## Women’s Rights Program (WRP) Portfolio Review on 2014 grant making

#### December 16, 2015, New York

### Context

The Women’s Rights Program (WRP) was launched in January 2014 following a process in 2013 that oversaw the redesign at the request of the Foundations’ Global Board of the International Women’s Program (IWP). The redesign established an explicit human rights focus for the program, reflected in its new name, and identified three new areas of work: (1) strengthening women’s rights organizations and movements, (2) promoting sexual and reproductive rights, and (3) advancing economic justice for women. Cynthia Eyakuze was appointed director in July 2014 and led the program through the transition period and the development of a new strategy that was approved in June 2015. During 2014, the program had two program officers who had been with the IWP (out of four available positions), both of whom stepped down by the end of the year leaving a staff of two program associates. Consequently, the year’s grant making was undertaken primarily by the director while new program officers were being recruited. The two main objectives of the 2014 grant making – limited in scope, but specific and relevant – were (1) to seed work in one or more of the three new areas of WRP’s future strategy; and (2) to develop or strengthen meaningful partnerships with geographic and thematic programs within the OSF network aimed at advancing women’s rights.

### The parameters of the portfolio

The portfolio under review covers all eight grants made by the program between January 1, 2014 and December 31, 2014 (see Annex 1). The grants are all categorized under the theme, “Equality and Inclusion: Gender Equality and Women’s Leadership” from 2013 that was used as a placeholder for all WRP grant making until the Strategy Unit finalized the new categories of work in 2015. The new categories of work under which the grants would now be classified are indicated in Annex 1. All the grants were for general support; the largest two were awarded to global organizations working on sexual and reproductive rights with the remaining six focused on supporting women’s rights organizations and movements in South Africa and South Sudan. The latter six organizations work on issues ranging from sex workers rights, legal empowerment, and women in prison and the grants were done in collaboration with OSIEA, OSF-South Africa and the Public Health Program (PHP)

The portfolio is illustrative of a grant making during a significant transition period for a program and in the absence of an articulated strategy. There were several strategic questions the director considered in implementing the two objectives described above, including (1) determining which organizations to support that were best placed to signal the new directions of the program; (2) the size and duration of the grants; (3) how to balance the interests of geographic and thematic programs with the new directions of the program. We will discuss the objectives of this phase of grant making, the selection criteria for the grants and how these grants contributed to laying the foundation for the current WRP strategy. Through this review, we hope to gain and demonstrate initial insights into how effective the grants have been so far; some of the lessons learned, challenges, and opportunities identified; what we hope to continue and build on as we implement the new strategy; and some questions we are currently considering.

### Our ambitions

The director determined from the outset that the grants needed to signal the new directions of the program. The overall goal for this portfolio was therefore to start building a foundation for the future 2016-2019 WRP strategy. Specifically, the director’s work aimed at seeding WRP’s work in sexual and reproductive rights and in strengthening women’s rights organizations and movements in close collaboration with appropriate programs within the OSF network. Our initial hypothesis was that if the program supports organizations that the director is familiar with and who are major players in the women’s rights field, we will be able to signal WRP’s nascent direction and focus through this solid core group of grantees. Another assumption was that the new program could leverage the local knowledge of the Foundations national and regional programs to identify strong organizations to support nationally. This strategy also sought to strengthen existing or build new partnerships with geographic programs, which we hoped would support situating and advancing the new program’s emerging work. Given the limited human resources and the absence of the program strategy, grant making was determined to be the most viable tool for the situation.

### The portfolio’s wider context and our place in the field

The portfolio was developed at a time when the program did not have a strategy though had identified three new areas of work. These areas were selected following a consultative process within the Foundation and with external actors that sought to inform new directions for the Foundation in its work to advance women’s rights. The process was also used to get input into the Foundation’s niche and value-added in the field of women’s rights. These were resoundingly seen to be the Foundation’s explicit emphasis on rights as well as the ability to address what were often seen as controversial issues that other foundations and donors were more hesitant to be identified with.

Grants under review in this portfolio

1. **Seeding work in WRP’s new areas of work**

Of the three new areas of WRP’s work, sexual and reproductive rights is arguably the most controversial. It is also the one in which the new director had significant experience and where she felt she could more easily identify one or two organizations to support in a significant way. The portfolio was therefore developed with these factors in mind and all were aimed at field support. The director sought organizations that were credible and influential field leaders and whose strategies we considered to be compelling. She also realized that given staffing constraints and the limited time for grant making in the context of the ongoing transition, it would make sense to prioritize for that year funding to international organizations that we were already familiar with regional/national groups that required more groundwork than we had staff power to do in 2014. Other criteria included the ability to absorb larger multi-year grants and the director’s confidence in the organization’s ability to use general support funds effectively.

*International Women’s Health Coalition*

We gave a three-year, $1,350,000 general support grant to the International Women’s Health Coalition (IWHC). A 30-year old international organization advocating for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), IWHC has played a central role in mobilizing and supporting advocates from around the world to establish key global normative frameworks and commitments towards achieving SRHR, particularly during the major UN processes of the mid 1990s through the present day. IWHC also provides long-term grants, and technical assistance and mentorship to women’s rights organizations and leaders in the global South to conduct advocacy on SRHR at national or sub-national level—particularly on the difficult issues of safe and legal abortion, and adolescents’ access to sexual and reproductive health information, education and services. IWHC also gives advocacy grants to a set of “anchor” organizations in key countries such as Brazil and India, as part of its effort to help rebuild a comprehensive SRHR movement, which for the past 10-15 years has been receiving less funding as donors increasingly emphasized single issue causes such as reducing maternal mortality and ending violence against women.

IWHC has been a long-standing grantee of OSF, receiving annual grants from the Office of the President of approximately $450,000 from 1997-2000 and $200,000 thereafter. Additional funding was also provided annually by the Karl Popper Fund. In 2012, the organization underwent a leadership transition initiated by its board following concerns about the leadership and finances of the organization. The new director, Françoise Girard, was the former director of OSF’s Public Health Program who during her tenure had doubled the program’s budget and established the PHP as one of the strongest programs in the Foundation. Within two years at the helm of IWHC, she had begun to do the same, re-establishing the organization’s diminished credibility as a leading thinker and strategists in advancing sexual and reproductive rights globally as well as increasing its budget by both bringing back former donors and recruiting new ones. As backlash against SRHR grew in international fora, IWHC was once again playing a critical role in organizing and rallying advocates from around the world to shore up and defend these rights internationally while simultaneously strengthening the capacity of national level organizations to do the same nationally. The director saw IWHC as an organization whose vision was strongly aligned with what she saw the new WRP supporting: strategic advocacy in international norm setting fora where decisions about policy and resources to SRR were set coupled with support to national women’s rights organizations, with particular attention to young women and next generation leadership, to enable them to hold their governments accountable. Therefore, she selected it as an important organization to back and do that in a robust manner and recommended a grant that more than doubled what IWHC had been receiving, to $500,000 a year, with a three-year commitment. This level of funding was possible because of the little grant making WRP had done that year. In proposing such a large grant, the director was signaling that OSF was committed to making large and long-term investments in our new areas of work. She was also looking to establish a grant making practice in the program of giving one to three large multi-year grants in each area of work while also maintaining flexibility to undertake program led initiatives and support newer and innovative efforts.

*Women’s Link Worldwide*

The other organization the director identified as a significant field player was Women’s Link Worldwide (WLW). A 14-year old international human rights organization based in Spain and Colombia, WLW is known for its strategic litigation and related advocacy with an explicit gender lens on SRHR, intersectional discrimination, human trafficking, and the rights of migrant women in Europe and Latin America. A relatively small and nimble organization established by lawyers who were former staff of the Center for Reproductive Rights, WLW has been at the forefront of breakthroughs in SRHR in Latin America, including a historic constitutional case establishing the right to abortion in Colombia. It has been working to establish itself including by setting up a Gender Justice Observatory and establishing the attention-getting *Gender Justice Uncovered* *Awards* that give gavels for legal decisions by judges, human rights committees and other legal institutions that promote gender equality and bludgeons for those considered to be sexist. The 2015 awards had over 100,000 votes from the public. WLW received a one year $95,000 general support grant from IWP in 2013. In 2014, WLW underwent a strategic planning process aimed in part at addressing what they felt to be a bit of mission creep as the organization started getting pulled in different directions. To their credit, they took stock of their strengths and weaknesses, and articulated a clear focus for their work that built on their strengths while planning a geographic expansion to East Africa, hoping to adapt the lessons from Latin America to this region in a South-to-South exchange. The director doubled the grant size and duration as a signal both of our interest in and commitment to their work and to give them the flexibility to implement their new strategy. WLW’s director asked WRP for support in developing a monitoring and assessment system for their strategy as this is not an area of expertise nor in which they have internal resources. The WRP learning officer has subsequently shared with them a number of resources and remains available to provide additional support as needed.

1. **Establishing meaningful partnerships with geographic programs**

This objective was informed by the director’s view that a national-level focus should be an important element of WRP’s work as this is where the “rubber hits the road” in realizing women’s rights, and where WRP should look therefore to strengthen local capacity to undertake such work. Doing this effectively would require close collaboration with national and regional foundations that are assumed to have better knowledge of local groups and context.

Given the very limited timeframe for making grants in 2014, we sought to build on relationships with geographic programs that had been established by IWP or by the director during her time with PHP. The result was a series of grants in South Sudan to organizations that IWP had been co-funding with OSIEA and to two groups in South Africa where the director had previous experience with the foundation. While the South Sudan grants were a bit of a stretch for the new directions of WRP (with the exception of the grant to the Strategic Initiatives for the Horn of Africa – SIHA, a regional organization of interest for broader support) they did enable the program to maintain a presence in the sub-region of Africa where IWP had been the most engaged. The yearlong grants were made with the understanding that we would assess future funding only once our strategy was finalized. The two grants in South Africa to the Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Task Force (SWEAT) and Women’s Legal Center (WLC) were in response to requests from the national foundation and the Public Health Program to take advantage of budget shortfalls in one organization and to start developing a footprint in the country for the second. SWEAT, an organization that organizes sex workers to claim their rights, including setting standards for fair and safe working conditions; advocating for adult sex work to be decriminalized; and addressing access to health, legal and social services issues. A key grantee of PHP, SWEAT faced a year end budget shortfall of $300,000 when they refused a new requirement to sign USAID’s Anti-Prostitution pledge. As the leading organization defending the rights of predominantly female sex workers in the face of excessive violence, WRP felt that covering this shortfall would send a strong signal about our commitment to sexual rights and women’s rights organizations and movements. The grant was only for one year with the understanding that SWEAT would develop a plan in the following months to make up for the shortfall. WLC, a legal advocacy organization, has been a longstanding grantee of PHP and the South Africa Foundation, and is now one of few women’s rights organizations, paradoxically, in the country with the strongest legal and normative framework on women’s rights yet quite weak implementation. The WLC grant was a signal to the national foundation of our interest in collaborating with them in supporting a more robust women’s rights NGO infrastructure to push for the implementation of the frameworks.

### Program learning and reflection

In this section, we reflect on whether the grants and other planned activities went as planned and what lessons we are learning. As the two largest grants were for field support, we will also consider whether they strengthened the grantees and/ or helped them become more effective actors in the field, including their capacity to identify and address the issues the field is facing.

The grants to both IWHC and WLW have been going well, with each organization playing the roles we had anticipated they would play. For example, IWHC was instrumental in reviving and spearheading the Women’s Major Group (WMG), a non-governmental coalition that aims to assure effective public participation of women’s non-governmental groups in the UN policy processes on Sustainable Development, Post2015 and Environmental matters. WMG’s goal was to ensure that the 2030 Agenda includes a renewed commitment to universal access to sexual and reproductive health services and a stand-alone goal on gender equality that committed unequivocally to end all discrimination and violence against women and girls and addressed major barriers to the enjoyment of their human rights. While the 2030 Agenda certainly has flaws and is weaker on SRR than previous global commitments, the WMG – and IWHC in particular – succeeded in securing a goal on gender equality and, against strong odds, ensuring that sexual and reproductive health and rights was included in the final outcome. This success speaks to IWHC’s key role in the field of women’s rights and its ability to mobilize and engage a wide range of players in a sustained way. Meanwhile, WLW expanded its legal advocacy to win a case on the reproductive rights of a lesbian couple whose assisted reproductive treatment was deemed to have been wrongfully terminated. WLW took the case to the Spanish courts, seeking to guarantee the fundamental right to decide when and how women want to be mothers, free of discrimination. The judge condemned the actions of both the hospital, for denying the treatments, and the Local Health Authority, for discrimination. One query about WLW is whether their work related to migrants is responding to the crisis in Europe. The director has referred WLW to organizations such as the Women’s Refugee Council, which sought support from OSF (the Human Rights Initiative and OSIFE are proposing to fund them) to conduct rapid assessments in a number of European countries to understand the situation and needs of asylum seeking women. With their knowledge of European law, WLW could have an important role to play but we have yet to hear whether they are involved in the crisis and plan to learn more about this.

The two organizations have also leveraged our funding to secure new funders, for example Oak Foundation for IWHC and the Sigrid Rausing Trust, in the case of WLW. In both cases, the donors consulted with WRP about them.

As to whether the grants have made the organizations more effective, it is too early to say with WLW, which is in the early stage of implementing its new strategy. With the strategy process WRP was undergoing in 2015, we have not had as much follow up with WLW as would be ideal to understand how they are doing. With IWHC being based in New York, it has been easier to stay in touch and assess their use of the grant. I am fairly confident that it has been beneficial, if only in enabling the organization to organize the series of consultations and advocacy efforts related to the SDGs and to build up their national level grant making in Brazil and begin work in South Africa. The director and other staff of IWHC are readily available as thought partners to WRP and often share their field assessments in countries that we are exploring. IWHC’s director participated in the first “Meet the grantee” session of the October WRP advisory board meeting and the board was impressed with her ability to reflect critically but not defensively on the tough questions they had about the limitations of the SDGs in advancing gender equality. We are also encouraged by both organizations’ interest in and commitment to strengthen their learning and assessment systems to help them do their work as effectively as possible and in order to better use information to improve and communicate program results.

The efforts to collaborate with regional foundations yielded several unintended and unexpected consequences. On the one hand, our assumption about better knowledge of groups by national/regional foundations did not always pan out. In some instances, we found more limited knowledge especially when the foundation didn’t have an articulated strategy for their work related to women’s rights. For example, the foundations would invite us to co-fund various proposals relating to women’s issues without explaining how they fit with their own strategy. In certain instances, the director used her own network outside the foundation to understand the reputation of the organizations because foundation staff had more limited knowledge. On the other hand, thanks to the signals about willingness to collaborate, the director found strong interest in having cohesive conversations about women’s rights work just as the foundations are going into the strategy review process. During the course of 2015, the director was invited to present the WRP strategy to the OSIWA, OSF-South Africa boards and the OSIEA staff as well as the Africa Regional Program advisory group. The meetings provided an opportunity for the foundations to do light portfolio reviews of their existing funding on women’s rights. As a result of these meetings, OSIEA and OSIWA were encouraged by their boards to develop strategies for their funding of women’s issues. The Africa foundations are now planning the first ever meeting to share their existing work on women and identify pan-African opportunities as they refresh their strategies in 2016. WRP has been invited to this meeting and to review the strategies they are developing. OSIEA and OSISA have also placed their women’s rights efforts under the offices of their deputy directors, which gives strong signals about their commitment to this work. As a result of joint grant making with the national and regional foundations, WRP contributed to increasing openness and interest in collaborating on women’s rights, which the program will leverage for grant making in the coming years. One challenge we anticipate based on the experience to date will be striking the appropriate balance between being responsive to the strategies and interests of the foundations while staying true to WRP’s strategic direction. We hope that participating in the foundations’ strategic planning processes in 2016 will help us avoid this challenge.

**The way forward**

The reflections described in the previous sections continue to inform our grant making. As the program’s initial grant making strategy signaled, WRP has started funding innovative work in all three areas, both by established players in the field of women’s rights and new organizations. For global organizations we seek those that don’t necessarily fit the traditional, global North-based models. For instance, a 2015 grantee, CREA, is an India-based sexual rights organization working at the grassroots and national levels in India as well as internationally. In 2015 we have continued to implement the strategy of giving a few larger multiyear grants in each of the program’s three thematic areas, deliberately spacing these out to enable us to renew at similar levels. We have also made progress in working with national and regional foundations to identify local organizations to support. While WRP now has more staff on board, most are new to grant making and have spent 2015 learning its art and craft while also developing the new strategy. The team continues to build and refine our understanding of the field and the organizations we encounter.

Advancing women’s rights seeks transformative, system level change and therefore it cannot be undertaken by a discrete program alone. Therefore, we will continue to leverage and build on the positive results of the program director’s outreach to geographic and thematic programs and to build up collaborations with other donors, such as through the new affinity group, Philanthropy to Advance Women’s Human Rights (PAWHR). For 2016, WRP already has several grants in the pipeline for the Africa region as well as plans to build up the work in Latin America, the Asia Pacific and Middle East and North Africa/South West Asia. As we plan to regularly liaise with our foundation colleagues to explore further areas for cooperation, we will continue to reflect on the type of collaborations that are most strategic between WRP and other foundations on each of three areas of work of the new WRP strategy.

Annex 1