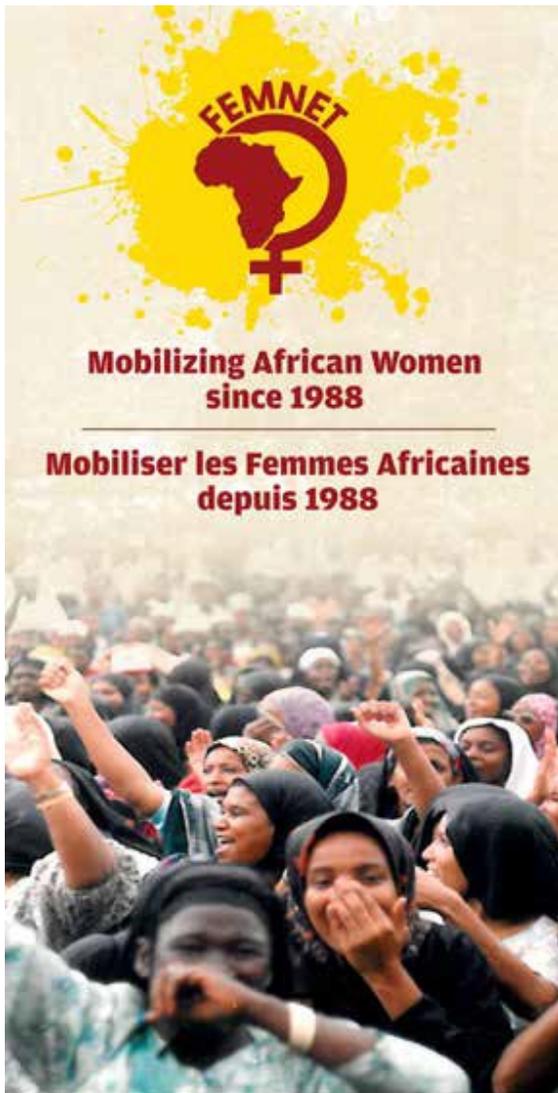


CASE STUDY

**INNOVATION FOR CHANGE
FEMENT**

Innovation for Change (I4C) Africa Project Mapping

Case Study: African Women's Development & Communication Network (FEMNET)



Program Focus

The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) is a regional, membership-based non-governmental organization (NGO). FEMNET was set up in 1988 to "share information, experiences, ideas and strategies among African women's NGOs as a strategy for strengthening women's capacity to participate effectively" in the development of the continent. FEMNET sought to fill a niche for women to advocate for them, to consolidate their views and to represent African women in global processes.

There is a focus on sexual and reproductive health (SRH), political inclusion, Harmful Traditional Practices with an emphasis on FGM/child marriage, violence against women and women and the economy. These strategic priorities and the strategic plan were developed in conjunction with members to ensure that they provide overall policy direction for the network and are revised every four years. This is important in between meetings when feedback is lacking and also because they do not have country focal points and rely on umbrella organisations for representation in country.

Geographic and issue scope of the network

The network carries out its work through advocacy, capacity building, communication and networking.¹ FEMNET seeks to empower

women's rights organisations to articulate their issues. Sometimes country context means that local organisations are unable to speak out on issues for fear of censure or reprisal and FEMNET is able to make their voices heard. They have over 630 members which include individuals, NGOs, CBOs and umbrella or network organisations.

They have members in over 43 countries in Africa and are governed by a Constitution and comprise of (i) elected board members including representatives for 5 sub regions, (ii) a secretariat and (iii) members who attend programming conferences every three years and a general assembly. Board members are elected by the paid-up membership of the network at the general assembly. This scope means English and French translation

¹FEMNET 2017 About FEMNET Available at <http://femnet.co/about/>

is needed for the website, documents and meetings, which consumes substantial resources. Staff note that members appreciate this translation even if they speak both English and French. However list-serves and emails are not always translated and Portuguese and Arabic speakers are excluded.

Achievements and success factors

FEMNET is strong in the use of social media and seeks to amplify the voices of their members through advocacy campaigns. They mobilised in several countries around the 'Bring Back Our Girls' movement that followed the kidnapping of a group of schoolgirls in Nigeria by *Boko Haram*, by creating visibility, galvanising activism and writing letters to the Nigerian embassies in member countries. In Kenya, after some men accused of rape received a mild sentence of manual labour, FEMNET worked on a campaign, 'Justice for Liz', through social media, letter-writing and mobilization of members and this resulted in the appointment of a special prosecutor and the re-opening of the case. In Malawi they worked with local members to bring to light the practice of initiation of young girls into sex and pushed for prosecution of the perpetrator dubbed 'hyena man'.

The organization has 21,000 followers on Twitter and 14,000 on Facebook, and they receive frequent requests for social media training from members. They use social media actively during campaigns, for example the 'Stop the Bleeding' campaign on illicit financial flows in conjunction with other networks through an Africa-wide platform. FEMNET produces documentaries, monthly e-bulletins and the African Women's Journal and a blog on matters of concern as part of their advocacy strategy. They publish numerous advocacy briefs, reports on outcomes of policy meetings and analysis of issues from a gender perspective. Other advocacy tools employed are identification of issue champions, including politicians, and a men-to-men approach for mobilization.

FEMNET engages with numerous other organisations and networks on multiple issues such as gender inequality and democratic rights for example through collaboration with and membership of the Fight Inequality Alliance and Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOWAR) at the Global and Regional levels respectively. Their theory of change states that change occurs when women as primary rights holders and relevant duty bearers are empowered and accept women's rights as a norm, and this can be achieved through the use of sustained action and solidarity to push for women's rights as human rights.

They have identified the 'Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa' (Maputo Protocol) as a key wide ranging policy that they are advocating for as it is crafted by Africans for the continent and will if implemented meet a substantive number of targets of other international agreements including the SDGs. In collaboration with local members, FEMNET provides information, audits and shadow reports on country compliance with international instruments related to women.

FEMNET strives to be part of national, regional and global policy processes to ensure the outcomes are gender sensitive; these range from national development plans to AU summits and UN meetings. For example they have pushed for more gender disaggregated data and statistics on the economic contribution made through unpaid care work at the High Level Policy Forum (HLPF). They work with the AU Directorate of Women and the Department of Political Affairs to input into their program plans and provide gender analyses of their policies. This work entails convening regional workshops and training events to build advocacy skills of members and prepare joint advocacy interventions at critical meetings such as the HLPF on the SDGs, the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) where FEMNET convenes the Africa women's caucus, and the UN General Assembly among others. They succeeded in influencing the wording of SDG Goal Five on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls and held preparatory meetings before the AU summit to discuss the theme and how women's issues can be incorporated into this.

FEMNET seeks to actively engage media in their advocacy work by providing training on SRH to journalists and inviting them to key advocacy summits. In line with shifts in AU policy, they are looking at further engagement with regional bodies such as the EAC or ECOWAS and have representation at the policy making meetings for these groupings. One result has been influence on the content of the EAC gender policy working with the Eastern African Sub-regional Support Initiative for the Advancement of Women (EASSI).

Working with network members

Membership is available to all who subscribe to Pan-African feminist principles and pay an annual membership fee, ranging from US\$20 for individuals to US\$300 for international/regional organisations. The network has difficulty collecting these fees and often relies on collecting them during meetings and workshops. As FEMNET regularly facilitates member travel to regional and international meetings it encourages the payment of membership fees. The cost of sending money across the continent can be more than the fees, so they are seeking an IT solution for this.

Facilitating the participation of members in international events allows for the presentation of local knowledge at regional and global levels. For FEMNET the use of list-serves and social media is key for knowledge management and communication with its members. This keeps members informed on regional and national level activities and where possible may allow for connections to these activities. This further serves to facilitate higher quality input and knowledge from members on issues thereby strengthening the network.

The network provides capacity building services largely on advocacy skills for members to effectively engage on technical issues at policy forums and workshops. Members who have specialisation in specific issues or technique are regularly invited to contribute as trainers or facilitators.

Challenges

As with most networks, responses to emails, newsletters, surveys, etc., is low and feedback loops fail – making it particularly hard to conduct surveys. FEMNET identifies lack of time and capacity as reasons for this poor response rate but note, however, that when members are brought to meetings participation is good and a large number are aware of their emails despite their lack of feedback.

This is addressed through two approaches: (i) knowledge management staff are aware of individual members' issue focus and target them individually; and (ii) meetings at regional or national level are used to get this feedback (whether 'in the hallways' or part of the agenda proper). This technique ensures a much higher response rate. Members have indicated that they would benefit from separate list-serves dedicated to specific interest areas and that this would likely increase their engagement level.

There is a tension within the broad membership between activist and softer advocacy approaches that can result in disagreements on strategy. FEMNET attempts to address this challenge by subjecting these strategy discussions to consensus or majority decisions and do not require those who do not support the approach to be part of it. FEMNET tries to not impose its viewpoint in advocacy campaigns but elicits positions collectively from the membership. Conflicts also arise over resources, niche and space for various different member organisations leading occasionally to frayed relations.

A further challenge is funding. The nature of emerging women's issues across such a diverse membership base means that funding is often problematic as there is a shift away from core funding to earmarked project-based funding, constraining their ability to respond to new issues as they arise.

Conclusion

The network's key strength is in its ability to marshal support and draw attention to issues through its social media platforms, membership base and linkages to policy

making processes at the regional level. Members benefit from the exposure to similar actors across the continent that allows them to rally together on issues and fills gaps they may have in capacity such as research or technical expertise. Members also increase their awareness of issues and policy making processes at the regional level.

Moving forward FEMNET sees its strength as its ability to mobilise among its members across the continent around gender-related issues. Its involvement with multiple policy level meetings and processes enables these members to present their voices and participate in decision-making. In a time of shrinking civic space at the country level and the disproportionate burden of human rights violations placed on women in the continent, access to such platforms grows ever more critical. These approaches have the potential to be an effective means to pressure for gender equality as well as to highlight the issues being dealt with by member organisations. FEMNET's utility to its network members is essential and it is important to note that in its advocacy campaigns emphasis is often on the message at the expense of their own brand.

This case study prepared by Nottawasaga Institute based on document reviews and interviews with Mildred Ngesa Head of Communication, Memory Zonde Kachambwa Programme Manager, Rachel Kagoiya Information Manager, Crystal Simeoni Head of Advocacy at FEMNET; Andrew Odete, Regional project manager – Women at work campaign, Hivos; Light Juma Programmes officer, Association of Media Women in Kenya (AMWIK)

