Redefining Risk: What Happens When Feminist Movements Are Not Funded or 'Defunded' and Their Civic Space Narrowed or Closed?

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February 2025

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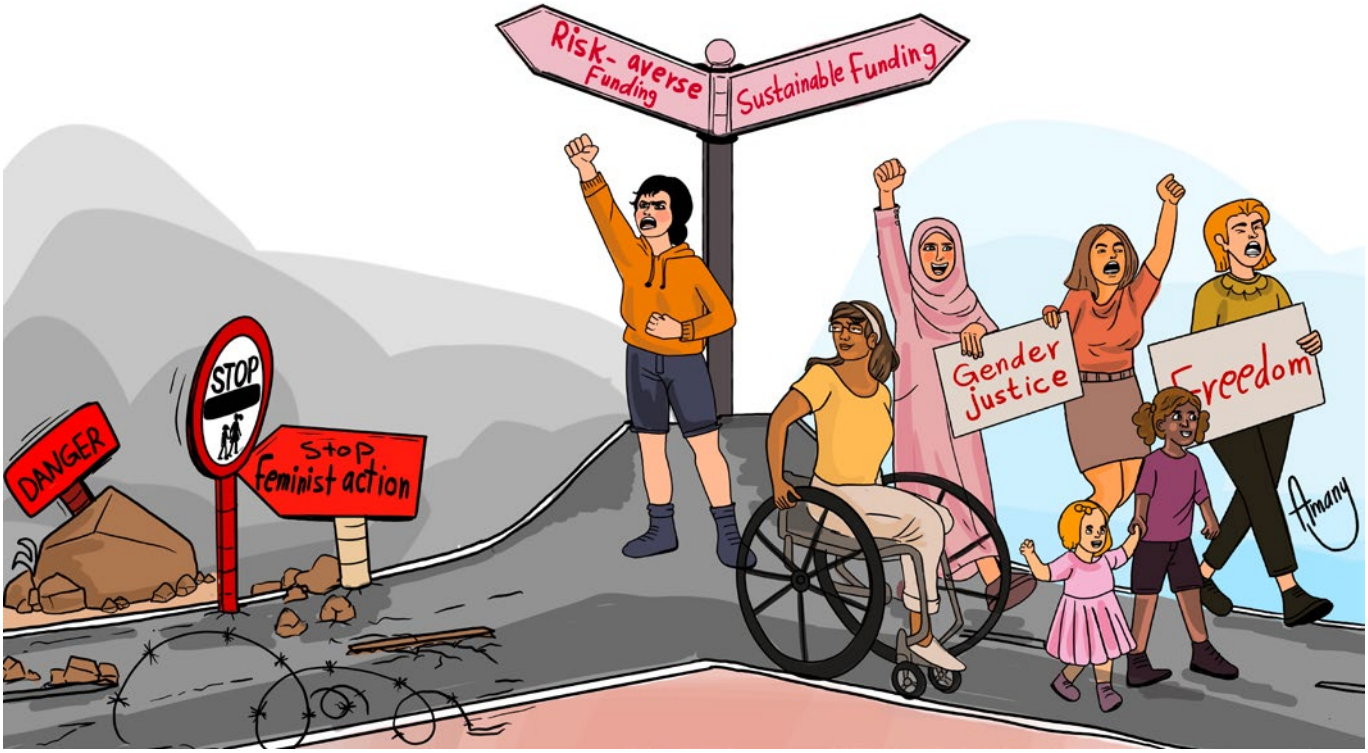

Illustrated by Amany Al-Ali

Advocacy Summary

The rationale for this study is the significant public and internal scrutiny donors face over the perceived risks associated with funding Women's Rights Organisations (WROs). By examining four country case contexts in which funding decreased and civic space closed (Bangladesh, Nicaragua, Türkiye and Zimbabwe), the study aims to flip the narrative of 'risk' on its head, interrogating what risks to gender equality and broader development outcomes arise when robust, well-funded, and well-supported WROs and feminist movements cease to operate.

Although feminist movements are key drivers of progress for gender equality globally, they receive only a tiny proportion of available funding. Legal and financial requirements of donors, and an emphasis on aid 'effectiveness' create challenges for donors to fund smaller grassroots WROs. For WROs, funding is increasingly only available for short-term projects instead of longer-term movement-building efforts. At the same time, the world is witnessing a period of democratic backsliding and closing civic space, and hard-won gains of WROs around the world are being systematically eroded.

Key Findings

- **Funding for WROs is less available, less flexible and comes with more strings attached:** Activists highlight decreased availability of flexible funding, increased competition for funding, excessive bureaucracy involved in securing international funding, and impact measurement requirements unsuited to the kinds of long-term change they are working towards, particularly in contexts of shrinking civic space.
- **Without funding, movements fade into silence:** Defunding of or reduced funding for WROs often go hand in hand with repression and closing civic space. Funding is often reduced in such contexts due to direct restrictions on receiving funding by autocratic governments or donors withdrawing or restructuring funding due to increased risk. Often, to be able to access funds, WROs shift to service provision instead of advocacy work or are unable to work on politicised issues such as Gender-based Violence (GBV), abortion and LGBTQI+ rights.
- **Weakened movements lead to adverse outcomes for gender equality:** All countries studied show worrying trends in gender equality measures. Key indicators of critical importance to women have stagnated or are moving in the wrong direction. In all case study countries, governments have rolled back or attempted to roll back gender equality progress, particularly on the issues of GBV and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR).

Key Recommendations

- **Government Donors**
  - When direct funding of local groups is not possible, consult and cooperate with local WROs to identify the most appropriate intermediary funder. It is essential to recognise that different types of intermediaries provide different political and programming benefits.
  - Support legal and compliance teams in learning from grantee partners and their contexts and engaging with other legal and compliance officers to learn from and adapt other flexible, responsible contracting practices.
  - Support intermediary funds, especially women's and feminist funds, that are embedded in local contexts. These funds provide long-term unrestricted support and legal and other types of protective support to local WROs and activists.
  - When advised by local activists, speak out against and push back on measures that restrict civic space limit the ability of activists and organisations to safely organise, receive and distribute funds, and demand accountability.

➔ **Philanthropy**

- Utilise philanthropy's unique position to support diaspora WROs that may not otherwise be able to access ODA or other types of funding.
- Engage and coordinate with other institutions and networks, such as the Human Rights Funders Network Better Preparedness initiative, to move money and support organisations operating in restrictive contexts, building complementary funding strategies for various risk tolerance levels among institutions.
- Ensure that funding portfolios support the full range of organisations critical to healthy movements, including older, more established organisations and emerging networks, including groups led directly by young people. Whenever possible, build this complementarity with other donors, including government donors.

Authors and Acknowledgments

Authors' biographies and positionality

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Acknowledgements

EM2030 team members Amanda Austin, Cecilia Garcia and Gabrielle Leite also contributed to this research. Editing was by Rebecca Heald.

The authors would like to thank all research participants for their time supporting this research and their insightful contributions. We would also like to thank Walking the Talk for funding this study and their support throughout the process.

Acronym List

AFM	The Alliance for Feminist Movements
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EM2030	Equal Measures 2030
GBV	Gender-based Violence
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex persons
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights
WHRD	Women Human Rights Defender
WRO	Women's Rights Organisation

Introduction

This study by Equal Measures 2030 (EM2030) and the Alliance for Feminist Movements (AFM) seeks to strengthen the evidence base for advocates and funders who look to direct more and better funding to women's rights organisations and feminist movements.[1]

The rationale behind this study is the considerable public and internal scrutiny that many donors face concerning the perceived risks associated with funding WROs. These risks include scrutiny over whether funding WROs delivers sufficient measurable results, alongside perceived risks related to absorption capacity and misuse of funds. The Alliance for Feminist Movements have consistently raised this, and the issue came up repeatedly with panellists during the Dutch-hosted *Shaping Feminist Foreign Policy Conference* in The Hague in 2023.

In this context, AFM and EM2030 aim to flip the narrative of 'risk' on its head, interrogating what risks to gender equality and broader development outcomes arise when robust, well-funded, and well-supported WROs and feminist movements cease to operate. To do this, the study explores four unique country contexts in which feminist movements have experienced a decline in funding or closing civic space since 2000: Bangladesh, Nicaragua, Türkiye and Zimbabwe.

This research will contribute evidence for campaigners to use both within funding bodies and in the broader feminist movement space to advocate for more and better resources for feminist movements and thereby bolster gender-equality progress across issues and contexts.

1. The researchers use the phrase 'women's rights organisations and feminist movements' (shortened to WROs) throughout.

Methodology

This small-scale research interrogates the concept of 'risk' by articulating the risks of not funding, not supporting, or actively suppressing the work of WROs. Extensive details of the research methodology are outlined in Annex 1.

The primary research question focused on whether adverse gender-equality outcomes can be observed when WROs' funding decreases and/or space for their activities narrows or closes. The research team hypothesised that observable links exist between the de-funding and/or suppression of WROs and adverse outcomes related to gender equality and wider development progress. The study considered national contexts in which funding decreased and space for WROs narrowed or closed since 2000, looking at the correlation with various indicators and indices.

Data collection was carried out using a mixed methods approach. The four country case studies were reviewed with a quantitative analysis of funding and gender-equality outcomes. Desktop research of the country case studies was carried out and one to three key informant interviews were conducted per country to validate the findings. Initial consultations with experts in the field of gender equality informed the development of the conceptual framework and identification of country case studies.

Defining a conceptual framework for this work was a key step of the research process, as no existing conceptual framework was available. The research team defined key concepts such as a 'supported civil society', 'risk', 'defunding', and 'suppression' of movements and the relationship between these concepts through initial consultations with WROs, donor organisations, and others in the gender-equality field.

The study commenced with establishing criteria that defined a well-supported feminist civil society. The key components of this definition are presented in the box below.

What does a well-supported feminist civil society look like?

Below are elements of a well-supported feminist movement:

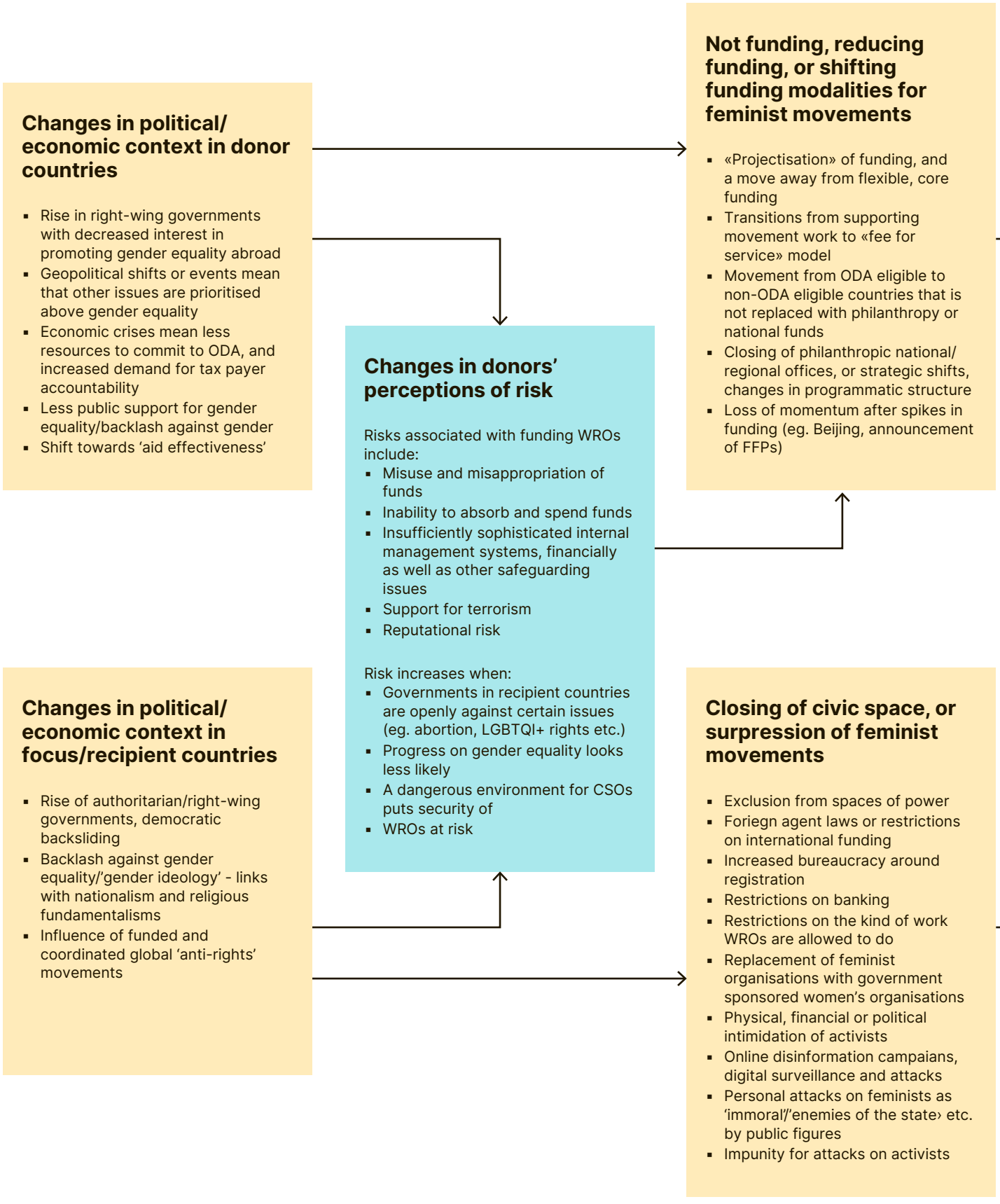
- Legislative and policy elements:
  - WROs can receive foreign funds and access banking systems
  - The registration process for civil society organisations (CSOs) is simple and efficient and the requirements are not overly burdensome.
  - Legal protections are in place for women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and civic space, especially around gender-specific threats such as doxxing.
  - Activists can organise public demonstrations freely and safely
  - Activists can freely leave and return to the country

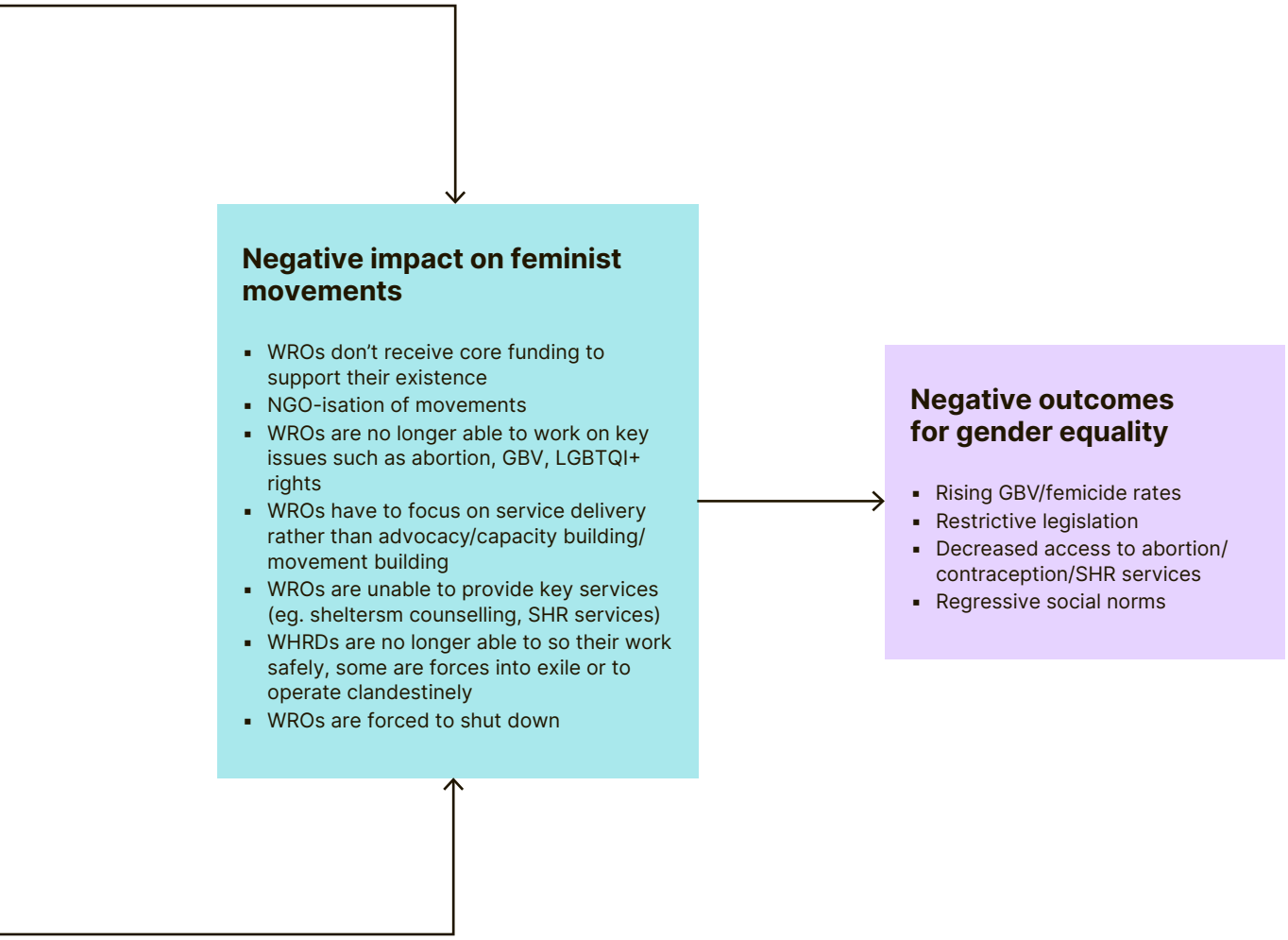
- Funding elements:
  - WROs have access to long-term, flexible, core funding that enables them to implement their mission and work towards transformative, systems-level change
  - A range of organisations receive funding (from large, anchor organisations to small, non-registered ones)
  - A variety of donors and approaches to support exist in the country (bilateral donors, private philanthropy, women's funds, and local support)

- Organising elements:
  - Connections, collaborations, and partnerships can form within feminist civil society and with other movements in the country (and regionally and globally)
  - WROs have access to digital technology
  - WROs are working on multiple issues and their intersections — policy, behaviour change, culture, etc.
  - WROs are allowed access to spaces with power and are consulted by the government on issues related to women's rights and gender equality.

Subsequently, a conceptual framework (Figure 1) was constructed to explain the mechanisms through which alterations in the geopolitical and economic landscapes of both donor and recipient nations can expedite the suppression or defunding of WROs. These actions may manifest directly or indirectly, through the cultivation of perceived heightened risk. The framework further delineates the consequential impacts on WROs and their operational capacity, ultimately explaining the potential for adverse effects on gender equality. This analytical tool was a foundational structure for selecting pertinent country case studies and provided a coherent lens through which to analyse each case. The intent is to illustrate the practical application of the framework's constituent concepts through concrete examples, acknowledging that the framework is not an exhaustive representation of all possible scenarios.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for 'redesigning risk' study




Negative impact on feminist movements
WROs don't receive core funding to support their existence
NGO-isation of movements
WROs are no longer able to work on key issues such as abortion, GBV, LGBTQI+ rights
WROs have to focus on service delivery rather than advocacy/capacity building/ movement building
WROs are unable to provide key services (eg. sheltersm counselling, SHR services)
WHRDs are no longer able to so their work safely, some are forces into exile or to operate clandestinely
WROs are forced to shut down
Negative outcomes for gender equality
Rising GBV/femicide rates
Restrictive legislation
Decreased access to abortion/ contraception/SHR services
Regressive social norms

Literature Review

Evidence shows that WROs are 'the key drivers of legal and policy change to address gender equality' (OECD, 2016). Women's collective action increases women's ability to hold their governments accountable and claim rights and resources through bottom-up pressure (Evans and Nambiar, 2013). Feminist mobilisation is the most critical factor in ensuring meaningful, enduring action on violence against women at the national level (Htun and Weldon, 2012). It is linked clearly to advances in women's rights in the economic sphere (Weldon, Forester, et al., 2020) and women's political participation (Weldon, Kelly-Thompson, et al., 2020). The efforts of coalitions of domestic WROs are a key factor in the likelihood of governments adopting gender quotas (Kang and Tripp, 2018) and WROs have been vital to lowering rates of child marriage and improving societal attention to gender-equality issues such as caste and labour rights (The Alliance for Feminist Movements and Equal Measures 2030, 2024). Over several decades, because of the efforts of WROs and their transnational networks, women's human rights have moved 'from the margin to the centre' of the global agenda (Bunch and Fried,1996).

WRO's achievements have been realised despite extreme funding constraints, which are getting worse.

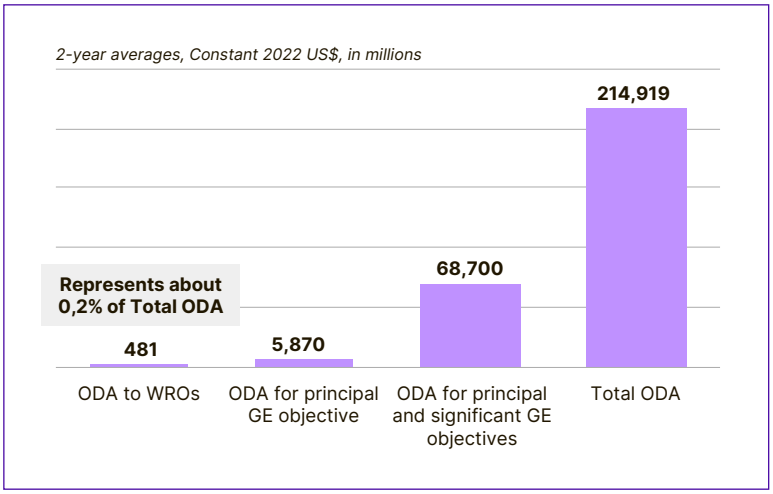
Official development assistance (ODA) specifically for WROs was already a minuscule proportion of the total ODA. On average for 2022 and 2023, ODA to WROs was US$481 million (OECD,2024b),[2] making up less than 0.2% of total ODA ($215 billion annually in 2022-23):[3] "Despite DAC members' recognition of the importance of women's rights organisations and feminist movements, ODA to enhance their effectiveness, influence and sustainability remains low." (OECD, 2024b).

In addition, the share of ODA with gender-equality objectives have, for the first time in a decade, dropped from 45 per cent in 2019—20 to 42 per cent in 2021— 22 (OECD, 2024b). This trend is seen in most donor countries, with the share of ODA with gender equality objectives declining in 20 of the 32 OECD donor countries in 2021—22. In Asia, bilateral allocable ODA going to and through CSOs and having as its fundamental objective advancement of gender equality

2. Excluding funding for public sector institutions, see page 51: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/development-finance-for-gender-equality-2024_e340afbf-en.html
3. Author's calculations: Based on $60.4B in ODA having gender equality objectives and this making up 45% of total ODA. Meaning aid to WROs is $500 M/$134.22 B.

has decreased since 2014 (Chugh and Gaind, 2023). Most WROs have never received unrestricted or multi-year funding (Shake the Table, 2022).

Figure 2: Official Development Assistance (ODA), gender objectives and WROs, annual averages for 2022-2023



Notes: ODA marked with sector code 15170 'Women's Rights Organisations and Movements, and Government Institutions'. ODA with GE objectives includes ODA with gender equality as either a 'principal' or 'significant' objective. Data represent the annual average for 2022-23. Source: OECD 2024

WROs' sustainability has traditionally rested with a few bilateral donors and private foundations. In the past decade, consistent contributions from the Netherlands, Canada, Norway, Sweden, and, more recently, France and the EU have accounted for most of the bilateral allocable ODA directed to WROs (OECD 2024b). Just 10 international foundations provided 97 percent of total cross-border giving for gender equality in developing countries in 2021—22 (OECD, 2024).

The funding picture for gender equality and WROs is likely to worsen, with eight major donor countries (including Sweden, the Netherlands, the UK, and Germany) announcing more than $17.2 billion in aid cuts in 2024 to take effect in the next five years (ODI Global, 2025).

The rise and fall of funding for WROs: the role of the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference

After the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995, funding for WROs rose as international donors paid more attention to struggles for women's rights across the world (Alpízar Durán, 2015; Bunch and Fried, 1996). For example, funding from the Canadian government to WROs in Pakistan quadrupled between 1991—93 to 1996—02 (Gossen, 2024). But the interest in funding WROs didn't last. By the conference's tenth anniversary, it was clear that donors were failing to meet their Beijing commitments, and resources for supporting WROs began to decline. In 2004, the Association for Women's Rights in Development started investigating

what happened to WROs' funding and campaigning on the issue. The 'Where is the Money for Feminist Organising?' campaign, combined with an overall increase in ODA towards the end of the decade, contributed to the establishment of several dedicated Women's Funds that are dedicated to supporting WROs (Hessini, 2020).[4]

The loss of momentum in the early 2000s impacted not only funding volumes but also funding modality and design. In many contexts (including the countries covered by this research), donors moved away from supporting movement-building and direct support to civil society more generally and WROs specifically. Many WROs, therefore, shifted to competing for funding and implementing shorter term projects. This trend further constrained the ability of WROs to work towards longer term systemic shifts in gender power relations (Batliwala, 2008). Both WROs and donor staff saw this shift as detrimental to WROs' ability to affect transformational change (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2011). A 2011 study by Pathways for Women's Empowerment quoted a government official as saying "'I recognise the value of mainstreaming [gender through government to government support for sector wide programs] 'but the [negative] impact on these [WROs] to carry on their transformative work has been enormous' (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2011). Additionally, increasingly complicated administrative requirements imposed by donors placed a considerable burden on WROs' capacities (OECD, 2016). Many consider these extensive reporting requirements inappropriate for measuring the systemic and long-term changes WROs work towards (OECD, 2016). As one donor noted in a 2016 review by GENDERNET, 'We didn't have these administrative requirements 10 years ago' (OECD, 2016).

Donor perceptions of 'risk' and 'efficiency' influence funding volumes and modalities

Donors have different appetites for risk, depending on where they sit in the funding ecosystem. For example, bilateral donors might take a more risk-averse approach than private philanthropy (Gray, 2024). This appetite, combined with a variety of other factors including an assessment of political context, determines whether a donor may take a cautious approach to funding WROs in a country,

4. Women's / feminist funds are public fundraising foundations that work to realise the power of grassroots women, girls, and trans people around the world by providing them with financial and other resources to achieve their vision of social justice and networks representing women's / feminist funds. The primary purpose of women's / feminist funds is to resource, strengthen the capacities of, accompany, and convene grassroots WROs, activists, networks, and movements.

placing safer bets on tried-and-true strategies, or risk more unconventional ideas to address politically sensitive issues (Better Preparedness, 2024).

The funding patterns outlined can be explained partly by changing perceptions of 'efficiency' among donors, as well as shifts in the perceptions of what constituted a 'risky' investment. As Mukhopadhyay et al. observed in 2011, 'In the changed international funding scenario in which results and effectiveness are prioritised over social transformation, it has grown harder to establish the legitimacy of supporting processes of claiming women's rights as integral to the gender and development agenda.' In this way, and especially for bilateral aid programs that are accountable to citizens for public spending, 'the idea of risk is tied up with ideas of "value" and "effectiveness"' (Jackson, 2016).

The Aid Effectiveness Agenda that OECD countries committed to in 2005 has been accused of limiting experimentation and risk taking and contributing to a move away from 'rights' towards 'results', with NGOs shifting from being innovators to contractors (AWID, 2013). This pressure to demonstrate results, coupled with the common perception that WROs cannot deliver at scale, has led some bilateral donors to perceive funding WROs as 'risky' (OECD, 2016).

The concept of and practices around 'risk' were also affected by the 9/11 attacks in 2001, which increased scrutiny of international spending and ushered in a rapid rise in legislation and measures intended to prevent terrorism and money laundering. These placed extensive requirements on donors and resulted in restricted financial flows to WROs (Duke Law and Women Peacemakers Program, 2017). Governments have also used such legislation as a pretext for monitoring and restricting the work of CSOs, including preventing them from receiving international funding under the guise of national security (Njoku, 2025). As financial and legal compliance gets stricter for CSOs — getting resources to WROs, particularly to small, unregistered, grassroots groups — has become increasingly complex (Chugh and Gaind, 2023). Anti-terrorism concerns, alongside increased public demands for government accountability in donor countries, have made it difficult for donors to fund smaller local organisations, leading to a preference for funding familiar organisations — generally international CSOs or those based in donor countries (OECD, 2023).

Donors' risk management is particularly challenging with closing civic space. When a country's political situation changes and progress seems less likely, or when restrictions are placed on civil society that make moving money more challenging, this increases donors' perceived risk level (Eddens and Kroeger, 2022). This can lead funders to pull out or, more commonly, decrease funds for

politically sensitive issues and channel more aid through donor-based rather than foreign NGOs (Chaudhry and Heiss, 2018).

But what about the risk of inaction?

Countries worldwide are experiencing 'democratic backsliding', with organisations such as Freedom House and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) producing annual data showing a steady decline in democratic principles and practices across most regions (Surie, Saluja, and Nixon, 2023). The 2024 SDG Gender Index shows that 91 out of 139 countries were rated 'poor' or 'very poor' in an expert assessment of whether the country protects 'personal autonomy, individual rights, and freedom from discrimination' (Ind. 10.2) in 2022. The Index also shows that, globally, women's right to openly discuss political issues, both in private and in public spaces (Ind. 10.4) saw a consistent decline from 2015— 22, evident across all regions, with Asia and the Pacific experiencing the most significant setbacks, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (Equal Measures 2030, 2024).

The decline of democracy and growing backlash against gender equality are closely linked and recent years have seen a rise in authoritarian, 'strongman' leaders who use traditional gender roles as markers of patriotism and attack women's and LGBTQI+ rights to solidify their power (Chenoweth and Marks, 2022). As feminist activism is an engine of democratic progress, such leaders see WROs as a direct threat to consolidating power and seek to delegitimise them, framing them as enemies of the nation (Kaul, 2021). Attacks on activists, including women's rights, LGBTQI+ and environmental activists are increasing alongside the rise in authoritarian governments, with 300 human rights defenders killed globally in 2023 (Front Line Defenders 2024). Such attacks are often one of the first steps in the authoritarian playbook, and as such can be a bellwether of broader democratic backsliding (McInnis and Hunter, 2024).

The global anti-gender movement[5] is growing in influence, driven by right-wing political and conservative religious forces, and WROs increasingly face coordinated and well-funded opposition to their work (Shake the Table, 2022). The Global Philanthropy Project estimates that, from 2021 to 2022, the aggregate revenue of just three large anti-rights organisations was over $1 billion (The Global Philanthropy Project 2024). The anti-gender movement has successfully increased donors' nervousness about taking risks and confronting the movement

5. The global anti-gender or anti-rights movement is an umbrella term that refers to movements opposing what they call "gender ideology," or "gender theory". The movement brings together conservative governments, religious groups, and civil society groups to form a coordinated opposition to a range of issues related to gender equality, LGBTQI+ rights, and gender studies.

requires them to navigate additional tensions and complexities around risk (VeneKlasen, 2024).

Donors must carefully weigh the risks of any funding decision. However, the multiple crises facing the world today mean the cost of inaction should also be considered. To date, research has not yet extensively explored the risks of inaction. By examining four countries that have experienced periods in which WROs have been defunded or suppressed (or, in many cases, both), and the impact on gender-equality outcomes, this study aims to raise awareness of the risks and missed opportunities that result from not funding WROs.

Findings

The four case studies present diverse movements worldwide and how they have been affected by and responded to periods of suppression, repression, and declining and/or shifting funding.

1. **Bangladesh**

   Although external aid financing has flowed to Bangladesh in relatively high volumes, funding noticeably shifted away from civil society and women's rights organisations from the mid to late 2000s onwards. These funding shifts coupled with restrictive civic space meant that WROs shifted to short-term project-based approaches and away from strategic advocacy cross-organisation movement building and sustained political influencing work.

2. **Nicaragua**

   Nicaragua has experienced a period of severe repression of civil society since the election of Daniel Ortega as president in 2006, which has become more pronounced since the protests that broke out in the country in 2018. Receiving foreign funding has become impossible for WROs and almost all WROs have shut down or are operating in exile.

3. **Türkiye**

   Türkiye's civic space has become steadily more restricted under the rule of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and WROs have faced an increasingly hostile environment. Although it has remained low, international funding increased slightly during this period which has enabled Turkish feminists to hold the line on several key issues, despite some major setbacks.

4. **Zimbabwe**

   WROs in Zimbabwe have experienced a closed civic space since the late 1990s under successive governments. This environment, combined with inconsistent international funding and economic challenges has left the movement severely weakened.

This section identifies salient themes across the case studies. See Annex 2 for the complete case studies.

5. **WROs are deeply interconnected with democracy.**

The case studies highlight the relationships between feminist activism, democracy, and the rule of law. In Bangladesh, Nicaragua, and Zimbabwe, WROs played roles in independence struggles and revolutions. Similarly, in Türkiye, WROs were key to the country's re-democratisation. The link between democracy and the rule of law is further strengthened by evidence that authoritarian leaders see such movements as direct threats to their consolidation of power.

> *"Dictatorships have understood very well the relationship between well-funded movements and their capacity for influence, even better than the donors themselves." (Nicaraguan activist, Interview NC002)*

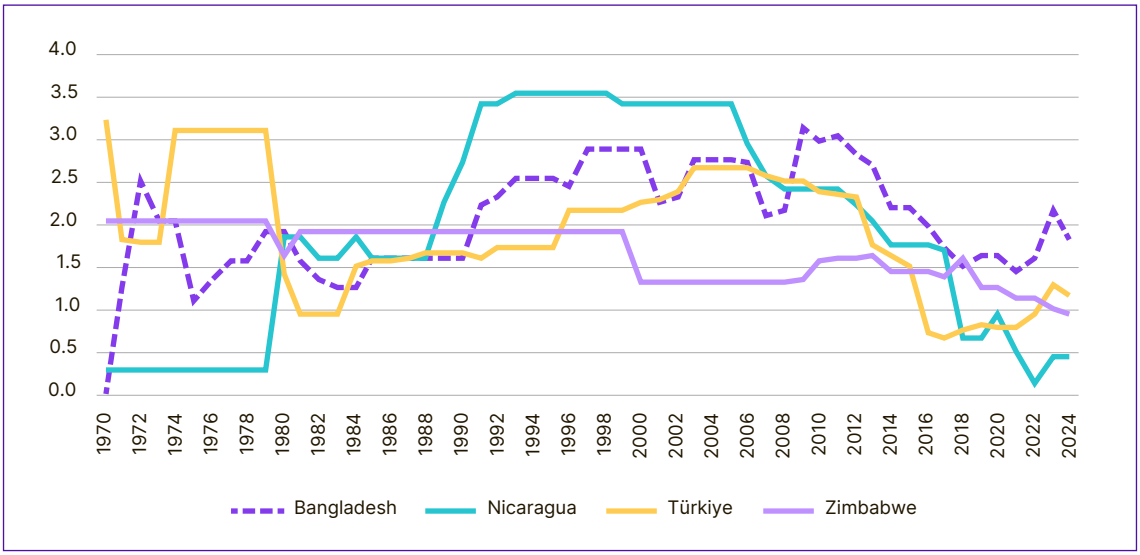
The case studies show that attacking women and LGBTQI+ rights is often the first step of an authoritarian leader. WROs are often united with other CSOs who speak up about democratic backsliding, as shown in Türkiye and Nicaragua. In Zimbabwe, WROs were key in the push for constitutional reform. For this reason, as in Nicaragua, authoritarian leaders often seek to maintain a veneer of democracy to the wider world and engage in 'autocratic gender washing', in which they proclaim publicly a commitment to gender equality while systematically eroding women's rights in practice. In the case of Türkiye, leaders co-opt the language of progressive women's rights agendas where President Erdoğan has used the term 'gender justice' to promote traditional gender roles

6. **Closing of civic space and rights backlash is increasing across contexts, making WROs' work even more important.**

The CIVICUS Monitor categorises each of the four case study countries as 'repressed' or 'closed' (CIVICUS 2024). Moreover, in all four countries, the SDG Gender Index shows that indicators for women's access to justice, freedom to discuss politics, freedom from discrimination, and the state of the criminal justice system have, since 2015, all stalled or are trending in the wrong direction. The

V-DEM graph (figure 3) shows that each country had a relatively open period and periods of repression. Analysis of the indicators reveals a demonstrable increase in advancements related to women's rights and civil society within each nation from the early 1990s to 1995.

Figure 3. Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) scores for "CSO repression" by country, 1970 to 2024



Source: V-DEM dataset, accessed at https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/ on 04/05/2025.

Governments across countries have attempted to prevent WROs from working by imposing restrictions for organising protests. For example, in Zimbabwe, community-level meetings require a higher level of clearance, usually granted to organisations whose programming is pro-government. In some cases, such as Nicaragua and Türkiye, women human rights defenders and activists have been targeted with arbitrary arrests and detentions. Additional tactics include using legislation, as well as increased regulation and audit requirements to undermine WROs systematically. Governments have attacked women's rights through new regressive legislation, including laws that criminalise dissent and 'foreign agent' laws that can be used to cancel NGOs' registration, limit their access to funding and criminalise activists and organisations. In Türkiye and Nicaragua, states have used public disinformation campaigns discrediting feminists and framing them as enemies of the state. In many cases, WROs have shifted their focus away from human rights and advocacy work to service delivery or stopped working on more contentious issues such as SRHR or LGBTQI+ rights. This can be a result of direct government pressure, pressure from donors seeking to avoid tensions with governments, or a survival strategy of WROs themselves.

7. Funding for WROs is less available, less flexible and comes with more strings attached.

The case studies show international funding for WROs has been central to the work of WROs, although these funds have ebbed and flowed. Funding was most available and flexible in the 1990s, following major international conferences like Beijing and Cairo that boosted international interest and attention to women's rights (Chen,1995). These convenings catalysed the movement through increased access to international funding and enabling movements to network and mobilise across and within regions. As highlighted in the case studies, the increase in commitments, funding, visibility, and mobilisation brought many wins, especially in policy and legal frameworks. However, flexible funding became rarer, and donors began to finance individual projects on specific themes of interest. In Zimbabwe, increased competition for the limited funding, from other sectors such as governance and democratisation, also led to competition among WROs. Many informants also pointed to the excessive bureaucracy involved in securing international funding, and impact measurement requirements unsuited to the kind of long-term change they are working towards, even less so in times of repression and shrinking civic space.

Nicaraguan WROs in exile, which play a crucial role in continuing to advocate internationally and document human rights abuses, struggle to raise funds for their work as many are based in high income countries that are ineligible for funding. In Türkiye, international funding is only available to a small number of larger organisations and networks, and the difficulties that smaller organisations face are compounded by the restrictive environment for civil society:

> *"You have to be careful if you receive money from international sources. You need a lot of HR [human resources] capacity and a lot of documentation, which is challenging for smaller organisations. If you don't pay fees or report every single detail [to the government] you are punished. There is a culture of fear [among WROs]." (Interview TY001)*

8. Without funding, movements start to fade into silence.

Defunding of or reduced funding for WROs often goes hand in hand with repression, because shrinking civic space increases challenges and risks for funders. At the same time, restrictive laws and regulations limit WROs' access to external funding. When activists face restrictions on their work, this reduces their impact and inevitably affects their access to funding. The case studies highlight not only direct funding restrictions but also more indirect forms of defunding, and issues arising not only when funding is consistently reduced but also resulting

from significant instability and inconsistencies in available funds year on year. For instance, in Zimbabwe, sanctions and the increased focus on governance resulted in funding reductions for WROs.

Fluctuations in funding landscapes contribute to the "NGO-isation" of social movements, wherein organisational structures increasingly adopt NGO-like forms to secure resources, and to the "projectisation" of women's rights organisations (WROs), which transforms their work into discrete, short-term projects. Consequently, WROs experience a diminished capacity for implementing context-specific, long-term initiatives, as they become primarily responsive to fluctuating donor agendas.

Activists in Bangladesh and Zimbabwe described decreased funding and short-term funding approaches have affected the movement:

> *"In Bangladesh, we refer to the NGO-isation of the movement space. [N] not just the feminist movement, but the broader rights movement, workers' movements. [T]his focus on short-term projects means that organisations get stuck in this cycle of doing very similar capacity building and training and advocacy events work, and not so much strengthening of communities or continuous advocacy. [A] lot of grassroots organisations, instead of being able to focus on service provision or engaging with the community, they get wrapped into short-term projects and creating new proposals and finding new funding sources." (Interview BD001)*

> *"The movement has stagnated since the rise of NGO-isation, with many NGOs and their leaders' becoming gatekeepers. As a result, the movement is fragmented, lacks cohesion, and struggles to reach a consensus on key issues." (Zimbabwean activist, Interview ZN001)*

9. Weakened movements lead to adverse outcomes for gender equality.

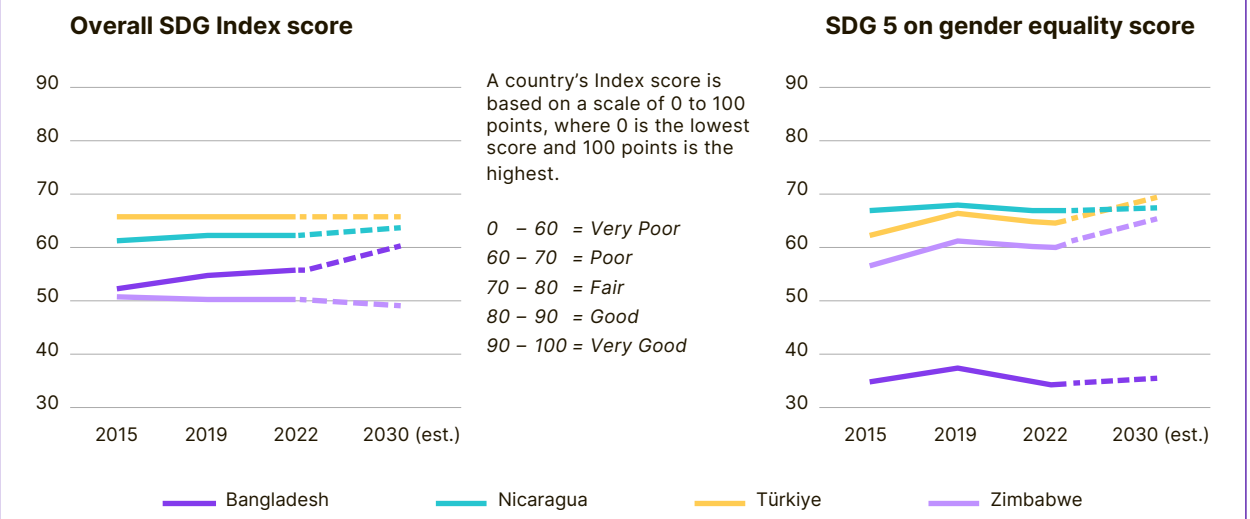
All countries studied show worrying trends in measures of gender equality. Key indicators of critical importance to women have stagnated or are moving in the wrong direction. The SDG Gender Index (Equal Measures 2030, 2024), for example, shows all case study countries score either poor or very poor on SDG 5: Gender Equality. The Index also indicates that indicators such as freedom from discrimination and freedom of association, and those specific to women's lives, such as women's ability to discuss politics freely and women's access to justice, have also consistently declined or stagnated across all countries. Here, as in other countries around the world, WROs not only push for change on issues related to

gender equality but also are primarily the only ones demanding accountability on issues related to women's rights. They invest much time tracking, monitoring, and holding leaders accountable for gender equality. Without WROs, this task is largely left undone.

A Zimbabwean activist reflected on the impact of a weakened movement:

> *"That voice is gone, but also the independence. And as funding has decreased more and more…we see the movement stagnate. It becomes the purview of very few people, it is very fractured, and it is very hard to see where it fits into the broader ecosystem of the issues being tackled. I would say, quite honestly, that we are seeing a very strong regression back into a deeply patriarchal society. I think Zimbabwe had made great leaps and bounds, even socially, in the way we spoke about issues, but we are now seeing that progress start to disappear." (Interview ZN001)*

Figure 4. SDG Gender Index Trends by Country, 2015-2030



Source: Equal Measures 2030. 2024.

In all case study countries, governments have rolled back or attempted to roll back gender-equality progress — for example, systematically eroding existing legislation that WROs have worked towards for decades. Legislation on gender-based violence (GBV) has been attacked in several countries, where governments have attempted to tilt the contents of the law towards 'family protection', redefine concepts such as femicide, or weaken provisions on their responsibility for preventing and responding to cases of violence. Re-entrenching hierarchies of power and control is key to the authoritarian project and legitimising,

or even encouraging, violence against women is a familiar strategy leaders use to accomplish this (Chenoweth and Marks, 2022).

In 2021, the Turkish government successfully withdrew from the Istanbul Convention, a European convention on gender-based violence. In 2015, the Nicaraguan government shut down the women's police stations established to investigate cases of GBV. In Bangladesh, after the government adopted the landmark Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act in 2010 implementation has been weak (Sultan and Mahpara, 2023). The result of a lack of action on GBV in Nicaragua has been that sexual abuse of minors has become normalised and occurs with impunity, and adolescent fertility rates are the highest in the region (Equal Measures 2030, 2024). In both Nicaragua and Türkiye, although governments do not report or underreport data on femicides, civil society sources claim femicides have increased year on year (We will Stop Femicides, 2025; Confidencial, 2024a).

Abortion is another right that WROs have staunchly defended and that conservative leaders seek to attack. In Zimbabwe and Türkiye, for example, the governments have tried many times to ban abortions. Unlike the other case studies, in Türkiye international funding increased slightly during the period that civic space closed. This funding was critical in allowing WROs to hold the line on some key issues, such as an attempted abortion ban, the removal of women's alimony rights and a law that would pardon rapists if they married their victims.

The case studies show progress on some indicators of gender equality is possible even in the absence of WROs or in periods of closing civic space, particularly on development indicators such as health and education, or issues that can be improved through a top-down approach, such as women in ministerial positions and other appointed roles. But eradicating GBV or protecting women's right to bodily autonomy requires the type of bottom-up change and large-scale social norm transformation that WROs are uniquely positioned to do.

10. Feminist movements are resilient, but this comes at a cost.

Feminist activists have shown remarkable courage, creativity, and resilience to continue operating, despite sustained overt efforts to weaken or destroy them or more directly undervalue their contributions. In many cases, they have continued to document human rights violations, stage public protests, ensure activists' safety, and advocate internationally despite severely restricted civic space, often with little or no funding. However, this resilience comes at a cost, with activists paying a high price experiencing threats to their safety and risking

severe trauma or burnout (Amnesty International, 2018; OHCHR, 2024). While WROs might be able to survive during challenging periods, they are forced to constantly be reactive to emerging crises and attempts to attack their rights, instead of being able to implement their agendas and influence genuine progress proactively. Efforts to secure funding can occupy a disproportionate amount of time and leave little time for strategising or other activities.

Resilience in the case studies looks different across the country contexts. Zimbabwean WROs have primarily focused on service delivery and development projects, and Bangladeshi WROs have also focused heavily on project-based work and more one-off advocacy events. Türkiye's WROs have been able to adopt a stance of resistance, but Turkish feminists have warned this resilience might run out:

'It's not just about shrinking spaces or diminishing funds anymore; we are now also facing criminal law and procedures in a country where the rule of law has been severely eroded. The foreign agent law wasn't passed this time, but they will try again and probably succeed, and then they can shut us down at any moment.' (Interview TY001).

Nicaraguan feminists are attempting to rebuild the movement in exile, for which funding is crucial:

> ***"Political change is going to take time. When it comes time to rebuild the movement, we need a movement with the same critical consciousness and capacity as before, so we need to maintain a pluralistic movement of rural women, domestic workers, lesbian women, afro-descendent women etc. To maintain this richness we need to meet, maintain connections with regional networks in Central America and go through a healing process together." (Interview NC002).***

Recommendations

Government Donors

- When direct funding of local groups is not possible, consult and cooperate with local WROs to identify the most appropriate intermediary funder, recognising that different types of intermediaries provide different types of political and programming benefits.
- Support legal and compliance teams in learning from grantee partners and their contexts and engaging with other legal and compliance officers to learn from and adapt other flexible, responsible contracting practices.
- Continue to support intermediary funds, especially women's and feminist funds, that are embedded in local contexts. These funds provide long-term unrestricted support and legal and other types of protective support to local WROs and activists.
- When advised by local activists, speak out against and resist measures that restrict civic space and limit the ability of activists and organisations to safely organise, receive and distribute funds, and demand accountability.
- Embed support for the collection and use of gender data into ODA not only to monitor projects but also to contribute towards building sustainable and comprehensive gender data ecosystems.

Philanthropy

- Utilise philanthropy's unique position to support diaspora WROs that may not otherwise be able to access ODA or other types of funding.
- Engage and coordinate with other institutions and networks, such as the Human Rights Funders Network Better Preparedness initiative, to move money and support organisations operating in restrictive contexts, building complementary funding strategies for various risk tolerance levels among institutions.
- Ensure that funding portfolios support the full range of organisations critical to healthy movements, including older, more established organisations and emerging networks, including groups led directly by young people. Whenever possible, build this complementarity with other donors, including government donors.
- Support legal and compliance teams in learning from grantee partners and their contexts and engaging with other legal and compliance officers to learn from and adapt other flexible, responsible contracting practices.

- When advised by local activists, speak out against and resist measures that restrict civic space and limit the ability of activists and organisations to safely organise, receive and distribute funds, and demand accountability.
- Report funding data to the OECD Creditor Report System, using the DAC gender equality policy marker, especially direct funding to WROs.

Multilateral institutions

- Continue negotiating with institutional donors to avoid pushing onerous compliance measures onto WROs.
- Engage with other intermediary funders and local activists to develop localised funding strategies that determine which intermediary funders are best placed to move funds in each context.
- Support partners and institutional donors to innovate new ways of measuring the impact of WROs, including ways to measure "holding the line" and preventing rollback of rights.
- Report funding data to the OECD Creditor Report System, using the DAC gender equality policy marker, especially direct funding to WROs.

Civil Society

- Continue to engage in cross-movement and cross-border solidarity, including by, among other things, supporting diaspora movements; building support among the public in the Majority World for ODA as an expression of global solidarity; and developing collaborative resource mobilisation strategies.
- Continue to engage in resource justice advocacy using an ecosystem approach in addition to institutionally specific resource mobilisation efforts.

Conclusions and Way Forward

The case studies have each highlighted the vital role of feminist movements and women's rights organisations, as well as the increasingly urgent need for coordinated resistance in a climate of closing civic space. Without sustained support, progress made by WROs over decades is at risk of being reversed, leaving millions of women and girls more vulnerable to discrimination and violence and without access to fundamental reproductive rights and economic opportunities. While risk management is a reality for both bilateral donors, philanthropists, and movements themselves, there is a serious 'risk' that donors' overall goals of gender equality will not be achieved without funding WROs.

The current global context of aid cuts and closing civic space calls for courageous action and creative strategies to enable donors to fund potentially transformative solutions of WROs. Donors must view funding for WROs not only as essential for improving the lives of women and girls around the world but also for defending and strengthening democracy. Those donors who can support WROs must take bolder action in the years ahead to ensure that feminist movements can not only withstand the headwinds they are facing but bring their vision of a feminist future to life.

This study has provided some initial evidence on the consequences of not supporting WROs and some recommendations for actors working in challenging contexts, intending to help those advocating as civil society or within donor organisations for increased funding for WROs. However, further evidence-building and articulation of this cost, in addition to the growing research on the impact of WROs, is needed to enable advocates to continue making the case for this investment. Future research could consider conducting in-depth, country-specific studies focused on the four case study countries, as well as additional countries that were longlisted during the research process. Such studies should prioritise the use of national-level funding data from women's rights organisations, rather than relying solely on global datasets. Additionally, extensive interviews with key stakeholders at all levels would rigorously examine potential causal relationships between funding cuts, the suppression of civic space and gender equality outcomes.

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72 N.d.

Annex 1: Further Detail on Research Methodology

Research Objectives

- The objectives of this research study were to investigate the following, through data analysis and literature for four case study countries:
  - Do negative outcomes occur for gender equality when funding for feminist movements decreases and/or space for their activities is narrowed or closed?
  - What sort of negative outcomes can be observed in the data at the level of an individual country?
  - Is there similarity in the types of negative outcomes that occur across contexts? Can any broad trends or themes be observed?

Research Approach and Key Activities

1. Develop a common framework to define how we identify contexts and periods where feminist movements have been de-funded, repressed, stopped or diverted from doing their work
   - **How**: AFM led discussions and focus groups across its network.
2. Determine contexts/countries that have experienced periods where feminist movements have been de-funded, repressed, stopped or diverted from doing their work
   - **How:** AFM held discussions/focus groups using the common framework, identifying a long list of countries, periods, and top-line details on context. EM2030 proposed contexts where "stagnation" or "decline" in key metrics can be observed over recent years.
3. Use a list of countries and analyse a range of "outcome" indicators.
   - **How:** EM2030 reviewed a range of global, regional and country-level data sets (including the SDG Gender Index, other relevant Indices, UN databases, national data sources, opinion polling, values surveys, etc.) to see if data shows shifts/increases in negative outcomes after the "crackdown/de-funding" periods. This was then corroborated with desk research and a review of available literature.
4. Upon agreement across geographies of a short list of countries for study, the researchers sought key informants in each context to shape an understanding of the de-funding/diversion of action by the feminist movement and its resulting impacts. Key informants received honoraria in recognition of their time and expertise and were invited to review and validate the consolidated findings.
5. Finalise external report with findings
6. Dissemination of report with AFM network at learning and sharing virtual event and at Financing Feminist Futures Conference

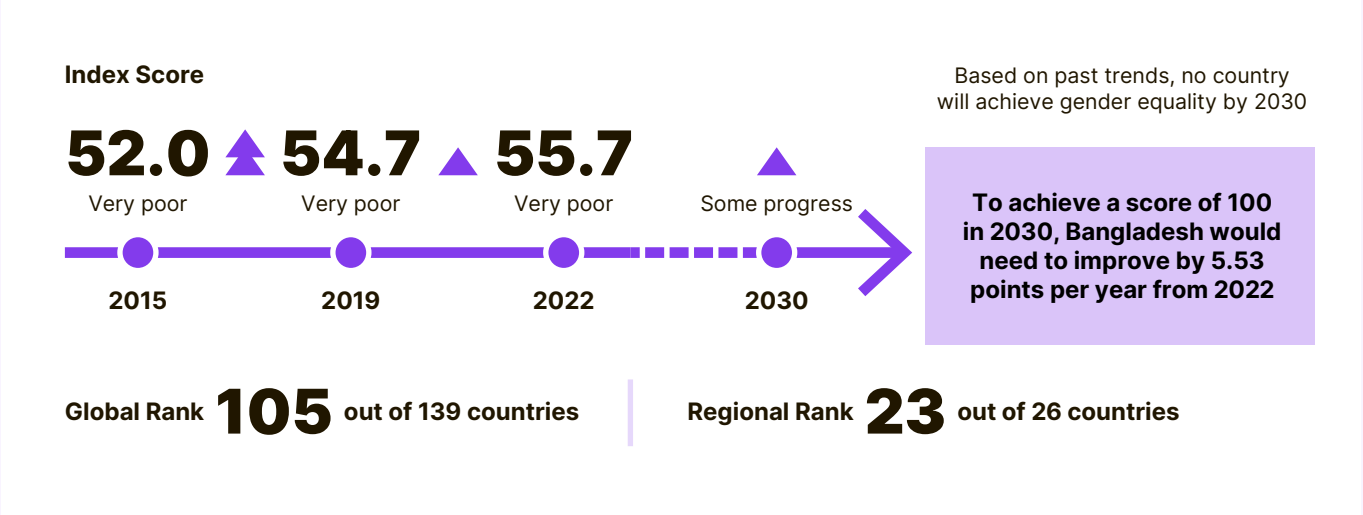
Case Study Selection

To ensure the selection of countries and contexts that facilitated the completion of the study, a multistage sampling approach was adopted to select country case studies. The first stage involved an initial compilation of a long list of countries based on their performance on gender equality indices and indicators of civic space. At this stage, 19 countries were longlisted. This list was then presented to key stakeholders within the feminist movement in the respective countries for further insights and validation with the guidance of the Alliance for Feminist Movements. The final stage in selecting case studies, which was purposively done based on data availability, stakeholder recommendations and access to potential interview participants. Diversity in geographical and historical contexts and the relative strength of feminist movements were also a consideration. An outcome of this was the selection of Bangladesh, Nicaragua, Türkiye and Zimbabwe for in-depth case study analysis.

Annex 2: Country Case Studies

Bangladesh

Figure 5: SDG Gender Index scores for Bangladesh, 2015 to 2022



Source: 2024 SDG Gender Index, Bangladesh Country Profile

WROs in Bangladesh before 2000

In Bangladesh, WROs have historically played a significant role in the nation's democratisation processes, cultivating robust alliances with broader social movements. The proliferation of these organisations during the late 20th century, particularly the 1980s and 1990s, was partly attributable to augmented external funding and heightened international attention. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Bangladeshi civil society organisations (CSOs), including WROs, demonstrated considerable efficacy in advancing women's empowerment, instigating legal and governance reforms, enhancing transparency and accountability mechanisms, and expanding financial inclusion through the development of microfinance institutions (Surie, Saluja, & Nixon, 2023).

Changes in political context since the early 2000s

In July and August 2024, massive protests erupted in response to the detention of student movement leaders (Reza,2024). But before this, heavy government repression from the early 2010s (*Ibid.*) led to CIVICUS downgrading Bangladesh's civic space rating to "closed" in December 2023 (Bin Seraj et al.,2024). CSOs working on politically sensitive issues such as rising inequalities, access to justice or the state of the economy faced the most significant pressure, and many have not survived (Bin Seraj et al.,2024). Citing rising anxiety and fear, alongside reduced funding options, some CSOs shifted from advocacy to service delivery (Bin Seraj et al.,2024). In a survey, 85 per cent of respondents said civic spaces were shrinking, while 77 per cent considered it increasingly difficult for CSOs to protest government decisions (Surie, Saluja, and Nixon 2023).

Shifts in funding for NGOs and WROs

Since 1990, to receive foreign funding, CSOs in Bangladesh must register under the NGO Affairs Bureau, which approves each foreign-funded NGO project and annual budgets. Foreign – especially bilateral – funding was particularly important to WROs in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Nazneen, Sultan, and Mukhopadhyay, 2011). Many received small establishment grants, enabling the development and testing of ideas on a small scale. These initial investments helped WROs secure bilateral funding, which tended to be more long-term. In the early 2000s, small grants and civil

society grants from bilateral donors were often 'the mainstay of support for women's organisations and small NGOs' (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2011).

However, from the mid-2000s, several donors cut funding to civil society, shifted to short-term project-based approaches, and reduced the presence of civil society liaison staff in Bangladesh. Consequently, many WROs lost bilateral funding support (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2011). The mid-2000s saw a shift in strategy and philosophy around direct funding of CSOs and WROs among bilateral donors. By 2011, a feeling of solidarity between WROs and donor staff in the 1990s and early 2000s was replaced with a more business-like approach emphasising value for money, accompanied by a move towards "fewer and bigger initiatives" (Nazneen, Sultan, and Mukhopadhyay 2011).

OECD data on funding for WROs in Bangladesh corroborates these funding pressures on WROs. ODA to WROs in Bangladesh averaged less than 0.25 percent of Official Development Aid (ODA) from 2005–22, with observable declines from key donors such as Canada and Norway. This continued into 2023 (Surie, Saluja, and Nixon 2023)—59 percent of Bangladeshi CSOs surveyed noted a decline in donor funding. Interviewees believed small CSOs outside Dhaka likely felt the reductions most acutely.

A representative of Bangladeshi WROs confirmed priorities in donor countries and the perception of 'risk' has continued to shape aid flows to Bangladesh:

> *"[F]oreign policies have had a very strong impact on the kind of foreign aid that is coming in or not coming in. Around 2019/20 when the Syrian refugee crisis hit European countries, that had a big effect on aid being [diverted] from the Bangladesh portfolio back into their own countries (especially Germany and the UK)." (Interview BD0001)*

> *"[We] have worked with the Embassy of the Netherlands and in the last few years [they are] shifting away from education [and] the 'soft side' of development into more trade and economic related areas. We're seeing a shift away from the kind of work [WROs] focus on." (Interview BD0001)*

Impact on WROs

The shift from in-country funding of local CSOs and WROs (especially among bilateral donors) has affected organisations' practices. A "growing homogeneity" in agendas and strategies has seen important tactics (such as street protest) sidelined – or, if they do still happen, they are not reported through formal grant reporting mechanisms (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2011). WROs have increasingly had to chase funding through short-term projects and neglect longer-term, more strategic goals (such as movement building) (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2011).

Using competitive grant mechanisms tends to disincentivise cross-organisational collaboration and movement building, crucial to civic spaces' resilience (Surie, Saluja, and Nixon 2023). Civic space in Bangladesh has suffered dramatically, notably at the same time as this move from long-term, direct funding towards more significant, more competitive, project-based funding.

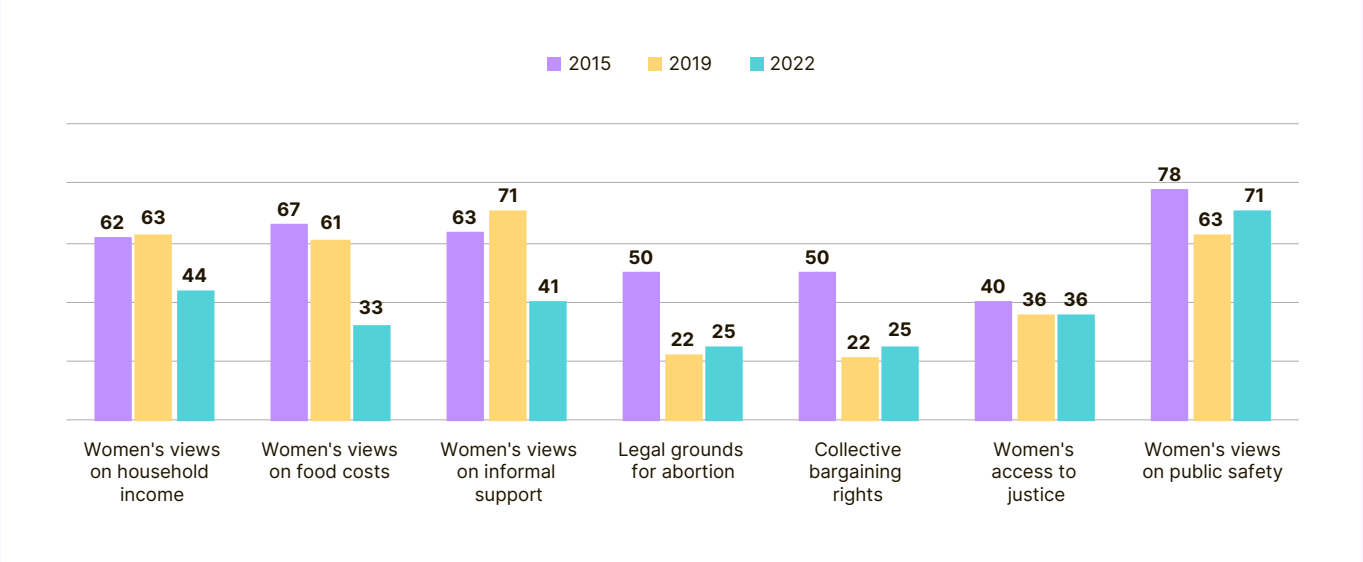
> *"In Bangladesh, we refer to the NGO-isation of the movement space. [N] not just the feminist movement, but the broader rights movement, workers' movements. [T]his focus on short-term projects means that organisations get stuck in this cycle of doing very similar capacity building and training and advocacy events work, and not so much strengthening of communities or continuous advocacy. [A] lot of grassroots organisations, instead of being able to focus on service provision or engaging with the community, they get wrapped into short-term projects and creating new proposals and finding new funding sources." (Interview BD001)*

Several global research studies have shown links between the strength of feminist mobilisation and WROs and law reform related to gender equality (The Alliance for Feminist Movements and Equal Measures 2030 2024) (Forester et al. 2022) (Htun and Weldon 2012). While we can't definitively tie this to the shifts in funding for WROs in Bangladesh, qualitative evidence indicates that momentum on key legal reforms in Bangladesh has stagnated since around 2010. Research shows a period of rapid change from 1970–2010 in laws affecting women at work, but no further reforms were observed in 2010–20 (Women, Business and the Law 2021).

Similarly, progress on GBV legal reform has slowed. After the government adopted the landmark Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act in 2010 – "an example of outstanding collaboration between the government and the women's movement" – implementation has been weak (Sultan and Mahpara 2023). One of the most significant strategies for WROs to enact this law would be coalition building and the formation of collectives to amplify their voice, vision, and struggle (Nazneen, Hickey, and Sifaki 2019).

In the 2024 SDG Gender Index, Bangladesh ranked almost last for SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Work), and SDG 10 (Inequalities) in 2015. By 2022, this had not changed (Equal Measures 2030 2024). Between 2015 and 2022, women's satisfaction with their household income, money to buy food or shelter, and whether they had family or friends they could count on dropped enormously (see Figure 6). The same period saw a significant rollback in collective bargaining and freedom of association laws, reflecting a crumbling legal framework for workers' rights. Several indicators within SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Institutions) also worsened substantially for women and girls: access to justice, homicide rates, and whether women feel safe at night in their neighbourhood (Equal Measures 2030, 2024).

Figure 6. Selected SDG Gender Index indicator scores for Bangladesh, 2015 to 2022



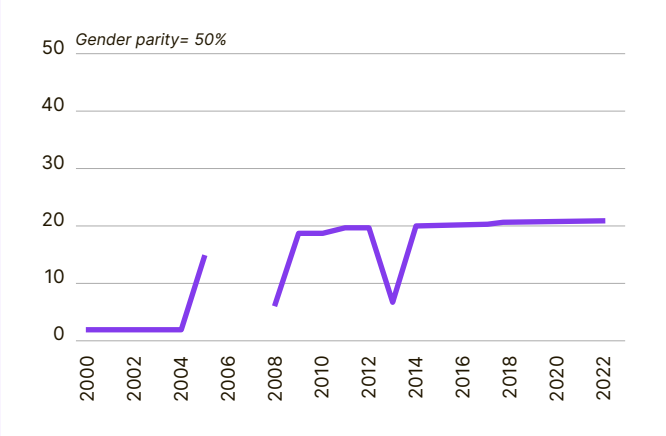
Notes: These five indicators from the SDG Gender Index are all standardised to the same scale where 100 is the best score and 0 is the worst score. The full descriptions and data sources for the indicators by reference number can be found at: www.equalmeasures2030.org/2024-SDG-gender-index/

Source: Equal Measures 2030, 2024.

Issues within the SDG Gender Index were examined to see if there were shifts in outcomes after the early 2010s, the period that aligns with the funding shifts for WROs in Bangladesh. The lack of sufficient historical trend data for many gender issues makes this analysis challenging, but two problems from the Index for which there is historical data show some evidence of stagnation in the period after the early 2010s compared to the decade before: Unmet need for family planning and women's representation in parliament. Between 1994 and 2004, the percentage of women with 'unmet need' for family planning dropped by 31%, a positive trend meaning that more women had access to contraception. Between 2004 and 2014, progress continued in the right direction but slowed, improving by 20% over this period.

Women's representation in parliament showed a similar 'improving then stagnating' trend over roughly the same period (though there are gaps in the data in some years). From around the year 2000 to around 2008, the percentage of women in parliament jumped from less than 5% to around 20%. However, from 2008 onwards, women's representation stagnated at 20% (except for 2013, where representation worsened dramatically for a short period) (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. The share of women in Parliament, 2000 to 2022



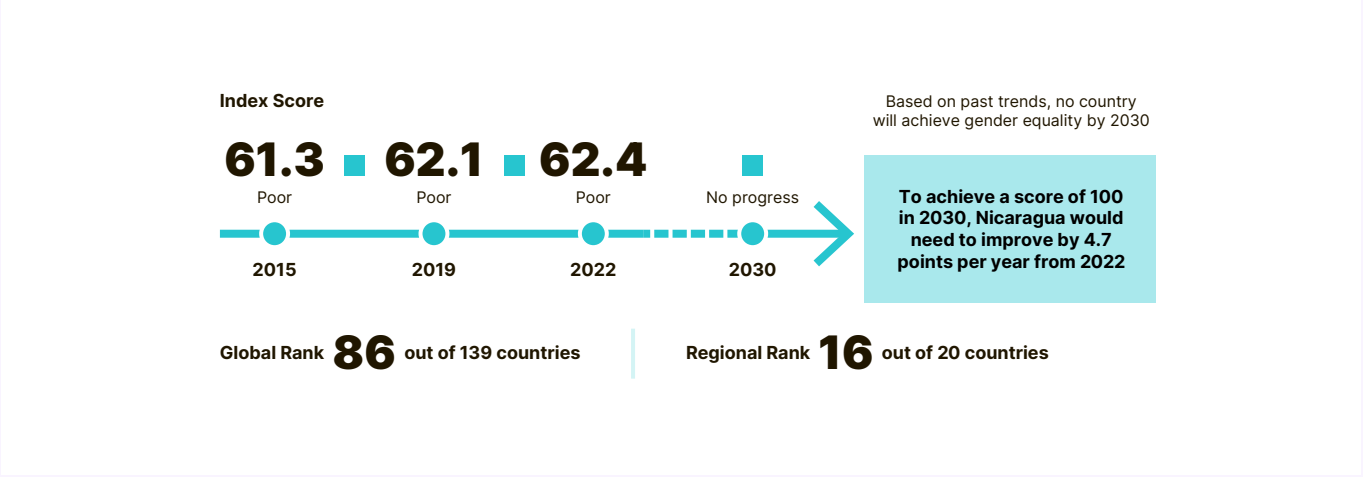
Source: IPU cited in Equal Measures 2030, 2024.

Conclusion

Bangladesh stands at a crossroads following the 2024 student protests which resulted in the ousting of the long-standing government. Activists hope this will bring a new era of progress, but government promises to collaborate with civil society in this transition have not yet materialised (interview BD001). In the context of a growing anti-rights movement in the country and rising insecurity for minority groups, a strengthened and well-funded women's movement – and one with the flexibility to pivot their tactics to respond to real needs, including street protest, providing physical protection for activists, and mental health support - will be crucial in ensuring the years to come bring tangible benefits for women and girls.

Nicaragua

Figure 8: SDG Gender Index scores for Nicaragua, 2015 to 2022



Source: 2024 SDG Gender Index, Nicaragua Country Profile

WROs in Nicaragua before 2000

After Nicaragua's revolution in the 1970s and 80s, WROs saw crucial gains including legal rights in family and marriage and the incorporation of women into education and work (Marques 2022). In the 1990s, new WROs emerged and began to coordinate, and international funding reached its highest level (Interview NC001). WROs were key in, for example, establishing specialised women's police stations – an initiative funded by a partnership of Nordic governments – and the country's first law sanctioning family violence (Interview NC001).

Changes in political context since 2006

Daniel Ortega of the Sandinista party was re-elected president in 2006, following a campaign in which he took an anti-feminist and anti-abortion rights stance. He immediately targeted WROs, framing them as "imperialist enemies" (Marques 2022). The government eliminated dialogue with state institutions, and sought to cut off WROs' sources of funding, first through regulation, then by criminalising advocates and dismantling organisations:

> *"Dictatorships have understood very well the relationship between well-funded movements and their capacity for influence, even better than the donors themselves." (Interview NC002)*

Under pressure to stop work on issues the government opposed, some WROs chose to work with the government, but many defended their autonomy. In 2008, the government prosecuted some high-profile WROs, accusing them of "money laundering and subversion of the 'constitutional order'" (Neumann 2018). By 2012, most bilateral donors supporting WROs had left. Many WROs closed but some survived with crucial support from a few INGOs.

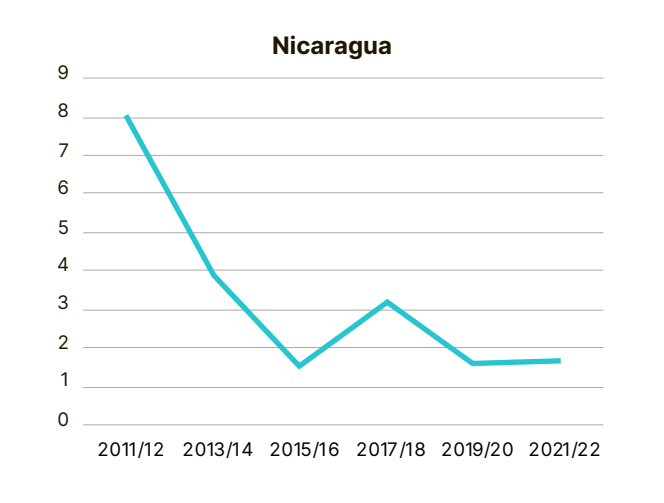
> *"Despite all their campaigns against us, they didn't manage to disarm the movement... we continued to march on 8 March[6] and 25 November.[7] We were the first ones to raise our voices about the authoritarian and anti-democratic direction of the regime". (Interview NC001)*

In 2018, after substantial anti-government protests, a police crackdown killed more than 350 people (Neumann 2022) and imprisoned hundreds. From 2020–24 new laws were passed controlling NGO funds, criminalising protest and dissent, banning NGOs from receiving foreign funding, and enforcing government partnerships. 72% of Nicaraguan NGOs have closed since 2006 (Confidencial 2024b).

Impact on WROs

The regime presented the 2018 peaceful protests – organised mostly by young people, women and peasant farmers – as an attempted coup d'état, and has since shut down more than 300 WROs and LGBTQI+ organisations, seizing their assets (Brunori 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, WROs provided crucial support to communities, while the government denied its existence. However, by 2021, all had closed. Some reestablished from abroad, documenting the regime's human rights violations and building a movement in exile.

Figure 9. ODA to WROs in Nicaragua (in millions) using 2-year averages, 2011 to 2022



Source: Calculations are authors, based on OECD 2024

ODA to WROs dropped from $8 million from 2011–12 to an average of $2.4 million from 2013–22 (see Figure 9) (OECD 2024a).[8] Funding to and through CSOs with gender equality as a principal objective increased slightly during this period, although this funding was almost entirely directed to NGOs based in donor countries (OECD 2024a). INGOs, such as Oxfam, continued to fund WROs even after bilateral donors stopped until forced to leave in 2020. INGOs were crucial in this period, although the government used them to investigate smaller partner WROs, some of which had to distance themselves and stop receiving support (Interview NC003).

Nicaraguan WROs in exile, mainly in Costa Rica, the USA, or Europe, struggle to raise funds because they are based in middle- or high-income countries. Since 2020, some INGOs that had to leave the country, and some women's funds, have been able to resume funding to support a handful of organisations (Interview NC001).

6. International Women's Day.
7. The International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.
8. Data provided by OECD-DAC Network on Gender Equality (Gendernet). ODA marked with sector code 15170 'Women's Rights Organisations and Movements, and Government Institutions', with government institutions filtered out.

Impact on gender equality outcomes

Ortega and his wife and vice-president Rosario Murillo have often expressed their commitment to gender equality publicly and have regularly boasted that since 2006 Nicaragua has ranked in the top 10 globally in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index[9] (Marques 2022). Yet, while the country has made progress on some gender equality indicators, including girls' education and early marriage (Equal Measures 2030 2024), closer analysis is more concerning. WROs' monitoring has been crucial to understanding the impact of policies, as government control raises questions about the reliability of official data.

The 2012 '50/50 law' mandated 50 per cent electoral quotas and steps to increase women's representation in state institutions. In 2022, women held over half of parliamentary and cabinet seats (Equal Measures 2030 2024). However, these advances occurred alongside the crackdown on informal political participation and civil society. Indicators of women's rights, ability to discuss politics, freedom of expression and association and CSO participation have all declined drastically since 2006, particularly since the 2018 protests (Varieties of Democracy 2025).

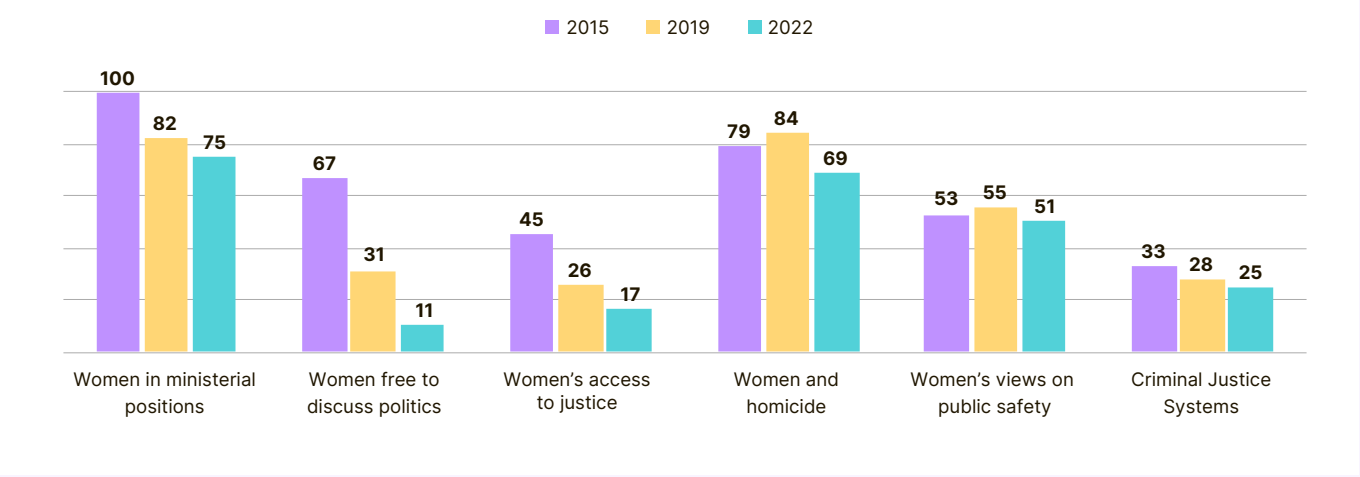
In 2012, Nicaragua passed Law 779, a comprehensive law on GBV and femicide (Neumann 2022). Ten months later, after conservative and religious backlash, the government weakened its provisions and changed its purpose to protect the family. A 2014 reform then narrowed the definition of GBV and included mandatory mediation. In 2015, the government closed the women's police stations that investigated cases of GBV, citing a lack of funding (Neumann 2018). It claims to have reopened more than 300 since 2020, but WROs note serious deficiencies in resources and training for officers (La Corriente and Sexual Rights Initiative 2024).

Nicaragua has high rates of GBV, and sexual abuse of minors goes unpunished (La Corriente and Sexual Rights Initiative 2024). Female homicides increased from 2015–21 (Equal Measures 2030 2024). The government did not publish figures on femicides and other violence against women in 2022 or 2023. Still, the CSO Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir claims femicides have continued to increase, with the highest ever rate in 2024 (Confidencial 2024a). Survivors of violence are unprotected and without key services, many of which were run by now-closed WROs. Only two of at least 16 shelters for female victims of GBV remain (Brunori 2023).

With high rates of sexual violence, an abortion bans since 2006, and a complete lack of sexuality education, Nicaragua has the highest adolescent birth rate in Latin America and the Caribbean (Equal Measures 2030 2024). The birthrate among girls aged 10–14 was almost twice as high as the regional average in 2022 (CEPAL 2025). According to the Legal Medical Institute, 80 per cent of women and girls treated for sexual violence in 2017–23 were younger than 17 (La Corriente and Sexual Rights Initiative 2024). With the fall in women's access to justice to the second lowest globally and the substantial decline in the score on the functioning of its criminal justice system (Equal Measures 2030 2024), this situation is even more concerning.

9. The World Economic Forum Index focuses specifically on the gap in outcomes between men and women on a small set of indicators. A similar global gender index on gaps - UNDP's Gender Inequality Index - ranked Nicaragua's score 93rd in the world. On global indices that measure the overall status of women rather than just the gap between men and women, such as EM2030s SDG Gender Index, Nicaragua was ranked 86th out of 139 countries in 2023, and 130th out of 193 countries in the Gender Development Index (UNDP) for the same year.

Figure 10. Selected SDG Gender Index indicator scores for Nicaragua, 2015 to 2022



Notes: These five indicators from the SDG Gender Index are all standardised to the same scale where 100 is the best and 0 is the worst. The indicators' full descriptions and data sources by reference number can be found at: www.equalmeasures2030.org/2024-sdg-gender-index/. Source: Equal Measures 2030, 2024.

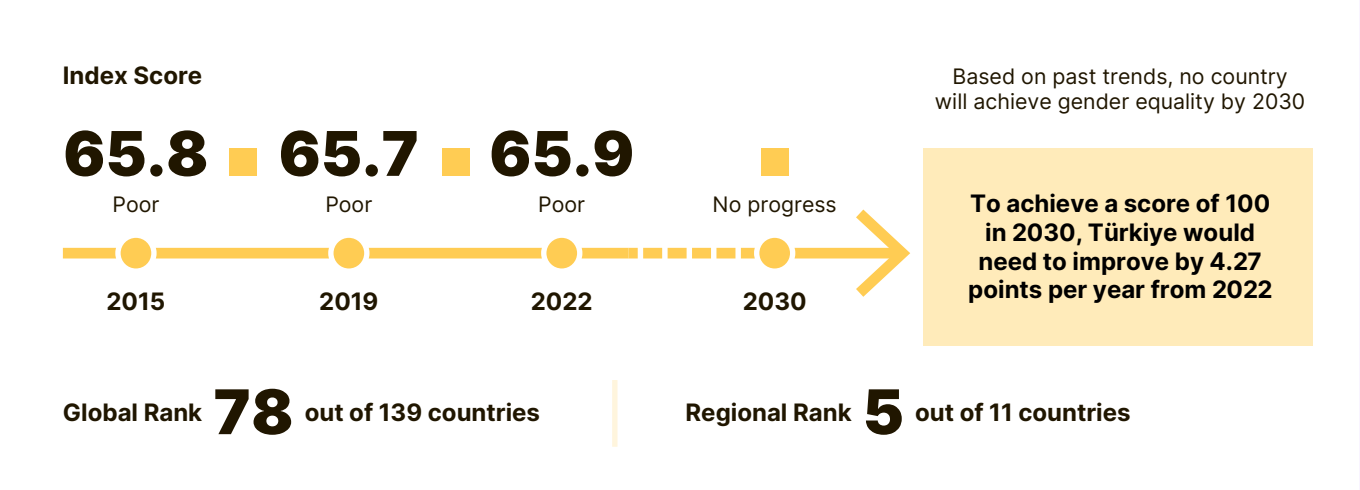
Conclusion

Nicaragua's socio-political, human rights and economic crises pose multiple challenges to donors. However, with the lack of progress on gender equality indicators, the situation urges us to find unconventional ways to support Nicaraguan WROs. Nicaraguan activists are calling for less rigid and bureaucratic crisis funding that considers the conditions posed by repression within Nicaragua and exile. In the words of one activist:

> *"Political change is going to take time. When it comes time to rebuild the movement, we need a movement with the same critical consciousness and capacity as before, so we need to maintain a pluralistic movement of rural women, domestic workers, lesbian women, afro-descendent women etc. To maintain this richness we need to meet, maintain connections with regional networks in Central America and go through a healing process together." (Interview NC002).*

Türkiye

Figure 11: SDG Gender Index scores for Türkiye, 2015 to 2022



Source: 2024 SDG Gender Index, Türkiye Country Profile

Women's Rights Organisations (WROs) in Türkiye before 2000

After the 1980 coup, Turkish WROs contributed greatly to re-democratisation and advancing key reforms (Dursun, 2022), including GBV and divorce laws and establishing essential women's institutions. WROs increased fivefold from 1983 to 2004 (Akduran Erol and Ekin Aklar, 2023). With Türkiye's recognition as an EU candidate in 1999 came a drive to align its laws with EU regulations, and government allies enabled WROs to push for reforms and legal changes (Gülel, 2021).

Changes in political context from 2000–24

When the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, it initially continued the Europeanisation agenda. However, opposition to gender equality and promotion of traditional gender roles became core to President Erdoğan's conservative, ethno-nationalist ideology (Eslen-Ziya and Kazanoğlu, 2022), which was enacted through state policies and reforms.

During a two-year state of emergency in 2016, the government shut down 400 non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including many WROs, and imprisoned several activists. Restrictive laws now mean CSOs must provide all information on international funding to a Ministry of the Interior portal, enabling the state to monitor and disrupt CSOs. Public institutions can use laws to stop NGOs from accessing resources, for example by requiring permission for public fundraising, or through extensive audit requirements or trustee appointments (Interview TY002). A proposed 2024 'foreign agent' law threatens to further restrict access to international funding for civil society groups and journalists (Buyuk, 2024).

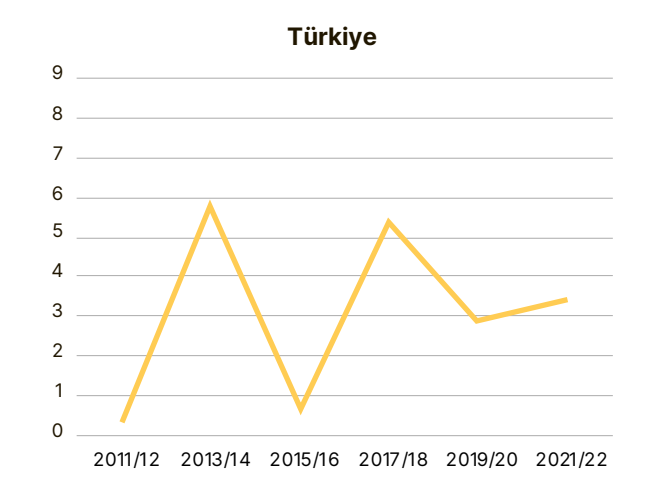
The state has created parallel civil society structures, and legitimised civil society participation in public processes through these organisations (Karakaş, 2021). For example, it has substituted government-operated NGOs (GONGOs), which co-opt the language of 'gender justice' to promote traditional, Islamist roles for women (Gülel, 2021), for independent WROs. The government has redirected domestic funding to GONGOs and works with them on legislation and preparing reports for international human rights bodies.

Impact on WROs

In the absence of meaningful dialogue with the government, WROs have transitioned to a strategy of preventing reversals on gender equality. Many have experienced threats and repeated shutdown attempts, including We Will Stop Femicides, which has faced government lawsuits alleging violations of public morality (Williams, 2023). The state has also used disinformation campaigns to discredit WROs. Many publicly identify as CSOs instead of WROs or focus on work such as service provision over rights-based work or advocacy (Ehrhart, 2023).

The WROs that chose to continue with advocacy have shifted to tactics such as public protests, court monitoring in GBV cases, blogging, and discussion forums (Yabanci and Maritato, 2023). New feminist networks such as We Will Stop Femicides have emerged and new alliances formed, including between Muslim and secular groups. Through large-scale public opposition, WRO coalitions have blocked some regressive legislation including an abortion ban, removal of women's alimony rights, and pardoning of rapists if they marry their victims. However, despite massive protests and legal action, Türkiye withdrew from the Istanbul Convention on GBV in 2021.

Figure 12: ODA to WROs in Türkiye (in millions) using 2-year averages, 2011 to 2022



Changes in the funding landscape for WROs

Historically, WROs in Türkiye have not received significant funding and have relied on volunteers. In the past 10 years, professionalisation has increased, along with international funding (Akduran Erol and Ekin Aklar, 2023). European governments, the EU delegation, and UN agencies have been the primary funders of WROs. ODA to WROs over this period has increased slightly since 2009/10, although it remains low, at an average of 3.09 million per year from 2010-2022, or 0.3 per cent of overall ODA (OECD, 2024a). Sida, the Swedish government's development agency, has been a particularly crucial funder for feminist organisations. For example, Sida consistently provided core support to Women for Women's Human Rights for 16 years, an organisation that was instrumental in blocking the government's attempted abortion bans and the 2016 rape law (Women for Women's Human Rights, 2024). However, this funding was severely cut in 2024, partly due to Sweden's reliance on Türkiye in their NATO application process and abandoning their Feminist Foreign Policy in 2022 (Interview TY001). Activists have also expressed concern that, although EU governments continue to fund gender-equality initiatives in Türkiye, much of this funding is directed toward government institutions and organisations, many of which are working to undermine women's rights (Interview TY002)

Turkish WROs have reported challenges in accessing funding, including donors' unwillingness to support human resources; 'projectisation' of funding and poor availability of long-term grants; and donors being unwilling to fund small, new, or local organisations. Additionally, many activists can no longer afford to volunteer, and organisations are struggling to survive (Akduran Erol and Ekin Aklar, 2023). Government restrictions further complicate the situation and make receiving international funding a mixed blessing. In the words of one activist:

> *"You have to be careful if you receive money from international sources. You need a lot of HR [human resources] capacity and a lot of documentation, which is challenging for smaller organisations. If you don't pay fees or report every single detail [to the government] you are punished. There is a culture of fear [among WROs]." (Interview TY001)*

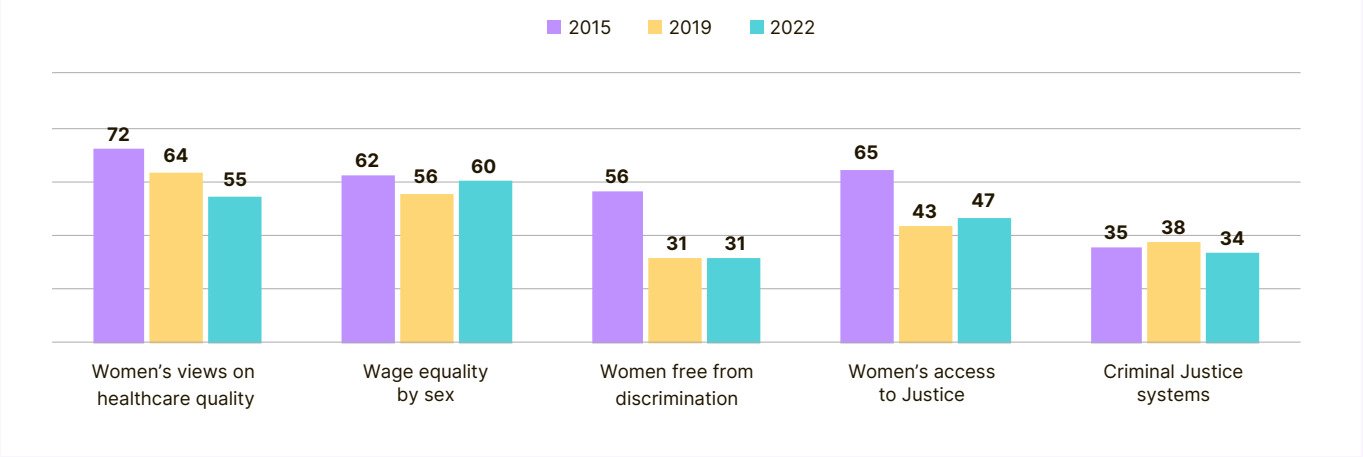
Impact on gender-equality outcomes and other indicators

While Türkiye has made progress on some key gender-equality issues since 2015, including girls' education, child marriage, and women's political participation (Equal Measures 2030, 2024), authoritarian rule and restricted civic space have affected the lives and freedoms of women and girls. According to the SDG Gender Index, Türkiye made no progress on gender equality from 2015–22 and has an overall 'poor' score. In particular, scores on women's autonomy, freedom from discrimination and ability to openly discuss political issues have declined drastically (Equal Measures 2030, 2024).

Levels of violence against women remain high and rising, according to civil society, with at least 394 femicides committed in 2024 (We Will Stop Femicides, 2025). Femicides rose by 16% in 2022, after Türkiye's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention (We Will Stop Femicides, 2023). A concerning parallel trend is a substantial decline in women's access to justice (Equal Measures 2030, 2024). While legal, access to abortion is challenging in practice – a study found just 10 out of 295 public hospitals provided abortion to the full extent of the law, and that it is often only available to those who can pay for private healthcare (O'Neill, Deniz, and Keskin, 2020). A 2021 study found that due to misinformation and abortion-deterrent policies of the state, women in Türkiye are largely unaware of their rights and unable to access medical and legal advice on abortion (Women for Women's Human Rights, 2021).

Although rates have increased slowly, Türkiye still has the lowest female labour force participation among OECD countries (OECD,2024). Other declining or stagnating indicators are wage equality and women not in education, employment, or training (Equal Measures 2030, 2024). Women's reported satisfaction with income levels, infrastructure, water quality, and healthcare have all decreased since 2015 (Equal Measures 2030, 2024).

Figure 13. Selected SDG Gender Index indicator scores for Türkiye, 2015 to 2022



Notes: These five indicators from the SDG Gender Index are all standardised to the same scale where 100 is the best and 0 is the worst. The full descriptions and data sources for the indicators by reference number can be found at: www.equalmeasures2030.org/2024-SDG-gender-index/

Source: Equal Measures 2030, 2024.

Conclusions

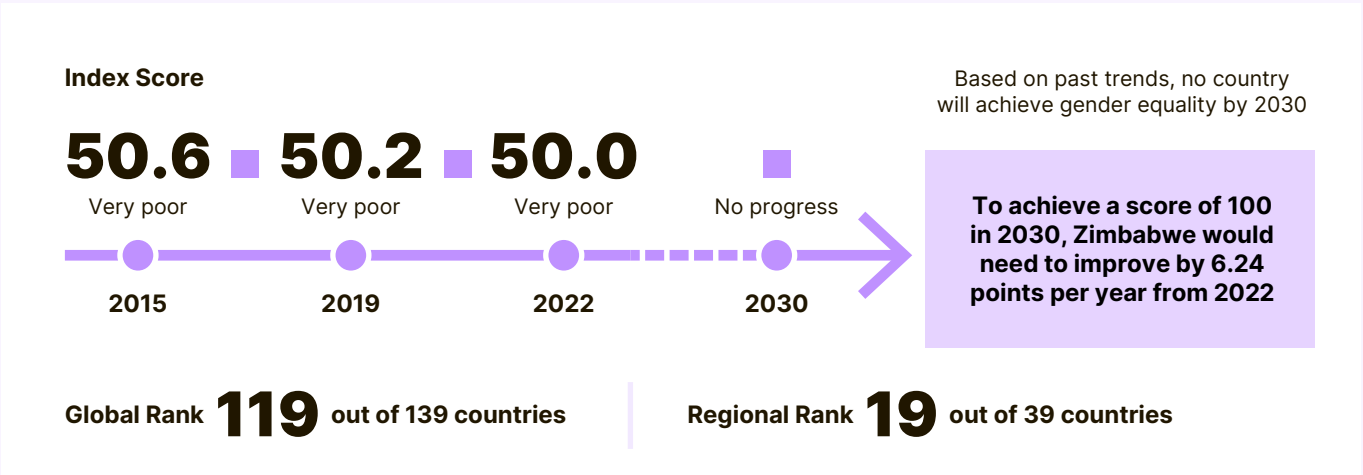
Türkiye's WROs have proved remarkably resilient, and their limited international funding has enabled them to hold the line on several key issues. However, Turkish feminists have warned this resilience might run out. In the words of one activist:

> *'It's not just about shrinking spaces or diminishing funds anymore; we are now also facing criminal law and procedures in a country where the rule of law has been severely eroded. The foreign agent law wasn't passed this time, but they will try again and probably succeed, and then they can shut us down at any moment.' (Interview TY001).*

With progress on key gender equality outcomes being reversed and worsening restrictions on civil society on the horizon, international solidarity is needed more than ever.

Zimbabwe

Figure 14: SDG Gender Index scores for Zimbabwe, 2015 to 2022



Source: 2024 SDG Gender Index, Zimbabwe Country Profile

History of WROs in Zimbabwe

WROs have been crucial in organising women, engaging in activism and providing community support (Makanje, Shaba, and Win, 2004) from mobilising urban women under colonial rule to upskilling women as the organisations developed. Legislation after independence in 1980 sought to advance women's rights, while WROs focused on welfare, supporting members with economic initiatives; ensuring women participated in development and reconstruction efforts; and educating women on their rights.

In 1983, a contentious crackdown detained more than 6,000 women (Law, 2021), sparking outrage that led to the formation of groups such as the Women's Action Group. WROs began to address broader issues of access to justice, power, and rights in the 1990s, bolstered by development funding and engagement at global platforms.

Changes in political and economic context

President Robert Mugabe's rule after independence saw increasing political uncertainty. Sanctions for human rights violations and suppression of CSOs isolated the country and stifled growth and development (Mnangagwa, 2009). Combined with the closing of civic space, this forced many CSOs and WROs to withdraw or leave (Oosterom, 2019). After his 2018 election, President Emmerson Mnangagwa initially inspired optimism, but governance, economic, and corruption issues continued to limit opportunities, and civic space remained restricted.

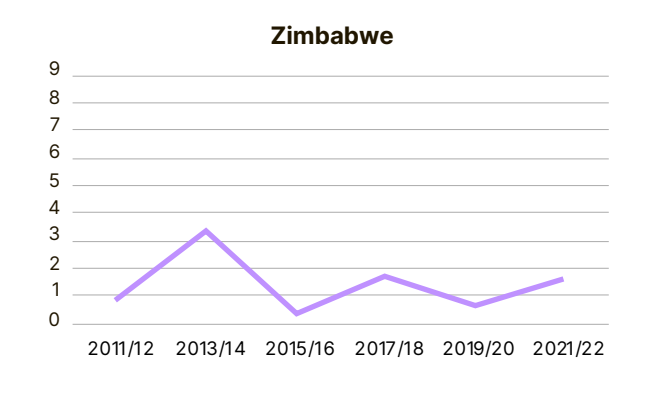
Additionally, multiple global crises (the COVID-19 pandemic, the Middle East, and Ukraine) exacerbated difficulties for WROs in Zimbabwe. The post-9/11 focus on national security and anti-terrorism, in 2018, placed Zimbabwe on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a global action to tackle money laundering, terrorist and proliferation financing grey list for deficiencies in its legal and financial systems (FATF, 2012).

Shifts in funding for NGOs and WROs

In the early 1980s, donor funding for development initiatives benefited WROs. However, a political crisis initiated a shift of the funding to governance and politics. At the same time, domestic economic challenges compounded by the 2008 global economic downturn led to a sharp decline in available resources for development work, including for WROs. Since 2012, funding has been unpredictable, fluctuating sharply. These pressures forced some WROs into survival mode and to be almost completely reliant on project-based donor funding, while donors dwindled due to Zimbabwe's instability. WROs shifted priorities to align with INGO funders, a situation exacerbated by the shrinking pool of global funding for women's rights. Money, when available, is often tied to specific projects and interventions, limiting WROs' flexibility to pursue their advocacy and movement-building efforts (Anouka Van Eerdewijk and Mugadza, 2015).

> *"The movement has stagnated since the rise of NGO-isation, with many NGOs and their leaders' becoming gatekeepers. As a result, the movement is fragmented, lacks cohesion, and struggles to reach a consensus on key issues." (Interview ZN001)*

Figure 15. ODA to WROs in Zimbabwe (in millions) using 2-year averages, 2011 to 2022



Impact on WROs

The political and economic challenges since the late 1990s led to a clampdown on WROs (Mnangagwa,2009). The civic space remained repressed after 2018, scoring 30 out of 100 on the CIVICUS monitor (CIVICUS, 2024). Authorities continued to intimidate, harass, and arbitrarily arrest activists, journalists, and opposition members, creating a restrictive environment that stifles civic and political participation.

New laws restrict public gatherings, criminalise actions or speech deemed to undermine the dignity and sovereignty of Zimbabwe, and enable the government to prosecute human rights defenders for dissent

(FIDH-OMCT, 2024). A 2023 bill allows the government's CSO Registry to revoke licensing without due process, demands CSOs disclose foreign funding, and allows the government to designate CSOs "at high risk" or "vulnerable to" terrorism abuse, with undetermined criteria (Saki, 2023). Each regulation is challenging; the combined effect is a highly restrictive space for WROs (Saki, 2023).

Despite these extreme challenges, WROs have achieved significant wins. Successes include laws creating a more inclusive environment for women to contribute to national development in the early post-independence period such as the legal age of the Majority's Act in 1982; contributing to ensure a more inclusive national constitution from 2007 – 2013; the domestic violence act 2007; blocking legislation that would worsen women's rights; multiple attempts to ban abortions (2016, 2018 and 2020); and a bill to pardon rapists if they married their victims (2016).

However, oppression and limited access to funds have hindered WROs' effectiveness. A major consequence, for example, has been WROs' tendency to follow the money, preventing them from focusing on their objectives and rendering them implementers of projects.

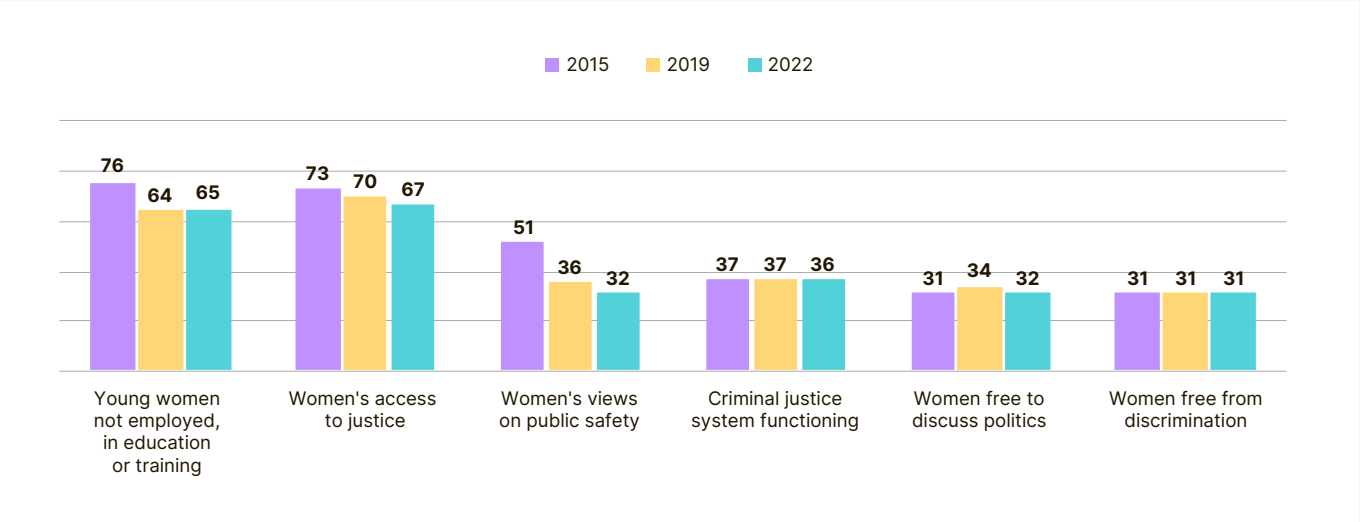
> *"That voice is gone, but also the independence. And as funding has decreased more and more... we see the movement stagnate. It becomes the purview of very few people, it is very fractured, and it is very hard to see where it fits into the broader ecosystem of the issues being tackled. I would say, quite honestly, that we are seeing a very strong regression back into a deeply patriarchal society. I think Zimbabwe had made great leaps and bounds, even socially, in the way we spoke about issues, but we are now seeing that progress start to disappear." (Interview ZN001)*

Impact on gender-equality outcomes

From 2015–22, Zimbabwe's score on the SDG Gender Index (Equal Measures 2030, 2024) slightly declined. Projections show that, at the current rate, it will not have progressed by 2030. Several key indicators for SDG 10 on equality show a decline, with two for SDG 4 on education reversing. Indicators of freedom from discrimination and women's ability to discuss politics stagnated from 2015–22. Women's access to justice and views on public safety have declined.

One in three women has experienced GBV, while one in four has experienced sexual violence (UNFPA 2023; DHS 2015). Women hold only 35 per cent of parliamentary seats, primarily due to the proportional representation system that allocates 30 per cent to women (The Sunday News, 2020).

Figure 16. Selected SDG Gender Index indicator scores for Zimbabwe, 2015 to 2022



Notes: These six indicators from the SDG Gender Index are all standardised to the same scale where 100 is the best and 0 is the worst. The full descriptions and data sources for the indicators by reference number can be found at: www.equalmeasures2030.org/2024-SDG-gender-index/

Source: Equal Measures 2030, 2024.

Conclusion

WROs in Zimbabwe have evolved, changing strategies to survive under uncertain and often dangerous conditions of inconsistent and unstable funding, an oppressive environment, and a global downturn in funding. The need to follow the money has led to a project-driven movement, often pulled in different directions. Working as a movement with a shared vision and strategy has been challenging, with tangible consequences for WROs and women – outcomes in education, political participation, and GBV show gains have begun to erode.

However, all is not lost. To push for transformative change in women's rights and gender equality, we need to join with those who share the principles and values of feminism and invest in analysis and strategies that will bring us closer to our goal of a gender-equal future.

> *"My wish for the women's movement in Zimbabwe and globally is taking a step back, back to basics of analysis, politically, deep political analyses of what is going on in our country in the world, in our region, leading to deep strategic thinking and strategising for transformative change, the transformation of the political, economic and social systems that are keeping us in a certain space." (Interview ZN002.)*

Weaving resources to thrive

Illustrated by Magda Castría