

“Passion Isn’t a Paycheck”: The Feminization of Unpaid Labor in Social Justice Work

By Monica Patrick

It’s 3pm, and I’m sitting here questioning whether I even deserve the title *Executive Director*.

Because truthfully — what kind of Executive Director has no salary, can’t sustain herself, and is struggling to support others while running on empty?

This is my daily reality.
And I know I’m not the only one.

Some days I wonder: between me and our beneficiaries, who really needs the empowerment right now?

I’m leading an organization that’s trying to shift lives, serve communities, and build futures — yet most days, I’m figuring out how to just *survive*.

I wake up thinking of new ways to motivate my team, even though I know deep down they’re tired of volunteering. They deserve to be paid. They deserve structure, security, care.

But instead, we’re all surviving on passion — and that’s not sustainable.

Let’s Be Honest

Passion has become a weapon used to justify underpaying (or never paying) people who do this work from the heart.

Especially women.
Especially grassroots leaders.
Especially those of us doing feminist work in communities where resources are scarce, and systems are stacked against us.

We’re told we’re “heroes” and “changemakers,” but what we really are is exhausted.

Whoever said “Trust the Process”

I wish I could sit down with them and ask what they meant.
Because this process feels broken.

The process looks like this:

- Rejection emails every week
- Crafting perfect funding proposals — for free — only to be ignored
- Spending days chasing donors who want beautiful reports, not the messy truth
- Trying to keep the work alive with zero core funding, zero salaries, and zero relief

And all the while, people say, “*you’re doing such important work,*” like that’s supposed to be enough.

But Important Work Should Be Funded.

Important work should be **respected**.

Important work should not mean **sacrificing our own mental health, stability, or dignity**.

The truth is the unpaid labor of feminist leaders is not a coincidence, it’s systemic.

A system that depends on our passion, our emotional labor, our unpaid hours — while refusing to build real structures to sustain us.

This is the feminization of unpaid labor in the nonprofit world.

Where women, especially from the Global South, are expected to lead movements, build solutions, manage communities — and do it all without expecting anything in return.

But I’m done calling that empowerment.

It’s not.

We Need a Shift.

We need funding models that recognize leadership isn’t just showing up — it’s work.

And **work deserves to be paid**.