

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

---

*Canada Supplement*  
**Supporting Women's Rights in Troubled Times**  
By Wariri Muhungi & Erin Edwards

Stanford Social Innovation Review  
Winter 2018

Copyright © 2017 by Leland Stanford Jr. University  
All Rights Reserved

# Supporting Women's Rights in Troubled Times

BY WARIRI MUHUNGI & ERIN E. EDWARDS

**F**or many community-level organizations led by women around the world, innovation is born of necessity. It is only by thinking creatively within systems—systems that have been designed to put them at a disadvantage—that they have been able to negotiate peace, access health care for LGBT populations, and ensure legal protections against rape and child marriage. These women and their organizations have developed an innovative reflex that enables them to approach challenges and advance human rights more responsively than most.

But at this juncture in history, women need the world of philanthropy to respond in kind. Canada has emerged as a counterbalance to some disturbing global trends for women and girls: growing populism, extremism, fundamentalism, and lines of conflict that are drawn and fought on women's bodies. With the stakes as high as they are, Canadian groups advancing women's human rights are going to have to do even more. We must match the courage and creativity of women at the front lines. There is no denying it: This work is political, and how we engage with it today will matter for decades to come.

Today, the hard-won gains that women have fought for are in question, and human rights movements are more restricted and more underfunded than ever. Women who lead organizations at the intersections of such movements often do so on less than \$20,000 a year. According to the "2017 State of Civil Society Report" by civil society alliance CIVICUS, civil society is "seriously constrained" in 106 countries. Between 2012 and 2016, governments the world over proposed more than 100 laws to restrict civil society organizations. What this means for many people on the ground is a moratorium on accepting international funds—and an inability to continue, at risk of imprisonment, providing vital services for women: family planning, protection from sexual violence, and advocacy to create and enforce legal protections.

It also means harassment, vilification, and sometimes murder of women human rights defenders, who are disproportionately targeted, particularly when they challenge long-held assumptions about women's bodies and behaviors. Refugees, lesbians, trans\* and gender nonconforming people, black women, indigenous women, women with disabilities, and human rights defenders face especially acute threats from regressive policies, damaging rhetoric, and often outright violence.

In response, the world has witnessed a massive swell of women's marches, protests, and digital campaigns. Women, trans\* people, and men are advocating for women's rights, designing new solutions, and mobilizing hundreds of thousands of new activists. Movements are working together to hold the line for women's rights, combining the tried and tested experience of established activists and organizations with the more experimental approaches of newer ones. One example is a group of Mayan women in Guatemala, working at the intersection of environmental, Indigenous, and women's rights, who have launched an ecotourism business that generates revenue and leadership opportunities for women who have survived decades of conflict and discrimination.

To help efforts like these succeed, social innovation funders need to recognize that the grantmaking best practices on which we've come to rely—such as focusing on long-term, core support—are not enough. We must also be responsive to ever-changing political contexts, take risks on emerging tools and ideas, and build relationships that position grantees as trusted advisors (not just as recipients of funding). Social innovation funders should not just push around money; they must push boundaries.

Canada's recently announced Feminist International Assistance Policy takes these needs into account, setting high expectations for treating women not only as beneficiaries but also as agents of change. Although we have frequently heard the call for women to participate and to lead, this has not always translated into funders trusting women to manage the very resources that are intended to address their causes.

Women's funds such as The MATCH International Women's Fund also aim to amplify the work of women and girls at the local level. Aligned with women's funds around the world that see investing in local groups as the key to transforming philanthropy, The MATCH Fund launched in 2013 to fund women-led social innovations. The women's fund model is, itself, an innovation: It mobilizes support and channels resources directly to the most effective grassroots groups that support women's creative breakthroughs to advance human rights and social movements. In the last 30 years, global, regional, and local women's funds have provided nearly \$1 billion to grassroots women- and trans\*-led groups, and today there are 168 women's funds on six continents. As Canada's only such fund, The MATCH Fund supports those at the center of the resistance—the women who are designing creative, nimble, and culturally cognizant approaches that change power dynamics.

In the last three years, the Fund has incubated women's organizations in 25 countries around the world. One example is Equifonía, a women-led group based in Veracruz, Mexico, where more than 500 women have been killed since 2010. Equifonía is part of a vocal network of organizations denouncing high levels of violence against women and advocating for women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. These groups employ a range of creative tactics: strategic advocacy, network and coalition building, the use of media, and targeted activation of legal frameworks. In 2015, they persuaded the Veracruz government to pilot a "gender alert" that declared a state of emergency and activated protective measures as the femicide rate reached record highs. In providing Equifonía with a web of support, The MATCH Fund fostered the kind of out-of-the-box thinking that will sustain and further women's human rights. Change can be slow to come, but flexible and responsive funding for these groups in their context is crucial to maintaining their creative resistance.

We believe that The MATCH Fund has created a model that can harness Canadian philanthropy and channel it directly to women seeding change at the grassroots. But to really see the scale of change we crave, Canada's progressive political brand and values must extend even further. The arc of the universe will only bend toward justice if we make it do so. At this moment, we must put money where it matters and not shy away from complexity, but, rather, invest in the courageous activists who have the most to lose. Alongside a courageous and creative women's movement, this effort may rewire the status quo. ✕

WARIRI MUHUNGI is manager for global programs at The MATCH International Women's Fund.

ERIN E. EDWARDS is senior communication strategist at The MATCH International Women's Fund.