

FUNDING OUR RADICAL WORK

In the early 1990s, I developed a growing concern about the funding of social change organizations. At that time I had worked for a dozen or more years at the Women's Project in Arkansas and in the Battered Women's movement locally and nationally. My connections to social change organizations were extensive, and I had had many opportunities to observe their struggles with funding.

Here are some observations that raised my concerns:

- It was a constant struggle for the Women's Project to maintain a left analysis that engaged the community in systemic change—and to receive funding that did not attempt to modify our work;
- The Battered Women's movement had moved from local, grassroots organizing to “professional” service delivery funded by government entities;
- Staff of nonprofit organizations were spending an extraordinary amount of time on fundraising and a rapidly decreasing amount of time on organizing;
- There was a dreadful competition among groups for fundraising and less cooperation in working together;
- There was a loss of political force and commitment to movement building;
- Very few organizations seemed to have an active membership base committed to organizing for change.

During this time, many people talked about the disorganization and weakness of the progressive movement. I came to understand this problem to be not the result of a failure in vision and courage but of the impact of prolonged attacks under McCarthyism and Cointelpro—and of the effect of becoming a nonprofit “sector” controlled by the state.

As with all politics, these issues are complex. As part of this panel of speakers, we cannot give a very nuanced analysis here, but we can lay the groundwork for a more detailed discussion. While I do not want to disparage the significant work that has been done by nonprofits (of which I have been a part) nor the work of those who have tried to reform philanthropy, I'd like for us to consider what we might do to fund a radical movement in a time of rapacious capitalism.

As an example of the impact of the 501c3 (tax-exempt status) on our work, a brief history of the battered women's movement perhaps is helpful. This movement arose in the 1970s in the space created by the Women's Movement. Women in cities and small towns across the country came together to describe our experiences with male violence. Through those discussions we learned that there were great commonalities in the experiences, and we were not alone nor unique in what we had suffered. Groups of women in large and small communities analyzed these common themes and then determined actions to provide safety and to end violence against women. We knew that we had to change radically the power relationships between women and men.

These beginnings were community-based and constituency-led—by women who had experienced violence. As programs were developed, women sought tax-exempt status for battered women’s shelters and credibility in communities for financial support. The latter demanded hours of public education, often in hostile environments such as men’s clubs and law enforcement agencies. When the goals of tax-exempt status and community credibility were achieved (albeit with considerable sacrifice such as being lesbian-baited, facing woman-hating jokes and accusations of being home-wreckers), the funders from all sources—individual, foundations, and government—began making demands for certain policies and practices.

It was in this environment that what we call “the professionalization of the movement” began. We began seeing new standards set for the highest level jobs, i.e., a social work degree and a different more business-like approach to working with battered women. Rather than a popular education approach (sharing stories of abuse, developing analysis, and taking action) where any skilled facilitator could be a leader, therapeutic groups and individual sessions were offered. Battered women’s organizations began to reflect corporations in their structure and policies. Domestic violence was redefined as an individual mental health issue requiring therapists rather than a social justice issue that required organizing. Though some organizing continued, most organizations moved to service delivery, accompanied by advocacy. Some of us think that the last big act of autonomy and defiance by the first wave of the battered women’s movement was NCADV’s rejection of a \$600,000 grant because the Department of Justice would not permit reference to lesbian battering, an analysis of racism, or promotion of organizing.

Though it is difficult to date particular changes, it seems that it was at this time that the movement split between those who thought we must work equally hard to combine service delivery with efforts to end violence against women—and those who thought that it was most critical to partner with government agencies and make necessary compromises to receive funding for service delivery and advocacy. Through the VAW Act, funding and partnerships became real, and battered women’s organizations engaged in cooperative work with the Department of Justice, with funding available to maintain programs in ways we had never experienced before.

Have the past 25 years of work to end violence against women been a failure because it has moved from a central focus of social change to one of social service? No. Many things have been accomplished: extraordinary public education, new laws and public policies, thousands of lives saved. However, the work was modified in ways that allowed some challenge to systems and to power—but only so much—in order to maintain funding stability. And there has been no indication that violence against women has diminished. The culture of violence remains to be changed. And this is a social justice issue, where the question is called, “How do we get to the cause of violence and change it so that women can be autonomous, self-determined, and safe?”

We also have to ask ourselves how much we have given up by being in the funder-controlled box. As the government was moving toward the right during the Reagan years, we were seeking relationships with government. They were writing the rules and

we were doing our best to shape the work within those rules and to defend the achievements we had made. As Reagan was destroying the tax base and eliminating human services, we were concentrating on service delivery. As every social issue was being racialized by the right, we were both taking on anti-racist education and excluding women of color from our professionalized, corporate-style leadership. As young feminists found fewer and fewer places to express their politics, they came to battered women's programs and found that the new systems gave little space for shared power or advancement up the leadership hierarchy. At what cost did we get government funding and community acceptability?

It was this experience in this many-faceted battered women's movement (that I loved) that led me to dwell on the effect of chasing money through our non-profit status. I observed the impact of funding conditions bringing changes to the progressive nonprofit world in general:

- An increase of charity and volunteerism to replace the government's role in meeting human needs;
- An increase of service delivery, using low-paid workers (majority women);
- A decrease in organizing to confront and change power relationships;
- An increase in financial dependence on foundations and government funding for nonprofits;
- A decrease of membership organizations;
- An increase of professionalism;
- A decrease of constituency leadership;
- Organizations modeled on corporations, with executive directors (even when there's only 3 staff), CEOs, etc., and a focus on outcomes and deliverables;
- Nonprofits competing with one another for funding, limiting our partnerships and collective work for change;
- One to three year funding cycles leading us to short-term efforts instead of long-term vision and strategies;
- Reform efforts instead of radical work;
- Less public dissent;
- The creation of a non-profit sector which, by offering just enough services and advocacy to keep people mollified, makes the world safe for capitalism.

All of these, I believe, are linked at least in part to the 501c3 and our pursuit of tax-exempt funding sources.

First, let me say that I believe the government should fund services. That's one of the reasons we pay taxes: to enable the human needs of all of us to be met. The questions for us at this conference are whether government-funded organizations and programs, in a time of rightwing control, will allow us to act in just and humane ways, will they support oppressed people to gain power, and will they initiate a revolution against the hand that feeds them? Do we need services? Yes, of course, and we need good liberals to make sure they are delivered justly to everyone. Will the provision of social services alone bring about true social justice? I think not.

Second, we cannot expect the government or foundations to fund our most radical work. The government or corporate entities will not fund us to change them at their core or to take them down. It is our work to bring about radical social change through demanding justice and fairness. It is our job to figure out how to support this work.

When I think of radical or revolutionary groups, I think of the American Indian Movement, the Black Panthers, the Zapatistas, the early Labor Movement, etc. Somehow I cannot imagine these groups going on a foundation visit or writing a large government grant. And yet their work has had a tremendous impact on the world we know today.

What do these groups have in common? They are radical groups that are built around either a membership or a group of people who closely represent people who have suffered injustice. They provide a place and way for people to express their passion, and they have constituency-based leadership. Their financial support comes from people who believe in them. At the core of their work is organizing.

I think there are lessons to be learned from radical groups around the world: the African National Congress, the Landless People's Movement of Brazil, ACT UP, and our own Incite! Women of Color Against Violence and Critical Resistance. We can learn, for instance, from the Black Panthers about adding service delivery to organizing—or in the case of many of our own organizations, adding organizing to service delivery. We can learn from the Zapatistas about how we must start small and local and build democratic units where people have genuine voice. And we can bring to Incite our question about how we do the work, how it draws people by its heat, how it appeals to the whole self, how it is imbedded as a way of life.

For our radical work to be true to people's needs and the courageous actions they demand, it will have to draw funding from individuals who believe in it wholeheartedly. It will require no less a commitment than that which millions of people make every Sunday when they enter a place of worship and drop a check or a \$5 bill in the collection plate. How will this commitment come about? Our victories will come through authentically connected membership and organizing. Collectively, we have to build a sense of possibility, grow muscles and courage and joy in the work, and stay strong together in the vision and practice of a transformed world.

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