



# BRAVE CREATIVE RESILIENT

THE GLOBAL STATE OF  
YOUNG FEMINIST ORGANIZING



Published by  
FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund &  
Association for Women's Rights in Development's  
Young Feminist Activism Program

EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY:  
TOP FINDINGS &  
A CALL TO ACTION



ver the past decade especially, young feminist-led organizations have garnered a reputation as outspoken, courageous, and creative movement-builders, pushing transformative change and social justice around the world. Until now, however, no comprehensive global study has been done to map key characteristics of young feminist organizing, including their current financial status. In 2014, FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund and AWID's Young Feminist Activism Program embarked on a research effort to answer these very questions, and this report outlines key findings from this joint effort.

## 1.1 Top Findings

This report's main findings indicate that despite the fact that young feminist organizations are using innovative strategies to tackle some of the most pressing issues of our time, with some of the most vulnerable populations, they are strikingly under-resourced and their sustainability is in jeopardy. The summary below provides a 'snapshot' of who young feminist organizations are, the issues and strategies they work on, and the financial and political realities that shape their work.

### 1. Young Feminists are Diverse and Organize Intersectionally

Young feminists are organizing across movements in an intersectional way, locally, nationally and regionally. Young feminist organizations (YFOs) represent diverse social movements and expressions of feminism and include movements such as: youth, climate justice, sex workers, LGBTQI, indigenous, sexual reproductive rights, grassroots women, human rights defenders, health and disability rights.

### 2. Many YFOs are 'Emerging' and Relatively New

**Half of participant groups can be described as emerging or nascent, as they were created since 2010 with only one sixth in existence for more than ten years.** These findings likely reflect a significant increase in young feminist organizing since 2010 or alternately may reflect a dynamic sector that re-forms and re-organizes frequently.

HALF OF PARTICIPANT  
GROUPS WERE CREATED

SINCE 2010.

### 3. YFOs are Charting their Own Patterns of Development

YFOs fall into three distinct groups or 'stages of development': 1) 'Small emerging' (under two years, less than 15 staff); 2) 'Established fast growing' (two or more years, more than 15 staff), and 3) 'Established slow growing' (five years or more with staff size remaining about the same). With 25% of survey respondents fitting into this last 'Established slow growing' category, we learn something important about YFOs—they do not necessarily pursue growth as a goal; small organizations are deemed valuable in and of themselves.

### 4. YFOs are Well-Integrated into Larger Movements and Work Intergenerationally

YFOs are collaborating with activists from other social movements and generations, strongly suggesting that young feminist groups are integrated into wider movements. Two thirds (67%) of survey respondents strongly agree that they collaborate with activists in other movements, and a majority (63%) collaborate with a range of generations of activists.

### **5. A Significant Proportion of YFOs are Unregistered**

A small majority of YFOs are registered (63%) but many are not, by choice or necessity, often resulting in increased difficulty in accessing resources and heightened insecurity, a trend that differs dramatically by region. A majority of groups in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia-Pacific are legally registered (84% and 71% respectively), with the highest numbers of unregistered groups coming from LAC (51%) and MENA (43%). The main reasons YFOs give for not opting to register their organizations include: the process is too expensive (35%); not being registered is a political choice / decision (33%); and they face a series of legal, fiscal, and administrative burdens that hinder the registration process (30%).

### **6. YFOs are Working Within a Broad Variety of Organizational Structures**

YFOs represent a diversity of life stages and organizing models, which vary according to context, location and political identification. Many young feminist groups forgo registration in favor of informal or collective structures, sometimes using host organizations or umbrella structures to receive funding or capacity development. When it comes to how YFOs conduct their work, many YFOs depend on a mix of virtual and actual workspaces. A degree of informality is confirmed by the fact that 40% coalesce around specific issues or campaigns and are relatively dormant at other times.

### **7. YFOs are Leading Through Participation and Consensus-Building**

YFOs are using a variety of decision-making models, but primarily employ participatory majority rule and consensus models. One quarter of survey respondents report using three or more kinds of decision-making models. Decision-making for Sub-Saharan African groups is more reliant on boards of directors and membership bodies than in any other region. When it comes to age, most organizations include leaders in age groups from 18 to 35. While leadership participation is lower in older age groups, 39% of organizations nonetheless include people in the leadership aged over 35.

### **8. Top Challenges and Priority Areas of Support**

Lack of financial resources is by far the most widely shared challenge in the survey, with 91% of respondents ranking lack of financial resources as their top challenge. A significant number of groups are challenged by lack of capacity, backlash and fundamentalism, and threats to safety and security. Young feminist groups place widespread value on training in project management, financial management, and resource mobilization, which speaks to their heavy interest in promoting their own financial sustainability and organizational development to continue the collective struggle.

91% OF RESPONDENTS RANKED  
**LACK OF FINANCIAL  
RESOURCES** AS THEIR TOP CHALLENGE.



# MORE THAN HALF OF RESPONDENTS REGULARLY FEEL UNSAFE BECAUSE OF THE WORK THEY DO.

## 9. Threats to the Security and Safety of YFOs

**More than half of survey respondents regularly feel unsafe or threatened because of the work they do.** This includes about one in eight who feel this way **all the time**. YFOs surveyed are challenged by backlash and fundamentalism, threats to safety and security, and political instability, as well as shrinking democratic spaces. YFOs feel threatened by a wide range of perpetrators, comprising both state and non-state actors. Religious fundamentalism is reported across all regions, with YFOs from Asia-Pacific and MENA being the most affected by threats and violent attacks perpetrated by members of extremist or fundamentalist religious groups. A regional analysis of identified perpetrators shows the following:

- In contrast to other regions, MENA and Asia-Pacific based organizations identify extremist or fundamentalist groups as threats much more prominently.
- Organizations in the sample from LAC and SSA are more commonly unsafe and threatened by state, departmental and provincial authorities.
- Over half of the organizations from SSA feel unsafe because of threats and attacks perpetrated by traditional authorities.
- With the exception MENA and the Global North, one quarter of respondents across regions contend with issues of insecurity as a result of threats by members of organized crime (e.g. gangs, cartels).

## 10. YFOs Work on the Most Pressing Issues of our Time

Top priority issues for YFOs are **gender-based violence, sexual reproductive health and rights, and political and economic empowerment for women**. Regionally speaking, women's empowerment, gender-based violence, and women's leadership are priorities for MENA, whereas Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) is predominantly reported in LAC and CEE/CIS regions. HIV and AIDS are almost exclusively mentioned in Africa, with economic empowerment being a key issue area of work in Sub-Saharan Africa. LGBTQI issues are prioritized primarily by MENA, LAC, and CANZUS, and registering comparatively low for Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia-Pacific regions. Finally, gender-based violence is a key priority area across all regions, with the highest prioritization in MENA and LAC.

## 11. YFOs use Innovative and Creative Strategies for Effecting Change

YFOs' strategies are heavily focused on information sharing and knowledge building, including: advocacy, campaigning, education, capacity building and awareness-raising. A secondary focus is on organizing and leadership and movement building, while direct action and service provision are not a primary focus for most. FRIDA applicant analysis shows that many young feminist groups also make use of innovative and creative strategies to effect change through 'artivism', including mediums such as painting, music, theatre, communication and technology. Direct action and street mobilization are also employed to raise awareness and bring about change.

## 12. YFOs have Expansive Reach and Coverage

While YFOs work with multiple communities, four populations of chief concern are grassroots women (46%), Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD) at risk (38%), students (38%) and LGBTQI people (33%). WHRDs at risk were prioritized highest by MENA (47%) and of high significance to all other regions except CANZUS. Over half of the respondents from Asia-Pacific and 46% of the organizations from SSA prioritize grassroots women the most, while in the CANZUS and CEE/CIS respondents work primarily with LGBTQI communities. Compared to other regions, CANZUS and Western Europe prioritize minority ethnic communities the most but hardly work with rural people, whereas SSA organizations prioritize people living with HIV/AIDS.

## 13. YFOs are Staffed Primarily from the Populations They Work With

YFOs are led by young women and trans\* youth aged under 35 years old, and they are fighting for change through direct action mostly at local and national levels in all corners of the world. **75% of respondents report that their organizations are made up of staff who represent the populations they are serving.** YFOs therefore possess unique awareness and understanding of the support needs of young people in their communities. This is substantiated by the FRIDA applicant findings which revealed that young feminist activists are driven to form their own organizations as a result of personal experiences of discrimination and rights violations, and an associated lack of human rights knowledge.



#### 14. The Under-Resourcing of YFOs

YFOs in the sample have incomes that are strikingly low, especially when compared to more mainstream women's rights organizations. They also rely upon a diversity of income sources to sustain their work, **with the notable exception or absence of** multilateral or bilateral agencies and national governments. Key findings include:

- **Self-generated income sources and membership fees** are a primary source of funding for YFOs, especially for groups working in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia-Pacific and North America. This is an indication that many YFOs are less reliant on traditional sources of funding, opting instead to leverage resources independently.
- **Half of survey respondents report 2014 incomes under \$5,000** and one quarter are working with incomes of under \$500 per year.
- About one third of surveyed organizations (30%) rely on a single source of income or none at all (14%).
- **Women's Funds, INGOs and Foundations are a much more common source** of revenue than domestic or foreign governments, and larger organizations benefitted from these channels of funding most. Funding from local and national governments is notably rare.
- While YFOs receive a significant portion of core funding (34% of their 2014 annual budgets), respondents across all regions report their **top funding challenge as being securing long-term multi-year support**, as well as lack of knowledge of grant opportunities (especially in LAC and SSA) and difficulty in meeting the required criteria.

#### 15. The Financial Precariousness of YFOs

Projected 2015-2016 incomes by YFOs surveyed showed that only a handful of organizations (6%) had secured 90% or more of their 2015 funding in May 2015. In contrast, **57% had secured only one quarter or less of the funds they needed for the year**. At that time, 75% had secured less than one quarter of their funding for 2016. Additional findings below highlight the precarious financial status of YFOs.

- **Volunteer Efforts Fuel Young Feminist Organizing:** A majority of young feminist-led organizations operate on small annual budgets and their work predominantly relies upon volunteer efforts. **46% of the organizations surveyed have no paid staff**, and only a minor group (14%) had most of their members in paid positions.
- **Low savings and reserves compromise the financial resilience of YFOs in the sample.** The majority of organizations (56%) believe they could operate for less than six months at most if they did not secure any additional sources of funding. Only 10% could last more than one year.
- **One quarter of groups (27%) have been in jeopardy of closing at some point**, a significant percentage given the relative youth of the YFOs surveyed. Funding, political instability and insecurity are the primary issues threatening the sustainability of YFOs.
- It is important to note some YFOs are not seeking long-term sustainability and instead are evolving in response to a strategic moment.



## 1.2 Recommendations: A Call to Action

Based on the report's main findings, funders and YFOs are faced with an important opportunity to build meaningful and long-lasting collaborations. Funders in all of their diversity should consider the following recommendations as an evidence-based guide to supporting different types of young feminist-led organizing ... a call to action!

### **1. Recognize the value and diversity of young feminist organizing.**

Girls, young women, and trans\* youth are leading sustainable, holistic and transformational changes in their communities and are not merely beneficiaries of projects managed by adults or large non youth-led organizations. Through their work, young feminists are challenging and addressing crucial issues of equality, sexuality, security and human rights. Recognizing the value of young feminist organizing means understanding the importance of their diverse forms and structures, as well as their cultures and the environments within which they work.

### **2. Prioritize supporting girls, young women, and collective efforts led by young people.**

Proactive work is needed to understand and rectify the shortage of funding for young feminist organizing. Funders should develop strategies for reaching out to, engaging with, and supporting these diverse groups, recognizing that current models are not accessible to many YFOs. Investment is needed in creating leadership opportunities, participation at national and international levels, and capacity building projects.

### **3. Fund intersectional, intergenerational agenda-setting projects.**

Most YFOs work on a range of different issues and with diverse beneficiaries. Funders must recognize that many groups do not

have a single issue focus, or even single identity or group focus either, and therefore reduce funding calls which require applicants to identify themselves with a narrow set of themes or activities. Instead, there need to be greater opportunities for groups working at intersectional and intergenerational levels to submit proposals which are cross-cutting and reflect the complex and diverse reality of young feminist organizing.

### **4. Support creative and unconventional strategies to achieve change.**

YFOs focus on changing cultural and social attitudes and practices. Moving beyond traditional advocacy, education and awareness-raising tactics, it is key to understand the value of art, theatre, film, graffiti, social media, blogging, radio, TV, street mobilizations, school occupations, and street blockings in achieving groups' aims. Recognizing the value of these strategies in achieving widespread social and cultural change is key to supporting the vibrancy, creativity and impact of young feminist organizing.

### **5. Engage with the strengths of participatory decision-making models.**

Participatory models take advantage of the different strengths and expertise of those involved and can lead to greater collective understanding and ownership of projects, which should be seen as strength by funders. These models can also appear cumbersome and slow to outsiders. Funders can

work with young feminist applicants to ensure that their grant-making processes take into account how groups work, communicate and make decisions.

### **6. Offer multi-year and flexible grants to reduce fundraising burdens and allow for strategic responses to context shifts.**

Funders should aim to provide flexible and multi-year funding which allow groups to pursue and react to unforeseen opportunities and challenges, to adjust programmatic priorities and to respond to changing environments. Multi-year grants take into consideration the long-term commitment needed to create social and cultural change and demonstrate impact. They give young feminist organizers the space to focus on action, engagement and reflection as opposed to constantly searching for new funding.

### **7. Make funds accessible to smaller and volunteer-led organizations.**

YFOs operate with very limited financial resources and much of their core work relies on volunteers. Reflecting this reality, funders should reduce the administrative burden of applying and reporting for grants. Allowing groups to choose their own proposal format, reducing cumbersome financial requirements, and engaging and communicating directly with grantees can simplify and expedite fundraising processes for all involved.

### **8. Help channel resources to unregistered groups.**

Over a third of YFOs surveyed are unregistered either by choice or necessity, situating them as less financially secure and vulnerable to heightened insecurity. Funders from all sectors can be trailblazers by employing alternative mechanisms for channeling funds

to (mostly small) YFOs who need it most. Donors should consider partnering with a host organization, umbrella structures, or women's funds who are experienced in resourcing unregistered groups and overcoming technical, context-specific obstacles.

### **9. Invest in integrated protection, well-being and self-care.**

YFOs are working in contexts of significant violence and insecurity; however, because of limited capacities they are heavily focused on promoting their own financial sustainability and organizational development to continue the collective struggle. There is therefore a critical role funders can play in both increasing awareness around issues of self-care and security, and investing resources in programs that can support the resilience and long-term sustainability of young feminist human rights defenders and their organizations.

### **10. Go beyond funding.**

Money alone will not ensure the success of young feminist organizing. The young feminist movement needs holistic support including opportunities for movement building, training and capacity building, and integrated protection strategies. The funding community can support this by providing opportunities for young feminists to take on leadership roles and participate in grant-making decisions, to attend events and conferences, to network with wider movements, and to access capacity and knowledge building trainings and resources. Support can also take the form of partnering with YFOs and other committed YFO donors and engaging in joint advocacy initiatives to expand available resources, influence the amount and quality of allocated funding, and diversify ways of grant-making.

