

Amina Doherty

One of the founding members of the young feminist fund, FRIDA, tells us why she thinks women's rights are still a 21st century issue

What is the FRIDA fund?

FRIDA (Flexibility, Resources, Inclusivity, Diversity, Action) is the only global funding and resource-mobilisation initiative led by young feminists for young feminists. FRIDA pushes the limits around grant making and social justice philanthropy in ways that are unique and innovative.

Why was it set up?

The idea of creating a funding initiative focused on supporting young feminists emerged in recent years with the Young Feminist Activism programme of the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). The young feminists involved in these discussions began questioning the nature of funding models that excluded the voices of those most affected by decisions around funding.

We began asking questions like: what would happen if progressive young women's groups were supported directly? What opportunities exist for young women themselves to shape the funding agenda? How can we mobilise more resources to fund the valuable work that young feminists are doing, such as tackling social and economic inequalities, confronting fundamentalisms and addressing the impacts of global concerns such as armed conflicts and environmental justice, among others.

Who is supported by FRIDA?

FRIDA supports initiatives and groups led by the often vulnerable and marginalised voices of young

women and transgender youth. FRIDA provides funding to groups based and working in the global south (Africa, Asia and the Pacific, the Middle East, Latin America, the Caribbean), Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States and we place particular emphasis on groups or networks led by young women located in remote and under-served areas.

We support groups that are diverse in membership and made up of and/or working with young women including but not limited to: refugees, ethnic, national and caste minorities, rural women, urban poor, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, women living with HIV/AIDS, sex workers, women with disabilities, women living in armed conflicts and post conflict zones. Of course, that is not to ignore the myriad of issues that women face in other parts of the world, but given our limited resources, we had to identify certain priority areas.

Why do you feel that focusing on young feminist activists is the best strategy?

Young women are a critical constituency in the world today. In demographic terms, young people make up a significant and growing percentage of the world's population, particularly in the global south. The United Nations estimates that youths currently account for approximately one billion of the world's population and that one person in five is between the ages of 15 and 24.

Beyond the numbers, our decision to focus on supporting young feminists comes from the recognition that when young women organise,

My feminism is inspired by the everyday rebels who refuse to become disillusioned



they are a powerful force for social change. Across the world, young women continue to mobilise in youth groups, student groups, women's groups, informal networks, formal NGOs and as members of social movements.

Young women are taking action on issues as diverse as the environment, violence against women, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and good governance and democracy. Young feminists represent a new group of progressive leadership for civil society, the economy and politics, and are vital for sustaining and bringing new ideas to the gender-equality agenda.

Yet, there are only a handful of funders providing direct support to young women's groups. Also by focusing on young feminists, we see incredible potential to engage a new generation of young people around issues of philanthropy. We are hoping to build support both from traditional and non-traditional donors, such as young philanthropists and young entrepreneurs, and are utilising new communication technologies and social media to leverage funding for women's and young feminist activism.

Ultimately, however, we believe that the long-term sustainability of feminist movements depends on supporting the expansion of young feminist activism.

What does activism and feminism mean to you?

Feminism simply equates to justice, equity, equality and freedom. The freedom to just be. My feminism has always been about self-determination; it is about women having choices and opportunities and refusing to be restricted by oppressive structures and institutions. There are many ways to be 'feminist' but ultimately, feminism is about supporting women's rights to be themselves.

Where have your activist feminist ideals originated from?

I can't think of a time when I haven't thought of myself as a feminist. As an African feminist, my activism is inspired by a strong community of African women who have helped to raise me, women

who have worked so hard to provide me with a decent education and a wealth of opportunity. My feminism is inspired by these women who support me everyday, share stories with me, offer advice, motivate me; by the everyday rebels who refuse to become disillusioned and who have taught me that in the face of all adversity, you just don't give up. I am inspired by their energy, action, passion and commitment, and by their love.

Some people believe that women these days are already equal, what would you say to this?

I'd have to fiercely disagree! We have certainly come a long way, but we still have so much work to do. In my mind equality is about being equal in all parts of my life that make me a human being (and not just a woman). For me, that means when I talk about equality, I must consider issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and sexuality as part of the bigger picture. So when we no longer have to stand up against economic injustice, and class oppression, and racial injustice; and when I no longer feel like I have to sign petitions and stand in solidarity against awful homophobic

We cannot assume equality when even so-called progressive countries continue to restrict women's choices and rights

laws; and when it doesn't come as a surprise to see women at all levels of decision-making; and when I'm not judged for what I wear and how I look; when my worth is judged by how much I do and how critically I think and when that is reflected in what I earn – then I think I can look you in the eye and say that I feel 'equal'. Additionally, we cannot assume equality when even so-called progressive democratic countries continue to restrict women's choices and rights.

Why do you think feminism is still an issue in the 21st century?

In the 21st century, feminist goals should already have been met, but we are consistently forced to address emerging challenges as well as holding the line to avoid regressions on previously attained rights. We are still having to challenge those in power, those that benefit for example, from the fact in the UK, female managers still earn around £10,000 less than their male counterparts for doing the same job; those that benefit from the fact that women in 2012 still do two thirds of the world's work for a paltry 10% of the world's income. We have to acknowledge that across the globe women are still poor, still overburdened with work, still physically insecure, still hold very little in the way of political power and influence – and that is precisely why feminism is still relevant and why it is important to keep advocating, keep demanding, and keep pushing the bar. We must be willing to fight for the kind of world we want, both for ourselves and for our communities.

You are passionate about all forms of creative expression. How can creativity contribute to activism?

I truly believe that art (and I use this term loosely here to refer to all forms of creative expression) provides an incredible opportunity for people to bring their full selves to their activism. We are not one-dimensional beings and thus we are affected and influenced by all of the things around us. I see art as an opportunity to take some of the very complex concepts and issues that we face on a daily basis and break them down in ways that are more palatable and easily digestible by young people.

I do this in my own personal work by organising movie nights and discussion groups where we meet and challenge each other on issues of race, class, privilege, sexuality and identity; I moderate several online art spaces; I facilitate opportunities to connect young socially minded African fashion designers and musicians with organisations and NGOs working to promote women's rights; I create mix-tapes to connect pop-culture with feminist literature – there are so many



I truly believe that art provides an incredible opportunity for people to bring their full selves to their activism

ways! This is what I mean when I say young feminists are finding new and alternative ways to express themselves and their activism.

How difficult has it been to raise funding for a feminist cause?

Mobilising resources for women's rights work is almost always a challenge, and certainly one that is exacerbated by a global funding environment where resources are increasingly limited. Funding decisions and commitments are constrained by the impacts of the global economic recession, and women's rights organisations have struggled to access the much-needed funding for their work.

Over the past few years, however, we have begun to see increasing interest by a wide-range of donors in "investing in women and girls", coupled with greater significance given to integrating youth voices into critical decision-making spaces. We see incredible potential and opportunity to mobilise resources for

young women but more broadly for women's movements at large.

In our first year, we secured our projected budget through the support of several champion women's rights funders. We expect that the backing of these highly respected donors will allow us to broaden our donor base to a more diverse set of funders, including those interested and committed to funding youth-led work.

A number of young individual donors have funded us right from the beginning. Many of them are young women themselves and are passionately committed to supporting our work. As one of our young women donors shared: "There are many reasons I am funding FRIDA. In doing what I can to support young feminists around the world in their work to create social change, I feel that I am contributing to my own liberation, voice, and agency, in solidarity with a community I feel part of."

Through my support, even if it is small, I know that I am actively participating in, and contributing to, the social change that we are working to bring about. I also know that material support is a vital component of the combination of time, energy, and other resources that go into making change happen. Young feminists around the world tend to lack that kind of support, while at the same time representing some of the greatest creativity, innovation, and potential for change."

How does FRIDA challenge current donor and grant-making models?

FRIDA seeks to involve and engage young feminist voices in all of its processes, including grant making. From consciously deciding not to restrict funding to specific thematic areas, thereby allowing groups to freely articulate their own needs, to our participatory model of grant making whereby groups themselves identify which groups receive funding – we have



The Community of Practices meeting in Amsterdam October 2011

Stah Van Brussel/Maria Cabal



Violeta Krasnic/MikKraenic

One of FRIDA's young women donors Ivana Rosas, at a FRIDA fundraising event at the Women Donors Network in San Francisco

Can you give some examples of projects you're hoping to run with the fund?

In our first call for proposals we received a broad range of requests, from safety and security for young transgender activists in Kenya, to online activism and advocacy by young queer groups in Kazakhstan, groups in Nicaragua requesting help to build cross-regional networks and alliances, requests to support reproductive justice work in the Pacific and feminist political consciousness raising in the Caribbean.

Given the unique nature of the FRIDA grant-making model, whereby

the applicants themselves vote, I can't say which of these groups will be selected until after the final vote – but we are excited at the possibilities! We are confident that each and every one of these proposals will have a direct impact on the lives of women in the communities where they work.

Our model follows years of questioning traditional philanthropic methods

How are you targeting your funding to ensure that help goes to those who need it most?

We have to be very mindful about where we allocate our resources. We are committed to providing support to groups or networks founded or led by young women and transgender youth as well as groups (including informal/non-registered groups) with little or no access to funding from larger donor agencies. We know that some of the key challenges young feminist groups face include: lack of funding and difficulty finding donors willing to fund start-up

initiatives, difficulty accessing knowledge and information, as well as a low confidence in their capacity and limited opportunities for young women to take on leadership roles. Acknowledging these challenges, FRIDA seeks to “fund the unfundable”: small locally based groups, loose collectives and networks that otherwise are often considered too risky to support. At the same time, we have the support of a strong global community of women's funds located in more than 40 countries of the world.

How do you measure whether individual projects have actually made a difference to women's lives?

We have many new ideas about this. As we go through our first grant-making cycle, we are thinking critically about how we tell our stories. We are considering ways to ensure that FRIDA grantees are part of the monitoring and evaluation system. We want to make sure that they take ownership of these processes. Part of our role is also to help donors recognise that evaluating success is about so much more than just numbers, which is why we are planning to develop the first grant evaluation process in partnership with our first round of grantees. We want them to tell us the difference our support has made and how they determine and understand social change. For us, evaluation is about learning – learning for our own programmes and for women's movements generally.

How has working on FRIDA affected you personally?

As one of the founding members of FRIDA, I have been so proud to see its growth and development over the past year. With very little personal fundraising experience, I'm honoured to have worked with a dedicated team of advisers and supporters and to have raised close to \$250,000 in our first year. Working on FRIDA has pushed me both personally and professionally, and I was really flattered recently to be recognised by Annie Lennox as a women's rights champion for change at the Southbank's Women of the World Festival here in London. **m**

Amina Doherty was speaking to Nancy Cremore

sought to make grant making a more inclusive and transparent process.

FRIDA's 'funding plus' model, developed with the support of the Central American Women's Fund (who have used this model for several years now) gives young feminists the opportunity to think critically about how they would like to allocate and prioritise funding, and encourages them to play an active role in critical decisions around what issues and groups receive funding. Our model follows years of questioning traditional philanthropic models that very clearly separates 'givers' and 'receivers'. Through our approach, we seek to break those power dynamics.

How has your first call for applications gone?

We've had an amazing response! We received close to 1,000 applications from 120 countries requesting nearly USD\$4m. We weren't sure what to expect in our first round so we planned to support between 15-20 groups with around \$5,000 each. It is really important to share this as a testament to often-cited critiques that the younger generation is not involved in feminist activism.