

# GLOBAL FUND FOR WOMEN = N

Champions for Equality™



## Europe and Central Asia Activist Convening 2015 **LEARNING MEMO**

# Learning Memo

## Europe and Central Asia Activist Convening 2015

In December 2015, Global Fund for Women organized a three-day convening in Batumi, Georgia in partnership with Kvinna till Kvinna and Women's Fund in Georgia, bringing together 84 of the most prominent women's and LGBTQI rights advocates from 16 countries across the Europe and Central Asia region. At a critical time to enable women and trans\* persons to resist the growing backlash against various social justice movements in the region, the convening's main goal is to provide a space for participants - our grantee partners, advisors, and peer funders - to reflect on the growing challenges and exchange strategies for resistance.

Activists in the region more often rely on collective action and joint work as effective strategies to build and sustain national and regional movements in order to resist the current backlash, maintain past gains, and bring about social change. While Global Fund for Women recognizes that the conservative backlash is a widespread phenomenon in Europe and Central Asia and that funding is needed everywhere in the region to protect and advance the human rights of women and trans\* persons, it is also convinced that in particular parts of this region the backlash takes more severe forms—where activists have even less access to funding. For this reason, the convening gathered activists from the following sub-regions of ECA: Central Asia, South Caucasus, Post-Soviet Eastern Europe (including Ukraine, Russia, and the Russian North Caucasus), and the Balkans.

This memo summarizes key findings from the convening as well as recommendations for next steps, both externally for supporting movements as well as internally for future convenings.

### KEY FINDINGS

**Finding #1: While Feminist and LGBTQI activists have made significant progress over the last several years, success is increasingly accompanied by backlash and closing of civil society spaces.**

Convening participants shared insight into the complex geopolitical context in the region where key powerholders nurture a disabling environment for civil society, vilify feminism and gender equality movements, and manipulate with homophobic, transphobic and xenophobic attitudes in order to maintain their status quo and strengthen their influence. Some of the positive changes that the social justice movements have brought about in the 1990s and early 2000s are now under a strong wave of attack. Around the region, a diverse set of actors, state or non-state, mobilize against activists in a systemic effort to limit their impact, undermine movement sustainability, compromise past gains and block the opportunities for achieving new victories.

Activists are observing ever more sophisticated strategies used by authoritarian governments, religious fundamentalists, and nationalist extremists. For example, Russian-influenced "foreign agent" laws and bills are spreading in the region and creating additional obstacles to feminist and LGBTQI groups; the counter-terrorism measures of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) specifically target civil society organizations and limit their autonomy and access to funding; and constitutional agreements and alliances between the church and the state fuel the resurgence of the so-called "traditional" and "family values" often used to

incite hatred and violence against women, LGBTQI persons, marginalized groups and also activists. A sharp contrast to this trend is the drastic decline in international funding available for the region, which is further limited by the legal restrictions that are increasingly imposed on foreign funding.

In order to survive this backlash, activists emphasize the importance of the following strategies: deepening solidarity among activists, groups, and movements; examining our own stereotypes and becoming more inclusive; mainstreaming security and shifting from training to daily practice; engaging new allies and actors, including human rights funders, progressive theologians, and dissenting feminist voices within religious communities; collective international lobby to challenge FATF's Recommendation 8; involving more young activists in the movement; maintaining strong ties with communities and working on the grassroots level.

### **Finding #2: Integrated security and self-care is a critical component to both the health of activists but also the movements they support.**

Activists described a wide range of security threats that they personally and/or their organizations experience on a daily basis because of their work and activism. The most common types of attacks they have received are in the form of verbal abuse, death and rape threats, and online harassment. A lot of these threats are coming from state and non-state actors as well as fellow citizens. Activists often rely on the Internet and social media for organizing and community mobilization – a method that sometimes proves to be highly insecure.

All speakers emphasized threats to their life and physical safety that many women and trans\* activists receive on a regular basis. Sometimes these threats are manifested in attacks to the office spaces or in physical violence towards individuals. If the police are called, activists often experience secondary victimization from police officers. Often, the perpetrators of violent attacks remain unpunished and the crimes uninvestigated.

One of the issues explored by the participants was burnout and health problems as the forms of security threat that are very common, yet not sufficiently addressed. Because of the personal and emotional nature of self-led social justice work, most activists have strong and deep commitments to their work and community. Activists often do not allow themselves or cannot afford to pause or ask for help. Burnout paralyzes the feminist movements and undermines their sustainability. Because of this, the practice of self-care and the holistic approach to security are critical political acts of resistance and effective strategies for sustainability.

In spite of these challenges, activists have shown resilience through their creative use of security tools and systems. They have responded to attacks by frequently changing office locations, keeping a low profile, and try to deal with the attacks and threats without the involvement of the law-enforcement agencies. Acquiring self-defense skills and relying on community-led solutions are becoming increasingly popular.

### **Finding #3. Great diversity, inclusion, and collaboration between social justice movements are critical to sustaining activism in the increasingly hostile environment.**

Many activists identify with more than one movement. Often, they find themselves at the margins of a number of movements – they are the only women's group in a disability rights movement and the only group led by women with disabilities in a women's rights movement; only feminist group in the youth movement and the only youth-led group in the feminist movement; only trans\* group in both the LGBTQI and women's rights movements and the only transfeminist group in the emerging transgender rights

movement. Because of being at the intersection of various social justice movements, and at their margins, often they find themselves fighting for greater diversity, inclusion, and justice in each of these movements and challenging them to become more intersectional in both their analysis and practice.

An important theme that was emphasized by each speaker was collaboration between social justice movements within which they operate. All speakers stressed that such collaborations are critical survival strategies to respond to the increasingly hostile environment where marginalized groups of people and their advocates are attacked and vilified. However, they have also underlined that these partnerships are not easy because of various patriarchal values entrenched in most of these movements.

#### **Finding #4. Convenings can be an effective strategy to facilitate collaboration between movements.**

Many of the first women's NGOs in the region arose out of the emergence of women's rights activism in the 70s and 80s in the Balkans and 90s in former Soviet spaces. However, their evolution followed different paths. While the Balkan feminist movement, deeply grounded in the grassroots, was not prompted by any funding interventions, there were intentional efforts made from the international donor community to launch an "NGO movement in the Post-Soviet space" that included the donor incentive to promote the gender equality principles. While some groups in the former Soviet countries have evolved into feminist groups, most of them have maintained their initial politics, vision and work ethics, which are heavily grounded in the patriarchal values. As a parallel process, a next generation of organizations have emerged in this sub-region that have clear feminist politics and a strong grassroots base. This has created obvious tensions and internal conflicts within the women's rights movements between actors from different "waves" or "generations" – established women's NGO workers and emerging grassroots feminist activists.

Convenings and other spaces that can bring activists together from these different movements was cited as a critical component to building solidarity. These opportunities provide spaces for new ideas for groups, exposure to other movements, and spark ideas for collaboration. In particular, the positive feedback received about this particular convening showed that it was useful for participants in not just learning about topics that were timely and important but also in forging new partnerships or deepening existing relationships.

#### **Finding #5. Participants affirmed the importance of incorporating the principals of integrated security and self-care into the convening.**

As the convening brought together activists, human rights defenders and advocates, the focus on security and safety emerged during the planning stage as a very logical priority. From the beginning, the core organizational team committed to addressing these issues head-on and in addition to including targeted panel presentations and group discussions on the topic, also committed to creating an environment that would help participants pause, reflect, rest and regain strength. Because of this, the event weaved the principles of Integrated Security<sup>1</sup> (sometimes referred to as Holistic Security) into the fabric of the meeting, including its format and agenda. Integrated Security offers a holistic understanding of security and

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<sup>1</sup> Integrated Security concept was developed by Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights in response to the various types of threats that women and trans\* activists and human rights defenders experience, such as verbal, physical, digital as well as emotional and personal attacks. Their joint manual developed in 2011 emphasizes the "intensely personal" aspect of security threats experienced by feminist activists (Barry, 2011). So, this approach is distinct from the more mainstream one common in the human rights field mostly focusing on physical and digital attacks.

emphasizes some of its more overlooked aspects, such as exhaustion, burnout, trauma and health problems. With this, it brings the concept of well-being into the center of the conversation and encourages activists to practice this approach on a daily basis, for example by incorporating it into the working culture of their organizations, along with the physical and digital security measures that they take.

The core team of organizers followed these principles during the convening in acknowledgment of the growing security challenges experienced by women and trans\* activists in the region. The goals were to protect participants from possible security threats and harassment, create a safe space for honest conversation, enable pause and reflection, and provide much needed opportunities for rest, relaxation and recuperation. In follow-up surveys and through feedback given at the convening, participants reflected on this aspect as a key highlight that exceeded their expectations. Many shared that the format and space created a safe and relaxed space that allowed for rich conversations and deepened learning. One participant wrote, "for the first time I made space for me without experiencing any guilt. I have never used a spa - these days I used it every morning. I spoke when I wanted to speak, mingled when I wanted to meet, and I was silent when I wanted to reflect and just consolidate my thoughts and emotions. This will have just as big an impact on me as the formal content of the convening."

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

### **Recommendation #1. Develop strategies to support intergenerational leadership.**

A strong theme that emerged during the conference was the need to support intergenerational leadership. Young activists, long-time experts, and individuals new to the field expressed desire to find new ways to encourage collective work and mutual learning. Participants cited wanting to preserve and transfer knowledge from those more established to the emerging activists in the field so that they are best equipped to build on the progress that has been made. In addition, the learning should be mutual as there are new ideas and approaches that can be shared across generations.

While there are many existing models among sister organizations, Global Fund for Women should explore additional approaches and possible partnerships to help foster intergenerational leadership. Potential models include: peer exchanges to facilitate learning between activists and deepen collaboration across generations; mentoring programs; initiative to preserve and transfer memories of the movements such as case studies, gatherings, publications, etc; global or regional convenings focusing on intergenerational leadership; intergenerational leadership school that is either online or a physical space for individual and collective capacity building; and travel grants to send women to established leadership programs.

### **Recommendation #2. Support peer learning exchanges to share effective strategies, build collective capacity, and foster collaboration.**

While closely linked with the recommendation above on intergenerational leadership, peer learning exchanges also provide opportunities for movements to learn from each other and address challenges of intersecting movements. In particular, during the convening, participants cited that they would like the opportunity to share strategies and best practices around key topics: cross-regional exchanges between activists from countries that have developed effective and creative strategies over the years such as Belarus, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and countries with new disabling environments such as Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, etc; peer exchanges women's peace activism between the Balkans and the South Caucasus and Ukraine to share lessons on conflict resolution and learnings from the strong women's peace

movement in the former Yugoslavia; cross-regional exchanges focused on sexual violence against women to build capacity and deepen expertise of organizations addressing it.

Peer exchanges can be facilitated through travel grants, study tours, or issue-focused convenings. As funders think about ways to best support peer exchanges, we should also learn from sister organizations that have established programs and lessons from hosting their own peer exchange programs.

### **Recommendation #3. Incorporate principles of integrated security at future convenings**

Future gatherings should be purposeful in thinking about the security measures as well as self-care. Special considerations should be made to ensure the security and safety of participants through setting clear guidelines and expectations for social media, photos/videos, disclosing meeting location or participant identities, etc.

To support self-care, the organizers should be mindful of agenda as well as physical space. This is important both as a support and retreat for activists as well as to create a safe space for sharing. Examples for this convening's incorporation of this intention include setting an agenda that includes optional activities with a dual purpose for teaching tools and tactics for well-being but also providing time or space for rest. Scheduling should also allow for additional time both as flexible for future issues that arise on the first days, networking opportunities outside sessions, and recognition that everyone is likely still working and communicating back to their home office. The physical space is also very important. An informal room set up provides a physical reminder of the collective support and ability to allow members to make themselves comfortable. The venue, when possible, should be a place that can facilitate relaxation and encourage self-care.

### **Recommendation #4. Engage key stakeholders in a participatory planning process**

Much of the success of this convening can be attributed to the participatory design of the planning process and partnerships. Global Fund for Women conceived and organized the convening in close partnership with two women's funds working in the region – Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and Women's Fund in Georgia. In addition, during the preparatory stage, representatives of women's funds and activists from each priority sub-region set up a representative Agenda Committee. The Agenda Committee ensured the high quality of the convening agenda and guaranteed its responsiveness to the needs of the participants. It also created a space for activists and women's funds to work hand-in-hand and make equal contributions to the agenda-setting process breaking down donor-grantee power dynamics. Members of the Agenda Committee also provided invaluable support not only before, but also during the convening. For example, some of the members spoke on or moderated panel discussions, led workshops, and provided feedback to the core organizing group and facilitators after each day.

### **Recommendation #5. Build in space for funder-activist dialogue, including a panel and space for reflection and joint action planning.**

During the convening there was a specific panel for funders to share information about their work in the region, reflections on the convening, and insights gathered that will inform their regional strategies going forward. While this sparked a lively conversation between activists and funders and provided useful feedback to both sides, we also recognized that it would be helpful to take the conversation beyond what was prepared for at the convening. Future convenings should include a funder panel such as this but also conversations with the funders before to discuss ability to respond to what they are hearing from the activists. At the end of the convening or soon afterwards, the funders should be reflect together and create

an action plan that they can present in response to what was learned at the convening.

**Recommendation #6. Further refine the movement capacity assessment tool as it has potential to be a useful resource for the movements.**

Global Fund for Women shared the newly developed movement capacity assessment tool during the convening discussions. Participants piloted the tool in small groups, discussing the strengths and challenges of their movements. Overall, the participants expressed excitement and found the tool very useful. One participant shared that the tool was a “thought-provoking, motivating self-reflection tool” and another group noted that it asked valuable questions about strengths and challenges that are often not talked about directly.

The challenge most participants voiced was identifying a specific movement and its scope for the assessment because issues are always intersected and movements are related to and/or overlap with each other. Many activists work at the intersection of multiple movements but the tool is designed to focus on one particular movement at a time. This feedback should be incorporated into the instructions and design of the tool as it is being developed further.