projects, keeping in mind, however, that some groups representing or working with marginalized groups may be threatened by increased exposure in the public sphere. Dialogue and work closely with organizations to find the best way and medium to manifest support and solidarity with them in times of political turmoil and external threats, whether through communications campaigns, statements, providing safe spaces or other means.

