

# Shifting the Power through local Philanthropy

Taking advantage of political moment in Zimbabwe



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FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS





## Shifting the Power through local Philanthrop

Two months after Zimbabwe entered into a new political dispensation, [Urgent Action Fund Africa](#) (UAF-Africa) convened a meeting for members of the women's rights movement in Zimbabwe. This was a deliberate move by UAF-Africa to bolster and embolden the work by the women's rights movement in advancing the women's rights agenda in Zimbabwe at this momentous time with multiple opportunities presenting themselves. The meeting brought together veterans of the women's movement, young activists as well as women living with disability groups.

The meeting was strategically held against the backdrop of a political and economic environment that is presenting a number of opportunities which the women's movement in Zimbabwe needs to strategically position themselves and take advantage of. The meeting, which was held in partnership with the [Global Fund for Community Foundation](#) (GFCF), also sought to provide a platform for the women's rights movement to reflect on how they can use their collective numbers to build a critical mass and raise funds locally to advance women's rights across the country. The main thrust of the meeting, which was organized under the theme **Funding from within: How women's rights organisations can harness the power of local giving**, was to draw attention to the importance of strategic local fundraising approaches that allows the women's movement to raise strategic resources and negotiate funding partnerships that is based on shared values and mutual respect within their environments. The key moment of the new political dispensation with increased foreign direct investment interests, shifts in the global philanthropic landscape and the effects of closure of civil society spaces which centralises issues of legitimacy for NGO's among some of the pertinent reasons why the women's movement must cease the current socio-political and economic moment in Zimbabwe to advance women's rights agenda in the country.

## Strategic Alliances for Strong Resource Base

The meeting deliberated on the innovative ways that the women's rights movement can build a robust and nation-wide resource and people base that justifies organizational relevance and legitimacy. This is happening in an operating sphere where critical questions are being raised of organizational constituency, possibilities of foreign influence on the national politik including interrogations of sources of funding. The imperative of building reputational capital in order to build in the political sphere as well as provide the necessary resources required to advance women's rights in Zimbabwe, these include building reputational capital in order to build trust both internally and externally was highlighted. This included working as a collective and leveraging technical, social and political expertise. During her presentation, [Jenny Hodgson](#) acknowledged that whilst Africa has been known to be a continent of givers, these givings are rarely documented or acknowledged, hence projecting Africa as a mainly external donor dependent continent. Donor driven approach to women's rights work comes with its own challenges such as interest of donors, the power dynamics of whose voice counts –communities or donors? The fact that most power holders are based in the global north, means that they determine and dictate what gets funded as well as how the funds are spent. In the same vein, organizations are expected to produce impact and high end products with limited funds as they receive project and not institutional funding. It became apparent in the conversations that the movement and institutional knowledge management systems have not been politicized enough and organizations have not been accountable enough to their communities as the knowledge sits with those who 'bought' our knowledge(donors). Organizations produce knowledge

products which neither they or their constituencies own as they belong to the person that will have availed the funds. The phenomena needed urgent deconstruction as it is taking the women's movements and communities backwards thus not developing them but extracting their dignity, intellectual and other assets.

Meeting deliberations surfaced the worrying trend of majority of organisations that are struggling to hold their donors accountable due to desperation for funding and seeking to be politically correct. This creates a lopsided power relationship wherein women's organisations struggle to negotiate for voice and power that holds both donors and the government accountable on their commitments and obligations. This has often resulted in women's rights organizing that is donor driven without necessarily determining their own agenda and the needs from the communities they serve. Power building and engaging a power analysis in the work that women do was argued to be good starting and ending point in winning the struggle against patriarchy and women's disempowerment. Forging ahead, conversations of social justice and women's rights ought to centralize matters to do with building formidable human resources around the work they do, forging cross-movement alliances with alliances that support and empathise with their cause, building strong local base in financial, social and political capital. It is when these matters have been provided considerable attention that movement efforts and interventions can be sustained, communities can be energized and supported to transform their situations into positive and longstanding developmental outcomes and the women's rights movement can be taken seriously as an autonomous and progressive vehicle for women's emancipation.

Assertions were made to the effect that competition for limited resources within the women's movement was a big drawback to solidifying the feminist agenda in the country. Activists alluded to the need of adequate individual and institutional solidarity and sisterhood, especially as the economy has been in doldrums for a long period. This practice and spirit has left the women's rights movement fractured and politically compromised due to polarized agendas including unhelpful moral postures that are detrimental to the women's rights agenda.

A major outcome from the meeting was that it is imperative for the Zimbabwean movement to work together towards building a strategic alliance that allows them to generate and build a resource base that provides opportunity to organize and promote grounded development for women's rights that is rooted in people and in communities. The best way for women's organizations to take their power and reclaim their voices is to harness the power of local giving, find common ground through a unifying agenda and support each other to achieve their vision goals. This will strengthen constituencies for specific issues or causes, flatten power dynamics and hierarchical community structures while emboldening civil society organisations to themselves more deeply within their local context through increased local ownership.

An example of harnessing local giving to advance women's rights is [TEWA](#) —a Nepali Women's rights Fund that raises funds locally to support the organizing of rural women in order to enhance their political voice and visibility. This has led to a sustainable and equitable development for rural women's organising in Nepal.

## **Reclaiming collective power and financial autonomy**

The new dispensation in Zimbabwe is a critical moment where the women's movement can reclaim their power, voice and space by collectively engaging with the new political dispensation with a political agenda that is based on a common feminist goal. Whilst women's organizations have been engaging with the new government at individual levels, it is important to be clear on what the agenda is—reaching out to the President and his government with clear asks or dismantling the systems and structures that hold women back, hence the need to be more politically strategic and move with one voice. The women's movement needs to set a formidable agenda by engaging in continuous reading of the current context, reviewing past strategies and adopting new ones. During this time when the government is open to engage constructively, this is the moment to seize the opportunity to form new alliances with the government for deeper women's rights outcomes. The meeting rationalized that the new government which has been perceived to be prompt and responsive can be constructively engaged. The 100 days in office is a strategic window of opportunity for the movement to take advantage of the moment to engage the government on key women's rights issues, such as pushing for the creative and sustained gender equality intergration through the whole whole political system in the country, prioritizing household food security, realizing that many women vendors have lost their dignity through vending, calling for reliable services in the health and education systems, having access to land and calling for the military to use their expertise by serving critical areas like hospitals which have limited capacity as well as demanding that most laws realign with the new constitution. The issues of upholding the constitution was also emphasized as the President has been heard on several occasions highlighting the same. The meeting opined that once the constitution is upheld, women's rights will inevitably be upheld.

### **Forging Ahead...**

The coordinating role of the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe was affirmed in the meeting. The leadership stance WCoZ has taken in creating strategic platforms where women's rights activists and organisations strategise, learn together and collectively bring to the fore a critical analysis on the new political landscape was deeply appreciated by the meeting. The Coalition was challenged to continuously seek means of ensuring adequate compilation of human and strategic resources (expertise, sisters in positions of power across the socio-economic and political spectrum to negotiate for space) that could be found within the movement for the greater good of advancing women's rights in the country. The Coalition was challenged to be bold in political posture of representing women's vision and voice with regards areas that they need urgent attention including health, education, food sovereignty, political participation, meaningful employment and economic growth.

Overall, it was agreed that the women's movement must work together as a collective with strong relevance in Zimbabwe's political arena bringing gender equality goals and feminist perspectives into broader social, political and economic spaces, influencing and catalysing alliances that advance the rights of women in Zimbabwe.