



Funding Feminist Alternatives and Futures

**The history of the Doria Feminist Fund
in strengthening Middle Eastern and North
African (MENA) feminist movements**



Background

Feminist movements in the MENA region have a long history of mobilizing to advance gender equality, social change, and democratic reforms and responding to crises and conflicts. As a result, there have been significant reforms in MENA personal status, reproductive justice, and women's political participation policies and practices¹. Feminists have elevated to the public discourse issues that are key to gender justice, like harmful and abusive work practices, sexual and gender-based harassment, domestic, public and structural violence, and LGBTQI+ rights. In addition to local and national activism, there are powerful examples of cross-region movement-building and solidarity across MENA feminists, including regional feminist forums, reproductive and sexual justice networks, climate coalitions, and gender studies programs. As part of building feminist knowledge, a key area of focus has been documenting the rich histories of feminist writers and activists and creating repositories of past and current feminist scholarship and activism. Significant attention has been given to the areas of collective care and justice, and how feminists address and work through conflicts in ways that advance accountability and healing. These bodies of work contribute to the building and amplification of knowledge created by and for MENA feminists that advance diverse narratives and voices and contribute to national, regional and global advocacy and organizing efforts.



¹ For example, some of foundational feminist organizations include:

- Tunisian Association of Democratic Women 1989
- Women Memory Forum Egypt 1995
- The New Woman Foundation Egypt 1984
- The Democratic Association for Moroccan Women 1992
- The Moroccan Association for Women's Rights, 1993
- Yemeni Women Association 1965
- Iraqi Women's Union 1945
- Sudanese Women's Union 1952
- Palestinian Women' Union 1930
- The Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering 1976
- Syrian Women's General Union 1967
- National Union of Algerian Women 1940s
- Jordanian Women's Union 1945

Feminist funding as a Political and Strategic Issue

Despite the rich and diverse scholarship and practice of MENA feminists, their efforts are often not prioritized in global convenings and platforms, and funding is piecemeal, and inadequate. Feminists have consistently maintained that to advance a more just and feminist world, radical shifts are needed in capitalist models of wealth distribution and the operations of philanthropic, development and government funders. They have worked to advocate from within mainstream funding ecosystems and have established their own funds, built new mechanisms to move resources and developed evidence that demonstrates that women can manage substantial amounts of money. Women's funds have also challenged the power dynamics of mainstream philanthropy by grounding their grantmaking in feminist funding principles and centering the needs, voices, and leadership of feminist movement. Feminist and LGBTQI funders provide unrestricted, core, and multi-year grants that allow organizations and movements to set their priorities, engage in trust-based and participatory practices and decision-making, prioritize the funding of those who most experience intersecting marginalization and advocate for changes with the mainstream funding sector. While global funds play an important role in advocating for shifts within philanthropy and mobilizing more resources, their physical distance and geographic location, doesn't allow for the deep understanding of local politics and relationship-building that is advanced by national funds. Global funds also have access to more resources and this has resulted in fewer flexible resources going to region and local funds, and more competition given the paucity of funding.

The Association for Women's Rights in Development's latest research published underscored the paucity of funding going to support feminist agendas across the globe. The median annual budget for feminist and women's rights organizations surveyed in 2023 was just 22,000\$ USD, 60% operated on less than 30,000\$ USD annually and over 80% lacked sufficient income to meet their strategic goals². This research complements data shared in 2008 when AWID and the Global Fund for Women convened 120 activists and funders across the region to engage in a critical and strategic conversation about how to secure more and better funding. Key questions that were raised at this convening included how to: fund-raise in more intersectional ways beyond thematic priorities, overcome political differences to create a bigger platform for funding and influence funder agendas to increase both the quantity and quality of funding for women's rights in the MENA region. The importance of new mechanisms to move resources and the idea of creating a regional women's fund were also discussed³.

²Where is the money for feminist organizing? 2025. Association for Women's Human Rights in Development.

³Resource Mobilization for Women's Organizations and Movements in the Middle East and North African region. 2008. Association for Women's Human Rights in Development.

Through Collective Labour and Conflict: The Birth of Doria Feminist Fund

Building on many conversations about the importance of creating an autonomous funding mechanism based in the MENA region, in 2019 a group of Egyptian activists initiated consultations about the political and practical implications of establishing an independent women's fund⁴. These conversations were supported by the efforts of different activists from the region who compiled scoping studies, previous recommendations and safety and security assessments related to how to move money in ways that did not put into harm the communities it was intended for.

Born of the collective labour of many different feminists in the region, the establishment of the DFF was made possible by a group of regional activists who gathered in Egypt to develop the strategic vision of Doria. This group also served as the interim board of directors of Doria during the inception phase. The DFF was made financially possible by the dedication of funds by the Egyptian organization Nazra for Feminist Studies and Mozn Hassan, an Egyptian feminist activist. In 2016, Nazra and Mozn were awarded the Right Livelihood Award (often called the 'Alternative Nobel Peace Prize') for "asserting the equality and rights of women in circumstances where they are subject to ongoing violence, abuse and discrimination."⁵ Agreeing that women's movements in the region deserved the funds from this award, Nazra and Mozn dedicated them in their entirety to seeding the DFF as a regional grantmaking institution in 2019. The DFF was officially launched on March 8 ,2021 in recognition of

International Women's Day, with the long-term vision of advancing equitable, inclusive, and just social change by building an autonomous feminist funding ecosystem accountable to movements in the region. Mozn Hassan, as well as others from the region, served on the first interim board. The fund's name is a tribute to the pioneering Egyptian writer, journalist, and activist Doria Shafik, who played a central role in the Egyptian women's liberation movement in the 1940s and 1950s.

As a nascent fund, Doria's earliest years were marked by significant challenges including shifting political and economic contexts, security risks and restrictions on foreign and feminist funding, shrinking civic spaces, and political backlash from state actors, but the most significant struggle came from within the movement that birthed the Fund.

In late September 2021, Doria (along with two other organisations) received a complaint of a collective grievance from a group of former Nazra employees who had worked with Mozn Hassan. They described what they called "repeated violations by Ms Hassan towards her employees, in what we believe was an abusive and toxic workplace". The complaint related to the period when Mozn Hassan was the Executive Director of Nazra for Feminist Studies and not her tenure as founder and Interim Board member of the DFF. Mozn stopped attending the board meetings after the complaints were received.

⁴The DFF decided not to include the names of the participants at the original meeting out of respect for their privacy and confidentiality.

⁵Egypt's Mozn Hassan and Nazra for Feminist Studies Announced as a 2016 Right Livelihood Award Laureate, 2016 Right Livelihood

In the face of these serious complaints, at a time when Doria was just beginning to build credibility, trust and visibility among feminist movements in the region, and without clear complaint, grievance and risk policies, procedures or processes in place, the Interim Board was unable to agree on how to respond. After a series of increasingly tense discussions among the Interim Board members, three of them resigned from the board. At this juncture, Mozn Hassan also decided to step down from the Board.

The decision by the then Doria Interim Board of Directors to respond to the complaint, even though it related to a different organization and a period of time before Doria Feminist Fund existed, was rooted in Doria's commitment to feminist movement building in the region and specifically a concern to provide support for the resolution of tensions within the feminist movement in Egypt. The agreement to respond through a restorative justice process, while not the action requested by the complainants, was the response that the Interim Board agreed was most aligned with Doria's feminist values, politics, and commitment to feminist movement building.

Seeking to adequately respond to the complaint as a nascent fund was a difficult and painful process for Doria. The remaining members of the Interim Board of Directors sought to identify a facilitator for a restorative justice process, which took a number of months.

In June 2022, the Interim Board members contacted the former Nazra employees to propose a facilitator, and to offer financial support for the restorative justice process, but with delays in receiving the offer, it wasn't taken up. The exploratory process to identify the best course of feminist action was coupled by the withdrawal of funds by some donors, hostility directed towards Doria first Executive Director, staff and new Board members, and a deepened mistrust in the ability of feminists from the region to manage and steward their own resources. And yet, through this challenging birth, vital insights emerged—shaping both the DFF's own evolution and offering valuable learnings for the broader feminist movements in the region it serves.

Doria has spent considerable time developing a feminist and inclusive organizational and governance structures and processes, installing a new board, setting up participatory, responsive and inclusive grantmaking processes and deepening its efforts to ensure that it is accountable to feminist organizations and movements across the region. In particular, this has occurred through incorporating healing justice practices into its organizational and grantmaking systems, deepening its commitment to accountability and safe-guarding through enhanced policies and practices, and strengthening its board structure to ensure accountability to feminist movements in the MENA region.



The Doria Feminist Fund's Grantmaking, Movement-Building and Advocacy Her story

2021: Launched the DFF's First Grantmaking Cycles

The DFF began its grantmaking journey in 2021 and the first year focused on establishing participatory grantmaking processes, building grounded activist advisory committees, and setting up systems to ensure that the Fund's support was accessible, transparent, and rooted in feminist values. The first call for proposals prioritized flexible funding to young and emergent feminist organizations and collectives. By its second year, DFF expanded both the scale and scope of its grantmaking. Funding priorities were refined to strengthen intersectional approaches—supporting organizations that work across multiple issues such as climate justice, economic rights, disability justice, bodily autonomy, and LGBTQI rights. There was also a deliberate focus on knowledge production and dissemination, strengthening of governance systems and processes and supporting feminist organizations and movements on their own terms. The first two years demonstrated the importance of flexible, accessible, and feminist-aligned funding in a region where feminist movements face shrinking civic space and multiple crises.

Deepening and expanding its advocacy and programmatic efforts: 2023-2025

These insights of the first two years laid the groundwork for expanding priorities and grantmaking strategies for 2023–2025. The DFF announced its third annual call for proposals and launched the first round of Emergency Response Grantmaking in response to the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria and the ongoing occupation and deepening crises in Palestine. DFF worked closely with local activist advisory committees in both countries to identify a cohort of grantee partners. These grantee partners received close accompaniment from DFF during the grants process, including access to capacity strengthening, psychosocial support, and renewal grants. DFF's Emergency Response Grantmaking expanded over 2023, in rapid response to ongoing crises in the region, including the earthquakes in Morocco, flooding in Libya, and the commencement of the siege on Gaza in Palestine.

The DFF's grantmaking efforts broadened to include more countries across the MENA region in 2024 and responded specifically to support feminist alternatives to the deepening crisis in Sudan. The year 2025 marked a significant expansion of DFF's applicant pool, due to strengthened outreach efforts to under-resourced communities including Mauritania, Sudan, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, as well as under-represented issue areas such as disability justice, climate justice, and indigenous rights.



This period allowed for several common threads to emerge from the DFF's grantmaking efforts. One, more grantee partners are adopting intersectional approaches and identifying priorities that address the layered and interconnected needs of their communities. Two, feminists are responding to ongoing crises in their contexts, requiring adaptability and responsiveness to shifting realities. While some focus on specific issue areas, unexpected developments often necessitate changes or expansion in their original scopes of work. To support the shifting needs and realities of grantees, DFF recruits diverse staff and activist advisory committees' members, bringing together wide-ranging networks and expertise in emerging issues across the region. In each grantmaking cycle, DFF reviews funding priorities through comprehensive research and field scans, then engages activist advisors to guide outreach, review applications, and participate in decision-making to select the final cohort. Regions and communities most affected by conflict, war, natural disasters, and authoritarian regimes represented the largest share of applicants and grantees. The activist advisory committee ensured that each grantmaking cycle's decision-making process is participatory and equitable, while addressing the most urgent needs of feminist movements. During this period, DFF also began offering grant renewals as part of its accompaniment strategy. Strengthening the sustainability of the feminist movement ecosystem remained a core strategic priority.

2024-2025: Collectively building the DFF's first strategic vision

As part of its efforts to reflect on its role in the region and within feminist movements, the DFF committed to developing collectively with key stakeholders, its first strategic framework. The Strategic Visioning process took place from July 2023 to June 2024 and was: 1) rooted in the DFF's feminist values, history, realities, and future dreams, 2) grounded in learnings to date around grantmaking and regional political context and 3) guided by the communities DFF serves and works with. The process began with a partner survey and sense-making webinar to better understand the priorities of local feminist organizations and movements and their vision for a philanthropic ecosystem defined by and for feminists from the region. This was followed by multiple stakeholder interviews, meetings with staff and partners, review of key grantmaking and governance materials and reflection sessions on the shifting context across the region. Given the political context and the timing of the strategic planning process, we were intentional about centering care, safety and community at the center of our efforts and discussing how we uplift feminist political alternatives and visions in a context of increased authoritarianism and militarism.

The shifting realities across the region prompted the Doria Feminist Fund to continue its work around gender equality, movement strengthening and philanthropic advocacy while also deepening newer bodies of work. These include the centering of care, safety and security in all its processes and practices, developing a holistic crisis strategy, and doubling down on narrative building and the shaping, reclaiming, and amplifying of stories and perspectives that challenge dominant power structures and open space for alternative futures.



As an intermediary feminist fund, the DFF navigates the tensions inherent in raising money globally and regionally while staying accountable to local feminist priorities. The DFF also strives to ensure the safety and security of staff, grantees, and the integrity of feminist funding principles, while surviving within restrictive political and philanthropic systems.

2025-2030: The DFF's Updated Strategic Pillar

- SP 1: Movement and Ecosystem Strengthening
- SP 2: Crisis Preparedness, Response and Recovery
- SP 3: Philanthropic Advocacy
- SP 4: Narrative Building/Strengthening
- SP 5: Collective Care, Safety and Security
- SP 6: Sustain responsible and purposeful growth of the Doria Feminist Fund as a key actor and influencer

Collectively Building Visions for a Feminist Future

Since its launch in 2021, the Doria Feminist Fund has positioned itself as an essential, responsive and strategic feminist fund in the MENA region, channeling flexible resources to feminist and queer organizations and movements that are often excluded from traditional philanthropy. Through participatory grantmaking and the guidance of activist advisory committees, the DFF has supported feminist organizing across diverse and intersecting issues—including bodily autonomy, sexual and gender rights, economic and climate justice, and responses to crises and repression. In its first four years of grantmaking, DFF has not only disbursed critical funds to sustain and grow feminist movements, but also invested in accompaniment, solidarity-building, and narrative change, ensuring that grantee partners are resourced not just to survive, but to imagine and create transformative feminist futures. Over its journey, the DFF has uplifted the importance of developing feminist approaches to restorative justice, and advancing healing justice and collective care. To achieve its bold new Strategic Vision, grounded in the priorities of regional feminist MENA movements, the DFF will deepen its efforts to provide spaces to be in dialogue with feminist movements and to uphold its accountability to them, increase its influence in philanthropic spaces, and advance narratives created by and for feminists from the region. The DFF plays a critical role in the MENA region and globally as it resources feminist movements that challenge the root causes of structural inequalities and advance sexual, gender, racial, and economic justice from the ground up. Through its provision of flexible, trust-based funding to activists and organizations often excluded from mainstream philanthropy, it is supporting transformative change led by those most impacted by systemic marginalization.

In a global landscape where resources for feminist movements are rapidly shrinking—and where the MENA region has long been chronically underfunded—a feminist fund rooted in and serving this region is not just valuable; it is a lifeline for countless feminist groups across MENA.



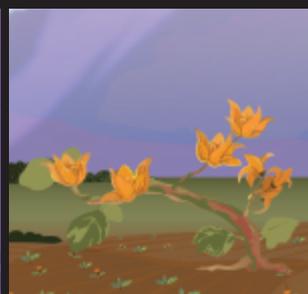
In the MENA region, movements don't just survive—they rise. Since 2021, Doria Feminist Fund has stood in the circle of solidarity.



Through shared strength, we've turned connections into a force for change. Gender justice. Climate action. Disability rights.



We are nurturing the local power needed to respond to today—and imagine tomorrow.



Change led by those who feel it most.

This is our 'Zaha.' This is our future.

