

# Roundtable Discussion and Learning Event on Feminist Economic Alternatives

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Presented by the *PowerUp!* and  
*Count Me In!* consortia



## The PowerUp! (PU!)<sup>1</sup> and Count Me In! (CMI!)<sup>2</sup> consortia gathered to shine a light on alternatives to the failing mainstream economic system.



The following presents the synthesised learnings and key takeaways based on a roundtable discussion between civil society and philanthropic actors about feminist economic alternatives (FEA) and the opportunities and challenges facing women's rights organisations and feminist funders in supporting FEAs.

- 1 **PowerUp! (PU!)** is a consortium of women's rights organisations led by Just Associates (JASS), together with PEKKA, a national women-headed family empowerment network in Indonesia and Gender at Work (G@W), an international feminist knowledge network. PowerUp! engages with women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and their organisations and networks to build, organise, mobilise, and transform power on three strategic agendas: bodies, voices and resources.
- 2 The **Count Me In! (CMI!)** consortium consists of member organisations Mama Cash, the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), CREA, JASS, and the Sister Funds Urgent Action Fund (UAF) and Urgent Action Fund Africa (UAF-Africa) with sex worker-led Red Umbrella Fund (RUF) and the Dutch gender platform WO=MEN as strategic partners. CMI! supports feminist groups and movements to grow in strength and numbers and to speak up, speak out, and take action.

## Event Overview

On 29 September 2022, the PU! and CMI! consortia welcomed 45 attendees in person and online to a roundtable discussion and learning event on FEAs, hosted in the office of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The invitation-only event included a mix of local partners and consortium representatives from the Strengthening Civil Society strategic partnerships of the Dutch MFA, representatives from the Dutch Enterprise Agency, members of the Dutch MFA Task Force Women's Rights and Gender Equality, and other guests from the philanthropy sector. Presenters included FEA experts and representatives from JASS, Yayasan PEKKA, AWID, Mama Cash, Gender at Work, and the MFA.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> **Speakers** included: Fatimah Kelleher, Women's Rights Strategist & Technical Adviser; Nani Zulminarni, Founder & Member Board of Directors, Yayasan PEKKA; Inna Michaeli, Co-Executive Director, AWID; Happy Mwendu Kinyili, Co-Executive Director, Mama Cash; and Karen Burbach, Head of Task Force Women's Rights & Gender Equality, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The discussion was opened by Madeleine Kennedy-Macfoy, Executive Director, G@W, moderated by Alexa Bradley, Programme Director, JASS and concluded by Vijaya Nidadavolu, Associate, G@W.



## FEAs are pluralistic, antagonistic, and systemic

**Fatimah Kelleher** presented the findings of a recent literature review conducted for the PU! consortium. She explained: FEAs comprise a wide spectrum of equitable alternatives to the current economic system, starting from a point of resistance to the status quo, which put gender justice and feminist leadership at the heart of the work. They are pluralistic in nature, bringing together a broad spectrum of approaches from microeconomic to macroeconomic. They do not depend on funding alone because they seek sustaining, systemic change that is informed by the needs and issues of local women and natural environments. FEAs value women's work and centre care work in the economy.

## Failures in the current economic system demonstrate the need for FEAs now

As highlighted by **Madeleine Kennedy-Macfoy of G@W**, millions of people are experiencing simultaneous crises – from the economic crisis to the pandemic to the rise of authoritarianism – pushing their ability to cope to the limit and deepening inequities and precarity. **Alexa Bradley of JASS** emphasised that feminist activists and movements have long made visible the violence and exploitation of patriarchal and neoliberal systems that concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a few, while imperilling people and the planet. FEAs are needed now to offer a life-sustaining and just path forward, one built on a different economic logic.

**Inna Michaeli of AWID** elaborated that FEAs are important now because we are stuck and need a new and inspiring direction: feminist expertise is disregarded, particularly in economics, and the current economic model is driving the destruction of the planet. Ideological narratives position the neoliberal model as the only option, and the private sector with its unlimited resources and political power possess the ability to influence and secure its domination.



## FEAs present a paradigm shift

When the overriding drive for economic growth is taken away, it invites a challenge to the fundamental logic of the current economic system. **Fatimah Kelleher** explained that FEAs shift the economic logic from exploitation and extraction – as demanded by the pursuit of growth at all costs – to one centred on care for people and the planet. Women can build FEAs together, strengthening women’s organising and their leadership in economic and land use decisions, fostering community, collective, and women-led initiatives, using deepened feminist political economy analyses, and prioritising climate resilience and care for nature. FEAs may also recuperate traditional practices by protecting the commons, ancestral lands, and traditional knowledge systems.

## Address power imbalances at all levels

Issues of power and how it is shared are not unique challenges for FEAs, but questioning how power is distributed and amongst whom is at the heart of the paradigm shift. **Nani Zulminarni of PEKKA** explained that social norms function as an invisible power that normalises the status quo and deters women from questioning the systems and layers of power in their lives. It normalises the belief that poverty and exclusion are their destiny. PEKKA trains women to *question*. Questioning and challenging power is one of the first steps in exploring and creating alternatives.

**Happy Mwende Kinyili of Mama Cash** emphasised that such questioning must also be encouraged for donors and grantmakers. Capitalism continues to be successful because donors pour money into sustaining it; philanthropy contributes to spreading the free market ideology. Instead, more money needs to go directly to women’s right’s organisations (WROs). Mama Cash, explained Kinyili, can fund only about 1% of the groups that apply each



year despite receiving thousands of eligible applications. Between 2018-2019, most of the funding to support women's rights work from eight multilateral organisations went to government institutions rather than civil society or feminist organisations. Of the small amount going to WROs, most are in the global north. Activists are calling out donors on what they are doing to counter this imbalance.

## Women act as change agents in their lives and communities

**PEKKA** shared that they approach feminist movement building by looking at the women not as beneficiaries, but as the agents of change in their own lives. Emboldened cooperative members are able to transform their lives to be more sustainable and dignified. Through the cooperative, many more women have money, power, and influence in their families and communities. However, the cooperative approach benefits the whole community, not just individual women. Shifting the economic model from one that prioritises growth and profit, to one that measures success by the inclusivity and self-reliance of the whole community. **Karen Burbach of the MFA** confirmed that contrary to economic empowerment or financial inclusion approaches, FEAs empower and strengthen women in a broader sense, not just financially.

### FEA in practice: PEKKA feminist economic model approach to shifting power

In Indonesia, women headed families are invisible in law, despite representing one out of every five families. PEKKA's cooperative approach supports them to organise savings and loan groups. All of the interest accrued is invested directly back to the group members and the community. With more available resources, the women gain power and influence in their communities. They collectively speak with their local government, sharing the needs and demands of the group members, and many run for office with the support of their fellow cooperative members. Now, there are 100+ PEKKA women serving in local government.

## Be wary of false solutions

While programmes for women’s financial inclusion sound promising and inclusive, they are grounded in perpetuating the current, colonialist economic system. According to **Inna Michaeli of AWID**, ample evidence already demonstrates the dangers and damages from austerity, public-private partnerships, and other current neoliberal models. As such, false solutions such as microcredit are promoted and celebrated worldwide even though they are a part of the problem. Individual success stories are used to hide structural failures, especially those built upon historical economic and political structures that disempower and exploit. **Fatimah Kelleher** showed how “solutions” such as microcredit have led to innovative (harmful) financing (e.g., insurance packages) that perpetuate debt.

## The State must always be considered in FEA solutions

Micro solutions can be successful, but they are limited because macro systems can interrupt them at any time, explained **Fatimah Kelleher**. The extent to which the State is engaged depends on certain factors: 1) the (in)ability to work with different governments; and 2) the type of FEA. **Inna Michaeli of AWID** raised the concern that the State creates injustices while simultaneously presenting false solutions. As the majority of global corporations are in northern States, these countries align with private lobby interests. Even when civil society actors outline gendered human rights abuses by corporations, countries that champion women’s equality stop short of countering corporate interests.

**Karen Burbach of the MFA** responded that the Dutch government has come a long way: a year ago, the Feminist Foreign Policy did not seem possible but now it is in place and implementation is underway. But, while the Feminist Foreign Policy marks an important milestone in Dutch foreign policy, there are still knowledge gaps where civil society’s voices and expertise can help them to learn and improve. Burbach emphasised that contributions and criticisms are welcomed as the MFA hopes to be seen as an ally of women’s and feminist movements.



## Moving the FEA agenda forward

**Vijaya Nadadavolu of G@W** summarised the shared vision for FEAs to stop being “alternatives” and instead to be the shared framework for organising our lives, families, economies, and protecting our planet.

### The following are key takeaways for developing and implementing agile and inclusive FEA strategies and interventions:

- **Be honest and accountable.** In the current financial architecture, none of us are harmless in our actions. We must be honest with ourselves and our institutions that are complicit in the systems that FEAs seek to change. Thus, we must commit to minimising harm.
- **Push for policy coherence.** Governments must be more coherent across their different policies. How do trade policies not further entrench neoliberal capitalism? How do we curb some of the military spending to lessen the violence? These policy questions have a real economic impact. Feminist foreign policies may help governments to act in a more inclusive manner but will not by themselves shift capitalistic tendencies alone.
- **Centre community and connect women’s voices.** Reimagine how we think of profit not in the individual sense, but in community terms that place women in the centre as drivers of and the main carers of the economy. Bring women and marginalised communities into the FEA discourse by making conversations more accessible to them. Facilitating the connectivity of movements to make women’s collective voices bigger and more powerful is an effective way to interact with the State.
- **Create traction for authentic FEAs.** Mobilise donor and civil society actors around FEA work, being mindful of harmful power dynamics and co-optation of the narrative. Even within civil society and the donor ecosystem, power shapes how work happens and how messaging is conveyed. Smashing patriarchy within institutions needs to happen hand-in-hand with promoting FEAs.
- **Build knowledge.** The evidence is already compelling that FEAs are good for people and the planet. We need to shift the paradigm of what knowledge is, how we build it, and what type of knowledge is needed and used in different spaces. We have to challenge the practice of how evidence is gathered, shaped, and shared.
- **Promote rights.** FEAs’ systemic nature provides an opportunity to take a rights-based approach to the economy. Basic public services, such as water for example, should be a right and not a privatised good. It is possible to put forward rights-based services at both the macro and micro levels with both policy actors and grassroots networks.



- **Resource movement building.** Local civil society groups find that the development ecosystem does not adequately support feminist movement building – an essential component of FEAs – because of resourcing challenges. Hard to reach populations are thus often excluded because it takes too much time and money to identify them.
- **Respect the right to say no.** Via the State, corporations extract consent by any means, but we need to respect communities saying no to unwanted and damaging “development” when they are protecting ancestral lands, water, and ways of life. Civil society and citizens need to hold governments accountable and to pressure them to stop working for private interests. However, we must acknowledge that it is not and will not be a win-win scenario: FEAs seek to put an end to the profiteering from exploitative and extractive economics.
- **Rethink measuring success.** Enormous amounts of time is spent by civil society proving their success. We must rethink our priorities, choose to trust local actors, and identify more appropriate metrics of success, as FEAs cannot follow traditional financial indicators.

