

act:onaid

Changing the world
with women and girls



Challenging the crackdown on women's rights:
**what feminist movements
need to sustain resistance**

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Glossary

Intersectional feminism: a framework that recognises that various aspects of a person's identity, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and ethnicity, overlap to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege

Intersectional analysis: understanding how different forms of power and oppression intersect

Reflection-action: Approach consisting of participatory methodologies for conscientisation and power analysis

Executive summary

The world is facing an unprecedented crisis for women's rights. A perfect storm of shrinking funding, intensifying political repression, and coordinated anti-gender backlash is strangling the very organisations fighting hardest for equality. As part of ActionAid's commitment to decolonial and feminist-led partnerships, we understand that these challenges require changes to our ways of working how we relate to social movements. For this reason, we commissioned this study to understand how women organise for gender justice, to defend their rights and those of their families and communities, and how best to support their work.

We mapped over 300 women's rights organisations (WROs) in sixty-five countries in eight regions and the response to our research was clear: "Talk to us! Listen to us! Get to know us!"

What we have learned is that international civil society partners and funders are often the first to inadvertently discourage intersectional programming and very rarely offer grants and the kind of support that give local organisations the flexibility and trust to work on the connections they see between issues. Usually, the support given as 'capacity development' is meant to help these organisations respond to the demands and requirements of funders rather than to achieve their own goals. Their message is clear: they do not want charity. They want partnerships based on trust and reciprocity, that respect their expertise, support their sustainability, firmly stand by their side, play their part to achieve structural change and recognise that how they make decisions on addressing interconnected challenges should belong to them alone.

The current global wave of repressive governments, shrinking civil space and criminalisation of protest affects social movements, including WROs. Two-thirds of the world's population now live under closed or repressive governments, with women's rights groups bearing the brunt of systematic attacks on civil society. They are disproportionately targeted by bureaucracy, security laws, surveillance, and smear campaigns. These organisations face challenges linked to requirements to register, and to state attempts to control the funds they use, the issues they address, the methods they use, and their messages and language. The risks of operating as social movements range from limited access to decision-making spaces or frozen bank accounts, to detention and physical violence. Furthermore, while social media has become a potent tool for advocacy, organisations across the multiple regions surveyed for this report also mention cyber-harassment as a new challenge to their work.

Additionally, this repressive environment is accompanied by a reduction in funds for human rights-based and gender justice work. The numbers tell a devastating story. Less than 1 percent of international development funding reaches feminist movements directly. For Black-led women's organisations globally, that figure plummets to just 0.1 percent, and only 1.4 percent of funds given to women and girls reach Indigenous women.

This report reveals a sobering account of current funding models and partnership approaches. They are not just inadequate – many are actively undermining the work they claim to support and appear divorced from the political landscape that frontline organisations

are navigating. Short-term project cycles force organisations into reactive firefighting instead of strategic movement building. Complex application processes in non-native languages exclude grassroots groups. Registration requirements that may sound reasonable become weapons of state surveillance. A focus on visibility and scale overlooks the needs and demands of those closest to the problem. Pressure for short-term results and easy-to-share messages simplify the nature of the work of these organisations and obscure the need for long-term processes.

This study is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. Instead, it offers crucial insights into patterns and shared recommendations of what it takes to more meaningfully work with women on the frontlines of the battle for gender justice – especially those on the margins of funding and global influencing spaces. These are the organisations often doing the most important work with the least resources. Understanding how to support them better is essential for anyone serious about advancing women's rights globally, and this can only be done in dialogue with them.

We found that feminist and grassroots organisations face surprisingly similar challenges everywhere. Yet, they are showing us the way forward and offering a roadmap for what must change to shape the future of global



gender justice. They are leading with courage and creativity, and designing intersectional, community-based strategies that defy one-size-fits-all models. Their work is locally defined and context-specific, complex and multi-faceted.

The lesson for us is there is no universal template for allyship, for what an organisation working on women's rights and gender justice looks like or for intersectional work – let communities take the lead.

We need to stop treating women's rights groups as a homogenous block, to support what is already thriving, and acknowledge that those who live the struggle may already have answers to how to navigate the dual crisis of collapsing funding systems and shrinking civic space.

Recommendations

The international development sector is in upheaval. Funding is shrinking, civil society organisations (CSOs) face unprecedented attacks on their legitimacy, and the people doing the most critical intersectional work – those serving the most marginalised communities – are being pushed further to the margins. To unlock meaningful progress, we need to embrace deep, flexible partnerships. This report has the following key recommendations developed by organisations

that are best positioned to know where their greatest needs lie:

1. Embrace and understand diversity and difference

Funders and INGOs must be in dialogue with a variety of organisations to understand how they can best support them, whether by establishing direct relationships or working through intermediaries. This involves acknowledging that until now, the sector has pushed social movements to adapt to the systems and structures of INGOs and funders. Now is the time to do the opposite, build systems that are flexible enough to be able to work with a variety of organisations.

2. Funding is important, but partnerships are about much more than this

Ultimately, the resilience and innovation of women's rights organisations and feminist movements prove the power of grassroots leadership. Their impact – despite constant challenge – shows why we need stronger, fairer partnerships with international allies. WROs and feminist movements would like to work with funders who are open to partnerships of equals, with flexibility, joint learning and dialogue, to find the best way to work together for the benefit of all involved.

3. Informal organising is here to stay: recognise its power and support it

Rather than a weakness, informality and non-registration are a deliberate choice for many WROs. Both registered and non-registered organisations deserve dedicated funding approaches designed for their realities and that offer them predictable, sustainable, secure, and empowering ways to keep pushing their agendas.

4. Build power through connection: strengthen networks

We need to build networks for learning and solidarity, not just visibility – this means creating infrastructure for peer learning, networking, regional convenings, and mentorship programmes. Rethinking partnerships means going beyond material support. We need to build relationships, not just transactions, and we need those relationships to be centred on context, safety, co-responsibility, reciprocity and trust.

5. Fund trust, not projects: mobilise flexible, direct, long-term funding

A shift to core funding that lets organisations address interconnected issues on their terms is required. Support community resource-sharing and mutual aid systems instead of fearing them. We need to make flexibility normal, and to trust and resource those closest to the problem – they know what works. Sustainable core funding enables organisations to develop long-term strategies and invest in growth, not just firefighting.

6. Shrinking civic space is a feminist issue – and fighting it is everyone's business

Supporting grassroots work without challenging rising autocracy is like building a house on quicksand. Larger organisations have a role to play in advocating for policies that recognise and legitimise the efforts of their embattled civil society peers all over the world, and in advocating for creating and extending legal and security infrastructure. WROs and feminist movements expressed their need for holistic security measures, such as legal support, protective advisory services, and emergency response plans that can help assure movements that they have allies and places to turn when times get tough. Frontline activists need allies who show up not just in solidarity statements, but with strategy, campaigning, funding, and protection.

7. Fund intersectionality like you mean it

Funders should stop prescribing what intersectionality looks like and start resourcing it. Let movements define what it means in their context, and the best approaches to address these interconnected challenges. Trust and back their strategies for tackling complex, multi-faceted realities – not templates designed in boardrooms.

8. Secure the web, invest in digital protection

Digital security must become core to how we partner with local women's rights groups – not an afterthought. This means providing gender-informed digital security support, funding risk assessments, and helping to create collaborative online spaces built by and for grassroots organisations.

9. Fund the margins – and let them lead

We need to create targeted, flexible support for organisations led by, and serving the interests of, the most marginalised communities. This involves recognising that those at the sharpest edges often push upstream against even mainstream feminist spaces. Their knowledge, strategies, lived experiences, and needs do not come in a single-sized package. They need targeted, flexible, accessible support designed in partnership with them, not for them.

Introduction

The world faces a women's rights and gender justice crisis. Significant cuts to international aid and shifting politics worldwide are making gender equality harder than ever to achieve. Women are hardest hit by climate change, economic downturns, disasters, and conflicts – yet they are expected to hold everything together when systems fail.¹ The numbers tell a stark story: at current rates, it will take 134 years for women to achieve full equality with men.² One in 10 women live in extreme poverty, and one in three have experienced violence in their lifetime.³ Violence against trans and non-binary people is on the rise.⁴ Legal progress to protect the rights of women and LGBTQ+ people are under threat in many countries. Clearly, we need a feminist agenda for change.

ActionAid's ultimate goal is to help build a just world free from poverty, oppression, and patriarchy. The bedrock of this work is our acknowledgement of – and commitment to transform – the international development sector's historical and ongoing complicity in perpetuating colonial power structures. Up to the present day, many international non-government organisations (INGOs), including ActionAid, have operated in ways that reproduce colonial dynamics.

Moreover, the sector's prevailing understanding of 'development' is often narrow, typically modelled on the paths followed by the United States and European countries. This perspective frequently overlooks the reality that development in these regions was built upon the exploitation and extraction of resources and labour from colonised areas. As a result, decisions are often made by organisations based in the Global North for communities in the Global South, without adequately engaging with or listening to local voices and expertise.

The sector's approach to development tends

to veil these Eurocentric foundations, falsely presenting them as universally applicable. Furthermore, there is a tendency to view social movements and communities as uniform groups, disregarding their diversity and unique contexts. Funding and partnership requirements set by INGOs and funders are often more easily met by organisations whose structures resemble those of established NGOs. This has led to privileged access to resources, partnerships, and decision-making spaces for certain organisations, to the detriment of smaller, grassroots movements.

To help address this, ActionAid places the transformative power of **feminist leadership** (leadership that is explicit in its goal of dismantling patriarchal structures and addressing power imbalances) centre stage of its work, and positions **intersectional feminism** (a framework that recognises that various aspects of a person's identity, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and ethnicity, overlap to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege) as a guiding principle, strategy and tool for social change.

Moreover, ActionAid recognises that addressing gender inequality requires context-specific approaches, as one-size-fits-all solutions are ineffective and fail to address the diverse realities experienced by individuals and communities. The homogenisation of work with social movements and communities creates barriers for women's rights organisations (WROs) and feminist movements, making it challenging to fully operationalise intersectionality in their work.

ActionAid is committed to addressing these challenges as part of its dedication to feminist and decolonial approaches and understands that this requires a transformation in the way

we work, the nature of our partnerships, and our role and presence within decision-making spaces and international networks. ActionAid acknowledges that decolonisation is not solely about recognising historical forms of social, political, and economic domination – it also requires us to confront and revise our institutional strategies and reimagine the possibilities for action within our organisation and the wider sector.

This report is part of our commitment to achieve this. This study was commissioned across 65 countries in multiple regions (Central Asia, East Africa and West Africa, South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA), South Asia, South East Asia, Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC), and the Pacific) mapped, analysed, and drew from the perspectives of a large-scale sample of more than 300 organisations. Our aim was to understand:

- how women's rights' and feminist organisations structure themselves;
- what issues they prioritise;
- how they connect different causes (like climate justice, economic rights, and violence prevention);
- what challenges they face;
- what they expect and need from INGOs and funders.

Our study found that a dual crisis of growing political repression and shrinking funding has forced women's and minoritised people's organisations to innovate and resist. And despite operating in very different contexts across the regions surveyed, the organisations studied share remarkably consistent recommendations for funders and international partners. The message is clear: those fighting daily battles for gender justice understand the solutions best – it is time to listen and fundamentally change how the international development sector works with them.



The following sections present ActionAid's approach to this research and explore in detail the information and messages from WROs and feminist movements, examining how civic space restrictions and funding challenges shape their organising, what strategies they are using to navigate and continue their work, and what specific changes funders and international partners should make to truly support grassroots feminist movements.

Our approach: a global research journey

Our efforts to understand how WROs and feminist movements operate around the world saw ActionAid partner with seven independent research teams who adopted their own mix of research and data-collection methods, adapted to local contexts and political climates. What unified all these efforts was a commitment to intersectional analysis – understanding how different forms of power and oppression intersect – and using reflection-action processes to map these vital movements.

Most of the teams comprised researchers from multiple countries in each region who brought their own creative approach to the work. For example, some drew from podcasts, blog posts, and social media, alongside traditional interviews. Others grounded their work explicitly in Black and decolonial feminist principles, analysing everything from institutional documents to communication materials (complemented by key interviews with organisations) and drew on qualitative case studies to examine how structural oppression plays out in different contexts. Others adopted a ‘feminist field theory approach’ – conducting interviews with independent activists and founders while also organising focus group discussions with women’s networks. This created space for collective analysis of key themes rather than just individual perspectives.

Some teams combined qualitative and quantitative methods, conducting in-depth interviews with everyone from grassroots feminist organisations to INGOs and independent activists. Researchers made particular efforts to include minority-led organisations, migrant rights groups, and feminist collectives operating in conflict zones or under authoritarian regimes.

Mapping local resources

Most teams began by looking at existing networks and resources. As an example, the SWANA team screened websites of regional funds like the Doria Feminist Fund and Mediterranean Women’s Fund – organisations that had been operating in the region for years and already knew which groups were active and effective. Teams in Africa and Central Asia used similar strategies to focus their mapping efforts.

From there, almost all research teams used snowball sampling (where one contact leads to another) and conducted interviews that ranged from highly structured to open-ended. The goal was always to identify patterns in how feminist organising happens, what challenges groups face, and what advocacy strategies actually work.

Several regional teams selected specific organisations as case studies, diving deep into how factors like geopolitical dynamics and donor dependencies shaped their advocacy work. Throughout, researchers were careful not to impose outside definitions of what counts as ‘indigenous’ or ‘local’ – recognising that communities define these terms for themselves, and that these definitions are in themselves political and contextual.⁵ All studies further reviewed the literature and analysed key policies to set their findings within the broader regional and global debates on gender justice, human rights, and the issues faced by civil society.

Obstacles and the impact of political and emergency-related events

For many teams, political circumstances and emergencies shaped their work and affected data collection, forcing some teams to change their approach. For example, the SWANA mapping began in November 2024 during intense Israeli bombardment of Gaza and unprecedented attacks on Beirut, in addition to escalating violence in Sudan. One research lead was based in Lebanon, and the team made the difficult decision to exclude Lebanese organisations and Gaza-based groups because engagement was inappropriate under such violent conditions.

In the Pacific, internet connectivity issues, resource constraints, and activists' understandable wariness of extractive research practices meant data collection stretched from January to April 2025. During this period, there were several climate disasters, including flash floods, cyclones and rainstorms, causing power and water outages on four Pacific Islands. Further, a dengue fever outbreak affected staff of several of the organisations mapped for the study. Southeast Asia faced similar challenges, with researchers reducing their planned scope due to flooding affecting WRO representatives. Political unrest in Bangladesh and Pakistan – including border tensions and the aftermath of the mass uprising that toppled Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina – disrupted research logistics throughout South Asia. And the political context in Central Asia and LAC had an impact on which organisations could participate in the research, how to contact them, and whether they could be named or not.

Additionally, several studies were initiated just as the international development sector faced massive disruption. Many interviews took



place after the Trump administration issued a 'stop work' order, immediately freezing funds for thousands of organisations across these regions. This created a climate of profound uncertainty that shaped every conversation.

Organisations working on migrant rights; sexual and reproductive health; sexual and gender-based violence; LGBTQ+ rights; and those with explicitly feminist perspectives were hit hardest.^{6,7} Many taking part in our study had to suspend their work (including disbursing salaries), which not only influenced the report's findings but also made organisations understandably reluctant to discuss their financial struggles openly, fearing it might jeopardise future opportunities in an already challenging climate.

Synthesising our research into a single report

The need for anonymity in politically sensitive contexts also restricted the use of direct organisational case studies, making it difficult to fully illustrate particular dynamics with identifiable examples. In some contexts, organisations consented to being highlighted directly – and we have honoured that openness. But in other regions where visibility comes with real risks, teams worked hard to anonymise their findings and distil lessons without putting these organisations in danger.

To bring the studies together, ActionAid worked with a consultant to thematically code and analyse each report, looking for patterns and outliers across regions. This helped identify cross-cutting themes, highlighted innovative practices, and categorised systemic barriers that transcend regional boundaries. The synthesis examined organisational characteristics, networks and coalitions, funding tactics, and advocacy approaches and challenges across the studies.

This report was never intended to be comprehensive or exhaustive. Instead, it offers crucial insights into patterns and shares recommendations of what it takes to more meaningfully work with WROs – especially those on the margins of funding and network flows. These are the organisations often doing the most important work with the least resources, and understanding how to support them better is essential for advancing women's rights globally.

Findings

The organisations involved in this research across regions vary widely but there are similarities in the challenges they face, and their message is clear: the approach to partnership needs to change. This section reflects the main messages shared by the movements that were involved in this study, how they work, and the challenges they face.

The power of the collective: how and why women organise

A key observation from all regions in this study is the capacity of women and their organisations to adapt their strategies and structures to their context, and to respond to their communities' priorities and needs, sometimes going beyond the sector's priorities to support women's rights. Women and girls' lives are complex, and their strategies are designed to address this.

Women organise in a variety of ways

When we think of women's organising we usually focus on WROs and feminist movements, but women also join other types of organisations to defend their rights, such as unions or community organisations.

Organising as NGOs

NGOs are one of the main groups in this study, whether they self-identify as feminist NGOs, or have women's rights as a framework for their actions. Many are formally registered, but they are far from homogenous. Some WROs are compelled to register as NGOs as they cannot register as social organisations or movements, and thereby may face formal requirements about organisational structure and reporting obligations that are hard to fulfil for small organisations. In this sense, a

homogeneous approach to the NGO sector in these regions would be problematic, as some of these NGOs are small and working mostly with volunteers from the communities they represent, while others have a larger structure, with remunerated staff, which allows them to connect more easily to the international aid sector.

Organising as social movements or CSOs

In some regions organisations register as a social movement or a civil society organisation (CSOs) – this may come with fewer requirements than registering as an NGO, allowing them to have a more flexible structure (which in some cases is similar to the structure of communal or Indigenous organisations).

Organising without registering

Despite options to register formally, some organisations opt to continue working without formal registration – partly because of the brutal impacts of state surveillance, but also because of difficulties in meeting state requirements to be a formal organisation, or because the existing legal framework is not adapted to their ways of organising.



We really try to develop structures that will fit our needs because we don't want to be bothered with structures that make us unnecessarily burdened.

Eni Lestari International Migrants Alliance (IMA)

How registration may affect funds

While being formally registered may open doors to donor funding and meetings with decision-

makers, this depends on the size of the organisation or social movement. Our research found that larger, more visible organisations find it easier to access funding. Smaller movements and organisations recognise that not being registered will block or hamper their access to funds, but they value the flexibility they have to adapt quickly to changing local contexts, and to operate with more protection from scrutiny and repression.

For example, not being formally registered meant an organisation in Myanmar was able to continue its work without being shut down, helping it avoid state scrutiny and work more flexibly as some of its leaders were located in other countries. In India, remaining unregistered for one organisation focusing on hate crimes kept it off the government's radar and less donor dependent. Similarly, collectives in Vietnam use informal structures to navigate restrictions on LGBTQ+ advocacy, organising film screenings, online discussions, and workshops to raise awareness and build solidarity, despite limited formal recognition and financial insecurity.

Organising as part of wider groups

Women may also join organisations not traditionally seen as WROs or feminist movements (such as unions, producers' associations, community/neighbourhood organisations), including those not led by women and those without gender justice as their primary focus. These are spaces in which women defend and demand their rights. For instance, our study in Southeast Asia showed that women's presence in unions contributes to gender justice through their fight for their rights as workers, and as political leaders in organisations that tend to be dominated by men. This latter point is also important for women who join communal or neighbourhood organisations as their presence shows

women can be leaders while fighting for the provision of gender-responsive public services, the protection of their territories, or against gender-based violence (whether domestic violence or violence linked to women's political work). In Southeast Asia and South Asia in particular, many of the organisations mapped maintain multiple identities – known to some as feminist organisations, but to others as service providers.

Women's rights organisations target issues in a variety of ways

This study was an opportunity to understand what women and their organisations prioritise, and how well ActionAid, as part of the INGO sector, aligns with these priorities. What we saw is that while the language used by these movements and organisations is similar to the language used by INGOs, in some instances these terms are used to embrace other, complementary issues. This means that if we work only with the sector's understanding of these issues, we lose the complexity and multiplicity of the priorities of women and girls around the world. For example:

- **Health rights:** In the Pacific region, organisations prioritising national policy change and collaboration with public organisations to improve access to health services and health education for sex workers simultaneously work to decriminalise and destigmatise sex work; meanwhile, organisations working at local level focus on the provision of health services to communities, particularly reproductive and sexual health.
- **Gender-based violence (GBV):** Some WROs and feminist movements work with governments and the United Nations on national-level policies, with a focus on domestic violence against women and

girls and LGBTQ+ people, while others providing counselling and support services for families and individuals. Beyond this, some organisations focus on other forms of violence often overlooked in GBV conversations, such as the violence suffered by those accused of sorcery (mentioned by WROs from the Pacific region), or violence against activists (particularly from Indigenous and Afro-Latin American organisations).

- **Climate justice and environmental rights:**

For some this work prioritises the contribution to, and participation in, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process. For others it is about fighting for self-determination and against threats to territories, land, and life, whether those threats come from extractive industries, land grabbing, hydroelectric plants, deforestation or climate change.

Women's organisations' approach intersectionality according to context

The work of organisations participating in this research reflects contextual approaches to intersectionality. For instance, organisations in the SWANA region focus on issues of humanitarianism and migration, while WROs in the Arab gulf support legal empowerment and migrant labour rights and others in Palestine and Lebanon address the intersections of conflict and gender-based violence. Other WROs report a focus on water, sanitation, environmental and climate change issues from a gendered perspective in fragile settings. In each of these programmatic interventions, what it means to be 'intersectional' revolves not only around questions of sexuality, gender, class, or ethnicity, but also around vulnerability to displacement and conflict exposure.

In South Asia, interviews with organisations that work with girls and adolescents clearly demonstrate that while girls' access to

education is in general curtailed, girls who are Muslim and who belong to a lower caste or class are less likely to be able to access education. Other organisations working on citizenship issues focus on helping people who have faced questions about their citizenship status, particularly those without legal documentation. They may also work on economic marginalisation and deprivation by enhancing livelihoods, or supporting minorities with legal aid, empowerment, and education about their rights and constitutional rights. One example from India shows WRO leaders working with marginalised women to support them legally, even when they cannot use funds directly on 'citizenship issues' or advertise that this is a part of their work.

In the Pacific, WROs work with diverse populations, including young women, LGBTQ+ individuals, sex workers, women with disabilities, and minority ethnic communities. Their work is shaped by the unique cultural, linguistic, and colonial histories of the Pacific. For instance, one organization's membership is open to local Indofijian women all religious backgrounds, filling in a gap in services and programmes for women and girls from this minority ethnic group often disenfranchised from national processes and other spaces due to political instability, language barriers, geographical location and socio-economic factors.

The pattern is the same in Central Asia, where organisations often focus on disability rights. For example, Uzbekistan has a rich history of societies uniting people based on their disabilities (a tradition established during the Soviet era that continued after independence), which helps communities through government and local authority grants and subsidies. Although these organisations have stable funding and perform public oversight functions, their explicit mentions of the status of women



appear limited. Two organisations involved in this study serve as examples of groups trying to fill this gap through an intersectional approach, supporting women and girls with disabilities who are sexual violence survivors.

Indigenous women's organisations in the Pacific, Southeast Asia and LAC provide

Silencing dissent: WROs, feminist movements and shrinking civic space

Globally, civic space shrinking⁸ and civil society freedoms under coordinated attack – currently, two-thirds of the world's population lives under repressive governments.⁹ Regression in terms of gender justice is one of the most visible aspects of rising autocracy and far-right populism, with women's rights groups and feminist organisations disproportionately the targets of attacks.

The global economic crisis, brutal austerity policies and the COVID-19 pandemic not only devastated economies – they fuelled the rise of anti-rights movements worldwide. Governments seized on narratives of stability and security to justify policies that prioritise short-term economic recovery over long-term social justice. Women's rights are being weaponised to justify xenophobic, racist and transphobic rhetoric, as far-right stakeholders wrongly present men of colour or trans-women

even clearer examples of this sophisticated analysis in action. An organisation in Cambodia tackles the interconnected challenges facing indigenous women – from economic marginalisation to land-rights violations. Their work recognises that land disputes and extractive projects not only threaten livelihoods, they also increase women's vulnerability to violence. It reveals how cultural preservation, land rights, and women's safety are inextricably linked – one cannot be effectively addressed without considering the others. This is also evident in the work of Afro-Latin American organisations, which address a complex reality shaped by colonialism, racism and sexism; or in the work of an organisation in Papua New Guinea as it expertly supports the transition from customary law to the state's justice system to resolve violence and end tribal conflict.

as a threat to women and girls.

Across our studies, WROs and feminist movements note an apparently systematic increase in scrutiny and impediments for their work. Far too many governments and conservative movements have labelled WROs and feminist organisations as threats to social cohesion or foreign agents destabilising society, such as Hungary, Poland, Croatia^{11,12}, China¹³. This is not accidental; it is a deliberate strategy to delegitimise their work and justify legal restrictions, smear campaigns, and funding cuts. Organisations advocating for the rights of LGBTQ+ people or women at the intersection of various structures of oppression – like women with disabilities, women of colour, immigrants, and Indigenous women – have especially found themselves in the crosshairs.

In all regions studied the same troubling pattern

emerges: social movements, including WROs and feminist movements, are under attack. While coalitions and networks remain lifelines for amplifying voices, advocating for policy and systemic change and pooling resources, the growing threats are so severe that in some places the risks of visibility outweigh the benefits. Anti-gender-rights groups and shrinking civic space are creating the perfect storm for rolling back progress made on gender justice. Regional and national dynamics may vary (shaped by unique histories, political systems, and current governance dynamics), as may the mechanisms of control, particular areas of repression or operational challenges, but nevertheless there are common threads and striking similarities – from bureaucracy and legal strangleholds, to security, the role of social media, surveillance and harassment.

Bureaucracy and legal strangleholds

Despite vastly differing political contexts, women's organisations everywhere face remarkably similar challenges. Bureaucratic controls and barriers enforced by governments place a stranglehold on CSOs, routinely affecting their ability to access funding and to register formally. In some countries, formal registration comes with a series of commitments of accountability to the state, which (as already mentioned) can be used by the state to exert control over social movements and organisations. In other countries, the description of the breadth of work by an organisation in its registration documents has been used to limit its capacity to evolve with the priorities and needs of its members. Similarly, while in some countries it is possible to register as a social movement, in many others these groups can only register as NGOs if they want to be able to function and be able to access funds. These threats to social movements have resulted in many

organisations folding or being registered without being able to actively operate. For example, in the Central Asia region, approximately 25,000 non-commercial organisations (the legal Kyrgyzstan term for NGOs) are registered, but only about one-third are actively functioning.

Beyond the limits imposed by registration processes, some governments have criminalised civil protest, reducing the action that WROs and feminist movements can take. For example, in the LAC region, legislation to prosecute protesters accused of disturbing public order, blocking roads, going against national security and even terrorism was identified in nine countries.

Funding restrictions and the 'security playbook'

Another clear trend across each of the regions was the weaponisation of security narratives and imposing restrictions on how organisations receive foreign funding. These restrictions range from limiting the themes that organisations can focus on with this funding; requiring government approval for the funds being received, or how much funding can be received; to the systematic stigmatisation of movements that receive these funds. There are local variations everywhere, but the principles remain the same. Our study shows cases in the SWANA and LAC regions, as well as in Malaysia, India, Kenya, Cambodia and Bangladesh, where these measures disproportionately target the movements defending women's rights, particularly against ecological destruction and extractivism.

In SWANA, rights defenders have accused governments of using national security laws and counterterrorism measures to silence dissent – in some cases, feminist and human rights organisations have been labelled as foreign agents or threats to national stability.

WROs everywhere face patterns of persecution, harassment, arbitrary interrogations, and disproportionate administrative demands to show financial documents. A crucial survival strategy for navigating restriction is to operate under alternative names that are more acceptable to current administrations. Some organisations route funds through differently named entities to sustain their activities, while others rebrand their work and change the language they use. Across each of the regions studied, the pattern was the same: WROs and feminist movements are implementing strategies to be able to continue to do their work, but they feel alone in this process. Funders and international partners need to recognise these struggles and learn to better understand and help reduce them.

gone digital too. Countries across regions are passing ‘misinformation’ laws and data controls that sound reasonable but often function as weapons to curtail free expression. For example, Tunisia, once hailed for its progressive stance post-Arab Spring, has seen a regression in freedoms. In September 2022, President Kais Saied enacted Decree Law 54, ostensibly to combat misinformation online. Article 24 of this decree imposes up to five years imprisonment and fines for spreading false information, with penalties doubling if the content targets state officials. Critics argue that the law’s broad language allows for arbitrary persecution of journalists, government critics, and political opponents. By July 2023, at least 14 individuals had been investigated under this law, with some arrests leading to imprisonment.

Legal restrictions on receiving foreign funds

Some governments impose strict laws that regulate civil society activities, making it difficult for organisations to operate freely. In Egypt and Libya, legal restrictions on receiving foreign funding severely hinder the ability of feminist organisations to access international grants. This highly restrictive legal framework governing NGO funding, which mandates extensive government oversight, can delay or block the receipt of funds. Authorities have withheld permits for organisations, scrutinised conference bookings and employed various tactics to suppress dissent. In Libya, activists report increased surveillance and legal harassment when attempting to secure foreign grants. These restrictions not only create financial instability but also force organisations to find alternative – often unreliable – funding sources such as private donations or informal fundraising networks.

The Central Asia region shows similar trends, with websites blocked and publications shut down. While Turkmenistan and Tajikistan have virtually eliminated independent journalism, activists in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan use social media for feminist organising – which is testament to their resilience.

And across regions, activists face cyber-harassment and digital violence. Despite the threat of doxxing, physical violence or arrest, activists continue to use social media as a tool for resistance. There is evidence across the board of new digital advocacy approaches, such

Internet: a double-edged sword for WROs and feminist movements

While social media has been used by social movements around the world to organise, expand reach, communicate and share strategies, crackdowns on civil society have

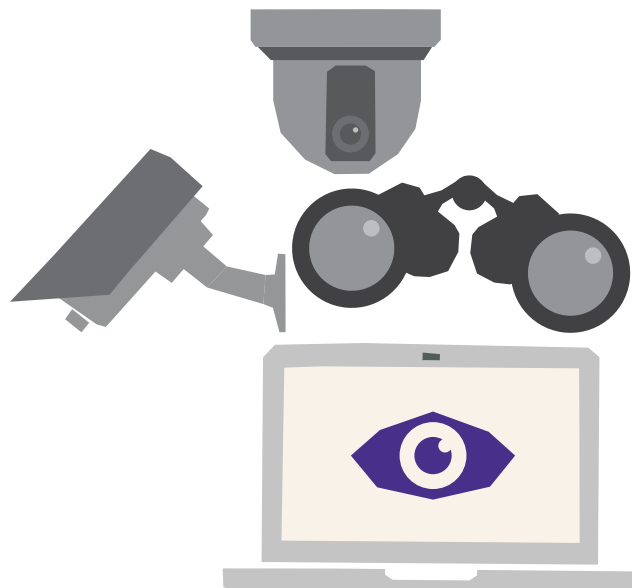
as encrypted communication, mobilising support online, or disseminating knowledge about digital safety, that help organisations remain impactful while minimising exposure to government harassment

Targeting LGBTQI+ rights and advocacy, Africa

Perhaps nowhere is the assault on freedom of expression more vicious than in the targeting of LGBTQI+ advocacy and sex work. In East and West Africa, anti-homosexual laws have become weapons specifically designed to target and suppress human rights defenders and women's organisations. Recently, the Ugandan government passed an Anti-homosexuality Act¹⁴ that imposes harsh penalties for same-sex relationships and related activities. This law criminalises not only same-sex acts, but also the promotion of LGBTQI+ rights and advocacy.

In Ethiopia, activists continue to face legal obstacles, while media outlets are closely monitored. Restrictions on internet access are used to suppress dissent and limit civic participation, and in December 2024, Ethiopian authorities suspended three human rights organisations whose work includes LGBTQI+ communities.¹⁵ A new bill has been introduced to amend the penal code so that anyone who “promotes homosexuality” could face up to 20 years in prison, putting activists, media, and organisations focused on LGBTQI+ issues at risk.

Similar issues are present in other regions: in Morocco, a trans- and sex worker-led organisation that focuses on decriminalising sex work, advocating for access to healthcare, and providing services like HIV testing, condom distribution, and psychosocial support to sex workers faces extreme state repression and smear campaigns.



Harassment and surveillance

Another observable pattern in restrictions faced by civil society groups across regions is the extent and degree to which WROs and other feminist activists face the brunt of state-sponsored surveillance, security harassment, and outright violence. Activists working in conflict zones and in regions where extractive industries are present face heightened risks of violence, displacement and economic marginalisation.

The LAC region experiences the most violence when it comes to social, environmental and human rights defenders. According to Front Line Defenders, four out of five murders of human rights defenders occurred in Latin America in 2023¹⁶ – indeed, the region accounts for 80 percent of murders of human rights defenders worldwide, with Colombia, Mexico, Brazil and Honduras at the top of the list.¹⁷ In the face of growing anti-rights groups and feminist-movement stigmatisation there are more and more cases of persecution, criminalisation, and harassment of women's rights defenders, especially those working in the field of sexual and reproductive rights.

Environmental and territorial defenders, who are predominantly Indigenous, rural, and Afro-descendant women – face disproportionate levels of violence.

In Fiji, the government amended the criminal code to outlaw activities around brothel keeping, procuring sex, and soliciting in public. Since this legislation's enactment there has been a rise in action against sex workers on the streets and harassment by police and the military. Against the backdrop of these legal barriers, a peer-led community network of women sex workers who advocate on health, human rights, safety and wellbeing for sex workers face the constant threat of criminalisation and surveillance for their advocacy work.

And in conflict-affected regions, the threat of violence for WROs not only comes from governments. In Yemen, women leaders, journalists, and human rights defenders face an increasingly shrinking civic space, targeted cyber harassment, and smear campaigns orchestrated by both state and non-state actors. The ongoing conflict in the country exacerbates gender-based violence, with women facing heightened risks of displacement, forced marriage, and sexual violence, often with little access to legal recourse or support services. Similarly, in Iraqi Kurdistan, patriarchal structures continue to limit women's rights through early and forced marriage, honour-based violence, and restrictions on sexual and reproductive health rights. Despite legal reforms, many of these practices persist due to weak enforcement, religious conservatism, and societal stigma. Survivors of ISIS-related violence, including women and children born from rape, face additional layers of discrimination and

exclusion, with few institutional mechanisms in place to support their long-term recovery and reintegration. In Libya, women in politics and civil society endure severe forms of harassment, kidnappings, and increasing restrictions on civic space. Recent laws have further entrenched patriarchal control – including requiring women to travel with male guardians, effectively treating them as perpetual minors. Political instability and armed groups have made gender-based violence pervasive while ensuring perpetrators remain unaccountable.

In India, a rise in right-wing political ideologies is shaping how many civil society organisations – both international and local – choose to highlight their work. Working with Muslim minorities, collectives, or labour unions comes with risks. Wary of state persecution, many organisations fear being too combative in their advocacy tactics.

Organising can also be challenging because of corporate and private-sector actors. WROs in South Asia report that large corporations are lobbying governments to amend labour legislation to restrict the power of unions. They also report that donor agencies often actively fund governments to amend labour laws in the interest of corporations for more favourable business and investment environments, all while simultaneously supporting the NGO sector with labour welfare and development activities.

In Hong Kong there have been mass arrests of activists and opposition figures, alongside forced dissolution of major civil society organisations and unions; in Cambodia, trade union laws limit labour organising; and in Sri Lanka, organising private sector workers is a huge challenge as corporations can openly dismiss workers for joining unions.

Anti-union sentiment and employer resistance

An example from the Philippines exemplifies the potential of labour unions to address the specific needs of women workers in a rapidly growing but often exploitative industry. This organisation advocates for fair labour practices, decent wages, workplace safety, and the right to organise.

The majority of workers in this sector in the Philippines are women, many of whom face challenges related to low wages, precarious employment, and gender-based discrimination. This union uses collective bargaining agreements to negotiate better wages and benefits, as demonstrated by their advocacy for a standardized, nationwide entry-level wage. They also push for policies addressing gender-specific concerns, such as ensuring paid maternity leave and benefits, access to reproductive healthcare, and protection from workplace harassment and violence. This experience reveals the complexities and barriers faced by labour unions in organising workers and advocating for their rights.

The biggest obstacle is not always government harassment, but actions from some private stakeholders. The prevalence of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) in this union's industry, which often prohibits workers from discussing their wages and working conditions, hinders solidarity-building efforts and makes exposing unfair practices more difficult. This union navigates a complex legal and political landscape where anti-union sentiment and employer resistance are common.

Summary and discussion

The findings in this section highlight a troubling trend whereby civil society is increasing

stifled by state bodies and legal instruments, making the work of advocacy organisations perilous and hindering not only their ability to set agendas but also to respond to them. The picture that emerges is one of suffocation. Civic space is shrinking rapidly as governments deploy an arsenal of legislative controls, expand surveillance infrastructure, and entrench practices that strangle freedoms of expression and association.

It is impossible to overstate how difficult it has become for women's rights organisations and feminist movements to secure funding in this hostile political climate. They are caught in a vicious double bind.

On one side, their funding faces intense government scrutiny, with international support weaponised against them as evidence of foreign interference. On the other side, as stated by these organisations, many donors are backing away entirely, unwilling to navigate the risky political landscape in which these organisations operate.

The donor community is not helping. International funders usually provide grants with a variety of conditions attached, both related to management and programmatic work. They often require compliance achievable for big NGOs, but practically impossible for social movements, particularly small, grassroots organisations (who are then perceived as weak). Our study found that much of the work on 'capacity development' for WROs and feminist movements aims to enable them to better comply with donor demands, and to speak the same language and use the same logic as funders. This transforms social movements into NGOs, making them a good fit to work with our systems and processes while distancing them from their grassroots origins, making them slower to adapt and respond to members'

needs, and turning social leaders/activists into employees who depend on external funders.

Another issue mentioned by WROs and feminist movements in our study is the instability of the support given by INGOs and funders.

They stated that when things get complicated politically, many partners cut ties with them. This leaves them not only without resources, but facing any political repercussions alone, without international support for their advocacy or campaigns.

Networks are a big part of what makes movements work. But grassroots organisations know that not all forms of cooperation are good. Collaboration can be a liability, and it can also be an opportunity. Local WROs do not always think the sign of success is working cross-nationally

Money talks: funding in uncertain times

Chronic underfunding affects virtually every women's rights organisation and feminist movement included in this study.

The statistics are stark. In Latin America, only 1 percent of funding directly reaches women's organisations.¹⁸ For Black-led women's, girls', and trans groups globally, that figure drops to just 0.1 percent.¹⁹ In the Pacific, less than 1 percent of available funding reaches women's organisations, while Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural women's groups worldwide receive less than 0.3 percent of total funding.²⁰ Moreover, only 1.4 percent of global funding has gone to Indigenous women's organisations.²¹

This picture shows that community-based organisations, Indigenous groups and WROs led by sex workers or other marginalised populations that have no ties to regional and international networks are particularly isolated from global funding flows – reflecting a system

or regionally. Especially for organisations operating in restrictive political contexts, international partners who do not understand local realities bring more risk than reward.

As a response to growing state control, many social movements, including feminist organisations and WROs, choose to operate without formal registration; others decide to relocate their work outside their home countries. For all of them, strategic decisions about how to survive shrinking civic space are shaped by the same challenges, partnerships that do not respond to their realities and needs, and a funding landscape that remains perpetually inadequate to meet the moment. The terms of how organisations work together need to serve everyone.

that excludes the very communities most affected by gender inequality.

Short-term, short-sighted

Most national and grassroots organisations operate with severely limited resources, forcing them into reactive rather than strategic work and routinely compromising the depth of their interventions. Financial constraints push organisations toward small-scale programmes that provide immediate but temporary relief rather than addressing underlying systemic issues. Short-term funding cycles make long-term planning nearly impossible. Organisations spend disproportionate time writing grant applications and reports instead of doing the work they were created to do.

Our findings complement a recently published analysis from the Dalan Fund, showing that in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central and North Asia, 71 percent of funding received by activists goes to single-project based initiatives, or lasts less than a year.²²

The Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN) also shows that only 6 percent of international human rights grants are flexible and direct.²³ The most recent survey (2025) by the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) of 1,174 feminist organisations found that nearly a third have no core funding and 64 percent could only operate for six months if funding were to dry up immediately.²⁴ A staggering 86 percent experience funding as complex and inaccessible, and more than 60 percent have reported changing their priorities to suit funder requirements.²⁵



There is a gap between what the rhetoric is and reality. We want social transformation. We want justice. We don’t change the world with crumbs ... Those crumbs come with shackles. Crumbs and shackles don’t change the world.

Francoise Moudouthe, Chief Executive Officer, African Women’s Development Fund

Power imbalances in funding relationships

Traditional INGO partnerships with local organisations often perpetuate existing power imbalances. WROs and feminist movements say power dynamics most commonly manifest in their partnerships with INGOs and funders in decisions about what programmes and approaches to fund; whose expertise matters; which language is used; one-way accountability systems linked to burdensome requirements; who gets to be present in which spaces or meetings with decision-makers; whose logos and names are included in documents and proposals; and what costs can be covered (or not) by funders.

This chronically burdensome and insufficient funding situation has direct human consequences.

In Latin America, more than half of those interviewed for this study received no payment for their work, with 43% of leaders and executive directors serving without remuneration.

Among paid positions, there is a clear disparity – organisations led by Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and working-class women are significantly more likely to operate with unpaid leadership. In the Pacific region, organisations were found to routinely scale back programmes or implement pay cuts, with staff often sharing salaries just to keep organisations running. Many barely meet basic cost-of-living expenses, leading to high burnout rates and constant staff turnover.

A shocking quarter of WROs across the eight regions explicitly want more psychosocial support – with teams feeling stretched, underpaid, exhausted, and embattled.

INGOs should make conscious decisions in line with their stated principles and be held



to the same standards as local WROs and feminist groups when seeking partnerships or funding. They should provide genuine evidence of grassroots partnerships, though this is rarely required.

Language and flexibility barriers

Funding systems often operate in languages and formats that exclude many organisations. Complex application processes, reporting requirements in foreign languages, and donor expectations that fit their own ideals rather than local contexts and knowledge create additional barriers that reinforce existing inequities, and often contribute to assumptions that WROs and feminist movements lack particular capacities.

Indigenous organisations face challenges when donors fail to understand their unique contexts and needs. The requirement to translate materials and operate in non-local languages forces indigenous organisations to adapt their thinking, approaches and priorities to fit funders' agendas, taking precious resources away from core work. These demands are inappropriate for Indigenous organisations, not only because they do not have dedicated staff with the time and skills needed to navigate complex funding systems, but also because putting this structure in place comes with the risk of turning their grassroots organisations into NGOs.

Feminists around the world have expressed their concerns about this type of change leading to the depoliticisation of social movements, their bureaucratisation, and the alienation of leaders from their communities.²⁶
²⁷ This gap in understanding and flexibility on the part of funders and INGOs leads to further exclusion of this type of organisation. One WRO in Southeast Asia observed that what is often missing is information and guidance

that can help donors find and work better with grassroots organisations. This could take the shape of information about existing organisations, how they work, and what would be seen as appropriate support their contexts and needs, and an openness on the part of donors and INGOs to understand them and adapt to them.

The lack of financial support and technical capacity for interpreters and translators is almost universal across the regions surveyed. WROs in East and West Africa, like their counterparts in the Pacific and LAC regions, mention these communication barriers not just in the context of language, but in relation to ways to create and share knowledge, and creative forms of expression. Poetry, music, dance, and song, among others, are systematically removed from interactions with donors.

The registration trap

One of the clearest findings across the study's eight regions was that current funding models are failing organisations that (often by necessity rather than choice) operate informally. In politically sensitive environments, formal registration can invite government harassment, but operating without registration makes it nearly impossible to meet financial audit requirements or demonstrate organisational track records to funders. Organisations are forced to choose between safety and sustainability.

But the problem runs deeper. For organisations that derive their legitimacy from the grassroots and see themselves as movements, registration options are almost never suitable or fit for purpose. They restrict their autonomy, limit their activism, and force more radical groups to soften their politics in the interest of donors and funders alike. Registration often demands

structures with clear hierarchies and following easy-to-code structures, with systems and processes similar to those used by funders.

In SWANA, organisations led by marginalised groups find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place: register and risk government retaliation or remain informal and lose access to most funding opportunities. In Southeast Asia, informal and unregistered groups also lament extraneous bureaucratic requirements for groups working in crisis situations or with limited administrative capacity.

And in the Pacific region, infrastructure barriers, regular climate emergencies, and difficulties with travel and being able to consistently connect with the outside world leave Pacific organisations with a high degree of scepticism about the value of international engagement. Many of the organisations in the Pacific consulted for this study have had negative experiences with international donors and report high burnout rates because of chronic underfunding and strong reliance on sporadic grants and continuously high workloads. Organisations with limited administrative support who are routinely diverting attention to climate disasters are managing what they believe to be unrealistic donor requirements that strain resources and distract from service delivery – and that force informal groups to work in ways that make little sense for their structure.

Donor-driven agendas

Organisations report increasing pressure to adapt their work to match funding priorities, often incorporating issues that do not align with their core mission or community needs – all while seeing little evidence of any reciprocal donor flexibility. Efforts to negotiate higher salaries have proven difficult and mostly unsuccessful, and funders are reluctant to

repurpose unspent funds or to flexibly enable pivots as situations on the ground change.

But above all, local WROs feel pushed to work on issues they might not choose for themselves. For example, when a WRO or a feminist movement looking for funds is invited to submit proposals for what they see as a non-priority issue (or an issue in which they have no expertise), they either have to refuse the invitation and risk straining their relationship with the funder, or adapt their work and present it as a new approach that could help them successfully access those funds.



A lot of INGOs create programmes that we don't actually need.

An alliance coordinator (anonymous)

Limited budgets cannot be meaningfully scaled to tackle climate justice programming alongside existing work, yet organisations – particularly in SWANA – are routinely asked to embed programming around climate change, countering violent extremism, and economic development, regardless of community priorities.

At the other end of the spectrum are groups that want to tackle issues for which they receive no funding. For example, Pacific Island communities are at the forefront of the climate crisis, both in advocacy and in bearing its impact, and Pacific WROs have in recent times taken on climate-related advocacy and programmatic work, motivated by their own experiences and seeing the direct impacts of climate change on gender justice. This has significantly increased their workload, but only one organisation in our study has received donor support for this workstream.



We are not funded to do this work. However, there is a need to inform our people about climate change effects. Landslides, high tides, floods, these have become common especially during the wet season. So, we take time out to inform communities about the dangers.

WRO in Papua New Guinea

There are also feminist organisations that do not accept funding from donors unless they are politically aligned with their objectives. In one example from Sri Lanka, an Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union and a Federation of Workers, which have memberships of 5,500 and 30,000 workers respectively, only accept funding from agencies that are willing to support union efforts and offer multi-year, flexible finance. Similarly, an organisation in Indonesia and Hong Kong has developed a particularly strategic approach to funding, only accepting support from funders that align with their mission. This approach enables them to fund a global secretariat and expand operations while preserving their commitment to migrant worker leadership and autonomous decision-making.

Summary

Overall, the picture of funding for WROs and their work is one of short-term, project-based approaches with insufficient funding flows, and donors routinely favouring high-impact and high-visibility outcomes – with little built-in flexibility for change or multidimensional programming. One example from Peru shows that to tackle abortions among Afro-descendant populations means working on access to decent healthcare and advocacy for the recognition of health as a right. But funding models restrict organisations and force them to put convenient, single-issue labels on their work and narrowly define their most pressing priority. WROs find that they are pushed to fundraise for issues as though they were separate, and to develop programmes addressing related issues in isolation from each other.

The details vary but the story everywhere is the same: current funding models do not build genuine community ownership. They do not give WROs and feminist movements the flexibility they need to address complex connections between complex subjects, and they do not support sustainable movements.

Creating innovative alternatives

Across different contexts, feminist groups lean heavily on trust, relationships, and collaboration to keep going – especially when they face the overwhelming challenges presented by resource shortages, political pushback, or threats to their very space to operate. WROs and women's movements are developing creative ways to do this.

Some build solidarity economy initiatives, develop social enterprises for independent income, or rely on mutual aid networks. Others leverage non-financial resources through community contributions and volunteers. Relationships (more important than ever) are

forged with peers and partners for legal aid, capacity support, and at times, to benefit from administrative and fiscal hosting (where a legally registered organisation manages funds for an organisation that is not registered).

Other examples of initiatives to fund their work include migrant workers' groups across several of the studies (especially in Southeast Asia) pooling their networks' resources, while Indigenous women's organisations combine traditional community resource-sharing with external fundraising. Indigenous women's organisations in the Philippines draw heavily on volunteer labour and solidarity support from partner organisations (highlighting both the challenges and resilience of grassroots organising), while in East and West Africa we see examples of WROs employing strategies such as integrated programming to do their work, for example combining sexual and reproductive health services with education. In Cape Verde, one organisation integrates sexual and reproductive health rights services with vocational training to empower women, while a WRO in Nigeria collaborates with traditional and justice leaders to champion gender justice and legal reforms. And in Kenya, one organisation's efforts to generate funds includes "savings clubs" to create an autonomous pool of resources for members (which were particularly valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic); individual fellowships and grants that allow leaders to build organisational capacity; and partnerships with international entities to gain legal aid and support. Many WROs have worked with well-established partners for fiscal hosting and for help with developing proposals.

When done well, these approaches have tremendous potential.

But in some of the regional studies, partners operating as intermediaries have played a part in shrinking the funding pie, taking up to half of total funding for management and technical support and depriving WROs of vital resources and long-term capacity development.

Funders need to be more flexible

Ironically, many of these innovative approaches are traditionally discouraged by funders, who prefer that non-profit resources remain separate from any income-generating activities. Indeed, women's cooperatives, savings groups, and market gardens that serve as platforms for collective action often struggle to receive support because they do not fit conventional non-profit models.

Attempts to develop alternative income streams also face obstruction and often depend on stringent registration rules. This creates a system where the most sustainable and community-owned approaches receive the least institutional support.

Yet what emerges from this analysis is clear: the most successful organisations balance different resource streams while maintaining their mission and community accountability – and this requires flexibility that current donor systems rarely provide. The funding challenge is not just about money – it is about power, priorities, and whose voices get heard in decisions about resources.

Until funding systems recognise and adapt to the realities of how effective WROs operate, the gap between rhetoric about supporting grassroots movements and the reality of resource distribution will continue to undermine the very work that donors claim to support. WROs continue to innovate and adapt despite a long list of constraints and are always making strategic choices on how to work in coalitions,

and how to push the causes for which they were created to fight.

So what conditions do these organisations need to realise their vision, to be able to take bolder actions, and to build stronger movements? We explore those ideas in the final chapter of this study.

Recommendations

We found remarkably consistent messages and calls for change across all eight regions in the study. The recommendations that follow are based on those demands, and together form roadmap for change, developed by organisations that are best positioned to know where their greatest needs lie.



Talk to us! Get to know us!

WRO leader, Middle East

1. Embrace and understand diversity and difference

WROs and feminist movements are as varied as the issues that women want to address. Approaching them as a homogeneous group results in assumptions that one WRO or feminist movement speaks for all women. This in turn leads to INGOs working with organisations that are more accessible (which usually benefits large, NGO-like organisations) to the detriment of grassroots movements. Grassroots organisations differ in structure, form, leadership, and in the role they play in their communities. In some cases they provide services, in others they work with decision-makers to change policies, while others challenge unequal structures and push for systemic change. Some work at local and national levels, and others act in national and international spaces. Some have paid staff, more vertical structures, and technical experts, while others function through the volunteer work of their members, and leadership rotates among all of them.

Similarly, women join other organisations that may not be led by other women, but through which they can still fight for their rights. And

when it comes to feminist organisations, many of them fight for gender justice through the lens of land, territories, queerness, informal work etc. These variations in size and approach may seem difficult for donors to accommodate on the surface, but they are actually one of the strengths of the global movement for gender justice. Funders and INGOs must seek to be in dialogue with a variety of organisations to understand how they can best support them, whether that means establishing direct relationships or working through intermediaries. This involves acknowledging that,

To date, the sector has pushed social movements to adapt to the systems and structures of INGOs and funders, and it is time to do the opposite – to build systems that are flexible enough to be able to work with this wealth of organisations.

2. Funding is important, but partnerships are about more than funds

Discussions about INGOs and funders often focus solely on funding, though this is just one aspect of their support for social movements. This study shows that partnerships can be strengthened further. WROs and feminist movements seek meaningful collaboration with funders and INGOs; they want to be involved in decision-making rather than having choices made for them. They want to work with funders who:

- are flexible in terms of their requirements, systems, and timelines;
- are willing to invest in long-term processes to work on the root causes of inequality and injustice;
- work through dialogue, not imposition;
- see them as equal and are open to learning

from and supporting the approaches chosen by WROs and feminist movements;

- support capacity-building to meet WRO needs rather than their capacity to comply with funders' requirements;
- are open to creating spaces to learn themselves, and to strengthen their capacity to be flexible and to develop equitable partnerships with social movements;
- can work beyond the thematic silos that oversimplify the complex realities of the issues women and girls face, and of the contexts in which they work;
- are willing to play their part by challenging governments, global decision-makers and other stakeholders who might not listen directly to social movements;
- are courageous and stand by their side when they face repression because of their work;
- acknowledge publicly the role and contribution of WROs and feminist movements;
- are interested in building mutual accountability mechanisms;
- facilitate opportunities to meet other stakeholders who could support them.

Ultimately, WRO and feminist movements' resilience and innovation prove the power of grassroots leadership. Their impact – despite constant challenge – shows why we need stronger, fairer partnerships with international allies. The global community must move beyond short-term projects and embrace inclusive, context-aware strategies that let local leaders tackle the roots of inequality. By fostering real collaboration, and pushing for systemic change, international actors can truly support these movements, on their terms and respecting their realities. In doing so, we take a step toward a more just world – where women and marginalised communities have the power

and tools to shape their own futures.

3. Informal organising is here to stay – recognise and support its power

Rather than a weakness, informality and non-registration are a deliberate choice many WROs and feminist movements make to stay agile and survive repressive governments or to remain true to their vision. Yet these same organisations – often doing the most important work – routinely cannot access funding because they do not fit donor spreadsheets. Current funding systems punish organisations for making smart survival choices. Demanding formal audit trails, post-project storytelling, and public reporting can expose organisations that prioritise their communities' safety over donor comfort, and are part of the reason why many non-registered organisations do not want to work with INGOs and funders.

We need funding mechanisms that understand that informal movements are not an exception or less trustworthy.

Competitive funding calls are designed for large, well-funded civil society actors with structures of, or similar to, NGOs – not WROs or feminist movements. They must rely on partners in their networks to potentially hold grants on their behalf, help them develop proposals, and who can translate their work to funders. INGOs and donors need to do more to identify, strengthen and/or create these intermediary platforms. Furthermore, funders and INGOs should establish a dialogue with non-registered organisations to understand how they should adapt their approach to partnerships, and their systems to fund movements and organisations that are not registered, instead of the other way around. In some cases intermediaries can help facilitate funding for non-registered organisations,



but they should not become gatekeepers – informal groups need direct relationships with funders too.

4. Build power through connection: strengthen networks that work

WROs worldwide are doing incredible work but often operate in isolation. Young activists lack mentorship. Experienced leaders cannot share hard-won lessons. Organisations reinvent solutions that others have already developed. This isolation not only wastes resources – it weakens the entire movement. Yet WROs do not want more top-down training from INGOs – they want to learn from each other. They want platforms where a young activist in Kenya can connect with a seasoned organiser in Colombia. They want spaces where Indigenous women’s groups can share strategies across continents. They want networks that help

them solve problems together, not compete for the same small pot of funding. They want to see infrastructure that allows them to mentor each other, plug knowledge gaps, and access resources both within their countries, but also across their regions. What this looks like in practice is for funders and INGOs to think like catalysts, not coordinators. Their role is not to control networks – it is to help create the infrastructure that allows grassroots organisations and frontline WROs to flourish independently. INGOs and donors often have a broader view of which organisations are working on related issues and they should use that perspective to facilitate connections, not manage partnerships.

We need to strengthen existing (or create regular) opportunities for organisations to meet, share strategies, and build relationships.

Some organisations want to influence international policy but lack access to these mechanisms. The bottom line is WROs and feminist movements in every region want more participation in strategic spaces, where they can influence conversations, how money and resources flow, and one another. Networks create resilience. When one organisation faces a crackdown, others might be able to provide support. When funding disappears from one region, organisations can share survival strategies and learn from one another. Above all, when one organisation has a win, the lessons can spread quickly. For funders to adapt to this critical moment of rupture, they need to remember that sustainable change happens when communities have the tools to support themselves and each other. Facilitate the establishment of regional convenings, mentorship programmes, secure communication platforms, and skill-sharing initiatives. But we must remember that how organisations use network spaces is for them to decide. Feminists know that change requires continuous learning. Our models for how we help organisations develop must reflect that.

5. Fund trust, not projects: mobilise flexible, direct, long-term funding

The call for direct funding is not new, but it must get louder. Funders must adopt flexible funding that prioritises marginalised communities and the organisations serving them. This means core, unrestricted funding that lets organisations address multiple intersecting issues without narrow project



constraints, and moving beyond traditional grants with burdensome reporting.

Sustainable core funding enables organisations to develop long-term strategies and invest in growth – not just emergency firefighting. Funders must actively support the diverse income-generation approaches that organisations are already using, rather

than fearing them. Mutual aid systems and community resourcing have been around for a long time, and we have much to learn from them. Donors and partners alike should support flexible, bottom-up initiatives that reduce external dependence and foster autonomous, sustainable organisations. Funders and INGOs must maintain greater transparency about resource allocation and overhead costs. Sustained institutional commitment to what they fund as well as how they fund requires regular dialogue with partners and investing in flexibility architectures that pivot to emerging needs and react to feedback.

6. Shrinking civic space is a feminist issue – fighting it is everyone’s business

Feminist movements cannot thrive in a world where civic space is collapsing – and pretending otherwise is a dangerous illusion.

Supporting frontline WROs without challenging the rising tide of authoritarianism and anti-gender backlash is like building a house on quicksand.

INGOs and funders must do more than resource grassroots work – they must also help protect the ground it stands on. Without that, we are doing very little to build these movements and guard their long-term ability to survive and thrive.

Protecting civic space must be seen as part of the core business for feminist movements, and we need a bold, well-resourced and coordinated response to rising right-wing sentiments and anti-gender policies. INGOs, routinely operating with greater protection, must be true partners for local organisations fighting to survive in conditions of repression. Larger organisations have a role to play in advocating for policies that recognise and legitimise the efforts of their embattled civil society peers all over the world, and in advocating for creating and extending legal and security infrastructure.

In almost every country in this study, WROs expressed their need for holistic security measures, such as legal support, protective advisory services, and emergency response plans that can help assure movements that they have allies and places to turn when times get tough. Frontline activists need allies who show up not just in solidarity statements, but with strategy, campaigning, funding, and protection. When local partners ask them to do so these same INGOs who have long track records of advocating for legal and policy change) need to exert pressure on governments – and call for international sanctions – when those governments systematically target women’s rights. Feminist leaders need to feel a greater sense of solidarity and to know it is understood that countering autocratic strategies can only be done collectively.

7. Fund intersectionality with intention, not as a buzzword

Intersectionality is not a buzzword – it is the

real-life logic women’s rights groups use to navigate layered injustices. But what counts as intersectional cannot be defined in a boardroom or written into a generic log frame. It is shaped by place, culture, community, and the lived realities of those doing the work. What it means to be intersectional will always be place-specific and context-dependent. In every region of this study, how organisations understood intersectionality and how they programmed for it depended on their unique community needs and circumstances – not on outside definitions or theories.

If funders and international partners are serious about supporting intersectional work, they need to stop prescribing it and start resourcing it.

That means letting movements lead, and providing funding for the long haul. We also need to remember that tackling complex issues, and their complex connections, is painstaking work. Funding slow, deep work – not just fast, measurable wins – means funding relationships based on trust, learning, and adaptation. Above all, flexible, evolving theories of change are at the heart of what it means to practice intersectionality. We need to give space to organisations to explore how overlapping systems of oppression manifest on their own terms – and how to dismantle them.

8. Secure the web, invest in digital protection

If WROs are going to survive – let alone thrive – in an era of digital threats, they need real, resilient infrastructure: tools, training, protection, and power. As civil society groups face attack from conservative forces and governments alike, they need tailored digital safety and security training with context-sensitive understanding of the risks they face. Women’s

rights groups working in conflict-affected areas or under acute autocratic conditions need gender-informed digital security support that can help them navigate issues of privacy, encryption, how to deal with online harassment, and when to recognise tech threats. Very few organisations have the resources and the training to fund digital risk audits or to invest in defensive tools. This is where funders and international partners can play a role, by providing funding for organisations to conduct their own digital risk assessments and help them secure the tools needed to prevent threats.

As funders and international partners look to support thriving, better-functioning ecosystems, they also need to help build online spaces that facilitate genuine knowledge-sharing, not just social media presence. Feminist groups want collaborative problem-solving tools, secure communication networks, and resource libraries built by and for grassroots organisations, and they need those spaces to be protected.

Digital security needs to become a core part of grantmaking – using encrypted reporting and anonymity when activists need it. International partners should back efforts to push for domestic and regional laws, norms, and enforcement that protect rights defenders against digital violence, and uphold digital rights.

9. Fund the margins – and let them lead

WROs and feminist movements on the margins – often youth-led, disability-inclusive, or rooted in indigenous and other highly marginalised communities – face unique challenges that standard funding models rarely address. These organisations do not need one-size-fits-all solutions; they need targeted, flexible, accessible support designed in partnership with them, not for them. Those operating at

the sharpest edges – at the margins of the margin, often pushing upstream against the current of even mainstream feminist spaces – need small, adaptable funding mechanisms that embed accessibility from the start. The lived expertise of marginalised leaders and organisations – who may not use the language of ‘intersectionality’ but nevertheless embody its principles daily – must be recognised as essential, not peripheral. They know what works in their communities.

Support must go beyond financial resources – building feedback loops, accountability systems, and cross-sector partnerships that recognise diverse governance models. Feminist and crowdfunding models alike can help marginalised WROs gain autonomy and chart their own course, and INGOs should back those efforts. Donors and INGOs working outside traditional gender spaces – across movements, sectors, and regions – can bring fresh perspectives on how to partner with indigenous leadership and work respectfully with traditional governance systems. The same applies for those working with disabled activists and leaders: we need better, more accessible models, and more diverse ones that do not assume all organisations have identical needs or access requirements. These collaborations can help move us toward a more grounded, praxis-driven approach that respects the multiple identities and struggles navigated by WROs.

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