

FUNDING NEEDS AND PRIORITIES FOR FEMINIST GROUPS AND COLLECTIVES IN TUNISIA

POLICY BRIEF

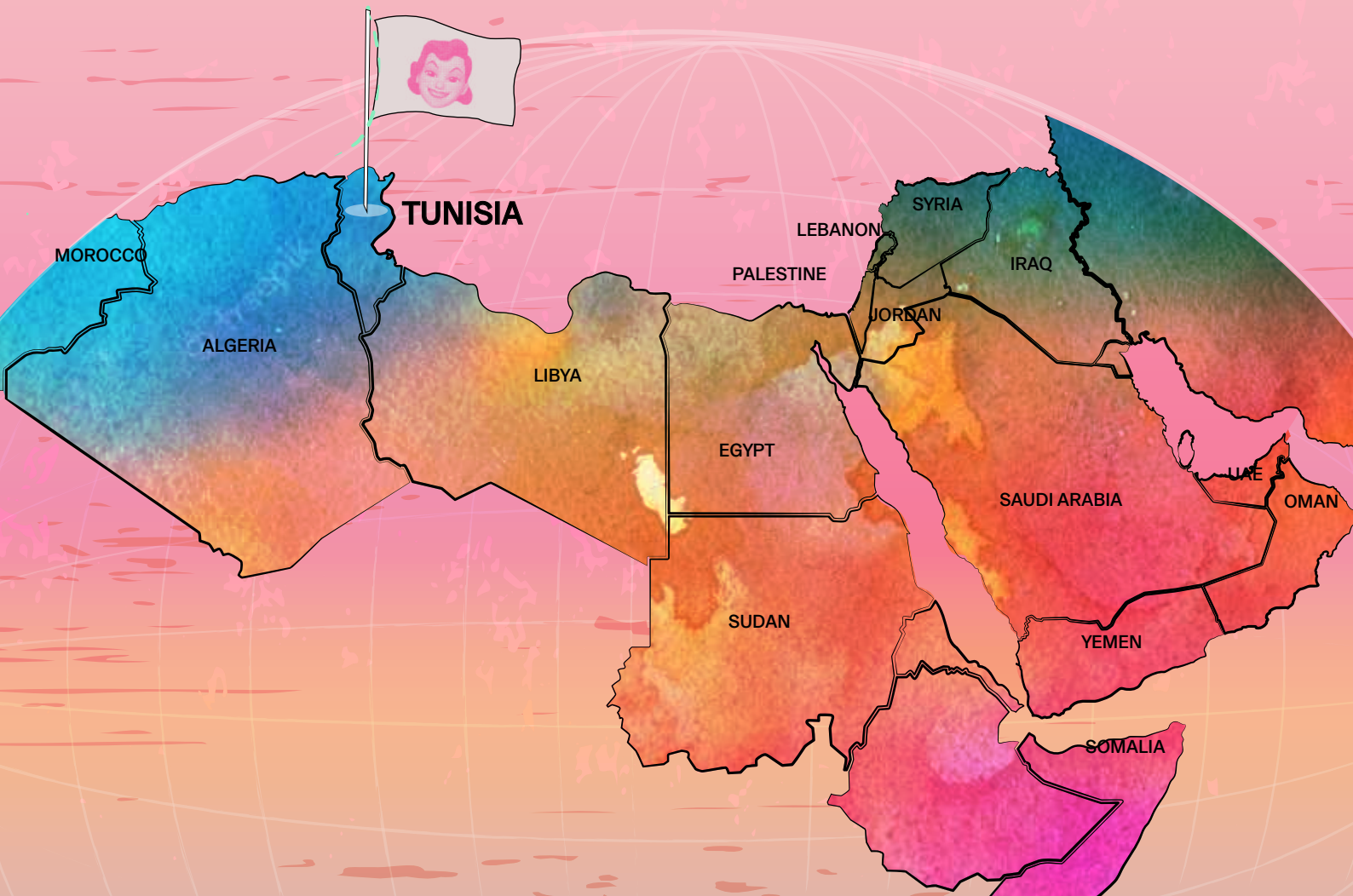
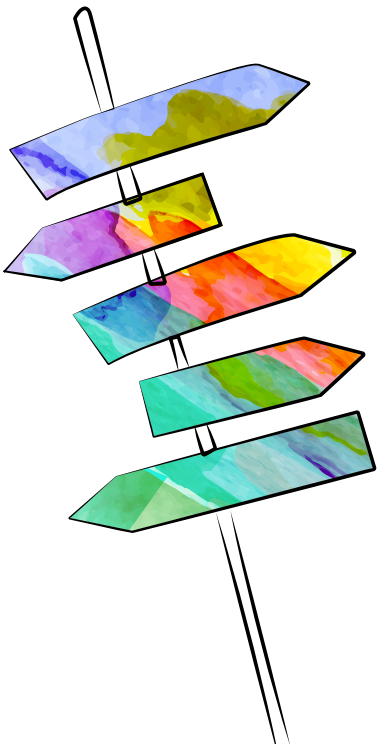


TABLE OF CONTENT

Introduction.....	3
Landscape of funding for feminist groups: Sources and strategies	4
Needs and Priorities for Funding.....	5
Recommendations.....	7



In Tunisia, Saied's consolidation of power in the past few years has posed an existential threat to feminist mobilization. Saied's actions after his election began concerning civil society activists and international observers alike. In 2021, Saied suspends the parliament elected in 2019, in a move criticized by many as unconstitutional, issues a decree sustaining this suspension and consolidating power, while drafting a new constitution without consulting with civil society and organizing a parliamentary election under this constitution (Yerkes and Alhomoud 2022). By late 2022, a historically low turnout in the aforementioned parliamentary election as well as its boycott by most political parties confirms the consensus that Saied's actions position him as an autocratic leader (Amara and Mcdowall 2023).

This has also represented a significant step back for women's rights, as well as for civil society organizing and mobilization. While Saied has appointed the first female prime minister in the region, many have criticized the move as an attempt to appease the international community with no real policy implications. Najla Bouden, Tunisia's new prime minister, has a limited range of action subordinated to the president's vision and has not taken any action on urgent matters concerning women's rights in the country, such as assigning resources for the implementation of law 58 on gender-based violence, or repealing Circular N.20, which guaranteed a policy of gender parity in appointments of senior government officials (Ben Said 2023). On the other hand, Saied's reform of the electoral law removed key provisions for ensuring women's political participation, such as electoral lists and parity (ibid). Finally, a draft decree seriously curtails civil society organizations' ability to receive funding from foreign sources, as well as their right of assembly, amongst others, submitting many to approval of the government (Cole, Hawthorne, and White 2022).

Among this backlash and regression in gains for women and marginalized groups' rights in the country, new and urgent needs have risen for small feminist groups and collectives in Tunisia. This policy brief, based on key informant interviews and focus group discussions with experts and activist in feminist mobilization in Tunisia, 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

Since 2011, smaller feminist groups have flourished in Tunisia due to the relaxing of regulations on forming organizations. However, many other groups emerged to tackle other topics such as education, culture and democratization, tackling gender inequality as a cross-cutting issue, without it necessarily being a primary focus or identifying as a feminist organization^{1 2}. Common causes for mobilization are issues such as social rights, economic integration, aid for marginalized in vulnerable group, political participation, and generating spaces for knowledge exchange and raising awareness on gender issues. Newer themes, such as LGBTQ+ folks' rights, sexual and reproductive health rights, and anti-racism have also emerged during this period. However, interviews revealed that certain issues remain neglected and in need of greater attention by activists and funders alike: The issue of women's labor, organizing and unionizing, as well as economic justice are usually absent from feminist debates, which is concerning given the precarious work conditions observed for women in textile industries or the agricultural sector.

A plurality of organizational forms has now also been observed, with older, larger and more established groups coexisting with informal and smaller collectives. This has consequences on the possibilities of receiving funding, as these larger organizations tend to have better networks, resources, and knowledge for applying for funding, and have agendas better aligned with those of donors³. This inequality is also particularly felt by groups in rural areas or comprised of young people, who are much fewer and face greater difficulty obtaining resources and physical spaces to ensure a sustainable operation. Many smaller groups also face difficulties linked with lack of experience, visibility or impact, collaboration with government institutions and ability to collectively mobilize. These issues are likely to be exacerbated by recent developments and Kais Saied's consolidation of power and must be a priority for funders.


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.

¹Mahfoudh-Draoui, D. 2013. *Les Associations qui Oeuvent pour l'Egalité des Chances entre les Femmes et les Hommes en Tunisie*. Tunis: CREDIF.

²Kréfa, A. 2019. "Genre et féminismes dans la Tunisie post-révolutionnaire" *Moyen-Orient* 44.

³Henneberg, S. 2023. "Civil Society in Tunisia: Resetting Expectations". Policy Notes 127. Washington: The Washington Institute.





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 Tunisia 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).

There exist important sources of tensions and conflicts for feminist organizations and collectives when it comes to funding. Given the history of authoritarianism in the country, state resources –especially national ones– are usually viewed with suspicion and as a possible venue for co-optation. However, most funding for feminist organizing (be it large or small in scale) in Tunisia is linked to international actors, organizations and agencies⁴. These can be through foreign governments, or direct grants or subgrants for their implementing partners.

Needs and Priorities for Funding

Since Kais Saied’s consolidation of power, these issues have become more problematic given his continuous attacks on feminists, the LGBTQI+ community and migrants, as well as the targeting of organizations and groups who support them as working for “foreign interests”.

⁴Refle, J.-E. 2016. “Tunisian civil society and its international links” Conference: The European Workshops in International Studies (EWIS).



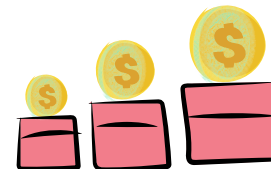
Public discourse as well as Saied supporters in media and social networks have labeled these activists and communities as traitors, operating against the interests of the nation and concerned with bourgeois and morally corrupt issues. Arrests, political persecution and blackmail of such activists has also increased exponentially, with sentences for political opposition resulting in decades in prison.

This political juncture has had several consequences on both large feminist organizations as well as small groups' activities: First, advocacy and lobbying activities were brought to a halt with the dissolution of parliament and the political persecution of activists. An increase in gender-based violence, as well as violence against migrants and LGBTQI+ folk was also observed, together with the closure of shelters, centers for women and judicial services as financial support for them decreased. Finally, respondents highlighted a fragmentation of civil society, due to dispersion, emigration of key figures, arrests, and a general sense of demoralization amongst activists. As a result, impacts of activities have decreased, with organizations and especially smaller groups struggling to gain the trust of their target populations and scrambling to provide immediate services without generating any type of visibility that could put them at risk:

This can create tensions with donors, not only due to lack of flexibility on previously goals, but also due to a general disappointment with Tunisian civil society after what donors perceived was "inaction" in response to Saied's consolidation of power. Activists and experts both expressed preoccupation at a seeming decrease in available funds because of a variety of factors such as the rise of far-right governments in Europe, the war in Ukraine, but, most of all, donors' fear of the current political climate. Donors operating in Tunisia seem to have shifted their focus to less controversial issues, such as economic development or climate change.

This, coupled with restrictions on receiving funds, blocking of money in banks, as well as massive increases in taxation for civil society organizations has put a huge strain on smaller groups and significantly increased competition. These restrictions on funding from external sources have provided an advantage for larger, urban organizations with foreign connections which have the means to open bank accounts abroad. The precarity of the actual situation is worsening existing difficulties linked to the sustainability of funding, favoring short-term projects rather than more structural support for feminist groups, such as capacity-building or other ways of developing and strengthening operations. Finally, security issues also affect reporting practices, as supporting documentation such as registration lists, minutes, receipts or others can create paper trails that can be used against organizations if found by authorities.





Recommendations

The current political climate in Tunisia urges donors to provide continuous support to feminist groups and collectives at this critical time. 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 hurdles. 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.

