

The Architecture of Change



**Feminist Pathways to
Financing Gender Equality**

**Walking
the
Talk**



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About Walking the Talk

Walking the Talk advocates for inclusive foreign policies, practices, and funding that champion gender equality in the European Union, reflecting the voices of women and LGBTIQ+ communities from the Majority World.

Launched in August 2023, the program is led by Hivos (Netherlands), Restless Development (UK), and Equipop (France), with support from ODI Europe at the European Union (EU) level.

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F-Word

This compendium of feminist funding research emerges during a time of profound global turbulence. It is launched in the context of foreign policy shifts and escalating tariff wars in reaction to the rippling effects of geopolitical conflict, economic nationalism, and regressive social agendas. Across the world, we are witnessing a renewed backlash against women's and LGBTIQ+ rights, gender equality, and broader agendas of social inclusion. Hard-won gains over the past century are threatened as austerity deepens, public goods are being gutted, and marginalised voices are increasingly silenced in domestic and international arenas. Across continents, movements are not sitting idly; they are pushing back and pushing forward, organising, and promoting alternatives to unjust policy agendas that centre care, justice, and dignity.

Reimagining global financial architecture has never been more urgent. Debt burdens are soaring, fiscal space is shrinking, and the global economic model continues to extract from the Majority World. Moreover, while feminist movements and women's rights organisations have always been at the forefront of driving progress, challenging injustice, and advancing gender equality, we are now at a critical juncture: the vast majority of these organisations are at risk of losing their funding. This funding crisis threatens to halt essential, life-changing, and transformative work that cannot wait. Without immediate and sustained investment in gender equality and gender-transformative solutions, we risk reversing hard-won gains and stalling the momentum needed to address deep-rooted systemic inequalities.

The need for transformative, grounded, and radical thinking could not be greater. This compendium meets this moment. It brings together sharp, situated feminist voices that move beyond critique toward action. These papers examine the issues most pressing to feminist actors, including fiscal and care policies, the intersections of climate justice, gender, and public finance, as well as new financing models that prioritise life over profit. What sets this collection apart is not only analytical rigour, but the lived commitments of its authors—activists, community organisers, and members of grassroots organisations deeply embedded in the daily struggles they analyse.

These are not distant, detached academic reflections. They are rooted in movement, memory, and resistance. 39 authors write from the ground, focussing on more than 30 countries: from Dalit feminist collectives reclaiming health rights, to African coalitions challenging debt colonialism, to queer organisers demanding bodily autonomy in hostile political climates. Their knowledge is forged in struggle,

sharpened by urgency, and infused with a fierce determination to reimagine a more just world. At a time when inclusive policies are being defunded and the political landscape is growing increasingly exclusionary and violent, these contributions represent a collective act of defiance and a roadmap for building a just and sustainable future together.

This collection serves as a potent reminder that transformation is not an abstract concept – it is already in motion. These pages reflect feminist worldmaking that refuses to separate analysis from action, critique from care, or imagination from lived reality. We propose empathy, responsibility, and relationality as key principles for building constructive and compassionate theories, deeply rooted in ethics and the well-being of others. We insist that economic justice cannot be severed from climate justice, racial justice, or gender and sexual rights. We reclaim public policy as a site of struggle and insist that the future we need cannot be built on shallow reforms—but must be reimagined from the ground up.

The Architecture of Change: Feminist Pathways to Financing Gender Equality is a call to action. A manifesto from feminists of the Majority World who are not waiting for change to originate elsewhere, but are actively shaping it through our collective action. These papers are part of a longer continuum of feminist resistance—a living archive of dreams, demands, and daily work. To walk the talk of justice, we must begin here: with knowledge that listens deeply, champions strategically, and dreams collectively. This compendium is a practical resource for policymakers and other stakeholders involved in shaping the global financial system and funding feminists, providing not only inspiration but also practical policy prescriptions for transforming the financial architecture. We call on them to make a shared commitment together with researchers and feminists to reimagine and take concrete action toward reshaping yesterday's systems to meet the needs of today and beyond.

The work of transformation is not only possible—it is already happening.

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Consortium*

Glossary of Terms

Austerity: Economic policies aimed at reducing government deficits through cuts in public spending, often disproportionately affecting marginalised groups

Common Ask Framework: The Common Ask Framework refers to a set of principles or an agreed-upon approach to managing and resolving sovereign debt crises, particularly those affecting low-income countries. It ensures that debt restructuring processes are fair, transparent, and inclusive, involving official and private creditors in negotiations.

Civil Society Organisation (CSO): a non-governmental organisation that advocates for various issues and encompasses multiple entities, including NGOs, community groups, labour unions, and faith-based organisations.

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative: A program created to provide debt relief to the world's poorest countries, enabling them to redirect resources towards social investments.

Debt relief refers to the reduction, restructuring, or cancellation of a country's or individual's debt, typically to alleviate financial burdens and enable better management of economic resources. In sovereign debt, debt relief is often provided to countries facing an overwhelming debt load that threatens their ability to meet basic needs or invest in development, such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. There are several forms of debt relief, including:

- **Debt Rescheduling:** Extending the debt repayment period or deferring payments to make them more manageable.
- **Debt Reduction:** Reducing the total debt owed, sometimes called a «haircut», in which creditors agree to forgive a portion of the debt.
- **Debt Cancellation:** In certain cases, the debt may be entirely forgiven, typically for the poorest or most heavily indebted countries. This allows them to focus on development and poverty reduction.
- **Debt Swaps:** A portion of the debt is forgiven in exchange for the debtor country committing to specific actions, such as environmental conservation (debt-for-nature swaps) or development projects (debt-for-development swaps).

Decolonial Funding: Funding approaches that challenge colonial legacies and put local voices at the centre whilst being responsive to specific contexts. This also involves shifting and challenging the existing power structures.

Free Trade Agreements (FTAs): Legal agreements between countries that outline the terms of trade, aiming to reduce barriers and increase economic cooperation.

Care Economy: Economic activities related to providing care services, including unpaid domestic work, significantly contribute to overall economic productivity.

Default: Default occurs when a country fails to meet its debt obligations, typically by missing scheduled payments on interest or principal. The default may trigger a restructuring process or lead to insolvency if not addressed.

Defunding: Withdrawing financial support from an entity, organisation or initiative.

Democratic Backsliding: The decline in the quality of democracy, characterised by the erosion of civil liberties such as freedom of speech, expression, and political participation.

Gender-based violence (GBV): Any harmful act that is perpetrated against an individual based on their gender, often rooted in unequal power dynamics and societal norms. GBV takes many forms, including physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse, and it typically disproportionately affects women and girls, though it can also impact men and gender-diverse individuals. It includes intimate partner violence, sexual assault, female genital mutilation, trafficking, forced marriage, and other harmful practices.

Gender-Responsive Budgeting: Budgeting that incorporates gender perspectives to ensure equitable resource allocation for men and women.

Heavily Indebted Country: A Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) is a nation classified as extremely poor and burdened with unsustainable debt levels. These countries are typically eligible for debt relief programs initiated by the World Bank and the IMF.

Informal Economy: Economic activities not regulated by the government, often characterised by low wages, lack of job security, and minimal social protections.

Intersectional Approaches: Informed by the term 'intersectionality coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989. Intersectional approaches refer to strategies that consider individuals' overlapping and interconnected social identities and experiences, particularly regarding race, gender, class, and sexuality.

LGBTIQ+

- **L:** Lesbian - A woman who is attracted to other women.
 - **G:** Gay - A person, usually a man, who is attracted to members of the same sex; can also refer to the broader community.
 - **B:** Bisexual - A person attracted to two or more genders.
 - **T:** Transgender - A person whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.
 - **I:** Intersex - A person born with physical sex characteristics that don't fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies.
 - **Q:** Queer - An umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities who are not heterosexual or cisgender; can also mean questioning.
 - **+**: Represents other sexual orientations and gender identities, such as pansexual, asexual, non-binary, etc.
-

Material Coloniality: Material coloniality refers to tangible, economic, and resource-based aspects of colonial domination that continue to influence post-colonial societies, i.e., the continuation of exploitative labour and economic systems established during colonial times, perpetuating inequalities.

Majority World: The Majority World refers to most of the world's population, usually referring to lower-income countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. While this includes some HIPC's, it is a broader category not solely defined by debt levels.

Participatory Grantmaking: A funding process involving stakeholders, particularly those who benefit from funding and the decision-making process.

Paris Club: The Paris Club is an informal group of creditor countries that work together to provide debt restructuring for developing countries with bilateral (government-to-government) debt. It plays a significant role in negotiating debt relief for these nations.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs): Collaborative agreements between government entities and private companies to provide public services.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): The SDGs, also known as the Global Goals, were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030, all people enjoy peace and prosperity. The 17 SDGs are integrated—they recognise that action in one area will affect outcomes in others and that development must balance social, economic, and environmental sustainability.

Social Enterprises: An organisation that addresses social, cultural, or environmental issues while generating revenue. Key characteristics of social enterprises include:

- **Mission-Driven:** They focus on solving specific social problems, such as poverty, education, healthcare, or environmental sustainability.
 - **Revenue Generation:** They earn income through selling goods or services, which helps sustain their operations and fund their social mission.
 - **Social Impact:** They measure success not just by financial performance, but also by the social or environmental outcomes they achieve.
 - **Sustainability:** They aim for long-term viability by combining social goals with sound business practices.
-

Sovereign Debt Restructuring (SDR): Sovereign Debt Restructuring refers to the process by which a government negotiates with its creditors to alter the terms of its debt, such as exchanging old debt for new debt or reducing the overall debt burden. The goal is to make the debt more manageable and to prevent default.

Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs): Economic policies and reforms that countries implement in exchange for loans or financial assistance from international institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These programs aim to stabilise and restructure the economies of developing countries, typically in response to financial crises or imbalances, by introducing a set of fiscal and economic measures designed to improve economic performance and debt repayment capacity.

Structural coloniality: Enduring social, political, and cultural institutions, systems, and hierarchies rooted in colonialism that affect how post-colonial societies govern, experience, and navigate their lives.

Tax Justice: The principle that the tax system should be fair and equitable, ensuring everyone pays their fair share based on their ability to pay.

Woman Human Rights Defender (WHRD): A Woman Human Rights Defender is an individual who advocates for human rights related to women and gender issues.

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

**Sinéad Nolan, Coretta Jonah, Rachel
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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

Sinéad Nolan is the Partnerships and Learning Project Manager at Equal Measures 2030. She has 9 years of experience in the global gender equality sector working with feminist activists. She has a background in men and masculinities and youth leadership. Born in Ireland, she is based in the UK.

Coretta Jonah is the Senior Data Capacity Lead at Equal Measures 2030. A Ghanaian feminist based in Cape Town, South Africa, she is a trained economist and international development expert deeply committed to challenging inequalities—particularly gender disparities—through data-driven advocacy and capacity strengthening.

Rachel Jacobson is one of the co-directors at the Alliance for Feminist Movements. Trained as a public health professional with a specialisation in human rights, Rachel has been engaged with feminist movements for over twenty years globally and locally in Texas, USA, where she was raised.

Alison Holder is the Executive Director of EM2030. Based in Toronto, Canada, she has 25 years of experience in international development, including leading policy, advocacy and campaigning work on gender equality, economic justice, and corporate accountability.

Albert Motivans is Head of Data and Insights at EM2030. Based in the US, he has led research and data collection initiatives on the status of women and girls for the UN and US government agencies.

Acknowledgements

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

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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.

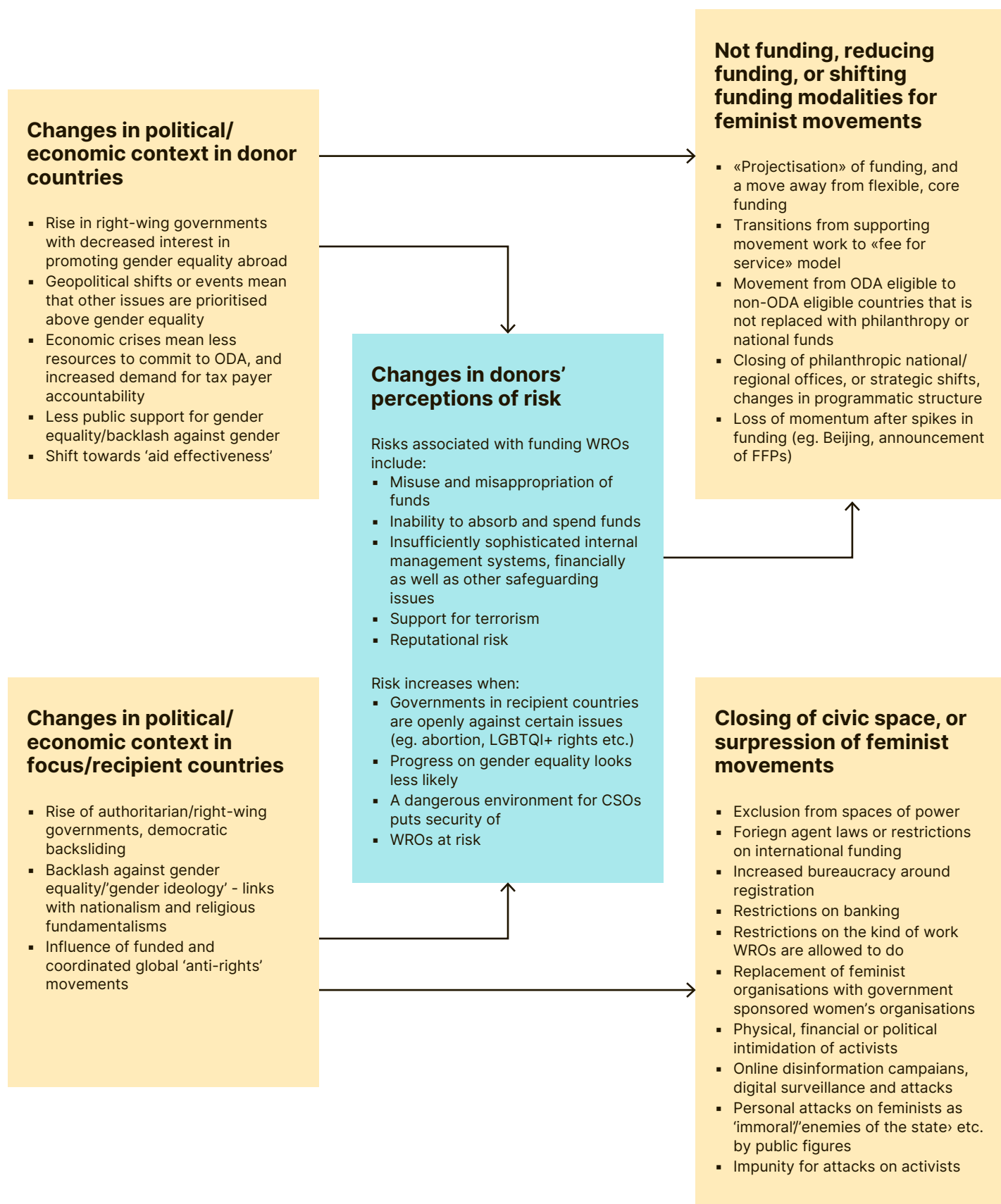
What does a well-supported feminist civil society look like?

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. shelters, counselling, SHR services)
- WROs are no longer able to do their work safely, some are forced 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).

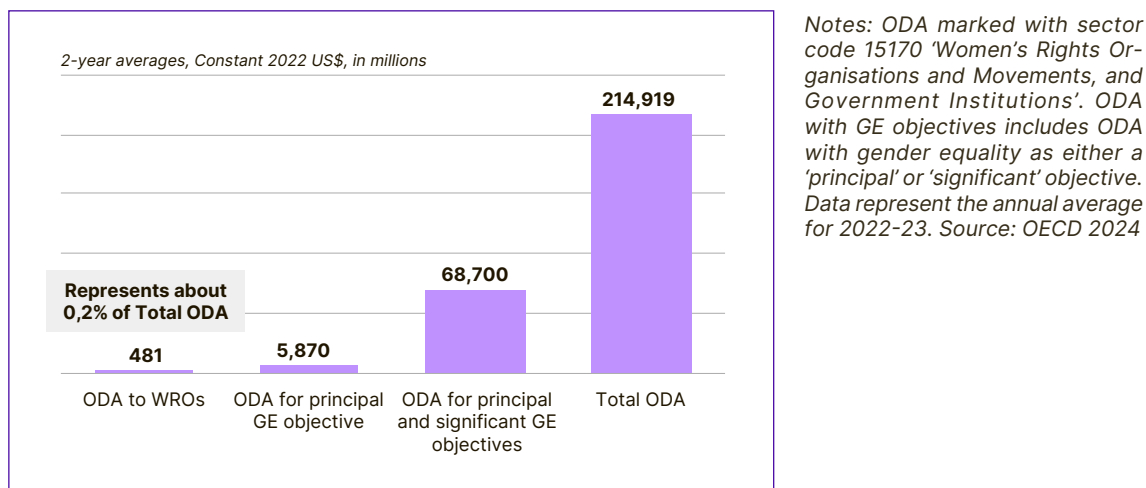
In addition, the share of ODA with gender-equality objectives have, for the first time in a decade, dropped from 45 per cent in 2019–20 to 42 per cent in 2021–22 (OECD, 2024b). This trend is seen in most donor countries, with the share of ODA with gender equality objectives declining in 20 of the 32 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_e340afb-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



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 (Alpizar 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 Gaiind, 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 movement⁵ 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)

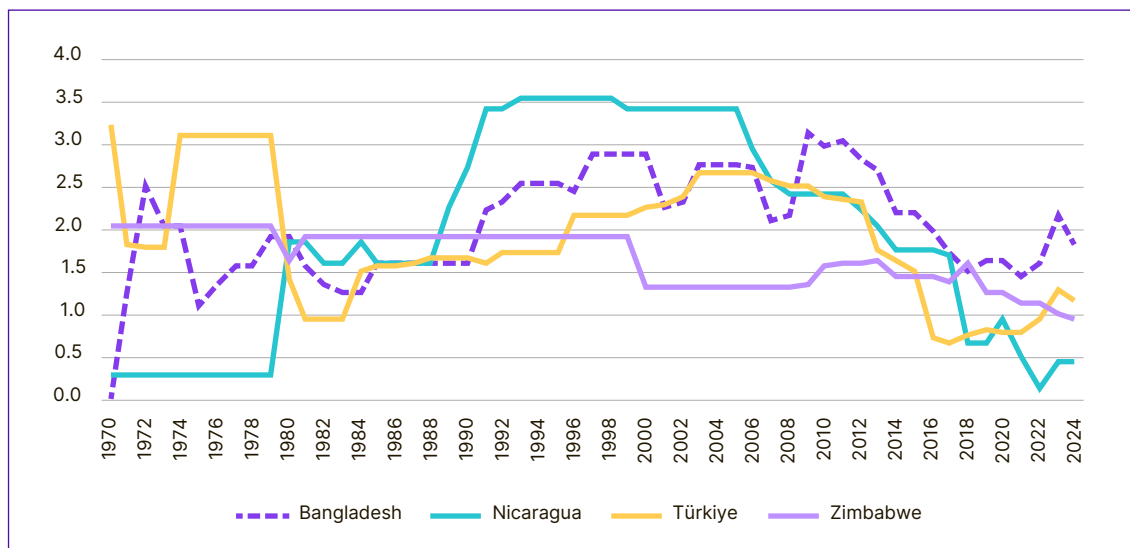
The case studies show that attacking women and LGBTQI+ rights is often the first step of an authoritarian leader. WROs are often united with other CSOs who speak up about democratic backsliding, as shown in Türkiye and Nicaragua. In Zimbabwe, WROs were key in the push for constitutional reform. For this 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]ot 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.

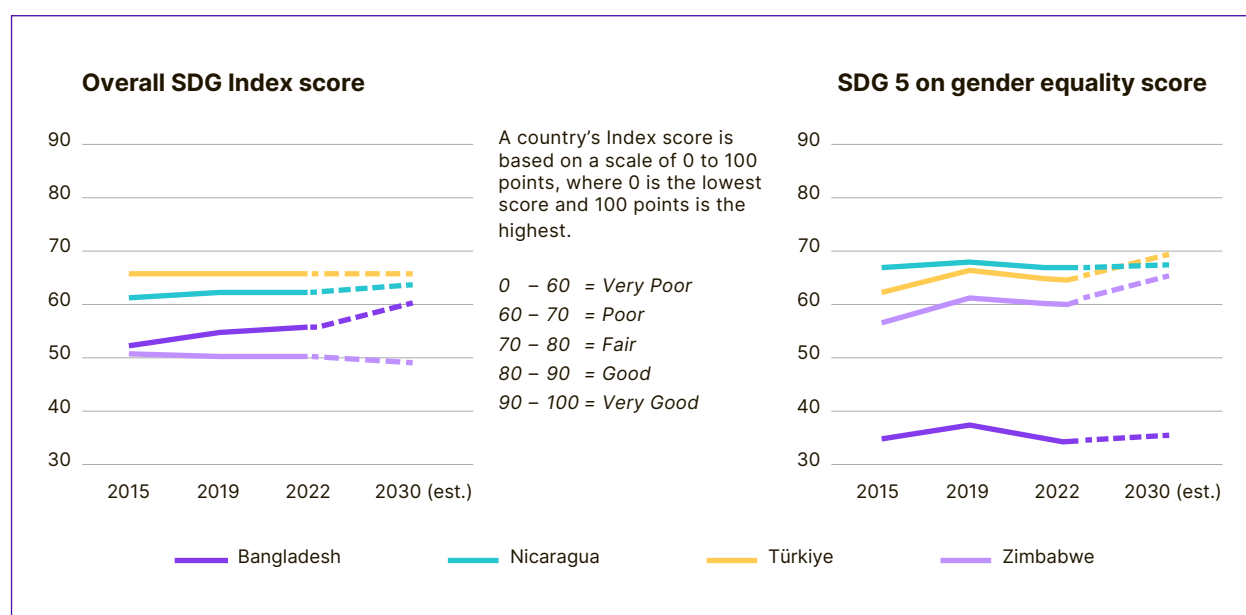
All countries studied show worrying trends in measures of gender equality. Key indicators of critical importance to women have stagnated or are moving in the wrong direction. The SDG Gender Index (Equal Measures 2030, 2024), for example, shows all case study countries score either poor or very poor on 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; Confidential, 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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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

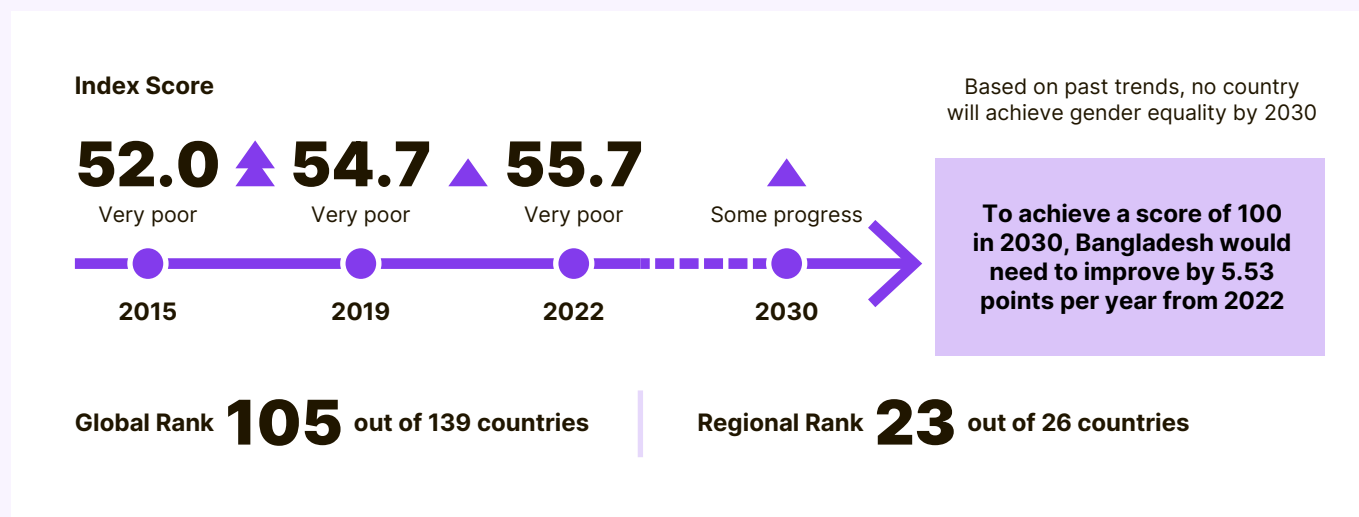
Case Study Selection

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 disincorporate 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]ot 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)

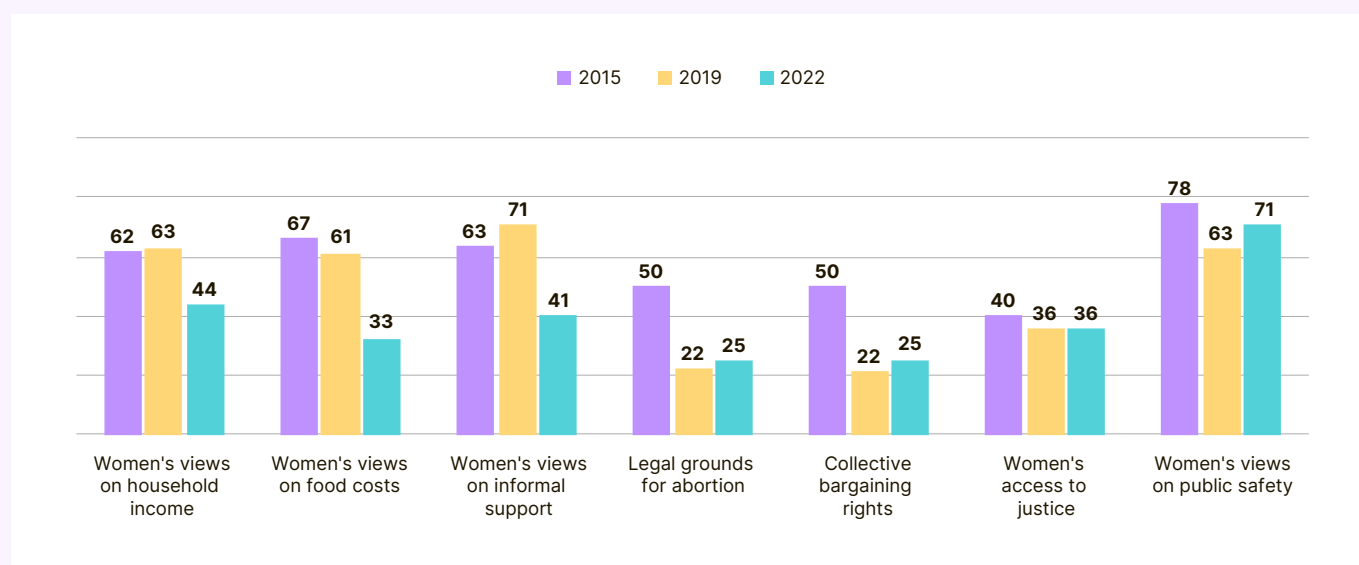
Several global research studies have shown links between the strength of feminist mobilisation and WROs and law reform related to gender equality (The Alliance for Feminist Movements and Equal Measures 2030 2024) (Forester et al. 2022) (Htun and Weldon 2012). While we can’t definitively tie this to the 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/

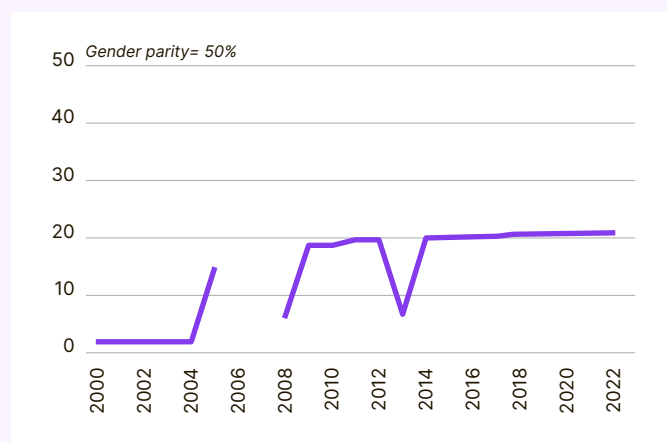
Source: Equal Measures 2030, 2024.

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



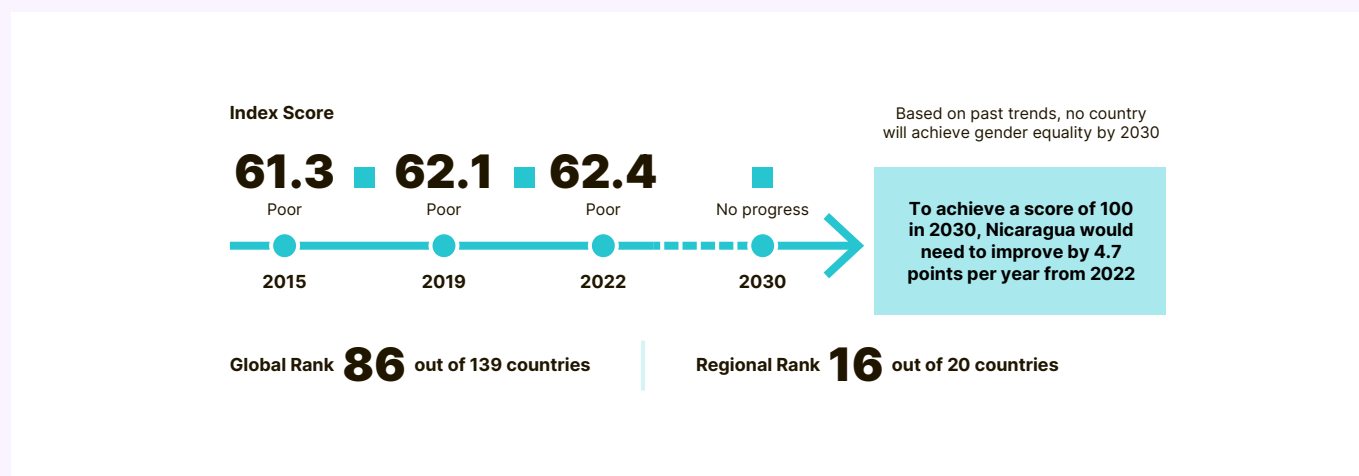
Source: IPU cited in *Equal Measures 2030*, 2024.

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.

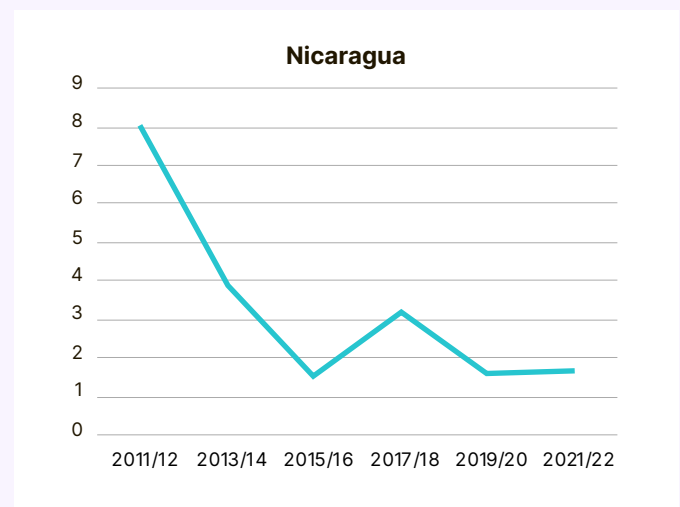
“Despite all their campaigns against us, they didn’t manage to disarm the movement... we continued to march on 8 March⁶ and 25 November.⁷ We were the first ones to raise our voices about the authoritarian and anti-democratic direction of the regime”. (Interview NC001)

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 Index⁹ (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

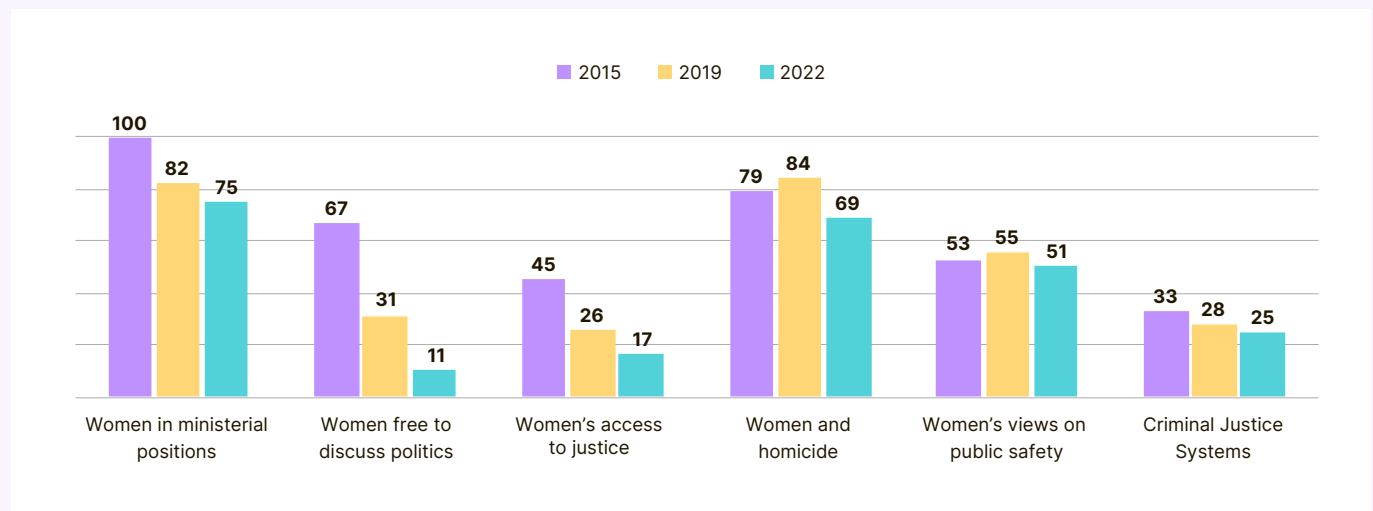
claims to have reopened more than 300 since 2020, but WROs note serious deficiencies in resources and training for officers (La Corriente and Sexual Rights Initiative 2024).

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.

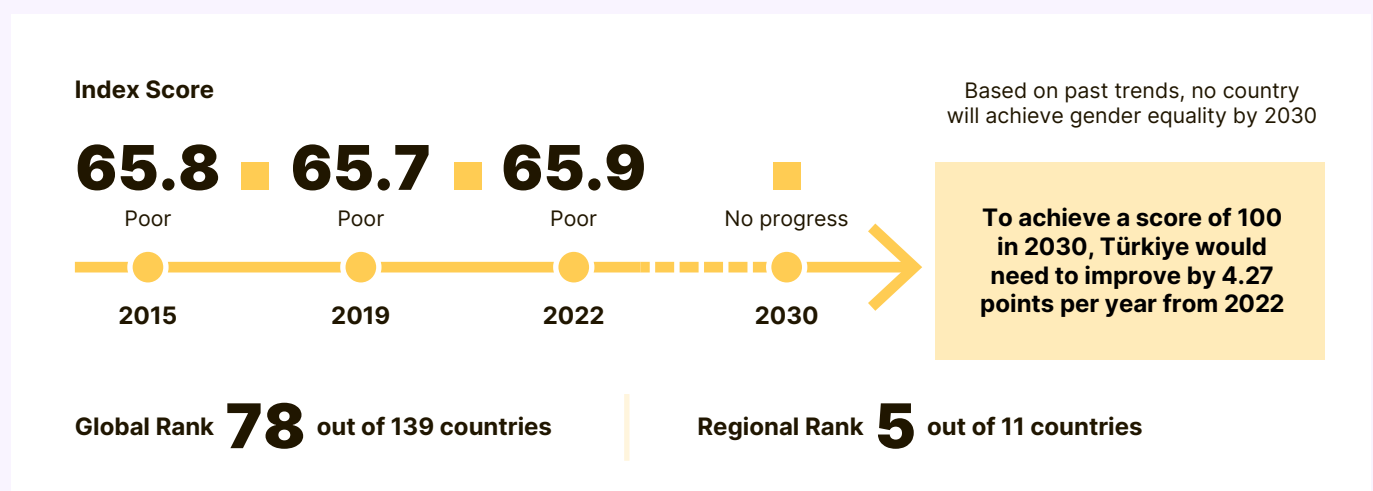
Conclusion

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).

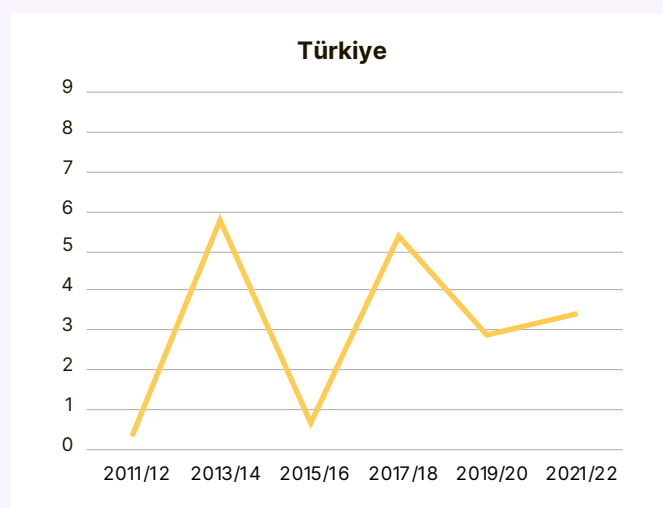
The state has created parallel civil society structures, and legitimised civil society participation in public processes through these organisations (Karakaş, 2021). For example, it has substituted government-operated NGOs (GONGOs), which co-opt the language of 'gender justice' to promote traditional, 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 (Yabancı 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)

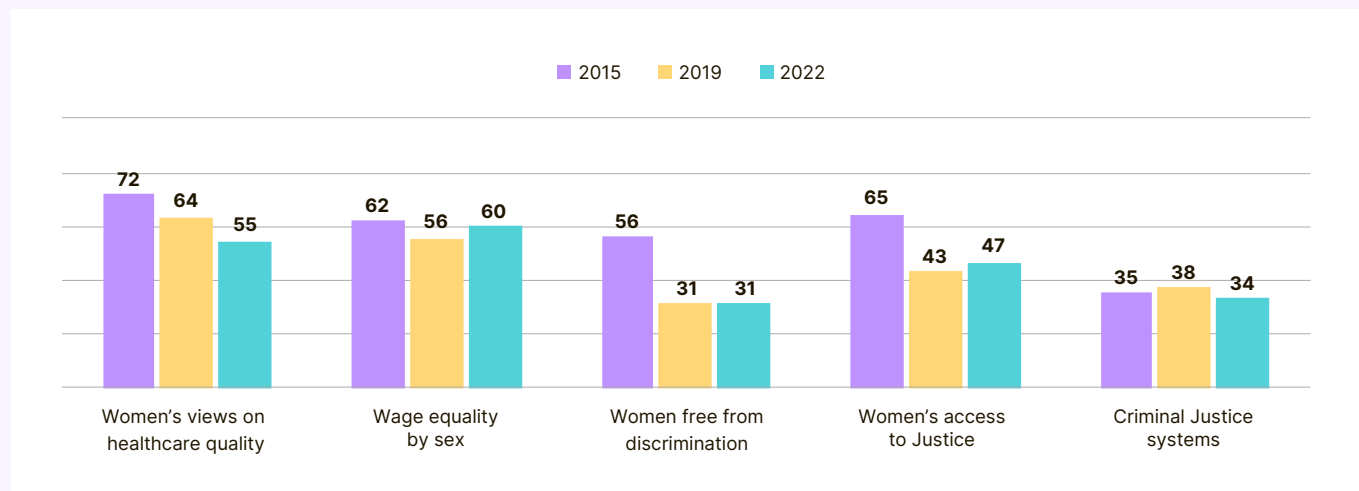
Impact on gender-equality outcomes and other indicators

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:

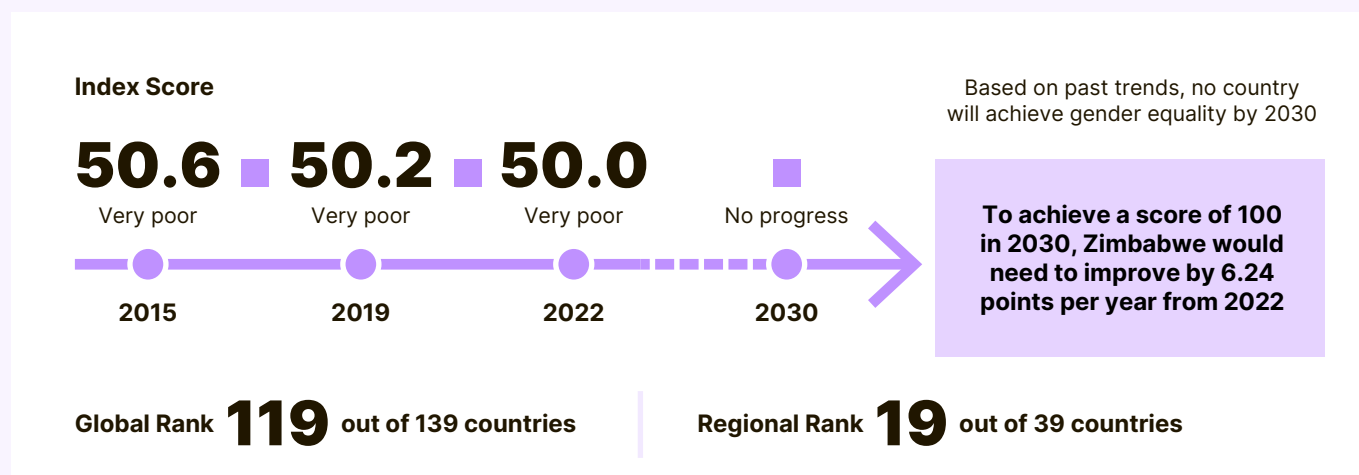
'It's not just about shrinking spaces or diminishing funds anymore; we are now also facing criminal law and procedures in a country where the rule of

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).

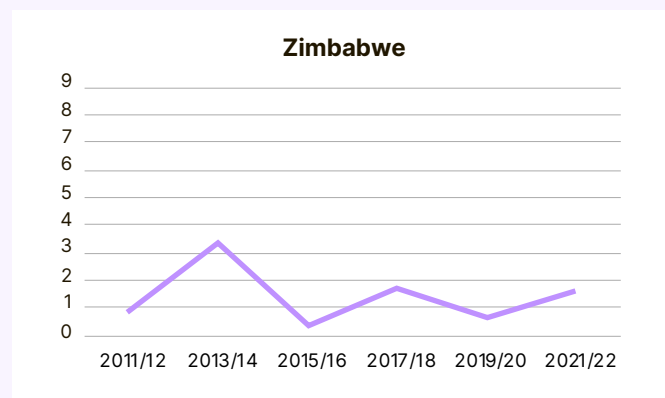
Shifts in funding for NGOs and WROs

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..."

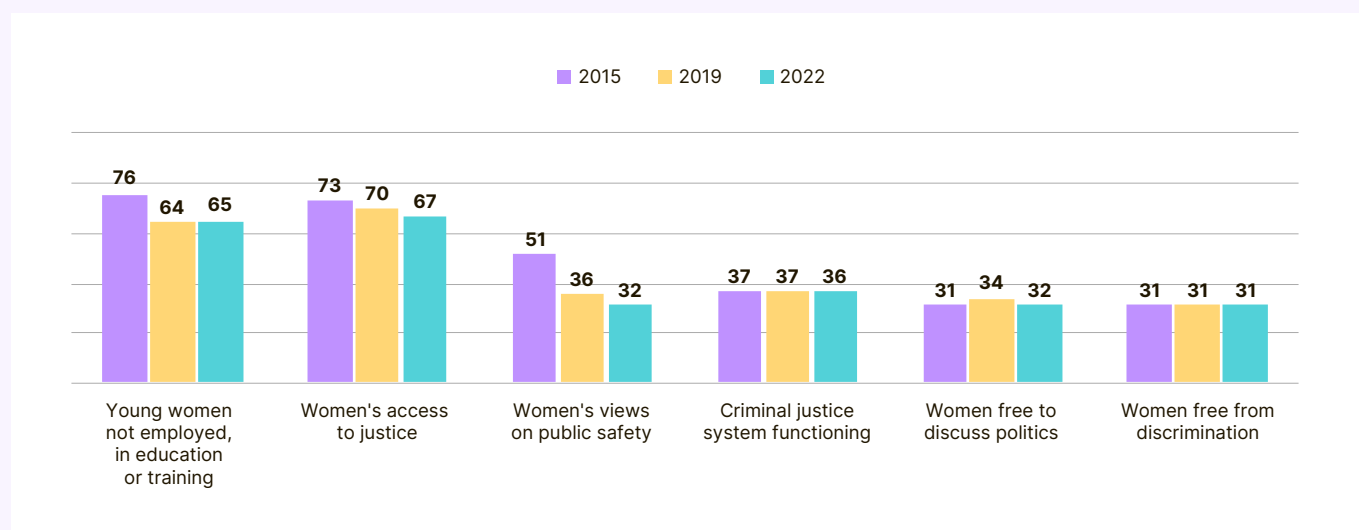
we see the movement stagnate. It becomes the purview of very few people, it is very fractured, and it is very hard to see where it fits into the broader ecosystem of the issues being tackled. I would say, quite honestly, that we are seeing a very strong regression back into a deeply patriarchal society. 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



Bridging the Gap: Empowering Youth Feminist Organisations

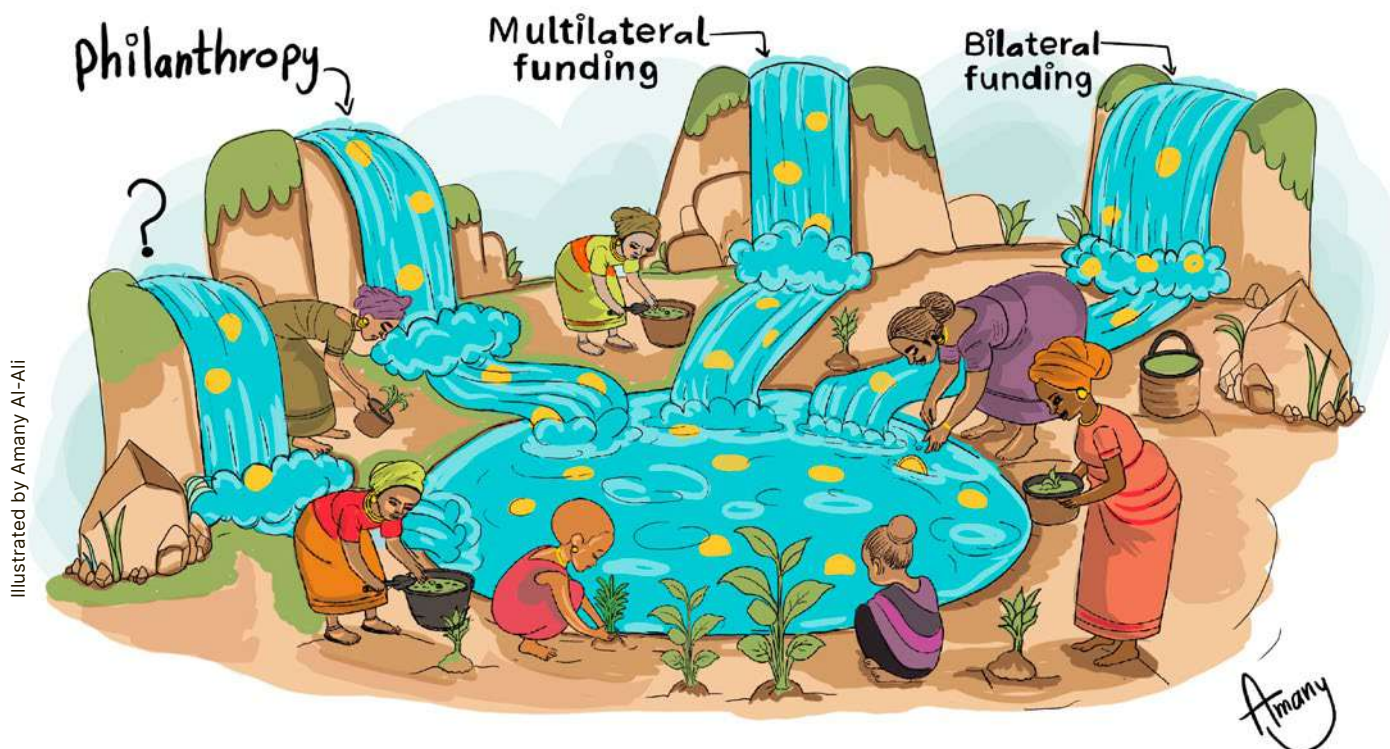
**Yasmina Benslimane
and Marie-Simone Kadurira**

February 2025



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Advocacy Summary

Background and Research Question

Young Feminist Organisations (YFOs) across Africa are central to the pursuit of gender equality and the eradication of gender-based violence (GBV). By centring youth-led activism and community-driven approaches, they mobilise grassroots communities, challenge oppressive power structures, and champion inclusive policies. However, these organisations face persistent structural barriers: patriarchal norms, political instability, restrictive legal frameworks, and minimal financial support—that impede their impact.

Key Findings

YFOs receive less than 0.02% of global funding for women's rights, forcing many to operate on annual budgets as low as USD 500. This chronic scarcity hinders their capacity to sustain programs, employ staff, and expand influence. Legal obstacles, such as Zimbabwe's Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Act and conflict-affected contexts like Sudan, tighten civic space, undermining YFO operations. In Tunisia, digital divides limit internet access, making outreach difficult.

Rigid grant requirements, such as multi-year operational histories and audited financials, often exclude smaller grassroots groups. Many YFOs serving LGBTIQ+ communities, for instance, face bias from mainstream funders. A lack of training in financial management, proposal writing, and digital engagement exacerbates funding difficulties, while over-reliance on volunteers can lead to burnout.

Emerging Solutions:

- **Alternative Funding Models:** YFOS are increasingly adopting social enterprises, crowdfunding, and community-based fundraising to diversify their income streams and foster local ownership.
- **Collaborative Partnerships:** Feminist networks and cross-regional coalitions provide resources, mentorship, and shared advocacy platforms, promoting movement-building and reducing operational costs.
- **Advocacy for Flexible, Decolonial Funding:** Multi-year, core, and participatory grants that prioritise grassroots leadership and local realities are essential to sustainably strengthening YFOs.

■ Key Recommendations

- **Governments:** Remove legal barriers, allocate budget lines specifically for YFOS, and establish accountability mechanisms to ensure transparent distribution of funds.
- **Multilateral Institutions and Philanthropy:** Allocate earmarked funding for YFOs, lower administrative hurdles, and embed capacity-building support into grant programs.
- **Private Sector:** Invest in CSR portfolios prioritising feminist initiatives; provide mentorship, pro bono services, and inclusive workplace policies to embed gender equality.
- **Civil Society:** Include YFOs in coalitions and leadership spaces, facilitate cross-regional knowledge exchange, and document effective grassroots strategies to shape policy debates.

By addressing systemic funding gaps, building cross-sector partnerships, and centring youth-led feminist leadership, we can create equitable, community-driven solutions to end GBV and advance gender equality across Africa.

Authors and Acknowledgements

Authors

Yasmina Benslimane is a feminist advocate and founder of Politics4Her, a platform dedicated to amplifying the political participation of young women and fostering inclusive leadership. With experience in global advocacy and youth engagement, Yasmina has consulted and advised leading feminist organisations and funds, including Vital Voices, Equal Measures 2030, SheDecides, the World YWCA, the United Nations (UN) Spotlight Initiative, and the UN Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund. Her expertise spans capacity-building, feminist policymaking, and advancing women's rights globally.

Marie-Simone Kadurira founded Vasikana Vedu, a nonprofit organisation that addresses menstrual health and empowers marginalised communities in Zimbabwe. Marie-Simone's work integrates advocacy, education, and resource distribution, impacting thousands of individuals globally. She has collaborated with organisations such as Womankind Worldwide, UN Women, and Equal Measures 2030, specialising in the prevention of gender-based violence and feminist movement-building.

Positionality of Authors

The authors, Yasmina and Marie-Simone, bring firsthand experience as young feminist leaders from the Majority World, with Yasmina from Morocco and Marie-Simone from Zimbabwe. This shared positionality informs their deep understanding of the unique challenges faced by Young Feminist Organisations (YFOs) across Africa. Their work, rooted in intersectional feminism and decolonial frameworks, amplifies the voices of marginalised communities while advocating for equitable funding and sustainable solutions to advance gender equality.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the YFOs across Sudan, Tunisia, Senegal, Zimbabwe, and Kenya who participated in the research and shared their insights and experiences. Special thanks to Walking The Talk for their invaluable support in convening networks, facilitating connections, and contributing to the research. The authors also acknowledge the researchers, activists, and feminist leaders whose groundwork has informed and inspired this report.

Acronym List

AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development	OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
CBO	Community-Based Organisation	PVO	Private Voluntary Organisation
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility	SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
GBV	Gender-Based Violence	SMEs	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
ITU	International Telecommunication Union	UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations	YFOs	Young Feminist Organisations

Introduction

Young Feminist Organisations (YFOs) in Africa are driving forces in the fight for gender equality and the eradication of gender-based violence (GBV). These youth-led, grassroots organisations bring innovative, community-centred approaches to activism, challenging deeply entrenched power systems and advocating for inclusive policies that foster empowerment (Cornwall & Darkwah 2022; Mama 2021). However, YFOs face significant structural and financial challenges, which are compounded by patriarchal norms, political resistance, and limited access to sustainable funding (Tripp 2019). These barriers are particularly acute in Sudan, Tunisia, Senegal, Zimbabwe, and Kenya, where political instability, restrictive policies, and inequitable resource distribution hinder progress (Tripp 2019; Mama 2021).

The global funding landscape for feminist movements further exacerbates these challenges. Research reveals that grassroots women's rights organisations, including YFOs, receive a minuscule portion of available resources—often less than 0.02% of global funding (AWID, 2020; OECD, 2021). This systemic underfunding impedes their capacity to scale their impact, sustain operations, and advocate effectively (Arutyunova & Clark, 2013; UN Women, 2022). Amid these obstacles, YFOs continue to demonstrate resilience and creativity, employing alternative approaches, such as social enterprises and feminist philanthropy, to bridge resource gaps (UN Women, 2022).

This article examines the critical role of YFOs in promoting gender justice and explores innovative funding models that could enhance their financial sustainability. By addressing the systemic barriers YFOs face and identifying practical, equitable funding strategies, this study aims to empower these organisations to amplify their transformative work and secure their place as key actors in the feminist movement. This study begins by highlighting the critical funding obstacles faced by YFOs, illustrating the intertwined nature of political resistance, gendered power imbalances, and the historical context that shapes their realities. The outlined study aims to shed light on alternative funding opportunities that promote the sustainability and impact of YFOs within their communities. By identifying unique challenges and exploring collaborative and innovative financial strategies, the research will contribute to nurturing robust feminist movements that can sustain long-lasting change amid challenging conditions.

Methodology

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to gather comprehensive data.

It aims to explore innovative funding models that could provide YFOs with enhanced financial independence, sustainability, and scalability of their efforts. By investigating the barriers YFOs face in accessing funding, the study proposes strategies to equip these organisations better to fight for gender justice.

Research Objectives and Scope

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the role of YFOS in promoting gender equality and addressing GBV across five African countries: Sudan, Tunisia, Senegal, Zimbabwe, and Kenya. Furthermore, it sought to examine alternative financing models that can bolster the sustainability of these organisations. The research explored YFOs' challenges in securing funding, revealing systemic barriers such as donor prioritisation, political resistance, and the masculinisation of funding mechanisms.

Ultimately, the investigation aimed to provide actionable insights into how YFOs can access more equitable and sustainable funding sources, despite the backlash against feminist initiatives. The study draws on literature on feminist funding ecosystems, youth-led activism, and gender financing, providing a well-rounded perspective on the challenges and opportunities that YFOs currently face.

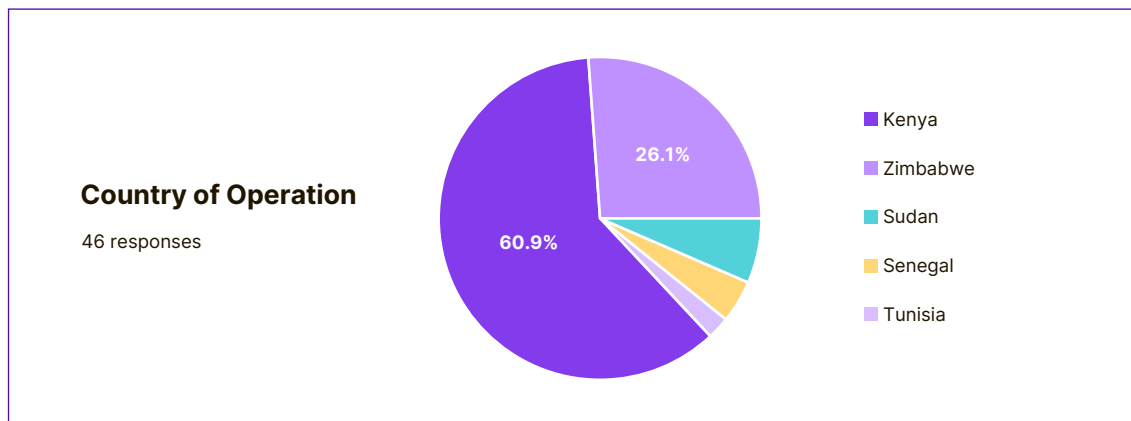
Research Design

The study used a combination of surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions to collect primary data from YFOs, funders, and policymakers in four African countries. Secondary data was gathered by reviewing existing literature, reports, and case studies on YFOs and donor relationships related to funding mechanisms and feminist financing.

Data Collection

Primary Data: Surveys were distributed to various YFOs in five African countries: Tunisia, Senegal, Sudan, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. To gather data on their funding experiences and needs, the research team conducted in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with YFO leaders and young feminist activists. 77 YFOs in Tunisia, Senegal, Sudan, Kenya, and Zimbabwe were reached.

Distribution of Surveyed YFOs Across Five African Countries



Secondary Data: The literature review focused on research on alternative funding mechanisms, the effectiveness of current funding models, and the specific needs of feminist organisations. In total, 30 reports, research papers, and advocacy briefings were consulted for this analysis.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative data from interviews and focus groups, identifying key themes and patterns. Quantitative data from surveys was analysed using statistical methods to identify trends and correlations.

Literature Review

Young Feminist Organisations (YFOs) in Africa

Feminist organisations globally aim to promote gender equality, challenge oppressive power structures, and advocate for women's rights (Federici 2004). Within this broad movement, Young Feminist Organisations (YFOs) stand out by centring young women and marginalised youth in their leadership, strategies, and advocacy work (FRIDA, 2019; Mama Cash, 2020). YFOs bring fresh perspectives, innovative approaches, and renewed energy to feminist activism, often intersecting their work with other social justice issues (Equality Fund, 2021). In the African context, this role becomes even more critical, as YFOs respond to unique regional challenges, such as limited access to funding, political instability, and deeply rooted patriarchal norms, all while reimagining activism in deeply community-rooted and culturally relevant ways.

In Africa, YFOs are particularly crucial in advocating for gender equality and combating GBV, especially in countries such as Sudan, Tunisia, Senegal, Zimbabwe, and Kenya. Young women and marginalised groups typically lead these organisations, actively challenging entrenched power systems, promoting inclusive policy changes, and fostering community empowerment (Fanon, 1961; Nkrumah, 1965; Spivak, 1988). However, YFOs encounter significant challenges in securing sustainable funding, which are further compounded by patriarchy, political resistance, and systemic inequities in resource allocation (FRIDA 2019; Mama Cash 2020).

Decline in Global Funding and Its Impact on YFOs

The global funding landscape for gender equality and women's rights organisations has declined sharply. According to UN Women (2020), international aid for gender equality initiatives fell from approximately \$8.3 billion in 2018 to around \$7.5 billion in 2019—a decline of nearly 10%. Additionally, new donor commitments in several regions reportedly decreased by up to 15% during the same period. These trends, combined with political backlashes, increased restrictions on civil society, and a contracting philanthropic foundation environment, have further strained the financial stability of these organisations, creating a severe disadvantage for YFOs. Research from EQI and the Accelerator for GBV Prevention reveals that grassroots women's rights organisations receive less than 0.02% of global resources, highlighting the systemic exclusion of YFOs from sustainable funding mechanisms (EQI and Accelerator for GBV Prevention 2021).

This chronic underfunding directly impedes the ability of YFOs to scale their interventions, maintain operations, and advocate effectively. The scarcity of resources limits their capacity to address systemic issues, such as gender-based violence (GBV) and gender inequality, despite their demonstrated potential to create transformative change in their communities (Federici 2004; UN Women 2022). For example, in Kenya, studies and interviews have documented that many YFOs have experienced funding shortfalls, which have forced them to reduce their program reach by up to 40%, thereby limiting their capacity to conduct sustained advocacy and community outreach (UN Women, 2020; EQI and Accelerator for GBV Prevention, 2021). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, grassroots feminist organisations have reported that inconsistent and inadequate funding has led to suspension of critical community engagement activities, resulting in a loss of organisational capacity and impact (Arutyunova & Clark 2013).

The Infantilisation of YFOs

Globally, the rise of youth-led feminist movements has shifted public narratives around gender equality, yet they face significant resistance, particularly in authoritarian regimes (Tambe 2018). This resistance is evident in state repression, such as detentions during protests, and restrictive legal measures that force grassroots organisations underground. Additionally, targeted harassment and censorship on social media further undermine these movements, while stringent funding criteria limit their operational capacity. African YFOs, shaped by unique historical and social contexts, often lead grassroots efforts to address gender disparities but face systemic marginalisation within the global feminist ecosystem. The belief that they cannot lead their emancipation and that of their communities often means they seldom receive core flexible funding and remain limited in their potential remit.

This marginalisation is reinforced by perceptions of YFOs as inexperienced, high-risk, and incapable of managing funding independently. Such perceptions stem from a global neoliberal capitalist framework that equates validity with institutional recognition and power, sidelining community-driven and youth-led initiatives (Nkrumah 1965; Equality Fund 2021). Postcolonial theory highlights how these narratives infantilise African organisations, framing them as dependent on external aid rather than capable of self-determination (Fanon 1961; Spivak 1988). This dynamic perpetuates dependency cycles and erases the agency of young activists in designing and implementing solutions tailored to their communities (Kabeer 2005).

Alternative Funding Mechanisms for YFOs

With these systemic barriers, YFOs use innovative funding mechanisms to sustain their work. One promising avenue is the adoption of gender-focused bonds—financial instruments often issued by governments or multilateral institutions to raise capital for gender equality initiatives. However, their complexity, including stringent regulatory requirements and high issuance costs, has limited accessibility for smaller, grassroots organisations like YFOs (Equality Fund 2021).

Feminist philanthropy has emerged as another critical funding model, emphasising long-term, flexible funding and donor accountability. Organisations like Mama Cash and FRIDA (the Young Feminist Fund) have pioneered approaches prioritising community-based solutions. For example, they support participatory grantmaking processes where local community members help set funding priorities, organise capacity-building workshops to train grassroots activists in digital advocacy and

social enterprise management, and establish local advisory councils to oversee projects and ensure culturally responsive programming. These models empower YFOs to design their advocacy strategies and build the capacity needed for long-term sustainability (FRIDA 2019; Mama Cash 2020)

Digital platforms and crowdfunding campaigns have also provided YFOs with alternative pathways to financial stability. Platforms like GoFundMe and Kickstarter enable grassroots organisations to bypass traditional gatekeepers and engage directly with global audiences who align with their mission (Ford Foundation 2021). However, digital divides persist as a significant hurdle. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2020), internet penetration in Sub-Saharan Africa remains at approximately 28%, which is significantly below the global average. Moreover, research by the World Bank (2020) shows that limited digital literacy and technical skills further constrain under-resourced organisations, impeding their ability to manage online fundraising campaigns and digital advocacy effectively.

YFOs are also exploring localised resource mobilisation strategies, including social enterprises that align with their social missions. They can reduce their reliance on external donors while fostering local economic empowerment by generating revenue through initiatives such as artisanal crafts or community agriculture projects. These innovative approaches demonstrate the resilience and creativity of YFOs in navigating restrictive funding landscapes; however, they require more robust support from funders and policymakers to scale their impact effectively (Mama Cash, 2020; Equality Fund, 2021).

Why Supporting YFOs Matters

Funding YFOs is not just a financial imperative but an investment in transformative social change. These organisations bring unique strengths to the feminist movement, including intersectional approaches that address the overlapping oppressions of race, gender, class, and sexuality. YFOs are often embedded in their communities, enabling them to design solutions that are deeply responsive to local needs.

Moreover, their focus on youth leadership ensures the sustainability of feminist movements by cultivating the next generation of advocates. By addressing systemic funding barriers and prioritising the voices of young feminist leaders, stakeholders can empower YFOs to drive long-term change in the fight against GBV and gender inequality (UN Women, 2022; Equality Fund, 2021).

Findings

YFOs across Africa play a vital role in advancing gender equality and combating GBV despite facing systemic barriers. Financial instability remains a critical challenge, with most organisations relying on short-term or external funding sources, which are often insufficient to cover their operational needs. Structural barriers exacerbate their struggles, such as restrictive funding requirements, limited network access, and geopolitical challenges. However, YFOs exhibit remarkable resilience and innovation, employing alternative funding mechanisms such as community fundraising, social enterprises, and collaborations with feminist networks. Using an intersectional feminist and Pan-African decolonial framework, this analysis highlights the need for inclusive, flexible funding models that prioritise grassroots organisations, enabling them to scale their transformative impact effectively. These findings underscore the importance of addressing systemic inequities while amplifying the voices of young feminist leaders to promote equitable and sustainable solutions.

Data Analysis Survey

Operating in diverse contexts, YFOs confront systemic barriers, including restrictive funding mechanisms, geopolitical challenges, and capacity limitations. Financial instability is a recurring theme, with most surveyed organisations reporting a reliance on short-term or external funding sources, which often cover less than 50% of their operational budgets. This analysis draws on the experiences of YFOs from Kenya, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Tunisia, and Senegal to highlight the structural inequities inherent in traditional funding systems. These countries were chosen due to their varied socio-economic and political climates, which reflect the broader challenges faced by YFOs across the continent, as well as to ensure fair geographical representation from East, Southern, North, and West Africa. Organisations in these contexts face complex application processes, stringent donor requirements, and limited access to networks and partnerships. Despite these challenges, they demonstrate resilience and innovation, exploring alternative funding mechanisms like social enterprises, community fundraising, and partnerships with feminist movements.

Using an intersectional feminist and Pan-African decolonial framework, this analysis delves into the financial and operational challenges articulated by the respondents. It also highlights emerging solutions, including localised funding opportunities, capacity-building initiatives, and advocacy for policy reforms prioritising grassroots organisations. The findings underscore the urgent need

for inclusive and flexible funding models that support and empower YFOs to lead transformational change in their communities. By addressing these systemic issues and amplifying the voices of young feminist leaders, this analysis aims to provide actionable recommendations for developing equitable funding mechanisms and enabling YFOs to scale their impact effectively.

Country Profiles

The survey responses from Sudan, Tunisia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Senegal highlight both common and unique challenges that YFOs face in diverse socio-political contexts. In contrast, each country presents distinct structural barriers, and key recurring themes emerge, including restrictive legal environments, financial exclusion, and the need for adaptive strategies to sustain their activism.

Structural and Legal Barriers

YFOs in Sudan and Zimbabwe operate under some of the most restrictive civic spaces. In Sudan, ongoing conflict and an inability to formally register organisations force many initiatives to rely on informal networks, limiting coordination and funding opportunities. Similarly, Zimbabwean YFOs struggle under laws such as the PVO Bill, which restricts legal registration, making it challenging for them to access institutional funding. Kenya, while offering a comparatively more open civic space, imposes financial and bureaucratic hurdles. Funding bodies often require audited accounts and extensive operational histories, effectively excluding grassroots initiatives from funding opportunities. The government's proposed regulations on crowdfunding could further constrain an already limited financial ecosystem.

Financial Exclusion and Resource Limitations

Across all five countries, access to funding remains a significant barrier, particularly for informal and rural-based organisations. Tunisian YFOs heavily rely on social media for outreach due to limited resources for website development and formal communication channels. In Senegal, international funding transfers in local currency instead of dollars result in significant value loss, negatively impacting operations. Meanwhile, in Kenya and Zimbabwe, strict funding requirements favour larger, well-established organisations, leaving grassroots movements with few viable funding alternatives. Despite these financial constraints, YFOs across the region are finding innovative ways to sustain themselves. Kenyan organisations leverage community fundraising and social enterprises to diversify income, while Zimbabwean YFOs employ collective movement-based frameworks

and human-centred design to foster local ownership. Senegalese groups focus on grassroots engagement and community-driven impact measurement, tracking behavioural changes as indicators of success.

The Way Forward

While each country presents specific challenges, the overarching need for inclusive funding models, flexible registration processes, and capacity-building support is evident. Funding bodies must adapt their approaches to support informal and grassroots YFOs, particularly in conflict zones and environments with restrictive laws. By amplifying the voices of these organisations and investing in context-specific solutions, the broader feminist movement can enhance its resilience and impact across the region.

Statistical Overview

The survey's statistical findings provide a detailed snapshot of the systemic challenges, capacity constraints, and innovative practices that shape the work of YFOs in Africa. These insights are crucial for understanding the operational realities of grassroots feminist movements and designing strategies that address their unique needs.

Financial Instability

Financial instability emerged as the most pressing issue, with 91% of YFOs (out of 77) identifying a lack of financial resources as their primary challenge. The precariousness of funding is stark: 76% of organisations reported unstable or at-risk funding, with 50% operating on annual budgets of less than \$5,000, and a quarter of respondents surviving on less than \$500 annually. This situation underscores the unsustainable nature of current funding models and the critical need for diversified, stable income streams. Alarming, 30% of YFOs rely on a single funding source or have no income, leaving them vulnerable to abrupt funding cuts. A Sudanese respondent remarked, *"We have ready projects but cannot implement them due to funding issues and the ongoing conflict,"* illustrating how limited financial resources exacerbate the operational challenges posed by geopolitical instability.

Structural Barriers

Structural barriers are another significant impediment, with 83% of respondents highlighting issues such as complex application processes, stringent eligibility

criteria, and limited access to networks and partnerships. For example, funders often require audited financial statements or a minimum operational history of five years—criteria that exclude many grassroots initiatives, particularly those in their early stages, such as YFOS. Linguistic and cultural barriers exacerbate these challenges, with 67% of respondents, primarily from Tunisia and Sudan, reporting difficulties in accessing funding opportunities. A Tunisian organisation shared, *“We rely on informal platforms like Facebook for outreach, as we lack the infrastructure for formal communication channels.”* These barriers hinder access to funding and limit the visibility and reach of feminist movements in these regions.

Staffing and Capacity Constraints

Capacity limitations are widespread among YFOs, with 46% relying entirely on volunteers and only 14% employing paid staff. Limited staffing and technical expertise were cited by 70% of respondents as critical constraints, particularly in proposal writing, financial management, and digital literacy. A Kenyan organisation emphasised, *“We need financial capacity, auditing support, and annual reporting assistance to meet donor requirements.”* This gap highlights the importance of integrating capacity-building initiatives into funding programs to equip YFOs with the necessary skills and resources for sustainable growth.

Impact Measurement Practices

Despite resource limitations, 90% of YFOs assess their impact using qualitative and quantitative methods. Storytelling and *herstories* of change are widely used to highlight personal and collective transformation, while baseline surveys and participant data provide measurable insights into program effectiveness. *Herstories*, a feminist reimagining of the term “histories,” centre on the lived experiences and perspectives of women and marginalised groups, emphasising narratives often excluded from traditional historical accounts. Additionally, 80% of organisations actively use feedback from beneficiaries to refine their programming. This practice reflects a commitment to human-centred approaches prioritising the needs and experiences of the communities they serve, even in resource-constrained environments.

Findings

Challenges in Accessing Funding

Systemic barriers significantly hinder YFOs in their pursuit of sustainable funding and operational stability. In Sudan, the ongoing conflict has caused near-total operational pauses for many organisations. The conflict in Sudan, which began in April 2023, has profoundly impacted the nation, with devastating consequences for communities already facing systemic inequalities. The ongoing violence has disrupted access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and humanitarian aid, deepening vulnerabilities among women, children, and marginalised groups. For YFOs, the conflict has further exacerbated existing challenges, forcing many to pause operations due to safety concerns and logistical barriers. These interruptions hinder their vital work in addressing GBV and advocating for women's rights. Despite these obstacles, YFOs continue to demonstrate resilience, with some initiating grassroots responses to support affected communities, underscoring the importance of feminist solidarity in times of crisis. This situation has drastically limited their access to critical resources and networking opportunities. One respondent highlighted that *“some initiatives are doing great work, but they cannot implement projects due to the lack of funding and the conflict context.”*

In Zimbabwe, restrictive legal frameworks, such as the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Act, have significantly constrained YFOs, shrinking civic space and undermining their ability to operate effectively. The PVO Act, signed into law in 2023 despite widespread criticism, grants authorities extensive oversight powers, including the power to deregister organisations for vaguely defined “political activities” and impose severe penalties for non-compliance. These provisions create an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, making it increasingly difficult for grassroots initiatives to register, secure funding, and sustain operations. The hostile implementation of these laws further exacerbates the challenges, as enforcement is often used to target dissenting voices, disproportionately affecting young activists and feminist movements. For example, Namatai Kwekweza, a young feminist leader, faced arrest and intimidation for her advocacy work, exemplifying the precarious position of those pushing for social change. The restrictive environment has led to a chilling effect on activism, discouraging engagement and limiting access to resources, as donors become wary of partnering with organisations operating under such conditions. These legal and political barriers collectively hinder the transformative potential of YFOs, leaving many individuals struggling to navigate an increasingly repressive civic landscape.

Tunisia presents a unique challenge for YFOS, as many rely heavily on Facebook for outreach rather than formal websites. This reliance on social media platforms highlights the digital and structural limitations of smaller organisations, including the high cost of establishing and maintaining websites, as well as a lack of digital tools and training. Web designers are also in short supply, further compounding these challenges. As a result, many feminist organisations struggle to establish a strong digital presence or effectively showcase their work. During the survey, only two feminist organisations out of 77 were accessible for interviews, clearly reflecting both limited visibility and the lack of digital capacity among Tunisia's young feminist movement. This limited visibility is not just about online presence; it also encompasses offline interactions. It also highlights the broader issue that young feminists are less active and visible in the public sphere than their counterparts in other regions. This trend is evident in the fact that fewer organisations can establish themselves in the digital space, and those that often face significant challenges in reaching wider audiences. These constraints on digital outreach contribute to a sense of isolation for feminist movements in Tunisia, hindering their ability to attract support, funding, and broader recognition for their work.

In Kenya, grassroots organisations encounter strict funding criteria that disproportionately affect smaller initiatives. Many funders require audited financial accounts and extensive operational track records, criteria that often exclude informal or newly established organisations. One Kenyan respondent explained that the requirements *"make it impossible for small grassroots organisations to access much-needed funding."* Gatekeeping within traditional funding systems remains a significant obstacle for YFOs. Many funding calls are closed to pre-selected partners, leaving newer or informal groups excluded from opportunities. This exclusionary practice reinforces systemic inequities and limits the reach of vital feminist initiatives. A respondent from Zimbabwe noted, *"We fail to access opportunities as funding calls are mostly closed to already benefiting partners."* Such practices perpetuate the marginalisation of emerging organisations, regardless of their impact or potential. YFOs serving marginalised groups, particularly LGBTQI+ communities, face additional layers of exclusion. Kenyan organisations reported experiences of backlash, gatekeeping, and classism from mainstream feminist organisations, which often act as gatekeepers rather than allies. This dynamic exacerbates the challenges already faced by vulnerable groups, restricting their access to critical funding and support. These systemic, exclusionary, and discriminatory practices highlight the urgent need for more inclusive, flexible, and equitable funding mechanisms to empower YFOs to sustain and expand their transformative work.

Resource Limitations

Resource constraints for YFOs are a deeply rooted challenge, stemming from scarcity and barriers to accessing resources. The scarcity reflects the lack of sufficient funding, infrastructure, and skilled personnel to support grassroots efforts, especially for smaller or newer organisations that lack the visibility or connections to access more significant funding sources. However, the barriers to access are just as damaging. These organisations often face bureaucratic hurdles, restrictive donor requirements, and a lack of opportunities to form vital partnerships. Even when resources are technically available, the complicated processes to access them often leave out smaller or informal initiatives at the heart of feminist movements. This combination of scarcity and inaccessibility limits the potential of YFOs, stifling their ability to sustain their work, fulfil their missions, and truly create the transformative change they envision.

The survey revealed that a staggering majority of YFOs report unstable financial footing, with 76% relying on external funding sources that cover less than 25% of their budgets. This precarious financial state forces many organisations to operate with minimal resources, often jeopardising the continuity of critical programs. Capacity constraints are another pressing issue for YFOs. Many organisations highlighted challenges related to staffing, technical expertise, and compliance with donor requirements. A Kenyan organisation described their struggle, emphasising the *“need for financial capacity, auditing support, and annual reporting assistance”* to align with donor expectations. Although standard for large and established organisations, such requirements often become insurmountable barriers for smaller grassroots initiatives that lack the necessary infrastructure or skilled personnel to fulfil them. The absence of sustainable funding streams compounds these limitations. Short-term and project-specific grants dominate the funding landscape, leaving YFOs without the flexibility to invest in operational costs, professional development, or strategic growth initiatives. One respondent explained that unstable funding leads to a reliance on volunteer labour, which is unsustainable in the long term. This over-reliance on volunteers can often become exploitative, as many YFOs struggle to offer compensation or financial incentives, despite the significant demands placed on their staff. Volunteers, particularly those in grassroots organisations, frequently work long hours without pay, and their labour is often expected to cover a wide range of tasks from administrative duties to organising campaigns and events. This situation can lead to burnout and attrition, undermining the organisation’s sustainability.

Furthermore, this exploitative dynamic disproportionately affects marginalised individuals, particularly young women, who may not have the financial cushion to

sustain themselves while working without compensation. As a result, volunteers may be caught in a cycle where they are expected to offer their time and skills freely, even when facing economic insecurity. In this context, while volunteerism is vital to many organisations, the lack of financial support or stable funding makes it an unsustainable model in the long run, stifling the growth and impact of YFOs and perpetuating inequalities within the sector. This dynamic affects organisational effectiveness and places undue strain on individuals within these movements, particularly in contexts where external pressures such as political instability or restrictive policies are already significant. The lack of technical expertise further exacerbates these challenges. Most organisations noted a need for capacity-building in financial management, proposal writing, and monitoring and evaluation. Without these skills, grassroots initiatives often struggle to compete for funding or effectively demonstrate the impact of their work in ways that align with donor priorities.

Alternative Funding Mechanisms Employed by YFOs

Despite persistent structural and financial barriers, African YFOs demonstrate resilience and ingenuity by adopting alternative funding mechanisms. These approaches reflect their ability to navigate restrictive funding landscapes and sustain critical work in advancing gender equality and combating GBV. The survey responses highlight the diversity and innovation of these mechanisms, offering valuable lessons for funders and policymakers.

Social Enterprises and Economic Innovation

Social enterprises have emerged as a transformative model for many YFOs, providing financial stability while advancing the organisations' social missions. These enterprises sell goods or services that align with their values and objectives, generating revenue to sustain their core activities. For example, in Zimbabwe and Senegal, YFOs have explored ventures such as artisanal crafts, agricultural products, and eco-friendly solutions as sources of income. These initiatives do more than just provide funding as they also foster skills development, local economic empowerment, and social cohesion, particularly among marginalised groups. A respondent from Zimbabwe noted, *"Our social enterprise helps fund our advocacy while providing jobs for women in the community."* This approach highlights the potential of integrating economic innovation into feminist activism, creating pathways for financial sustainability and long-term social impact.

Despite the promise of social enterprises, the lack of clear legal frameworks in some countries presents significant challenges. In many countries analysed, such as Zimbabwe, Sudan, and Tunisia, there are no specific laws or regulations explicitly governing the registration and operation of social enterprises. In Zimbabwe, for instance, organisations often have to register under the Private Voluntary Organisations Act [Chapter 17:05], the Companies and Other Business Entities Act [Chapter 24:31], or as trusts under the Deeds Registries Act. None of these frameworks is tailored to accommodate the hybrid nature of social enterprises, which aim to achieve both social impact and financial sustainability. This legal ambiguity presents challenges for YFOS seeking to operate as social enterprises. Without clear guidelines, they may face uncertainty regarding taxation, business operations, and legal status, which can make it more challenging to secure funding, attract investment, and ensure long-term viability. Starting a social enterprise can be particularly daunting in countries like Zimbabwe, where the broader regulatory environment is already restrictive. The absence of a supportive legal infrastructure leaves YFOs vulnerable to compliance issues, forcing them to navigate a complex web of inconsistent policies that fail to reflect their dual-purpose missions.

Additionally, while social enterprises can provide financial sustainability, accessing startup capital is often a significant hurdle. Indeed, financial systems do not support startups, especially those with a social mission. Traditional funding channels, such as banks and investors, may be reluctant to invest in ventures that do not promise high financial returns. In this context, YFOs must rely on alternative funding sources, such as crowdfunding, grants, or partnerships with local businesses and cooperatives. Even when such funds are available, the startup money is often insufficient to scale social enterprises or sustain their operations in the long term. There is a need for stronger legal frameworks, more accessible startup capital, and improved support for social enterprises. Establishing a supportive environment for social enterprises in feminist spaces could significantly strengthen the capacity of YFOs to sustain their activities and increase their impact on the ground.

Community Fundraising, Crowdfunding, and Digital Campaigns

Community-focused fundraising has emerged as a vital strategy for many YFOs, enabling them to reduce reliance on external donors while fostering local ownership and support. 60% of respondents reported leveraging social enterprises, crowdfunding platforms, and local fundraising initiatives to sustain their operations.

One respondent shared, *“We fund our projects through poultry farming and gardening, which provide a steady income while keeping us connected to the community.”* These activities generate revenue and align with the organisation’s broader goals of promoting food security and community resilience. Similarly, in Kenya, grassroots initiatives organise community fundraising events and member contributions to fund their programs. These approaches emphasise the importance of local buy-in, ensuring that funding remains closely tied to the communities they serve.

Crowdfunding and digital campaigns have become vital lifelines for YFOS, providing an innovative way to connect with a broad base of supporters and reduce their reliance on traditional funding structures. By utilising platforms like GoFundMe and local equivalents, many organisations can raise small contributions from individuals who may not have the financial means to make large donations, but still believe in the cause. One Kenyan organisation shared their experience: *“Crowdfunding allows us to connect with individuals who believe in our cause, even if they cannot contribute large amounts. Every small donation counts.”* These digital tools help YFOs bypass traditional gatekeepers, offering greater access to financial support for grassroots initiatives. However, while crowdfunding can be a game-changer, it also comes with hidden costs and challenges. For one, the digital divide remains a significant barrier in many regions. In countries where internet access is limited or expensive, or digital literacy is low, YFOs face an uphill battle reaching potential donors. Special skills are required to create effective campaigns, including digital marketing, social media management, and crafting compelling narratives that resonate with potential supporters. Additionally, the platforms often charge fees, and managing a crowdfunding campaign can be time-consuming, requiring dedicated staff or volunteers to monitor progress, engage with donors, and handle the financial aspects of the campaign.

Crowdfunding has proven to be particularly effective in times of crisis. In Kenya, for instance, during last year’s protests, crowdfunding was essential for organising and mobilising resources quickly. It allowed activists to bypass traditional funding structures, enabling them to access immediate funds to support their work. However, this has led to a proposed bill to regulate crowdfunding platforms, signalling the state’s intention to control how such resources are raised and spent. The bill, if passed, could impose restrictions on fundraising activities, adding another layer of challenge for organisations already operating in a restricted and hostile environment. This tension highlights the risks of relying on digital tools in politically volatile contexts, where activism is often under threat.

Collaborative Partnerships and Feminist Networks

Collaboration has proven to be a cornerstone of alternative funding strategies, offering YFOs the opportunity to pool resources, share expertise, and amplify their collective impact. 75% of respondents emphasised the importance of partnerships with other feminist organisations and networks as a key strategy in navigating resource constraints and reducing operational costs. Feminist funding circles, where organisations collectively allocate resources to shared priorities, have emerged as an innovative model, reflecting a commitment to solidarity and mutual support. One Kenyan respondent noted, *“Collaboration through feminist networks not only strengthens our work but also provides access to resources and mentorship.”* However, while collaboration can be transformative, it has challenges. Existing organisations—especially those with longer histories—often dominate these networks, unintentionally sidelining nascent groups still finding their footing. This dynamic creates a power imbalance, where older, more established organisations set the agenda and control resources, making it difficult for younger feminist organisations to be heard or fully participate. The barriers to intergenerational collaboration are particularly evident when nascent YFOs lack the same access to networks, institutional knowledge, or digital capacity as their more established counterparts. Despite these obstacles, many nascent YFOs remain determined to build connections, navigating these power imbalances by seeking out smaller, more informal networks and feminist circles that are more inclusive and supportive of new initiatives. This struggle highlights the need for more intentional strategies to create space for younger feminist organisations in collaborative spaces, ensuring that intergenerational solidarity is not just an ideal but a practical reality.

Local Resource Mobilisation

Localised resource mobilisation efforts have become a vital strategy for many YFOs, especially as they seek to reduce their dependence on external donors and strengthen their ties to the communities they serve. These organisations cultivate a sense of shared ownership by engaging community members, local businesses, and regional philanthropists, fostering greater accountability and trust. This localised approach helps organisations build a more sustainable funding base and promotes long-term impact, as it ties the success of initiatives to the community’s well-being.

In Senegal, for instance, some YFOs have formed strategic partnerships with local cooperatives, which serve as critical sources of funding and resources. These

cooperatives, often composed of community members pooling resources for mutual benefit, enable organisations to access financial contributions, materials, labour, and technical skills. One respondent shared, *“Our partnership with local cooperatives has been instrumental in sustaining our work, especially in rural areas where external funding is harder to secure.”* This localised support network enables organisations to operate in areas where external funding is scarce or non-existent, particularly in rural regions where financial resources are limited. However, while these efforts are innovative and influential, they are not without challenges. Given the widespread poverty in many communities, the financial capacity to contribute to these initiatives can be limited. In many cases, the resources available through local businesses or cooperatives may be modest, affecting the overall scope and sustainability of YFOs’ programs. Additionally, the financial contributions of local philanthropists may be constrained by their economic realities, limiting the impact of such fundraising efforts.

Another potential connection between localised mobilisation and sustainable funding is the establishment of small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that community members or local activists often lead. By fostering these local businesses, YFOs can create more robust economic networks that generate income to support social causes. However, YFOs must navigate challenges such as limited access to capital, infrastructure, and market opportunities for this model to be effective. Moreover, for those living in poverty, investing in or supporting local enterprises requires careful attention to balancing social impact with economic feasibility.

Advocacy for Flexible and Decolonial Funding Models

Beyond implementing alternative mechanisms, YFOs actively advocate for changes to existing funding models to make them more inclusive and sustainable. **85%** of respondents supported multi-year flexible grants, feminist funding circles, and participatory grant-making as viable alternatives to traditional systems. A Sudanese respondent emphasised the importance of co-creating funding frameworks: *“Donors should work with us to design funding models that are equitable, culturally sensitive, and reflective of local realities.”* This call for a decolonial approach to funding underscores the need to dismantle paternalistic practices and centre the voices of grassroots movements in funding decisions.

Measuring Impact and Advocacy

YFOs in Africa demonstrate a range of creative and context-sensitive approaches to measuring their impact, reflecting the diversity and adaptability of their work. Many organisations prioritise qualitative methods to capture the depth and complexity of their interventions. Storytelling, for instance, is widely used to document “*herstories*” of change, highlighting personal and collective experiences that illustrate progress in gender equality and the fight against gender-based violence (GBV). This approach allows YFOs to showcase the human impact of their initiatives, moving beyond traditional metrics to emphasise lived realities.

Community-driven frameworks are also central to impact measurement for many YFOs, particularly in contexts where quantitative data are insufficient or inaccessible. Organisations employ baseline surveys and human-centred design methodologies to ensure their programs are grounded in the needs and aspirations of their communities. One respondent from Zimbabwe shared, “*Our programming is purely community-driven, and we co-create knowledge and solutions with our stakeholders.*” By engaging communities in developing theories of change and tracking indicators that reflect local priorities, these organisations ensure their work remains relevant and impactful.

Advocacy remains a cornerstone of YFOs’ efforts, with many highlighting the critical need for flexible funding models that enable responsiveness to emerging challenges. A respondent from Kenya emphasised, “*Flexible funding is essential to address emerging needs and build grassroots resilience.*” This sentiment highlights the importance of flexible financial support for advocacy campaigns, rapid responses, and long-term movement-building initiatives. These innovative impact measurement strategies and advocacy priorities reveal the unique strengths of YFOs. They underscore the need for funding mechanisms that respect and accommodate these organisations’ diverse approaches to create change, ensuring their efforts are sustained and amplified.

Limitations in Outreach and Research

Challenges in outreach and research underscore significant barriers to engaging with YFOs in regions like Sudan and Tunisia, where digital divides, conflict zones, and structural inequalities persist. These limitations highlight the need for localised, adaptive, and culturally sensitive approaches to ensure inclusivity and comprehensive representation.

In Sudan, ongoing conflict has disrupted communication networks and limited the operational capacity of many YFOs. One organisation noted that their members are scattered across different locations due to the conflict, making it challenging to maintain coordination or participate in regional networks. Despite these barriers, grassroots initiatives often operate informally, relying heavily on personal networks and community connections. However, these efforts are primarily underrepresented in formal research and funding due to the lack of accessible outreach channels. Similarly, in Tunisia, the reliance on informal and digital platforms, such as Facebook, rather than formal websites or structured networks, has created obstacles to identifying and engaging with feminist organisations. This reflects a broader digital divide that disproportionately impacts smaller and informal groups, limiting their visibility and access to research and funding opportunities. One Tunisian respondent mentioned that their reliance on social media resulted from resource constraints and limited access to the technical expertise needed for formal organisational development.

The gaps identified in the survey responses point to a critical need for more localised and adaptive outreach strategies. Traditional engagement methods—such as relying on formal registration databases or maintaining an extensive digital presence—often exclude informal or emerging YFOs. To bridge this gap, funders and researchers must adopt approaches that consider the unique challenges faced by organisations in conflict-affected and under-resourced regions. For instance, partnerships with local networks, on-the-ground intermediaries, and community leaders can provide valuable entry points for identifying and supporting these groups. Capacity-building initiatives that equip YFOs with digital tools, technical expertise, and resources to enhance their visibility can address some of the structural barriers. These measures would strengthen outreach and empower YFOs to participate more effectively in regional and global discussions. By addressing these limitations, stakeholders can create a more inclusive ecosystem that values the contributions of all feminist movements, regardless of their size or formal status.

Recommendations

Governments

- Enact direct funding policies for YFOS: Develop legislation or budget lines that support YFOS working on gender equity and preventing GBV. Prioritise flexible, multi-year funding that allows for long-term planning and capacity-building.
- Establish enabling environments: Amend or remove restrictive laws that limit the operation and registration of YFOs. Simplify bureaucratic processes and provide transparent channels for youth-led organisations to access governmental grants and resources.
- Strengthen accountability mechanisms: Create oversight bodies or advisory councils with representation from YFOs to ensure the transparent distribution of government funds. Publish annual reports detailing how much is allocated to feminist and youth-led organisations, including measures to reduce corruption and political interference.

Multilateral Institutions

- Increase earmarked funding for YFO-led initiatives: Allocate specific percentages of development aid and gender-focused funds to YFOs, especially those addressing GBV. Introduce streamlined application processes that lower administrative barriers for smaller, youth-led groups.
- Facilitate capacity-building programs: Collaborate with YFOs to design training sessions on grant writing, financial management, and advocacy strategies. Provide opportunities for peer learning among youth-led organisations across different regions.
- Incorporate YFOs into decision-making structures: Invite representatives from YFOs to participate in program design, monitoring, and evaluation. Prioritise local expertise, intersectional perspectives, and the lived experiences of young activists in shaping global funding frameworks.

Private Philanthropy

- Fund feminist movements directly: Shift from large intermediary organisations to direct grants for grassroots YFOs. Emphasise core, unrestricted funding that allows YFOs to address urgent needs, innovate, and scale their interventions against GBV.
- Adopt participatory grantmaking: Involve YFOs in deciding which projects and groups receive funding. Reduce or eliminate rigid reporting requirements and co-design flexible evaluation metrics tailored to context-specific challenges.

- Champion intersectional approaches: Recognise the multi-layered realities of race, class, sexuality, and disability in youth-led activism. Encourage multi-sector partnerships and joint grants integrating anti-colonial, anti-racist, and feminist principles.

Private Sector

- Invest in social impact projects led by Young Feminist Organisations (YFOS): Create dedicated corporate social responsibility (CSR) portfolios or impact investment streams focused on feminist and youth-led initiatives. Offer venture seed funding or social enterprise opportunities to amplify their reach.
- Develop mentorship and partnership programs: Partner with YFOS and private sector professionals to build skills in areas such as communications, leadership, strategy, technology transfer, and pro bono services, thereby strengthening operational capacity.
- Promote inclusive workplace policies: Collaborate with YFOs to draft workplace guidelines on gender equity and GBV prevention. Extend these practices to supplier codes of conduct, thus reinforcing a culture of equality and accountability in broader value chains.

Civil Society

- Elevate YFO voices in coalitions: Encourage established NGOs and coalitions to include youth-led groups in leadership roles and decision-making committees actively. Share resources, campaign platforms, and advocacy networks to strengthen collective impact.
- Promote cross-regional collaboration: Connect YFOs across African countries to share best practices, pool resources, and engage in joint advocacy campaigns. Use digital platforms and regional convenings to facilitate ongoing exchanges.
- Foster knowledge sharing and documentation: Collaborate with YFOS to publish case studies and toolkits that highlight effective grassroots strategies for GBV prevention and gender equity. Disseminate these materials widely to inform policy discussions and shape donor priorities.

Conclusions and Way Forward

YFOs in Africa are at the forefront of addressing gender equality and GBV, bringing essential perspectives and strategies rooted in youth-led, intersectional activism. They stand out for their ability to mobilise communities, challenge entrenched power structures, and champion innovative solutions tailored to local realities. However, they continue to face significant funding barriers—from limited donor trust and restrictive grant requirements to entrenched patriarchal norms and political resistance. These obstacles hinder YFOs from scaling successful interventions and achieving sustainable impact.

The recommendations above aim to address these systemic challenges by urging governments, multilateral institutions, private philanthropy, the private sector, and civil society to invest in, collaborate with, and amplify YFOs. By offering flexible, long-term funding, adopting inclusive decision-making practices, and reducing administrative burdens, stakeholders can help build YFOs' capacity to lead transformative change. Moreover, nurturing cross-sector partnerships and creating open channels for youth representation ensures that the specific needs and insights of young feminist leaders are recognised and prioritised.

Moving forward, stakeholders can utilise this research to restructure current funding mechanisms, foster collaborative ecosystems, and secure meaningful participation from youth-led organisations in policy and practice. This requires ongoing dialogue, transparency, and mutual accountability. By committing to these changes, powerholders will strengthen the financial security of YFOs and contribute to a broader shift toward equitable, community-driven solutions that effectively combat GBV and advance gender equality across the African continent.

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How Climate Response and Mitigation Financing Intersect with Feminist Funding

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Advocacy Summary

■ Background and research question/objective

Given that the impacts of climate change and the need for adaptation are inextricably linked to gender issues, there is an urgent need to investigate how two of the most pressing challenges of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the 21st century are being financed. This policy paper examines the intersection of climate response and mitigation financing with feminist funding through voluntary and mandatory Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) frameworks in emerging market economies. Drawing on a comparative analysis of Kenya and India—two emerging markets with significant climate and gender-responsive development needs—this paper examines the regulatory frameworks shaping corporate and governmental actions. It seeks to understand:

1. How governments and corporations in these economies are regulated to ensure climate responsiveness.
2. The extent to which these regulations incorporate gender-responsive and mainstreaming elements.
3. Opportunities for feminist organisations to leverage these regulations for impactful change in their communities.

Recent philanthropic trends reveal a significant disparity in funding allocations, with only 0.42% of foundation grants being directed toward women's rights, despite growing awareness of the need for gender-responsive initiatives. In contrast, climate-adaptive and responsive funding has surged globally, reaching an average annual flow of \$1.3 trillion in 2021/2022 (Time 2023), almost doubling from the previous decade. However, much of this funding is directed toward mitigation projects, leaving adaptation efforts underfunded and grassroots organisations excluded. This disconnect highlights the compounded challenges that emerging market economies, such as Kenya and India, face, where intertwined climate and gender vulnerabilities necessitate systemic financial and policy interventions. The persistent lack of funding for feminist initiatives highlights structural inequities within development finance, undermining progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Addressing this gap requires integrating gender equity into climate adaptation financing while ensuring equitable participation from local and grassroots actors.

■ Key Findings

In emerging markets, globalisation and the presence of multinational corporations (MNCs) have introduced new financial opportunities through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) frameworks. In India, CSR regulations under the Companies Act, 2013, mandate that companies allocate 2% of their net profits to social initiatives, including climate and gender-responsive projects (Giving for Good 2024). Meanwhile, Kenya's voluntary CSR frameworks include progressive elements, such as the County Climate Change Funds (CCCFs), which encourage women's leadership in climate resilience (NDC Partnership, n.d.). Yet, these frameworks often fail to fully integrate gender equity due to limited enforcement and exclusion of feminist organisations from decision-making processes. Structural and procedural barriers frequently favour established networks or "gatekeeper" organisations, sidelining grassroots groups and limiting equitable access to funding opportunities.

Philanthropic and development donors also contribute to this fragmentation. While climate finance from development donors has surged, much of it prioritises large-scale mitigation projects over adaptation initiatives that directly benefit marginalised communities. Additionally, many philanthropic organisations continue to silo feminist funding from climate finance, missing critical opportunities to leverage synergies between these areas. Grassroots women's organisations, which often lack technical capacity or visibility, face particular challenges in accessing these resources. Fragmented funding ecosystems, combined with

a lack of transparent coordination between public and private actors, further exacerbate these gaps, preventing systemic funding allocation and impact improvements.

The evolution of CSR frameworks demonstrates their potential to address these shortcomings, particularly through Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) aligned goals. Companies like Google, L'Oréal, and IKEA exemplify the integration of gender equity into CSR strategies by combining internal operational practices with external philanthropic initiatives. However, such examples remain exceptions rather than the norm. Most CSR initiatives still prioritise compliance or reputation management over transformative systemic improvements. CSR-driven climate finance risks falling short of its potential without robust coordination mechanisms, mandatory inclusivity of women's rights groups, and consistently updated policies. Aligning climate finance with feminist funding priorities through transparent, inclusive, and adaptive public-private partnerships offers a pathway to advancing climate resilience and social equity.

■ Key Recommendations

Mandatory Regulatory Frameworks:

- ➔ Majority World countries should prioritise developing and enforcing mandatory CSR and climate finance regulations that explicitly include gender-responsive and feminist funding requirements.
- ➔ Mandatory CSR frameworks should be designed to facilitate compliance for MNCs while aligning with government strategies and policies. These frameworks should incorporate agile structures of contribution that prioritise equitable distribution and are informed by gender-sensitive or transformative requirements. Such measures are essential to ensure that local women's rights movements not only have access to these resources but are also positioned as key stakeholders in implementing CSR strategies and utilising allocated funds. This approach fosters inclusivity, enhances impact, and ensures that CSR contributions drive meaningful, localised outcomes.
- ➔ Prioritise funding for adaptation projects that incorporate a gender lens, ensuring alignment with both climate resilience and feminist goals.
- ➔ International and philanthropic donors should adopt intersectional approaches that connect gender equity with climate action, ensuring alignment and accountability within inclusive corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks and government strategies across the Majority World and Minority World, where the value chains of multinational corporations and their regulatory responsibilities converge.

Enhanced Public-Private Partnership Coordination:

- Mandatory CSR frameworks must be designed and enforced with inclusivity, adaptability, and responsiveness to ensure their effectiveness while avoiding politicisation.
- To support this, CSR frameworks should be developed in conjunction with collaborative platforms that promote ongoing cooperation among governments, multinational corporations MNCs, donors and NGOs.
- Oversight and regulatory processes must incorporate diverse stakeholder participation, including government bodies, private sector representatives, and NGOs. Particular emphasis should be placed on integrating local women's rights groups into the decision-making processes for CSR and climate finance allocation.

Transparent and Adaptable Funding Mechanisms:

- Design CSR frameworks to be regularly updated to reflect evolving priorities and maintain relevance and accountability at local, national, and international levels. Establish interconnected mechanisms for transparent reporting, monitoring, and evaluation to inform stakeholders and guide the continuous adaptation of these frameworks for greater responsiveness and impact.
- Enable platforms to align CSR frameworks with taxation, philanthropy, and other development priorities, ensuring cohesive and comprehensive funding strategies.
- Facilitate continuous realignment, optimisation, and impact assessment across CSR and all development finance efforts to address dynamic needs and priorities at national, regional, and local levels.

Capacity Building and Inclusion of Grassroots Organisations:

- Development actors and Women's Rights Organisations (WROs) must build their policy and implementation capacity to focus on the gender and climate nexus, positioning themselves as viable resources, actors, and implementers for future CSR and climate finance mechanisms. This includes preparing local WROs to meaningfully guide and implement CSR financing and climate response initiatives, ensuring these efforts are gender-transformative and community-focused.
- Provide technical support and capacity-building programs to grassroots women's organisations to enhance their access to CSR and climate finance opportunities.

Authors and Acknowledgements

[Catalystas Consulting](#), an intersectional feminist consulting collective founded in 2018, has operated in 89 countries, specialising in shaping, advising, and assessing foreign policy and development initiatives, particularly in financing. With a track record of raising over €280 million for NGO and CSO clients and advising on more than €500 million in public and philanthropic funding, Catalystas brings unparalleled expertise to the sector. The collective excels in tracking climate finance and regulatory frameworks in emerging markets, guiding the private sector on ethical engagement, and supporting feminist movements and leadership from the Global Majority. [Women in International Relations Network](#) (WIRN) is a feminist collective that seeks to amplify the voices of women and marginalised communities in foreign policy, diplomacy, peace and security, international development, and related areas. WIRN's geographical focus is on India, South Asia, and the Majority World. This policy paper is made possible by funding from the [Walking the Talk Consortium](#), comprising *Hivos*, *Equipop*, and *Restless Development*.

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Acronym List

ADB	Asian Development Bank	MCA	Ministry of Corporate Affairs
AFD	Agence Française de Développement	MKSP	Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana
APWLD	Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law, and Development	MNC	Multinational Corporation
AWIEF	Africa Women Innovation & Entrepreneurship Forum	MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development	NAP	National Action Plan
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa	NAPCC	National Action Plan on Climate Change
CAMPA	Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority	NAFCC	National Adaptation Fund on Climate Change
CCC	County Climate Change Fund	NDB	New Development Bank
CCCF	Climate Change and Catastrophe Fund	NEMA	National Environment Management Authority
COP	Conference of Parties	NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
CSO	Civil Society Organisation	OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility	PFM	Public Financial Management
DFI	Development Finance Institution	SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment	SOAWR	The Solidarity for African Women's Rights
EIB	European Investment Bank	SRI	Socially Responsible Investment
EMCA	Environmental Management and Coordination Act	UN	United Nations
ESG	Environment, Social, Governance	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
FCRA	Foreign Contribution Regulation Act	UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment	UNGP	United Nations Guiding Principles
GBV	Gender-Based Violence	UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
GCF	Green Climate Fund	USD	United States Dollar
GDP	Gross Domestic Product	WECF	Women Engage for a Common Future
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency	WEDO	Women's Environment and Development Organisation
		WRO	Women's Rights Organisation

Introduction

Climate change's impacts and the need for adaptation are inextricably linked to gender issues; there is a deep need to investigate how both of the most pressing issues of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the 21st century are being financed (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2023). This stark disparity hampers efforts to tackle the intertwined crises of climate change and gender inequities, especially in emerging markets like Kenya and India, where funding for climate adaptation and gender equity is critically lacking. This policy paper aims to address the urgent need for reforming climate finance and corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks to explicitly include gender-responsive and feminist funding in emerging market economies. Despite surging global climate finance flows, with over USD 1.3 trillion allocated annually, only 0.42% of foundation grants are directed toward women's rights (Time 2023).

Governments in the Majority World must mandate CSR frameworks that require gender-informed and transformative contributions, enforced through robust, dynamic regulatory systems. These frameworks must include transparent mechanisms for reporting, monitoring, and evaluation, ensuring alignment with national strategies and priorities. Local women's rights organisations (WROs) must be positioned as essential stakeholders in decision-making processes for CSR and climate finance allocation to ensure responsiveness to community needs and equity in distribution.

Additionally, development donors and multinational corporations (MNCs) must integrate intersectional approaches that link gender equity with climate action, aligning CSR efforts with government policies and global accountability mechanisms. Fragmented funding ecosystems must be replaced with collaborative platforms that unify governments, MNCs, donors, and civil society organisations (CSOs) to drive consistent realignment, optimisation, and impact. Simplified funding processes and targeted capacity-building programs must prioritise the inclusion of grassroots WROs, breaking down barriers created by established networks.

Majority World governments must lead the normalisation of mandatory CSR frameworks, not only to diversify development finance and climate response costs but also to prevent emerging markets from becoming havens for MNCs seeking to evade accountability. Immediate action is needed to align climate finance and feminist funding with inclusive, transparent, and enforceable frameworks that drive equitable and transformative outcomes across regions and sectors.

Methodology

This policy paper is informed by research that explores the intersection of CSR, climate responsiveness, and gender mainstreaming in emerging markets, with a focus on India and Kenya. The study employed a comprehensive methodology, starting with extensive desk research and stakeholder mapping to identify key actors, including donors involved in climate finance and feminist action, feminist organisations, CSR obligations, and relevant government policies. This foundational work provided critical insights into the existing landscape, highlighting gaps in funding and the integration of policy.

Building on this, primary data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with representatives from feminist NGOS, government regulators, donors, and MNCs. These interviews captured diverse perspectives on the inclusivity and effectiveness of existing CSR frameworks. The findings from both phases were triangulated to ensure reliability, enabling the identification of country-specific and comparative insights, the mapping of best practices, and the formulation of actionable recommendations for policymakers, corporations, and feminist movements.

While the research faced challenges, including timing constraints due to major events such as the Conference of Parties (COP) and the Africa Women Innovation & Entrepreneurship Forum (AWIEF) 2024, as well as the sensitive nature of CSR funding, the consortium's established networks facilitated the gathering of valuable perspectives. The resulting insights emphasise the need for mandatory CSR regulations that align with feminist funding and climate goals, ensuring resources are directed to women's rights organisations and grassroots climate initiatives. This paper aims to engage policymakers, activists, and researchers, providing actionable recommendations to drive systemic change and foster gender-responsive climate action and equitable development.

Findings

Overview of Focus Countries Gender Climate Nexus

The compounded effects of climate change and social inequities further emphasise the pressing need for increased development finance, yet funding for women's rights remains disproportionately low. This trend is particularly evident in emerging markets where globalisation has facilitated the entry of major corporations. Many of these corporations continue to rely on development finance to support their development goals and commitments. In certain countries, CSR models have transitioned from voluntary to obligatory frameworks. This shift has opened new avenues for financing, notably focused on climate adaptation efforts, which are often inaccessible to feminist organisations due to the lack of interconnection between these two critical causes.

Kenya

The Cross Dependency Index identifies Kenya as one of the most climate-vulnerable nations, with several regions facing significant risks to physical infrastructure due to climate change by 2050 (XDI 2024). The distribution of these risks varies across the country: the northern and northeastern areas are more susceptible to droughts, while central Kenya faces increasing land degradation, landslides, and soil erosion. Coastal regions are experiencing rising sea levels and an increase in extreme weather events, such as tropical storms (UNFCCC, 1992).

The effects of climate change in Kenya are felt most acutely by marginalised communities, including women, pastoralists, and smallholder farmers, potentially reversing years of progress in poverty reduction and sustainable development (UNDP 2020). Rural households are particularly vulnerable to shifting weather patterns and climate-induced disasters, with agriculture forming the primary source of livelihood for over 80% of Kenya's population, as well as contributing 33% of Kenya's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) directly, and another 27% of GDP indirectly, through linkages with other sectors (FAO 2023). Women account for approximately 75% of the small-scale agricultural labour force; yet, a review of county-level climate action plans shows that gender considerations are often overlooked, limiting the effectiveness of adaptation strategies (UNDP 2020). Research indicates that Kenyan women face heightened vulnerability to climate impacts, as they are more likely to bear the brunt of water and food insecurity, exacerbating existing gender inequalities (Gachathi and Obuya 2024).

India

The Cross Dependency Index ranks India third (XDI 2024) globally among countries with provinces facing the highest risk to physical infrastructure from climate change effects by 2050, with nine of its states in the top 50 most vulnerable regions. The country's climate risks are unevenly distributed: the southern zone is prone to extreme events, the northeast faces higher flood risks, the northwest is increasingly likely to experience droughts, and coastal areas are threatened by rising sea levels and intensifying cyclones (Mohanty and Wadhawan 2021).

Beyond geography, climate change impacts in India are felt disproportionately by vulnerable and marginalised communities, including women. They can erode years of development progress and lead to increased poverty (Climate Adaptation Platform 2024). More than 80% of India's population resides in districts and cities vulnerable to climate-induced disasters (World Bank, 2023). Yet, an analysis of city-led climate action plans reveals that gender considerations are largely absent in all plans (Mukund, Vishwanath, and Kabra, 2023). Some studies highlight that Indian women are more vulnerable to extreme temperatures (Down To Earth 2024) compared to men, amplifying existing gender disparities in health, economic opportunity, and access to education. To highlight another example, women's employment opportunities in the farming and agriculture sector, which employs 62.9% (Press Information Bureau 2023) of all female workers in the country, decreases by 7.1% (Afridi, Mahajan, and Sangwan 2023) more among them than among men in a given drought year, while their workdays fall by 19%. This disparity is driven not only by inherently gendered roles in agriculture but also by structural barriers that limit women's ability to transition into non-farm employment. While men diversify their income sources during droughts by taking on non-farm jobs, women remain in the farming sector (Afridi, Mahajan, and Sangwan 2023).

CSR Obligations and Regulatory Frameworks That Affect Large and MNCs

CSR obligations for large companies and MNCs have evolved from voluntary initiatives to regulated and mandatory frameworks across various regions of the world. These frameworks not only shape how companies address social, environmental, and ethical issues but also influence their operational practices and the welfare of their stakeholders.

CSR obligations generally fall into two broad categories: those that focus on internal business practices and their direct impact on value chains, and those that are proactive in fostering social and environmental good (often aligned with Environmental, Social, and Governance [ESG] goals). The latter may take the form of philanthropic initiatives. Examples of corporations that blend both internal and external CSR efforts include Google, L'Oréal, and IKEA, each bringing distinctive approaches to fulfilling their social and environmental responsibilities (Tamvada, 2020). The existing models of CSR are Ethical Social Responsibility, Environmental Social Responsibility, Philanthropic Corporate Responsibility, and Economic Social Responsibility. Corporations adopt their preferred models of CSR engagement based on existing legislations or alignment with organisational missions. While voluntary corporate responsibility measures are effective means for corporations to make an impact both within their businesses and within the ecosystems in which they operate, they do not encompass the track record of the majority of MNCs entering developing markets and economies.

In countries such as India and Kenya, CSR regulations are being increasingly utilised to guide MNCs in addressing climate and social issues. Both countries have implemented frameworks that move CSR obligations from voluntary actions to legally mandated responsibilities, ensuring that companies contribute meaningfully to sustainable development (FIDH 2021). While voluntary CSR measures have enabled MNCs to make a positive impact, particularly in areas such as sustainability and ethical practices, they often fall short in the developing world. This is mainly because many companies adopt CSR measures selectively, focusing on compliance or reputation management rather than implementing systemic improvements that can alleviate poverty and promote gender equity. Furthermore, the primary economic focus of developing countries is often to attract foreign investment and putting in place stringent legislations on CSR obligations can make a country unattractive to MNCs to consider entering given that expansion into emerging markets or production is driven by profit margins and ease of business which mandatory CSR can complicate if not designed and enforced effectively. Additionally, the lack of community awareness regarding how to claim benefits accrued from companies operating in their localities, combined with inadequate enforcement of benefit-sharing practices, is a problem.

Voluntary CSR initiatives often lack uniform reporting standards, allowing companies to highlight positive outcomes without clear benchmarks selectively. This leads to inconsistencies in impact reporting, making it challenging to assess whether CSR claims result in tangible improvements (Lin 2020). A 2020 European Commission study found that many companies would not engage in CSR activities without external pressures, such as regulations, customer expectations, or

reputational risks. Consequently, voluntary CSR efforts often result in symbolic actions, such as token environmental projects, rather than addressing deeper, systemic issues (Lin, 2020).

In developing countries, weak legal frameworks surrounding CSR further limit corporate participation in social and environmental causes. MNCs typically drive meaningful CSR initiatives when they are subject to international scrutiny or operate in regions with stricter regulatory frameworks. The World Economic Forum reports that companies are more likely to implement effective CSR programs when facing regulatory pressure. Laws such as the European Union's Non-Financial Reporting Directive and France's Corporate Duty of Vigilance Law, which mandate transparency and accountability, have compelled companies to adopt more responsible and impactful practices (Speeki 2023).

Regulatory requirements impose accountability by establishing clear benchmarks and legal consequences for failure to meet them, ensuring that corporations do not merely "greenwash" their practices. Regulatory frameworks empower local governments and international bodies to oversee and enforce CSR standards, guaranteeing that MNCs adhere to human rights, labour conditions, and environmental standards. By mandating due diligence and directive requirements of how CSR obligations should be applied, developing and emerging economies as well as global minority government can support directive means to direct and regulate in areas such as human rights, environmental protection, and social inclusion, regulatory requirements can push corporations to adopt practices that contribute to the broader development goals of emerging markets such as gender equality and climate adaptation policies.

In majority world countries, where MNCs enter emerging markets, there is a unique opportunity to leverage mandatory and directed CSR policies and regulatory frameworks to address pressing development needs. Countries such as Indonesia, Mauritius, and India have implemented various forms of CSR, paving the way for global minority investor groups to more effectively assess which companies comply with the growing requirements for Socially Responsible Investment (SRI). Mandatory CSR policies and regulatory frameworks, if applied effectively, can support directing finance toward development needs in emerging markets through philanthropic finance as well as through attracting and standardising responsible investment-related finance. One of the key benefits of mandatory CSR is its ability to draw in global funds guided by SRI standards, with the responsible investment community managing approximately USD 3 trillion in assets in the U.S. alone, which has already set significant precedence of rejecting investing in MNCs who do not align and comply with SRI standards

of practice in developing global majority countries such as Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Morocco, or Thailand (Yegon 2016).²

Kenya

Kenya's CSR landscape is shaped primarily by voluntary actions, as the country lacks a legislated requirement for CSR spending. However, the Vision 2030 national development blueprint and sustainability goals have encouraged widespread corporate engagement in areas like environmental sustainability, healthcare, and economic empowerment (Yegon 2016). CSR efforts in Kenya are driven by companies' internal policies, alignment with ESG factors, and global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Kenya has adopted the UN Guidelines on Business and Human Rights, operationalised through its National Action Plan (NAP) approved in February 2021, becoming the first African country to implement such a policy (Women's Economic Empowerment Hub 2023). The NAP, although non-binding, emphasises responsible business conduct and outlines a five-year strategy to translate commitments into actionable policies applicable to all corporations, stressing due diligence to prevent human rights infringements. It encompasses themes such as sustainable land use, environmental protection, and gender equity, supporting Vision 2030's goals of social, economic, and political transformation through a dedicated implementation framework. Kenya's commitment is further reflected in its adoption of the United Nations Global Compact (Global Compact Network Kenya 2024) and participation in the Paris Agreement, with updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) aiming for a 32% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and a strong emphasis on renewable energy, sustainable transport, and climate-smart agriculture (Republic of Kenya 2020). The private sector plays a crucial role in financing these initiatives through loans and corporate social responsibility efforts.

Kenya is actively incorporating corporate social responsibility (CSR), business obligations, climate change initiatives, and gender equality into a developing legislative and institutional framework. The National Treasury's Climate Finance and Green Economy Unit focuses on mobilising resources to meet Nationally

2. Several firms from Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Morocco and Thailand have been rejected outright by the California Public Employees Retirement System (CalPERS), which is the world's largest pension fund, because they do not meet the SRI criteria of CalPERS (Yegon, Elizabeth. "Corporate Social Responsibility Legal Framework, Policies, and Practices in Kenya: A Strategic Approach to Enhancing the Image of Libraries." *ResearchGate*. 2016. Accessed December 23, 2024. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311774860_Corporate_Social_Responsibility_Legal_framework_policies_and_practices_in_Kenya_a_strategic_approach_to_enhancing_the_image_of_libraries.

Determined Contributions and commitments under the Paris Agreement, notably utilising carbon credit trading as outlined in Article 6 for climate financing. Compliance with the Environmental Management and Coordination Act of 2015 is overseen by the Environmental Management Coordination Authority, which ensures protection of the constitutional right to a clean and healthy environment (Republic of Kenya 2020); nonetheless, CSR actions for businesses largely remain voluntary unless explicitly stated in individual agreements.

Recent advancements in Carbon Market Regulations (Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr, 2024) require companies involved in carbon projects to disclose detailed information regarding project costs and emission reductions, while adhering to the legal frameworks governing such operations. By 2024, businesses engaged in land-based projects will need to allocate 40% of their net earnings to community development through a Community Development Agreement. In contrast, those in non-land-based sectors are required to contribute 25% to both community development and the Climate Change Fund (EY 2024). The revised 2016 Climate Change Act requires multinational corporations, particularly those in resource-intensive industries, to adopt climate resilience practices and report their emissions. However, comprehensive implementation is still lacking, as only eight counties, including Makueni and Garissa, have fully embraced the Act, establishing Climate Change Adaptation Funds to tackle climate risks. Collaborations with global entities, such as the World Bank, have facilitated local policy adaptations, promoting initiatives in climate finance and resilience. This is exemplified by Kilifi County's updated climate policy and Kisumu County's establishment of Ward Climate Change Planning Committees. *"In terms of the environment, our role is to ensure counties have legislative frameworks....The Climate Change Act establishes the CCCF and also establishes the CFCs within the counties...The CCCF is streamlined to the community level. At the community level, Adaptation Consortium has done training on roles and responsibilities as far as environmental conservation is concerned, training community members on environmental hazards, what climate change is, the causes and what communities can do in fighting climate change," (Interview with Molly Ochuka).*

As counties continue to improve their implementation of the CCCF through the support of organisations such as the Ada Consortium, they also prepare themselves to receive funding from large-scale MNCs that require structures and bureaucracy to invest in CSR. As shared by Ms. Ochuka, *"Most donors or investors depend on existing structures; in Kenya, we can now say that all the counties are finance-ready."*³

3. Please see [Annex 1- table for Kenya Implementation of climate Change Act.](#)

Emerging Trends in the CSR landscape in Kenya

Kenya's CSR landscape is evolving, with companies increasingly integrating social and environmental initiatives. However, the absence of a binding regulatory framework leads to inconsistent practices, often driven by brand enhancement motives rather than long-term social impact. As noted by Osman Bagaja, Director of the Environment and Climate Change Department in Isiolo County, Kenya, *"There are no specific legislations on CSR; what exists is partnerships or the signing of MoUs when engaging with the private sector"* (Gituma 2024).

Despite the voluntary nature of CSR, many multinational corporations (MNCs) in Kenya are making significant contributions across various sectors. Environmental initiatives are particularly prominent, likely due to their tangible impacts. For instance, Standard Chartered Bank (Matheka 2021) has invested in environmental education and partnered with the Kenya Forest Service to promote urban green spaces (Equity Group Holdings 2019). Equity Bank Group has also partnered with the Kenya Forest Service in a 35-million-tree planting campaign. It has invested in clean energy, providing Eco-Moto loans that have benefited 100,000 households, thereby contributing to sustainable energy solutions.

MNCs also focus on community health and education. BAT Kenya has set ambitious carbon neutrality goals (British American Tobacco Kenya 2024), committing to plant 2 million trees annually, totalling \$54 million since 1978. Coca-Cola supports waste management and public recycling awareness through environmental education and recycling programs (Coca-Cola Beverages Africa 2023). In 2018, banks contributed \$14.3 million (Ksh 2.1 billion) to CSR, focusing on education, health, and environmental initiatives. Foreign Direct Investment increased by 11.6% between 2020 and 2022, reaching \$8.2 billion (Ksh 1.2 trillion), with Europe accounting for nearly half the total. Despite the challenge of balancing CSR obligations and regulatory frameworks, Kenya continues to attract foreign investment while advancing its sustainable development goals (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2023).

To enhance the effectiveness of CSR initiatives, a comprehensive regulatory framework is needed that mandates corporate contributions to social and environmental causes. Such a framework would ensure consistency and alignment with national development goals, moving beyond voluntary actions driven by profitability and public relations. Additionally, fostering partnerships between the government, private sector, and civil society can create synergies that amplify the impact of CSR activities, particularly in areas like climate resilience and gender equality.

Challenges

Challenges also remain in enforcing CSR-related legislation. Inconsistent enforcement, resource limitations, and varying regulatory capacities at national and county levels hinder effective implementation. The costs associated with CSR compliance and meaningful social projects can deter firms facing financial constraints, leading them to prioritise profit margins over CSR investments, especially without regulatory mandates. Additionally, the reliance on international support for CSR financing indicates a need for sustainable, locally driven funding mechanisms (Mbogo 2024).

Established organisations often become gatekeepers, preventing smaller entities from accessing capacity-building or direct funding opportunities. Additionally, the nascent stage of CSR regulations and policy implementation in Kenya means there is limited understanding among local communities and companies about CSR rights and corporate responsibilities. Without adequate awareness and capacity-building, local communities may not fully benefit from CSR projects, and multinational corporations may be unaware of their obligations. Building capacity within local governments and educating communities about CSR objectives, fund usage, and grievance mechanisms are essential steps toward empowering communities to hold companies accountable and ensuring CSR initiatives are tailored to their specific needs (Kenyatta University 2024).

India

India's CSR regulatory framework is governed by the Companies Act 2013 (Government of India 2013), which mandates that eligible companies meeting specific financial thresholds must allocate 2% of their average net profits over the past three years towards CSR activities. While not constitutionally enshrined, the CSR framework does somewhat aligns with India's constitutional values, specifically Article 21 (Government of India 1956), which guarantees the right to life and has been interpreted to include the right to a clean environment (Government of India 1956). Additionally, the Directive Principles of State Policy promote social equity and sustainable development (Government of India, 2024), laying a moral foundation for CSR in the country.

Traditionally, CSR spending in India has been concentrated on three main sectors: education, healthcare, and rural development. Despite the CSR framework encouraging investment in environmental sustainability and gender empowerment, these areas remain notably underfunded. For example, in 2023,

only \$46.39 million was allocated toward gender-related initiatives, underscoring a significant funding gap for gender equity (Sattva 2024). The prioritisation of gender in the CSR landscape remains unclear, as financing for gender equality is often embedded within broader initiatives, such as education and healthcare, raising concerns about its visibility and impact. While gaining gradual traction, environmental sustainability continues to rank fourth in CSR spending, with financial commitments significantly lower than the top three sectors.

A notable trend is the growing reliance on implementing agencies, which now execute 46% of CSR activities compared to 33% managed directly by companies. While these intermediaries bring expertise in areas like climate action, gender empowerment, and sustainable development, they also raise concerns about transparency and accountability, as companies may become distanced from the direct outcomes of their initiatives. An interviewee noted that while intermediaries can play a crucial role in bridging the gap between corporations and CSR recipients, they also introduce an additional layer of coordination and communication, which can complicate project execution. Moreover, these intermediary organisations and consultancies require substantial funding to operate effectively, raising concerns about whether a significant portion of CSR funds is being absorbed by intermediaries rather than reaching the intended beneficiaries.

Challenges

CSR initiatives often lack strategic alignment with long-term development goals, being influenced more by the priorities of company leadership. This perpetuates an outdated 'welfare' model, particularly in urban areas, where CSR activities primarily focus on education, health, and hygiene. Environmental initiatives are common in tribal and remote regions, typically near corporate factories and plants. However, this focus does not negate the fact that many of these same corporations have historically contributed to environmental degradation in these areas through mining, deforestation, and large-scale resource extraction. While CSR programs may fund afforestation and conservation efforts, they often do not address the root causes of ecological harm or the displacement of indigenous communities. Urban environmental efforts, such as tree plantation drives, tend to be superficial and fail to address complex sustainability challenges effectively. These gaps underscore the untapped potential for CSR to make a meaningful contribution to climate resilience and gender equality in both urban and rural settings. Despite growing awareness of the intersections between gender and climate change, these priorities remain underrepresented in CSR initiatives. The absence of structured frameworks and clear action plans impedes their integration into corporate agendas. While there is little overt resistance to incorporating

gender considerations within corporations, the lack of clarity and alignment hampers meaningful progress.

For NGOs and feminist organisations seeking CSR funding, a preference for established models over experimental approaches presents a significant challenge. Corporations, focused on visible and short-term outcomes, often avoid developmental models that require longer timelines and carry inherent risks. Foundations are more likely to fund innovative models due to their nuanced understanding of social issues, whereas corporate CSR often remains narrowly tied to immediate business interests. This dynamic limits the scope of CSR initiatives, emphasising the need for more diverse and innovative approaches that prioritise long-term social impact over brand-driven objectives. Integrating gender and climate priorities into CSR remains a significant challenge for both corporations and NGOs. The separation of climate resilience and gender equality in CSR initiatives limits their potential for intersectional impact. NGOs often concentrate on immediate program execution, overlooking broader connections to these critical areas. This fragmentation underscores the need for a more cohesive approach to CSR planning and execution that comprehensively addresses these interrelated challenges.

Addressing these systemic barriers is crucial to ensuring that CSR initiatives achieve their intended impact, particularly for marginalised communities and underrepresented issues such as gender and climate resilience. A more integrated and supportive approach involving corporations, intermediaries, and regulatory bodies is essential for fostering effective and sustainable social development.

One notable insight is the challenge CSR laws pose for NGOs, particularly smaller ones. An interviewee highlighted that their organisation had struggled with this issue in the past, finding it nearly impossible to comply with the strict timelines while ensuring meaningful project execution: If an NGO receives more than ₹1 crore (approximately \$117,000) in funding and does not utilise it within the same financial year, the unspent amount must be deposited back to the government, accompanied by extensive reporting and justification. This requirement is especially burdensome for smaller NGOs that lack dedicated CFOs or accounting teams, making CSR funding management challenging. Additionally, after filing taxes, most corporations only finalise their CSR budgets in Q2 or Q3 and begin disbursing funds in Q4. This leaves recipient NGOs with just one quarter (Q1) to utilise significant funds before the financial year ends—a nearly impossible task, given that most project cycles span 2–3 years. Although the law was introduced with good intentions, it no longer aligns with the realities of project implementation. It has become a barrier to the effective utilisation of CSR funds.

Geographic disparities also pose challenges for accessing CSR funding. Rural-based organisations often struggle to connect with CSR opportunities concentrated in urban hubs. Networking limitations and the reliance on personal connections exacerbate this divide even further. While government platforms exist to connect civil society organisations with CSR opportunities, their effectiveness has been limited, reinforcing the need for in-person networking and stronger connection-building mechanisms. Grassroots organisations also face challenges related to funding processes. Elaborate reporting requirements and extensive needs assessments are often prerequisites for securing CSR funding, but limited resources make it difficult for these organisations to meet such demands. Additionally, the lack of unrestricted or institutional grants restricts NGOs' ability to address broader organisational needs, as most CSR funding remains project-specific. Addressing these systemic barriers is crucial to ensuring that CSR initiatives achieve their intended impact, particularly for marginalised communities and underrepresented issues such as gender and climate resilience.

Another significant gap in CSR allocation exists for gender-related initiatives, despite many corporations embedding gender-focused goals internally through recruitment, promotion, and DEI strategies. This disconnect between internal corporate strategy and external community impact is evident in the disproportionately small percentage of CSR funds directed toward gender equity projects. This misalignment raises critical questions about CSR decision-making and corporate priorities in addressing broader societal commitments.

In India, the term “feminist funding” may inadvertently deter corporate support for gender-related initiatives. While feminist organisations often employ strong, advocacy-driven language, corporations tend to avoid explicitly using terms like “feminist” in their CSR documentation. This avoidance could stem from discomfort, reluctance, or a lack of understanding, which may limit corporate engagement in gender-focused projects. CSR efforts in India often focus on traditional sectors, including women's livelihoods, girls' education, water and sanitation, and the prevention of gender-based violence. Consequently, emerging areas, such as the intersection of gender and climate, remain underexplored. Interviews reveal that corporations struggle to find implementation partners for gender and climate initiatives, highlighting the need for increased awareness and capacity-building among corporate and government stakeholders. Additionally, non-urban audiences may not resonate with the term “feminist,” posing challenges for outreach and framing.

India's corporate sector possesses the financial capacity to drive large-scale social change. However, barriers persist in making CSR funding accessible to gender-focused and feminist organisations. To bridge this gap, it is crucial to identify effective

language, positioning, and strategies that attract corporate engagement in support of gender justice. A deeper understanding of corporate cultures and priorities is essential, as is fostering partnerships that align gender equity with corporate social objectives. Future research should focus on these dynamics to develop effective strategies for enhancing the impact of CSR on gender-focused initiatives.

Climate Action Financing and CSR Intersections

Climate action financing, bolstered by CSR and philanthropic contributions, is an expanding domain critical for addressing the urgent impacts of climate change, particularly in Majority World countries where women disproportionately bear the brunt of these challenges. Global climate finance needs are projected to exceed \$10 trillion annually by 2050, requiring substantial increases in funding flows. Despite doubling over the past decade, annual climate finance flows of \$1.3 trillion in 2021/2022 remain insufficient to meet these targets.

Governments and DFIs have incorporated gender-responsive strategies into climate financing frameworks, such as the Paris Agreement, which emphasises women's participation in climate action. However, these efforts often result in token inclusion rather than transformative grassroots engagement. Multinational corporations (MNCs) primarily focus their climate finance CSR efforts on business-aligned initiatives, such as carbon reduction and reforestation, leaving women's rights organisations excluded from decision-making processes and funding opportunities.

In Kenya, decentralised climate financing mechanisms, such as the County Climate Change Funds (CCCFS), have shown promise in empowering communities through participatory decision-making processes that prioritise local needs. These frameworks have improved women's representation in climate resilience planning, but remain limited in scale and consistency. Kenya's reliance on international financing—accounting for 79% of its mitigation costs—highlights the need for sustainable, rights-based investment partnerships. The country's legislation, requiring MNCs to contribute to the Climate Change Fund and community development, represents progress but faces governance and implementation challenges.

India's climate finance landscape, shaped by domestic initiatives like the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) and international cooperation, similarly grapples with integrating gender equity. While policies like the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana support women farmers in adopting climate-resilient practices, broader feminist participation in climate financing remains limited. Regulatory

barriers, such as the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), further hinder smaller NGOs' access to funding, perpetuating inequities in resource allocation.

Both Kenya and India reveal systemic barriers to linking climate finance with feminist funding. Grassroots women's organisations face exclusion due to limited visibility, capacity constraints, and socio-cultural norms. Feminist networks and intermediaries are crucial in bridging these gaps, but current funding structures often favor more prominent, established actors, marginalising smaller organisations.

To address these challenges, climate financing mechanisms must prioritise accessibility for women's rights organisations by integrating gender-responsive frameworks, streamlining funding processes, and fostering inclusive decision-making. Aligning CSR initiatives with broader climate goals and feminist objectives can ensure equitable resource distribution and enhance the transformative potential of climate action financing.

Assessment of Availability and Overlap of Funding Opportunities Between Climate Action and Feminist Movement Financing

Women's Rights Organisations (WROs) and feminist movements are at the forefront of transformative work on gender equality, yet they continue to face considerable barriers in securing adequate and stable funding, despite their critical role (Womankind Worldwide 2024). According to research by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), many women's rights and feminist organisations in the Majority World operate with annual budgets below \$30,000, revealing stark power imbalances within funding ecosystems (AWID 2022). Furthermore, the Handbook on Gender Communication and Women's Rights (Wiley 2024) notes that only a tiny fraction of development aid and foundation grants directly support these organisations—particularly those addressing intersecting forms of marginalisation—further exacerbating the challenges they face in accessing resources.

Meanwhile, global climate finance has surged, averaging USD 1.3 trillion annually in 2021/2022, compared to USD 653 billion in 2019/2020 (Climate Policy Initiative 2023). Although many climate funds are required to take gender-transformative approaches, the Gender-Responsive Climate Governance indicators from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) indicate that most initiatives remain in the mid-action stage (IFC 2024). As a result, much of this funding is concentrated

at MNC decision-making levels, rather than effectively advancing gender equity on the ground.

According to the Seeds for Harvest 2023-24 report, initiatives that address gender, climate, and the environment receive minimal financial support. Funding in these sectors ranged from just 1% of human rights grants in Eastern Europe and Central Asia to 6% in Latin America and the Caribbean (Seeds for Harvest Report 2024).

However, at the intersection of climate-responsive funding and feminist movement financing, a disconnect often exists. Research conducted by our team across 18 of the most significant global climate response funds shows that while gender equity commitments are usually present, through representation in decision-making, gender-responsive program design, and small grant programs aimed at women's livelihoods, these funds are not typically channelled directly to local feminist movements. In many cases, partnerships are established with long-standing, global feminist organisations that focus primarily on gender-climate policy, often at the multinational corporation level. These global feminist organisations may partner with local counterparts in the Majority World, but the extent of their effectiveness remains to be further investigated in our primary research. Such partnerships include collaborations with UN Women, the Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO), and Women Engage for a Common Future (WECF).

In some cases, larger alliances such as the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law, and Development (APWLD) or Fòs Feminista, which are broad federations, are involved. However, major climate finance initiatives are often complicated for local feminist organisations in the majority world to access directly for local feminist organisations in the Majority World, such as those in Kenya or India. This reflects a persistent challenge: despite the involvement of larger feminist organisations, local grassroots movements remain marginalised in the global climate finance landscape.

Kenya

In Kenya, a precedent is already being set for integrating gender into climate finance and the climate change agenda. In counties such as Wajir and Isiolo, the County Climate Change Act contains legislation requiring the participation of women in leadership and decision-making positions in the context of climate funds (Interview with Ada Consortium Member, paving the way for the rest of

the country to follow. Such integrations of climate action and gender equality present a key path forward as Kenya continues developing legislation and regulations around climate change and corporate activities like CSR. As Kenya continues to operationalise the CCCF at the local county level, further integrations can be realised, such as how to include women in community engagement and development of MoUs with companies conducting operations and CSR activities.

Simultaneously, the current status of large networks of NGOs as gatekeepers preventing small and new grassroots organisations from accessing information and opportunities for funding is an active barrier to many women's organisations that could otherwise be able to access climate finance opportunities (Interview with local grassroots representative). While intermediary organisations, such as Ada Consortium, play a crucial role in facilitating access to climate finance by providing capacity building to both local communities and government officials, they could be enabled to do more when it comes to ensuring that all grassroots organisations have access to information about funding opportunities, and that large NGO networks are held accountable as facilitators rather than gatekeepers.

India

India's CSR framework presents opportunities and challenges in aligning corporate priorities with gender-sensitive and climate-resilient initiatives. Many CSR activities remain owner-driven, reflecting traditional charity models that prioritise health, education, and livelihoods over climate or empowerment-based projects. This focus on tangible, infrastructure-based initiatives, such as solar panel installations, highlights a lack of understanding about the transformative potential of "soft development" programs like capacity-building and community resilience. Consequently, critical areas such as the gender-climate nexus remain underfunded and overlooked.

Feminist and women's rights organisations often find traditional international donors more effective than CSR funding for empowerment-based initiatives. Western donors typically exhibit a more advanced understanding of development processes, supporting long-term programs with transformative goals. By contrast, many smaller CSR setups in India lack the expertise to engage in meaningful development work. Corporations frequently approach CSR with an annual funding cycle, which is inadequate for the 3–5-year timelines to achieve sustainable development outcomes. The focus on short-term, visible results further limits the alignment of CSR with long-term gender and climate objectives. However,

opportunities for impactful partnerships with grassroots organisations could increase as corporations begin shifting toward sustainable, long-term projects.

A critical gap also exists in translating global frameworks into locally actionable policies. While international climate benchmarks are vital, their priorities often fail to align with India's socio-economic and geographic complexities, particularly in urban areas. Maharashtra, which receives the highest share of CSR funds in India, has shown promising leadership with initiatives like the Mumbai Climate Action Plan (MCAP) and 43 cities preparing their climate strategies. Despite this progress, these efforts lack a unified gender and climate lens, which remains a missed opportunity to amplify the impact of CSR initiatives. Municipal bodies have made strides in fostering partnerships between NGOs and corporates. However, addressing the intersection of gender and climate in urban governance and development policies is essential for maximising CSR's potential.

Development and Philanthropic Actors' Roles

This research also looked into how development donors integrate CSR with development goals, particularly in climate resilience and gender equity. Only a few actors are aligning their efforts in ways that support transformative processes within governments in Global Majority countries, enabling these nations to reduce their dependency on development aid.

For example, a 2021 World Bank study found that setting up parallel public financial management systems for projects cost four major donors—Gavi, the Global Fund, UNICEF, and the World Bank—\$1.2 billion in the health sector from 2011 to 2016. This significant expenditure could have been redirected toward programs delivering better health outcomes. Similarly, the lack of donor coordination and alignment with bilateral cooperation efforts for governance often affects national NGOs, especially feminist groups. These organisations, despite setting three- to five-year strategies, frequently have to adjust their plans to align with donor funding calls and objectives (Effective Cooperation 2024). For women's rights groups in Majority World countries, this has led to a greater focus on issues like women's livelihoods, GBV, education, and health care response, rather than proactive lobbying efforts on fiscal responsibility and spending. As a result, their ability to advocate for CSR regulatory frameworks is often limited. AWID found that in emerging markets, majority world countries, which have development needs lingering, financial constraints and donor-driven agendas, limit feminist organisations' capacity to engage in strategic advocacy efforts like lobbying for regulatory frameworks around CSR (AWID 2022). The focus

often shifts towards short-term service provision due to donor preferences for measurable and immediate outputs.

The lack of alignment in development efforts with bilateral cooperation has resulted in development actors financing NGOs and CSOs to fill gaps that government actors should be addressing. While these stopgap measures provide temporary relief, they do not lead to transformative, sustainable solutions. This issue is not new; the OECD's 2011 Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation report highlighted that fragmented donor approaches and a lack of coordination can significantly undermine the effectiveness of aid programs, particularly in governance and institution-building (OECD 2024).

The current approach often compels NGOs, especially feminist groups and civil society organisations in Majority World countries, to focus on short-term service delivery rather than advocating for systemic changes such as CSR regulatory frameworks. When donors prioritise immediate needs over structural reforms, it limits the potential for sustainable development and reinforces dependency on external aid.

Development actors must coordinate their agendas with each other and broader CSO and government networks that access funding to achieve lasting impact. There is a pressing need for development funding to align with bilateral cooperation efforts to pave the way for inclusive governmental reform. By involving local NGOs and CSOs in these processes, development initiatives can facilitate systematic governance changes rather than relying on temporary stop-gap solutions, strengthening government and civil society networks within Majority World countries.

For example, donor governments could finance and facilitate technical and advocacy support to help countries improve their Public Financial Management (PFM) systems, including budget, procurement, financial reporting processes, and supreme audit institutions. Strengthening these systems offers a more sustainable approach by providing a transparent and accountable framework for managing public and donor funds.

Furthermore, local feminist organisations, particularly grassroots groups, often encounter barriers in accessing climate finance. These challenges stem from limited visibility, lack of data, and capacity constraints, making it difficult for them to demonstrate their impact and attract funding (Climatelinks 2022). The absence of gender-disaggregated data on climate initiatives further hampers their efforts (WECF 2024). Additionally, these organisations are underrepresented in decision-making spaces, where critical discussions about climate finance and the allocation of resources for climate adaptation and mitigation occur

(Rights and Resources Initiative 2024). This lack of representation complicates the alignment of corporate resources with gender-focused climate initiatives (Climatelinks 2022).

In India, mandatory CSR has resulted in significant development contributions, but challenges remain regarding the breadth and impact of these initiatives. India's 2013 CSR Law, which requires companies to allocate 2% of their net profit towards social development, has led to a substantial increase in CSR spending, reaching over \$1 billion annually (India CSR 2024). However, this investment often gravitates towards “low-hanging fruit” in sectors such as education, healthcare, and localised environmental projects (Emerald Insight 2024). These initiatives focus on areas where companies have existing business operations, or a history of CSR and philanthropic activity, leaving underserved regions and deeper systemic issues unaddressed. Additionally, the perception of CSR as a compliance obligation rather than a genuine commitment has resulted in projects that prioritise short-term, measurable outcomes over transformative social change.

Similarly, Kenya's voluntary CSR framework shows a trend toward corporate investments in easily achievable areas to fulfill legal obligations. These flexible regulatory approaches aim to attract and retain MNCs by preventing overly stringent business practices (The Rockefeller Foundation 2024). This allows companies to comply with CSR mandates without significantly altering their business models. Such strategies may facilitate corporate engagement in social projects, but they often fail to drive systemic changes or address structural inequalities at a deeper level.

In both countries, the mandatory and voluntary CSR laws present opportunities for alignment with broader development goals. However, the regulatory frameworks favor projects that deliver easily achievable results, often overlooking more complex social challenges. For a more sustainable impact, there is a need for strategic oversight and incentives that encourage companies to engage in transformational efforts, such as addressing climate resilience and gender equity at scale.

Donors and philanthropic groups are crucial in leveraging bilateral cooperation and development partnerships to strengthen CSR impact in emerging economies like India and Kenya. By collaborating with local women's groups, NGOs, and government bodies, these stakeholders can build governmental structural capacity while providing MNCs with clear guidelines on channelling CSR funds effectively.

One approach is to support capacity-building initiatives that enhance the ability of governments to manage and regulate CSR activities. This could involve

strengthening Public Financial Management (PFM) systems and creating transparent tracking and reporting CSR spending mechanisms. Such systems can guide companies on how to align their CSR efforts with national development priorities, such as climate resilience, gender equity, and social inclusion, which are often underfunded despite their critical importance. Secondly, support capacity-building initiatives that enhance the ability of governments to manage and regulate CSR activities.

Additionally, creating a guiding body to direct CSR funding, regulate activities, and oversee impact can facilitate better business practices and improve the reporting and measurement of CSR financing outcomes. In India, intermediaries naturally play a role in helping MNCs align their CSR activities, while in Kenya, established mechanisms like CCCFs serve as natural pathways for MNCs to direct their CSR finance.

However, there is no actual mandate for these mechanisms to prioritise women's empowerment through inclusion and financing, nor specific climate-related mandates or reporting requirements. Such mandates could help governments and the private sector utilise CSR more effectively, creating lasting and transformative impacts.

Donors can also facilitate partnerships between MNCs, local women's groups, and NGOs, often better positioned to identify pressing community needs and implement grassroots solutions. By providing funding and technical support to these organisations, donors can ensure that CSR efforts meet regulatory requirements and deliver measurable social change. This approach helps bridge the gap between the often high-level strategies of corporations and the local realities where their CSR initiatives take place.

Moreover, philanthropic groups can help develop and disseminate best practices for CSR implementation, including frameworks for impact assessment and reporting. By offering easy-to-follow guidance on effective CSR strategies, they can reduce the burden on companies navigating different regulatory environments. This would enable businesses to make meaningful investments in women's empowerment and climate adaptation, which often require sustained, long-term commitments rather than one-off projects.

The collaboration between donors, local NGOs, and governments can significantly enhance the impact of CSR initiatives, ensuring that corporate investments contribute to structural development goals while making the business case for socially responsible practices more compelling for MNCs.

Recommendations

For Governments and Policy Makers in the Majority World

- **Mandate clear CSR contributions:** Establish legislation requiring corporations earning above specific thresholds—particularly MNCs—to allocate 2%-5% of gross earnings to CSR activities. Clearly define qualifying CSR activities and align these contributions with national priorities, such as climate adaptation, gender equity, and community development, ensuring the predictable and equitable distribution of resources.
- **Develop standalone CSR legislation where it does not yet exist:** Introduce comprehensive CSR laws to reduce ambiguities and improve enforcement. Standalone laws can clarify implementation, monitoring, and local-level enforcement in countries like Kenya, where regulations are embedded in various legislative frameworks. Include provisions that embed gender inclusion and climate resilience into CSR mandates to ensure underserved communities benefit directly.
- **Embed gender equality into CSR policies:** Require CSR frameworks to prioritise gender equity and inclusion explicitly. Governments should make gender-responsive programming a non-negotiable aspect of CSR projects, ensuring these efforts align with international development commitments, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- **Establish oversight bodies:** Create semi-government entities composed of representatives from CSOs, feminist organisations, and government agencies to oversee CSR activities. These bodies should:
 - Monitor, review, and evaluate corporate initiatives.
 - Enforce compliance through penalties and incentivise multi-year adherence with tax benefits or regulatory advantages.
 - Ensure equitable fund distribution across regions and sectors, particularly to underserved areas.
- **Localise implementation mechanisms:** Support regionalised models like Kenya's CCCFs, which integrate community priorities with CSR projects. Such localised approaches ensure resources reach vulnerable communities and address specific challenges.
- **Collaborate with local communities:** Actively involve communities in the planning and implementing CSR projects. Mandate participatory approaches to ensure initiatives reflect local priorities and promote community ownership.

For Feminist Organisations in the Majority World

- **Integrate climate adaptation into mandates:** Identify intersections between feminist advocacy and climate resilience to access CSR and climate finance. Organisations should collaborate with environmental groups to bring a gender lens to climate action.
- **Offer gender-transformative advisory services:** Position feminist organisations as experts in designing and implementing CSR projects that promote equity, inclusion, and sustainability. This will enable MNCs to meet DEI requirements while addressing systemic inequalities.
- **Engage with government and oversight bodies:** Work with policymakers and regulators to ensure gender expertise is included in CSR frameworks and funding decisions. Advocate for policies that mandate the inclusion of feminist organisations in CSR planning and implementation processes.
- **Build networks for collective impact:** Form regional or national consortiums to increase visibility, access funding, and enhance influence in CSR and climate finance discussions. By collaborating, feminist organisations can scale their impact and share resources effectively.

For Development Donors and Philanthropic Actors

- **Drive Inclusive and Adaptive CSR Frameworks:** Fund and provide bilateral technical support to develop and enforce mandatory CSR frameworks that are inclusive, adaptable, and responsive to evolving priorities. Establish collaborative platforms to enhance coordination among governments, MNCs, donors, and NGOs, ensuring alignment, streamlined processes, and consistent optimisation for impactful and equitable outcomes.
 - **Foster Collaborative Alignment:** Establish platforms that facilitate continuous collaboration among governments, MNCs, and NGOs to ensure that development objectives, trade goals, and CSR policies are mutually informed, aligned, and comparable. This approach enhances regulatory coherence and promotes sustainable practices across sectors.
 - **Standardise Impact Metrics:** Develop and implement standardised indicators and measurement frameworks for CSR initiatives to ensure consistency and comparability across stakeholders. This standardisation enables effective assessment of social outcomes and business performance, fostering transparency and accountability in CSR activities
 - **Promote transparency and accountability:** Establish publicly accessible data repositories that track CSR fund allocations, regional investments, and sector-specific initiatives. Such platforms allow donors to identify gaps and effectively align their contributions with local priorities.

- **Demand and Drive Stakeholder-Driven Oversight:** Integrate diverse stakeholder participation in CSR oversight and regulatory processes, prioritising the inclusion of local women's rights groups in decision-making. This ensures frameworks are legitimate, responsive to local needs, and effectively drive equitable climate finance allocation and community impact.
- **Support capacity-building initiatives:** Fund programs to train CSOs, grassroots organisations, and feminist groups in accessing and managing CSR funds. Donors can also provide technical assistance in proposal writing, compliance, and impact measurement to level the playing field for smaller organisations.
- **Advocate for gender-transformative CSR investments:** Push corporations to integrate gender equity into CSR projects, demonstrating how such initiatives align with DEI goals, enhance community resilience, and foster long-term economic stability.
- **Promote long-term funding models:** Encourage multi-year CSR funding cycles to enable sustained impact and systemic change. Donors should work with governments to address regulatory barriers that limit longer project timelines.

For MNCs in the Majority World

- **Align CSR with mandatory frameworks:** Recognise that mandatory CSR obligations are not barriers but opportunities to demonstrate leadership in social responsibility. Leverage CSR activities to meet DEI reporting requirements, which are increasingly critical for investors and stakeholders.
- **Leverage data to drive marketing and growth:** Use impact data from CSR projects to highlight social and environmental contributions. Incorporate this information into marketing campaigns to attract socially conscious consumers and investors, transforming CSR from a compliance obligation to a strategic advantage.
- **Engage in localised partnerships:** Build meaningful collaborations with grassroots organisations and CSOs to ensure CSR efforts address community-specific needs. Localised partnerships enhance trust and maximise the impact of corporate investments.
- **Focus on gender-responsive programming:** Prioritise CSR initiatives that empower women, particularly in climate-vulnerable regions. Programs that address systemic inequalities—such as access to education, economic empowerment, and health—generate measurable community improvements and align with global sustainability goals.

For Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the Majority World

- **Advocate for inclusive CSR frameworks:** Actively advocate for governments and corporations to adopt policies prioritising grassroots participation and gender-responsive programming. CSOs should use their expertise to ensure CSR initiatives align with local needs.
- **Build capacity for CSR engagement:** Strengthen organisational capabilities to meet CSR compliance requirements through proposal development, reporting, and impact assessment training. This preparedness will increase their competitiveness in accessing CSR funding.
- **Form coalitions to increase influence:** Collaborate with other CSOs, feminist organisations, and environmental groups to pool resources and expertise, amplifying their collective voice in CSR discussions. Coalitions can also improve access to larger funding pools and increase visibility. Efforts must be made to create inclusive alliances that do not become gatekeepers or exclusionary networks.
- **Engage in partnerships with MNCs:** Act as implementation partners for CSR projects, providing local knowledge and ensuring initiatives reflect the needs and priorities of the communities they serve.

Conclusions and Way Forward

As of early 2025, development budgets are facing cuts globally, and the already precarious state of feminist funding is set to become even more severe. This reality places feminist movements, women's rights organisations, and climate justice movements in a challenging position—where traditional sources of financing are shrinking, yet the need for gender-equitable climate and development policies has never been greater. The experiences of India and Kenya, two large economies in the majority world, offer critical insights into how regulatory frameworks, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and climate finance can be leveraged to bridge these gaps. Their models—whether India's mandatory CSR framework or Kenya's evolving climate finance strategies—demonstrate some good practices that can be adapted elsewhere in the global majority. However, feminist civil society must also find new, creative ways to fund their causes, whether by strategically engaging corporate actors, influencing ESG priorities, or embedding gender-focused accountability mechanisms within existing funding structures. While CSR is not inherently feminist, it possesses the capacity to fund feminist initiatives, provided that civil society actively shapes these processes. Now is the moment for feminist networks, activists, and organisations across the board to claim space in these discussions—ensuring that as global finance and development priorities shift, gender justice remains at the center, rather than an afterthought.

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Annex 1: Table for Kenya Implementation of Climate Change Act

Implemented Climate Change Act	Pending Full Implementation
Makueni	Nairobi
Garissa	Bomet
Isiolo	Tana River
Kitui	Elgeyo-Marakwet
Wajir	Nyamira
Kilifi	Meru
Embu	Kirinyaga
Kisumu	Uasin Gishu

Annex 2: Detailed Trends Analysis of Climate Finance and CSR per Country and Globally

CSR and philanthropic efforts are rapidly expanding to address the pressing challenges of climate change. This is particularly crucial for countries in the Majority World, where existing development issues exacerbate the impacts of global warming, especially for women.

Annual global climate finance needs are projected to rise from \$8.1–\$9 trillion through 2030 and exceed \$10 trillion annually by 2050. To mitigate the worst impacts, financing must increase five-fold annually as soon as possible. Financing from governments, development financial institutions (DFIs), households, and corporations has already doubled or tripled over the past decade, with average annual flows reaching \$1.3 trillion in 2021/2022, nearly double the levels of 2019/2020 (Buchner et al. 2023).

DFIs and bilateral initiatives are beginning to incorporate gender-responsive strategies, influenced by frameworks like the Paris Agreement, which emphasises women's participation in climate action. However, while all 19 climate funds assessed include commitments to women's inclusion, these often result in token representation rather than meaningful grassroots engagement or influential roles. Most participation is limited to high-level decision-making within small elite networks, excluding broader representation of women in vulnerable communities.

MNCs primarily direct their climate finance CSR efforts toward initiatives that align with their business strategies, such as carbon emission reduction, renewable

energy investments, sustainable supply chain management, and nature-based solutions like reforestation and conservation. While these initiatives contribute to climate mitigation and corporate sustainability goals, access to climate finance remains largely inaccessible to women's rights organisations. Research indicates that only 0.01% of global funding supports projects addressing both climate change and women's rights (Climate Policy Initiative 2024), with systemic barriers such as exclusion from decision-making processes, limited representation, and capacity constraints, including insufficient staff and technical expertise, further hindering their ability to secure funding. Addressing this disparity requires targeted reforms to climate finance mechanisms to ensure inclusivity and equitable access, empowering women's organisations to play a more significant role in climate action.

Government strategies and policies, both nationally and internationally, play a critical role in directing climate adaptation financing. However, these often fail to align climate goals with gender equity objectives, creating a disconnect between financing structures and on-the-ground needs. Governments in the Majority World frequently create financing opportunities aligned with strategic priorities but struggle to bridge the gap between climate resilience and gender inclusion. This misalignment mirrors gaps in CSR policy structures, underscoring the need for integrated approaches to address climate challenges and gender disparities effectively.

Kenya

Kenya's climate financing strategy heavily prioritises mitigation, with adaptation initiatives receiving significantly less funding despite the increasing severity of extreme weather events. To meet its Nationally Determined Contributions target of a 32% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, Kenya relies on international financing for 79% of mitigation costs, emphasising the need for sustainable, rights-based

investment partnerships with public and private stakeholders. Public and private contributions to Kenya's climate finance include 23% \$249.38 million USD (Ksh 37.4 billion) from government allocations, 40% from DFIs, 19% from the private sector, and 18% from philanthropic sources (Climate Policy Initiative 2024). Public funds are predominantly allocated to renewable energy (33%), water and waste management (19%),

and transmission systems (25%), while adaptation-focused sectors such as agriculture (9%), disaster risk mitigation (2%), and health (2%) remain underfunded (Green Climate Fund 2024).

The Adaptation Fund, managed by the National Environmental Management Authority, finances resilience-building projects in water management, food security, agroforestry, and coastal ecosystem protection. Additional funding from the Green Climate Fund supports clean energy initiatives like KawiSafi Ventures (KawiSafi Ventures 2024), which provides affordable energy access and reduces carbon emissions. However, governance challenges, including fund misallocation, often hinder the intended impact of these resources (KawiSafi Ventures 2024).

Decentralised climate financing through the CCCF initiative empowers communities by adopting participatory planning and decision-making processes. Operational in eight counties (UNDP Kenya 2024), CCCFs prioritise local needs such as water management and agriculture, with Climate Change Planning Committees ensuring gender representation in leadership roles. In northern Kenya, the CCCF framework has successfully increased women's participation in climate resilience planning and decision-making. This is further bolstered by Kenya's recent legislative adoption of the requirement for MNCs to contribute both to the Climate Change Fund and community development initiatives (40% of net income for companies conducting land-based operations; 25% for companies non-land based), with community development formalised through Community Development Agreements (CDAs) that detail how funds will be spent at the community level, and require formalised community engagement and agreement. As explained by Bagaja Osman, the Director of Environment and Climate Change in Isiolo County:

“The private sector through companies plays a major role in complementing government efforts at the county level...When companies want to initiate projects, they come to the County, share information about who they are and the projects they have. The companies then sign an MoU with the County Government. The County cannot force businesses on what projects to support, the businesses decide on projects to engage... Existing opportunities are shared during Country Steering Group meetings, which bring together

different stakeholders and different government departments including CSOs.”

Gender and climate are deeply interlinked, with women, particularly in rural and marginalised communities, often bearing the brunt of climate change impacts. Grassroots women are largely excluded from climate change-related negotiations, limiting their ability to engage in the climate fund application process (UNDP Kenya 2024). Structural barriers, such as gender biases and socio-cultural norms, further exacerbate these challenges. For example, women's limited land ownership—only 10% of land titles are held by women—restricts their ability to use land as collateral, which is often required to access financial resources for adaptation projects. This lack of resource ownership is a significant impediment to their participation in climate finance, particularly in adaptation-focused initiatives, as highlighted by the UNFCCC and Kenya's Climate Change Act (Climate Change News 2024).

Kenya's patriarchal society presents significant challenges for feminist organisations, particularly in accessing climate finance. While many groups are grounded in feminist principles, they often do not explicitly identify as feminist, limiting their visibility and access to funding. Accessing climate finance is especially difficult for smaller organisations that often lack essential information, accreditation mechanisms, and the capacity to submit competitive applications.

These feminist networks, such as African Women Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), Solidarity for African Women Rights (SOAWR), and Akina Mama wa Afrika often act as intermediaries in accessing climate funds, largely coming from large scale multilateral development financing, and then disbursing grants to smaller grassroots organisations (UNDP Kenya 2024). However, these smaller organisations often need to be part of the network or aligned with its objectives to qualify for funding (African Philanthropy Forum 2021).

This structure creates a barrier for groups that may not have formalised memberships or established relationships within these networks (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 2023). Consequently, local NGOs struggle to access the resources necessary for impactful, gender-just climate action that directly addresses structural inequalities and local priorities.

The combination of barriers to access and a lack of guidance for donors and investors on how to best allocate resources to gender equity efforts results in not only a fragmented sector with heavy reliance on networking with key stakeholders and a small group of well known actors, both financiers and recipients; it also fails to foster a transparent and accountable approach to building a sustainable and equitable future for Kenya (UNDP Kenya 2024). However, some key advances have been made through the implementation of the CCCF, with varying approaches from county to county. As Molly Ochuka of Ada Consortium noted, in some cases, gender equality elements are being successfully integrated into the climate change agenda:

“Changes have been seen in the northern Kenya region, where women were not previously regarded or considered in decision making spaces. The 2/3 majority rule [Gender Rule] demands that women must participate and play roles in leadership ... they [the CCCFs] have to abide by the law and women are now participating in decision making and resilience planning at the local levels.”

The climate change sector in Kenya is characterised by fragmented efforts, with organisations often working in isolation rather than in coordinated partnerships. This lack of collaboration has been identified as a barrier

to effective climate action, including access to climate finance. For instance, Kenya’s CCCF (World Bank 2021) was designed to address this by decentralising climate finance and involving multiple stakeholders across counties, and presents a clear entry point for private sector involvement; but challenges persist in harmonising efforts between government departments, civil society, and the private sector (Green Climate Fund 2024). These funds enable communities to participate in decision-making about climate adaptation projects, addressing local priorities such as water management, agriculture, and natural resource conservation. CCCFs have been relatively successful in ensuring that local communities have a say in the planning and implementation of climate projects. For example, CCCFs in counties like Isiolo, Garissa, and Wajir have helped fund initiatives that directly address the climate-related needs of pastoralist communities, leading to better resilience against droughts and floods (World Bank 2021).

Coordination mechanisms remain weak, and projects often operate in silos without sharing data, resources, or strategies for maximum impact. Furthermore, access to Green Climate Funds can be challenging for women’s groups due to the complex application processes and stringent requirements.

India

India’s climate finance landscape is multifaceted, shaped by domestic initiatives and substantial international cooperation. As India increases vulnerability to extreme climate events—such as floods, droughts, and cyclones—effective climate financing is essential to its sustainable development and resilience efforts. Its approach to climate finance is distributed across public, private, and multilateral channels, each contributing to its mitigation and adaptation strategies.

India’s government plays a central role in mobilising climate finance through various policy frameworks and financial mechanisms. The National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) is the cornerstone of India’s climate policy, supported by state-specific climate action plans (Government of India 2021). The

National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change (NAFCC) finances state-led projects focused on adaptation (NABARD 2024), especially in vulnerable regions, while the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) collects funds from industries for reforestation efforts (Government of Haryana 2024).

India has also introduced fiscal incentives to attract private investment in climate-related sectors. For instance, renewable energy projects, particularly in solar and wind, benefit from subsidies, tax breaks, and favourable regulatory environments (IISD 2023). These initiatives are integral to achieving India’s ambitious goal of generating 450 GW of renewable energy by 2030 (Government of India n.d.).

Multilateral Development Banks such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), are pivotal in financing India's large-scale climate projects. The World Bank has been actively involved in funding various climate initiatives, including a \$250 million loan to support India's National Mission for Clean Ganga, aimed at reducing pollution and improving water quality in the Ganga river basin (World Bank 2023). Additionally, the bank has committed financing for developing solar parks across the country (World Bank 2016). Similarly, the ADB has provided substantial financial support for climate resilience and infrastructure development in India. In 2023, it approved a \$200 million loan to improve urban services and tourism facilities in Nagpur, Maharashtra, incorporating climate-resilient designs (Asian Development Bank 2024). ADB has also funded sustainable coastal protection projects and climate-adaptive farming projects in Karnataka and Kerala, ensuring that communities are better prepared for climate-induced challenges (Asian Development Bank 2024).

Other DFI are also making significant contributions. The New Development Bank (NDB), established by BRICS countries, has approved several projects in India, including a \$646 million loan for renewable energy generation. The European Investment Bank (EIB) has supported climate action through a €550 million investment in the Pune Metro Rail project, which aims to provide sustainable urban transport.

Bilateral donors are also playing an essential role in India's climate financing landscape. Germany's GIZ has partnered with the Indian government on initiatives like the Indo-German Energy Programme, focusing on renewable energy and energy efficiency (GIZ 2024). The Japan International Cooperation Agency has provided loans for various climate-related projects, including the Delhi Metro and forest resource management initiatives across several Indian states (JICA 2023). Additionally, the French Development Agency has supported sustainable urban development projects, including smart city initiatives and water management systems (AFD 2024).

The private sector plays a growing role in India's climate finance ecosystem, with conglomerates such as Tata Power (Tata Power 2024), Adani Green Energy (Adani Green Energy 2024), and Reliance Industries (Reliance Industries Limited 2023) investing heavily in renewable energy projects. These investments are bolstered by India's green bond market, which provides targeted financial instruments for climate-friendly initiatives. Additionally, the Companies Act, 2013, mandates private companies to allocate funds for CSR, leading to increased contributions toward environmental sustainability projects.

However, the intersection of gender and climate remains a critical gap in India's climate finance landscape. Women, particularly in rural and marginalised communities, disproportionately bear the impacts of climate change but are often excluded from decision-making processes and access to financial resources for climate adaptation (CORE 2024). Despite their significant roles in agriculture, water management, and natural resource conservation, socio-cultural barriers and systemic inequalities marginalise women's participation in climate policies and finance allocation.

National strategies like the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) acknowledge the importance of integrating gender into climate action, but implementation has been inadequate. Addressing these gaps requires policy measures that enhance women's access to financial resources, integrate gender considerations into climate finance mechanisms, and ensure inclusive decision-making at all levels. Strengthening these efforts can align India's climate finance strategy with its broader goals of sustainability and social equity (CORE 2024).

Consequently, local feminist organisations, particularly those working at the grassroots level, frequently face barriers in accessing climate finance. These challenges arise from limited visibility, a lack of data, and capacity constraints (WEDO 2024). Many women's organisations and grassroots groups⁴ struggle to showcase their impact due to insufficient gender-disaggregated

4. India's 266,665 registered NGOs hold significant potential for transformative development but face major challenges in accessing international funding due to complex processes, stringent requirements, and limited capacity. Streamlining funding mechanisms and enhancing donor-NGO collaboration are critical to unlocking their impact on India's development goals.

data on climate initiatives, making it difficult to attract funding. Additionally, the underrepresentation of these organisations in decision-making spaces exacerbates their challenges (Rights and Resources Initiative 2024). Women's voices are largely absent from critical discussions surrounding climate finance, including the allocation of resources for climate adaptation and mitigation efforts (WECF 2024). This lack of representation further complicates the alignment of corporate resources with gender-focused climate initiatives (Climatelinks 2022).

At the policy level, despite the structural barriers for women, India's climate finance policies are beginning to show some recognition of the need for gender-responsive approaches. For instance, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) has integrated climate resilience and gender empowerment, providing employment to women in rural areas to support afforestation, water conservation, and other climate adaptation projects (UNSDG 2024). Additionally, the government's Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP), a sub-component of the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), aims to empower women farmers by enhancing their capacities to adopt climate-resilient farming practices (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 2023).

Feminist networks and NGOs have advocated for more inclusive climate finance mechanisms that specifically target women's needs, yet the climate finance landscape remains dominated by larger, well-established actors (CORE 2024). The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), which is accredited to manage funds from the Green Climate Fund (GCF), has begun to pilot gender-responsive projects, but

these remain the exception rather than the rule (PwC India 2024). The potential for feminist organisations to influence climate finance allocations remains underexplored, and gender-equitable climate action is not yet mainstreamed into India's broader climate finance agenda (CORE 2024).

India's Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) imposes strict regulations on NGOs, disproportionately affecting smaller organisations. Amendments in 2020, including a prohibition on sub-granting and a 20% cap on administrative expenses, have strained operational budgets and reduced flexibility (The Bridgespan Group 2024). Centralising foreign funding through a designated State Bank of India branch has added complexity, further challenging grassroots NGOs (Firstpost 2024). Between 2017 and 2022, Tamil Nadu received ₹19,376 crore (\$2.6 billion USD) of the ₹88,882 crore (\$11.9 billion USD) in foreign donations, revealing significant regional disparities in funding distribution (Times of India 2023).

Over 6,000 NGOs lost their FCRA licenses between 2020 and 2022 (Eco-Business 2024), severely weakening smaller organisations' capacity to address critical issues like healthcare, education, and climate resilience. While regulatory oversight and transparency are essential, frequent amendments and rigid compliance requirements limit the operational flexibility of NGOs, narrowing the scope of foreign funding. For grassroots organisations, which play a vital role in addressing local challenges and advocating for marginalised communities, these restrictions have been particularly damaging. The current framework isolates smaller NGOs, undermining their ability to contribute meaningfully to India's development goals.

An Evidence- Based Approach to Adopting the GEDI Lens among Women and Queer- Represented Family Philanthropy in India and South Asia

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Illustrated by Sanitarypanels



Advocacy Summary

Background

Most donations from Indian family funders focus on education and health, leaving gender equity initiatives severely underfunded. With regulatory constraints in foreign and corporate social responsibility (CSR) giving, family philanthropy can be vital in long-term resourcing towards gender equity. A new generation of family givers is beginning to adopt more inclusive and transformative giving practices, and it is necessary to leverage this momentum. Addressing intersectional inequalities by adopting Gender, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (GEDI) can build proximate leadership and create intergenerational benefits for women, girls, and gender minorities. This research codifies good practices by feminist funding groups and cross-pollinating insights into family giving with a focus on India.

Literature Review

Funders neglect the complex and intersectional needs of women and marginalised genders, limiting their empowerment and societal participation. Engaging funders in reflection and collective action can address the root causes of inequity and

drive sustainable, transformative change. However, a notable lack of research on engaging family philanthropists in India with gender-intentional, intersectional strategies is missing an opportunity to enhance impactful giving. Women's funds have established partnerships and flexible funding models that respond to local contexts and the needs of historically marginalised communities. The literature highlights the importance of cross-learning and collaboration between women's funds and family philanthropists by combining expertise and resources to strengthen philanthropy for gender and intersectionality.

■ Key Findings

This research examines feminist grantmaking practices in India and South Asia to identify good practices and inspire greater domestic capital deployment toward funding gender and intersectionality in the regional context. It aims to bridge the gap between traditional philanthropy and feminist grant-making. Drawing on feminist principles, the researchers developed the GEDI framework, a reflective tool designed to guide family philanthropists in analysing their funding strategies. The GEDI framework emphasises long-term, trust-based, flexible, transparent, participatory, accessible, and community-centred funding. The framework was applied and tested in interviews with family philanthropists. Conversations with feminist grantmakers, family philanthropists, and sector experts shed light on the practical application of these principles, revealing both alignment and challenges. The study highlights that GEDI implementation is often imperfect, influenced by internal constraints and external dynamics, affecting the on-the-ground outcomes. The research employs a systems thinking approach and utilises feedback loops to illustrate these dynamic interactions. The study underscores the GEDI framework's critical role in fostering consultative processes and reflective inquiry among grantmakers.

■ Key Recommendations

- **Philanthropy**
Support and resource organisations embedded in feminist movements
- **Civil Society**
Reflect on internal structures and shift power to proximate leaders
- **Multilaterals/ Government**
Anchor convenings and platforms to promote dialogue
- **Private Sector**
Commit to GEDI principles within business processes and systems

Authors and Acknowledgements

Author Bios

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Ami Misra leads the Research and Insights team at Dasra. Her research practice is focused on the philanthropy ecosystem, gender equity, and development studies. She has anchored key flagship reports by Dasra. Her worldview is rooted in feminism, compassion, and an intuitive optimism. She graduated from

the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, specialising in gender studies, and has an executive degree in social policy from ETH Zurich. Before Dasra, Ami worked as a researcher and evaluator with the government, multilateral agencies, and think tanks, such as the NITI Aayog and UN Women.

Mahima Sharda is a committed nonprofit and public sector professional with over two years of international and domestic experience. Originally from Jaipur, she completed a Master's in Public Administration, specialising in international development, at New York University. Here, she was a Gallatin Human Rights Fellow and Ellen Schall Scholar. Mahima also holds a Master's in Financial Economics from Singapore Management University. Before joining Dasra in 2022, Mahima worked in various roles across the social sector with the UNDP, the Afghanistan Mission to the UN, and Crisis Group. She is passionate about gender equality, animal welfare, and improving access to financial services.

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Acronym List

BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, and people of colour
ESG	Environmental, Social, and Governance
GEDI	Gender, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Plus
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
UHNH	Ultra-High-Net-Worth Individuals

Introduction

India's civil society and philanthropy practice is rooted in the Freedom Movement against British colonisation. Throughout history to the present day, women and individuals from intersectional identities have been critical in shaping the discourse and on-ground mobilisation for social change. From Savitribai Phule, who was an educator and social reformer, fighting discrimination on grounds of caste and gender in 1800s, to Elaben Bhatt who founded SEWA Bharat, as a federation that dismantles the economic and societal barriers for women in the 20th century – the pursuit of gender equity has been a persistent effort by different actors. While the Indian Government's Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) repository shows over 80,000 organisations dedicated to women's development and empowerment, funding for gender equity remains critically low.¹

Research shows that women's rights organisations globally receive less than 1% of total foundation funding, and only about 1% of gender-focused international aid goes to these groups (Shifman, Deepak, and McHarris, 2022). This lack of funding is particularly pronounced for organisations based in the Majority World, with 94% of foundation giving directed to organisations in the United States and Europe (Johnson et al., 2018).

In India, 60% of donations from the most prominent family givers are channelled into education and health initiatives, leaving philanthropic efforts for promoting gender equity struggling to receive contributions (India Philanthropy Report 2022). Mainstream charitable causes such as health, education, and livelihoods often do not prioritise gender equity in a targeted way, even though issues affecting women and girls are deeply intertwined with these areas (Ackerman et al., 2023). While investments in these specific areas are valuable, these are insufficient to drive the transformative change needed to challenge the power dynamics and build the agency of communities. In the current scenario, funders lack a deep understanding of the contexts in which the organisations they support operate, resulting in unconscious biases and fragmented approaches to giving (Mohapatra et al., 2022). Equitable giving must extend beyond gender to incorporate other intersectional lived experiences across a spectrum of identities related to gender, sexuality, disability, caste, ethnicity, class, and religion.

Family philanthropy is uniquely positioned in India. It can provide risk and patient capital to address systemic challenges. Family philanthropy faces fewer compliance

1. Based on data accessed on 25th February, 2025 on Government of India's official website as a repository of NGOs: <https://ngodarpan.gov.in>

and infrastructure constraints than other forms of philanthropic capital in India. Therefore, it is well-poised to focus on underserved causes, sectors, regions, and communities (Nundy & Chatterji, 2023). Based on this context, this study aims to build a compelling case for increasing investments by family philanthropists in gender, equity, diversity, and inclusion by applying principles based on good practices from feminist grantmaking.

Methodology

Research Questions

- What are the key principles and good practices in feminist grant-making applicable to the Majority World (with a focus on India and South Asia)? How are feminist grant-making strategies building proximate leadership and creating intergenerational benefits for women, girls, and gender minorities?
- How can women/queer-represented family philanthropy leverage feminist grant-making strategies in expanding and diversifying their portfolios? What is the current intentionality of women/queer-represented family philanthropy to adopt a GEDI approach in India and South Asia?

Research Objectives

This research aims to compile and promote good practices from feminist grant-making that can be adapted for family philanthropy, emphasising inclusive, equitable, and sustainable funding strategies. It seeks to evaluate the extent to which family philanthropists are adopting a GEDI lens in their giving practices through reflective conversations with funders. The research also aims to identify pathways for collaboration between feminist organisations and family philanthropists to adopt GEDI-centred approaches, focusing on the potential for systemic change.

Conceptual Framework

The research adopts a GEDI framework to distil and analyse grantmaking, emphasising intersectionality to ensure no one is left behind. GEDI principles are borrowed from good practices in feminist grantmaking to underscore fair access to opportunities, representation, and respect for all individuals and communities. The sections below explain the framework in greater detail. The GEDI framework has been integrated at every stage of the research process and thereby refined through the development of interview tools, selection of

stakeholders, and analysis. Socio-economic factors unique to India, such as caste and ethnicity, are considered.

Approach to Data Collection

In the first phase, the researchers used primary research to collate good practices on feminist funding principles through discussions with regional women's organisations. This was complemented by a secondary desk review of available academic and grey literature to contextualise feminist funding practices within broader development frameworks. The second phase focused on a reflective inquiry with awareness and critical consciousness within women and queer-led family philanthropy to facilitate this shift. The primary research component was qualitative, based on a mix of deductive and inductive reasoning and feminist reflexivity. The researchers undertook a stakeholder mapping to define archetypes - representative models of different types of actors in the feminist funding landscape. These archetypes guided interviewee selection to ensure that key perspectives were included, allowing for a broad and balanced understanding of feminist funding practices across the ecosystem. Furthermore, ethnographic and participatory tools were employed to align respondents with research objectives and generate actionable insights.

Limitations

The limited academic research on feminist funding, particularly in India and the Majority World, challenges the study's theoretical depth and rigour. This necessitates reliance on grey literature, which lacked academic rigour but provided practical insights. To address the challenge, the research employed a feminist lens to analyse available resources. The study's qualitative approach, including ethnographic and semi-structured interviews with a small, purposively selected group of stakeholders, provided nuanced insights but limited generalisability. Additionally, the funders interviewed for the study were at different stages of their giving journeys, making it difficult to identify clear trends. The research team tried to ensure diverse perspectives by including different archetypes of informants. Despite the intention to cover South Asia, the research study primarily captured insights from the Indian context. The researchers also acknowledge the potential for biases to arise from their professional experience within the philanthropy advisory research field, notwithstanding their efforts to maintain analytical objectivity.

Literature Review

Programming for gender equity requires a transformative approach

Despite evidence of the power of gender-transformative programming, philanthropic contributions from foundations and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity in India focus mainly on programming for family planning, reproductive health care, and support for women's rights organisations (OECD, 2022). This distribution of resources indicates a tendency to prioritise health-related interventions. Indeed, reproductive health care receives ten times more funding than gender-based violence (OECD, 2022). Such a focus may inadvertently continue to perpetuate gender-focused programming aimed only at gender roles and overlook the multifaceted aspects of gender equity, including the aspirations of women and girls. By concentrating primarily on reproductive health, philanthropic efforts may overlook critical domains that are essential for the full societal participation of women and marginalised genders (Lam, 2020).

Academic research on feminist approaches to philanthropy has intersected with perspectives such as gender-transformative approaches, which seek to reshape gender dynamics by redistributing resources, expectations, and responsibilities among men, women, and non-binary individuals. This type of programming often focuses on norms, power, and collective action (MacArthur et al., 2022). Research from the Pathways of Women's Empowerment project (2006) indicates that for programs to achieve transformative change, they must engage women in critical and conscious reflection on their circumstances and facilitate the sharing of this process with other women. Additionally, the effectiveness of these initiatives hinges on engaging frontline intermediaries who implement policies, projects, and programs. Finally, when women come together to advocate for change, build networks, and form alliances, they are more likely to witness broader transformations and experience the empowering effects of collective action (Cornwall, 2016).

Likewise, agency – the ability to make decisions about one's life – is central to women's empowerment. Empowerment is described as the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. Genuine choice requires several conditions: the availability of alternatives, the awareness of these alternatives, and the significance of the choices in terms of life impact. Gender norms often obscure power relations, leading women to internalise disempowerment, such as accepting lesser claims on household

resources or enduring domestic violence. Therefore, empowerment in the gender-transformative sense would involve expanding women's ability to make meaningful, strategic choices in ways that challenge patriarchal power structures. It is not merely about becoming more effective in fulfilling assigned roles but about exercising transformative agency that actively questions and changes societal constraints (Kabeer, 2005).

It is critical to build solutions with an intersectional perspective

Coined by the feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), the term “intersectionality” captures the complexity of social relations, highlighting how multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination shape individuals' experiences. As such, funders need to integrate an intersectional approach into their philanthropic efforts. This integration means reaching people as they live intentionally, recognising that varied identities and characteristics can elevate privilege or compound injustice (Human Rights Funders Network, 2022). An intersectional approach fosters open, continuous dialogue to better understand diverse experiences across intersections and enable more effective solutions. This includes prioritising leadership development within diverse caste groups, marginalised genders, and individuals with disabilities, as representation is crucial for creating inclusive strategies. It is also a tool for social change and can help build solutions that consider individuals' varied lived experiences.

Flexible funding is equally important. Addressing complex intersectional realities often requires investment in innovative, transformative programs that may not yield immediate results. Organisations focused on gender equality usually need dependable, long-term financial support to fulfill their missions effectively. However, philanthropic donors predominantly offer short-term funding, which can impede partners' ability to operate efficiently and sustain their efforts (Pawar & Mishra, 2022). This calls for a shift toward “systems change philanthropy,” focusing on long-term investments to address root causes and drive structural shifts rather than short-term, project-based funding (Bukachi & Mwangangi, 2022).

In this context, the family philanthropy community must reflect on its power and privilege, recognising that the responsibility for driving social change lies with the communities. Their role should be facilitation rather than appropriation (Pawar & Mishra, 2022). For instance, it is insufficient to allocate funds to address violence against women or to support women and girls; resources must be used to confront the socio-political dynamics that perpetuate inequality, discrimination, and violence (Srivastava, 2019).

The shifts in philanthropy across India and South Asia

Intermediaries have primarily researched philanthropy in India based on their vantage points. Despite the limitations in data, macro-trends indicate that the philanthropic landscape in India and South Asia is evolving, driven by a new generation of family givers committed to more inclusive approaches. The India Philanthropy Report (IPR) 2023 identified two cohorts as forerunners in reshaping giving: Now-Generation (NowGen), comprising professionals and entrepreneurs who are first-generation wealth creators, and Inter-Generational (Inter-Gen), comprising the next generations of wealth creators.

Family givers can provide long-term risk capital (Kapur et al., 2023). Therefore, the shoots of change visible for both groups are in their increasing interest in diversifying their giving approaches. Early trends indicate that these donors are adopting transformative approaches, which include a willingness to share insights and provide unrestricted or collaborative funding. For instance, Amira Shah Chhabra of the Harish and Bina Shah Foundation supports several nonprofits with flexible, accountable, and goal-oriented funding to create purposeful and patient impact. Furthermore, over 90% of donors from the Inter-Gen and Now-Gen cohorts expressed interest in strengthening philanthropy infrastructure (Kapur et al., 2023).

As global wealth distribution evolves, Asian women are also increasingly becoming influential players in the philanthropic and investment landscape (Raman, 2022). Women's wealth in Asia is projected to increase by over \$1 trillion annually over the next four years, given the current annual growth rate of 10.4% (Zakrzewski et al., 2020). With this increase in wealth, Asian women are increasingly aligning their investments with funds that perform well and positively impact communities, social causes, and the environment. In a recent survey, 64% of Asian women reported incorporating environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors into their investment decisions (HSBC Holdings Plc, 2023). As their wealth grows, these considerations become even more central. For example, a study conducted between 2020 and 2022 by the WealthiHer Network found that 75% of women prioritise responsible investing over financial returns. Additionally, 53% expressed a desire to give back to their communities, and 63% emphasised the importance of practising philanthropy, compared to 56% of men (HSBC Holdings Plc, 2023).

There is a lacuna of research on the giving behaviours of women in the Indian context. However, based on a limited dataset from Dasra's GivingPi network,²

2. GivingPi is an invite-only network for India's most philanthropic families to engage, learn and accelerate philanthropy

we observe that while women constitute a minority of Ultra-High-Net-Worth Individuals (UHNI), wealth and philanthropic contributions, their impact is still significant. Emerging insights from GivingPi in 2025 also highlight significant engagement: 54% of members indicate women-led family philanthropy, with 70% reporting active female representation in their family philanthropy efforts. Women and queer individual givers are reshaping funding narratives and institutions by including a gender lens to their giving (44% vs. 33% men). The emphasis on gender could be correlated to their lived experiences in the Indian landscape. This can help shift historically gendered power dynamics by addressing complex issues, including social justice, caste discrimination, and intersectional mental health (Sheth et al., 2024).

The value proposition in feminist funds

To date, most official development assistance (ODA) and cross-border philanthropic funding promoting gender equality has not effectively reached feminist movements. However, philanthropic foundations focused on gender equality and women's empowerment increasingly channel their efforts through re-granting organisations in the Majority World (Hessini, 2020). These include local grassroots groups and women's funds, which have been established since the early 2000s to consolidate financial and non-financial resources in support of feminist movements worldwide. For instance, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) collaborates with intermediaries such as the African Women's Development Fund, FRIDA, the Global Fund for Women, and Mama Cash. These funds can play a crucial role in enabling philanthropy to back transformative gender initiatives, particularly in contexts of systemic oppression where ODA donors may have limited flexibility (Leading from the South, 2023). Women's funds also create pathways for philanthropists to enhance the effectiveness of their contributions and engage other donors in the field. With their on-the-ground presence and closer connections to their communities—often facilitated by their organisational structures—they are better positioned to attract local philanthropic support (OECD, 2024).

While funders are increasingly striving to adopt intersectional perspectives in their philanthropy, it is essential to build on this momentum by integrating existing good practices from feminist praxis. Women's funds are reshaping the dynamics of power and decision-making in philanthropy by shifting control over resources to grassroots organisations, centering lived experiences, and challenging traditional top-down funding models. This shift has led to a global movement advocating for more core, multi-year, and flexible funding, particularly

for the Majority World, ensuring that funding structures are more responsive to the needs of marginalised communities (Equality Fund, 2020). An analysis by the Human Rights Funders Network (2023) reveals that 92% of the grantmaking by women's funds in the Minority World is directed to the Majority World, with half of that support being flexible funding. Women's funds provide more flexible funding to the Majority World than any other donor group, including public, family, and corporate foundations, community philanthropies, and donor collaboratives (Vaill et al., 2024). Therefore, exploring avenues to facilitate knowledge exchange and collaboration between these organisations and family philanthropists is valuable, bridging expertise and practices to drive impactful change.

These examples illustrate that women's funds, through their work with partners, have effectively leveraged their institutional knowledge to develop frameworks and good practices for integrating feminist principles into philanthropy and grantmaking. However, while much of this research addresses the Majority World, it may not be entirely generalisable to India and South Asia due to its distinct cultural nuances. Consequently, there is a dearth of literature focusing specifically on the Indian context. Additionally, there is a significant gap in engaging family philanthropists in the region to gauge their understanding of intersectional approaches and the extent of their willingness to integrate these principles into their philanthropic strategies.

Findings

The findings below draw upon insights from two interviews conducted with feminist practitioners and funders (women givers engaged in family philanthropy within India). The discussions provided an in-depth exploration of the principles that guide feminist philanthropy and the evolving practices within the field. Further, the research uncovered the gaps and challenges in family philanthropy in attaining the precedents set by feminist funds. Juxtaposing feminist grantmaking principles helps articulate the opportunities for transforming grantmaking through gender equity, intersectionality, and community-centred approaches. Studying the perspectives of family philanthropists helped in understanding the inherent limitations and unconscious biases held by this cohort.

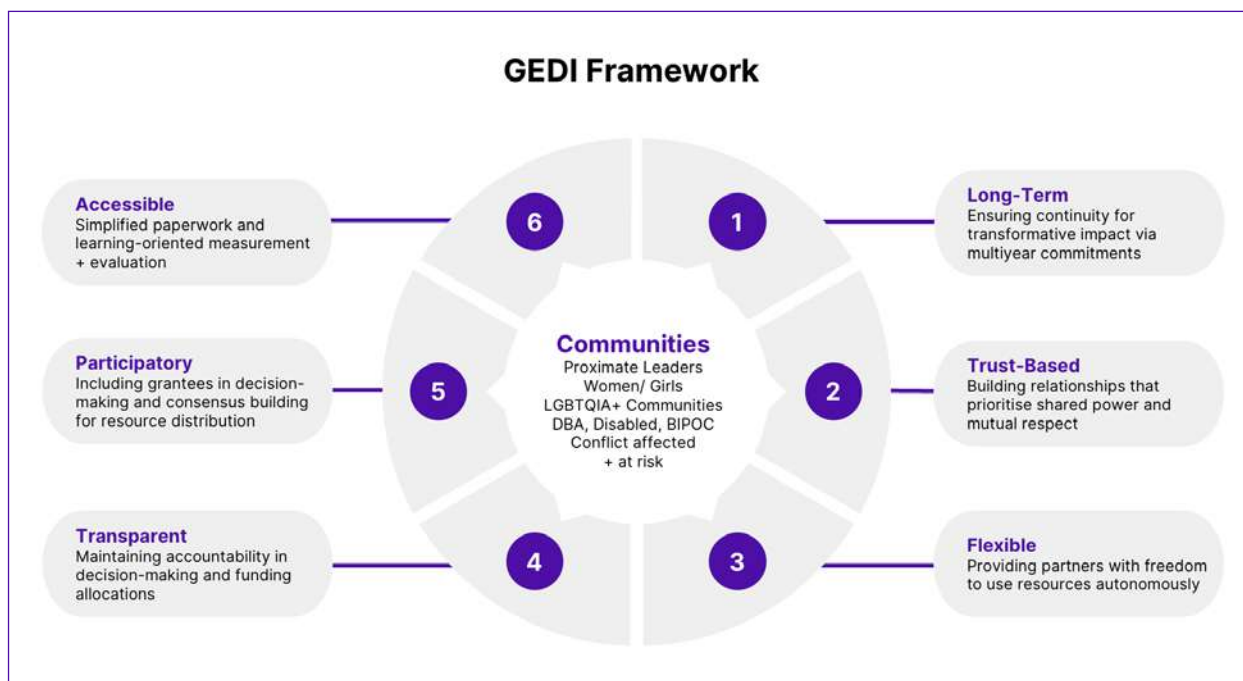
- **Part I** introduces the GEDI Framework, which outlines key principles for feminist philanthropy. It was a precedent for funders prioritising gender equity and intersectionality in their giving practices.

- **Part II** presents perspectives from reflective conversations with family philanthropists to reveal the limitations, challenges and practical implications of applying these principles in family philanthropy, offering insights on integrating GEDI values.
- **Part III** examines the concept of feedback loops, using it to analyse how grantmaking practices either reinforce existing power structures or catalyse shifts toward more equitable and transformative outcomes.

Part I: The GEDI Framework

Phase 1 of the research comprised interviews with feminist funds and gender equity experts based in India (and South Asia) to understand their perspective on grantmaking and the core principles defining feminist philanthropy. These conversations highlighted the salient features and key principles used in feminist philanthropy for inclusive, intersectional, and transformative grantmaking. The insights gleaned from the interviews informed the development of the conceptual backbone for the study, with the GEDI Framework (figure 1).

Figure 1: GEDI Framework based on Good Practices in Feminist Grantmaking



The GEDI framework was built upon feminist grantmaking to guide funders interested in funding for gender equity and intersectionality. The GEDI framework encompasses both the “who” and “how” of giving, centring the lived experiences of grantmakers and grant recipients by emphasising trust-based, participatory

grantmaking practices that prioritise long-term, flexible, and unrestricted funding. The framework empowers partners to develop innovative solutions tailored to their specific contexts and reduces administrative burdens, allowing a focus on their core mission and impact. The paragraphs below describe insights from interview conversations on the practice and meaning of each principle outlined above.

1. Long-Term: Ensuring continuity for transformative impact via multi-year commitments

- Feminist grantmaking recognises that sustainable change is nurtured over generations and should not be constrained by short-term grant cycles. Moving beyond project-based funding, feminist funds prioritise multi-year, flexible support that allows programs to grow strategically yet organically, without the pressure of securing the following grant.
- Many funds have institutionalised multi-year grant commitments to provide stability and build trust with partners. Some offer transition grants to support financial sustainability beyond the funding cycle. These models acknowledge that long-term impact requires more than a single funding window.
- However, sustaining long-term commitments remains a challenge, especially for smaller feminist funds that rely on annual fundraising. As one fund leader reflected, “We want to offer long-term grants, but when our funding is uncertain, how do we make promises we may not be able to keep?” Despite these challenges, long-term funding remains a feminist imperative - an investment in movements, people, and transformation’s slow, non-linear work.

“Feminist funding is not about quick wins. It is about showing up, year after year, for work that is slow, messy, and necessary.” - Feminist Practitioner.

2. Trust-based: Building relationships that prioritise shared power and mutual respect

- Trust in feminist grantmaking moves beyond compliance-driven funding toward relationships built on mutual accountability. One fund leader shared, “Our role is not to oversee but to support, listen, and co-create solutions that truly build movements.”
- Many feminist funds prioritise flexible, unrestricted funding, acknowledging that grassroots organisations are best positioned to determine how to allocate resources effectively. This autonomy bolsters NGO agility, allowing them to respond to needs on the ground swiftly and without bureaucratic constraints.
- Sustaining trust in an increasingly restrictive political climate is a challenge. The rise of backlash against progressive feminist work has made transparency

risky for many organisations working on gender equity. One fund leader noted, “Being too visible can be dangerous in some regions. We need donors who understand this and adapt their processes to protect us.”

“Trust is about standing beside movements, even when the path is uncertain. Trust-based philanthropy is a political commitment that prioritises solidarity over control.” - Feminist Practitioner.

3. Flexible: Providing partners with the freedom to use resources autonomously

- Feminist grantmaking prioritises flexibility, ensuring organisations can allocate funds based on their needs. Core unrestricted funding allows organisations and movements to sustain themselves beyond specific, condition-bound projects.
- Many funds institutionalise flexible funding through core grants covering operational costs, internal systems, or strategic priorities. Some introduce models like risk reserves, enabling partners to prepare for crises, adapt to changes, and ensure sustainability.
- Feminist grantmaking prioritises accessibility by simplifying application and reporting processes, ensuring that grassroots organisations can make applications with reduced barriers posed by language, internet access, or formal grant-writing experience. Many feminist funds accept offline applications and alternative formats such as videos or phone calls and focus on vision and long-term impact rather than traditional formats, ensuring smaller grassroots groups are not overwhelmed or excluded.
- Beyond crisis response, flexible funding supports the well-being of those leading feminist movements. Many organisations use unrestricted grants to cover salaries, rent, or care-related expenses, which traditional donors often overlook. By allowing partners to determine the allocation and use of funds, feminist funds ensure the long-term well-being and resilience of the individuals and communities driving change.

“During COVID-19, many organisations struggled to reallocate funds as activities were suspended, facing delays in donor approvals—even for essential expenses like staff salaries. Core and flexible funding is critical, not just for survival during crises, but for sustaining and advancing their work beyond them.” - Feminist Practitioner.

“Flexible funding is not just about money—it is about shifting power, ensuring movements have the resources and independence to determine their priorities and respond to both urgent needs and long-term aspirations.” - Feminist Practitioner.

4. **Transparent:** Maintaining accountability in decision-making and funding allocations

- Feminist and women's funds emphasise that transparency is a two-way street. It is about partners making information available and ensuring they can navigate the funding landscape with clarity and confidence. Open communication about funding priorities, decision-making processes, and grant criteria helps dismantle the opacity that often excludes smaller, under-resourced groups from accessing critical funding.
- Transparency also extends to reporting expectations. Rather than imposing rigid compliance structures, feminist funds focus on learning-driven, co-created reporting that captures impact meaningfully without excessive bureaucracy. The emphasis is on making transparency a tool for collaboration rather than control.
- Transparency is about honesty and communication. It is essential to ensure that partners understand how and why funding decisions are made while creating space for their feedback. Feminist grantmaking prioritises a process of continuous learning and adaptation.

"Because the decisions themselves are made by partners, there is a high level of accountability and transparency that exists over there. For a call for applications, we share how many applications we received, from what regions, and the percentage of funding allocated where." - Feminist Practitioner.

"We believe that those receiving funding should know exactly how it was allocated, why some applications were chosen over others, and what percentage of resources are going where. This builds trust and accountability." - Feminist Practitioner.

5. **Participatory:** Including partners in decision-making to ensure shared ownership

- Feminist grantmaking embraces participatory approaches, ensuring that those most affected by funding decisions have a direct role in informing them. Participatory philanthropy redistributes power to communities or those closest to them by involving partners and movement leaders early in decision-making, fostering shared ownership and accurate representation.
- Participation exists on a spectrum, from involving communities in grant design and allocations to ensuring they shape how funding is communicated/ accessed. Some feminist funds integrate participatory voting, where applicants and advisory committees composed of movement leaders collectively determine funding priorities. As one fund leader shared, *"We are very consultative with*

our community of partners and advisors about the support that we offer. Whenever we are designing new strategies, we ensure that we get enough feedback to guide our work."

- Participation also extends to monitoring and evaluation, recognising that learning and impact measurement is best articulated by those closest to the work. Many funds include peer panellists and rotating advisory committees, ensuring diverse representation from marginalised communities, including sex workers, trans and intersex individuals, and Dalit and Adivasi groups.

"Women's funds recognise that those closest to the challenges are best positioned to drive solutions. Through participatory processes - whether peer panels, advisory committees, or community-led voting - they create funding models where partners are not just recipients but decision-makers." - Feminist Practitioner.

6. Accessible: Simplified paperwork and learning-oriented measurement and evaluation

- Feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) practices guide reporting processes, emphasising dialogue, adaptation, and learning over rigid, top-down metrics. Accessibility also means maintaining trust-based, flexible reporting structures that acknowledge shifting contexts. Rather than requiring partners to "prove" impact through exclusively quantifiable metrics, feminist funds create space for real-time learning, ensuring that grantmaking leads to lasting qualitative outcomes.
- Feminist grantmaking also allows space for contradictions, responding thoughtfully to conflict and critique. It acknowledges that change is complex and layered, requiring imagination, unlearning, and co-creation alongside engaged communities. Trust, accessibility, and transparency in information sharing are vital, ensuring equitable and respectful relationships between funders and partners.

"Grantmaking should empower, not overwhelm. By valuing vision over polished applications and offering simple, accessible processes, women's funds ensure grassroots groups can thrive." - Feminist Practitioner.

7. Community-centred: Placing the needs, voices, and aspirations of diverse communities, particularly the most marginalised, at the heart of decision-making (e.g., proximate leaders, women and girls, LGBTQI+ communities, Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi, disabled, BIPOC, conflict-affected and at-risk groups)

- Feminist funds intentionally support the most marginalised communities, strongly emphasising identity intersectionalities. At the core of their work is an explicit funding focus on proximate leaders, women and girls, LGBTQI+ communities, Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi groups, disabled people, BIPOC communities, and conflict-affected groups.
- A fundamental tenet of feminist grantmaking is the commitment to decolonised practices for resource distribution. This means shifting power in decision-making, ensuring that young feminist organisers and excluded communities determine how much funding is allocated, what kind, and which feminist strategies are most relevant. By focusing on individuals and leaders from social movements, this approach challenges traditional philanthropy and ensures that resources serve those building long-term, systemic change. Feminist funds also hold themselves accountable to the movements they support. “We are constantly learning from the communities we fund,” one fund leader reflected. “The more we listen, the better we become at redistributing power, not just money.”

“Sustained engagement with communities is essential. We work in a way that is supportive and deeply mindful of context - whether it’s with rural communities, marginalised communities, or young women. Context is central to our work and long-term relationships with communities have been critical to our impact.” - Feminist Practitioner

Part II: Insights from Reflective Conversations with Family Philanthropists

Drawing on the GEDI framework, the researchers developed a rubric (Annex 3) to facilitate reflective conversations with family philanthropists. This process initiated an inquiry for funders to reflect on their perceptions of feminist funding principles. It provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of integrating GEDI-aligned approaches within family philanthropy. The responses from grantmakers included mixed responses with willing acceptance, unconscious biases, and restrained limitations. While overarchingly, most family philanthropists were interested in aligning or engaging with feminist principles outlined in the GEDI framework. However, principles such as participatory and transparent grant-making seemed restrained, and long-term, trust-based, and flexible principles were based on conditions. A summary of their responses is noted below.

1. Long-term:

Most family philanthropists interviewed acknowledged that achieving meaningful impact requires sustained commitment. While many begin with short-term learning grants, their ultimate goal is long-term engagement. As one funder noted, *“The goal of the learning grant is clarity. It’s not just a placeholder to defer decision-making.”* This approach ensures stability for organisations while allowing funders to refine their strategy. Some funders now extend commitments to a decade or more, recognising that lasting change requires sustained support. As one funder noted, *“Long-term support truly enables change - it’s about staying the course, not just looking for the next shiny, innovative thing.”* Family philanthropists are also considering how to create sustainable pathways for organisations when they eventually exit or shift funding priorities. While these transitions can be disruptive, especially for partners in underfunded sectors, family philanthropists are ensuring continuity. One funder explained, *“In cases where our funding no longer aligned with an organisation’s goals, we pivoted away from long-term support. However, we always ensured a sustainable pathway for the organisation to continue or find alternative ways to support the project.”*

2. Trust-based:

Few funders were able to operationalise trust-based relationships in the local context. Partners may struggle to engage openly, even when funders try to foster open dialogue, shaped by years of operating in a high-stakes environment. The fear of scrutiny, judgment, or losing funding remains a critical concern among organisations supported by the funders consulted. As one funder reflected, *“It’s difficult for NGO leaders to show vulnerability - it’s a learned behaviour on all sides, not just one. And it doesn’t change with just one donor. Even if you approach things differently, you’re still one among many, and the fear remains real.”*

3. Flexible:

“Under a certain amount, grants are unrestricted - no questions asked. Beyond that, we practice ‘directed flexibility,’ asking organisations where our grant would be most useful and align with their insights. And if their needs evolve, we remain open to change. No program should exist just because we fund it—it should exist because the organisation sees its value.” - Funder.

Most funders practice flexibility in their grantmaking by providing unrestricted or minimally directed grants, allowing organisations the autonomy to adapt their work as needed. As one funder explained, *“For the most part, our funding is*

unrestricted. If a partner wants to reallocate, it's not a problem." - Funder Funders also adopt a model of 'directed flexibility,' offering guidance on fund allocation while still centring the organisation's expertise. However, decision-making power often remains in the funder's hands. As one funder described, *"Below a certain amount, we just make it unrestricted, no questions. Above a certain amount, we ask organisations where they think our grant would be most useful, and we go with it"*. While this approach introduces a synergy between agency and collaboration, it may carry an implicit expectation that organisations align their priorities with donor preferences rather than independently shaping long-term strategies.

4. Transparent:

"It is a balancing act. I have realised that finding exceptional partners is difficult if they don't know you're looking. In investment management, you source deals because people know you want to invest; philanthropy is no different. While my network builds through word of mouth, I see the merits of sharing information openly on public platforms." - Funder.

Most family philanthropists keep their giving private, often due to personal comfort levels. One funder shared, *"I don't feel comfortable talking about it. It's a personal thing, I think."* In contrast, corporate philanthropic spending is disclosed in annual reports for compliance. Some philanthropists rely on intermediaries such as Dasra to track their giving and share details within trusted circles such as Giving Pi,³ ensuring transparency without public disclosure. Moreover, most funders we interviewed lacked a formal process for partners to provide feedback on the grant cycle or a structured approach to communicating funding criteria, expectations, and outcomes to partners. However, this gap stemmed from a lack of a formal structure in their philanthropic approach rather than a lack of transparency. As a funder shared, *"Some philanthropies have a grants manager or family office staff overseeing giving. That's not us - I manage our family investments personally."*

One funder highlighted the ongoing challenge of balancing transparency with trust-based philanthropy. While their grant agreements aim for clarity, execution remains complex. *"We are constantly on a learning curve,"* they admitted, emphasising the trial-and-error nature of their grantmaking approach. They described the challenge of utilisation-based disbursements, where funds are tied to spending reports that arrive six months later. *"Am I going to hold back*

3. GivingPi is an invite-only network for India's most philanthropic families to engage, learn and accelerate philanthropy.

the disbursement or, in good faith, go ahead?" they reflected, illustrating the fine line between accountability and flexibility. This perspective highlights that transparency in philanthropy is about creating structured, yet flexible, mechanisms that build trust and responsibility between funders and partners.

5. Participatory:

"When it's just one or two people making decisions, it's difficult to incorporate community input meaningfully." - Funder.

Most funders recognised the value of participatory grantmaking but struggled to implement this principle. Collective giving structures, such as pooled funds and networks, make shared decision-making easier, whereas individual philanthropists find it challenging. One funder noted, *"It's just me and my mother—we're not a full foundation,"* highlighting the difficulty of integrating community voices in smaller setups.

Some funders see their philanthropy as conviction-driven rather than participatory but acknowledge its importance in specific contexts. In cases where funding involves multiple contributors, participatory approaches become more necessary for accountability and representation. Others emphasise open dialogue with partners and flexible funding but have yet to formalise participatory governance. Some take a more pragmatic stance, expecting partners to engage communities rather than doing so themselves, prioritising effectiveness over process. For many, participatory grantmaking remains a distant aspiration, shaped by structural constraints and individual philosophies. As one funder put it, *"A network provides the space and framework for shared decision-making in ways that individual giving cannot."*

6. Accessibility:

"We try to make it as simple and easy as possible for organisations to engage with us, but it's not always as formal or structured as possible." - Funder.

In India, many family funders use a flexible, personal approach to grantmaking instead of lengthy, detailed paperwork. One funder explained, *"I trust a good conversation over a mountain of forms,"* which shows their preference for getting to know organisations through conversations, video calls, and referrals. This method helps them intuitively understand an organisation's work without being slowed down by lengthy applications.

Language accessibility is also an essential part of the process. For example, few funders accept proposals in Marathi or even in video format. At the same time, some funders work mainly in English—a practice that, as one noted, “*rarely creates communication issues but might inadvertently introduce bias.*” This mix of approaches highlights a desire to keep things simple while recognising the need to reach a broader range of organisations.

Many funders mentioned that NGO site visits allow them to build a personal connection, to first-hand understand the work on the ground, and access the local context in which the organisation operates. Most funders keep their application process straightforward with a one-page form. One U.S.-based funder added, “*Organisations must have a 501(c)(3) or a fiscal sponsor,*” showing that while the process is relaxed in some areas, specific formal requirements still apply. Funders are trying to balance simplicity and direct communication with the need for clear guidelines to ensure fair access for all organisations.

7. Community-centred:

All funders interviewed prioritise marginalised communities, supporting groups facing significant social or economic exclusion. Their grantmaking strategies are deliberately designed to emphasise community engagement by focusing on one or more priority groups. However, the extent to which funders can support community-driven, transformative change varies. Some funders, notably smaller family philanthropies, have the flexibility to take risks and fund grassroots, experimental initiatives that directly address community needs. As one funder noted, “*We can take many risks because we don’t have staff depending on us. So, we can move into risky spaces for bureaucratic funders.*” In contrast, larger institutions, which control the majority of funding, often prioritise initiatives with limited backlash and align with existing systems. This cautious approach can lead to funding strategies that favour incremental change rather than the deep, structural transformations that marginalised communities seek.

Part III: Feedback Loops

Part 1 of the research focused on interviewing women’s funds to identify good practices in feminist grantmaking to inform the GEDI framework. Building on this, Part 2 comprised engaging family philanthropists to gather their reactions and assess their intentionality in adopting GEDI practices. Conversations with both cohorts revealed key differences in philanthropic principles and approaches

— while some practices reinforce existing power structures, others aim to challenge and transform them.

Drawing upon these findings, Part 3 of this research leverages the systems thinking tool, i.e., feedback loops, to explore how these strands interact and influence one another. It compares and contrasts the grantmaking approaches of the two cohorts, highlighting points of alignment and divergence. Feedback loops serve as a valuable tool in this analysis, illustrating how actions within a system can either reinforce entrenched power and resource distribution patterns or create shifts that challenge and rebalance these structures over time (unttools, n.d.). This tool can guide future research and facilitate reflection for advocacy efforts focused on intentional GEDI outcomes.

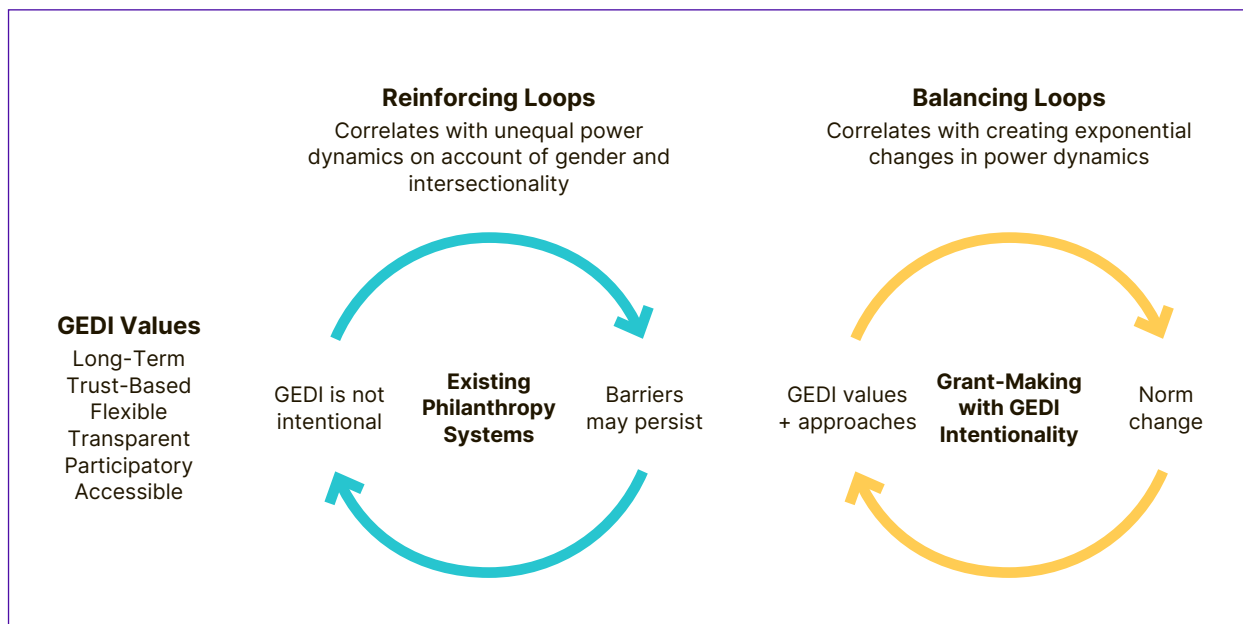
Feedback Loops provide a lens to analyse complex relationships, making them a practical framework for exploring the impact of interventions in interconnected systems.

Reinforcing Loops: Processes where behaviours or events amplify each other, creating a cycle that either perpetuates certain outcomes

Balancing Loops: Processes that stabilise systems by counteracting deviations and maintaining equilibrium for the ideal state (in this case, aligned with GEDI outcomes)

In the context of this research, reinforcing loops demonstrate how traditional philanthropy, when not intentionally guided by a GEDI lens, maintains hierarchical resource flows and hinders transformative change by failing to address systemic barriers that marginalise individuals based on gender, caste, disability and other barriers. In contrast, balancing loops capture how grantmaking, rooted in GEDI values, redistributes decision-making power, cultivates proximate leadership, and supports long-term movement-building. This is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Feedback Loops for GEDI Grantmaking



	Stages>>		
Outcomes	Philanthropy where GEDI is not intentional	Grant Makers Giving with a GEDI Lens	Feminist Grant Makers
Capital, resources, time	Generated for the short term for project-based funding	Generated for the medium-term initiatives for project-based funding or organisational development	Generated for long-term movement building
Capacity building	Capacities built for program delivery with a focus on efficiency	Capacities built for service delivery and leadership development with a focus on sustainability	Capacities built to undertake reflexive work and change the status quo with a focus on empowerment
Power dynamics and agency	Traditional power structures are retained, with limited agency built in	Traditional power structures change with limited intentional representation in decision-making	Proximate and intersectional leadership cultivated with more significant equity and agency for communities
Narratives and acceptance	Neutral acknowledgement of GEDI, with broader alignment to mainstream approaches	Responsive to mainstream approaches, with broader alignment to GEDI; low backlash	Transformative, compared to mainstream approaches, rooted in GEDI; more backlash

The research process revealed that the implementation of the GEDI framework is rarely a straightforward process. Respondents within feminist funds and family philanthropy acknowledged constraints, such as limited resources and overarching power dynamics, while applying GEDI principles. These imperfections and influencing factors directly shape the outcomes of grant-funded projects. The figure above illustrates outcomes across distinct stages of applying the principles.

To better understand the interplay of these factors, the feedback loops conceptually represent how actions and reactions within the grantmaking ecosystem influence each other over time, highlighting the interconnectedness of its various elements. It demonstrates that applying the GEDI framework is not merely a checklist but a dynamic and iterative process requiring constant adaptation and critical self-assessment. The three stages of using the GEDI framework, in correlation to the outcomes, are described below.

Grantmakers where GEDI is not intentional: Many funders, while not explicitly adopting a GEDI lens, prioritise scale, efficiency, and measurable impact, often viewing gender inclusion as a byproduct rather than a core objective. Their philanthropy is driven by sectoral priorities such as education, health, and livelihoods without necessarily interrogating who benefits most or who is left out. As a result, while their funding may support women and marginalised communities, this occurs incidentally rather than through a deliberate strategy to address systemic inequities. One funder said, *“I don’t consider gender—many of the organisations happen to work with women but don’t look at it in an isolated sense”*, emphasising that the issue of gender equity is so widespread that it requires broader systemic action rather than targeted interventions. This approach can yield significant reach but risks overlooking the more profound structural barriers that prevent equitable access to resources and opportunities.

Grantmakers giving with a GEDI lens: This group comprises funders beginning to integrate a feminist lens into their giving while navigating the nuances of language, perception, and personal beliefs. Their approaches reflect an effort to embed GEDI values in philanthropy, though their strategies and levels of commitment vary. As one funder shared, *“For me, feminism is fundamentally about equality, and its values deeply align with my beliefs. I don’t think it would be true as much for my family. Across generations, the term carries more heat or activist undertones or are associated with particular times and movements as opposed to the values and philosophy itself... it can spark more debate than the words necessarily hold.”* This highlights how funders may embrace feminist principles in practice while navigating the complexities of family dynamics,

language, and perception. Another funder noted that she prioritises giving to feminist organisations and marginalised groups. Her family members support different causes, and their philanthropic decisions reflect mutual respect rather than complete alignment on sector focus. This reflects a broader trend where funders strive to embed GEDI values in philanthropy while balancing generational and ideological differences in their giving strategies.

Feminist Grantmaking: At the farthest end of the spectrum, feminist grantmakers are shifting from short-term funding cycles to long-term movement-building. Their focus extends beyond leadership development to reflexive work that actively challenges the status quo. Most of the group of funders interviewed acknowledged that caste remains a defining force in the South Asian context, concentrating decision-making power within homogenous caste groups and creating skewed funding patterns that reinforce existing privileges. In practice, the grey areas are acknowledged and there is a thriving culture of critique and debate among feminist experts, practitioners and grant-makers. As an activist stated, *“Frontline human rights defenders struggle to raise resources due to language barriers and bureaucratic hurdles, reinforcing a beneficiary-oriented, charity-driven, and patronising approach. A feminist approach asserts that marginalised people have rights. In rights-based language, there is no space for charity or patronisation - everyone is a rights holder and entitled to resources.”* Therefore, feminist grantmaking prioritises redistributing financial resources and transferring decision-making power to historically excluded groups. By positioning them as leaders rather than beneficiaries.

Recommendations

This research was conducted to deconstruct the role of private philanthropy and civil society in financing feminist futures. Therefore, the recommendations are directed primarily towards these stakeholder groups. Since the study acknowledges the interconnected roles of government/multilateral and the private sector in shaping feminist grantmaking, the way forward section covers specific recommendations for these groups.

1. Fund organisations and individuals rooted in feminist movements

“Feminist funds evolve out of movements and continue to support movement building. There’s enough said about the importance of movement building. There is strong evidence to show that women’s rights and gender equality are highly dependent on the health of movements and women’s movements.”

The increasingly restrictive global political economy is severely limiting funding for feminist work, jeopardising organisations focused on gender and intersectionality. Now, more than ever, funders must prioritise grantmaking for organisations and individuals rooted in feminist movements. At this critical juncture, where the space for feminist activism is shrinking, funders must prioritise grantmaking that directly supports organisations and individuals deeply embedded within grassroots feminist movements. Often operating with limited resources, these organisations possess invaluable expertise and community trust, enabling them to address the nuanced and complex challenges women and marginalised groups face. These organisations can carry movements forward by balancing complex compliance demands with vital on-the-ground program delivery.

2. Support organisations with small budgets and rethink scale

“Feminist funds tend to give a larger number of smaller grants with more flexibility. This becomes extremely important when you’re supporting grassroots work.”

Emerging research from India shows that most Indian nonprofit organisations operate on budgets of less than INR 100 million (Dasra; Kearney 2025). This finding underscores a critical need for a paradigm shift in how funders approach grantmaking. Traditionally, funders prioritise large-scale growth, equating impact with an increased operational reach and geographical expansion. However, this focus on numerical growth can inadvertently

pressure grantees, forcing them to prioritise expansion over their core mission, ultimately leading to mission drift. Organisations may feel compelled to take on projects or expand into areas that do not align with their original goals, simply to meet the demands of funders. Organisations focusing on gender and intersectionality may have to focus on scaling deep, concentrating efforts in a specific geography, persistently, concentrating efforts in a particular geography, persistently, to change norms. (Darcy and Michele-Lee 2015) Supporting smaller-budget organisations is crucial for enabling effective interventions at the hyperlocal level, ultimately creating intergenerational benefits.

3. Build infrastructure for dialogue, cross-learning, and collaborative action

*We need spaces and venues where people with shared values can find each other, forge deep personal connections, exchange ideas, co-learn in real time, and co-create enduring solutions. For social change to occur, relationships must serve as the scaffolding for growth. This relational foundation is not a secondary feature; it is the essence of meaningful, adaptive change.*⁴

South Asia and India urgently require more dialogue, cross-learning, and collaborative action spaces. The current funding landscape, heavily inclined towards supporting service delivery, undermines vital movement-building efforts and reduces relationship strengthening to transactional exchanges. By investing in infrastructure for dialogue, grantmakers can empower communities to become stewards of change. This shift enables a move away from instructive pedagogies, tapping into the collective wisdom and hidden knowledge found in oral histories and personal memories, crucial elements of feminist epistemology. The historical success of feminist movements underscores the necessity for these spaces.

4. Integrate intersectionality with a focus on dismantling caste discrimination

As people from marginalised communities, we often ask ourselves: Why can't I do something that others can? If we can't find answers and there is no one to help us with our queries, we start blaming ourselves and our community. Where do these self-perceptions come from? Is this the result of an underlying mental illness? No, it is a product of discrimination and social hierarchies. We need conversations that address the root causes of our mental stressors. For thousands of years, our people have been told that

4. This text is copied from the following article on the India Development Review by Gautum John: <https://idronline.org/article/perspectives/connection-not-abstraction-rethinking-philanthropy-for-social-change/>

*they are inferior to the privileged few. They have heard their caste being mocked in daily conversations.*⁵

Caste discrimination remains a pervasive and deeply entrenched reality across South Asia, transcending regional and cultural boundaries. Despite constitutional protections and affirmative action policies, caste continues to dictate socio-economic relationships and power dynamics. Notably, individuals from dominant castes disproportionately occupy positions of influence within philanthropy and civil society, despite not representing the majority. To achieve genuine GEDI, practitioners must confront these structural barriers head-on. This requires actively dismantling the concentration of power and fostering meaningful representation within organisational leadership and decision-making. Funders are critical in driving this transformative shift by promoting affirmative action policies and strategies.

Both civil society and philanthropy can shift power dynamics. Philanthropy must evolve to support feminist futures by aligning funding decisions with community needs. While traditional grantmaking approaches demonstrate good intentions, they can unintentionally perpetuate power imbalances, with funders often setting the terms of support without listening to the communities. Civil society must build solidarity for feminist narratives through storytelling and setting precedents that challenge existing power structures. In synchronicity, philanthropy and civil society can foster community resilience and equitable proximate leadership.

5. This text is copied from the following article on the India Development Review by Deepa Pawar: <https://idronline.org/article/social-justice/mental-justice-addressing-the-mental-health-of-de-notified-tribes/>

Conclusions and Way Forward

This research highlights family philanthropy's critical role in advancing gender equity by integrating the GEDI lens into their funding strategies. Despite the increasing wealth among family funders, particularly women leaders, the philanthropic landscape remains dominated by traditional approaches. These often neglect the intersectional needs of marginalised communities, perpetuating systemic inequities. The GEDI framework developed through this research provides a reflective tool for funders to align their strategies with feminist principles.

The findings emphasise the transformative potential of feminist grantmaking, which prioritises solidarity, decolonised practices, and sustained community engagement. By adopting GEDI principles, stakeholders can address systemic barriers, centre marginalised voices, and enable innovative solutions tailored to local contexts. Moreover, the research identifies the value of feedback loops from systems thinking to guide this shift, replacing reinforcing cycles of inequity with community-centric, adaptive approaches.

Here's how each stakeholder can utilise the research moving forward:

- ➔ **Private Philanthropy:** Funders must support and resource organisations embedded in feminist movements to drive positive impact for gender and intersectional causes. Family funders can use the GEDI framework as a reflective tool to evaluate and evolve their grantmaking approaches. It encourages considering processes like participatory decision-making, reducing administrative burdens, and offering unrestricted, long-term funding.
- ➔ **Civil Society** Organisations should reflect on internal structures and shift power to proximate leaders. This research study can help discern the need to advocate for systemic shifts. Civil society must also work in solidarity to strengthen narratives through data and storytelling. Combining such practices can help amplify and implement GEDI principles with greater rigour across the ecosystem.
- ➔ **Government and Multilaterals:** As critical ecosystem infrastructure builders, government and multilateral entities can anchor convenings and platforms to promote dialogue. Policymakers can integrate GEDI principles into regulatory frameworks to set high precedents that are followed. Furthermore, creating platforms for multi-stakeholder engagement can enable collaboration among funders, civil society, and communities, ensuring solutions are anchored around community needs.

- ➔ **Private Sector:** Businesses can align their philanthropic initiatives with GEDI values by embedding them into corporate strategies and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) frameworks. Supporting gender-equitable supply chains and promoting diverse organisational leadership complements philanthropic efforts. It is also critical for businesses to do this with committed intentionality, which remains untethered to populist narrative shifts.

The GEDI framework developed through this research is not a fortress. Instead, it is a reflective tool that opens the gates to a garden. It helps understand the ethos of feminist funding, emphasising building grantmaking practices that can generate intergenerational benefits for communities. In an era of growing uncertainty, the approach offers a starting point for implementing feminist funding practices prioritising gender and intersectionality. It encourages supporting organisations embedded in feminist movements to cultivate equitable futures. It seeds GEDI-intentional grantmaking, as one participant aptly stated,

*“...we need to let a **thousand flowers bloom.**”*

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Annex 1: Research Methodology

Phase 1: Identifying Good Practices

This phase focused on mapping good practices in feminist funding globally, with a specific emphasis on India and South Asia.

Secondary Research

The secondary review consisted of a comprehensive analysis of available literature, both academic and grey, to contextualise feminist funding practices within broader development frameworks.

Academic Literature on Development Practice:

While traditional academic literature on philanthropy, especially in the context of gender equity funding in India, was limited, the researchers reviewed available feminist academic literature that discussed development practices. This helped situate the work of feminist funds within a wider historical and political context, enabling framing feminist funding as a form of development intervention.

Grey Literature on Philanthropy and Feminist Praxis:

A significant portion of the secondary review focused on grey literature. This included reports, case studies, and policy documents produced by feminist funds and other organisations involved in philanthropy and development practice. Grey literature is particularly valuable because it often reflects real-world practices and challenges that may not yet be captured in formal academic research. These documents, produced by feminist funds, are crucial knowledge sources reflecting lived experiences and feminist praxis in action. Given the limited academic material on feminist philanthropy, especially in the Majority World, these resources provide a necessary and valid perspective on the strategies, challenges, and opportunities faced by feminist funds and movements. By integrating this material, the researchers could balance theory with practice, ensuring that our analysis reflects the realities on the ground.

Primary Research

Semi-structured Interviews with Sector Practitioners:

The researchers conducted interviews with 15 key informants who held deep knowledge of the feminist funding landscape. These stakeholders were selected using a purposive sampling strategy based on archetypes identified through initial stakeholder mapping. This ensured that the researchers captured a broad spectrum of perspectives across geographies, funding levels, and thematic priorities within the feminist ecosystem. This group included civil society practitioners, feminist funds, academics, and thought leaders. Interviews were guided by a structured interview guide (Annex 2) to ensure that conversations remained focused on the research objectives while allowing flexibility to explore specific insights and lived experiences. The interviews were both qualitative and ethnographic to understand the complex, nuanced dynamics of the feminist funding landscape.

Sampling: The stakeholder mapping helped define archetypes, representative models of different types of actors in the feminist funding landscape. With an emphasis on feminist grant-makers, the researchers also covered the spectrum of actors by interviewing feminist non-profit organisations, thought leaders, and activists. These archetypes guided interviewee selection to ensure that key perspectives were included, allowing for a broad and balanced understanding of feminist funding practices across the ecosystem. The archetypes helped generalise findings while still reflecting the diversity of stakeholders.

Stakeholder Mapping: By developing these archetypes, the researchers highlighted patterns in feminist funding practices and identified key characteristics of successful funding models. This was particularly useful for creating a framework that can be applied by funders, NGOs, and other actors looking to adopt or adapt feminist funding strategies in their contexts. The initial mapping exercise identified the key players in feminist funding in India and South Asia, spanning grassroots organisations, international philanthropies, regional feminist funds, and other relevant actors.

This stakeholder map supported the archetype development and provided a valuable visual tool for

understanding the relationships and power dynamics within feminist funding networks.

Phase 2: Reflective Tool for Funders

Building on the insights from Phase 1, Phase 2 focused on creating a practical framework to guide family foundations in adopting GEDI-intentional giving. In this phase – the researchers developed the following tool for in-depth reflective conversations with family philanthropists.

Rubric for Reflection: A rubric was developed using insights from regional organisations that have adopted a GEDI lens to their giving. Designed as a non-evaluative tool, it featured benchmarks and reflective prompts. It aimed to inspire self-reflection among funders, offering them a flexible framework for aligning their giving patterns with transformative systemic shifts. It

also helped gauge the current intentionality of women/queer-represented family philanthropy to adopt a GEDI approach.

Reflective Interviews with Family Givers: We engaged with 5-7 family funders led by women and queer individuals in one-on-one reflective conversations using the prompts. These interviews encouraged participants to reflect on their existing giving practices, identifying progress and areas for improvement, and equipping family philanthropists with actionable guideposts for adopting good practices from feminist grantmaking, coded as the GEDI framework, in their philanthropy.

Annex 2: Interview Guide for Experts

Approach

1. What principles and values guide your feminist grant-making approach? How do you define feminist funding in your organisation?
2. How do you ensure that intersectional feminist approaches are embedded in your grant-making practices?
3. How do you support partners beyond providing financial resources (e.g., capacity building, technical support, or network building)?

Grant-making process

4. How are partners involved in the decision-making process? How do you balance power between the funder and the partners?

5. How do you maintain transparency and accountability in your grant-making process, particularly regarding decision-making and funding allocations?
6. How do you maintain feedback loops and partners' autonomy in the grant-making process?

Challenges and Opportunities

7. What are some of the key challenges you face in feminist grant-making? How do you address power imbalances, especially with donors?
8. What strategies have you found effective in scaling the impact of feminist funding or reaching under-represented communities?
9. How has your grant-making evolved in response to feedback from partners or changes in the feminist movement?

Annex 3: GEDI Rubric for Funders

GEDI Funding Principle	Guiding Question	Comments from Funder
Long-term Ensuring continuity for transformative impact via multiyear commitments	Are the majority of grants structured as multiyear commitments for partners?	
	Have partners reported deficits in their long term funding pipelines?	
	Do you provide core funding for the corpus or capital expenditure?	
Trust-based: Building relationships that prioritise shared power and mutual respect	Is trust foundational in your due diligence and contracting process?	
	Are partners encouraged to share challenges or failures without fear of negative repercussions?	
Flexible Providing partners with freedom to use resources autonomously	Do you consider the evolving needs of partners when structuring funding agreements, such as allowing for the reallocation of funds during unforeseen circumstances (e.g., crises, emergencies)?	
	Are partners empowered to make decisions about resource allocation to achieve program goals?	
	Are there caps on using funds across programmatic, administrative, and personnel costs?	
Transparent Maintaining accountability in decision-making and funding allocations	Are funding criteria, expectations, and outcomes communicated to partners?	
	Is there a system for partners to report concerns, share feedback, or seek clarification about funding priorities?	
	Do you share details about your grant-making on public platforms?	
Participatory Including partners in decision-making to ensure shared ownership	Does your decision-making process include input from partners or community members?	
	Do partners have representation and space to share feedback on your strategies during or before/after the grant cycle?	
Accessible Simplified paperwork and learning-oriented measurement + evaluation	Do you believe that your evaluation process prioritises learning, failure, and improvement rather than standalone compliance?	
	Does your MEL process include storytelling, narrative change, and qualitative indicators?	
	Do you take measures to ensure the application and reporting processes are inclusive for partners (e.g., allowing proposals in multiple languages or providing alternative formats for accessibility)?	
Community-centered Placing the needs, voices, and aspirations of diverse communities, particularly the most marginalised, at the heart of decision-making	Do you work with the following communities: Proximate Leaders Women/ Girls LGBTQI+ Communities DBA, Disabled, BIPOC Conflict affected + at risk	

Reimagining Dalit Feminist-Led Caste Equity in South Asia: Pathways for Sustained Funding & Movement-Building

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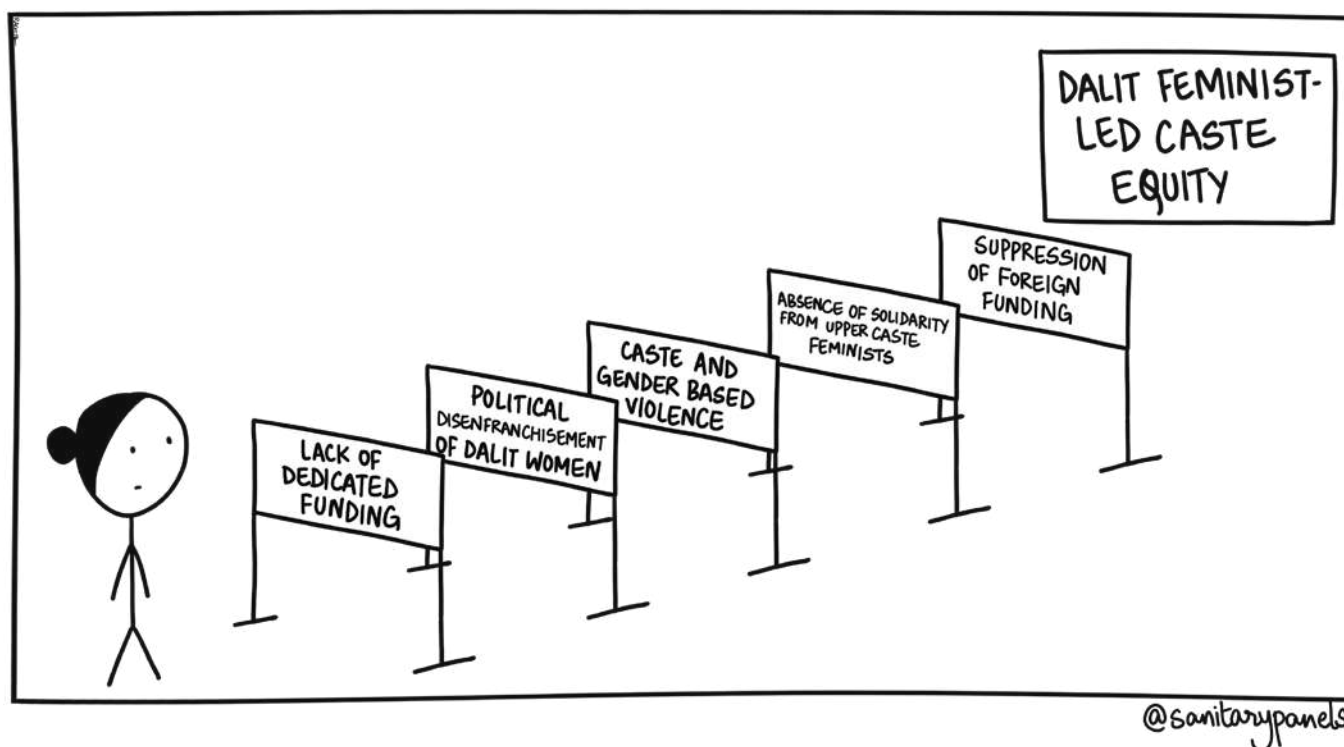
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Illustrated by Sanitarypanels



Advocacy Summary

In recent years, there has been an increased demand for funding and philanthropy to be more representative of the communities they aim to support. This demand requires that decision-makers possess both the lived experience and the political understanding of intersecting hierarchies, as well as the multiple layers of oppression they generate. Within South Asia, an intersectional lens must translate to a caste-equity or an anti-caste lens, which foregrounds how caste, a system of graded socio-religious hierarchy, shapes power, access to basic needs, availability of opportunities, life options, and outcomes, both today and historically.

A significant number of funding and philanthropic institutions, particularly those located in the Minority World, are heeding the call to decolonise funding practices and beginning to support Indigenous and Black feminist-led movements. Along similar lines, those seeking to resource communities in South Asia must acknowledge the presence of social hierarchies in the region, explicitly accounting for people who caste-based systems have historically marginalised. Indeed, there is an urgent need to adopt the principles of caste equity. It is also essential to recognise the work of Dalit feminist-led movements, which are often actively discriminated against, excluded, and marginalised on the grounds of caste when it comes to funding and representing their voices globally.

The necessity for funders to allocate dedicated funds for Dalit feminist movements in South Asia stems from the unique challenges faced by Dalit women. These include caste-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and socio-economic marginalisation, all of which are compounded by a systemic denial of representation in the broader feminist and caste-equity movements. Intentional funding is crucial to empower Dalit women to lead their movements, articulate their specific needs, and achieve systemic change. To ensure that funds reach the most caste-oppressed communities, funders should consider the following steps:

1. **Direct Engagement:** Work directly with grassroots organisations led by Dalit women leaders. This ensures that funds are used effectively and reach those who need them most.
2. **Participatory Grantmaking:** Centre Dalit women in fund and resource allocation decision-making processes. Participatory approaches help ensure that funding priorities align with the community's needs.
3. **Capacity Building:** Invest in building the organisational capacity of Dalit feminist-led community-based organisations to manage funds, implement projects, and sustain their activities over the long term.
4. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish transparent caste-informed mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation, while adopting decolonial and debrahminised frameworks.

Philanthropy should include Dalit women's representation because it ensures that the voices and experiences of those most affected by caste and gender oppression are heard and prioritised. Meaningful and substantial representation that is not merely tokenistic can lead to more inclusive and equitable policies and practices within philanthropic organisations, ensuring that the lived realities of Dalit women inform funding strategies. This representation also challenges the dominance of upper-caste perspectives in feminist and social justice movements, fostering a more inclusive and intersectional approach to addressing systemic inequalities.

■ Key Recommendations for Funders

- ➔ Increase investments in long-term, sustained social change led by Dalit feminists in South Asia.
- ➔ Work actively to de-brahminise philanthropy, which warrants a deep and rigorous understanding of caste-based structures and anti-caste movements.
- ➔ Set up collaborative funds at global and regional levels to circumvent caste-based, language-related, and country-specific challenges.

Authors and Acknowledgements

The Global Campaign for Dalit Women (GCDW) is an initiative that aims to empower caste-marginalised women to pursue strategies that ensure their dignity, safety, access, and justice. GCDW adopts sustainable and proactive approaches to support survivors, develop leadership, promote grassroots activism, and foster strategic partnerships. It also forges strong connections with global communities by collaborating with other marginalised groups and engaging in international human rights mechanisms.

About the Authors

Christina Dhanuja is a researcher by academic qualification, a strategy consultant by experience, and an external relations professional who has held multiple roles in India, China, Singapore, and the Netherlands, working with stakeholders in government, business, and development sectors. She is the convenor and founder member of the Global Campaign for Dalit Women, consulting with corporates, non-profits, faith-based institutions, and academia on leadership development, caste diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as accountability frameworks. She is the co-founder of the Dalit History Month project and has published extensively on topics such as caste, gender, religion, sexuality, and mental health.

Anju is a prominent Dalit feminist with over 14 years of experience advocating for the empowerment of young Dalit girls and women. She is a founder-member and secretary of the Global Campaign for Dalit Women and initiated the Ambedkarite Social Café, a safe space for youth that offers resources and support rooted in the principles of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Anju has led several significant initiatives during her decade-long tenure as a national leader at the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch and Dalit Women Fight, a self-led grassroots collective. Anju has also played a key role in organising

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increased demand for funding and philanthropy to be more representative of the communities they aim to support. This demand requires that decision-makers possess both the lived experience and the political understanding of intersecting hierarchies, as well as the multiple layers of oppression they generate. A vital initiative in this regard has been the call to #ShiftThePower, which “seeks to tip the balance towards a fairer and more equitable people-centred development model and reform top-down systems of international development and philanthropy” (Inga & Kodi 2024). For instance, directly funding Indigenous-led funds recognises the population’s expertise and agency in addressing their needs. Additionally, by providing resources and support, funders can catalyse self-driven solutions that profoundly impact the community and promote long-term sustainability (Bridgespan, 2024).

In South Asia, an intersectional lens must translate to a caste-equity or an anti-caste lens, which foregrounds how caste, a system of graded socio-religious hierarchy, shapes power, access to basic needs, availability of opportunities, life options, and outcomes, both today and historically. A significant number of funding and philanthropic institutions, particularly those located in the Minority World, are responding to the call to decolonise funding practices and beginning to support Indigenous and Black feminist-led movements (Zovighian 2022; Banerjee and Sriram 2022; Human Rights Funders Network 2021). Along the same lines, it is crucial that those seeking to resource communities in South Asia acknowledge the presence of social hierarchies in the region and specifically account for people who have been historically marginalised by caste.

The caste system is a complex social phenomenon that has transcended borders in South Asia, impacting countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and across religious and ethnic communities. Beyond South Asia, caste is also prevalent across contexts where a significant South Asian population exists. This includes the United States, Canada, Europe, the United Kingdom, South Africa, and parts of Southeast Asia (Zwick-Maitreyi et al., 2018). While it may not be as visible in every society as in India, caste is expressed in various forms in policymaking and practices across South Asia. Globally, the Dalit population is estimated to be about 250 million. India has nearly 201 million, followed by Bangladesh at 5.5 million, Sri Lanka at 4.5 million, and Pakistan at approximately 0.33 million Dalit population (Asia Dalit Rights Forum, 2014).

There is, therefore, an urgent need to embrace principles of caste equity and recognise the work of caste equity movements, but more specifically, initiatives led by Dalit feminists, who have been systematically denied agency to represent their voices globally, both in feminist spaces and within the philanthropy ecosystem. In this research study, the [Global Campaign for Dalit Women \(GCDW\)](#), an initiative that empowers caste-marginalised women towards dignity, safety, access, and justice, reimagines Dalit feminist-led caste equity work in South Asia through innovative pathways for sustained funding and movement-building.

Methodology

The researchers aimed to investigate a key research question: how could the future of Dalit feminist-led caste equity work in South Asia be reimagined through sustained funding and movement-building? The research objective was to understand the trajectories and funding challenges faced by South Asian collectives working on caste equity. Additionally, the study sought to identify ways and best practices for addressing these challenges.

The approach undertaken for this study is primarily qualitative, based on a review of the existing literature and primary interviews and focus group discussions with organisations engaged in this space. Fourteen in-depth semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted with Dalit feminist leaders across the five countries. Their organisations and movements recognise that Dalit women experience a “triple oppression” based on caste, class, and gender, and actively critique the social, cultural, and religious norms that perpetuate caste-based and gender-based hierarchies (Paik 2022). All the initiatives referred to in this research prioritise the experiences and perspectives of Dalit women and gender minorities, while creating platforms for them to speak for themselves and lead their own struggles.

Limitations

While there are case studies of organisations, there is limited research documenting trends in anti-caste movements, particularly outside of India. Even within India, comprehensive documentation of the trajectories and challenges faced by organisations focused on anti-caste work has been scarce, with only a few reports published in the last decade. Primary interviews with these organisations across the focus regions have helped validate some initial hypotheses around challenges and potential solutions.

Literature Review

Evolution of Dalit feminist organising in India

Till the early 1990s, Dalit feminist voices and organising in India manifested through literature and other social movements. They highlighted the vulnerabilities of Dalit women, seeking more excellent representation and participation (Sarvesh, Singh, and Alam 2021). While there is a history of Dalit women raising their voices and participating in social movements in pre-Independence India, few are as historically prominent as their non-Dalit counterparts.

One of the earliest recognised leaders of the Dalit feminist movement is Savitribai Phule. Savitribai was the first caste-marginalised woman (although not a Dalit) to stress the importance of education and English through her poems. She and her husband, Jyotiba Phule, raised the issues of Dalit women in particular and women in general (Gorain and Sen 2021). Elite caste feminists have often co-opted Savitribai's legacy in India and abroad by emphasising her contributions to education and women's rights, while neglecting the broader social reform work she championed, which addressed caste-class-based hierarchies.

This selective appropriation presented her as a singular figure in the narrative of South Asian feminism, sidelining the intersectionality of her struggles and the voices of marginalised communities she represented (Prasad 2015). This had also obscured the collaborative spirit of the social movements she participated in and diminished the transformative potential of her work within a more inclusive, diverse and staunchly anti-caste feminist framework in India until the 1990s (Kushwah 2022). This was when formal Dalit feminist organisations began to establish themselves, shifting the focus to access to education and healthcare, and leveraging rights- and justice-based approaches.

The National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), founded in 1995 by Ruth Manorama, emerged as a significant force in India following the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The Conference provided a platform for Dalit women to articulate their unique experiences of oppression, intersecting with both gender and caste-based discrimination (Guru 1995). The organisation has since played a crucial role in advocating for the rights and empowerment of Dalit women. Through grassroots mobilisation, legal advocacy, and awareness-raising campaigns, NFDW has worked to combat violence against Dalit women, promote their access to education and healthcare, and challenge discriminatory social norms. Furthermore, by advocating for the inclusion of caste as a form of

discrimination in international human rights frameworks, NFDW brought to light the state's inability to protect the human rights of Dalit women (Subramaniam 2006). At the UN World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, NFDW demanded that caste discrimination be declared a form of racism.

Other organisations, such as the All India Dalit Women's Forum, later fought for greater political representation among Dalit women (Berg 2007). This was also happening with affirmative action legislation being codified into the Indian Constitution. Despite constitutional provisions against untouchability, Dalit communities, and especially Dalit women, have continued to face severe discrimination and violence. This violence often takes the form of physical and sexual assault, land dispossession, and social ostracisation. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 is a notable example and was enacted to address this issue. It aims to provide legal protection against atrocities committed against members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This act culminated years of activism and advocacy by Dalit leaders and organisations.

Initiatives led by Dalit feminists in other South Asian countries

In Bangladesh, the emergence of Dalit feminist activism can be traced back to the 1990s, with organisations like the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement advocating for the rights of Dalit women. These movements initially focused on raising awareness about caste discrimination and the specific challenges faced by Dalit women, including violence and economic exploitation. Over time, they have evolved to encompass a broader agenda that includes education, health rights, and political representation. Today, Dalit feminists in Bangladesh are increasingly vocal about their rights, seeking to integrate their struggles into the national discourse on women's rights.

In Nepal, the Feminist Dalit Organisation (FEDO) was established in 1994 and has played a pivotal role in advocating for the rights of Dalit women. Initially focusing on education and empowerment, FEDO has evolved to address broader issues, including political representation and social justice. The political upheaval following Nepal's civil war allowed a platform for Dalit women's voices to be heard, leading to increased participation in local governance. Today, Dalit feminists in Nepal continue to challenge both caste and gender oppression while striving for greater inclusion within mainstream feminist movements.

In Pakistan, Dalit feminist movements have gained traction in recent years, mainly through the efforts of organisations like the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network. Initially focused on addressing caste-based discrimination and violence against women, these movements have expanded their scope to include issues such as land rights and access to education. The context of rising religious extremism has posed additional challenges, as Dalit women often face violence not only from caste-based discrimination but also from patriarchal structures within their communities. These movements are working towards building solidarity among marginalised groups and advocating for legal reforms to protect the rights of Dalit women.

In Sri Lanka, Dalit feminist movements have historically been less visible but are gaining momentum through grassroots organisations focusing on social justice and equality. The intersection of caste discrimination with ethnic conflict has complicated the struggles of Dalit women, who often find themselves marginalised within both ethnic and gender-based discussions. Recent efforts have focused on raising awareness about the specific challenges faced by Dalit women in Sri Lanka, including access to education and healthcare. As these movements evolve, they aim to build alliances with other marginalised groups to strengthen their advocacy for social change.

Lessons from Global feminist movements

The Black feminist rights movement in the United States of America emerged as a response to both the civil rights movement and the mainstream feminist movement, which often marginalised the voices and experiences of Black women. Black feminism's roots can be traced back to the mid-19th century, with early figures such as Sojourner Truth advocating for the intersection of racial and gender rights (Smiet 2015).

In the 1970s, Audre Lorde and the Combahee River Collective articulated the need for an intersectional approach that recognised how race, gender, and class intersect to shape the lives of Black women. This period marked a significant shift as Black feminists established their organisations, such as the National Black Feminist Organisation, to address their unique struggles and advocate for systemic change. Over time, Black feminism has further evolved to embrace diverse perspectives, including queer and trans identities, and Black feminists have been at the forefront of major social justice initiatives, such as the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements, highlighting their ongoing commitment to ending both racial and gender-based violence (Stueven 2021).

Early expressions of Indigenous feminism can be traced back to the 19th century when women like Matilda Joselyn Gage highlighted the intersection of race and gender in their advocacy for rights. Indigenous women began to articulate their distinct struggles within the broader civil rights and women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

The formation of groups such as the Women of All Red Nations (WARN) in 1974 marked a pivotal moment, as these activists sought to address both gender and colonial oppression, emphasising that patriarchy was intertwined with colonialism. Contemporary Indigenous feminism continues to focus on issues such as sovereignty, decolonisation, and the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW), advocating for justice while reclaiming traditional roles and cultural practices that empower Indigenous women.

Organised political activism among Romani women can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s in Romania and Poland (Izsak 2008). The establishment of the General Union of Roma in Romania sought to include women in leadership roles and address their specific needs. In Spain, the Gitanas movement emerged in the late 20th century, focusing on dismantling patriarchy and challenging gendered anti-gypsyism while advocating for the rights of Romani women (Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2018). The late 1990s marked a pivotal moment for Romani feminism, with the first international conference of Romani women held in Budapest in 1998. This event catalysed the formation of networks and initiatives to promote gender equality within Romani communities.

A critical look at countries like New Zealand, Sweden, and Canada that position themselves as feminists within international relations and foreign policy lays bare the colonial legacy of disenfranchising indigenous communities. For instance, the feminist movement of Māori women in New Zealand has undergone significant evolution since the 19th century, characterised by a strong push for gender and indigenous rights. Initially, Māori women participated in the suffrage movement, advocating for their right to vote and to hold positions in the Māori Parliament, as exemplified by Meri Te Tai Mangakāhia's efforts in the late 1800s (Johnston 2022). This early activism laid the groundwork for contemporary Māori feminism, often referred to as *mana wāhine*, which emphasises the intersection of being Māori and a woman, challenging both colonial and patriarchal structures (Simmonds 2011). This perspective critiques mainstream feminist narratives that often overlook the complexities of indigenous experiences (Stewart 2021).

Sámi women's movement in Sweden, gaining prominence in the 1970s, has argued for an intersectional lens by highlighting how colonial histories and patriarchal structures have compounded the oppression of Sámi women, particularly within the context of reindeer husbandry and broader societal norms (Knoblock 2022). Sámi feminists emphasise the need to integrate Indigenous perspectives into feminist discourse, advocating for recognition of their specific experiences and struggles against both gendered violence and colonialism. They critique the historical erasure of Sámi women's contributions to Swedish feminist scholarship and seek to reframe gender studies to include Indigenous knowledge systems (Asztalos Morell 2021). This intersectional approach challenges the dominant narratives marginalising Sámi identities within feminist and national discourses (Brovd 2023).

Further, in Canada, the feminist movements of Inuit and Métis women have evolved to address the unique intersection of gender, culture, and colonialism. Organisations like Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada have been pivotal since their founding in 1984, advocating for the rights and empowerment of Inuit women while emphasising the importance of cultural identity and community well-being. Inuit women have increasingly engaged in political activism, challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for representation in decision-making processes. Similarly, the Métis women's movement has focused on intersectionality, recognising that issues such as violence, health disparities, and socioeconomic challenges disproportionately affect Indigenous women due to systemic racism and colonial legacies (Strong-Boag 2021).

Global feminist movements have demonstrated the power of solidarity across borders and communities. Dalit feminists led caste-equity work in South Asia could substantially benefit from building alliances with other feminist movements, particularly those that address similar forms of systemic oppression. However, the burden of forging solidarities rests not solely with Dalit feminists. At its core, the Dalit feminist movement challenges mainstream feminist movements in South Asia, dominated by privileged and oppressor caste women, not just to be more inclusive, but to address the complexities of oppression and work together to dismantle all hierarchies that contribute to caste-patriarchal subjugation.

Findings

Landscape analysis of Dalit feminist-led caste equity movements

India

In India, the Dalit feminist movement primarily focuses on anti-caste activism and social justice. It began in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Before that, while there were several Dalit organisations, Dalit women's organisations were conspicuously absent as formal collectives. Feminist movements also emerged around this time, but their struggles often focused on issues like domestic violence and household matters, which, while necessary, did not include the far more expansive and specific challenges faced by Dalit women. Dalit women have a unique set of issues because they face both gender-based and caste-based violence, both of which compound the other.

Senior Dalit women leaders, such as Ruth Manorama and Vimal Thorat, came together because, at the time, only left-wing women's organisations were addressing labour issues. However, these organisations were unwilling to recognise the caste system's role in creating and perpetuating labour exploitation, failing to address its root cause. While Dalit organisations and feminist groups existed, they neither acknowledged nor prioritised the unique issues faced by Dalit women, nor were they willing to cede leadership to them.

The urgency of Dalit women's issues demanded focused attention, prompting these leaders to develop their agenda and framework. This effort led to the formation of organisations such as AIDMAM (All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch) and NFDW (National Federation of Dalit Women), as well as the contributions of other individual Dalit women leaders, marking the emergence of the Dalit feminist movement.

Even today, Dalit feminist organisations in India and South Asia remain exceedingly rare. This scarcity is not accidental; it reflects the deeply entrenched marginalisation faced by Dalit women throughout history. Establishing an organisation poses significant challenges for Dalit women due to numerous obstacles, including a lack of resources, mentorship, and institutional knowledge.

As a result, only a handful of registered Dalit feminist organisations exist, and those that do face immense difficulties in securing recognition, resources, and

formal approvals such as FCRA (Foreign Contribution Regulation Act) clearance. Despite these barriers, many Dalit women leaders continue to advance caste equity—whether as independent activists, members of collectives, or participants in broader movements.

Nepal

In Nepal, the Dalit feminist movement has emerged as a dynamic socio-political force addressing the intersectional challenges faced by Dalit women, who are marginalised on both caste and gender grounds. Historically, the Dalit community in Nepal has faced economic, social, and educational disadvantages. Following the pro-democracy movement, the movement gained traction post-1990 and witnessed a notable increase in Dalit-led organisations after 2000. Over the past three decades, organisations like the Feminist Dalit Organisation have played a pivotal role in advocating for the rights and empowerment of Dalit women, with a particular focus on enhancing their representation in governance and decision-making processes.

A significant disparity exists in the ground reality for smaller community-based initiatives. Dalit feminist organisations like the Centre for Dalit Women Nepal and Samari Utthan Sewa face substantial challenges in pursuing caste equity due to funder preferences that often prioritise organisations with long-standing experience and established expertise. Many Dalit-led organisations, having emerged prominently only after 2000, struggle to meet these criteria despite their enduring relationships within communities and their profound understanding of the issues they address. This creates a disparity in funding opportunities between self-led and non-self-led organisations.

At the local level, many mainstream feminist organisations, often led by privileged caste women, and other local groups remain unwilling to share knowledge, resources, or platforms with Dalit feminist collectives. There is a persistent reluctance to acknowledge Dalit feminist leadership, resulting in further marginalisation within the broader feminist movement. This lack of solidarity prevents Dalit women from gaining the visibility and support necessary to combat caste-based violence and discrimination effectively.

While India and Nepal have strong constitutional provisions and legal safeguards against caste-based discrimination, enforcement of these provisions remains weak. Dalit women continue to face deep-rooted social biases and limited societal acceptance, restricting their full participation across various spheres.

Their representation in political leadership also remains low. Although quotas exist for Dalit women in governance, meaningful participation is still lacking, with many reserved seats either left unfilled or existing only in name.

Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, Dalits constitute the majority of the Hindu minority community. However, there is also a significant presence of Dalit Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists. Dalits are predominantly employed in menial jobs, including cleaning, manual scavenging, leather processing, and steel clearing. Many also work as labourers on farms and in plantation areas.

For over three decades, the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement has been advocating for the rights of Dalits across various religious communities. Organising Dalit feminist organisations in Bangladesh remains complex and challenging. Yet it has become an increasingly vital part of the struggle for social justice and equality over the past two decades. Grassroots and national organisations, such as the Bangladesh Dalit Women Forum, play a crucial role in empowering Dalit women and amplifying their voices in the fight for their rights, despite facing limited funding, capacity, and human resources compared to larger intermediaries like Nagorik Uddyog.

Pakistan

The Dalit movement in Pakistan is rooted in the broader struggle for the rights and recognition of Scheduled Castes within the Hindu community, as well as among Christian minorities and marginalised Muslim communities, such as the Kohli and Meghwal castes. Historically, these communities have faced systemic discrimination and economic marginalisation, often relegated to jobs like sanitation work and manual labour. Although Islam does not formally recognise the caste system, caste-based discrimination persists in practice, affecting Hindu, Muslim, and Christian groups alike. The movement has struggled with limited political and social representation, as upper-caste minorities often occupy reserved seats in parliament.

Dalit feminist-led organisations, such as the Shelter Participatory Organisation and the Bonded Labour Liberation Front, are actively raising awareness and advocating for the rights of these communities. The movement is increasingly taking an intersectional approach, with leadership by women from oppressed

caste backgrounds who are addressing issues such as gender-based violence and the political participation of Dalit women. The Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network highlights the urgent need for constitutional amendments to explicitly recognise and protect the rights of Scheduled Castes, advocating for equality regardless of religion or caste.

Self-led caste equity initiatives primarily address the challenges that grassroots organisations face in securing funding. In this context, feminist movements can play a crucial role in strengthening anti-caste advocacy and advocating for policy changes that promote lasting structural reforms.

Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, caste issues are often overshadowed by broader ethnic minority concerns, particularly for Tamil plantation workers who face both caste- and ethnicity-based discrimination. The Human Development Organisation has played a crucial role in securing citizenship for stateless plantation workers and advocating for their rights, including access to land and housing. Many plantation workers identify as *Malayaga Tamilar* (or Indian Tamils) and are concentrated in the Southern Province, primarily in smallholdings for tea and the rubber plantation sector. While caste continues to shape personal aspects like marriage, it is less visible in public discourse. However, systemic barriers such as language discrimination, lack of representation in leadership, and entrenched biases continue to hinder the progress of Dalit and lower-caste communities. The primary struggle remains to secure full citizenship rights, which could significantly enhance their socio-economic standing in Sri Lankan society.

The Dalit feminist movement in Sri Lanka is not as explicitly recognised as in India, but anti-caste feminist principles are embedded in the work led by Dalit women. The Human Development Organisation has advocated for the rights of plantation workers, focusing on citizenship, fair wages, and women's empowerment. There is now a growing movement toward acknowledging and addressing caste-based discrimination at both local and international levels, underscoring the need for more inclusive policies and greater representation of oppressed caste women in global forums.

Dalit feminists and Dalit feminist organisations have worked tirelessly to raise awareness about caste-based oppression and address its root causes, despite facing numerous challenges. The intersection of caste, gender, class, and other social conditions creates compounded forms of marginalisation for Dalit women.

While various organisations focus on women in agriculture, labour, or elder care, these discussions often fail to acknowledge caste identity. Many of these organisations speak about women's vulnerabilities but overlook the fact that women are not a homogeneous group. Dalit women, for instance, experience gender-based oppression in ways that are deeply intertwined with their caste identity.

Dominant caste perspectives frequently obscure the specific struggles of Dalit women. These voices lack the lived experiences of caste-based violence, discrimination, and exclusion. This is why Dalit women and Dalit feminist organisations have consistently led the charge in raising awareness about the intersection of caste and gender, highlighting the unique forms of oppression Dalit women face. Through their activism, they have brought much-needed visibility to intersectionality, ensuring that the voices of Dalit women are heard and their struggles are addressed in both feminist and social justice spaces.

Impact of Caste in the Funding Ecosystem

Dalit feminist organisations face significant challenges in securing funding. One major obstacle is the language barrier. While these organisations are more comfortable drafting proposals in regional languages, funders typically require applications to be submitted in English. Given their limited resources, many Dalit feminist-led groups cannot afford to hire professional grant writers, further restricting their access to funding. Some funders impose unrealistic requirements, such as mandating a minimum annual turnover. This raises questions on how these organisations can build their financial capacity if they are not adequately supported. With scarce funding, Dalit feminist organisations struggle to sustain their work, develop leadership, and expand their impact.

The Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) process reinforces casteist hierarchies at multiple levels. Over the past decade, trust-based approaches in M&E have sought to empower Indigenous organisations by reducing reporting burdens. Moreover, this grants them greater control over resource allocation and fosters culturally appropriate solutions to community challenges. While conversations in the Majority World have critically engaged with the colonial legacy, historical trauma of Indigenous peoples, and the inherent power imbalances within trust-based philanthropy, funding for caste equity remains primarily excluded from these discussions.

Funding agencies in South Asia continue to impose reporting requirements aligned with hetero-patriarchal, capitalist standards, often weaponising accountability while normalising elite caste mediocrity in the name of effectiveness. In contrast, Dalit feminist-led initiatives in South Asia advocate for an intersectional lens, emphasising how colonial histories intersect with local social hierarchies, particularly the caste system and its entanglement with gender discrimination. They assert that the struggles of Dalit women cannot be understood in isolation from their broader cultural and social contexts, demanding a more nuanced and equitable approach to funding and evaluation.

Another major challenge for Dalit feminist organisations is chronic underfunding, which severely impacts their ability to retain skilled team members. Many struggle to offer fair wages, leading to high turnover rates. In contrast, upper-caste feminist organisations or better-funded groups often hire Dalit women but relegate them to lower-level positions or fieldwork rather than leadership roles. This tokenisation limits their potential and prevents the genuine development of Dalit feminist leadership.

Additionally, funders prioritise programs like microfinance or climate change initiatives over rights-based work. They prefer measurable, tangible ‘hardware’ outputs—such as infrastructure or economic development—over ‘software’ approaches like movement building, advocacy, and knowledge production. This bias significantly hampers long-term engagement and impact within Dalit communities.

A further obstacle is the deeply skewed knowledge-sharing landscape within and outside South Asia’s philanthropy ecosystem. Dalit feminist-led grassroots organisations often lack timely access to funding opportunities due to limited networks and lower social media visibility. This restricts their ability to stay informed about available grants. However, available funding is often limited to small, short-term grants, typically ranging from six months to a year, which are insufficient for achieving meaningful, long-term impact.

Moreover, funders impose rigid demands for measurable outcomes, such as success stories and quantifiable achievements, within unrealistic time frames. They fail to recognise that deep-rooted social change—especially around caste and gender—requires sustained effort, long-term commitment, and the flexibility to address complex, evolving challenges.

State-level Challenges

Dalit feminist organisations face significant repression from the state, particularly in India, where local and regional governments actively target them for challenging the status quo. By raising issues of dignity, human rights, caste atrocities, and systemic poverty, these organisations confront entrenched power structures, making them more vulnerable to state retaliation. In contrast, feminist organisations that do not centre caste oppression in their work often operate with greater safety and autonomy, as their work is perceived as less politically contentious.

State surveillance is a significant obstacle, with many Dalit feminist organisations in India facing the cancellation of their FCRA (Foreign Contribution Regulation Act) licenses. This crackdown on foreign funding severely restricts their ability to function effectively, reinforcing financial precarity and limiting their outreach. The constant threat of government scrutiny, legal harassment, and funding restrictions creates a hostile environment, forcing many organisations to navigate immense risks simply to continue their work.

In Pakistan, while laws exist to address caste-based exploitation and discrimination, they fail to recognise or address the gendered caste violence that Dalit women face. Similarly, in Nepal and Bangladesh, governments have offered some preliminary support for Dalit feminist-led initiatives, particularly in advocacy and policy discussions. However, bureaucratic hurdles and restrictive policies on foreign funding continue to hinder meaningful and sustained investment in caste equity efforts.

Conclusions and Way Forward

Dalit feminist organisations require long-term, sustainable funding to plan and implement lasting change, rather than being constrained by short-term, piecemeal grants. They also need capacity-building support to strengthen their teams and infrastructure. However, funders frequently compare Dalit feminist organisations to upper-caste feminist organisations, which often have historical access to resources, larger teams, and well-established infrastructures. This comparison is fundamentally unfair, as it ignores the systemic marginalisation Dalit communities face—barriers that limit their access to the same levels of funding, networks, or institutional support.

For meaningful change, **funders must recognise that resourcing caste equity initiatives is not optional but essential.** Caste oppression intersects deeply with gender, geographic location, and poverty, placing Dalit women in particularly vulnerable positions where human rights violations are severe and persistent. Funding frameworks must be restructured to prioritise Dalit feminist leadership, ensuring that resources are directed toward those most affected by caste-based discrimination and gendered violence.

Caste equity is not a short-term project—it is a long-term commitment. Raising visibility and advocating for systemic change requires sustained effort, consistency, and dedication. Transforming deeply entrenched caste hierarchies is an ongoing process, requiring long-term engagement with communities and relentless advocacy for justice.

Dalit feminist leaders emphasise that effective change comes not just from advocacy but from **deeply listening to and learning from the lived experiences of those most affected by caste-based discrimination.** Being present with communities fosters trust and solidarity, enabling more effective strategies for resistance and transformation. However, for this work to be impactful, Dalit feminist organisations need stable, long-term funding.

Short-term grants of one or two years are insufficient to create lasting structural change. When funding cycles are brief and unpredictable, organisations must constantly scramble for resources, diverting energy from their core mission. Long-term funding provides the stability necessary to build momentum, expand reach, and transition from grassroots efforts to national-level impact.

Moreover, **funding must be core and flexible.** Rigid, project-based funding often fails to meet the evolving needs of communities. Flexible funding allows organisations to adapt to emerging challenges, invest in leadership development, and sustain long-term strategies for systemic change. Without this, the Dalit feminist movement remains constrained by financial precarity, despite its critical role in challenging caste and gender-based oppression.

Strengthening partnerships between Dalit feminist organisations and funders is essential for long-term impact. However, these partnerships must be built on principles of equality and shared leadership. Dalit feminist organisations are not passive recipients of charity—they are leaders at the forefront of justice movements. True partnership requires funders to recognise this and move away from paternalistic support models.

The concept of “giving back to society” should be mutual, dismantling the hierarchy between funders and the organisations they support. Funders must go beyond transactional grant-making and instead invest in the overall well-being and growth of these organisations. This means shifting the focus from rigid metrics, such as quarterly reports and numerical outputs, to a deeper understanding of organisational challenges, needs, and long-term capacity-building.

Sustainable funding must cover more than just operational costs. It should include essential support for travel, urgent actions, and emergency grants, ensuring that Dalit feminist organisations can respond swiftly to crises and opportunities. Without this flexibility, organisations are often forced to choose between immediate survival and long-term strategy—an impossible trade-off for movements working to dismantle caste and gender oppression.

Intersectionality must be at the core of the philanthropic ecosystem, yet many international funding agencies continue to operate from a limited, homogenised understanding of women’s issues. White women often lead these agencies from the Minority World, whose perspectives, while valuable, may not fully grasp the layered and systemic nature of caste oppression. A more diverse leadership within philanthropy, particularly with increased representation of women of colour, especially Black women and those from caste-oppressed backgrounds, could bring deeper intersectional awareness. Black feminist thought, for instance, has long challenged one-dimensional approaches to oppression, offering critical insights that could reshape how funders engage with Dalit feminist movements. Without such perspectives, funding agencies risk reinforcing the very inequalities they claim to dismantle by treating “women’s issues” as a singular, universal category rather than recognising the specific struggles of caste-marginalised women.

Philanthropy must move beyond performative inclusivity and actively integrate intersectionality into its decision-making structures. This includes shifting power to Dalit feminist-led organisations, acknowledging their expertise, and ensuring that funding frameworks reflect the realities of those they seek to support.

The priorities for Dalit feminist organisations in the next decade include the following:

1. **Building the capacity of organisations and communities:** Strengthening the internal capacity of Dalit feminist organisations and empowering local communities is essential for long-term sustainability and impact. This includes providing training, resources, and support to help them address their unique challenges more effectively.
2. **Registering more organisations:** Expanding the number of registered Dalit feminist organisations will increase their visibility and influence, allowing them to better advocate for the rights and needs of Dalit women on a larger scale.
3. **Raising the voices of Dalit women at the international level:** It is crucial to elevate the voices of Dalit women in global discussions around gender, caste, and social justice. This includes advocating for their representation in international forums and policy-making spaces, where their issues often remain underrepresented.
4. **Focusing on youth and adolescent girls:** A key priority should be empowering Dalit youth, particularly adolescent girls, by building their leadership capacity. Providing them with the tools, knowledge, and support they need to become community leaders is essential for creating a more equitable future.
5. **Promoting digital literacy and education:** In today's world, digital literacy is vital for social and economic empowerment. Dalit feminist organisations should prioritise providing access to education and digital skills, enabling young people to navigate the modern world and create opportunities for themselves and their communities.

Focusing on these priorities, any substantial work that involves movement building and capacity building for communities at large would require long-term, dedicated funds that are fundamentally driven by trust and a genuine intent for a casteless society. Funders need to take responsibility for strengthening Dalit feminist organisations' movement, amplifying the voices of Dalit women, and creating lasting changes for future generations.

Recommendations

Organisations

In terms of overarching approaches, by drawing on these lessons from the evolution of feminist movements worldwide, Dalit feminist organisations in South Asia can enhance their strategies for empowerment, advocacy, and social justice, ultimately working towards a more equitable society for all marginalised women.

- **Intersectionality:** The evolution of key global feminist movements underscores the importance of recognising how various forms of oppression intersect, such as race, gender, and colonial histories. Dalit feminist movements in South Asia can benefit from an intersectional approach that addresses their unique challenges while acknowledging the historical context of caste discrimination.
- **Grassroots organising:** The formation of groups like the National Black Feminist Organisation, WARN illustrates the power of grassroots organising in addressing specific community needs. Dalit feminist movements can learn from this by establishing their platforms to advocate for rights without being overshadowed by mainstream feminist narratives.
- **Addressing violence against women:** The MMIW crisis highlights the urgent need to address violence against Indigenous women. At the same time, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has focused on police violence and systemic racism, which can affect Black women in particular. Similarly, Dalit feminist movements must prioritise issues such as gender-based violence within their advocacy efforts, creating awareness and seeking justice for survivors.

Funders

Black feminist movements in the U.S. have been actively addressing the chronic underfunding they face through innovative strategies and the establishment of dedicated funding initiatives. The Black Feminist Fund (BFF), launched in 2021, exemplifies a new approach to philanthropy that aims to significantly increase resources for Black feminist movements globally. This fund seeks to overcome traditional barriers by providing sustained, multi-year grants ranging from \$50,000 to \$200,000, allowing organisations to focus on long-term goals rather than project-specific funding. By employing a participatory funding model where a diverse committee of Black activists decides on grant allocations, BFF aims to build trust and ensure that funding directly supports grassroots movements often overlooked by mainstream philanthropy.

Additionally, there is a growing trend of philanthropists of colour and women supporting these movements. This shift is partly driven by an increased awareness of the need for intersectional approaches in philanthropy that recognise the unique challenges marginalised communities face. Reports indicate that while Black feminist movements receive only 0.1% to 0.35% of all philanthropic funding, there is a rising commitment among some funders to prioritise Black leadership and intersectional issues (Human Rights Funders Network 2021). By diversifying funding strategies and moving away from siloed approaches that focus solely on single issues, these philanthropists are working to create a more equitable distribution of resources that supports the holistic needs of Black feminist movements.

Specifically, some approaches could include;

- **Establishing dedicated funds:** The creation of funds, such as the BFF, highlights the importance of establishing dedicated financial resources for specific movements. Dalit feminist organisations can advocate for similar funds focusing on their unique challenges and needs, ensuring sustained support over time.
- **Participatory funding models:** Implementing participatory funding models can empower marginalised communities by involving them in decision-making processes about resource allocation. Dalit feminists can adopt this approach to ensure that funding aligns with their priorities and addresses their specific concerns.
- **Building networks among philanthropists:** The increasing involvement of philanthropists of colour and women in supporting Black feminist movements suggests that building networks among diverse funders can enhance resource mobilisation for Dalit feminist causes. Engaging with allies who understand the importance of intersectionality can lead to more substantial support.
- **Advocating for Long-Term Funding:** The emphasis on long-term funding commitments within the BFF model highlights the need for Dalit feminist movements to advocate for sustained financial support rather than short-term project grants. This approach enables organisations to plan effectively and implement comprehensive strategies for change.
- **Raising awareness about intersectionality:** Black feminists' ongoing efforts to highlight their intersectional struggles can serve as a model for Dalit feminists in South Asia. By raising awareness about how caste intersects with gender and other forms of discrimination (such as economic and health inequities), Dalit feminists can attract broader support and understanding from potential funders.

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The Feminist Public Financing Ecosystem in Central Africa: Status, Challenges and Prospects

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Illustrated by Mariana Lorenzo



Advocacy Summary

This study follows the work of analysing public funding for women's and feminist organisations worldwide. It is based on data collected in three Central African countries, namely Cameroon, Chad and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), to highlight the specific challenges of the funding ecosystem in this sub-region. Based mainly on primary data from semi-structured interviews, this research analyses how feminist financing operates at national, regional and international levels. It also examines the opportunities and relationships between local women's and feminist organisations and public funders at each level. Thus, as with earlier studies, this research aims to show that the feminist funding ecosystem is still fragile worldwide.

■ Literature Review

Indeed, the literature shows that national governments struggle to financially support local women's and feminist organisations (Laila Hessini, 2023; Cazabat, 2016; Eval4change, 2024). Even ministries dedicated to gender issues often lack sufficient resources to implement their activities and support women's civil society organisations (MINPROFF, 2020; Onu Femmes, 2023). At regional and international levels, the dependence of community institutions on foreign funding (González 2017) and the requirements of international donors to access

their funding opportunities further complicate the feminist funding ecosystem (Equipop 2022, Mama Cash 2024).

■ Findings

Institutionalised precariousness of feminist public funding is evident in the three countries studied. Technical, rather than financial, support is generally provided to local women's and feminist organisations. Additionally, at the regional level, funding opportunities lack visibility and women's and feminist organisations lack confidence in regional institutions. At the international level, foreign feminist policies are diversified, but their implementation in funding local organisations remains debatable. This dynamic exerts considerable pressure on relations between international public funders and regional women's and feminist organisations.

Beyond the usual findings on the chronic underfunding of African feminist organisations, our research brings an innovative perspective to the existing literature. It reveals that the challenges of the feminist funding ecosystem cannot be attributed solely to funders but are a shared responsibility between all actors. From this perspective, this contribution highlights the mutual criticisms between public funders and feminist organisations. It underlines the need for a reciprocal commitment to optimise the feminist funding ecosystem and its impact.

■ Recommendations

Main recommendations for achieving this goal, according to each actor:

- **For multilateral institutions**, this means adopting an inclusive approach to feminist funding, putting an end to discrimination against organisations based on the age of the leader or organisation, the field of intervention and the geographical area. The abovementioned elements collectively constitute a multi-tiered filter that diminishes funding prospects for numerous organisations dedicated to women's issues and feminist causes.
- **For local governments**, it is essential to cleanse the feminist public funding system, ridding it of corruption, favouritism, nepotism and other abuses that are sources of prejudice in the allocation and use of feminist funds.
- **For local women's and feminist organisations**, it is imperative to continuously consolidate institutional and human capacities. The organisations should prioritise and facilitate the continuous professional development of members in areas such as financial management, project proposal development, and other relevant domains. This strategic investment will enhance their overall credibility and expertise.

Authors and Acknowledgements

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Acronym List

ADIEFA	Association for the Development, Innovation and Entrepreneurship of Women and Girls for Empowerment	NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
AFLADEGT	Association of Feminist Leaders for Access to Rights and Gender Equity in Chad	OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ALVF	Association for Combating Violence Against Women	PILC	Public Interest Law Centre
AMEN	Alternative, Ménage, Nature et Marché	RAGFHT	Network of associations and groups of disabled women in Chad
ASFM	Association for the Relief of Young Mothers	REFED/N-K	Women and Development Network-North Kivu
CSO	Civil Society Organisations	REJEFEMAC	Network of Young Feminists of Central Africa
FDA	French Development Agency	REJEFFT	Network of Young Women and Girls Leaders of Chad
FDA	Focus, Droits et Accès	REFELA	Network of African Elected Women
FONAREV	National fund for reparations to victims of conflict-related sexual violence and other crimes against the peace and security of humanity	SCAC	The Cooperation and Cultural Action Service
GRB	Gender-Responsive Budgeting	UCLG Africa	United Cities and Local Governments of Africa
IGA	Income-generating activities	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Intersex	UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
LTDF	Chadian League for Women's Rights	WPMC	Women for Peace, Mediation and Conflict Prevention

Introduction

Feminist movements are essential drivers of social transformation (Eyakuze, 2019). In Africa, as elsewhere, they play an invaluable role in combating the gender-based violence and inequalities present in the public and private spheres. However, their activities are often compromised by their poor financial viability, whose sources of supply, although diversified, present considerable complexities regarding their allocation, acquisition and use. Indeed, feminist funding, defined by Michael Edwards as “the set of different income-generating options tailored to the diversity of needs required by social change” (Edwards, cited by AWID 2019: 5), is crucial in ensuring the sustainability and impact of feminist initiatives. However, its scope and terms of access are still subject to criticism in discourse and literature.

This study analyses the feminist funding ecosystem, focusing on its public component in Central Africa. It examines funding from national governments, African regional institutions and public development partners and their interaction with women’s and feminist organisations. It is structured around two fundamental questions: How are feminist public funding systems structured, presented and organised in Central Africa, regarding actors, mechanisms and challenges? Moreover, how can this funding be optimised for accessibility, sustainability, monitoring and evaluation to ensure social and systemic transformation?

Therefore, this study’s overarching objective is to analyse the feminist public funding ecosystem across national, regional and international levels and to propose practical recommendations drawn from the experiences of women’s and feminist organisations approached in the course of field surveys. The aim is to analyse each actor’s actions and their interactions to understand the dynamics, meanings and counter-meanings of these actions. From an intersectional feminist perspective, this study also aims to highlight feminist movements in Central Africa, which are often marginalised in literature and the allocation of financial resources, compared with black feminist movements in Europe, America and West Africa. It is led by two Cameroonian feminist associations: the Association for Feminist Research in Central Africa (ARFAC) and the Network of Young Feminists of Central Africa (REJEFEMAC).

Methodology

The research is anchored in the field of feminist research and based on a rigorous qualitative methodology, combining documentary research (scientific articles, legal texts and reports from national and international organisations), in-depth semi-structured interviews (with discussion guides adapted to each category of actors) and direct observation¹ (Bloor & Wood, 2006; Creswell, 2003). Feminist anchoring enables a shift from the default androcentrism of the social sciences to implement modes of knowledge construction that are more sensitive to the realities of dominated social groups (Charron & Auclair, 2016). Field surveys of 40 women's and feminist organisations in Cameroon, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of Congo were conducted to understand their experiences and positions on feminist financing with national, regional, and international donors. The surveys generally indicated that public funding for feminist initiatives in Central Africa is insufficient, less frequent and less consistent than private feminist funding.

Twenty representatives of public funders (ministries, communes, embassies and development agencies) in the three countries studied were also interviewed to understand their perceptions of their financial and/or technical support for women's and feminist organisations in Central Africa. The concepts of "women's organisations" and "feminist organisations" are used concomitantly and non-interchangeably in this study to refer to women's organisations that campaign for the rights of women and girls and may or may not assume the feminist label (Aboudi 2024) depending on the political context or ideological goals they pursue.

The limits

This study encountered several challenges during data collection and analysis. Field teams in all three countries encountered difficulties obtaining interviews with specific organisations, particularly at the regional level. Challenges arose in accessing public funding data, possibly due to intentional withholding or interviewees' limited knowledge stemming from their organisational roles. During the analysis, the main challenge was to extrapolate the results to the three countries due to their different political, economic and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, mitigation strategies were developed to overcome these obstacles and produce this study aimed at cleansing the feminist financing ecosystem in Central Africa. The objective is to rebalance relations between national, regional and international donors and women's/feminist organisations, to increase feminist funding and to

1. Direct observation was carried out at the sites of women's and feminist CSOs, national and local public administrations and international organisations approached for the surveys. The aim was to observe the respondents' environments and behaviours during the interviews.

adopt a more inclusive approach to funding by taking into account all women's and feminist organisations, irrespective of their size or age, while respecting their areas of intervention.

Literature Review

While several studies focus on women's access to financing (Akouwerabou, 2020; Djodjo, 2021; Bentancor, 2022; Okopoue & Bangagnan Yanga, 2024), there is a paucity of research specifically focusing on the feminist financing ecosystem, or on the efforts made by financing players to support feminist activities and initiatives. This dearth of research is more evident in Africa, particularly in the Central African sub-region, where the websites and annual reports of national and regional public institutions rarely highlight their efforts² dedicated to funding gender equality (ICR, 2022). Consequently, scientific articles and other publications analysing these efforts are few and far between (ICR, 2022). Thus, this non-exhaustive literature review aims to show the few works on feminist financing carried out by authors and research or funding institutions that analyse, globally or partially, the feminist financing ecosystem at the national, regional and international level.

A. Research on feminist financing at the state level

According to Laila Hessini (2023), very few countries currently have sources of funding to advance feminist agendas. However, alternative sources of funding remain woefully inadequate. This situation particularly hard hits African countries, as they struggle to mobilise specific funding to support feminist initiatives spearheaded by women's civil society organisations. These African CSOs, which have only low membership fees at their disposal, stand in stark contrast to Western NGOs, which benefit from the support of private donors and extensive fundraising (Cazabat, 2016). This financial precariousness forces them to turn to international donors to ensure their survival and continue their activities.

In its final report on the "interim evaluation of the 'Feminist in Action' 2021-2023 project", Eval4change (2024) reiterates this alarming finding, revealing that *"national funding remains scarce unless they assume the role of public service*

2. Regional organisations could include in their reports detailed documentation of budgets specifically earmarked for gender equality programmes, as well as initiatives taken to support women's and feminist CSOs in achieving their goals and building their capacities. Thus, these documents would combine qualitative and quantitative data to highlight existing opportunities, identify African organisations and sub-regions that have already benefited from these programs, and highlight geographical areas where these resources remain underutilised. The analysis of challenges encountered and the proposition of concrete avenues for their surmounting would offer a clear and actionable vision of the progress made and the efforts to be intensified.

operators". Furthermore, African women's CSOs only receive national public funding for service provision. Despite the commitments made by some states to significantly increase their financial support for gender equality, Mama Cash (2024) points out that these promises and intentions are not systematically followed by an increase in commitments or the establishment of funding mechanisms for women's rights organisations. In Central Africa, the minimal budgets allocated to ministries in charge of women's rights often do not allow them to support their activities, let alone those of women's and feminist organisations.

In Cameroon, for example, the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Family (MINPROFF) has only 2% of the total government budget (MINPROFF, 2020). As a result, women's CSOs operate under challenging conditions and focus on international aid (Cazabat, 2012). In the Chadian context, national mechanisms for promoting gender equality are equally fragile and suffer from a chronic lack of funding. Following an evaluation and positioning survey conducted in 2021 among women's and feminist CSOs, the latter cited the lack of financial resources as the primary obstacle to integrating the gender approach into their projects (DAI, 2021). This financial challenge for CSOs persists in a national context where the ministry in charge of gender issues receives less than 1% of the national budget (Onu Femme, 2023) and where the government relies mainly on Technical and Financial Partners (TFPs) to implement National Gender Policy programs (National Gender Policy Chad, 2011). In the DRC, the situation is no better. Although the country has many women's NGOs and associations, most do not have access to national funding (Hilhorst and Bashwira, 2016), making them dependent on foreign funds.

In West Africa, feminist movements are not exempt from funding challenges at the national level. Organisations campaigning for gender justice in this subregion sorely lack the resources to function (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung 2022). Doubogan (2021) uses Benin's example to denounce the heavy dependence of feminist movements in the South on Western ideology and financial aid.

This pattern of dependence on women's and feminist organisations, constantly noted in the literature, generally highlights a decolonial approach to feminist funding that requires restructuring relationships. However, this is difficult in a context where states are struggling to develop viable national funding mechanisms and where the organisations themselves do not have sufficient funds to continue their activities. On the contrary, they are subject to national legal and political constraints that seal their dependence on foreign aid.

In Cameroon, only women's organisations with NGO status are eligible for national and international public subsidies, donations or legacies (Cazabat, 2016). This status is granted upon government approval after an arduous and complex procedure (Cazabat, 2016). Based on the findings of Jules Falquet (2007), whose research examines civil society organisations (CSOs) in Latin America, it is posited that the "NGOisation" of associations may result in a diminished autonomy for the women's movement, especially within contexts characterised by rigorous and more transformative struggles.. This dynamic is explained by the fact that this status subjects local organisations to the constraints imposed by projects and funding conditions determined by the specific interests of development agencies.

B. Feminist financing at the regional and international level

Although the African Union (AU) and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) coordinate the multilateral action of African states in gender equality, funding difficulties are also perceptible. Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS) noted in its report analysing the "contribution of African women to the declaration on the integration of the gender perspective in the African Union" that the AU's Women's Directorate lacked resources (FAS, 2004; Guignard, 2016).³ This statement highlights the inability of this regional body to provide financial backing for gender equality projects and/or organisations.

Moreover, the work of Olga M. González (2017) has underscored the reliance of African regional bodies on international aid in the same way as local CSOs. However, at the regional level, the way they operate means that the resources of regional bodies that support projects and organisations campaigning for gender equality come mainly from member states' membership fees. According to González, these institutions and CSOs depend on donors and competition for funds, which considerably limits their ability to promote gender equality in Africa.

As for the international level, several works highlight the feminist foreign diplomacy of Western states (Equipop, 2022; Mama Cash, 2024), defined as "the policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states and movements in a way that prioritises gender equality and enshrines the human rights of women and other traditionally marginalised groups, allocates significant resources to realising this vision, and seeks, through its implementation, to disrupt patriarchal power structures..." (Thompson & Clement, 2019). Actions in this direction are carried out within bilateral and multilateral frameworks (Reminy-Elizor et al., 2023).

3. Created in 2002 within the office of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, this department promotes gender equality in Africa and within the AU, and oversees the development and harmonisation of gender-related policies, etc.en Afrique et au sein de l'UA et supervise l'élaboration et l'harmonisation des politiques liées au genre etc.

If foreign policy, as formulated, guarantees feminist funding for other states' and local feminist movements, several pieces of research point to a gap between theory and practice. For example, Mama Cash (2024) draws on a recent report by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), which published data from seven countries committed to feminist diplomacy. Overall, women's equality organisations and institutions have only received \$2.37 billion, or 9% of these states' commitments to the governmental and civil society sectors (i.e. \$26.1 million). It should be noted that the percentage received by feminist movements (9%) represents only a minuscule fraction (2%) of overall gender-based aid (\$117.6 billion). These figures reinforce the relevance of the question posed by AWID in its report, "Where is the money for organising feminist movements?". Indeed, these organisations receive a mere 0.13% of official development aid and only 0.4% of all gender-related aid (AWID 2021).

In addition to these figures, which call into question the effectiveness of bilateral and multilateral aid to feminist movements, other studies examine the challenges in granting this international aid and its impact on achieving gender equality objectives. According to Coordination SUD (2024), international aid is not always adapted to the needs and realities of local feminist organisations. Complex procedures, restrictive eligibility criteria and long disbursement times can hamper the effectiveness of organisations and limit their ability to respond rapidly to urgent needs. What is more, the agencies through which these funds are channelled to implement the feminist foreign diplomacy of Western states are accused of being responsible for many of the shortcomings in the states that "benefit" from this aid. Mirla Cisne and Telma Gurgel (2015) show how, in the Brazilian context, feminist NGOs have developed their activities thanks to the support of international cooperation and development agencies. However, they underline that the latter act as intermediaries for organisations primarily responsible for poverty and inequality on the Latin American continent, namely the IMF, the Inter-American Development Bank and the WB (Cisne & Gurgel, 2015).

Findings

I. The underfunding of women's and feminist organisations by national governments in Central Africa

The analysis of data procured from a selection of women's and feminist organisations and public authorities in the three studied countries shows that the feminist public funding ecosystem at the national level is in its nascent stages. The issue is primarily driven by the restricted financial resources of national governments and the fundamentally suspicious dynamic between civil society organisations and governments. This sub-section analyses the forms of public support identified (A) while concurrently addressing the salient challenges characterising this feminist funding ecosystem in Central Africa (B).

A. A support system that is more technical than financial

It is very challenging to speak of feminist public funding at the national level in Central Africa, as most of the leaders of women's and feminist organisations in the countries studied stated that they had never received direct funding from the government, a decentralised local authority or any other public institution. Nevertheless, the interviews revealed at least five forms of technical and financial support from public authorities to these organisations.

The first form is the provision of premises (rooms or discussion areas), which organisation leaders obtain free of charge or at a flat rate. In Cameroon, organisations like the Association for Combating Violence Against Women (ALVF), Women for Peace, Mediation and Conflict Prevention (WPMC), Sourire de Femmes, and the Association Parler d'Elles receive this assistance through partnership agreements with MINPROFF's regional delegations or their local communes.

The second is support in the form of work materials. In Cameroon, the *Association for the Relief of Young Mothers* (ASFM) often receives dignity kits for GBV survivors from the MINPROFF regional delegation through the municipalities' women's and family promotion centres. In Chad, some organisations, such as the *Network of Young Women and Girls Leaders of Chad* (REJEFFT), are provided with vehicles and office equipment by the Ministry of Women and Early Childhood Protection to facilitate the implementation of their activities.

The third form of support is the provision of public personnel to support women's or feminist organisations in their activities. This may be an expert or a public official who acts as a facilitator in women's capacity-building workshops run

by these organisations, or a social worker who helps an organisation achieve a specific objective over a given period. By way of illustration, the Cameroon government supported the installation of the ALVF branch in the Far North by allocating the services of a social worker who worked 15 hours a week. The fourth form of technical support is establishing a strategic partnership between a public institution and a women's or feminist organisation. This may take the form of sponsorship by a ministry, which provides the organisation with administrative facilities or expertise in seeking and obtaining funding, or the signing of a partnership agreement that defines the roles and responsibilities of each party and enables the organisation to be registered in the ministry's file of partners or its project bank (depending on the country). This strategic collaboration enables women's or feminist organisations to benefit from several advantages, such as being given priority for providing public services or obtaining referrals to donors. To take advantage of this support, women's and feminist organisations must fulfil several conditions that differ by country: they must be authorised to operate, be registered and assessed beforehand, and be highly active in the field, among others.

Funding was identified as the final form of support, but it was found to be minimal. Most leaders from women's and feminist organisations reported never having received financial support. Some had heard of such an initiative in favour of other organisations,⁴ while a negligible proportion said they had benefited from direct public funding. In the three countries studied, it was mainly the ministries in charge of gender, youth and economic issues that were cited as providing one-off funding for select women's and feminist organisations, either on the occasion of specific events such as the celebration of International Women's Day or within the framework of projects.

The mechanisms for accessing these public funds are diverse. They may be allocated following a call for projects, a funding application submitted by an organisation, or through informal mechanisms (favouritism, clientelism, etc.). In the DRC, for example, Alliance pour la Vie, a feminist organisation operating in the provinces of North and South Kivu, received funding from the provincial government of South Kivu to run a project aimed at raising awareness about sexual health and menstrual management among young people and teenagers. Also, the National Fund for Reparations to Victims of Conflict-Related Sexual

4. Interviews with Brenda and Faycal, respectively Deputy General Secretary and Communications Officer of the Pan-African Youth Networks in Search of Excellence for Sustainable Development (REJEUPARED); with Maître Delphine Kemneloum Djiraibe, President of the Public Interest Law Center (PILC); with Minguemadji Elodie, General Secretary of SuperBanat, Nadege Doumdanem, Artistic Director of Fille'ture, Viviane Tathi, Executive Coordinator of the Association Sourire de Femmes and Laetitia Lowe etc.

Violence and Other Crimes against the Peace and Security of Humanity (FONAREV)⁵ allocates modest financial resources to women's and feminist associations such as Women and Development Network-North Kivu (REFED/N-K), whose mobilisation of community workers has been financed by this public institution. In Cameroon and Chad, none of the organisations approached during the surveys claimed to have received any funding.

Another indirect funding mechanism is gender-responsive budgeting (GRB), which has been tried out by some public administrations and local authorities in the three countries in the study. This approach allows funds to be directed towards programs and initiatives that specifically address the needs of women and girls. Many other mechanisms are specific to each country and integrated within ministries or local authorities.

B. Structural constraints on feminist public funding in Central Africa

An analysis of the feminist financing ecosystem in Central Africa reveals a series of constraints that justify its nascent stage. From a multidimensional perspective, these obstacles can be classified into three categories: systemic, economic and socio-political.

On a systemic level, relations between public authorities and women's and feminist organisations in Central Africa are generally distant and self-serving. Communication between these two actors is typically only established in administrative interactions (requests for authorisations). Only a handful of organisations request technical and/or financial support from the state. At the same time, the majority express reservations about the ability of public authorities to grant them financial backing due to the governance problems affecting their countries. On the other hand, public authorities favour community-based women's organisations, which they support through donations of agricultural equipment (hoes, machetes, seeds). At the same time, they adopt a wait-and-see attitude towards women's and feminist organisations, seeking to take advantage of the opportunities they offer.

Several organisation leaders stated during interviews that *"public authorities expect us to come and give them money", or "when we invite the authorities to our activities, it's like I told you, it's in exchange for money. They don't do it for free (...) so when we do activities, we're the ones who take care of everything"*.

5. FONAREV is a public institution of a technical, financial and social nature, under the supervision of the Ministry of Human Rights. It encourages women's CSOs to register in order to access its various support programs. However, obtaining this support does not seem to be systematic.

As a result, information is difficult to circulate between governments and feminist organisations in their territories, making the national feminist funding ecosystem fractured. The relationship between these two actors is made all the more fragile because Central Africa has legal mechanisms dedicated to controlling the evolution and activities of CSOs wishing to acquire NGO status. As a result, many women's and feminist organisations voluntarily remain "associations", refusing to migrate to NGO status because of the consequences this entails.⁶ ALVF is a case in point. This organisation refused NGO status and remained an association because one of its founders believes that *"the Cameroonian state wants to control them, but gives nothing [in terms of financial support]"*.

Whatever their legal status, women's and feminist CSOs remain classified in general categories, which deprives them of specific recognition and support. Even when public funding is allocated to CSOs directly or through GRB, it is impossible to quantify the share that goes to organisations campaigning for the rights of women and girls. Several administrative authorities in the study countries have stated that there is no mechanism or procedure for distinguishing women's and feminist organisations from other CSOs. The situation is made all the more complex because the state and local authorities are struggling to identify and map these organisations, whose exact number is still poorly understood. Systemic constraints are also perceptible when it comes to conditions of access to the few public funds available, as information, when it is available, remains confined to the bulletin boards of central government departments or is sometimes relayed to a few organisations based on favouritism.

On the economic level, in all the countries studied, government institutions in charge of gender issues suffer from a chronic shortage of budgetary resources. They receive only a marginal share of the state budget - around 1% in Chad and the DRC and 2% in Cameroon - which has to be divided between implementing the ministries' activities and supporting the thousands of CSOs listed. As the communes approached, they generally limited their support for women's and feminist organisations to material assistance. This is due, on the one hand, to insufficient communal resources and, on the other, to mistrust stemming from past experiences where specific local organisations had not demonstrated rigorous management of allocated funds, as *"they take the money and share it"*.

6. Cameroon has a Commission in charge of examining applications for approval and monitoring the activities of non-governmental organisations. According to decree no. 2001/150 of May 03, 2001 on the organisation and functioning of this institution, its mission is to carry out technical studies of applications for approval, examine the financial accounts and inventory of the movable and immovable property of NGOs, monitor the activities of NGOs with a view to ensuring the proper use of subsidies from legal entities under public law, and control the activities of NGOs with a view to proposing sanctions applicable to them.

Conversely, as an economic mechanism and governance instrument, GRB has been the subject of substantial criticism. Effective monitoring of the funding utilised for gender equality, let alone that allocated to women's CSOs, remains unfeasible. This calls into question the impact of GRB on social change in Central Africa. Indeed, the research in the three countries did not identify any monitoring and evaluation mechanism to ensure the transfer and use of public funds to women's and feminist organisations through GRB. There is speculation that nepotism and clientelism may be involved in allocating some public funding.

It has been observed that the allocation of funds through formal mechanisms is often accompanied by delays in disbursements, which impede the effective implementation of activities by women's and feminist organisations that cannot self-finance. Furthermore, grievances have been lodged against specific focal points, particularly ministries, who have been found to demand financial compensation from women's and feminist organisations in the course of their administrative procedures associated with disbursements or other undertakings..

On the socio-political level, feminism, particularly in its intersectional manifestation that accentuates all sexual identities and safeguards the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals, encounters staunch opposition from national governments, as they are fiercely opposed to homosexuality. Moreover, it is subject to criminal sanctions. As a result, women's and feminist organisations advocating for these rights are unable to receive state support, including operating permits. These cannot be obtained by organisations identifying as feminist or that explicitly prioritise the well-being of LGBTQI+ individuals. Feminism itself is not yet completely free of the stigma of being an imported concept, overshadowing notions such as the promotion of women and the family, the protection of girls and children, and the enhancement of the status of women, as shown by the names of the ministries in charge of gender issues in the three countries surveyed.⁷ This approach hurts feminist public funding, confining it to areas of intervention that are no longer relevant to communities and organisations. This sometimes results in the distribution of hoes and machetes to rural women, an approach that “keeps women in the conditions of the 1800s.”⁸

7. In the West, the names of the ministries dedicated to gender issues directly highlight the issue of sought-after equality. In France, for example, it's the Ministry for Equality between Women and Men and the Fight against Discrimination, and in Germany, it's the Ministry for Gender Equality and Diversity.

8. By referring to the “conditions of the 1800s”, Ms. Sike Bilé is referring to a time when women's rights and freedoms were severely restricted. With a touch of irony, this phrase underlines the persistence of archaic conditions reminiscent of the 19th century.

II. The opacity of regional feminist funding mechanisms in Central Africa

The feminist public funding system at regional level in Africa suffers from a profound lack of visibility and confidence. Although opportunities were identified in the course of the surveys (A), the majority of organisation leaders interviewed were unaware of them or had not yet explored them (B).

A. Marginal feminist financing opportunities at the African regional level?

Leaders of women's and feminist organisations surveyed agree that the AU, its institutions, and sub-regional bodies like CEMAC have significantly promoted gender equality. However, the actions of these institutions in terms of concrete funding of organisations working in this field are not known. Despite this lack of transparency, some organisations have claimed to have received funding from one of the regional bodies.

In Chad in 2022, REJEFFT received a funding proposal request from the AU to run the “16 Days of Activism” campaign against gender-based violence. The association's national coordinator explained that no funding application had been submitted to the regional body, but that it was the latter that had taken the initiative of contacting them to propose. Moreover, the budget submitted by REJEFFT had been increased by the AU. In the same country, the feminist organisation, *Fille'ture*, received funding from the AU for training in information processing on the issues of female genital mutilation and gender-based violence in Addis Ababa. In the DRC, Smart Hub Kivu, an incubator that supports women and young people in setting up businesses, also received funding from the AU as part of the fight against GBV.

The surveys also identified feminist financing opportunities often launched by CEMAC, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and regional African banks, although the organisations that identified them have not yet taken advantage of them.

In addition to this financial support, women's and feminist organisations mentioned other forms of support from regional bodies, including participation in regional and sub-regional workshops and conferences, which are fully covered, as well as frameworks for collaboration with certain regional bodies. Concerning the latter, the feminist association *Parler d'Elles in Cameroon* has collaborated with the *Network of African Elected Women* (REFELA) and *United Cities and Local*

Governments of Africa (UCLGA). However, these collaborations were not pursued by the association due to a lack of resources.

B. Understanding the lack of connection between African regional bodies and Central African feminist movements

The AU has established a Women, Gender and Development Directorate which promotes gender equality and women's empowerment in AU activities, and ensures that member states comply with the AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa. However, the AU faces major challenges in terms of funding and remains largely dependent on external financing to implement its programs. This is due to a significant shortfall in statutory contributions, with several member states failing to meet their annual financial obligations (Bidouzo, 2019). These funding difficulties are well known to many leaders of women's and feminist organisations, and partly justify their apathetic attitude towards funding opportunities at a regional level. Many leaders of women's and feminist organisations are unaware of funding from African community institutions. Others, on the other hand, are aware of them but point to the difficulty of accessing information, despite having subscribed to these organisations' *newsletters* and social networks, or stress their dismay at applying and never being selected.

Beyond this informational opacity, the organisation leaders also pointed to the predominance of English in African institutional spaces. This phenomenon puts Central Africa's predominantly French-speaking women's and feminist organisations at a disadvantage. The restricted ability to understand and apply for funding opportunities, and form regional partnerships, was attributed to the predominant publication of regional tenders in English.

A representative from the Association Sourire de Femmes stated: "Having the capacity to apply in English also requires double the work for us, because we need to translate so that the application we send out is coherent, and we haven't just gone to Google Translate to copy and paste".

This situation is reinforced by an even more paradoxical one: leaders of women's and feminist organisations are regularly asked to act as consultants to regional and sub-regional organisations. This choice of the individual as expert, rather than the organisation she coordinates, is increasingly criticised. "As a consultant, you're still thinking for someone else, for another organisation (...) so you don't even have time to think for your association", opined the ALVF coordinator. Thus, analysis of the feminist funding ecosystem at the regional level highlights minimal interconnection between actors and low accessibility to funding opportunities

due to prejudice, poor information flow and language barriers. Nevertheless, opportunities to participate in workshops and conferences at the regional level are numerous and important for building capacity and expanding address books, but do not enable local organisations to finance their activities. This is why interest in international feminist funding is so high.

III. Is international feminist policy on track or the sidelines when financing women's and feminist organisations in Central Africa?

Over the past decade or so, Western states have been gradually adopting a feminist foreign policy, particularly after Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström announced in 2014 that Sweden would become the first state to implement a feminist approach in terms of diplomacy (Mama Cash 2023). Data from Cameroon, Chad and the DRC underline the need to go beyond rhetoric and increase the regularity and volume of funding for feminist movements. This section analyses the feminist diplomacy of some of the international donors cited in the surveys (A) and the challenges impinge on construction of a balanced and egalitarian funding ecosystem (B).

A. Feminist diplomacy is supported and implemented by diplomatic bodies and development agencies

This sub-section does not aim to map or classify the international donors working in Central Africa, but it does draw on a few examples from the surveys to analyse the overall state of feminist international aid in terms of mechanisms and arrangements.

France's feminist foreign diplomacy

France has adopted a feminist diplomacy formalised in a five-year plan, translating into the systematic integration of gender indicators into projects financed by French cooperation. This strategy focuses on three key areas: the environment, the political and civic participation of women and young people, and the fight against gender-based violence and sexuality. The gender equality and gender inclusion dimension, with a particular focus on women and girls, must be visible in all projects dealing with these themes. To elaborate further, strict inclusion criteria are applied in all projects, encompassing a target of 50% female participation, including collaborations with ministries. France's approach is, thus, in line with the OECD's gender markers (0, 1 and 2). Projects are submitted to the Ministry in Paris for validation, with the obligation to justify the level of gender

mainstreaming according to these markers. Increasing attention is paid to projects reaching marker 2, corresponding to the highest level of gender mainstreaming.

This policy is supported by a dedicated annual budget managed locally by each embassy. In Cameroon, this budget amounted to 300,000 euros for 2024, divided equally between funding for international mobility (150,000 euros) and direct support for local initiatives (150,000 euros). The feminist funding strategy France favours is an integrated approach⁹ rather than exclusive support for explicitly feminist organisations. Emphasis is placed on projects that “aim to reinforce gender equality, to work as closely as possible with women and girls, and to integrate women into the whole process of implementing, participating in and contributing to the realisation of the project”.

The mechanisms for allocating feminist funding are diverse and varied. They generally involve calls for projects. But for the aforementioned annual budget envelope, launching calls for projects, as mobilities constitute a specific funding channel. As for direct support to local initiatives, the French Embassy in Cameroon states that it receives requests on an ongoing basis, which means that it does not need to launch calls for projects. This budget envelope is an open call. The sole requisite is to adjudicate the submitted projects, based on a set of predetermined criteria: the area of operation, specifically rural regions, adherence to gender equality, the quantity of female beneficiaries, the inclusion of women in the project execution process, the duration of the organisation’s existence, and the organisation’s social media presence.

Based on this criterion, an organisation that has existed for 30 years and one that has only existed for 5 years are not subject to the same requirements. However, according to the respondents, the French Embassy sometimes gives preferential support to young associations, created less than 5 years ago, to avoid always working with the same structures that are more experienced with donors and already know how to set up a project or a budget. The aim is also to build the capacities of small organisations by entrusting them with small grants of between 5,000 and 10,000 euros, so that they can acquire the skills they need to compete for larger grants. Several women’s and feminist organisations have received funding from the French Embassy in their respective countries, including REJFEMAC and Sourires de Femme in Cameroon, and LTDF in Chad.

9. For example, the Comité Inter-États des Pesticides de l’Afrique Centrale (CPAC) financed women in the agricultural sector to help them form cooperatives and improve production while respecting the environment. There was also another project with Women Development Advocate in Campo, on the preservation of mangroves, which helped to strengthen women’s capacity for income-generating activities.

Local French embassies play an important role in the overall resource allocation policy, as they are more familiar with the local contexts in which they operate. They collaborate and work regularly with women's and feminist organisations. This knowledge of the local context makes their advice important to other European donors, notably AFD,¹⁰ the European Union and the British and US aid departments, who generally consult them before committing to funding an organisation. France's feminist funding policy is implemented not only by embassies, but also by the French Development Agency (AFD), Expertise France and the SCAC. AFD¹¹ is a development bank separate from the cooperation department. Its resources are mainly provided by France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance. Within the AFD group is Expertise France, which holds a fund to support diversified initiatives in several sectors. Given that France contributes to the Global Fund to Fight Malaria, Tuberculosis and HIV, etc., an initiative called "L'Initiative" has been set up within Expertise France to directly support women's and feminist associations working on these three themes. AFD also has specific funding for feminists: the Support Fund for Feminist NGOs. The process for benefiting from this fund can be very long, as it involves different levels of instruction: the local office level, the Paris office, with back-and-forth exchanges accompanied by comments. Several organisations in the three study countries have benefited:¹² REJEFEMAC, Association Parler d'Elles, ADIEFA, PILC, Chadian League for Women's Rights, AFLADEGT and RAGFHT.

However, AFD does not finance CSOs, as *"it's not our job to make grants"*. Instead, it relays funding offers published by the French funding agency, the Paris-based Service de Coopération et d'Action Culturelle (SCAC). Unlike embassies, SCAC funds projects for higher amounts, generally over 500,000 euros. The conditions for receiving this funding are still high: "Only CSOs that have already received large amounts of funding, and AFD funding in particular, have a better chance of being selected", as the minimum funding from this structure is 100,000 euros.

Feminist diplomacy in the United Nations system

The United Nations system is also a source of feminist funding that is regularly mentioned by women's and feminist organisations in the three countries surveyed. This funding is allocated for development projects, operating through various specialised agencies, each with a specific mandate:

10. AFD, through its support fund for women's organisations, had, for example, asked the French embassies in Cameroon, the DRC and the Central African Republic (CAR) for references of women's and feminist associations they knew of. These references were used to launch the call for projects, and the embassies were again asked to give their opinions.

11. AFD works primarily on governance, education and climate, and the feminist approach is at the level where all projects have a gender approach.

12. Most of them have benefited from the Gender Sahel project.

- UN Women: for gender equality and women's empowerment;
- UNDP: for development;
- UNICEF: for the protection and rights of children;
- UNFPA: operating with a mandate centred on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR).

According to survey results, the funding mechanisms of international organisations have evolved. The old “basket funds”, where funding was available on simple request, has been replaced by a more structured program approach, based on multi-year strategic plans, broken down into annual work plans. This planning now conditions the allocation of funding: for a local women's CSO to receive financial support, its proposed activities must be closely aligned with the objectives and priorities defined in the international organisation's strategic plan. In this context, CSOs acquire the status of Implementing Partners (IP), establishing, according to a respondent who is a gender expert, a win-win partnership: CSOs obtain the funding they need to carry out their activities, while international organisations can integrate the results obtained into their performance indicators.

UN Women does not list funding as an action in support of women's and feminist organisations. It is more a question of « *building the capacities of these women and women's groups* », ¹³ advocating for organisations, discussing funding conditions with donors and developing training and support activities. For example, on the theme of access to funding, several webinars on resource management have been set up in Dakar, but they can be accessed from any country.¹⁴ Another concrete action is to support in applying for calls for projects. Some of the organisations approached have benefited from feminist funding from the United Nations, namely: ASFM¹⁵ and REJEFTT (UN Women); AMEN (FAO); Super Banat (UNDP, UNICEF) and RAGFHT¹⁶ (UNDP).

Other feminist funds supported by bilateral cooperation agencies such as GIZ and the Netherlands were also mentioned. For many women's and feminist organisations, international funds are not yet large enough to cover their real needs, and they pose procedural challenges. However, they cannot yet do without them, given the lack of alternatives at national and regional levels.

13. Interview with a UN Women representative from the regional office for Central and East Africa.

14. Ibid.

15. ASFM was supported by UN Women at the launch of the 67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

16. According to the association's President, these funds have supported the project linked to the rights of disabled women, their economic empowerment and the fight against gender-based violence.

B. The challenges of accessibility and appropriation of international feminist funding

Funding from bilateral and multilateral cooperation represents a crucial source of support for African women's and feminist organisations, particularly in Central Africa. However, the surveys revealed several mutual grievances, which trouble relations between international donors and local organisations and, consequently, the international feminist funding ecosystem in the three study countries.

Overall, women's and feminist organisations have grievances with international funding agencies. Firstly, the fact that calls for projects are the main way of obtaining funding. Indeed, according to the organisation leaders approached, these calls for projects *"take an inordinate amount of time"* to understand (sometimes with the need to translate the call from English to French), draft (when the first proposal is accepted) and implement. On this last point, leaders of women's and feminist organisations criticise the lengthy procedures during which they have to answer questions to prove their expertise or work on the accounts. The coordinator of ALVF, for example, shared her experience of using an international public grant in the following terms: *"The conditions are tough! For 3 million, we spent 6 months answering their questions"*. What's more, this project-based funding approach eliminates organisations run by women with low levels of education. Indeed, as the AMEN representative pointed out, most organisations are run by women with secondary education, because, unlike in European countries, very few university-educated women are involved in women's and feminist organisations in French-speaking Africa. As a result, *"there are even organisations run by illiterates, women who can barely write, read or do arithmetic. But since they have the leadership, they come forward. But when it comes to speaking the language of projects with donors, they can't do it"*. Another negative aspect is that some calls for projects distance women's and feminist organisations from their objectives, insofar as they work for the objectives of donors. As a result, they are sometimes rejected by local communities, who accuse them of serving foreigners and instrumentalising their needs to obtain funding.

The second area of contention is that international public donors mandate a wide array of criteria to access funding, including submitting audit reports prepared by accredited firms. The expense of producing these reports represents a substantial financial burden for grassroots women's and feminist organisations.. Furthermore, the number of years of experience an organisation has is also taken into consideration by donors. In this case, young organisations are generally overlooked, as donors consider them *"too young to handle a certain amount*

of money". Even when the local organisation has all the required skills, donors still use this "magic phrase": *"You don't have the capacity to absorb the funds (...) your project is interesting, but your organisation is too young. You have no experience of managing large sums of money"*. In the three countries surveyed, most women's and feminist organisations were confronted with this difficulty, including REJEFEMAC, Sourires de Femmes, WPMC, Smart Hub Kivu, PILC and others. Sometimes, philanthropic entities preferred to give funds to established organisations to manage for promising new organisations. In addition, some projects require pre-financing, leading some organisations to withdraw or refrain from applying. Finally, when organisations succeed in obtaining funding, they have to deal with issues of accountability and *reporting*. According to several organisation leaders and some donors, it is important to respect all these criteria, as failure with one donor can jeopardise opportunities with other donors, due to the rapid circulation of information.

The third complaint is the lack of flexibility in international public funding, which is rigidly aligned with international standards and disconnected from local realities. As a woman leader of a feminist organisation put it:

"(...) what's flexible in Yaoundé isn't necessarily so in Bertoua, even if we consider Cameroon alone. In other words, there's a real problem of contextualisation. It's all very well to talk about flexibility, but as long as flexibility is aligned with the standards of a donor who, however well-intentioned he may be, is sitting in his own context, he may always find that he is flexible, when in reality he is always far from reality."

This remark is all the more pertinent as African states, particularly in French-speaking Africa, have their own environmental, climatic, socio-political¹⁷ and economic specificities, which do not allow women's and feminist organisations to comply rigorously with the requirements of international public donors. For example, several organisation leaders highlighted that some donors require them to use funds rigorously, with a requirement for traceability (receipts,¹⁸ invoices, attendance lists¹⁹). However, given the divergent cultural, political and economic

17. Some leaders of women's and feminist organisations have pointed out that sometimes when a conflict occurs in their country or locality, some donors understand the need to adapt the use of funds, but others do not, and suspend funding.

18. Leaders of women's and feminist organisations pointed out the difficulty of issuing small receipts. For example, to produce proof of payment of 5, 10, 15 or 20 thousand FCFA as per diem for participation in an activity as part of a funded project. Generally speaking, the people who receive these sums are outraged to be asked to sign for such a derisory amount.

19. A respondent from PILG, pointed out, for example, that some donors require attendance lists with the signatures of people who have taken part in an event or awareness-raising activity organised by the organisation. But in some localities, participants refuse to sign these lists because of prejudices about the use of their signatures. When the organisation therefore submits a list without signatures, or with insufficient signatures, the lessors consider it ineligible.

contexts. For some international public funders, all these requirements “seem normal” because *“it’s public money, we can’t just give it to anyone, otherwise there’s a risk of losses, of waste... We need a safeguard somewhere”*. A male respondent’s assertion that *“international public organisations are systems, and therefore difficult to change”* makes perfect sense.

Finally, leaders of women’s and feminist organisations accused public funders of favouritism in allocating their funds. Some of them even said that they have the impression that it’s always the same organisations that receive funding, because these backers have like a *“club of friends built around their funding”*, i.e., *“organisations they’re used to”* and which have all the criteria they’re looking for. This strategy marginalises young organisations, because *“to be big, you have to start small”*. Furthermore, leaders of local organisations mentioned the importance of networking in obtaining international funding: *“to get funding, you need to know someone, a white person in the industry to support you”*, said a feminist association leader.

Grievances were also levelled at women’s and feminist organisations. From a comparative perspective, women’s and feminist organisations in Central Africa were said to be less dynamic than those in West Africa, both on social networks²⁰ and in the field. This argument relativises the language barrier raised during the interviews, as West Africa also abounds in French-speaking countries and French-speaking feminist organisations. However, the feminist movement there is described by both donors and some Central African organisation leaders as more structured, dynamic and impactful, thanks to local organisations.

The research also uncovered a lack of synergy amongst women’s and feminist organisations in Central Africa, as many leaders were found to be unaware of other similar organisations operating within their own countries. This lack of awareness often results in competition for international funding, rather than collaboration and a unified approach to addressing gender-related issues. This lack of cohesion ultimately impedes the overall effectiveness of the women’s movement in the region.

Furthermore, many organisations in Central Africa are entirely dependent on foreign funding and have no funds to pre-finance certain activities. As one organisation leader said; *“If I say to myself that I’m going to set up an association, it’s because I’ll have 60% to give to that organisation. And then, the support of*

20. Many women’s and feminist organisations are still neglecting social networks in Central Africa, yet it is through this channel that international donors conduct surveys to assess certain capacities of these organisations to implement projects. Still others are only visible on one social network and neglect the others.

A, B, C, who will be convinced by what we're doing and who will want to take part in our action should only come in support. But, unfortunately, it's the poor in Africa who create associations so that the poor can benefit. Many women's and feminist organisations have no IGAs.²¹

On another note, women's and feminist organisations are criticised for being opportunistic, i.e., submitting applications to all calls for projects, including those that don't fit in with their field of intervention. Their strategy is, thus, to *"pull all the strings to get funding"*. Except that this *"blurs their message and their guideline"*, as they become associations that work on everything, but ultimately do not have an area of expertise recognised by funders and other local associations.

The final grievance at women's and feminist organisations is that some are not making enough effort to obtain the administrative and operational documents required for their functioning and credibility. For more than three years, some have been complaining about the same difficulties, which could demonstrate their laxity in obtaining these documents.

Recommendations

Discussions with international donors, women's organisations and feminist organisations have led to a number of recommendations to improve the feminist financing ecosystem in central Africa. These recommendations aimed at multilateral institutions (A), government (B) and women's civil society (C).

A. Multilateral institutions

- Adopt an inclusive approach to feminist funding: Stop discrimination against organisations on the basis of the age of the leader or the organisation, the field of intervention and the geographical area. All these elements form a multi-layered sieve that reduces funding opportunities for many women's and feminist organisations.
- Trust small organisations: by prioritising results-based rather than appearance-based evaluation, as small organisations' fund management and project implementation capabilities are usually systematically questioned. Yet, they generally have very good knowledge of the field and of women's issues, but need to gain the trust of donors in order to grow and seek larger funds.

21. For IGA organisations, IGAs account for only 5% of revenues, whereas international financing accounts for 60%.

- ➔ Strengthen communication about feminist diplomacy: by organising information, training and awareness-raising sessions that enable women's and feminist organisations and governments to understand and appropriate feminist funding mechanisms, their access criteria and terms of use.
- ➔ Adopt flexible financing: by migrating from the concept of flexibility to that of adaptability, feminist funds can be used without restriction or determination and can be adapted to local contexts that are clearly different from the socio-political, economic, security, cultural and environmental contexts of the countries for which multilateral institutions allocate funds.
- ➔ Restructure fund allocation mechanisms: by simplifying procedures for obtaining funds and reducing prerequisites (audit reports, bank accounts and excessive administrative and operational paperwork), as resources are not the same in all organisations.
- ➔ Increase feminist funding: by increasing subsidies to local organisations, so they can not only implement their projects properly, but also cover other expenses, such as the salaries of teams involved in project implementation, rents and other administrative and operational costs.
- ➔ Consult women's and feminist organisations before allocating funding: it's important to talk to the selected or consulted organisations to implement a project, to understand their real needs in terms of financing and human resources, as well as the real problems of the identified target. Indeed, donors generally set an amount and identify a problem to be solved in a community unilaterally. This distorts the results to be achieved in advance.
- ➔ Diversify the forms of funding: Utilising a diverse array of funding forms makes it possible to resolve needs that vary in numerous respects, and considerably reduces suspicions of misappropriation of funds. By allocating both general and operational funding, leaders of local organisations can distinguish between funding intended to support general costs and that dedicated to project implementation.
- ➔ Offer regular support to small and young organisations with direct funding: Small and young organisations generally have difficulty getting off the ground due to a lack of funds and structuring. It is, therefore, important to support them with small grants (*seed grants*) to enable them to grow and strengthen their institutional and human capacities.
- ➔ Establish close collaboration with local organisations: Send emissaries to local organisations to assess the work being done in the field and observe how they operate, adapting the financial resources allocated. This approach helps to improve relations through direct contact.
- ➔ Improve communication on available funding opportunities (at the regional level): by clearly communicating funding opportunities through all AU, REC or other regional public institution websites and social networks.

B. The governments

- Facilitate the dissemination of national and international feminist funding opportunities: by maximising the sharing of information both at the capital city level and in the provinces/regions and rural areas through ministerial delegations to ensure a symmetry of information.
- Create a national file of international donors: This file will classify donors by country, continent, and field of intervention and will be available online for consultation by all women's and feminist organisations. This will enable them to target only the donors whose actions and funding correspond to their core business.
- Advocate for better feminist funding: political decision-makers should use their strategic positioning and diplomatic influence to bring the voice of local women's and feminist organisations to the attention of international donors and negotiate funding conditions better adapted to local realities.
- Simplify administrative procedures: reduce the time required to obtain administrative authorisations, so that women's and feminist organisations can have a formal status and carry out their activities within a formal framework.
- Initiate gender-sensitive budgets within local authorities: include a chapter in commune budgets to provide financial support to women's and feminist organisations in their area, not to be limited exclusively to material support.
- Facilitate collaboration between international donors and local organisations: local public authorities must fully transfer feminist funds to local feminist organisations, which pass through them, and redistribute them based on objective and equitable criteria, and by eliminating favouritism practices.
- Organise a government-CSO dialogue: dispel the mutual distrust between the two parties and strengthen collaboration to combat GBV in a complementary manner while jointly seeking national and international funding opportunities.
- Operationalise GRB at the level of all public institutions: define a national quota or percentage of funds to be allocated to women's and feminist organisations as part of the definition and implementation of GRB at the ministerial and communal levels.
- Cleansing the feminist public funding system: ridding it of corruption, favouritism, nepotism and other abuses that plague the allocation and use of feminist funds.
- Develop community-based feminist philanthropy: drawing on and structuring the virtues of charity and hospitality recognised by the African people to find mechanisms for raising funds at the local level. This implies involving the community and local donors.

- Increase the budgets of certain ministries: Increase the budgets of ministries in charge of gender issues so that they can better financially support women's and feminist organisations.

C. Women's civil society

- **Constantly seek information:** by subscribing to all national, regional and international donor *newsletters*, visiting their websites and approaching them to find out about available opportunities or projects.
- **Strengthen the subregional feminist movement:** Map women's and feminist organisations in Central Africa, create or integrate an existing subregional network (like REJEFEMAC) in which organisations share experiences, opportunities and build each other's capacity to set up projects, and advocate for a feminist funding ecosystem that is healthy for all stakeholders.
- **Transparent use of feminist funds:** these resources must be dedicated to achieving concrete gender equality objectives, not personal enrichment. Organisations must therefore accept accountability and show the impact of their actions in the field, to co-construct a trusting collaboration.
- **Strengthen the cohesion and effectiveness of the local feminist movement:** women's and feminist organisations in the same country need to meet regularly to get to know each other better and pool their efforts in searching for grants and even in implementing projects.
- **Regular institutional and human capacity building:** training in financial management, project writing and other skills that strengthen the organisation's credibility and expertise.
- **Work on visibility and dynamism on social networks:** Be dynamic without neglecting any, regularly publish content that fits in with the organisation's activities, and encourage volunteer work if you can't recruit a permanent team.
- Professionalise **organisational practices:** even if an organisation operates on its funds, it must produce quantified reports on its activities that it can present to donors to demonstrate the efforts made with the available funds.
- **Stay true to the organisation's vision:** apply only for opportunities that correspond to the organisation's core business, and stop any opportunism that disperses expertise and reduces the organisation's credibility. This vision must be anchored in community needs, not donor agendas.
- **Combining research and activism:** Feminist research should be carried out not only by feminist academics, but also by feminist organisations, as it enables local feminist activism to be rethought and scientific knowledge based on local knowledge to be produced.
- **Being affiliated to a network:** Belonging to a feminist network enables an organisation to show that it shares a common message with that network,

that it can join forces to define common advocacy messages. It also shows that the organisation is not a free electron with no interconnections.

- **Have measured ambitions:** small or young organisations applying for donor funding should adopt a strategy of small steps. For a first initiative, they should focus on one area of action or target audience, rather than several regions or targets.
- **Promote a culture of solidarity and ethics in accessing funding:** organisations are encouraged to actively share project and funding opportunities within their networks, and to develop an ethical approach to funding selection: declining those that do not match their expertise and proactively directing donors to organisations with the appropriate skills.
- **Develop a self-financing system:** local women's and feminist organisations need to have their own IGA funds to finance activities and reduce dependence on donors.
- **Involve the State in the search for funding:** overcome prejudices about its inability to support feminist organisations and explore all possible forms of partnership, including those that are not strictly financial.
- **Remain calm and active in all circumstances:** Local women's and feminist organisations must keep up their courage even when they have no funding, and continue to carry out activities that correspond to the small resources available.
- **Adopt a proactive and diversified approach to fundraising:** don't just wait for calls for projects to apply, but research women's issues related to or close to our core business and create a fundraising environment.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The future of feminist financing in Central Africa is contingent upon a profound transformation of current practices. The study's recommendations identify three key areas for development. Firstly, there is a necessity to democratise access to funding, notably through adopting an inclusive approach by multilateral institutions, which would no longer discriminate against organisations according to their size, age, or area of intervention. This reform would facilitate the utilisation of the field expertise of small organisations and their capacity to address local needs. Secondly, enhancing transparency and access to information is paramount. Establishing a national donor database and the enhancing the dissemination of funding opportunities, particularly in rural areas, are promising initiatives for democratising resource access. Finally, the strengthening of links between national and local governments and the development of a strong regional dynamic, notably through the consolidation of existing networks such as REJEFEMAC, offer encouraging prospects for the future. The consolidation of experience and resources through such collaborative endeavours holds the potential to catalyse the emergence of a more robust and equitable feminist financing ecosystem in Central Africa. The implementation of these recommendations necessitates a sustained commitment from all stakeholders—governments, multilateral institutions, and civil society organisations—to establish a feminist financing system that is more accessible, transparent, and effective in the sub-region.

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Annex

A selection of women's and feminist organisations approached during the field surveys and their geographical location:

Noms des OSC féminines et féministes	Acronymes	Centres d'intérêts	Localisations
Association for Combating Violence Against Women	ALVF	Combating all forms of violence against women	Cameroon
Association for the Relief of Young Mothers	ASFM	Promoting and defending the rights of girls, in particular young mothers and girls married at an early age	Maroua, Cameroon
Network of Young Feminists of Central Africa	REJEFEMAC	Leadership of young feminists in Central Africa	Yaoundé, Cameroon
Association for Feminist Research in Central Africa	ARFAC	Feminist and gender research in Central Africa	Cameroon
Wake Up Ladies	-	Protection, empowerment and capacity-building of vulnerable girls and women	Bertoua, Cameroon
Sourires de Femmes	-	Feminist organisation providing emergency services to women and girls victims of violence, especially in rural areas (medical, psychological, psychosocial and legal support, as well as security for victims of violence). Also works on sexual and reproductive health, survivors of violence and the empowerment of women and girl survivors of violence.	Yaoundé, Cameroon
Association Parler d'Elles	-	Advocacy, leadership promotion, women's empowerment and well-being..	Yaoundé, Cameroon
Leap Girl Africa	-	Rights and education of girls and young women on sexual and gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health	Yaoundé Cameroon
Women for Peace, Mediation and Conflict	WPMC	Peace and security, mediation and conflict prevention and peacebuilding	Cameroon
Hope Advocate Africa	-	Women's rights, human rights, minority rights, sexual and reproductive health peacebuilding etc.	North-West and South-West, Cameroon
Vivre en Comptant sur les femmes	VECOF	Women's rights and empowerment	Cameroon

Alliance pour la vie	-	Promoting and defending the rights of women, girls, children and minority groups. Action is mainly focused on sexual and reproductive health, combating violence against women and gender inequality.	Feminist organisation based in South and North Kivu, DRC
Alternative Ménage, Nature et Marché	AMEN	Promoting and defending women's household rights	Mwenga, RDC
Kongo Mwinda, Dynamique citoyenne de femmes leaders	-	The cognitive emancipation of girls and the digital fulfilment of adolescent girls	Goma, RDC
Focus, Droits et Accès	FDA	Women's rights, gender equality, empowerment and inclusive leadership of women, girls and other marginalised social groups in North Kivu province.	Goma, RDC
Smart Hub Kivu	-	Supporting women and young people in setting up businesses	Goma, RDC
Women and Development Network-North Kivu	REFED-NK.	Promoting and defending the rights of women and girls in rural areas, in armed conflict and post-conflict zones	RDC
Association pour le Développement, l'Innovation et l'Entrepreneuriat des femmes et filles	ADIEFA	Promoting and defending the rights of women and girls	N'djamena, Chad
Chadian League for Women's Rights	LTDF	Sexual and gender-based violence against women	Chad
Association of Feminist Leaders for Access to Rights and Gender Equity in Chad	AFLADEGT	Fighting gender-based inequalities, including gender equality, and women's entrepreneurship, and ensuring girls' and women's access to essential health services, and promoting girls' schooling in rural and urban areas.	N'Djamena, Chad
Pan-African Youth Networks in Search of Excellence for Sustainable Development	REJEUPARED	Education, entrepreneurship, climate change and social justice	Chad
Network of Young Women and Girls Leaders of Chad	REJEFFT	A specific area for young women, aged 15 to 35, to provide a space for free expression and implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.	Chad
Public Interest Law Centre	PILC	A public interest legal centre that focuses on access to rights for vulnerable people, specifically women and girls.	Chad

Building Transformative, Collaborative, Feminist and Accountable Funding Ecosystems for Feminist Organisations in Türkiye

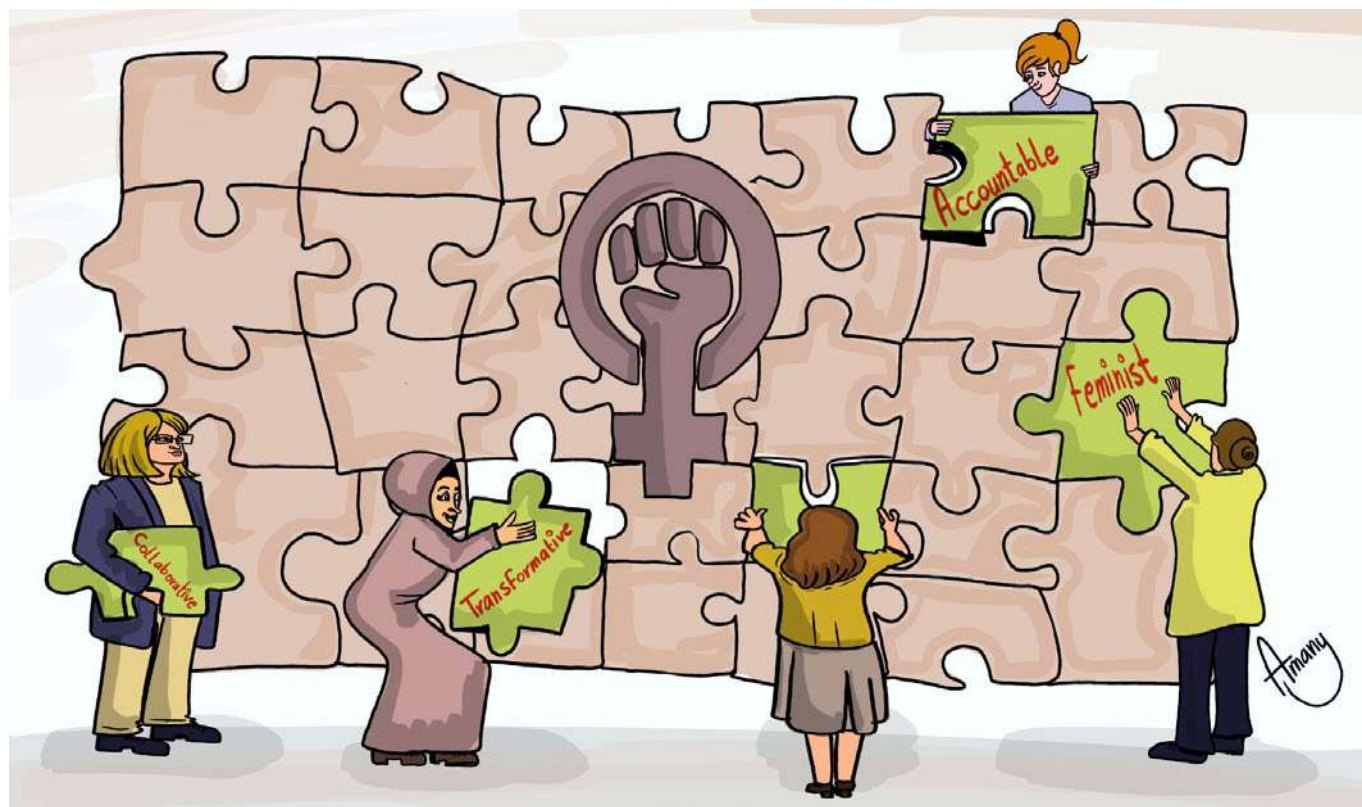
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Advocacy Summary

■ Background and Objective

Feminist organisations in Türkiye struggle with financial and structural challenges due to declining international support, limited domestic funding, and political restrictions. This research explores how to build a transformative, collaborative, feminist, and accountable funding ecosystem that ensures long-term sustainability for feminist movements. It examines how official development assistance and private sector funding can be improved to better support feminist activism. In this context, a literature review was conducted first, followed by 20 in-depth interviews with Official Development Assistance (ODA) donors, private sector representatives, philanthropic organisations, feminist activists and organisations.

■ Literature Review

Feminist funding ecosystems aim to shift away from hierarchical donor-driven models toward movement-led, participatory, and sustainable financing structures. However, global data indicates that feminist organisations receive only 0.13% of total Official Development Assistance (ODA), with the majority of funding

directed toward governments or large institutions (AWID, 2021a). ODA and private sector funding remain largely inaccessible to feminist organisations due to a lack of transparency, bureaucratic barriers, and donor-driven priorities that do not align with feminist movements' needs (OECD, 2024). The private sector primarily engages in gender equality initiatives through short-term corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects, avoiding direct collaboration with feminist movements (Willems, 2022). Alternative feminist funding models—such as community-led funds, participatory grant-making, and social entrepreneurship—are emerging globally but remain underdeveloped in Türkiye (Akduran Erol and Aklar, 2023). To build a more effective feminist funding ecosystem, donors must ensure flexible, multi-year funding, engage feminist movements in decision-making, and support independent women's funds (Miller & Jones, 2019).

■ Key findings

The feminist funding ecosystem in Türkiye is still in its early stages and remains weak across most dimensions. While FFP has yet to become a transformative tool or a mechanism for increasing ODA funds, it continues to serve as a valuable advocacy instrument. FFP offers a framework for initiating national-level discussions on gender equality, but its potential remains largely untapped. Feminist organisations in Türkiye rely heavily on international funding due to the scarcity of domestic resources, which is largely a result of political barriers. Although ODA remains a critical funding source, the growing unpredictability of global crises, the shifting priorities of donor countries, and the rise of right-wing governments in ODA-DAC nations have made access to these funds increasingly uncertain.

Transparency and accessibility in funding continue to be significant challenges. With few exceptions, complex application processes, excessive reporting requirements, and donor-driven priorities limit the ability of feminist organisations to access long-term and sustainable funding. In Türkiye, both ODA providers and private sector institutions often collaborate with UN agencies on gender-related issues, seeking legitimacy while minimising political risks. However, engagement between the private sector and feminist movements remains minimal. Most corporate funding is allocated through CSR programs that fail to address structural inequalities, and businesses tend to avoid politically sensitive topics such as LGBTQI+ rights and reproductive justice. To ensure movement-led decision-making and financial resilience, diversifying fundraising models and establishing independent feminist funding structures is urgently needed.

■ Key Recommendations

→ ODA Providers:

- Prioritise Türkiye and gender equality with direct, flexible, and multi-year funding aligned with feminist values, avoiding intermediaries.
- Ensure transparency and simplify processes to make funds more accessible to grassroots feminist organisations.
- Support independent women's and feminist funds and embed intersectionality and crisis-responsiveness in all funding strategies.

→ Private Sector:

- Build trust-based partnerships and include feminist organisations in decision-making on funding and social investments.
- Develop joint funding pools with other actors and channel resources directly to feminist movements.
- Increase internal awareness on feminist movements and engage feminist intermediaries to guide funding practices.

→ Feminist Community:

- Advocate for direct ODA and resist its diversion to intermediaries and demand core, long-term funding to strengthen feminist movements' political power and sustainability.
- Diversify funding streams beyond ODA, mobilising local and private sector resources.
- Forge alliances with feminist actors inside the private sector and community to expand influence and solidarity networks.

Authors and Acknowledgements

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Acronym List

AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development	OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
AFD	French Development Agency	Prospera	Prospera International Network of Women's Funds
CERV	Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme	SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility	Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
CSO	Civil Society Organisation	TIKA	Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency
DAC	Development Assistance Committee	TUSEV	Third Sector Foundation of Türkiye
EUD	European Union Delegation	UN	United Nations
GONGO	Government-organised Non-Governmental Organisation	UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
GRI	Global Reporting Initiative	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
GDWG	Gender Donor Working Group	UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
FFP	Feminist Foreign Policy	UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisations	WEPs	Women's Empowerment Principle
ODA	Official Development Assistance		

Introduction

The rights-based civic space in Türkiye is increasingly under threat due to growing political pressures, restrictive legal regulations, and shrinking funding opportunities. These conditions, together with the reinforcement of patriarchal discourse shaping policies and daily life, hinder the sustainability of the feminist movement by limiting access to financial resources and deepening power imbalances between donors and grantees. They also pose a challenge to feminist organisations in developing long-term resilience strategies.

In this context, ODA funding has played a crucial role in sustaining feminist advocacy in Türkiye. The most significant ODA funds for gender equality advocacy in Türkiye come from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and the EU Delegation to Türkiye (EUD Türkiye). Sida's 20-year support for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Türkiye is now at risk due to Sweden's 2022 election, which brought a right-wing government to power and ended its feminist foreign policy. Additionally, Sweden's NATO membership negotiations with Türkiye have influenced its diplomatic priorities, potentially affecting its ODA allocation. In 2024, Sweden joined NATO with Türkiye's approval, reinforcing a shift toward maintaining good relations with the Turkish government, which may have further implications for funding feminist organisations. Similarly, EUD Türkiye remains a key ODA provider, but political negotiations increasingly shape its funding allocation. Since the 2016 Türkiye-EU migration agreement, which is renewed every five years, the Turkish state has insisted on managing most EU funds, significantly limiting direct support for CSOs. Additionally, since it does not contribute financially, Türkiye remains ineligible for the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV). Meanwhile, the rise of right-wing politics across Europe, reinforced by far-right gains in recent EU elections, is expected to shape EU policies on gender equality and human rights funding, potentially affecting resources allocated to feminist movements in Türkiye.

Against this backdrop, feminist organisations in Türkiye have struggled to survive, particularly in the last 15 years¹, under a growing right-wing authoritarian and gender-oppressive regime in Türkiye. Public resources are inaccessible, and the private sector is ineffective in filling this gap. Private sector funding remains restricted mainly to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs, which favor short-term, project-based grants rather than sustained, flexible, or movement-building support. Therefore, the funding ecosystem in Türkiye is

1. For the historical evolution of shrinking civic space in Türkiye, see Büyükgöze 2023; Esen and Gümüşçü 2016.

underdeveloped, predominantly depending on international funds. ODA constitutes the largest share among these international funds, and the organisations with access to these funds are predominantly civil society organisations that engage in subgranting. The public funds are granted to service-based CSOs or Government-Organised Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGOs) rather than right-based organisations.

In response to similar challenges globally, feminist movements worldwide have increasingly sought to develop alternative funding models that prioritise collective decision-making, movement sustainability, and financial autonomy. These include community-led funding initiatives, intersectional philanthropy, participatory grant-making, and feminist investment models designed to reduce dependency on traditional donor structures. However, in Türkiye, such models remain primarily underdeveloped due to political and legal restrictions on civil society, the corporate sector's preference for short-term CSR initiatives over structural change, stigma around feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations, limited recognition for alternative feminist funding models, and economic instability that hinders long-term financial planning for feminist organisations.

This research examines the feminist funding ecosystem as a theoretical and practical framework. It seeks to investigate the current feminist funding ecosystem in Türkiye but also critically examine its limitations and propose pathways toward a more accountable, collaborative, and transformative funding structure. By incorporating insights from feminist organisations, ODA providers, private sector representatives, and feminist funding experts, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on creating sustainable financial infrastructures that empower feminist movements without compromising their core values. Ultimately, this research advocates for a feminist funding ecosystem that is financially viable and politically and ethically aligned with feminist principles, ensuring that feminist organisations can continue to thrive despite growing political and economic constraints.

Longstanding engagement in the feminist movement and experiences and insights from the research team played a crucial role in shaping the foundation of this research.

Methodology

This research aims to analyse the feminist funding ecosystem in Türkiye by exploring the challenges and opportunities for feminist organisations in accessing sustainable financial resources. It addresses key questions, such as how to transform ODA financing mechanisms, and how Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) commitments can transform funding sources to be more effective, transparent, and collaborative. It also questions how to integrate the private sector in funding feminist organisations, and how to build a multi-actor, sustainable funding ecosystem that responds to the different needs of feminist organisations at various levels. The research questions, centred around the three main problem areas of study, along with the supporting sub-questions, are as follows:

- **Research Question 1:** How can ODA funding be transformed into a more context-sensitive and sustainable funding centre in Türkiye? How can the funding processes become more equitable, participatory, and feminist?
- **Research Question 2:** How can the private sector (corporate foundations and corporations) play a new role in funding feminist organisations in Türkiye? What are the necessary conditions for this?
- **Research Question 3:** How can the feminist movement and women+ organisations benefit from the developments and discussions taking place around the feminist funding ecosystem and mechanisms that are aligned with feminist values and based on feminist solidarity across the world?

This research employs a qualitative methodology to explore the feminist funding ecosystem in Türkiye, with a focus on ODA, private sector contributions, and feminist funding models. The study is structured around a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews and supported by a literature review. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and key themes within the data, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the dynamics. Additionally, a comprehensive literature review contextualised the findings within global feminist funding trends, drawing from sources such as AWID, OECD, and Prospera International Network of Women's Funds.

To explore these research questions, key stakeholders from ODA funding agencies, the private sector, and feminist organisations were identified using a purposive sampling approach. The research team also identified informants/activists whose insights were sought for each question. Before interviewing the ODA donor representatives, OECD data was analysed to assess the total ODA funding these countries provided to Türkiye. In total, the research team

conducted **21** in-depth interviews. Of these interviews, **6** were with ODA donor representatives,² **7** with private sector institutions currently offering funding or with the potential to do so, **8** with key informants and international women's organisations. The views of feminist women+ movements operating in Türkiye regarding the funding ecosystem are integrated from Silva's research (Akduran Erol and Aklar 2023) which provided critical perspectives from feminist women+ movements in Türkiye. Silva's research findings were reflected in the recommendations to ensure that the analysis not only reflects donor and institutional perspectives but is also grounded in the lived experiences of feminist actors.

The political climate in Türkiye also significantly impacted the research process, particularly in interviews with private sector representatives and ODA providers. In discussions with the private sector, it became evident that these conversations would likely not have occurred without anonymity. In contrast, ODA providers were informed from the outset that institutional names would be referenced, leading representatives to exercise even greater caution in their statements. To ensure methodological integrity, it was clearly stated that findings and direct quotations from interviews would only be included with interviewees' approval, and this principle was strictly followed. All but one ODA provider gave feedback, allowing the text to be finalised in consultation with them. However, one of the ODA providers later decided not to be included in the study, requesting that all references to their interview be removed. This entire process highlights not only the structural and data-related limitations of ODA funding in Türkiye but also the intense political sensitivity that researchers of this paper had to navigate throughout the study.

Limitations

The first limitation encountered in this research was the lack of precise data on ODA allocation in Türkiye. Funding flows through multiple channels, including government agencies, international organisations, and civil society actors, making tracking difficult. The OECD's data system is also complex, making it challenging to determine how much ODA funding reaches feminist organisations and through which mechanisms.

2. The interviews were conducted with representatives from the German Embassy, the Dutch Embassy, the French Embassy, Sida, UN Women Türkiye, and the EUD, including the EUD's gender focal point. These ODA donors (excluding UN Women and the EUD) have either formally adopted or previously committed to a feminist foreign policy (FFP). An exception is the EUD, which, despite not having a formal FFP commitment, has made significant contributions to gender equality initiatives in Türkiye. Its substantial investment and sustained support for women's rights and inclusive policies position it as a key actor, warranting its inclusion alongside FFP-aligned donors. All information pertaining to Sida in this research has been exclusively derived from the Open.Aid website.

Beyond data challenges, the structure of ODA funding itself adds another layer of complexity. ODA operates through both centralised and decentralised funding streams, which affect the transparency and predictability of resources for feminist movements. While embassies play a key role in decentralised funding, they cannot map centrally allocated funds fully, making it difficult to establish a clear picture of funding distribution.

Literature Review

Achieving gender equality clearly needs the presence of strong feminist movements. However, in addition to the existence of the climate of multiple crises, the world is witnessing the rise of anti-gender movements and increasing restrictions on civic space which is not coincidental (Alliance for Feminist Movements 2022). Feminist movements are waging this struggle with significantly diminished access to funding. While billions are pledged at international forums like the Generation Equality Forum, only a tiny fraction (7.4%) reaches feminist movements. Between 2015 and 2019, half of the women's rights organisations applying for funding from the Global Fund for Women and a 2021 assessment by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) indicated that 48% of women's rights and feminist organisations in the Majority World, had annual budgets below USD 30,000 (Alliance for Feminist Movements 2022 & AWID 2021a). This underscores the urgent need for increased investment in feminist organisations and movements in all countries to build a future rooted in gender equality (Alliance for Feminist Movements 2022).

It would be appropriate to examine the funding support provided by official development aid and charitable organisations more thoroughly to better illustrate the situation from the perspective of women's rights organisations and feminist movements.

Official Development Assistance

ODA and charitable foundations predominantly sustain the financial framework for women's rights organisations and feminist movements. Nevertheless, these sources frequently fail to satisfy the financial requirements of these groups. Furthermore, a mere 0.13% of total ODA and 0.42% of foundation funding are expressly designated for women's rights and feminist organisations (AWID 2021a). According to a recent OECD report, ODA allocated to support women's rights organisations, movements, and state institutions decreased by approximately

29%, from USD 891 million in 2019-2020 to an annual average of USD 631 million in 2021-2022 (OECD 2024a). The decrease was even more significant when excluding funding directed to state institutions such as ministries of women, dropping by around 44%, from USD 767 million to USD 432 million in 2021-2022 (OECD 2024a). While there are pockets of support, these significant gaps in funding and inclusion persist, especially for grassroots feminist organisations in the Majority World (Deepak 2023). This underfunding, exacerbated by peer funders changing course, limits the impact of feminist organisations, especially in sectors like violence prevention and women's rights.

As ODA countries diminish their financial support (OECD 2024a) and global funders' commitment to gender issues wanes (Rajvanshi 2024), the private sector can fulfil the funding requirements of feminist organisations centred on gender equality. Nonetheless, partnerships with the private sector do not offer a straightforward trajectory for feminist organisations.

Private Sector Partnerships

Feminist organisations' primary motivation for pursuing private sector partnerships is often the increased access to funding and potential visibility. Feminist activists have expressed concerns that these collaborations could dilute feminist messages or shift the perception of feminism towards a consumption-oriented and individualistic model rather than one focused on structural and societal change (Willems 2022). While accepting corporate partnerships may give feminist organisations more significant funding and visibility, they may require them to compromise their values and priorities while corporations' dominance, power, and resource inequities leads to marginalisation of them (Grosser 2016).

While the private sector's funding relationship with women's organisations primarily emerge through CSR initiatives, the main criticism indicate that CSR initiatives the involvement of women's organisations in new governance systems must be guaranteed, and their participation in the dialogue should be increased to improve the accountability of these initiatives (Grosser and Moon 2005; Grosser and McCarthy 2019)

CSR methods, especially in developing countries, oversimplify women's empowerment by emphasising individual empowerment stories. They ignore power dynamics' complexity and are imposed top-down without consulting women (McCarthy

2017). According to Adrienne Roberts (2015), “transnational business feminism³” reduces women to economic resources by framing women’s empowerment projects as ways to use their labor for financial gain rather than addressing structural challenges (Roberts 2015). They tend to see women’s empowerment as a financial benefit for companies rather than as a means to address the root causes of gender inequality or to transform power structures (Calkin 2016). These projects, especially in the Majority World, are seen as neocolonial power dynamics rather than gender equality attempts (Ozkazanc-Pan 2019). Therefore, engagement of the corporate world in women’s organisations carries the danger of co-option of feminism by neoliberalism (Fraser 2013; Prügl 2015).

Feminist Funding Ecosystem

At its core, feminist funding ecosystems embody the ideal of transitioning from a structure where grantees are dependent on and subordinate to donors to a dynamic, interconnected, learning, transparent, intersectional, and inclusive funding ecosystem based on the interdependence and relationality of all actors (Arutyunova 2018; Miller and Jones 2019). The feminist funding ecosystem emphasises the sustainability of resources distributed to feminist movements. It adopts an approach that prioritises the needs and priorities of feminist movements rather than the issues funders consider significant. As proposed in the AWID report (Miller and Jones 2019), all participants are crucial in creating a feminist funding ecosystem. Activists can challenge systems by being critical, tracking financial flows, and advocating for resource redistribution that meets their needs; they can challenge fragmented funding sources by focusing on intersectional issues. Funders should rigorously align their grantmaking policies with feminist and social justice values, advocate for additional funding from other sources, and involve feminist movements in strategic and financial decision-making to maintain transparency and accountability (Miller and Jones 2019).

A recent study by Silva Association, also offers similar conclusions from the perspective of feminist women+organisations in Türkiye and emphasises a climate that ensures mutual empowerment, learning, and change in clearly defined and participatory planned funding processes is needed (Akduran Erol and Aklar 2023).

Current women’s rights and feminist organisational financing streams fall into three pillars: self-generated institutional, commercial, and movement funding

3. Transnational business feminism is a politico-economic project launched in response to the 2008 global crisis, and has been another significant initiative to promote gender equality through the efforts of corporate actors. It is backed by a coalition of states, financial institutions, the UN, corporations, and CSOs, and it promotes the role of business in advancing gender equality.

(Arutyunova 2018). Institutional and commercial funding do not offer a smooth path for women's organisations and feminist movements. Autonomous financing is becoming increasingly significant, particularly when the civic space and the operating environment for women's rights actors are shrinking (Arutyunova 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly contributed to the proliferation of autonomous resourcing, a relatively new funding method (IWDA, 2021; Jones 2022). The political and financial power of "autonomous resourcing" is highlighted (Dolker 2019). The feminist movement has used various strategies to create autonomous resources while forming alliances and benefiting from international support. Unlike working with external funding, autonomous funding has provided feminist movements empowerment, flexibility and the ability to adapt to emergencies quickly (Tesorio 2022) with setting their agendas, responding swiftly to urgent issues, building alliances, and fostering a solidarity economy through creative fundraising methods (AWID 2021b). However, its limited financial capacity can restrict movements' reach and legitimacy (AWID 2021b).

As an alternative to conventional financing sources, women's funds frequently prioritise community-driven solutions, participatory grant-making, and sustained commitment to feminist causes (Arutyunova and Clark 2013) by putting feminist groups' needs and voices front and centre and subverting established financing hierarchies (Miller and Jones 2019). Since most of the women's funds are born out of movements and maintain linkages to the communities they serve and the context, their resilience is crucial to maintaining the activities of global movements promoting gender justice (Fenomenal Funds 2023). According to Fenomenal Funds, a global initiative established in 2020 composed of women's funds, private philanthropies, and the Prospera International Network of Women's Funds (Prospera INWF), based on feminist funding principles⁴, women's funds and private foundations should have equal power in decision making (Fenomenal Funds 2023), emphasising the need for feminist philanthropy (Daly and Carrasco-Scherer 2017).

4. <https://astraefoundation.org/wp-content/themes/astraefoundation/microsites/feminist-funding-principles/index.html>

A Short Glance at Financial Environment of Feminist and Rights-Based Civil Society in Türkiye

Especially over the past two decades, feminist movements and organisations in Türkiye have grown significantly alongside the growing influence of feminist politics across civil society organisations. While deep-rooted history of feminist movement within civic space in Türkiye, feminist organisations today face increasing challenges in an increasingly restrictive civic space. At the same time, in line with the anti-gender movement at global level, opposition to gender equality has intensified, often referred to as a ‘gender backlash.’ This backlash includes various regressive actions aimed at undermining women’s and LGBTQI+ rights, manifesting through political polarisation, restrictive legislation, and social marginalisation (Atay, 2024) with increasing restrictions on civic space (Eldén and Levin, 2018). An overview of recent challenges in Türkiye’s civic space provides essential context for the discussion on the feminist movement’s financial sustainability.

Financial challenges force feminist CSOs to prioritise survival over sustainability, as economic instability and targeted repression deepen their financial struggles (Akduran Erol & Aklar, 2023). The restrictive nature of Türkiye’s philanthropic landscape further exacerbates the financial struggles of feminist organisations. Despite recent initiatives, philanthropy in Türkiye remains traditional, with power imbalances between donors and grantees and limited transparency and inclusion. The prevailing grant culture fails to address the shrinking civic space, as GONGO-type organisations uphold strict administrative and fiscal barriers that exclude independent CSOs (Akduran Erol and Aklar 2023; Büyükgöze 2023).

Beyond financial constraints, CSOs frequently face challenges such as excessive audits, restricted access to funding, exclusion from state–CSO meetings, arbitrary arrests, and forced shutdowns. (Doyle 2017; TÜSEV 2023). While new legal regulations have increased penalties and imposed additional sanctions on organisations, significantly complicating their financial sustainability (TÜSEV, 2024). New draft legislative regulations are also on the agenda which carries the risk of making all these legitimate activities of civil society organisations subject to investigation and punishment (Amnesty International, 2024). If enacted, this law could severely restrict the civic space in Türkiye (TÜSEV, 2024) in particular the access to international funding opportunities.

In this challenging landscape, anti-gender movements, misogyny, and escalating political pressure continue to marginalise feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations. In addition, the financial needs of the feminist movement have become more

visible due to the rapid impoverishment and increased political targeting of feminist activists within society (Akduran Erol and Aklar 2023).

CSOs receiving international funding often face smear campaigns, particularly those advocating for human rights, women's rights, LGBTQI+ rights, ethnic minorities, and migrants. They and their funders are frequently accused of terrorism or being "foreign agents." Additionally, Türkiye's tax policies hinder the growth of CSOs by taxing nonprofit entities like commercial ones and providing tax-exempt status arbitrarily. This lack of transparency in tax policies limits the financial support available, with tax incentives benefiting only a few organisations. There is also an absence of systematic public funding that supports the sustainability and development of CSOs, which constrains their capacity to foster social change.

In addition to all the challenges described above in the funding ecosystem for feminist organisations, the last few years have been marked by disasters, crises and attacks on vested rights. The crises in Türkiye have become all but perpetual amid the mounting threat against the feminist movement's gains, deepening problems faced in the realm of human rights fueled by the growing authoritarianism of the regime, the past two decades' sharpest fall in national economy, and the Türkiye-Syria earthquakes in 2023 that struck 11 provinces, resulting in immeasurable losses and an uncontrollable disaster.

Last but not least, Türkiye currently lacks a national women's fund or a feminist funding organisation. Until 2022, this gap remained unaddressed, with no formal initiatives to establish a sustainable, movement-driven funding mechanism for feminist organisations.

Findings

I. ODA Contributions to Women's Rights and Feminist Organisations in Türkiye

Between 2016 and 2022, Sweden contributed 133 million USD, the Netherlands 116 million USD, France 1.02 billion USD, and Germany 1.89 billion USD to ODA funding (OECD 2024b). While funding from Sweden and the Netherlands to Turkish government institutions is relatively rare, most ODA funding from Germany and France was directed toward government institutions, primarily for migration and infrastructure projects.

Over 27 years (1998–2024), Sida has distributed a total of 186 million USD, with 51.21% (95.29 million USD) directed at civil society, and 12% (22.32 million USD) specifically to feminist organisations⁵ (Openaid 2024). However, conducting a similar analysis for the Netherlands is not possible due to a lack of comparable data. Nevertheless, it has been stated that approximately 50% of the total 1.5 million EUR distributed annually through the Matra and Human Rights Grant Programs of the Dutch Embassy is allocated to women's rights initiatives.⁶

When focusing on the allocation of ODA funds to gender-related initiatives (classified under significant and principal objectives) and directed to civil society, Sweden and the Netherlands emerge as the leading contributors to women's and feminist organisations despite their overall funding being significantly lower than Germany and France's. Notably, in 2015—just a year after Sweden had announced its FFP—Sweden allocated a record-breaking 3.8 million USD under the principal objective category for gender equality in Türkiye (OECD 2024c).

1. Türkiye's Middle-Income Label: A Double-Edged Sword for Feminist Funding

Türkiye's classification as an upper middle-income country has significantly influenced its standing in ODA funding allocations. Many international donors rely on income-based eligibility criteria, leading to Türkiye's exclusion from crucial funding streams for feminist and women's rights organisations.

5. In Türkiye, Sida has been providing funding to feminist organisations since 2005. The proportion of total annual funding allocated to feminist organisations has varied over the years. In 2024, 16% of the total funding was directed to feminist organisations, while in 2023, this share was 8%. In previous years, the allocation fluctuated, with 23% in 2022, 21% in 2021, 17% in both 2020 and 2019, 9% in 2018, 8% in 2017, 15% in 2016, and 18% in 2015. Earlier, feminist organisations received 11% of the funding in 2014, 10% in 2013, 6% in 2012, 9% in 2011, 11% in 2010, 8% in 2009, 9% in 2008, 12% in 2007, 6% in 2006, and 10% in 2005 (Openaid 2024).

6. Information gathered from the interview with the Dutch Embassy.

After the announcement of its FFP, the Netherlands launched global special grant programs for feminist and women's organisations. However, the geographical focus of these funding programs did not include Türkiye, as the country is now categorised as “developed.”

Türkiye has simultaneously transitioned into a donor role, conducting development projects through its development agency, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA)⁷. This dual position—simultaneously an ODA recipient and emerging donor—complicates its standing in global development frameworks.

While Türkiye is classified as an upper middle-income country based on economic metrics, its progress in societal and gender equality remains misaligned with this categorisation. According to the 2024 Gender Equality Index, Türkiye ranks among the lowest globally, positioned 20th from the bottom, trailing nations such as Nigeria, Gambia, and Senegal. Furthermore, the World Economic Forum's June 2024 statistics place Türkiye at 127th in gender parity. The gap between economic classification and gender equality realities highlights the challenges of employing broad income-based categorisations to assess developmental needs.

Türkiye's receipt of ODA funds has been further constrained by shifting global priorities due to escalating international crises and conflicts. Wars in Ukraine, Palestine, and Sudan have led to a reallocation of funds toward urgent humanitarian interventions, as these crises present more significant needs. Moreover, it is generally expected that ODA flows to Türkiye may decline as resources are prioritised for countries facing more severe challenges.

Regarding the classification of Türkiye, UN Women Türkiye acknowledges that development-focused aid in Türkiye is not at the same level as in other recipient countries. However, the decline in ODA financial aid does not reflect the realities on the ground, and many global targets remain unmet. UN Women's Gender Snapshot 2024 report highlights the urgent actions needed to achieve gender equality. Given this pressing agenda, the contraction of essential ODA financial aid during such a critical period inevitably impacts efforts on the ground. They underlined that the decline in ODA financial aid imposes significant constraints on organisations, both regarding program implementation and sustaining their structures. Particularly in a period of rising anti-gender movements, it is crucial to ensure uninterrupted financial support that reaches local organisations and strengthens global connections among gender advocates. Additionally, the

7. For the TIKA projects in the field of Women's Empowerment please see: <https://tika.gov.tr/en/activity/womens-empowerment/>. The analysis of these projects through a feminist lens is the focus of a separate study.

close link between ODA decisions and shifting geopolitical agendas makes organisations heavily reliant on external funding vulnerable.

2. Uneven Commitments: ODA Providers' Diverging Approaches to Gender Equality in Türkiye

The prioritisation of gender equality and women's rights among ODA providers in Türkiye varies significantly. While Sweden, the Netherlands, and the EU have placed gender equality at the core of their aid strategies, others, such as Germany and France, take a more situational approach. Germany recognises gender equality in policy documents but does not consistently integrate it into its ODA framework, often treating it as secondary to broader development goals like migration and infrastructure. The Netherlands, in contrast, directs a significant portion of its decentralised ODA funding (30-40%) to women's rights issues, aligning with its FFP. France also funds gender-related initiatives in Türkiye, particularly through multi-sectoral aid streams, but transparency around funding allocation remains limited.

According to some of the key informants, as a strong advocate in this field, Sweden's potential policy shift could create uncertainties regarding the long-term sustainability of core funding for feminist organisations in Türkiye, potentially putting their continuity and impact at risk. UN Women Türkiye also acknowledges that in recent years, factors such as the increasing intensity and influence of anti-gender movements not only at the national but also at the global level, shrinking funding opportunities, and restrictions on civil liberties have directly impacted the work of women's organisations. Therefore, they state that partnerships with women's organisations and civil society organisations play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of existing restrictions (Interview with UN Women Türkiye).

3. Transparency in Grant Processes: Practices and Implications

Transparency in grant allocation and management varies among ODA providers in Türkiye, and political and strategic considerations shape it. The Netherlands and France⁸ have shifted toward confidentiality in funding disclosures, citing the need to protect CSOs, though this limits CSOs' ability to make independent decisions about transparency. In contrast, Germany operates a Transparenz Portal⁹. At the same time, Sweden's OpenAid platform stands out as a good practice, offering detailed and accessible data on multi-year ODA allocations, including funding for feminist organisations. Another noteworthy example is

8. data.aide-developpement.gouv.fr

9. <https://www.transparenzportal.bund.de/en/>

Türkiye's centralised online system for tracking EU funding to CSOs, which enables a more comprehensive assessment of the impact of these financial flows.

4. The Impact of Feminist Foreign Policy in Türkiye

The implementation of FFP in Türkiye exhibits significant variability across donor countries. FFP promises systemic change and gender mainstreaming in donor countries' foreign assistance frameworks. Most FFP donor countries commit to flexible funding globally, yet such commitments often lack implementation in Türkiye, where rigid project-specific funding models dominate. Except for Sweden, there is little evidence of FFP influencing embassy- or development-agency-led funding practices.

In the context of Türkiye, Sweden is the only example where we can assess the impact of FFP on development assistance over eight years. Its implementation provides valuable insights and good practices regarding FFP application. However, Sweden's exit from FFP marked a significant shift in its foreign policy and development aid, leading to the adoption of a new strategy for civil society cooperation on February 2, 2024.¹⁰ This strategy suspended some civil society partnerships in Türkiye, with only a few exceptions. Sweden's withdrawal from FFP introduces significant uncertainties for feminist organisations, as future funding priorities remain unclear. Uncertainty has already impacted organisations in Türkiye, as illustrated by layoffs at gender-focused CSOs such as Association for Struggle Against Sexual Violence¹¹. The ongoing geopolitical shifts (e.g., the war in Ukraine) are expected to influence Sida's funding strategies. Sweden's former FFP, announced in 2014, did not have a specific funding target. However, the ODA funds Sweden provided to Türkiye with a "principal" objective, reached its highest level of USD 3.8 million in 2015, marking the peak between 2009 and 2022. This achievement can be interpreted as a clear impact of the FFP.

France establishes specific funding targets linked to gender equality within its development cooperation. Establishing the Support Fund for Feminist Organisations in 2020 shows France's commitment to directly supporting feminist organisations worldwide. However, the tangible impact of these targets remain unclear, as this fund is not operating in Türkiye.

Germany's FFP Guidelines aim to deliver 100% of humanitarian assistance in at least a gender-sensitive manner. However, interviews suggest these goals remain abstract and challenging to quantify. The guidelines also highlight the

10. <https://www.openaid.se/en/contributions/SE-0-SE-6-17014>

11. <https://cinselsiddetlemucadele.org/2024/12/27/cinsel-siddetle-mucadele-derneginden-bilgilendirme/>

importance of the Istanbul Convention, but the practical application of these commitments in Türkiye appears minimal. Despite acknowledging women's interests in Germany's foreign policy, the broader goal of systemic change has not been realised. This suggests a need for more actionable strategies beyond policy documents.

In line with its FFP, the Netherlands has initiated two strategic partnerships in Türkiye and organised four women's rights consultations. Through these regional consultations, it actively engages with women's organisations and independent grassroots feminists nationwide, demonstrating its commitment to supporting women's rights. Their internal FFP guidelines exist but are not publicly disclosed. While women's rights were already a funding priority, FFP has facilitated and increased gender mainstreaming in broader activities. The Netherlands does not establish explicit FFP funding targets. Instead, FFP in Dutch development cooperation focuses on integrating gender mainstreaming across activities without directly linking it to funding allocations.

The EU does not operate under an FFP framework but integrates gender-related objectives through its comprehensive Gender Action Plan III and Country Level Implementation Plan (CLIP). These plans are aligned with gender equality principles. Gender Action Plan III outlines five key pillars of action, including a significant commitment: by 2025, 85% of all new actions across external relations will contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment.¹²

5. Preference for Collaborations with UN Agencies

Another critical issue with ODA funding in the Turkish context is that increasingly, it is being routed through UN agencies instead of directly reaching local organisations. The EUD collaborates with UN Women on projects like "Strengthening Civil Society Capacities and Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships to Advance Women's Rights and Gender Equality", granting EUR 4.5 million over three years. Similarly, Sida's funding to UN partners increased from 34% of total funding in 2022 to 46% in 2023 (OpenAid 2024). The EUD sees UN Women as a key partner due to their expertise in managing large-scale financing and ability to connect with diverse grassroots organisations while avoiding political entanglements. The Netherlands generally favors direct CSO support and does not systematically use UN agencies, except for specific cases, it primarily funds UN agencies through central mechanisms. However, under the Matra Program, which should target local and national organisations, the Netherlands supported in the past various UN

12. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/gender-action-plan-iii-towards-gender-equal-world_en

agencies for niche projects. France and Germany provide project-based funding to UN agencies but do not use them as primary grant distributors. Donors trust UN agencies for their intense monitoring, evaluation, and reporting mechanisms, ensuring compliance with funding objectives and transparency. Additionally, UN agencies are perceived to have operational capacity, established networks, neutrality in fund allocation, and the ability to engage across multiple policy levels.

UN Women Türkiye states that it carries out this grant distribution role under its Operational Mandate (Implementation Support Role), one of its three globally defined areas of authority while considering its strategic priorities. UN Women Türkiye has most recently implemented the “Strong Civic Space for Gender Equality Project” (October 2021-2024) with financial support from the EUD. It has provided funding support to 49 CSOs within this framework. UN Women Türkiye implements various projects with CSOs and the presidency, executive, and judiciary bodies as beneficiaries. UN Women acknowledges the political, economic, and social conditions and, as well as the associated political risks in this process. Unlike civil society organisations, they operate with a longer-term projection, allowing them to strategically navigate and manage these risks strategically as they move forward.

In response to the role of third parties and UN Agencies serving as sub-granting mechanisms, UN Women Türkiye stated that one key reason is to enhance access to funding, as grants provided by the EUD and embassies come with significant barriers, including project writing expertise and language requirements. This often results in limited long-term access to a select group of organisations, while smaller and newer local CSOs struggle to obtain the resources they need.

The relationship between UN Women and civil society—particularly the women’s movement and activists—is ongoing and organic, as UN Women emerged from feminist advocacy. Many of its staff come from activist backgrounds, maintaining a continuous connection with the movement. Structured engagement occurs through regular meetings where priorities are set and corresponding support measures are planned, while the most formalised collaboration—financial and technical support—is provided through open calls in line with transparency and accountability principles.

6. Challenging Constraints: How ODA Donors Engage with Türkiye’s Gender Policies

Although aware of the challenges faced by feminist organisations in a restrictive political environment, most ODA donors emphasise the importance of communication,

negotiation, and collaboration with the state as a means to achieve meaningful societal impact. The EUD continues to support gender-related projects and has adjusted the Turkish translation of the project title “Gender Sensitive Planning and Budgeting” to “Women-Men Equality Sensitive Planning and Budgeting,” reflecting a shift in terminology.¹³ However, this adjustment demonstrates a response to governmental preferences rather than a reframing initiated by the EU. Germany promotes diplomatic dialogue, by actively raising the Istanbul Convention in bureaucratic meetings, while France prioritises civil society support and adapts its language to maintain engagement. The Netherlands also undertakes similar efforts to promote gender equality through formal dialogues, public diplomacy, and advocacy efforts. They bring up women’s rights and the fight against violence against women in conversations with Turkish counterparts.

Donors focus on supporting civil society and engaging in diplomatic dialogue, but the political climate constrains their impact.

7. Challenges and Debates Around Core Funding for Feminist Organisations

Core funding, which provides financial support for general operations (such as human resources, rent, administrative expenditures, etc.), is a significant facilitator for the sustainability and long-term impact of feminist organisations. However, donor countries have different attitudes toward core funding, shaped by accountability concerns, procedural constraints, and evolving policy priorities.

The EUD in Türkiye has no theoretical restrictions on providing core funding. However, due to the lack of human resources and the complex tender processes that organisations would be subject to, it prefers collaborating with UN agencies and other intermediaries. While intermediaries like UN Women could facilitate core funding, this approach may still be constrained by EU procedures and donor commitments, which prioritise project-specific funding models. Nevertheless, despite the current emphasis on project-based financing, the EUD is also exploring ways to increase core funding within these collaborations.

France acknowledges the importance of core funding. However, it was noted that implementing such support would require changes to public accounting rules in Paris, making immediate action difficult. For the Netherlands, core funding might face Dutch people’s opposition over development aid expenditures. If core funding leads to misuse, even minor scandals could trigger widespread public and political backlash, jeopardising other funding streams. As they have

13. https://ab.gov.tr/turkiyede-cinsiyet-odakli-planlama-ve-butcelemenin-uygulanmasi_52223.html

expressed, despite persistent requests over the past 20 years to provide core funding, the recent government change and Sida's shift away from this practice make it increasingly unlikely.

8. Coordination and Communication Among ODA Providers

Coordination among gender-focused ODA providers remain critical to maximising impact and efficiency in allocation. Efforts such as the Gender Donor Working Group (GDWG)¹⁴, coordinated by the EUD Gender Focal Point, show potential. However, there is a long way to align strategies, schedules, and practices. In addition, its temporary status (two years) and reliance on external funding may lead to concerns about a lack of institutional commitment from the EU in contributing to gender policies at the national level.

The existence of GDWG may facilitate better coordination among donors, potentially reducing redundancies and streamlining grant application processes for feminist organisations. GDWG could help mitigate the burden on grantees by fostering information-sharing and aligning funding timelines, allowing them to focus more on program implementation rather than administrative workload. However, without a long-term commitment and structural integration into EU mechanisms, its effectiveness in shaping sustainable gender-focused ODA strategies remain uncertain.

II. The Potentiality of Corporate Giving and Philanthropy of Private Sector in Türkiye for the Feminist Funding Ecosystem

This section examines the current state of private-sector funding for feminist organisations in Türkiye based on in-depth interviews conducted with representatives of private sector institutions¹⁵ supporting civil society organisations through various resources, including CSR collaborations, corporate foundations, or different methods of giving.

14. The Gender Donor Working Group comprises representatives from the EU Delegation Türkiye, the German Embassy, Sida Türkiye (Sweden), the Norwegian Embassy, the UK Embassy, and the Netherlands Embassy. While previously inactive, the group was revitalised a year ago following the appointment of Gender Focal Point Amra Levnjak, is seconded and funded by Sweden, who played a key role in strengthening engagement with rights-based civil society organisations working on gender issues. However, as this is not an ordinary EU position, it lacks guaranteed continuity.

15. The term "private sector institutions" in this research refers to holding companies, corporate companies, corporate foundations, and banks that were interviewed. These institutions also function as key corporate and philanthropic actors within the broader private sector ecosystem.

1. Position of Private Sector Institutions Towards Philanthropy and Funding

Despite growing awareness of attacks on women's rights and gender equality, Türkiye's severe economic conditions create uncertainty about the impact of financial support for feminist organisations. While there is consensus on the necessity of such funding, economic instability has made it difficult for private sector entities to initiate new feminist/gender-oriented investments. This financial strain is expected to affect CSR budgets, leading to reductions by 2025.

Additionally, Türkiye's political climate, characterised by a rising anti-gender movement, the government's intolerance toward the concept of gender, and the removal of gender-related terminology from public institutions' vocabulary discourages the private sector from openly funding feminist organisations. As a result, private sector actors hesitate to openly fund feminist organisations, fearing potential backlash or being perceived as opposing government policies. Concerns over reputational risks, regulatory scrutiny, or jeopardising business relationships with state institutions further deter companies from forming direct partnerships with feminist groups. This reluctance significantly narrows the opportunities for collaboration, reinforcing the financial precarity of feminist organisations and limiting the scope of private sector contributions to gender equality initiatives.

Türkiye does not have large-scale philanthropic foundations similar to those in other parts of the world. The most noteworthy finding about corporate giving in Türkiye is that many holding companies - among them, one of the wealthiest foundations in Europe- created a closed ecosystem by working within their affiliated foundations or organisations. Donations and social investments were confined mainly to this ecosystem.

International corporate foundations and philanthropic umbrella organisations play a crucial role in enhancing the strategic development of national foundations. By contributing to field monitoring and fostering knowledge exchange, these institutions help shape funding strategies for gender equality initiatives.

2. Relevance of Social Investments with Gender Equality

Regarding the issues that private sector institutions prefer to invest in; they tend to prioritise the societal problems with high visibility, rapid impact and high return. They like to invest strategically and politically in these areas. Many holding companies and corporate foundations focus their social investments on education and health, integrating gender equality within broader CSR principles rather than as a standalone issue. Some private sector institutions focus on

gender-specific issues such as combating violence against women, promoting workplace equality, and supporting women's employment¹⁶. However, topics like abortion rights, sexual health, sexual orientation, and gender identity remain avoided mainly due to political sensitivities.

When the development of gender equality initiatives within the private sector institutions' historical trajectory is examined, corporate foundation representatives attribute the gender sensitivity within their organisations to the importance placed on this issue by their founders—particularly in family businesses—where a central or leading female figure within the family often champions the cause. Women on the board of directors have sometimes driven these efforts by donating their assets.

Reporting requirements in terms of sustainability commitments is another driving force that has a positive impact on forcing them to engage in gender equality initiatives, enabling the emergence of other intersecting themes, such as climate justice. Many organisations integrate gender themes into their CSR principles to align with international protocols, such as the UN Women's Global Compact and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

For private sector institutions, incorporating gender equality into CSR strategies protects brand reputation, especially in sectors targeting female consumers. In certain industries, companies may also align with values such as sexual health if relevant to their products or services. Even among private sector institutions that prioritise gender equality, structured long-term funding is rare. Instead, most private sector companies prefer one-off donations, event sponsorships, and short-term collaborations within CSR projects.

3. Private Sector Engagement with Feminist and Women's Organisations

The private sector's engagement with feminist organisations remains superficial. Private sector institutions often lack knowledge about these organisations' work and perceive them as rigid, challenging to collaborate with, or politically marginal. Additionally, LGBTQI+ organisations are notably excluded from discussions, reflecting a significant recognition gap.

16. Beyond the findings from the interview discussions and the philanthropy and funding preferences of the private sector on feminist organisations, it is important to highlight the active involvement of major Turkish holdings in the HeForShe campaign[#], launched under the initiative of UN Women in 2014. In its early years, companies invested in various areas, including mainstreaming gender equality within their institutions, sports, and technology. Although its visibility and impact have diminished over time, these efforts continue. This campaign provides a significant insight and foundation for understanding how a segment of the private sector in Türkiye approaches the issue of gender equality.

Feminist organisations and individuals often engage in internal corporate initiatives to signal indirect support rather than sustained investment. Most private sector institutions prefer and have experience engaging with individual feminist gender equality experts and academics, mainly through ad hoc bilateral professional consultations rather than institutional partnerships with feminist groups. Feminist and women's organisations are occasionally consulted during crises, such as pandemics and earthquakes, but these interactions lack long-term commitment and structured funding. Once they are willing to support or collaborate, collaborations are primarily formed with well-established, reputable women's organisations with long-standing work, public trust, and strong ties to government institutions, often facilitated through references from trusted individuals.

Some corporate foundations, particularly those distributing grants or funds, engage with feminist organisations to some extent. Foundations that are most frequently in contact with feminist and women's movements and actively follow new organisations, policies, and developments in the movements are usually corporate foundations of this kind. However, as a shortcoming, these corporate foundations prioritise establishing partnerships with women's organisations that have developed institutional capacity, ensure legal guarantees, and have the expertise on reporting.

4. Challenges and Considerations for the Collaboration of Private Sector with Feminist Organisations

Although the private sector has limited institutional engagement with feminist organisations, it is not entirely disconnected from the field. While it may not fully embrace all feminist values, issues such as violence and equality in the workplace are recognised and taken seriously. Interviews also revealed that women figures within companies often follow, take an interest in, and are curious about the feminist movement on an individual level. In this context, despite the observed challenges in institutional collaboration between the private sector and the feminist movement, the findings indicate that cooperation is highly possible under certain conditions.

First and foremost, it is imperative to underline that private sector engagement with CSOs, including feminist groups, is often shaped by broader perceptions of civil society, reflecting concerns around reputation management and perceived political risks. These factors heavily influence the depth, nature, and sustainability of collaboration.

In parallel with this general perception toward CSOs, they noted that the organisation's identity and political stance mattered. Organisations seen as too politically targeted by the government or at risk of being shut down due to the political climate were considered challenging partners. LGBTQI+ organisations were identified as a deterrent for companies, given the government's antagonistic stance toward LGBTQI+ rights. Therefore, private sector institutions do not prefer partnering with them to avoid taking any political and legal risks.

In addition, aligning with feminist principles, the power hierarchies matter. Imbalances in power dynamics negatively impact partnerships between private sector institutions, corporations and feminist organisations.

Besides these external factors, private sector institutions believe that feminist organisations hesitate to engage in institutional partnerships with corporations. For effective collaboration, it was emphasised that feminist organisations should take proactive steps to engage with the private sector. Yet, the private sector prefers to collaborate with feminist and women's organisations that are institutionalised, reliable, transparent, and capable of impact assessment and reporting. A key challenge is the lack of institutional capacity and legal guarantees for feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations in Türkiye. Companies seek partners that operate in a structured and professional manner, aligning with corporate approaches to sustainability and governance.

Another major challenge for the private sector is the lack of knowledge about existing feminist and women's organisations including their missions, focus areas, and organisational capacities. This knowledge gap often leads to missed opportunities for meaningful collaboration, as private sector actors may struggle to identify relevant organisations, understand their work, or recognise potential synergies. Structured mechanisms are needed to bridge this gap, improve mutual information flow, and foster deeper engagement.

5. Preference for Collaborations with UN Agencies

As highlighted in ODA funding findings, the private sector prefers to collaborate with UN agencies such as UN Women, UNDP, and UNICEF for gender equality initiatives. This preference is driven by several strategic advantages that UN partnerships offer corporations.

Working with UN agencies grants private sector actors access to high-profile global platforms, enabling them to position themselves as key stakeholders in international gender equality efforts. Also, partnerships with UN agencies facilitate

strategic engagements with public institutions, including national governments and intergovernmental bodies. Moreover, collaborating with UN agencies provides companies with structured and pre-designed project proposals, reducing the need for extensive in-house program development. While these collaborations offer numerous benefits, they may reinforce existing power dynamics and limit direct engagement with grassroots feminist and women's organisations, which often operate outside the UN system.

UN Women Türkiye states that they collaborate with umbrella organisations and sister UN agencies to advance gender equality in and through the private sector. Together, they follow globally established principles and procedures, while assessing partnerships based on the scale of the impacted target group, mobilised resources, and the potential for replication and sectoral influence. Within the framework of partnerships established with the private sector, particularly under the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), relevant institutions and organisations are expected to adopt a gender equality perspective and implement corresponding policies and practices.

Conclusions and Way Forward

Türkiye's funding ecosystem for gender-related initiatives is shaped by ODA providers and private sector institutions, each with distinct approaches, priorities, and limitations. When assessed against established frameworks, Türkiye's current ecosystem based on our findings and existing definitions of a "feminist funding ecosystem," we found that it is far from aligning with established frameworks. However, we also identified promising initiatives and opportunities that give us hope.

Given that Türkiye is not at a starting point but is still far from an ideal ecosystem, we sought to understand how to position this context. As a result, we developed a preliminary benchmark, "Feminist Funding Ecosystem Progress Levels," based on seven key criteria, combining existing theoretical frameworks with our research findings (please see Annex 1). The benchmark we created is not a finalised tool but an instrument to spark further discussion. Below is an evaluation of the ecosystem in Türkiye based on seven key criteria from this benchmark.

- 1. An interconnected and communicative structure** – ODA providers have only recently started becoming interconnected through a working group moderated by the EUD Türkiye. In contrast, most private sector institutions

return their resources to their foundations, creating a closed-loop system within corporate capital groups. However, an opportunity lies in the private sector's growing desire to enhance its social impact, which motivates them to engage with different sectors.

2. **Needs and Priorities of Feminist Movements as the Primary Focus** - Most ODA providers engage with only a tiny fraction of feminist organisations, and their funding processes rarely allow for mutual learning. However, their commitments to FFP can serve as both a foundation and a guide to strengthening engagement with feminist movements. Recently, some initiatives have emerged to understand the needs of women's organisations beyond funding relationships, as an outcome of FFP. In the private sector, open grants for gender equality are minimal, and while UN Women Türkiye representatives may be involved in funding decisions, feminist organisations often lack representation. However, decision-makers within these institutions hold feminist values, engage with feminist movements, and are eager to learn—creating an opportunity for shared learning and collaboration, particularly in advancing intersectional approaches. Intersectionality is not yet a widely recognised or adopted approach within the ODA providers and private sector; particular identities are deliberately excluded from discussions to avoid political and reputational risks.
3. **Presence of a holistic approach aimed at achieving social and systemic change** - Apart from Sweden and the EUD, most ODA providers do not focus on systemic change, instead funding isolated gender equality projects under broader human rights grants. For ODA providers committed to FFP, leveraging FFP as a tool could present an opportunity to drive systemic change. The private sector lacks a holistic, multidimensional approach to addressing gender inequality at a systemic level. Companies typically engage in gender-related initiatives that align with their CSR principles and pose no political risk, often through project platforms or collaborations with UN agencies. Private sector funding decisions prioritise corporate-defined thematic areas rather than systemic change in gender equality. However, increasing authoritarian pressure and the broader impact of Türkiye's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention have sparked discussions within the private sector on the need for systemic change.
4. **Presence of Collective Funding Mechanisms**- There is no collective funding mechanism among ODA providers supporting gender-related initiatives in Türkiye. The GDWG, facilitated by the EUD, is a new initiative where the EUD gender focal point is working to foster collective action, but it has yet to yield

concrete outcomes. Similarly, private sector institutions that provide open-call gender funding lack a collective approach, and while some express interest in such a platform, no institution has taken the lead yet. However, donations remain the safest way for private sector actors to contribute to social issues, and both corporations and women philanthropists are open to collaborative funding if a trusted multi-stakeholder environment is established, allowing resources to grow and amplify impact.

5. Addressing Gaps in Funding for Marginalised Groups and Stigmatised Issues

- The ODA providers interviewed have no recorded funding relationships with organisations working with sex workers. At the same time, support for LGBTIQ+ groups exists but has become increasingly invisible due to political concerns. Stigmatised issues like abortion and the Istanbul Convention receive little direct funding, except within broader feminist initiatives supported by Sweden or the EUD. Similarly, private sector funding does not extend to underfunded groups or stigmatised issues, and representatives acknowledge that topics like abortion and LGBTQI+ rights are unlikely to be funded in the current political climate. However, the private sector could support these groups indirectly via umbrella organisations or independent funds. Additionally, intermediary organisations could use tools like cryptocurrency to enable anonymous donations outside traditional financial systems.

6. Commitment to Transparency and Accountability-

Among ODA providers, Sweden stands out for its transparency, publishing all development aid data on Open.Aid, while Germany has the Transparenzportal. Other countries like France and the Netherlands previously shared funding data but stopped to protect their partners from potential risks. EUD funds can be tracked through various platforms and sources, but it lacks a transparency system as comprehensive as Open.Aid. In the private sector, open-grant providers disclose past funding recipients. Still, those using other funding methods rarely share details on beneficiaries or financial allocations, and corporate links to feminist organisations beyond CSR initiatives are also not publicly accessible. However, transparency and accountability are closely tied to the broader political context, and fostering even small circles of trust can strengthen both, creating a positive cycle of increased openness and reliability.

7. A system open to mutual learning and development-

There is no structured space for ODA providers or private sector institutions to engage with civil society, particularly feminist organisations, for mutual learning. The EUD GDWG has established a CSO consultation group to provide input twice a year. Still, the lack of direct interaction between the two groups and the

infrequent meetings limit its effectiveness. Private sector representatives also highlight the need for dedicated spaces to facilitate regular engagement with civil society. However, both ODA and private sector representatives have expressed a strong willingness to share knowledge, presenting an opportunity to build a collaborative solidarity network for gender equality.

The assessment of Türkiye's feminist funding ecosystem reveals that, across multiple criteria, it remains **weak**, with some **emerging** elements in certain areas. ODA providers and private sector institutions show limited engagement with feminist movements, systemic change, and marginalised issues, while collective funding mechanisms and transparency remain underdeveloped. However, there are signs of progress, such as the GDWG, increasing awareness within the private sector, emerging female philanthropists and a willingness to engage in mutual learning.

A key takeaway from this analysis is the critical need for an independent women's fund to address funding gaps and strengthen the ecosystem. Such a fund could serve as a resilient funding mechanism, complementing ODA funding while fostering strategic partnerships with the private sector, particularly as ODA support declines. Given the shifting landscape, feminist organisations must diversify resources and think beyond traditional financial methods. A women's fund could play a catalytic role in expanding access to funding, building cross-sector partnerships, and enhancing financial autonomy.

Based on this research's findings, the following section presents recommendations for ODA providers and the private sector. As part of the feminist movement, the research also aims to share its observations with the community in a way that aligns with feminist values; rather than presenting recommendations in bullet points, it embraces a feminist approach by making a call through a letter.

Recommendations

ODA Providers

- ➔ Adopt feminist funding principles that align with FFP guidelines and prioritise Türkiye and gender equality in funding allocations. Ensure funding is flexible, multi-year, and adaptable to feminist organisations' needs, including covering human resources costs. Move beyond project-based funding to provide sustainable, long-term support.
- ➔ Establish dedicated gender expertise within embassies and development agencies to maintain meaningful relationships with feminist movements. Align political priorities with feminist agendas by actively consulting with feminist organisations and integrating their insights into policy decisions.
- ➔ Ensure transparency in funding processes by publicly disclosing funded organisations and past funding data. Simplify grant applications and reporting requirements to remove bureaucratic barriers that disproportionately burden feminist organisations. Make funding accessible to grassroots feminist groups, not just well-established actors.
- ➔ Coordinate funding decisions with other ODA providers supporting gender equality to prevent over-centralisation of resources among a few organisations. Support the establishment and sustainability of independent women's/ feminist funds in Türkiye to strengthen the ecosystem of feminist organising. Compensate feminist activists for their participation in panels, conferences, and consultations to prevent invisible labor.
- ➔ Respond to crises by ensuring continued support for feminist organisations, as women are disproportionately affected by conflicts, economic instability, migration, and health emergencies. Implement context-sensitive MEAL tools to assess impact effectively. Apply intersectionality as a guiding principle in all funding allocation and management processes.

Private Sector Institutions

"Invest our common future, trust our collective power"

- ➔ Create safe, trust-based spaces for open and transparent dialogue where feminist organisations and other stakeholders can discuss needs, ethical dilemmas, expectations, redlines, and opportunities. Establish diverse, inclusive, and equitable dialogue mechanisms to facilitate meaningful engagement with feminist organisations and movements and to promote mutual empowerment, learning, and change.

- ➔ Ensure the meaningful and comprehensive inclusion of feminist organisations in decision-making processes concerning social investments, funding allocation, and strategic philanthropy. Leverage the deep expertise, insights, and policy frameworks developed by the feminist movement to inform and enhance these processes.
- ➔ Recognise the opportunity to establish a collaborative funding pool alongside other private sector stakeholders committed to gender equality and dedicated to resourcing this cause while collectively assuming responsibility. This strategic pooled fund can be efficiently directed toward the feminist movement through diverse and impactful funding mechanisms.
- ➔ Enhance the knowledge and awareness about feminism, the feminist movement's core advocacy areas, diverse organisation models and its history and achievements in Türkiye.
- ➔ Think about alternative methods to respond to expectations from the business field in funding processes and collaborations with feminist movements by navigating good practices of international philanthropic institutions. Consider that intermediary feminist institutions can share the responsibility by keeping the feminist movement's field experience and knowledge.

Feminist Community¹⁷

- ➔ Advocate for increasing ODA funding to feminist movements and ensuring its direct allocation to feminist organisations, rather than diverting it through intergovernmental intermediaries such as UN agencies, which often prioritise maintaining state cooperation. Emphasise that the core mission of UN agencies should focus on policy development, advocacy, and lobbying to transform state policies, while addressing the fact that the real issue is not resource scarcity but the ongoing reshaping of funding channels and priorities by political agendas, limiting feminist organisations' access to ODA—the largest funding source within the ecosystem.
- ➔ Assert that systemic change and gender equality are only possible when feminist movements are supported with core, sustainable, and long-term funding. Challenge and resist funding models that weaken advocacy by shifting resources to service provision only. Demand direct investment in feminist movements and resist colonial funding structures that limit their political power.
- ➔ Diversify funding strategies by building a broad-based funding ecosystem that includes ODA, private sector partnerships, individual donors, and local resource mobilisation, open and enlarge the communication channels with

17. Please look at Annex 2: "A Letter to Feminist Community" to find out the background of these recommendations.

female philanthropists, women from different communities and sectors to resist the anti gender movement and practices.

- ➔ Engage with private sector actors that may align with feminist values to build stronger alliances and may serve as bridges for developing progressive funding practices and partnerships. Remember that within these institutions, there are many women employees who may share feminist values, and reaching out to them can further strengthen the mass base and solidarity networks of the feminist movement.

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Annex 1: Feminist Funding Ecosystem Progress Levels

Criteria	Weak Ecosystem	Emerging Ecosystem	Strong Ecosystem
An interconnected and communicative structure	There is no interconnect- edness in terms of funding between the sectors that make up the ecosystem (public, civil, and private sectors), nor is there interconnectedness within the sectors themselves.	There is no interconnect- edness in terms of funding between the sectors that make up the ecosystem (public, civil, and private sectors), but interconnectedness within each sector can be observed.	Interconnectedness in terms of funding can be observed both between the sectors that make up the ecosystem (public, civil, and private sectors) and within each sector itself.
Needs and Priorities of Feminist Movements as the Primary Focus	Funding processes in the field of gender equality are deter- mined independently of the needs and priorities of feminist movements, and feminist actors are not included in the process.	In funding processes related to gender equality, the needs of feminist movements are partially considered; however, the inclusion of feminist actors in funding and decision-making processes remains limited.	In funding processes related to gender equality, the needs and priorities of feminist movements are at the center, and feminist actors actively participate in decision-making processes.
Presence of a holistic approach aimed at achieving social and systemic change	Funding is predominantly short-term, project-based, and isolated, lacking a clear focus on driving systemic change.	Some funding mechanisms aim for systemic change to a certain extent; however, short-term and isolated project-based approaches still dominate.	The ecosystem is designed in a coordinated manner, incor- porating long-term, flexible funding and core funding to foster systemic change, moving beyond isolated project-based approaches.
Presence of Collective Funding Mechanisms	Funders operate entirely inde- pendently, with no collective funding pools or joint grant programs established.	There are certain sectoral collaborations among funders on specific issues; however, collective funding pools and joint grants are limited and not sustained over time.	A strong and widely practiced culture of creating collective funding pools and joint grant programs exists among funders, both within and across sectors.
Addressing Gaps in Funding for Marginalised Groups and Stigmatised Issues	Funding for marginalised groups and stigmatised issues is insufficient or entirely absent.	Some initiatives exist, but the needs of these groups and issues are not fully met.	Funding for marginalised groups and stigmatised issues is treated as a priority, ensuring adequate support.
Commitment to Transparency and Accountability	Funding processes are not transparent, and accountability mechanisms are weak.	Transparency and account- ability principles are partially applied, but standards are not clear.	Funding processes are fully transparent, and accountabil- ity mechanisms are strongly enforced.
A system open to mutual learning and development	There is no information sharing between funders and recipients, and no transfer of experience takes place. The principles of egalitarianism and reciprocity are not considered in processes and relationships.	Some learning and develop- ment processes exist but are not sufficiently institutional- ised. Even if not in processes, efforts are made to uphold the principles of egalitarianism and reciprocity in relationships.	There is continuous informa- tion sharing, feedback mech- anisms, and development-ori- ented collaborations between funders and recipients. The principles of egalitarianism and reciprocity are fundamental in both processes and relation- ships.

Annex 2: A Letter to Feminist Community

Dear Feminist Community, Our Movement,

From the very beginning of this research, we pursued one central question: What kinds of tools can strengthen us as a feminist movement, hold up a mirror to our work, and simultaneously make our presence and voices more visible? If a feminist funding ecosystem is to take root in Türkiye, we must always remember that our movement is and should be the key actor in shaping it. For this reason, we wanted to first share our findings, insights, and recommendations with you in the form of a letter. Let's be clear from the start—we are eager to hear your thoughts, challenges, and feedback and to engage in discussion together.

When we started writing this letter, Trump had just begun his presidency and was already turning the world into a dystopia. The alliance of right-wing governments and the wealthy, conservative men backing them had likely never been this widespread in history. As we saw most recently with Trump, conservative right-wing governments have made it their first order of business to dismantle human rights mechanisms, undo the hard-won gains of democratic political movements, and suspend or terminate ODA, including support for rights-based civil society.

According to OECD reports, in 2022, 211 billion USD in ODA was distributed globally, marking a 17% increase in real terms compared to the previous year. So, overall, these state-provided funds are not decreasing but rather growing. But how much of this funding actually reaches feminist organisations? While exact calculations are difficult, we know that in 2022, only 5.6 billion USD—a mere 3%—was allocated to initiatives where gender equality was the primary focus. In 2020, the total amount of private sector and foundation funding dedicated to gender equality was 892 million USD. Even though feminist organisations receive only a small share of total ODA, state funding still constitutes the largest financial source for our movements and will continue to do so. The problem is not that there is no money—rather, the institutions and channels through which this money flows are constantly being reshaped by political agendas.

Our research suggests that ODA allocated to Türkiye will likely decrease in the coming years, given that Türkiye is classified as an upper-middle-income country by traditional development indicators. We are living in a country where waving a rainbow flag is considered a crime, where state-sponsored hostility against LGBTI+ communities has become official policy, and where at least three women are murdered every day. What kind of development are we talking about? Development cannot be defined solely by economic indicators. This is why we must continue to demand, track, and advocate for more feminist funding. However, the issue is not only about securing more funds—we must also ask, how can we ensure that these funds align with feminist values? Feminist funding is not just about creating financial resources for feminist causes; it is also about structuring and managing these resources in ways that align with feminist principles.

One of the key findings of our research is that ODA is increasingly reaching feminist organisations through indirect channels rather than direct support. In Türkiye, we observed that states providing ODA are choosing to channel gender equality funding through UN agencies rather than directly to feminist organisations. When we asked them why, we heard arguments such as the need to work at different policy levels, professionalism, maintaining cooperation with the state, and being an independent intermediary donor. However, our own herstory tells us that real systemic change and gender equality gains come from political movements fighting for them.

Alongside broader civil society, we must resist this funding trend as a political stance and demand more direct funding for feminist movements. We should emphasise that UN agencies' primary mission should be policy development, advocacy, and lobbying rather than acting as funders. We must resist the shift from advocacy-based funding to service-delivery projects, because this is not just a technical change—it is a transformation that weakens the role of feminist movements in social change. Resisting this trend also means insisting on core and multi-year funding while raising our voices against colonial funding norms and bureaucratic barriers that restrict movement-building.

Let's always remind ourselves: The feminist movement in Türkiye has played a powerful role not only in national victories but also in shaping global discussions. We have made significant contributions to mechanisms such as the Sustainable Development Goals, CEDAW, and the Istanbul Convention. However, over the past 20 years, relentless attacks on our hard-won rights, deepening poverty, crises, and resource limitations have slowed this engagement. Despite these challenges, feminist activists in Türkiye continue to provide critical expertise and perspectives in various international platforms. Feminist movements must actively shape international policies, not just network and lobby. This is a message we must continue to deliver persistently to funders.

While we do not intend to abandon ODA funding, we must also remain realistic about the political landscape in Türkiye and globally. As we conducted this research and considered the needs of feminist movements, we realised that diversification is a critical strategy for long-term financial sustainability. Over-reliance on a single funding source poses serious risks to the resilience of feminist movements. Rather than completely breaking ties with certain donors, we believe a diverse funding portfolio that ensures a steady flow of income from multiple sources is a more effective and risk-mitigating approach.

Alongside ODA funding from developed countries, we must also consider private sector institutions that align with feminist and women's movements, wealthier individual donors and mid-level philanthropists, and small-scale individual donors like you and us. Thinking about all these sources together, and mobilising local resources, is key to sustaining feminist movements at scale.

Although the relationship between feminist movements and the private sector is not as widespread or viable in Türkiye as in some international examples, there is still time—and even a need—to initiate these conversations.

The private sector is not a monolithic entity; it consists of varied dynamics and different actors. While we do not seek to ignore patriarchal capitalism, we must also recognise that some companies may be more aligned with feminist principles or could potentially support elements of the feminist movement.

Rather than focusing only on corporate entities, let's also support feminist allies working within the private sector. These individuals can serve as bridges, enabling meaningful collaborations and progressive funding practices within their institutions.

Feminist organisations worldwide are using storytelling and strategic communication to illustrate the impact of feminist funding to donors. We should keep this in mind. Our research findings indicate that neither ODA nor private sector funding alone can ensure the sustainability of feminist movements. Alternative feminist funding models already exist—we can start building infrastructure for Solidarity Philanthropy and Community Philanthropy as viable options.

Structures like Silva Women's Fund for Türkiye and Feminist Fund Türkiye are becoming more widely recognised as feminist funds that channel direct resources to the movement while centering solidarity and participation. These funds have the potential to redefine philanthropy. If we believe in their vision, let's amplify their voices and advocate for more funding to be directed toward them.

Finally, let's reflect together on how we arrived at this point. But let's never forget—this is not our fault.

We hear criticisms like “they are too dependent on external funding” or “they haven't developed their own resources”. Let's acknowledge these critiques but not allow them to lead us into despair. Instead, let's deepen our solidarity, strengthen our collective resilience, and continue forward with unwavering belief in our power.

Decolonising Foreign Funding Policies from Localised Contexts in Kenya, India and Bangladesh

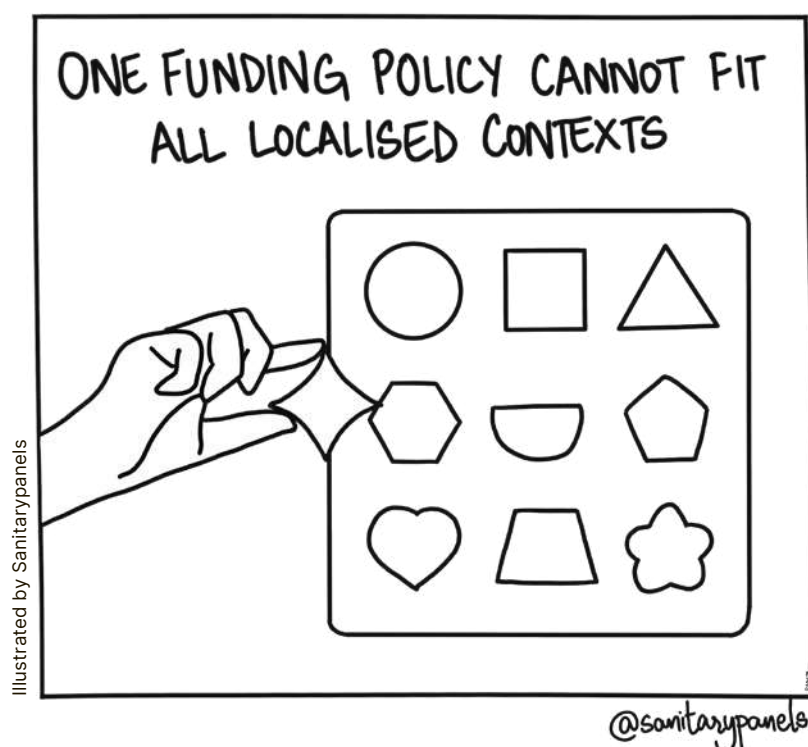
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Advocacy Summary

■ Background

Colonial legacies persist in foreign development funding policies, influencing feminist movements and perpetuating structural inequities in the Majority World. Our research investigates how coloniality manifests in official development assistance (ODA) from Minority World countries with feminist foreign policy frameworks. By analysing qualitative interviews and policies, we propose a decolonial funding framework.

■ Key Issues

1. Colonial Dynamics in Funding

Donor-imposed priorities undermine local contexts, exacerbating socioeconomic disparities. Structural and material colonialities are embedded in ODA strategies, limiting recipient autonomy.

2. Impact on Feminist Movements:

Funding focuses on Western frameworks, neglecting Southern feminist voices.

Compliance requirements disproportionately burden local NGOs, marginalising grassroots movements.

3. Geopolitical Contradictions:

Countries advocate feminist policies while supporting geopolitical agendas, such as arms exports to conflict zones, undermining gender justice efforts.

■ Key Findings

1. ODA often prioritises donor interests over local needs, perpetuating inequality.
2. Strict compliance measures and centralised oversight hinder equitable access to funds.
3. Intersectional issues, such as caste and gender, are frequently overlooked in program designs.

■ Key Recommendations

→ For Governments

- Adopt reparations-based funding models prioritising marginalised voices.
- Simplify compliance mechanisms to support grassroots organisations.
- Ensure funding decisions align with community-defined priorities.

→ For Multilateral Institutions

- Promote equity by incorporating intersectional frameworks into funding criteria.
- Encourage localised decision-making in project planning and implementation.

→ For Private Philanthropy

- Provide flexible, long-term funding for feminist movements.
- Prioritise culturally sensitive, community-driven initiatives.

→ For Civil Society

- Advocate for reduced structural barriers to funding. Build coalitions to amplify local voices in global funding dialogues.

■ Call to Action

Stakeholders must urgently dismantle colonial funding structures by adopting reparative justice models, simplifying bureaucratic barriers, and ensuring that funding priorities are defined and led by intersectional marginalised communities. A decolonised funding framework must prioritise long-term, flexible, and locally governed investments that empower feminist movements, address systemic inequalities, and transform global power dynamics to enable sustainable and equitable development in the Majority World.

Authors and Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Colonial and unequal power dynamics dominate Kenya, India, and Bangladesh's funding mechanisms. The neo-colonial frameworks that underpin the global landscape of foreign aid and development funding have emerged over many years. Activists and practitioners working on women's economic rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and gender-based violence frequently encounter complexities associated with official development assistance (ODA) provided by government agencies in Europe and North America. These engagements often reflect donor-imposed priorities that either fail to align with or actively undermine local contexts' geopolitical, social, and cultural nuances. In the last decade, 'feminist foreign Policy' has been put forward by several states in Europe and North America. Their vision has been, broadly, to overcome the gendered exclusions that have contributed to crises and insecurities, uplift women leaders through more explicit policies and funding, and counter the backlash against gender justice emerging worldwide. While all feminist foreign policies have not continued with changing governments, substantial ODA funding has nevertheless originated from countries that initiated them (e.g. Canada, France, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain), or responded to them with more advanced gender equality-focused funding (e.g., the United Kingdom, the United States).

This research reviews and analyses the feminist foreign policy frameworks of Germany, Canada, and Sweden, as well as the gender-informed funding frameworks of the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Netherlands. This analysis highlights the underlying colonialities, both material and structural, inherent in bilateral funding mechanisms. This is complemented by in-depth qualitative interviews with feminists, women's rights activists, and NGO workers in ODA-funded institutions in the three countries. This research examines the diverse impacts of development funding on southern Majority World feminist movements. Subsequently, a decolonial funding framework is proposed based on these findings.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology informed and guided by three complementary analytical lenses: i) Black Feminist ‘standpoint theory’ (Hill Collin, 2000), ii) Dalit feminism (Paik, 2020) and iii) intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1994). All call attention to the impacts of dominant power structures on the lives of women and girls:

- Black Feminist Standpoint theory focuses on the experiences and perspectives of marginalised women. It calls on the research to focus on Black women’s lived experiences, voices, and distinctive points of view as critical knowledge sources.
- Dalit feminist analysis addresses the unique intersection of caste and gender oppression faced by Dalit women, who are often marginalised within both patriarchal structures and the caste system.
- Intersectionality calls attention to the barriers and exclusions experienced by women living at the intersections of oppression along the lines of race, gender and class.

Ultimately, these three approaches consider the impacts of overlapping power structures and call attention to impacted women’s experiences, perspectives, and demands. By utilising this ‘experiential learning’ methodology, the researchers explore how feminists in these countries navigate, challenge, and transform funding policies. The project generates new insights into development funding and its relationship to historical and present-day (neo)coloniality.

Research Methods

This research commenced with an examination of publicly accessible Official Development Assistance (ODA) strategies from the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), Germany, Canada, Sweden, and the Netherlands. As highlighted in existing empirical work, we chose these countries, and desk research revealed the significant ODA funding from these countries to Kenya, India and Bangladesh. They employed a decolonial analysis, informed by the theoretical frameworks, that revealed various material and structural colonialities in these strategies. This was followed by 17 interviews with NGO workers, feminist activists, and community organisers in India, Kenya and Bangladesh. Snowball sampling was used to find research participants. Data from the literature review and interviews allowed for exploration of the different ways coloniality shows up in the sending and receiving of bilateral funding in three countries. This process facilitated the development of the in-depth interview questionnaire .

Limitations of the research

One of the most significant limitations was time. Owing to unforeseen administrative constraints, the project started a month later than scheduled; so, the timeline for conducting the research was only three months. An extended research period would elicit engagement with more participants and deeper/broader exploration of perspectives in the interviews and literature. Another challenge was the availability of interviewees during the time frame. Many potential participants were occupied with major conferences and events, and while many expressed a willingness to participate, time constraints made meetings impossible. A significant limitation also emerged towards the end of the project. When President Donald Trump announced executive orders to freeze USAID worldwide, participants who formerly agreed to be part of this study withdrew their consent and requested that the researchers remove any of the shared information. This may have narrowed the scope of the findings. Finally, since this research employed qualitative methods and a relatively small sample size for interviews, its generalisability is limited. Regardless, the unique value it provides is in-depth insights into the experiences of ODA funding in the specific contexts of the three countries. The participants' and researchers' subjective experiences and interpretations shape the findings.

Literature Review

Post-colonial nation-building in context

The notion of building a sovereign nation after hundreds of years of colonial extraction, displacement and decimation of indigenous cultures, livelihoods, and norms is a mammoth challenge. Colonisers deliberately redrew continental political geographies, reshaped socioeconomic structures and divided and merged ethnic groups, with devastating long-term consequences. After achieving independence, nation-building in Kenya, India, and Bangladesh faced complex negotiating processes with economic, political, and social conditions, not just at a national level but also on the broader evolution of the global capitalist and geopolitical context.

After **Kenya** achieved independence from the British in 1963, it faced entrenched barriers to development and industrialisation (Fahnbulleh, 2006). Colonial extractivism built its economy around natural resource extraction for export to the British (Odege, 2009; Easton and Gwaindepi, 2021). This was implemented structurally, making it hard to undo. For example, land policies were set in place that discriminated against native agricultural practices, forced the mobilisation

of Kenyan labour to service European agriculture, and displaced and dispossessed indigenous people from their lands to make way for European settlers (Fahnbulleh, 2006). Extractivism was (and continues to be) highly gendered, leading to particular social, political and economic barriers and exclusions for women and girls (Pereira and Tsikata, 2021; Presley, 1992). These structures laid the foundations of a development trajectory rooted in colonial legacies and norms. In the immediate post-independence era, Kenya had remarkable macroeconomic growth. However, after a decade, the growth faltered. The state pursued excessively expansionary policies in 1970-71, leading to a balance of payment crisis (Bevan, Collier and Gunning, 1990). When this was resolved, the 1973 global oil crisis triggered a price rise and, alongside a severe drought, Kenya's economy faced a serious trade deficit.

India became independent of British rule in 1947 and faced similar structural barriers. British rule had cemented a deeply extractive economy, draining nearly \$45 trillion between 1765 and 1938 (Patnaik, 2017). Efforts to build a nation focused on economic development, social justice, 'unity in diversity', and democratic governance, themes underpinned by the 1950 Constitution. The National Congress's mobilisation against British rule was strengthened by its advocacy for a cohesive national identity, marked by efforts to unify India's diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic groups around a collective vision. Yet, Independent India grappled with significant economic challenges, leading to the development of Five-Year Plans aimed at industrialisation and agricultural growth to shift the economy away from colonial structures (Jha, 2005). The independence period was characterised by high regulation of industries and control over integration with the broader world. Between the 1950s and 1980s, India experienced a modest GDP growth rate of around 3.6%, but at the same time, the trade deficit grew, from approximately \$0.1 billion in 1948 to \$6.3 billion in 1980 (Government of India, 2021). This led to questions about the sustainability of the economic model in the globalising context.

Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971. Given the legacy of British colonialism until 1947 and the oppressive rule by Pakistan, Bangladesh's post-colonial nation-building has been complex and multifaceted, focusing on solidifying its national cultural identity through language and religion (Hajjaj, 2022). The nation established a parliamentary democracy that struggled with instability, experiencing several coups and periods of military rule. Nevertheless, the new nation managed steady economic growth in the 1970s-1990s at a rate of 2%, rising to 4.5%. This was followed by rapid growth since the 1990s, due to a focus on the textile and garments industry and the power of remittances from its talent working abroad (Helal and Hossain, 2013). Bangladesh is often called

a success story of post-colonial development, notably by cutting poverty in half (World Bank, 2024). But the nation has continued to face severe challenges affecting its development trajectory, including severe climate change impacts, as well as global economic instability brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and conflicts, and political instability and lack of trust in government, leading to the ousting of the former Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, in 2024. Many of these challenges are rooted in the coloniality embedded by the British in Bengal over two hundred years; in particular, the establishment of elites aligned with British and broader western values and agendas, as well as their own economic and political interests (Kabir and Chowdry, 2017).

Foreign Policy, Development Funding and Neocolonial Power

Subsequently, all three countries have accessed significant financial transfers from the Majority World through foreign aid and Development Assistance budgets. Each country developed its foreign policy positions, which enabled the transaction of aid to serve national priorities. Much of these efforts to transfer aid to meet these aims have been critiqued over time as tools to maintain (neo) colonial power over post-colonial nations.

Post-independence **Kenya** pursued a general foreign policy framework focused on contributing to international and multilateralism, addressing inequalities and championing a 'rising Africa' (Howell, 1968). Kenya developed close relationships with the United States and Britain to provide a pro-West ally, vis-à-vis Russia, on the African continent. Given shifting political and territorial dynamics around it, its vision of economic development and national security underpinned the development of close relations with the US and UK (Mabera, 2016). In the 1980s trade deficit context, the nation was encouraged by the international financial institutions to address its structural economic deficits through a 'structural adjustment programme' (SAP). SAPs were implemented across the Majority World over the 1980s-2000s. Unfortunately, they resulted in very little inclusive economic growth and development, especially in Africa. They have been heavily critiqued for being neo-colonial tools, encouraging an over-dependence on resource extraction and cash-crop agriculture rather than industrial development and diversification (Geo-JaJa and Mangum, 2001). In this era, the 'United States Agency for International Development' (USAID), founded under the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, initiated development funding to Kenya to 'strengthen institutions, preserve natural resources, support better healthcare, education and economic opportunities. This funding faced significant fluctuations in the 1980s

and 1990s but grew in recent decades due to a renewed donor confidence in the government's resolve for economic management and building governance measures to mitigate corruption (Mweiga, 2009). Its strategic development plan, Vision 2030, is critical to Kenya's development relationships today. It envisions transforming Kenya into 'a newly industrialising, middle-income country providing a high quality of life to all its citizens in a clean and secure environment'.

India's post-colonial identity was mainly characterised by its foreign policy. During the Cold War, the nation adopted a non-aligned position to assert its sovereignty and maintain independence from the American and Soviet blocs (Srivastava, 2010; Abraham, 2008). Indian foreign policy was characterised by three features: its role in United Nations peacekeeping operations, as a critical proponent of the non-aligned movement, and as a protagonist for decolonisation (Srivastava, 2010). This analysis has not been without critique, *"far from standing apart from the world, India's international relations thinking was the story of multiple intellectual lineages—both 'imperial' and 'anti-imperial'—and their entanglements in global processes of knowledge systematisation"* (Raghavan et al, 2022). India's first foreign aid deal was a loan from the United States in 1947 as part of its 'Post-War Reconstruction Program', which aimed to help countries rebuild after World War II (Kamath, 1992). Subsequently, India has received substantial development aid from numerous countries and international institutions, sometimes being the most significant national recipient. For example, in 2020 received 80 billion US dollars in aid. India's relationship with aid is complex, as it has also become a provider of official development assistance in recent years (Agarwal, 2007).

Bangladesh also developed a foreign policy based on non-alignment, aiming to maintain regional economic integration through diplomatic relations with India and China (Khan, 2023). Bangladesh's foreign policy has emphasised sovereignty and equality, 'friendship to all', including non-interference in other countries' internal affairs, peaceful settlements of international disputes and respect for international law (Hasan, 1983; Ahsan, 1999; Shahjahan, 2023). Economic diplomacy is at the core – to secure investments, aid and technical assistance (Siddiqui et al, 2022). The first foreign aid received by Bangladesh was from USAID in its post-war independence in the form of food, medical and logistical supplies (Rafi and Khan, 2021; Hossain, Amin and Alam, 2012). As aforementioned, Bangladesh is framed as a development success, moving from the world's second poorest nation to a lower-middle-income country with an average 4.5% GDP growth in the last decade (IMF, 2024). A focus on good trade relationships, export-oriented industrialisation, education and social protection has been key (Raihan & Bourguignon, 2020). Bangladesh is also one of the countries that receives the most foreign aid year on year. However, a devastating famine occurred in 1974, leading to the

deaths of over 1.5 million Bangladeshi people - and this was caused primarily by the intersections of government mismanagement, consecutive climate-related disasters and a failure of international aid donors to understand and respond appropriately to the social political dynamics of the post-colonial context (Hossain, 2017). Naomi Hossein points out that foreign aid to Bangladesh surged in efforts to ensure no such famine would recur. However, an emphasis on 'growth' rather than inclusive growth allowed elites to align their agendas, attract aid and fail to focus on addressing weak governance. As a result, Bangladesh became a kind of 'lab' to experiment with western-led development ideas - often at the expense of local people, especially women.

Coloniality, as a conceptual framework, represents the lasting influence of colonial socio-political and economic systems on Minority World-Majority World relationships (Winter, 2016). Scholars from Africa and Asia have illustrated the legacy of colonialism's economic, social and political impacts on the foreign aid agenda. ODA has been characterised by coloniality through the use of "political conditionalities, Westerners imposed incompatible and decontextualised values" forcing nations into endless crises (Fentahun, 2023: 2; Kozul-Wright, 2024; Barrowclough et al, 2021). Donor countries commonly impose their normative frameworks and values on recipient nations under the pretext of aid and development assistance (Winter, 2016). This sustains colonial power structures, diminishes local autonomy and engagement, and exacerbates disparities (Barder, 2011). This colonial, capitalist economic exploitation has played a significant part in exacerbating inequalities in the Majority World. These colonial economic legacies continue to influence the socio-economic conditions as well as the frameworks for the conception and execution of ODA in Kenya, India and Bangladesh, making it a driver of colonialism and imperialism in its ways (Greco, 2020; Gupta, 1998; North and Grinspun, 2016). Development investment is, therefore, a form of soft power – whether intentional or not (Winter, 2016; Blair et al, 2022). This power reinforces the hierarchical dynamics between donors and recipients (Tiessen, 2024; Becker, 2020).

Development aid and feminism in post-colonial contexts

Most feminists argue that conventional development finance channels reinforce colonial power dynamics by often excluding the opinions and experiences of marginalised groups, especially women and gender minorities (Hicks, 2021). For example, international development organisations may fail to account for women's complex barriers to accessing resources and services. Existing research proves that the current funding dynamics frequently favour Western feminist ideals, neglecting Indigenous feminist voices (Okech, 2009). They may also co-opt feminist

perspectives and movements for more conservative activities or aims, or rehash generalised statistics or tropes about 'women' and their 'value' to development rather than fund southern women's rights initiatives and their articulation of their goals and needs (Ibid). These trends prompt essential enquiries regarding the purpose and impacts of development programs on development and the people and nations on the receiving end (Altaf, 2011). It prompts us to examine whose voices are elevated and muted in aid discourses. Researchers and practitioners in Kenya, India and Bangladesh have argued that there are common gaps in understanding amongst bilateral funders of local contexts as well as racialised and colonial assumptions and tropes which impact their funding decisions and modes of engagement (Umuhumuza, 2019). This research addresses some of these gaps and attitudes by offering new insights for feminist foreign policy and funding from local contexts.

Important to emphasise in the feminist analysis is how patriarchal norms inform ODA decision making, as well as broader decision making that affects women's, girls' and gender non-conforming people's lives. The global context of polycrisis, with overlapping climate injustice, macroeconomic injustice and imperial wars, overlaps to compound the barriers to women's and girls' rights. In these contexts, there are particular impacts on gender justice due to patriarchal notions of fiscal management; when budgetary space is squeezed, services that are critical for gender equality are often some of the first to lose funding (FEMNET, 2022; Muchhala and Guillem, 2022; Hawkins and Zucker-Marquez, 2024). For 26 countries, debt repayments in 2022 cost more than they received in total bilateral foreign aid (IIED, 2024). The creditors have historically been multilateral development banks and private lenders operating from colonial positionalities in the United States and Europe. However, the landscape is now evolving as China plays an increasing role.

Nevertheless, there is an inherent coloniality and paradox in the failure of ODA to explicitly address the structural macroeconomic justice while emphasising its efforts to drive gender equality (Feminist Action Nexus for Economic and Climate Justice, 2024; FEMNET, 2024). Debt is a direct manifestation of neocolonial patriarchal violence, as is climate injustice, which was driven by colonial forces and has severely gendered impacts. Climate-focused ODA and broader climate finance solutions funding have privileged male and elite voices and institutions (UN Women, 2024). Colonial patriarchal violence is systemic and perpetrated through ODA in different forms. In recent years, there has been an explicit pulling back of ODA funding to feminist movements and collectives who are challenging the system norms and structures, demonstrating the resistance to feminist decolonial work in the Majority World.

Fundamentally, the feminist movement calls for a critical transformation of how money and financial support are conceptualised and allocated. This reform must focus on equality, acknowledge historical injustices, and commit to elevating marginalised voices through inclusive and collaborative development processes. The following section explores some of these themes, providing insights and evidence from this research.

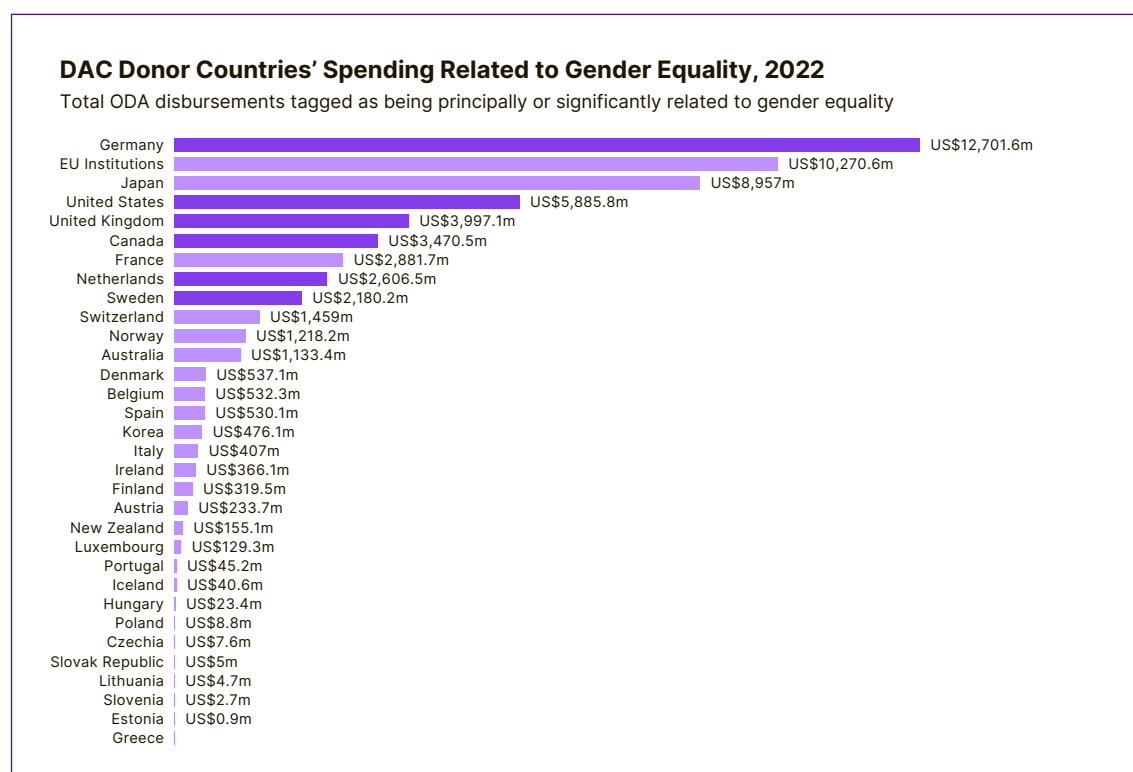
Findings

This section reviews ODA funding for gender equality in six countries: Germany, Sweden, Canada, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US.

Ambivalence of feminist foreign policies

The ODA tracker, illustrated in Figure 1, outlines the levels of bilateral funding for gender equality in 2022 from OECD countries to its 'development assistance committee' listed nations.¹

Figure 1: DAC Donor Countries' spending related to Gender Equality, 2022



Source: OECD CRS, Based on the DAC Gender Equality Policy Marker. Disbursements, in 2021 prices.

1. For more info see: <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/oda-eligibility-and-conditions/dac-list-of-oda-recipients.html#oda-eligible-international-organisations-list>

German Feminist Foreign Policy

Summary

Germany adopted a feminist foreign policy (FFP) in its 2021 coalition agreement, following countries like Sweden (which later discontinued one), Canada, France, Mexico, and others. Its FFP seeks to address power structures traditionally embedded in foreign policy, which have been male-dominated, elitist, and shaped by colonial influences (Federal Foreign Office, n/a).

Implementation

The Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development released a feminist strategy in 2023, which states that a human rights-based approach is foundational to its development policy. The BMZ then announced a target funding quota for projects contributing to gender equality. The German FFP prioritises three areas: protecting women's rights, promoting gender equality and increasing women's participation and representation in global politics (Ibid). Like Sweden, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs offers guidelines for implementation. The FFP guidelines focus on three areas of action: gender mainstreaming, gender budgeting, and internal diversity.

Challenges

- **Navigating Political Resistance:** The FFP has encountered resistance and debate in German politics, with critics, particularly conservative factions, arguing that the 'feminist' label is divisive or overly idealistic (Saskia, 2023; Domres, 2024). Analysts have also questioned whether the FFP may weaken Germany's ability to respond to security threats. The FFP's supporters emphasise its role in addressing systemic inequalities and promoting inclusive participation in peace and security processes (Ibid).
- **Geopolitical Positions:** The most significant challenge of Germany's FFP is in realising its values in the context of the country's increasing focus on security and defence, brought to light by its contrasting positions on the ongoing Russian war on Ukraine and the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people. For example, the German government has increased military spending, partly in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine (Mello, 2024). In the FFP guidelines, the Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs, Annalena Baerbock (2023) argues that the policy calls for a proactive stance on Ukraine, based on human rights values (Saskia, 2023). However, the guidelines offer no advice on balancing feminist goals with Germany's strategic interests. Indeed, Germany's international support, financial or military, aligns with broader Euro-Atlantic

strategic security interests. This perpetuates a colonial relationship where German security concerns—and those of its allies—take precedence over the specific needs of countries, reinforcing a structure in which Western allies retain the power to shape global security norms (Domres, 2024).

Germany's unwavering support to Israel with substantial military, financial and political backing has contributed to the systemic oppression, displacement, violence and genocide of the Palestinian people. Indeed, Palestine has become a 'test for FPPs', illuminating which women matter to these governments, and which women's lives are expendable (Saleh, 2024). This duality of response to the Russia-Ukraine war and Israel's genocide in Palestine contrasts with the FPP's disarmament goals. Feminist scholars from the Majority World point out that, *"the rhetoric of doing feminist good has become embedded in imperial and repressive state projects whose goals are antithetical to the basic principles of justice and dignity that feminism advances, often appearing as an active instrument in their logics"* (Abu-Lughod et al, 2023).

- **Eurocentricity:** Feminist advocates and experts have called on the government to integrate a plurality of feminist perspectives worldwide in its FPP to mitigate against a solely Eurocentric understanding and approach (Hauschild and Leonie, 2024).

Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy

Summary

Sweden released the first FFP in 2014, under the leadership of then Foreign Minister Margot Wallström (OECD, 2021). It aimed to mainstream gender equality in diplomacy, aid, and trade. The United Nations' Security Council Resolution 1325 on 'Women, Peace and Security' informed the FFP.

Implementation

The Foreign Service Action Plan 2015–2018 outlined five priority action areas: promoting the rule of law, fighting gender-based and sexual violence, supporting sexual and reproductive health rights, advancing women's economic empowerment and finally championing sustainable development (Aggestam and Annika, 2016). When the government changed in 2022, the incoming foreign minister, Tobias Billström, declared the policy would be retracted (Walfridsson, 2022). There are questions about the extent to which the normative shifts brought about by the

policy can be reversed, nevertheless, the FFP is no longer in existence (Towns and Elin, 2024).

Challenges

A closer look at Sweden's 'pioneering' FFP reveals its embedded contradictions and colonialities, including:

- **Arms exports, economic priorities and feminist principles:** Sweden's self-image as a 'humanitarian superpower' driving gender equality is undermined by its arms exports. The nation still ranks among the world's top ten arms exporters, selling to authoritarian regimes like the United Arab Emirates, which is involved in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen (Nasser, 2018). These exports fuel conflicts where women and girls suffer disproportionately, creating a striking contradiction between Sweden's FFP goals and its economic actions.
- **Dissonance between domestic and global gender commitments:** Since 2019, funding for gender-focused initiatives has decreased annually, signalling a shift away from prioritising women's empowerment in Swedish ODA (Irsten, 2019). The new government has announced plans to freeze aid spending, lowering its traditional contribution from 1 per cent of Gross National Income to a projected 0.8 per cent in 2023. In September 2024, Minister for International Development Cooperation Benjamin Dousa revealed that the annual ODA allocation will drop from SEK56 billion (US\$5.5 billion) to SEK53 billion (US\$5.2 billion) between 2026-2028, but did not specify which programmes would receive cuts. This reflects the country's changing political dynamics as conservative politics grow across Europe (Ibid).
- **Homogenising imperial feminisms through FFP:** The FFP's framework has been criticised for presenting a monolithic view of women's issues, failing to incorporate diverse local-level and intersectional perspectives. The policy fails to articulate how to account for the geographically and culturally specific challenges faced by different groups of women, creating risks to its effective implementation (Ibid). Some critics argue that Sweden's FFP inadvertently promoted a Western-centric feminist agenda, imposing values that may not align with the unique sociopolitical contexts of non-Western nations (Ibid).
- **Immigration and refugee asylum policies:** During the 2015 refugee crisis, Sweden received about 160,000 asylum seekers but enacted restrictive border policies that disproportionately affected women. Many lacked the documentation required to enter the country, which posed significant

barriers, especially for family reunification, leaving women and children in precarious situations in camps abroad (Skodo, 2018). Nearly 30% of Sweden's development budget, earmarked for development aid, was redirected to manage the refugee influx. This funding shift, caused by contradictory and restrictive policies, jeopardised gender-focused programs in the Majority World, reducing support for initiatives specifically targeting women and children (Nasser, 2018).

Canadian Feminist Foreign Policy

Summary

Canada has become a prominent advocate for advancing gender equality globally. Canada launched the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) in 2017, focusing on gender equality, climate change, and inclusive economic growth. It included specific commitments on gender equality spending; that by 2021-22, i) At least 95% of Canada's bilateral ODA will target or integrate gender equality; and 15% of bilateral ODA will go to initiatives dedicated to advancing gender equality (Govt of Canada, n/a).

Implementation

The FIAP has directed over CAD 1.4 billion annually toward gender-equality projects, impacting sectors ranging from sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) to women's economic empowerment. However, the FIAP has failed to deliver on certain commitments, such as the 15% ODA to gender equality-focused initiatives (Equality Fund, 2023).

Challenges

While Canada's ODA funding strategy emphasises partnership, local ownership, and a flexible approach, its design and execution are embedded with material and structural colonialities. These include:

- **The contradiction of its foreign policy and national approach to indigenous rights:** Canada's ODA outlines various projects to enhance indigenous rights in countries across the Majority World (IUCN, 2024). Yet in Canada, while there has been a degree of focus on indigenous rights, historical injustices - especially the implementation of the legal frameworks that protect the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children, youth and families - remain inadequately addressed.

- **Canada's arms exports:** Canada is one of the world's top arms exporters, with significant deals with Saudi Arabia, known for their human rights violations and involvement in the Yemen conflict. Despite being a signatory to the Arms Trade Treaty, which aims to prevent transfers contributing to human rights violations, Canada (like Sweden) has prioritised its economic interests over human rights. Activists and scholars have also pointed out Canada's contracting foreign policy concerning Israel's genocide of the Palestinian people (Ayyash, 2024). While the Government has issued a freeze on arms exports to Israel, its motion does not cover freezing existing export permits (Ayyash, 2024). Prior, Canada had authorised at least CAD 28.5 million in permits for military exports to Israel during the first two months of its genocidal operation (Ibid).

Netherlands Feminist Foreign Policy

Summary

The Netherlands first signalled its interest in an FFP in 2019, but efforts to formally launch one catalysed it in 2021 when parliamentarians made a formal recommendation to the government. The government has subsequently taken steps to develop its FFP, including consultations and an international conference on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. International policies on gender equality are not new to the Netherlands, and it was one of the first states to prioritise spending on gender equality, the rights of LGBTIQ+ people, and direct funding of women's rights organisations.

Implementation

Currently, the government is basing its development of the Dutch FFP on four R's (Govt of the Netherlands, 2022):

- Rights - women all over the world must be able to claim their universal rights and know that they are safeguarded from violence.
- Representation - they must be represented and take part in political decisions
- Resources - there must be sufficient resources to achieve these goals
- Reality check - circumstances differ around the world, and a particular approach will not have the same effect everywhere. Therefore, we must implement our policy goals in a way appropriate to the local context.

Analysts have argued that the Dutch FFP has been 'quietly' underway, with the government investing substantially in the 'four Rs' (Zwinkels, 2023); indeed, being

the biggest donor to gender equality in 2022 (Donor Tracker, n/d). However, in 2024, the government announced its intentions to cut ODA by €1 billion over five years, and its funding priorities appear to be shifting away from a women's rights lens.

Challenges

Dutch civil society organisations heralded the opportunity of an FPP but offered cautions based on its current direction: “it could turn into a meaningless policy if paramount issues – such as decolonisation, oppressive elements of religious traditions, patriarchal structures, harmful gender norms and roles, power relations, etc. – are not addressed by the Dutch FPP (Cordaid, 2024).” Our analysis highlighted the following challenges and contradictions:

- **A persistent emphasis on Dutch economic interests in ODA:** This emphasis is brought to light by phrases such as “persuade the Dutch business community to invest more,” “strengthen our competitiveness,” and “access to new markets for Dutch businesses.” Similar to Canada, narratives like this reinforce colonial patterns, in which development assistance is used to advance the economic interests of the country that is providing the help.
- **A focus on business partnerships to advance imperialism and neocolonialism:** Dutch ODA significantly emphasises forming partnerships with Dutch companies and the possibility of financial gain. Although private sector engagement can be useful, placing an excessive amount of dependence on it can marginalise communities' voices and requirements, which may, in turn, worsen existing inequities (Hickel et al., 2022).
- **The Netherlands' arms exports:** the country is one of the world's biggest exporters of arms (Tufts University, 2025). The country has actively participated in the Afghanistan, Iraq wars and enabled conflict in Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, and India through its arms deals. The Netherlands also supplied fighter jets to Israel during the ongoing genocide of Palestine, contravening the guidance in international law. Despite the International Court of Justice's ruling that there is a plausible genocide being perpetrated on Palestine, the Netherlands has consistently sided with Israel (Leeuw, 2024).

United States' Foreign Policy

Summary

Relative to its economy, the U.S.' ODA is low, at 0.24% of GNI in 2022 and provisionally as well in 2023, placing the United States 25th among OECD Development Assistance Committee members (ODA tracker, 2024). According to the Government's official website, its foreign policy includes a 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy', based on its 2021 [National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality](#). In 2022, the US released a "[Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally](#)" and "[Strategy for Global Women's Economic Security](#)", based on this foundational approach.

Implementation

These strategies outline several principles and approaches, which largely cover women's economic empowerment and entrepreneurship, valuing care work, promoting human rights, addressing barriers to participation and rights, and addressing violence against women and girls. These policies also call for an intersectional approach, considering the areas of overlapping discrimination that affect women's rights, including gender, race, class and disability. In 2023, USAID and the Department of State's Gender Equity and Equality Action Fund invested \$2.6 billion in gender equality programmes (USAID, n/d), although they have not delineated which was spent internationally and nationally in all areas. This included at least \$100 million through the Gender Equity and Equality Action Fund; d \$449 million to tackle urgent challenges women are facing in food and water systems; \$303 million in development, multilateral, and security assistance for Women, Peace, and Security-related activities; and \$369 million on Gender Based Violence programmes (USAID, n/d).

Challenges

With Donald Trump elected as the 47th President in 2025, and under his executive orders, currently, most USAID funding has been frozen and is under review. However, we highlight that the U.S.'s foreign policy often contradicts USAID policies. For example:

- **Funding for promotion of democracy while building alliances with authoritarian regimes:** While the US promotes democracy and human rights, it also funds militarisation and wars in many countries, including such as Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine. They also maintain alliances with authoritarian and violent regimes such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pinochet's regime in Chile during the Cold War and Israel and their ongoing genocide in

Palestine. Feminist scholars argue that this contradiction reflects a patriarchal prioritisation of state power over human dignity, reinforcing a hierarchy where women's and minority peoples' rights become secondary to geopolitical interests (Tickner, 1992, 1994; Prugl, 2014). From a decolonial standpoint (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011), the US foreign policy's selective democracy promotion can be seen as a tool of coloniality, where certain authoritarian and violent regimes are supported to maintain strategic interests. This sustains a neo-colonial influence over nations by placing them within a hierarchy of acceptability for US allyship.

- **Support for human rights whilst violating them:** The US often advocates for human rights, yet its military interventions have led to massive loss of life; violence against people and their communities; huge destruction of ecosystems; and systemic oppression, e.g. in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and Libya. Critics argue that these interventions, which are sometimes justified on humanitarian grounds, tend to prioritise geopolitical and economic interests over genuine human rights concerns (Hunt and Cristina, 2001). For example, military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan were partly justified on humanitarian grounds, yet local women's rights organisations observed that these interventions led to intensified violence, insecurity, and instability, including for women (Ibid). The US has also been quietly involved in 'regime change' in countries across Latin America, Asia and Africa, leading to destabilising consequences not just on nations but on human rights (Ibid).
- **Promoting international institutions vs taking unilateral actions:** The US was instrumental in founding international institutions and often advocates for global governance. Yet, it continues to act unilaterally when multilateral approaches do not align with its interests. For example, vetoing ceasefire resolutions in the UN; withdrawing from agreements like the Paris Climate Accord, the Iran Nuclear Deal, and implementing a unilateral trade measure – the Inflation Reduction Act. Feminist critique highlights how US foreign policy's disregard for international agreements undermines collective approaches needed to address issues that disproportionately impact women, such as climate change, health, and security (Tickner, 2004).
- **The US' arms exports:** According to Who Arms War? The US is the biggest supplier of arms in the world, directly contributing to wars and conflicts in many countries. Israel has been the leading recipient of US foreign aid. Since the October Hamas attack, the US enacted legislation that assures direct military aid to Israel, amounting to at least 12.5 billion till 2028 (Masters and Will, 2024). The US has enabled, empowered Israel in its genocide in Palestine.

While USAID guidelines talk of women, peace and security, the actions of the state are in stark contrast to their commitments to gender equality.

UK Foreign Policy

Summary

In 2023, former Foreign Secretary David Cameron issued a [White Paper on International Development](#). It identified three core goals for UK ODA: eradicating poverty, tackling climate change and addressing biodiversity loss. The UK has increasingly aimed to mainstream gender equality in its broader foreign policy, especially since adopting its first National Action Plan on Women, Peace & Security (2018-22). This is based on an understanding that gender equality contributes to peace, security, and development.

Implementation

The UK government has continued to produce plans in line with gender equality aims. It renewed its approach to Women, Peace and Security with a [second action plan](#) from 2023 to 2027. It also released a new [International Women and Girls Strategy](#) from 2023-2027. One major component is a commitment to ensure that 80% of bilateral ODA targets gender by 2030. The following pillars are core to the strategy:

1. Standing up for women's and girls' rights and freedoms globally and bilaterally
2. Emboldening/ amplifying the work of diverse grassroots women's organisations and movements
3. Targeting investment towards the key life stages for women and girls
4. Acting for and with women and girls impacted by crises and shocks
5. Strengthening systems that play a critical role in protecting and empowering women and girls

In 2022, the UK was the fifth largest ODA donor, spending US\$4 billion, or 57%, of its bilateral ODA, on activities that targeted gender equality in a principal or significant way, above the DAC average of 42%.

Challenges

Ongoing cuts to aid budgets have impacted gender equality programs, with funding reductions for initiatives on gender-based violence and reproductive health. Our analysis of the UK's foreign policy, in light of its commitments to women's and girls' rights, finds:

- **Gender equality vs feminist principles:** UK foreign policy instrumentalised gender equality to achieve broader strategic aims, rather than treating it as an end (Guerrina, 2012). This is evident in the emphasis on women's participation in peacebuilding and economic growth, often framed to enhance stability and promote economic development, serving UK interests, rather than the needs of women in the Majority World (Ibid). For example, the UK's promotion of women's participation in Afghanistan's peacebuilding has been heavily critiqued for focusing on short-term, at times unsustainable, outcomes that align with Western security interests.
- **Feminist geopolitics vs securitisation:** Feminist scholars argue that the UK's approach to gender equality in foreign policy is often selective, emphasising rights in certain regions while overlooking others where it has significant strategic or economic interests (True, 2012). This selectivity is a form of 'feminist geopolitics' where the UK advocates for gender rights in contexts that align with its international image while disregarding oppression in allied nations (Ibid)
- **Neo-liberal women's empowerment:** The UK's focus on gender equality frequently adopts a neoliberal framing of women's empowerment, emphasising economic participation as a pathway. Critics argue that this emphasis on market-based solutions, such as promoting women's entrepreneurship, often neglects structural inequalities and overlooks the socio-political dimensions of gender-based oppression (Cornwall, 2007).
- **The white saviour complex:** Like the other nations discussed above, the UK's foreign policy approach to gender often reflects colonial legacies, where the Minority World is positioned as the liberator of 'oppressed' women in the Majority World, reinforcing harmful norms and unequal power dynamics. The UK's gender agenda reproduces a 'white saviour' narrative, wherein western standards of gender equality are imposed on diverse cultural contexts, disregarding local women's agency and indigenous frameworks for gender justice (Mohanty, 1988).
- **Tokenistic vs. transformational changes:** In Pakistan, UK-funded initiatives often emphasise women's participation in the labour force but fall short of addressing more transformative gender justice issues, such as inheritance rights or access to local governance. This narrow focus fails to tackle inequality's underlying structures (Cornwall et al., 2007).

- **Reinforcing coloniality of language:** In Bangladesh, UK aid initiatives for educational development have emphasised English language acquisition, viewing it as an essential skill for global competitiveness. However, this approach could contribute to erasing the use of Bengali in academic and professional spaces, reducing cultural identity to Western norms and perpetuating linguistic dominance (Rahman et al., 2012).

The hypocrisy of feminist foreign policies and violations of Palestinian women's rights

The aforementioned sections have illustrated that the donor countries under review have promoted either feminist or gender equality-focused foreign policies, while concurrently supplying arms to Israel. These arms deals are ultimately enabling Israel's perpetration of physical and structural violence against women and girls in Palestine and, very plausibly, genocide. Given the contradictions, a section of this report must be dedicated to addressing them. Whether it is nations with explicit FFPS (Sweden, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands) or those with significant ODA goals in gender equality and addressing violence against women and girls (the United States and United Kingdom), they are both silent on and complicit in the plight of Palestinian women.

These nations have offered, largely, unwavering support for Israel and its military actions in both Gaza and the West Bank since 2023, despite their being assessed by leading human rights organisations, women's rights organisations, scholars of international law and genocide as genocidal actions (Amnesty, 2024; MSF, 2024; UNOHR, 2024). Further, the International Court of Justice has assessed these actions as a plausible genocide, and Israel has been asked to take several actions by the court by which they did not comply with (OHCHR, 2024). Finally, a number of these countries have repeatedly vetoed ceasefire resolutions, aiming to halt the violence and ensure access to basic medical and food supplies to prevent loss of life. These diplomatic actions are in stark contrast with feminist foreign policy and the principles of gender equality and gender justice more broadly. The Israeli occupation and blockade of Gaza, mass-scale murders and incarceration of Palestinian men, women and children are realities that these FFP frameworks fail to address. The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls has pointed out that gendered violence is central to Israel's military actions in Palestine: *"It's very clear that Israel has been targeting Palestinian women as part of its project of destroying the Palestinian people in whole and sparing no means to achieve this objective"* (Rahman, 2024). According to data from the United Nations Human Rights Office, as of one year into Israel's genocidal actions in

Gaza, around 70% of the Palestinians killed were women and children (UNOHR, 2024). Palestinian women continue to face systematic displacement, violence, starvation, mass environmental destruction and socioeconomic marginalisation.

This illuminates a tension between rhetorical commitments to justice and geopolitical priorities. It sheds light on the racism towards Palestinians by their former colonisers and their allies. Those who continue to supply arms to Israel, despite evidence of their use in violations of international law, cannot legitimately claim to be champions for gender equality, nor advise other nations about how to achieve it. The selective application of human rights principles is an extension of colonial white supremacy, which serves the function of maintaining the oppression of racialised people and their communities in the Majority World.

Landscapes of development funding and decolonising possibilities: Case Studies

Case Study: Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a relatively new sovereign nation, as described in section 3.1. Since its independence, the country has experienced periods of political instability, including coups and eras of military rule. In 2024, the government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was toppled. A peaceful student-led protest, met with a violent government response, led to widespread public unrest and the toppling of the government.

The gender justice movement in Bangladesh is primarily led by community and grassroots organisations, which are often funded by ODA, either through grants from national organisations or directly by foreign institutions.

Interviews revealed two significant ways that foreign funding is impacting the feminist movement in Bangladesh: i) conditionalities which precipitate colonial institutional structures, governance and norms; and ii) funding for programmatic models that are designed externally and serve the reputational or institutional interests of the donor country. These findings are consistent with critiques elevated in the broad feminist and decolonial literature.

Conditionalities which precipitate colonial institutional structures, governance and norms

Interviewees B1 and B3 described how organisations receiving foreign aid have, as part of grants, been encouraged to partake in **exercises of ‘institution building’**. Hence, these organisations become structured by institutional standards established by donors and their cultural contexts. They are increasingly capacitated of applying for ODA funding calls, which are typically designed by the donor agency with pre-set objectives. Interviewees described how these organisations are then considered ‘ODA-ready’. Next, they tend to reach out to communities or social movements at the grassroots to implement programmes to meet these pre-set objectives. This is a top-down process rooted in structural coloniality: the donor typically sets the agenda as a funding conditionality. Interviewees pointed out that grassroots feminist organisations rarely receive support with core funding, and so are beholden to this colonial funding model. Without core costs to run organisations, they are beholden to project funding and have limited space to define key programmatic and advocacy priorities towards their long-term vision and theory of change.

Another element of this structural coloniality is the presence of **an in-country regulatory framework** called the NGO Affairs Bureau. This regulatory body grants permissions to NGOs to apply for foreign funding, oversees the flow of funds, and ensures taxation. It acts as a coordinating agency between the state, the funder, and the receiver.

In principle, this Bureau serves as an important accountability mechanism for effective governance. However, the interviewees revealed that the Bureau often operates exploitatively, echoing colonial times’ structural barriers and norms. Post-colonial South Asia is deeply entrenched in colonial administrative governance (Hull, 2012). Many governments operate in paper-based systems, making administration extremely challenging and slow, including in Bangladesh. Interviewees explained that the NGO Affairs Bureau places overwhelming paperwork demands on organisations to attain clearance just to apply for foreign funding calls. This has forced a practice of networking with bureaucratic officials to reduce paperwork and fast-track applications, and there are regular reports of bribes to get quicker approvals – a practice that became entrenched in colonial times.

According to the interviewees, once organisations have approval, access to foreign funding usually follows two streams: firstly, through social networks

and secondly, through competitive bidding.² The **social network approach** is inherently colonial, through its restrictive access for certain elites. Only those elites are invited to the spaces where key relationships and opportunities can be accessed, e.g., conferences, events, and dinners. They also tend to have relative class privilege and are typically located in the nation's capital, Dhaka. Most of the country's community and grassroots organisations and networks are not Dhaka-based, so they do not have the same access to these spaces. Secondly, in these relationship-based opportunities, the elites who access them tend to have greater flexibility and less administrative burden to access the funding.

For the second stream – **competitive bidding** – NGOs must prove their capacity to meet specific standards, predefined by the ODA donor and the NGO Affairs Bureau. For example, a set 'overhead' where a particular budget is ring fenced for admin functions and wider 'indirect costs'. Indeed, while this is a good practice for organisations, many grassroots organisations have not had many opportunities to access the 'core funding' that enables a practice in managing indirect costs. Interviewees shared that in their experiences, ODA grants are sometimes underpinned by a generalised assumption that organisations have core funding to cover their indirect costs, hence limiting the amount that can be ring-fenced into grant applications, favouring expenditure on direct project activities. This means that organisations must have raised some core funding or been in business for a specific time to be eligible for ODA. The irony is that the compliance and regulatory nature of funding is cumbersome, and this usually is an indirect cost requiring non-project staff time to deliver on (e.g. administrative staff). Interviewees shared that funders are increasingly creating or re-inventing donor compliance requirements, so every penny needs a paper trail. They emphasised that this contradiction has severely impacted the quality of work, as programmatic staff must deliver these extra bureaucratic requirements. As a result, staff who work on these projects are often overworked and underpaid. On top of this, ODA funding tends to pay local staff the national average, but international staff doing the same jobs receive an international pay package, even in an international NGO. This is a profoundly colonial practice because it perpetuates a discursive and material hierarchy where non-locals' time and work are valued more, and international staff are enabled with a more outstanding quality of life and opportunity.

2. Testimonies shared by B1 and B3

Funding for programmatic models that are designed externally and serve the reputational or institutional interests of the donor country

Interviewees particularly emphasised how climate justice-focused ODA is premised on donor country interests. For example, funding from the Netherlands often prioritises **the application of Dutch knowledge** about water management and climate governance over the local knowledge of Bangladeshi communities, which is much more appropriate to the geography and political ecology of the country.³ To illustrate this, B1 pointed out that the elevated land model of flood prevention used in Amsterdam was imported to Bangladesh. Bangladesh is an entirely different delta with natural siltation, making the Dutch model irrelevant. Dutch consultants were paid to import this model through ODA – effectively channelling the funding back to the Netherlands. According to B1 and B2, and backed by much academic and grey literature, Bangladeshi communities have their indigenous ways of climate adaptation that are not recognised as scalable or fundable under the current ODA funding of the Netherlands.

The white saviour complex is obvious in ODA-funded projects in Bangladesh, because a common requirement for compliance is that local recipient organisations **publish the donor's logo across all financed activities**. Photographic evidence is needed as part of compliance reporting. B1 mentioned the example of USAID, whose budgets on advertising and branding are more than the programme activities. The mandate of printing USAID logos in all materials is a constant reminder to the Bangladeshi people of the generosity of the American people. B1 and B3 argued that doing these short-term projects while spending large resources on branding and advertising creates more inequalities in communities than alleviating poverty.

Case Study: India

"In India, to truly work on social impact, you need funding to sustain".
Participant I1.

This often comes from foreign donors due to the country's limited domestic resources. However, the gender politics in India is currently dealing with significant consequences of an increasingly "authoritarian and hyper-masculine state that is shaping the national contexts" (Kundu and Chigateri, 2024) This context has led to increasing shutdowns of CSO spaces and crackdown on dissent, which is "systematically dismantling of women's rights—backlash" (Ibid)

3. Testimonies shared by B1 and B2

Conditionalities which precipitate colonial institutional structures, governance and norms

India has recently ramped up **regulatory measures that limit funding for domestic NGOs**, most notably with the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) (Dasgupta, 2024). First enacted in 1976 and substantially revised in 2010, the FCRA imposes registration requirements and spending restrictions on NGOs receiving foreign donations (ICNL, 2022). Amendments in 2020 further tightened these rules by banning sub-granting among FCRA-registered organisations, capping administrative costs, and centralising control of foreign funding under the State Bank of India in New Delhi and the Ministry of Home Affairs (Dasgupta, 2024). One of the impacts has been reduced employment in the social sector and hampered service delivery to vulnerable communities, where civil society was playing a key role in filling public service gaps (Ibid). More and more NGOs are losing their FCRA licenses, with escalating economic and human impacts (Trivedi, 2022). According to government data, *“35,488 NGOs have either been cancelled or expired and were not renewed... Only 15,947 NGOs currently hold active licenses”* (Tripathi, 2025). These restrictive conditions limit how nonprofits can fund their efforts.

Three interviews were conducted with local NGO workers to understand their experiences of the ODA landscape and implementation. Each has extensive experience collaborating with international funders, government agencies, and grassroots organisations. Four **recurring themes were identified: livelihoods, health, gender-based violence (GBV), and a growing focus on climate justice**. All noted a pervasive gap in addressing caste.

Their work has frequently involved UK, Germany, and Southeast Asia funders. Limited domestic support means foreign funding becomes crucial for organisations. As one interviewee, I1 explained, *“resources are very small and limited in the country,”* so foreign donors are seen as *“more supportive, punctual, and can provide sustainable funding.”* Such funding offers vital benefits covering operational costs, ensuring program continuity, and enhancing organisational visibility.

Shifting Priorities, Complex Compliance

Participants noted that ODA often advances last-mile service delivery, innovative projects, and system-wide accountability, leaving work focused on gender equality underfunded. Where it is funded, **it is often tied to objectives defined top down by the donors, which don't account for the overlapping forms of discrimination and exclusion** that women, girls and gender minorities face. One

interviewee, I2, highlighted that *“it is not an open-ended approach - programs are restricted by the call for proposals,”* making it challenging to address intersectional issues. The “Bell Bajao!” (Ring the Bell!) campaign, focused on violence against women (VAW), stands out as one success story that emerged from a grassroots organisation. The campaign calls on men and boys to identify and address VAW. It was eventually scaled up nationally and across different South Asian contexts through the support of international donors. The longevity and impact of the campaign are related to its emergence from the needs and understandings of grassroots feminists in India.

All three respondents observed that **foreign funding is inaccessible due to strict compliance requirements** such as child safeguarding, anti-harassment policies, procurement standards, and due diligence checks. The respondents do not object to high standards of ethics, safeguarding and accountability, but note that how they are implemented tends to uphold coloniality through top-down power relations between donors and local partners. “The donor can reject and approve funding,” remarked I1. Additionally, respondents mentioned the FCRA-specific hurdles referred to earlier as barriers, such as mandatory electronic filings, overhead limits and stringent spending guidelines. I1 & I3 further described struggling with the ESE portal and other country-specific compliance demands that can overwhelm smaller NGOs.

Caste, Religion, and Community Perceptions

In tackling caste, religion, or tribal issues, respondents noted that **donors tend to avoid being direct about a politically sensitive topic** and prefer to use generalised language such as ‘systematically oppressed’. I1 and I2 both pointed out that issues of caste and religion are not addressed openly. To navigate this, some organisations partner with local governance bodies such as the Gram Panchayat, a village-level self-governance structure, to address intersectional challenges such as gender and health care. This can involve bridging systemic gaps in accessibility, providing safe spaces for women, and challenging local customary practices that oppress marginalised communities.

Respondents discussed community perceptions of foreign-funded work, especially work related to GBV or caste. One interviewee, I2, who described having 14 years of experience with foreign funding, noted that, *“communities often view foreign funding with scepticism, creating a power differential that impacts project acceptance.”* Sometimes, **communities see NGO staff as outsiders or fear that the project drives a foreign agenda** that is not cognisant of local norms or needs. This mistrust can lead to resentment, hostility and backlash to specific

projects and programmes, with broad impacts such as preventing future work on the topic or affecting the security of the people involved in implementing or participating in them.

Power Dynamics and Funding Autonomy

All respondents emphasised that funders hold a significant balance of power in the relationships and use this, often, to prioritise external agendas or transactional outcomes, as underscored by I2 and I3. I2 added that the power is rooted in resource ownership, *“there is always one person who has more money than the other and one who’s more needed than the other”*. Local organisations also have to navigate a gap in understanding local realities and are **forced to navigate aligning donor directives with those realities**, *“you tend to tweak some of the objectives...changing the language so it does not impact your results,”* I1 explained. In many cases, this undermines autonomy as it entails negotiation or compromise to ensure crucial local issues, like addressing mental health or offering legal support to those participating in projects, can still make it into proposals, even if funders take issue with finding them hard to measure.

Case Study: Kenya

“Africa is different, we are facing different challenges and very unique challenges...” Respondent K1.

The foreign funding mechanisms in Kenya are formed by rigid conditionalities that often reinforce the bureaucratic systems, governance models, and institutional hierarchies shaped by coloniality. Through our interviews, we understood how these manifest through i) due diligence requirements rooted in colonial structures, governance and norms, and iii) Power dynamics in project design and rigid reporting and accountability mechanisms hamper authority and drive western interests. These power dynamics perpetuate coloniality, dictating the foreign funding available to Kenyan civil society.

Conditionalities which precipitate colonial institutional structures, governance and norms

Interviewees referred to an inherent coloniality of the due diligence requirements of foreign funders. In practice, they reported that such requirements tend to perpetuate exclusions against marginalised communities, *“due diligence processes assume neutrality, but they are built on colonial accounting standards. When you’re questioning why a sex worker group’s bank account name is different*

from their organisational name, without realising they legally can't register under that name, you're already excluding them", shared K1.

Power dynamics in project design, and rigid reporting and accountability mechanisms, that hamper authority and drive Western interests

In the interviewees' experiences, donors retain control over programmatic decision-making, reinforcing colonial power dynamics and hampering autonomy. When discussing the governance structures of foreign-funded projects, participants K2 and K3 revealed how decision-making is rarely fully transferred to the local partner organisations. K2 stated, *"The funder has all the say, "* reflecting the donor organisations' top-down, hierarchical nature and financial disbursements. This rigidity prevents autonomy and actively undermines the partner's grass-roots work. *"When you do things without their approval, that is counted as an ineligible expense, and they ask you to pay it back. So you have to wait for their permission, even if the situation requires immediate action",* added K3. Often, this would mean a delay in immediate support to the affected organisations or immense bureaucratic hurdles in getting approval on time.

Interviewee K2 noted there is typically a racialised lens to the distribution of funding and also trust, emphasising that *"white governments will trust white companies"* and only organisations led by white people can easily access funding opportunities. This reproduces the white supremacy inherent in coloniality and positions African feminist organisations as subordinate implementers rather than the agenda setters. Minority World institutions, or white-led African institutions, control resources, monitoring and knowledge production. The coloniality of knowledge is stark in the ways expertise is defined and controlled by the Minority World. K2 recounts an experience with a funder-appointed evaluator with no context or methodological expertise, stating, *"this lady had never come to East Africa before... she had only evaluated projects in farming and livestock."* Additionally, she was unfamiliar with qualitative feminist work, yet her assessment still determined the project's viability. This reflects how epistemic authority remains Eurocentric, where local knowledge is devalued in favour of external "experts" who often lack insight into the local socio-political context and complexities.

Interviewees K3 and K5 shared how foreign donors often prioritise their programmatic agendas that advance their political and institutional interests. According to K3, *"...right now there's so much money around climate justice work, which is great, but also it limits other places that need support. So really is it responsive to the local context?"*. Interviewees reflected that donors often fail to prioritise gender-equality work areas, even when they are what communities define as

urgent. This disconnect usually leads Kenyan grassroots organisations to reshape their work to fit the foreign funding criteria. Often, the program objectives and successes are based on quantifiable, time-bound indicators rather than long-term structural transformations. Another topic brought up was sudden funding withdrawal, which left the communities in precarious situations and reinforced a structural cycle of dependence. K4 shared, *“They want to fund a project for one year, then move on. But people don’t stop being queer after one year. People don’t stop needing support.”*

Moreover, as shared by K4, Western accountability structures such as audits, financial reports, and strict funding conditions are imposed as a universal model of good governance. These systems fail to recognise localised reporting mechanisms rooted in community relationships.

Recommendations

For ODA donors, Governments, Private funders, Philanthropy and INGOs:

- **Recognise that structural racism is real and exists in funding** - it is a collective responsibility for all stakeholders to dismantle it.
- **Seek and invest time in fostering meaningful relationships with local partners and grantees.** These must be non-extractive, non-hierarchical working relationships rooted in respect for local knowledge and perspectives.
- **Pay the same remuneration package to local people that is paid to ‘expat’ hires** - Reassess the need to hire them for positions abroad and reflect on whether the ‘need’ is seen through a white supremacist, colonial lens.
- **Prioritise flexible funding for feminist movements** – start now, urgently, to address gender injustice, underdevelopment and inequality.
- **Recognise the colonial legacies and harm that foreign aid has caused nations** and start to work on reconceptualising development funding as reparations.
- **Create spaces to reflect on embedding transformative change into funding streams** - especially centring marginalised voices and those living at the intersections of identities such as caste, class, religion, gender and sexuality. Value local knowledge and integrate it into programmatic funding.
- **Reduce the structural barriers to accessing funding**, ensuring that grassroots NGOs and networks are eligible to apply for funding without needing to become more ‘Western’.
- **Simplify accountability and compliance mechanisms for grantees. De-centralised** accountability mechanisms, ensuring that community voices

are central to them . Redistribute decision-making powers, giving local organisations and communities more autonomy.

- **Encourage local NGOs to hold you to account, question and challenge power dynamics without fear of losing funding** - Be open to criticism and evolve accordingly.
- **Alongside local advocates, call for more accessible and better functioning regulatory mechanisms** that promote transparency and efficiency without overwhelming and excluding smaller, women-led organisations and networks.

For International NGOs and Private Philanthropy:

- **Be mindful of communication materials. Adopt** an anti-racist and decolonial lens in all internal and external communication.
- **Adopt clear milestones to transfer power and resources** to the Majority World feminist organisations and networks, being mindful of coloniality in the space. Be aware of the process of reducing investments in Minority World offices and expanding in Majority World movements.
- **Consult and co-create—Engage** grassroots experts and organisations on key issues and co-create programmatic, advocacy, and influencing work with local partners.
- **Promote and encourage decolonial research** - centring the voices of the communities, especially those living at the intersections. Use the research for policy advocacy and programmatic change.
- **Discourage the practice of white feminism in deciding or influencing feminist causes and funding priorities** - actively listen to and centre southern feminist voices and experiences in funding streams.
- **Go beyond tokenistic and performative ‘Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion’ policies and practices.** Hire Majority World people in senior leadership and decision-making roles and give them space to make decolonial, anti-racist, feminist, institutional change. Reflect on who holds power in the organisation and shift access to the most marginalised in decision-making.
- **Avoid the tokenistic use of ‘localisation’** to defend neoliberal approaches to funding.
- **Evaluate partnerships with local organisations to accommodate their needs. Adopt** mutually acceptable, accountable, and supportive leadership and approaches.
- **Hold governments accountable for their complicity in the genocide of Palestine. Otherwise,** your funding efforts to address different forms of injustice will be understood as hollow and hypocritical expressions of geopolitics and coloniality.
- **Trust local NGOs and communities to identify needs and make appropriate decisions.**

Conclusions and Way Forward

This research has elevated insights into the enduring colonial logics and rationale embedded in foreign funding policies in Kenya, India and Bangladesh. Germany, Sweden, Canada and the US have adopted feminist foreign policy frameworks, while the UK and the Netherlands have adopted gender-equality-focused foreign policies. Yet, their implementation, demonstrated through a literature review and the lived experience of local feminist practitioners, overall tends to operate as neo-liberal, neo-colonial vehicles for reinforcing structural and financial dependencies. Furthermore, they undermine and negatively impact local feminist organisations and networks. Through this research, we have highlighted the inherent racism and hypocrisy of Western nations in promoting 'Feminist' or gender-equality-focused foreign policies while continuing to profit off the arms trade being used to actively destroy communities of the global majority and entire regions of the Majority World.

As shown through this research, constraints imposed by myopic, project-based funding models, restrictive donor conditionalities, overwhelming regulation and heavy reliance on compliance depoliticise gender justice from a very Western lens. This research reveals how contemporary aid structures embed material and structural colonialities. Rather than driving transformative change, current structures often replicate the inequalities they claim to address, perpetuating neo-liberal and neo-colonial paradigms.

Decolonising foreign funding requires a tectonic shift from hierarchical donor-recipient relationships to funding models rooted in feminist movements from the Majority World, their local agency and autonomy. This would mean prioritising long-term, flexible and unrestricted funding that empowers southern feminist movements to define their agendas rather than adapting to Western ideals of feminism and gender equality. Western nations and donor agencies must reevaluate their role in sustaining colonial power imbalances in existing funding models. By doing this, they will be able to adopt decolonial participatory funding mechanisms rooted in the struggles and resistance of communities from the Majority World that have faced and continue to face intergenerational colonial power asymmetries. By creating spaces of transformation, funding agencies have immense potential to value and centre the voices of the most marginalised. There is hope and possibility that by challenging the entrenched structures of development finance, feminist movements in Kenya, India, and Bangladesh will reclaim their agency and chart their trajectories, free from the constraints of neocolonial funding regimes.

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Annex 1: Details of Research Process

Particulars	Date (from)	Date (to)	Details
Review of existing literature	20 Sep 2024	20 Oct 2024	Reviewed existing literature on foreign funding policies and their impact and influence on the Majority World, exploring theoretical frameworks that informed this research. Compiled a detailed review of the literature that guided this project.
Decolonial analysis of ODA strategies of the UK, US, Canada, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands	20 Oct 2024	15 Nov 2024	All three researchers looked at two countries each for this review and analysis. Informed and guided by the literature review, the three researchers thoroughly analysed ODA strategies. This revealed the various material and structural colonialities embedded in the ODA funding for development to Kenya, India and Bangladesh.
Finalising the in-depth interview questionnaire and reaching out to recruit research participants	15 Nov 2024	10 Dec 2024	An in-depth interview questionnaire was developed following the literature review and decolonial analysis of ODA strategies. Research interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling.
In-depth Interviews	15 Dec 2024	Jan 2025	<p>In total, 15 interviews were conducted across three countries. Profiles of the interviewees are as follows:</p> <p>India: 5 interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I (1): Works in a local NGO on women survivors, which receives foreign funding and has operational FCRA. ▪ I (2): Works in the field of foreign and development aid for over 14 years. ▪ I (3): Works in a local NGO and has experience with ▪ I (4): have experience working with gender-transformative tools in South Asia. They work in strategic partnerships and have experience working directly on donor mandates, as well as with UK and US donor organisations. ▪ I (5): Has experience serving on legal boards and is the CEO of their feminist organisation in India. They have expertise in securing foreign funding, including retail foreign funds and institutional funding. Their skills include drafting proposals, finalising contracts, fundraising, and managing related paperwork.

			<p>Kenya: 7 interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ K(1): Works in the development space. Is a founder and mobiliser on a large feminist collective with a presence in over four counties in Kenya ▪ K (2): A feminist activist who works as a diplomatic representative for the Kenyan government as a youth envoy in Nairobi, Kenya. ▪ K (3): A feminist and woman in political discourse. Organises and mobilises grassroots women in Kisumu and Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya. ▪ K (4): A data scientist who works in international development in Ethiopia, Kenya and Cameroon ▪ K (5) KL: Works in the women's rights and feminist space. Is in senior leadership at an INGO in Kenya. ▪ K (6): Works in the feminist space and LGBTQ+ spaces. Is a founder and in senior leader of an NGO in Nairobi, Kenya ▪ K (7): Works in women's rights and feminism. Is a founder and in senior leadership at an NGO in Nairobi, Kenya <p>Bangladesh: 5 interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ B (1): Works in the international development space. In a senior leadership position at an INGO in Dhaka, Bangladesh ▪ B (2): Works in a local NGO that receives foreign funding. The main objective of the NGO is to provide free and subsidised legal aid to women who experience violence. ▪ B (3): Works in a local NGO that receives foreign funding. The organisation works on issues of women and disability. ▪ B (4): Consent withdrawn ▪ B (5): Consent withdrawn
Final Report			28 February 2025

Annex 2: ODA Funding Strategy Review and Analysis Template from a Feminist Decolonial Lens

Introduction

Objective: Provide an overview of the analysis framework to critically assess the ODA (Official Development Assistance) funding strategies of the UK, US, Canada, Sweden, Netherlands and Germany towards international development in India, Kenya, and Bangladesh.

Scope: This template is designed to identify and analyse colonialities in the funding strategies, highlighting material and structural colonialities underpinning these strategies, and suggesting areas for decolonisation from a feminist perspective.

Feminist Decolonial Review Framework

A. Power Dynamics and Agenda Setting

1. **Analysis Question:** How are the priorities set in the ODA funding strategies?
 - Are local actors involved in decision-making?
 - How are the goals aligned with or imposed upon the local context?
 - Spotting Colonialities:
 - Look for top-down approaches where donor countries set the agenda without adequate local consultation.
 - Identify instances where local knowledge or priorities are marginalised in favour of donor priorities.
 - Examples of Material/Structural Colonialities:
 - Conditionalities are attached to funding that force recipient countries to adopt specific policies or programs.
 - Lack of transparency in decision-making processes, often controlled by donor countries.

B. Gender Equality and Feminist Foreign Policy

1. **Analysis Question:** How is gender equality framed within the ODA strategy?
 - Does the strategy align with feminist foreign policy principles?
 - Are intersectional and context-specific gender issues adequately addressed?
 - Spotting Colonialities:
 - Examine if gender equality initiatives are implemented in a one-size-fits-all manner without considering local cultural, social, and political contexts.
 - Identify the presence of Western-centric gender norms/ideas being imposed on local communities.
 - Examples of Material/Structural Colonialities:
 - Funding is tied to Western concepts of feminism, ignoring or undervaluing local feminist movements and practices.
 - Programs that fail to address the intersectionality of gender with race, class, caste, etc.

C. Funding Allocation and Conditionalities

1. **Analysis Question:** How is funding allocated, and what are the conditions attached?
 - What are the criteria for funding distribution?
 - Are there restrictions that limit the autonomy of recipient countries?
 - Spotting Colonialities:
 - Investigate if funding is allocated in ways that reinforce donor dominance (e.g., prioritising projects that align with the donor country's geopolitical interests).
 - Analyse conditions that may restrict the recipient country's ability to use funds as they see fit.
 - Examples of Material/Structural Colonialities:
 - Conditions requiring the procurement of goods and services from donor countries.
 - Restrictions on the use of funds limit the flexibility of recipient countries to address their specific needs.

D. Local Participation and Representation

1. **Analysis Question:** How are local voices and communities represented in the ODA process?

- Are local NGOs, women's groups, and communities involved in the planning and implementation of funded projects?
- How is local knowledge and expertise valued?
- Spotting Colonialities:
 - Look for tokenistic inclusion of local voices that do not translate into meaningful influence.
 - Assess whether local knowledge is sidelined in favour of 'expert' opinions from the donor country.
- Examples of Material/Structural Colonialities:
 - Projects are designed and implemented without meaningful input from local communities.
 - Over-reliance on expatriate staff for project implementation, undermining local capacity.

E. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Accountability

1. **Analysis Question:** How are projects monitored and evaluated?

- What metrics are used to measure success?
- Who is responsible for accountability, and to whom are they accountable?
- Spotting Colonialities:
 - Examine if evaluation criteria are set by donors without considering local definitions of success and progress.
 - Check for accountability mechanisms that primarily serve the interests of the donor rather than the recipient.
- Examples of Material/Structural Colonialities:
 - Imposing Western standards of success that may not be relevant or appropriate in the local context.
 - Donor-driven evaluations that prioritise accountability to donor taxpayers rather than to the beneficiary communities.

Towards Feminist Philanthropy: A Global Majority-Led Solution for Bridging the Needs of Activists and the Interests of Donors in a Changing Political Context

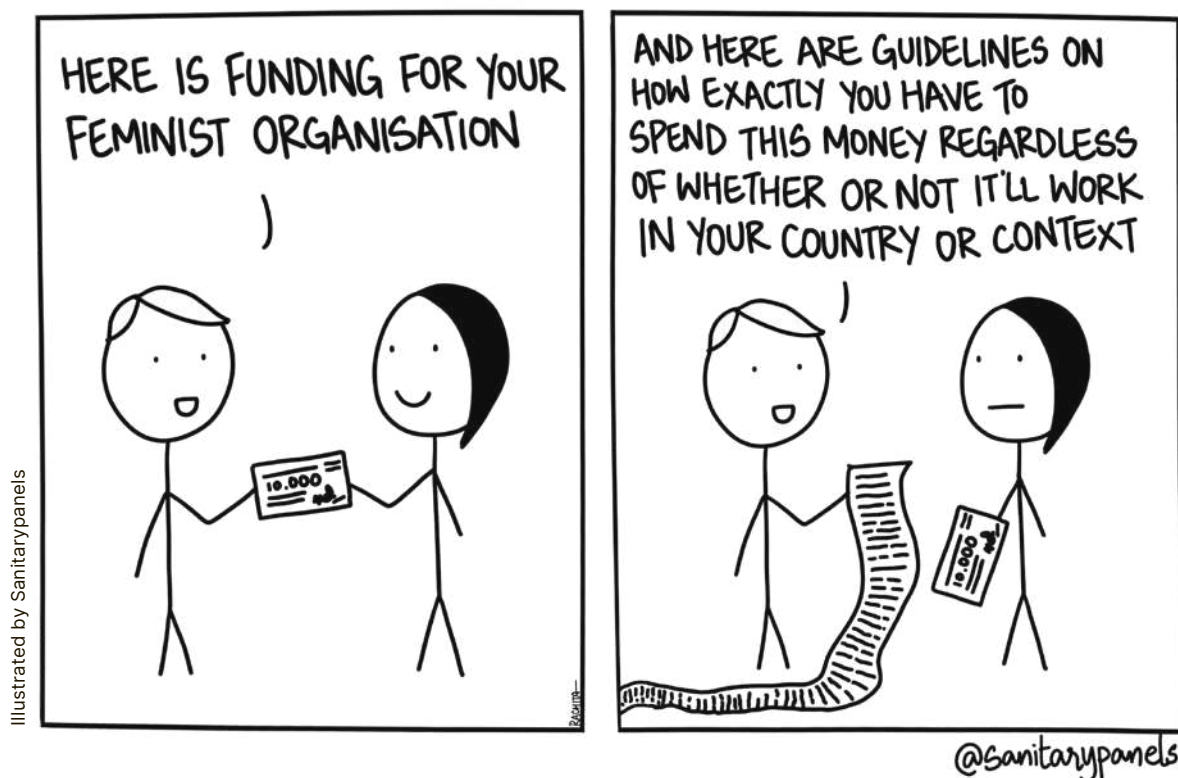
**Maria Aïcha Boumeddiene,
Natalia Marsicovetere Fanjul**

February 2025



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Advocacy Summary

■ Background and research objective

This research examines the funding landscape for gender justice organisations in Latin America (LATAM) and the South West Asian and North African region (SWANA). It identifies the administrative, ethical, and political challenges they face when applying for, receiving, or managing funds. The study aims to provide actionable insights and recommendations to address systemic funding barriers, strengthen organisational sustainability, and amplify the impact of gender justice movements. The need for this research stems from persistent inequities in funding distribution and the unique challenges that grassroots and marginalised organisations face in these regions.

■ Literature Review

The literature highlights the transformation of social justice movements into institutionalised NGOs, often referred to as the “NGOisation” of movements. This shift, influenced by international cooperation and funding structures, has led to tension between grassroots activism and the professionalisation demanded

by donor agendas. In regions such as Latin America, feminist movements have faced the challenge of maintaining political autonomy while securing international funding, which often necessitates adjustments to their missions to align with global priorities. Critics argue that this dynamic weakens the transformative power of movements, as neoliberal and postcolonial forces increasingly shape them. The emergence of feminist philanthropy seeks to address these challenges by advocating for more equitable, long-term, and flexible funding models that prioritise local leadership and address the root causes of oppression. However, systemic barriers, such as rigid funding policies, donor-driven agendas, and the professionalisation of activism, continue to hinder the full realisation of feminist philanthropy's potential. Funding to empower grassroots movements must embrace decolonisation, decentralise decision-making, and ensure the most marginalised voices are heard and supported.

■ Key Findings

The findings highlight significant administrative and political challenges that gender justice organisations in LATAM and SWANA face when securing and managing funding. Administrative barriers include financial instability due to short funding cycles and the lack of coverage for living wages, forcing organisations to rely on volunteer work. This leads to activist burnout and weakening of the movement.

Organisations also face pressure from donors to align their political views with donor agendas, compromising their independence and advocacy efforts. Both private and public donors impose constraints, such as expectations to adopt particular political stances or participate in projects that do not align with their movement's goals. Organisations are also concerned about the risk of censorship and the loss of funding due to political views. These power imbalances between donors and grantees create a tension between securing necessary resources and maintaining the integrity of their mission, ultimately affecting the transformative potential of these organisations in their respective regions. A shift in this dynamic is needed to ensure donors partner with organisations, uplifting their expertise and political vision to achieve impact.

Organisations are interested in developing self-funding strategies that ensure sustainability despite changing political climates and donors' agendas. Investment in an organisation's longer-term sustainability is a funding stream that can address some of these issues and provide political autonomy.

■ Key Recommendations

- **Adapt funding schemes** to provide flexible, long-term, and unrestricted funding that supports the autonomy and transformative goals of Majority World feminist organisations, enabling them to adapt effectively to evolving political and administrative needs.
- **Recognise and remunerate the labour of activists fairly**, particularly in grassroots and community-based organisations, to ensure the financial sustainability of movements and the protection of the well-being of activists.
- **Reduce dependency on specific donors** by implementing funding models that diversify sources, promote self-sustainability and allow organisations to maintain autonomy and resist political or ideological pressures.
- **Ensure organisations can align with their agendas and principles** without fear of compromising economic sustainability and promoting authentic, impactful work.
- **Promote inclusive and decolonised funding models** that actively involve and support grassroots and non-institutionalised organisations, ensuring equitable access to resources in horizontal partnerships.
- **Adapt funding requirements** to the sociopolitical contexts and needs of social movements, recognising the expertise of activists and organisations to guide solutions to their needs.

Authors and Acknowledgements

About the Authors

Natalia Marsicovetere Fanjul (she/her) is a social psychologist, feminist researcher, and queer activist focused on gender justice issues and human rights. Her recent work has focused on gender-based violence, the dynamics of social justice movements and the threat of the global anti-gender movement.

Maria Aïcha Boumeddiene (she/they) is a researcher, advocate, and activist specialising in LGBTQI+ rights. Their work spans global advocacy, international human rights mechanisms, and exploring funding landscapes, with a focus on marginalised communities, particularly those in the Majority World and their diaspora.

This research aims to present evidence-based data through an objective lens and do justice to the perspectives of those who shared insights. At the same time, all research is influenced by the authors' lived experiences and positionality. Natalia is a Guatemalan queer cis woman, she is mestizo-ladina and at the time of publication was 31 years old and based in Guatemala City. Maria is an Algerian queer person, raised in Algeria and France, and at the time of publication was 29 years old and based in Berlin.

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The authors are deeply grateful to all the activists and organisations that shared their perspectives, lived experiences, and visions for the future, and believed in the potential of this research project. They also extend their gratitude to the numerous social justice movements across their regions that continue to fight for rights and strive for a better future, even amid the complex political challenges they face today. It was truly inspiring to see how this research topic resonated with so many visionaries, and the authors hope this report honours the trust placed in them by sharing their needs, wisdom, aspirations and dreams.

Acronym List

BIPoC Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour

LATAM Latin America

LGBTIQI+ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer

NGO Non-governmental organisations

ODA Official Development Assistance

SOGIESC Sexual orientation, gender identity, expression and sexual characteristics

SWANA South West Asia and North Africa

Introduction

The critique of the non-profit industrial complex has been present for decades, denouncing how neoliberal models of movement financing have stifled the transformative political visions of Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) and Majority World activists and collectives. This critique feels especially relevant in 2025, where anti-rights and far-right movements are consistently gaining power and further threatening the rights of women, gender and sexual diversity, immigrants, and those living in occupied territories. The increase of anti-gender politics in Minority World governments has severely impacted the sustainability of social movements around the world. Thus, it is crucial to rethink funding dynamics that return the system-breaking power to these activists and collectives and find solutions in this rapidly changing political context.

Feminist philanthropy,¹ as an alternative to funding dynamics, has been discussed, particularly around who² is financed and to what amount.³ However, the conversation must also include the “how”, particularly when the notion of “partnerships” has become depoliticised and neutralised⁴. Collectives in the Majority World consider that a true feminist philanthropy must include a decolonial approach to funding.⁵ At the same time, philanthropy organisations often lack systematic data and evidence to advocate for this with private donors. Thus, this research project aims to bridge the gaps in systematised information that give way to advocating for a change in funding frameworks as part of the feminist philanthropy conversation, focusing on Latin America, North Africa, and Southwest Asia.

This research aims to create a roadmap toward implementing feminist philanthropy principles that bridge the political demands of feminist organisations with the interests of private and public donors. It analyses ethical dilemmas and administrative challenges that feminist organisations face when resorting to the private sector of philanthropy, as well as public/State donors, and their impact on their work, while collecting lessons learned and successful sustainability practices that can inform feminist philanthropy.

1. Ostrander, “The Growth of Donor Control.”

2. Howe and Frazer, “Pocket Change: How Women and Girls of Color Do More with Less.”

3. Shifman et al., “Lighting the Way: A Report for Philanthropy on the Power and Promise of Feminist Movements.”

4. Daly and Carrasco-Scherer, “Feminist Philanthropy: A New Era for the Philanthropy Field?”

5. Private meeting with Latin America and the Caribbean feminist and post feminist collectives, February 2023.

Methodology

Data Collection

The authors conducted secondary research based on various documentary sources, including scholarly articles, feminist philanthropy reports, essays, manifestos, and reports from civil society organisations.

An online survey was also administered to feminist and gender-transformative organisations that have worked with either private or public funding, or are self-sustaining. The survey's sample size comprised 122 participants from at least 10 countries in Southwest Asia and North Africa, as well as at least 14 countries from Latin America, and regional organisations focused on these contexts. Seventy-five per cent of survey respondents are from Latin America, and 25% are from Southwest Asia and North Africa.

Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of gender-transformative organisations operating in five countries in Latin America, four countries in North Africa and Southwest Asia, and two organisations working regionally in both contexts. Participation in the interviews was fairly compensated.

Limitations

Due to the exploratory nature of this research, the survey sample is small and not statistically representative of either region. Participation was higher in LATAM than in SWANA, as ongoing political crises in the latter region limited the capacity to engage in such initiatives. Data collection took place from November 2024 to February 2025, a period marked by unprecedented colonial aggression, political repression, and persecution of activists in and from the SWANA region.

Additionally, during this time, the global political landscape saw a significant rise in far-right movements and democratic backsliding in donor countries, leading to drastic cuts in funding for sexual and reproductive rights, gender justice, and LGBTQI+ issues. While this research seeks to honour the testimonies shared by participants, it cannot fully capture the extent or impact of these rapidly evolving contexts on gender-transformative organisations in the SWANA and LATAM regions. Further research is needed to explore the complexities arising from this global democratic backtrack.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in this research was through informed consent, and the project prioritised the protection of all participants' anonymity. The present report does not include information that could jeopardise participants' anonymity. For this reason, no country names, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or sexual characteristics (SOGIESC) are disclosed for the survey or interview participants.

Literature Review

The NGOisation of Social Justice Movements

Activists have denounced the effects of the institutionalisation of civil society movements since this phenomenon began in the 1990s around the United Nations World Conferences.⁶ These world conferences set the global agenda to advance human rights and strongly shaped the funding streams from international cooperation that would impact social justice movements in the Global Majority. After these, organisations had to shape their aims, alliances, and even their names to be eligible for these new forms of funding.

In Latin America and the Caribbean during the early 2000s, feminist activists believed that donors had compromised their original political views, values, and goals by channelling them into funding streams related to global agendas from the World Conferences. The movement, which had gained significant momentum in the preceding decades, was then torn between the benefits of receiving international funding and remaining true to its original mission.^{7 8} This turned into a debate that was referred to as "autonomous" vs "institutional" feminism, in which organisations got involved in the international cooperation funding dynamic while others were critical of the neoliberal and postcolonial nature of this dynamic and refrained from participating in it.⁹ Today, a significant portion of feminist, LGBTQI+, and gender justice organisations in the region are established as NGO.

The transformation of social movements into NGOs has become known as the "NGOisation of movements"¹⁰. This phenomenon has also been strongly present in the SWANA region over the last three decades, primarily due to increased

6. Curiel, "El Lesbianismo Feminista En América Latina y El Caribe: Una Propuesta Política Transformadora."

7. Curiel.

8. Mogrovejo, *Movimiento Lésbico En América Latina y Sus Demandas*.

9. Espinosa-Miñoso, "Historizar las disputas, indagar las fuentes."

10. Mitri, "From Public Space to Office Space: The Professionalization/NGO-ization of the Feminist Movement Associations in Lebanon and Its Impact on Mobilization and Achieving Social Change."

international cooperation and funding. Notably, around the global schemes for development promoted by the World Bank in the 1990s and the increased interest of the United States in “promoting democracy” in the region during the 2000s.¹¹ The resulting proliferation of women’s NGOs in the region promoted the “professionalisation” of activists, in which donors favoured highly skilled professionals while “non-professional” forms of women’s organisations found it increasingly complex to sustain their work.¹²

These resulting dynamics have been named “non-profit industrial complex”¹³ by critics in which the state, in combination with capitalistic interests, uses nonprofits to monitor, manage, and control dissent, push social movements into adhering to capitalist structures, and redirect activist efforts into career-based modes of organising that render organisations incapable of holding transformative power.¹⁴

Feminist Philanthropy

The NGOisation of social justice movements presents a dilemma for philanthropic funders and activists alike: how can activism be economically sustainable while also remaining politically autonomous and transformative? The criticism towards the non-profit industrial complex highlights the paradoxical nature of these dynamics. At the same time, proponents of feminist philanthropy consider that relationships between funders and civil society organisations can be nuanced, and power imbalances can be revised, particularly regarding funding for gender justice issues.

Feminist philanthropy can be defined as “redistribution of wealth with trust in the leadership and strategy of those most marginalised, women and gender-expansive people of colour.”¹⁵ It is built upon these key principles: respecting local contexts and knowledge, providing long-term flexible funding, and supporting women’s leadership.¹⁶ It understands that traditional philanthropy reinforces unequal power dynamics in multiple ways. For instance, feminist philanthropy has denounced the unequal distribution of funding for gender justice¹⁷, particularly for organisations led by Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPoC)¹⁸. Additionally, it understands that imposing political agendas from a top-down

11. Jad, “The NGOization of the Arab Women’s Movements.”

12. Ghoul, “The NGO Industrial Complex and Palestinian Feminism: A Case Study.”

13. Rodríguez, “The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex.”

14. INCITE!, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*.

15. Brathwaite, “Feminist Philanthropy.”

16. Peñaloza, “Feminist Philanthropy Can Do More to Save Democracy—Here’s How.”

17. Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, “Women & Girls Index 2024.”

18. Howe and Frazer, “Pocket Change: How Women and Girls of Color Do More with Less.”

perspective, rather than a horizontal liaison, reduces the capacity of civil society organisations.¹⁹ Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of contextualising gender justice and its intersectionality with other social movements.²⁰

Proponents of a change in funding frameworks also raise the pressing issue of decolonising philanthropy, acknowledging that this may be perceived as paradoxical. The proposition of decolonising philanthropy, in line with feminist philanthropy principles, asserts that philanthropy must address the root causes of current societal systems of oppression, rather than just their symptoms, such as poverty and inequality. This includes philanthropy's role in participating and perpetuating the social and political architecture left behind by colonialism.²¹

Funders following philanthropic frameworks have also highlighted the current state of funding for gender justice, LGBTI, and feminist organisations, advocating for increased funding while denouncing existing power imbalances in the field. As of 2021, women's rights organisations received only 0.13% of the total Official Development Assistance (ODA), and only 0.42% of foundation grants are allocated towards women's rights.²² Furthermore, estimates show that 99% of ODA funding for gender equality supports large, mainstream organisations and has gone to governments or development agencies rather than directly to organisations and activists.²³ Furthermore, with the rise of far-right governments in donor countries, the available public funding for gender justice is going to decline further, making it urgent to create new effective financing frameworks, applying feminist and decolonial philanthropic principles to ensure funds increase the transformative power of organisations.²⁴

Roadmaps and Gaps for a Feminist Philanthropy

Feminist philanthropy seeks to correct the historical imbalances that have characterised global funding systems, which have often marginalised gender justice movements, especially in the Majority World. A key aspect of this philanthropic model is the shift toward long-term, flexible funding that empowers grassroots movements, rather than imposing rigid conditions that restrict their ability to lead political change on their own terms.

19. Gill and Wagner, "Why Feminist Philanthropy?"

20. Brathwaite, "Feminist Philanthropy."

21. Banerjee and Urvi, "Decolonising Philanthropy."

22. Dolker, "Where Is the Money for Feminist Organizing? Data Snapshots and A Call to Action."

23. Staszewska et al., "C."

24. Benjamin and Mwende Kinjili, "Change That Lasts."

However, systemic barriers persist, as highlighted in AWID and Mama Cash's report²⁵. On the donors' side, these challenges include insufficient internal capacity, a lack of movement-connected staff within institutions, and short and rigid policy cycles, as well as inflexible budget timeframes. Funding thresholds often exclude grassroots organisations, being either prohibitively high or unrealistically low. At the same time, formulaic due diligence processes, resistance to regranteeing funds, and a reluctance to collectively pool resources hinder efforts to implement feminist funding models. Addressing these structural issues is crucial for feminist philanthropy to move beyond theory and become a transformative force.

Funders, while claiming to support feminist principles, continue to maintain control over resource distribution, often imposing restrictive criteria that prioritise alignment with global agendas over local grassroots needs.^{26 27} This can lead to a conflict where organisations feel pressured to conform to external frameworks rather than maintain the radical and intersectional approaches that many feminist movements initially advocated for. The tension between accessing essential resources and staying true to a movement's political goals creates a critical gap in the landscape of feminist philanthropy.²⁸

Additionally, the professionalisation of activism often favours well-resourced NGOs and trained professionals while putting less formal grassroots organisations on the sidelines. This dynamic risks excluding the voices of the most marginalised, who typically lack access to these structures.²⁹ While some initiatives aim to address these disparities through decolonised and participatory funding models, such approaches remain in their early stages and face resistance.³⁰

To realise feminist philanthropy's transformative potential, it's essential to dismantle the colonial and capitalist frameworks that underpin the current philanthropic systems. Bridging these gaps requires a radical shift in funding practices that redistributes resources and redefines power dynamics. A genuinely feminist model would prioritise the leadership of grassroots feminists, embrace participatory approaches, and reject donor-driven priorities.³¹ Until these systemic barriers are addressed, feminist philanthropy will struggle to achieve its full potential.

25. Lever, E., Miller, K. and Staszewska, K. (2020). Moving More Money to the Drivers of Change: How Bilateral and Multilateral Funders Can Resource Feminist Movements. AWID and Mama Cash with support from the Count Me In! Consortium.

26. Yucel, "Money and Power."

27. Ostrander, "The Growth of Donor Control."

28. Bloodgood and Tremblay-Boire, "Does Government Funding Depoliticize Non-Governmental organisations? Examining Evidence from Europe."

29. Mitri, "From Public Space to Office Space: The Professionalization/NGO-ization of the Feminist Movement Associations in Lebanon and Its Impact on Mobilization and Achieving Social Change."

30. Daly and Carrasco-Scherer, "Feminist Philanthropy: A New Era for the Philanthropy Field?"

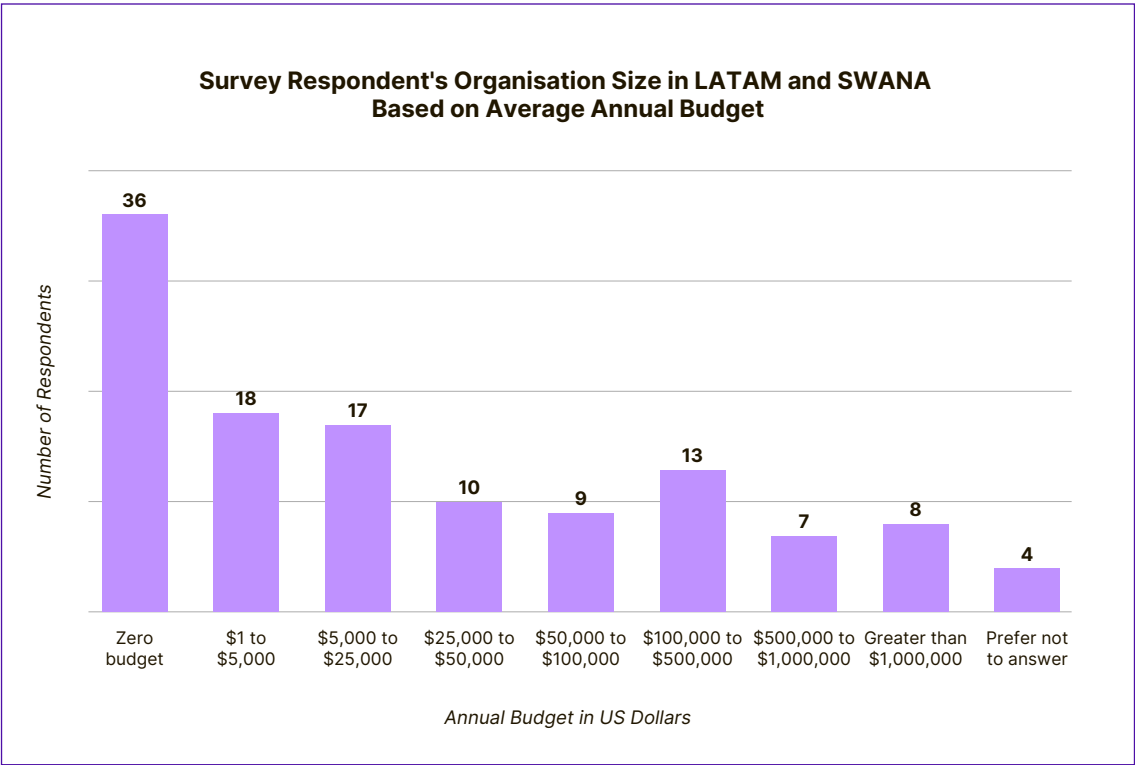
31. Yucel, "Money and Power."

Findings

The following findings reflect the core issues and needs that organisations working on gender justice in LATAM and SWANA face regarding funding dynamics. The main barriers identified can be categorised into administrative and ethical/political issues. These barriers prevent organisations from accessing funding or hinder their work by restricting their transformative potential. The findings also include organisations’ perspectives on avenues for balancing donor-grantee funding dynamics and how these can help shape feminist philanthropy.

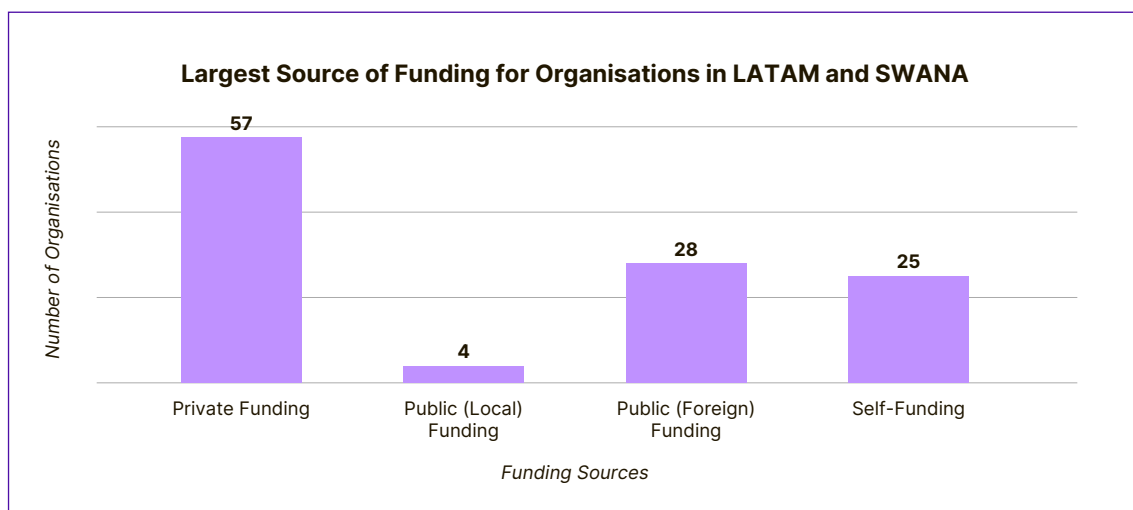
Funding landscapes of Gender Justice organisations in SWANA and LATAM

Some of the main challenges organisations encounter when applying for, receiving, or executing funding are administrative in nature. These challenges include the amount and types of funding received, the financial sustainability of their organisations and work, and the administrative and legal requirements they must fulfil to be eligible for financing.



Source: Research survey “Challenges in Funding for Gender Justice organisations from LATAM and SWANA” (2025) (n=122)

In line with feminist philanthropy reports, the survey found that the majority of gender-transformative, LGBTQI+, or feminist organisations in the LATAM and SWANA regions are severely underfunded. Approximately 30% (n = 36) of respondents reported having no average annual budget, while an additional 29% (n = 35) reported an average annual budget of less than \$25,000. The majority, 66% (n=81), of organisations have used private funding, and approximately 44% (n=53) have used public funding, including both local and foreign sources. Approximately 20% (n = 30) of the surveyed organisations rely on a combination of private and public funding sources, including both local and foreign sources. A significant portion of survey respondents, 37% (n = 46), also rely on self-funding strategies to compensate for the funding gaps observed in the first chart, which will be addressed below.



Source: Research survey "Challenges in Funding for Gender Justice organisations from LATAM and SWANA" (2025) (n=122)

The majority (47%, n = 57) of survey respondents rely primarily on private or philanthropic funding as their primary source of funding. At the same time, 20% of those who primarily rely on private funding report an average budget of zero and 40% have an average budget of \$25,000 or less. Interviewees confirm that this type of funding, although more flexible and more accessible for smaller organisations compared to public funding, is an unsustainable source as they often rely on fragmented, short-term funding streams that undermine their long-term stability. On the other hand, 22% (n=28) of organisations rely primarily on foreign public funding sources. These organisations tend to have larger average annual budgets, with approximately 32% (n=39) of organisations whose primary funding source is public foreign funds having budgets exceeding \$1,000,000 annually.

The Urgent Need for Living Wages

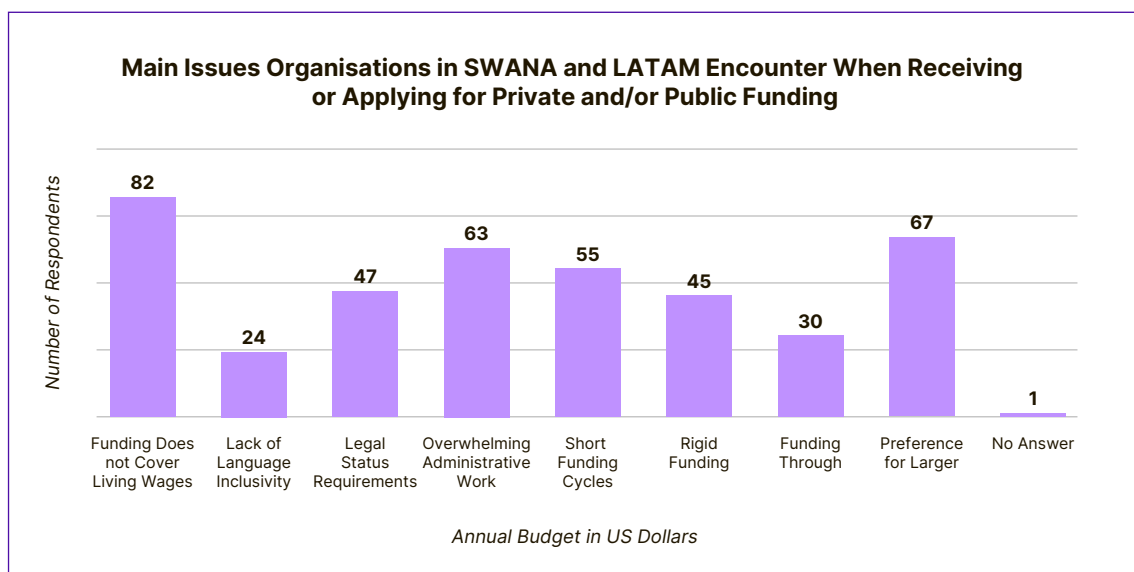
*“[The lack of living wages] forces us to become a [grants] executing entity, it hides the fact that **social movements are made up of people**, we need a funding logic that prioritises the work that people already do and builds towards social movements.” – activist from LATAM*

Among the issues reported by organisations when applying for or receiving funding, significant challenges to financial stability and flexibility were revealed, the most pressing one being the lack of coverage for living wages by both public and private funders. An overwhelming 67% (n = 82) of survey respondents stated that grants did not adequately cover salaries. Interviewees elaborated on how they often received funding for projects or specific activities, but little to no money to pay the individuals carrying out this work.

This funding gap forces organisations to underpay staff, often leaving them without access to healthcare, social security, and other labour benefits. Organisations may hire consultants or external service providers for specific tasks in such scenarios. However, this approach weakens movements, as external providers are not necessarily aligned with the organisation’s political mission.

Furthermore, 67% (n = 82) of the surveyed organisations reported relying on volunteer work to compensate for insufficient funding. This pushes activists into precarious living conditions, where they must balance income-generating work with their demanding voluntary commitments, all while facing the same inequalities and oppressions they seek to transform. Interviewees highlighted the perception among funders that human rights work is a “duty” or “sacrifice” that activists must endure, leading to the exclusion of living wages from grant allocations.

Interviewees emphasised that people drive social and political change. They argued that current funding dynamics neglect the core of social movements: the individuals behind them. By investing in the living conditions of those working for gender justice, movements become more substantial and sustainable. There is a need for core funding that prioritises sufficient resources for operational costs, mainly living wages, over the limitations of project-based financing, which often imposes low salary budget ceilings or excludes salary allocations entirely.



Source: Research survey "Challenges in Funding for Gender Justice organisations from LATAM and SWANA" (2025) (n=122)

Breaking Down Bureaucracy: Addressing Inequities in Grantmaking

"The proposal and funding process is a rat race. It exhausts activists, limits their creative thinking, and almost always leads to inefficiency ... The bureaucracy is even more insidious than any perceived politics." –activist from SWANA

Research participants highlighted the burdensome and often harrowing process of applying for funding. The competitive nature of grant applications creates divisions within social movements, as organisations compete against one another for limited funds. Moreover, the application process demands significant unpaid labour, without guaranteeing that the time and resources invested will yield results.

In line with this, 52% (n = 63) of survey respondents identified overwhelming administrative requirements as another significant issue in applying for and receiving funding. Interviewees shared that instead of focusing on their organisation's or movement's goals, they are often bogged down by extensive administrative work required to utilise granted funds. This is particularly detrimental for organisations working in crisis contexts in the SWANA region, where urgent action is often needed but hindered by lengthy administrative procedures and inflexible funding structures. In LATAM, interviewees emphasised the disproportionate operational costs of applying for and executing grants compared to the amount of funding

provided. This issue is further exacerbated by the insufficient allocation of funds for living wages in grants, as previously discussed.

Furthermore, 55% (n=67) of survey respondents expressed that donors' preference for working with larger organisations is a significant issue when applying for private or public funding. Interviewees noted that this is particularly problematic for public funders, who often require a more robust administrative structure for grant execution, reporting, and auditing processes than private donors. This issue is closely tied to the legal status requirement for accessing more substantial funding opportunities, which 38% (n = 47) of survey respondents identified as a significant barrier. Interviewees elaborated that obtaining legal registration carries substantial financial and political consequences for organisations. In many countries across SWANA and LATAM, legal registration exposes organisations to scrutiny from local and international governments, which is incredibly unsafe and unviable in contexts where criminalisation of LGBTQI+ individuals or human rights activists is rampant, or where laws restrict the work and international funding of NGOs. Even when legal registration is possible, the process is often costly and involves lengthy bureaucratic procedures, making it inaccessible for organisations that lack the necessary resources. Additionally, organisations may compromise their political vision to meet legal registration requirements.

“If you [legally] register, you then depend on foreign funds who want you to conform and comply with conditions that do not fit the reality of your region, you can get lost in constantly looking for funds and trying to adjust to [their] procedures.” – activist from the SWANA region

A typical solution to these challenges is the creation of regranting structures, where larger national organisations redistribute funding to smaller or grassroots organisations, particularly those without formal legal registration. However, interviewees in LATAM highlighted that this structure often creates tension between re-granters and grantees due to power imbalances and competition for funds, fracturing local movements rather than fostering solidarity. In SWANA, interviewees noted that funding tends to be concentrated in specific countries—often those perceived as more “westernised”—which re-grant to the rest of the region. This results in insufficient funding for grantee countries and places an excessive administrative burden on regranting organisations, leading to overwork and burnout.

Interviewees advocated for more equitable feminist philanthropy practices, such as compensating organisations for their application efforts and allowing them to self-determine the content of their proposals. This contrasts with the

current competitive models, which often require organisations to submit similar themes and methods, which are disadvantageous to smaller or less experienced groups. Additionally, funders should be supportive by guiding, notably those that are more undersized, grassroots, or inexperienced organisations, through administrative procedures to access funding. Participants also called for revising regranting models to ensure organisations are fairly compensated and that there is prioritisation of the autonomy and needs of grant recipients.

Bridging the Divide in Donor-Grantee Relationships

As previously mentioned in the literature review section of this report, since the trend of NGOisation began, international cooperation has vertically imposed its political agendas onto the Majority World through rigid funding schemes. Interviewees from the LATAM and SWANA regions emphasised that, to this day, funders continue to dictate the priorities organisations should focus on, often disregarding the relevance or viability of these priorities within local contexts.

A striking data point from the survey is that nearly half of the respondents (48%, n = 59, regarding private funding and 51%, n = 62, regarding public funding) expressed concern about the pressure to adapt their political vision to receive funding. This compromises organisational independence and highlights how power dynamics undermine responses to local needs in funding relationships. Such dynamics minimise the transformative potential of activists, who often must trade their political goals for economic sustainability. Interviewees shared how they have frequently had to shift their primary focus to align with funders' priorities when their original scope of work is deemed "no longer trending." Additionally, they noted how funders often impose strategies irrelevant to the local organisational ecosystem or incompatible with the sociopolitical context.

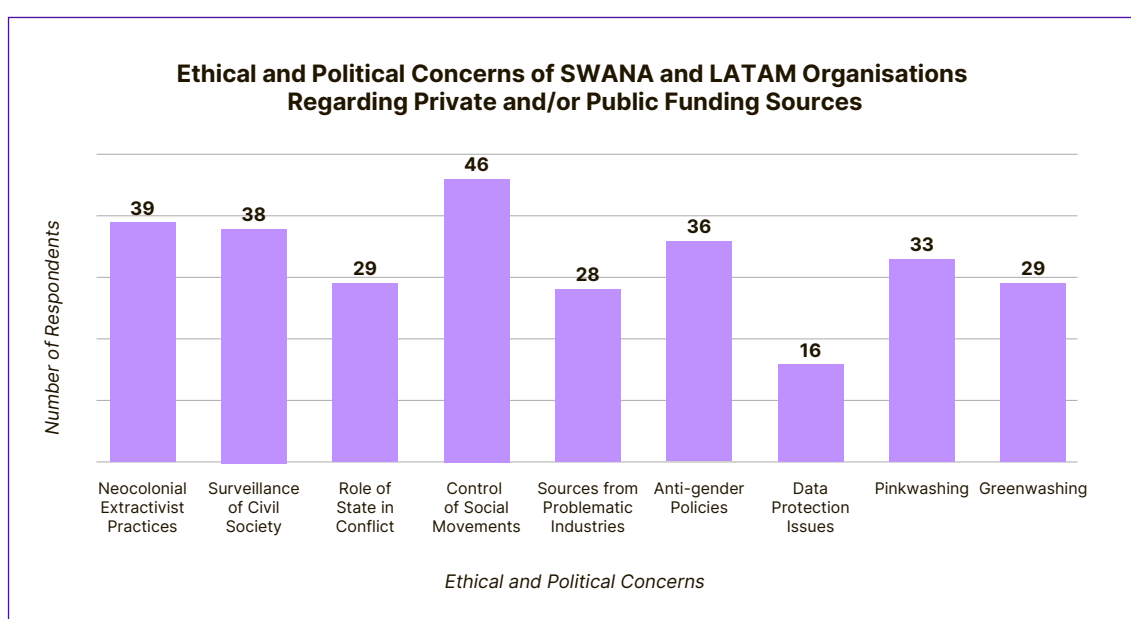
Another manifestation of this political disconnect is the retraction of funds in contexts of shrinking civic space. Activists from LATAM and SWANA, who are under authoritarian regimes, shared how funders retreated when political contexts shifted, leaving organisations unprotected and unfunded. Similarly, funders should advocate for and protect organisations and communities in occupied territories, particularly when these are being subjected to aggression and repression by colonising entities, such as the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Many interviewees expressed that donors should play a braver role in such contexts, holding their ground to safeguard grantee organisations through their international infrastructure, access to support networks, and advocacy capacity.

“I think political and organisational autonomy has matured [in the last decade]. Receiving funds does not make organisations more or less politically autonomous; autonomy is when organisations are, autonomy is organisations being able to decide how and on what terms this funding is granted. Being able to dictate and establish ways of working with funders, choosing how these relationships are built; that is autonomy, too” –activist from LATAM

According to activists interviewed from both regions, the relationship between donors and grantees needs to shift toward a more horizontal partnership to address these challenges. This requires acknowledging the underlying power imbalances while recognising the local expertise of organisations to determine the most effective ways of working within their contexts. Grantmaking processes should be participatory and collaborative, ensuring that relevance, care, and sociopolitical nuances are central considerations in the decision-making process. Safeguarding organisations, notably smaller grassroots groups in countries with shrinking civic space, should be a key priority in this partnership.

Ethical and Political Concerns of Funding Sources

Sources of funding often place organisations in political dilemmas, forcing them to balance their political integrity with the need for economic sustainability. These tensions are particularly pronounced when working with specific funders whose agendas may conflict with the values and missions of the organisations they support.



Source: Research survey “Challenges in Funding for Gender Justice organisations from LATAM and SWANA” (2025) (n=122)

Regarding private or philanthropic funding sources, the most common concerns shared by survey respondents included funding tied to anti-gender politics or lobbying (30%, n=36), “pinkwashing” (27%, n=33)—where donors promote pro-LGBTQI+ policies while simultaneously harming related or other causes—and “greenwashing” (24%, n=29). Notably, 23% (n = 23) of respondents reported having no ethical concerns when applying for or receiving private funding. This suggests that some organisations may have established clear boundaries or rely on carefully vetted donors. However, these cases are exceptions rather than the norm, reflecting the widespread ethical challenges faced by many organisations. These findings emphasise the critical need for funding practices that respect organisations’ political and moral integrity, enabling them to pursue their missions without compromising their values and greater transparency regarding funding sources and their involvement in political practices.

Regarding public funding, 38% (n = 46) of respondents expressed concerns about government control of civil society action through funding mechanisms. Similarly, 31% (n=38) are concerned about funds used by state entities to surveil civil society, highlighting organisations’ vulnerability in certain regions where public funds may come with heightened scrutiny and reduced autonomy. Additionally, 32% (n = 39) identified the role of states in neocolonial extractivist practices as a key ethical issue in receiving public funding.

For most organisations, these concerns evidence the double-edged nature of private and public funding. While such funding provides vital resources, it often introduces constraints that challenge the independence and effectiveness of civil society organisations.

The Cost of Political Autonomy: Funding and Censorship in Advocacy Work

*“[It feels like] I am wearing a straitjacket. I am banned from discussing abortion [by the donor], as an activist and as an individual, even though it is my human right as someone who can get pregnant. **This is how they pressure and force you to modify your core to adapt to their ways.**” –activist from LATAM*

In a similar vein, participants shared their experiences with censorship from funders. Twenty-nine per cent (29%, n = 35) of survey respondents reported refraining from expressing their political views due to fear of losing funding. Organisations working on gender justice and advocacy often face financial risks

tied to their political stances, with potential repercussions from both public and private funders. Political alignment can become a decisive factor in sustaining funding, as evidenced by the 19 organisations that reported losing public funding and the 16 that lost private funding due to their expressed views.

These losses highlight the challenges of maintaining financial security while adhering to organisational values and political beliefs. Warnings from funders, though less frequent than funding losses, further underscore an environment of conditional support. Public funders warned 13 organisations, while 16 were warned by private funders, signalling pressure to modify or downplay political stances to ensure continued funding. Such dynamics undermine the autonomy and authenticity of advocacy efforts. Notably, 17 respondents chose not to answer this question, indicating that it may be a sensitive issue.

Political views expressed by gender justice organisations for which funding was withdrawn by private and/or public donors (n=35)*		
Theme of Political View	SWANA (n=11)	LATAM (n=23)
Supporting general LGBTIQ Rights	45% (n=5)	52% (n=12)
Supporting trans rights	18% (n=2)	35% (n=8)
Supporting Sexual and Reproductive Rights	18% (n=2)	70% (n=16)
Supporting Indigenous and Land Rights	36% (n=4)	30% (n=7)
Calling out war crimes	45% (n=5)	30% (n=7)
Criticising a State or political entity	67% (n=7)	52% (n=12)
Denouncing far-right or far-right actors	27% (n=3)	61% (n=14)

**35 respondents shared that they lost funding for expressing political views, but one participant refrained from sharing which.*

Source: Research survey "Challenges in Funding for Gender Justice organisations from LATAM and SWANA" (2025) (n=122)

As shown in the table above, LATAM organisations face more repercussions for advocating for sexual and reproductive rights and denouncing far-right actors, which, according to interviewees, is often linked to views on abortion rights. This is particularly critical, as these issues are central to the work of gender justice and gender-transformative organisations. Censorship from funders, thus, reduces their capacity to address these key issues effectively. In both the SWANA region

and LATAM, criticising a state or political entity also led to significant backlash. In SWANA, this was especially pronounced when organisations called out war crimes. Interviewees across regions shared that backlash—or the fear of it—is often associated with criticising the United States, the State of Israel, and their perpetration of genocide in Gaza.

The withdrawal of funding is closely tied to political views that are central to the work of gender-transformative, LGBTQI+, and feminist organisations and to the survival of the communities they serve. The fear of funder backlash severely restricts these organisations' political autonomy and transformative capacity. This data underscores the need for funders who prioritise movements' long-term sustainability and independence over political conformity, as well as the importance of diversified funding strategies to safeguard organisational missions.

Navigating Funding Gaps: Strategies for Sustainability

Organisations have adopted various strategies to sustain their operations and address funding challenges. The most common approach, used by 67% (n = 82) of respondents, relies on volunteer work. While this reflects the importance of community support, it is also tied to the lack of funding available to cover living wages, which ultimately weakens movements and organisations, as previously discussed.

Other strategies include autonomous funding methods such as selling ticketed events (25%, n=30), crowdfunding or mutual aid (25%, n=30), offering services or consultancies (24%, n=29), selling merchandise (23%, n=28), and, to a lesser extent, online subscription models like Patreon or Ko-fi (3%, n=4). These approaches demonstrate the creativity and resourcefulness of organisations in navigating financial constraints. Interviewees highlighted the nuances of these strategies. While selling services, ticketed events, merchandise, and subscriptions can generate small amounts of income for specific activities, they are rarely sufficient to cover the operating expenses of organisations with long-term programs or political goals, particularly those providing health services, legal support, or humanitarian aid.

Crowdfunding and mutual aid are popular strategies, as they raise awareness of an organisation's work and build solidarity around human rights issues. However, crowdfunding requires infrastructure that many organisations lack. For instance, organisations without legal registration or bank accounts must rely on individual accounts, posing data safety risks. Additionally, most crowdfunding platforms

operate primarily in the Minority World, forcing organisations in the Majority World to depend on partnerships or diaspora networks for access.

Both survey and interview participants expressed interest in further exploring self-funding strategies but cited a lack of knowledge, skills, and funding for infrastructure as barriers. They identified this as an area where funders could provide support, through seed funding, capacity building, or infrastructure development, to help organisations achieve greater sustainability. Interviewees shared that seed funding to kickstart sustainability projects could be directed at farming projects, research centres, training centres, and other initiatives that address community needs while creating creative sustainability models. Such support could shift power dynamics, reduce dependency on traditional funding streams, and foster economic and political autonomy.

Insights from Southwest Asia and North Africa

“We’re not fighting anymore for the rights and the freedoms of the people or the communities we serve, we are fighting for our existence.” Activist from the SWANA region

Gender-transformative organisations in the SWANA region face context-specific barriers in accessing and utilising funding under political repression, war and conflict and anti-LGBTQI+ laws. Bureaucracy forces organisations to divert resources from their core missions, leaving little room for strategic planning or long-term activities that address systemic oppressions. Beyond the bureaucratic barriers, several interviewees highlighted how donor-driven reporting structures force organisations into constant cycles of justification rather than action, making them feel like they are in a perpetual state of proving their legitimacy rather than being supported to carry out their work. Many funders demand compliance with rigid grant structures that fail to accommodate the realities in which these organisations operate. Restrictions such as a lack of living wages and inflexible budget lines exacerbate these challenges. For example, organisations cannot reallocate funds during emergencies, such as providing legal or financial support to detained members of their communities and organisations.

Furthermore, funders often prefer larger, regional, more established, or more “Westernised” organisations over smaller, grassroots groups more connected to local communities’ needs. Funders also push for artificial collaborations, such as consortia in the region, which lack genuine trust and dissolve after funding

ends. This undermines solidarity and reinforces inequities, rather than building on existing networks of solidarity and communities.

Participants recommend shifting power to local movements by prioritising grassroots leadership and providing flexible, long-term funding to address these challenges. Interviewees from conflict zones also stressed that funders must recognise the emotional and physical toll of activism in crisis settings, advocating for funding that includes mental health support, rest, and recovery measures. Funders should reduce bureaucratic barriers, consult directly with communities, and ensure funding addresses intersectional challenges faced by women and LGBTQI+ people in contexts of displacement, conflict and restrictive laws. Moving away from short-term, crisis-driven funding is essential to support sustainable, systemic change in the region.

Insights from Latin America

“Latin America can strategise new futures, especially having fascism [in the United States] around the corner. We need to make more radical, longer-term, and more urgent strategies based on coalitions and collaboration”.
Activist from LATAM

Funding challenges in Latin America are characterised by insufficient resources for gender justice and LGBTQI+ issues, fostering competition and fracturing movements. Regranting schemes exacerbate these issues by concentrating money and political power in institutionalised organisations while neglecting grassroots and politically independent groups. The strong presence of intermediary organisations, often competing for funding with grassroots, further complicates the landscape. The role of these intermediaries should be critically evaluated to ensure they support, rather than undermine, local movements. Donor requirements are also frequently disconnected from local contexts. For example, reporting and auditing demands, such as requesting receipts for services or goods in rural communities reliant on informal economies, are often unviable.

Additionally, funding streams tend to follow donor trends rather than addressing urgent regional needs. Critical issues, such as responding to the rise of far-right and anti-gender movements, are overlooked. For instance, gender justice organisations working on masculinities or with young men struggle to secure funding. Funders also compartmentalise topics, categorising organisations into rigid boxes that fail to reflect their complex, intersectional work. For example,

organisations are often excluded from funding streams for migration, climate justice, and democracy, as they are narrowly labelled as “gender justice-only” or “LGBTQI+-only” groups.

Conclusion: Toward a Transformative Feminist Philanthropy

This research highlights the urgent need to reimagine funding ecosystems for gender justice movements in Latin America (Latam) and the South West Asian and North African region (Swana). The findings reveal a stark contradiction: while feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations drive transformative change, they are systematically undermined by funding models that prioritise donor agendas over local expertise, short-term projects over long-term sustainability, and bureaucratic compliance over political autonomy. This leads to activist burnout, fractured movements, and the dilution of radical political visions for social justice.

The path forward demands a fundamental shift in power dynamics. Feminist philanthropy must embody its core principles: trust in grassroots leadership, decolonised decision-making, and an unwavering commitment to intersectional justice. To achieve this, funding must become flexible and long-term, prioritising living wages and core funding so that organisations can focus on transformative impact rather than on economic sustainability. Donors must build horizontal partnerships, co-creating strategies grounded in local realities rather than imposed global agendas. In contexts of political repression and crisis, funders should offer protection and solidarity, rather than retreating due to their own administrative or political risks. Donors should invest in self-sustaining models to break the cycle of dependency and promote organisational autonomy.

The rise of anti-gender movements and anti-democratic backlash globally makes this transformation essential. The activists and organisations featured in this research are not merely recipients of aid; they are architects of liberation. Feminist philanthropy has the potential of being a reparative practice, one that redistributes wealth, power, and trust to those who have long been denied all three. The future of gender justice depends on funding that matches the courage of the movements it seeks to support.

Recommendations and Way Forward

- **Prioritise core funding:** Allocate funding that covers essential operational costs for organisations, with a primary focus on living wages, social security, and the health of activists and staff involved in grant-related activities. Ensuring the well-being of those at the core of movements ensures their sustainability.
- **Create longer funding cycles:** Establish multi-year, renewable funding cycles that align with organisations' long-term goals and impact. These cycles provide financial stability, reduce the administrative burden of frequent reapplications, and allow organisations to work on long-term advocacy goals.
- **Adapt funding requirements to sociopolitical contexts:** Adjust funding requirements to what is feasible and practical, while protecting organisations and reducing bureaucratic burdens. For instance, create flexible agreements for organisations that cannot legally register due to democratic threats, allow alternative documentation in informal economies, and adopt flexible and culturally relevant monitoring and evaluation practices.
- **Revisit the use of umbrella regranting:** Evaluate the power dynamics and administrative challenges between regrants and grantees, ensuring there are adequate resources to support smooth collaboration and promote movement building in these relationships through fair compensation and political autonomy. Accountability measures should be in place to prevent larger entities from dictating grassroots priorities or misallocating resources.
- **Co-construct grant objectives with civil society:** Ensure grantmaking processes are developed through horizontal, participatory decision-making processes in setting grant goals, expectations and political objectives. Avoid setting political agendas from a top-down approach by building partnerships based on trust before developing grants and ensuring alignment with local priorities.
- **Learn the context of grantees:** Understand the contexts of grantees thoroughly, not only on a political level, but also in terms of the social and cultural nuances and dynamics of civil society. This allows them to allocate funding to specific context-based needs and understand what type of program and funding address them. Funders should integrate contextual risk analysis and consult with local actors before imposing funding conditions that could compromise safety or strategy.
- **Support self-funding strategies:** Support civil society efforts to develop self-funding and autonomous funding strategies, such as cooperatives, social enterprises, and activist-led resource generation initiatives, that foster sustainability and political independence. This includes providing seed funding

for financial sustainability projects and capacity building, as well as supporting the development of self-funding and autonomous funding strategies, such as cooperatives, social enterprises, and activist-led resource generation initiatives, that foster sustainability and political independence. This includes providing seed funding for financial sustainability projects, capacity building or supporting infrastructure implementation. This can reduce dependence on external donors and strengthen local ownership over funding structures.

- **Protect civil society:** Funders play a crucial role in safeguarding organisations and activists in contexts of shrinking democratic space. They should allocate resources for protection, but they also have a role in advocating for the protection of activists with local governments, policymakers, and authorities. Funding should invest in long-term security infrastructure, relocation support, legal defence funds, and digital protection measures. Protection mechanisms must be designed in collaboration with grassroots organisations to ensure they address real security needs.
- **Implement intersectional funding streams:** Ensure that funding streams encompass the intersectional work of gender justice, feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations working on overlapping issues of migration, transitional justice, humanitarian emergencies, democracy, climate justice and Indigenous rights.
- **Promote transparency in ethical funding sources: Increase transparency regarding the funding source and its** involvement in political practices and policies to prevent partnerships that may harm activists' credibility or safety. Ethical guidelines should be developed in collaboration with grantees to ensure that funding aligns with the movement's values.

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Unseen,
un(der)paid,
yet we carry
the economy



The Importance of Local Public Financial Resources in Improving Women's Roles in Society

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Illustrated by Mariana Lorenzo

Advocacy Summary

Women's rights organisations receive only 0.13% of official development assistance (ODA), and only 0.42% of foundation grants are directed towards women's rights projects (AWID, 2021). This stark disparity between the critical role these organisations play and the financial resources they receive creates a significant bottleneck in progress. The underfunding limits the scope and impact of their work, undermining their capacity to build sustainable infrastructure, develop long-term strategies, and respond effectively to emerging challenges. This scarcity forces many organisations to operate on a project-by-project basis, hindering their ability to establish consistent, systemic change. Furthermore, it perpetuates a cycle of precariousness, where organisations are reliant on short-term grants, making it challenging to attract and retain skilled personnel, invest in crucial research, or engage in sustained advocacy. Investing in feminist movements is not merely a philanthropic gesture; it is a strategic imperative that recognises their unique understanding of the complex, intersectional barriers women face, and their ability to drive transformative change from the grassroots level. Broad funding of feminist movements would be a powerful means of advancing equality between women and men. By providing consistent and substantial funding,

donors can empower these movements to amplify women's voices, challenge discriminatory norms, and create lasting, equitable societies.

The research was conducted in the 12 departments¹ of Benin, covering 23 municipalities to explore the constraints, opportunities and possibilities for funding feminist organisations from public resources collected at both local and central levels. The lines of research included:

1. Are there any mechanisms already in place to fund feminist organisations?
2. What are the main obstacles to local funding for feminism?
3. What opportunities might communities have for securing local funding for feminist initiatives?
4. Could feminist funding be factored into the municipal budget?

■ Key Findings

Analysis shows that 89% of communities surveyed have gender-sensitive budgets (actions specific to women), but the funds are not allocated to feminist organisations. Actions for women are carried out directly by the town hall staff. Among these, the amounts allocated remain very low, often less than 1% of the municipalities' overall resources.

Interviews conducted revealed that people in charge of planning at the town halls, who are responsible for listing civil society organisations, find it challenging to identify women's organisations within their municipalities. In some municipalities, they are virtually non-existent, as they are either non-functional or not known to town hall departments. Accessing local revenues, such as taxes and fees, is also difficult.

According to the heads of women's organisations, the municipalities stand to gain significantly from partnerships with women's organisations because they have a better grasp of grassroots populations and would contribute to reducing cases of violence against women. The organisations would be functional, contributing to the municipalities' development and helping them carry out community actions.

Additionally, women from feminist associations would assist municipalities in raising awareness among women in the markets and other businesses about the benefits of paying taxes, and contribute to collecting taxes from women

1. Departments are the administrative divisions of Benin. These are equivalent to provinces in some countries. For more information <https://www.mappr.co/counties/benin-departments/>

traders and entrepreneurs. Moreover, the municipalities would improve their Local Governance Index (LGI).

Based on the responses from the surveyed municipalities, all executive managers (i.e., 100%) have agreed to vote for or make provision for a section on gender equality activities and to finance most of the women's activities in the 2026 budgets, as well as in 2025 for some. To ensure its effectiveness, pleas or motivational communications must be made to the municipalities' supervisory boards starting in 2025.

■ Key Recommendations

- **Women's organisations:** Should participate at the municipal level to ensure visibility and legal recognition by local authorities.
- **To municipal and central authorities:** Should promote sustainable development through funding women's organisations' community actions.
- **To technical and financial research partners:** Should continue to support the implementation of budgeting mechanisms for women's organisations in the identified municipalities.

Authors and Acknowledgements

About the authors

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In 2022, she carried out studies on the rights of immigrant women in Northern Benin, funded by the European Union (EU), and in 2023, on the satisfaction of women users of health centres in Atacora, financed by the Association of Communes. In addition, between 2023 and 2024, Nadia implemented projects to defend the rights of young girls who are victims of forced marriage, financed by the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) with Féministe en Action. Another project was implemented between 2024 and 2025 to strengthen knowledge of and access to women's rights from the villages in Benin with support from the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF).

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Acronym List

AWID	Association for Women's Rights In Development	ODA	Official Development Assistance
CSO	Civil Society Organisation	OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
CSP	Centre for Social Promotion	SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
ES	Executive Secretary/ Executive Secretariat	TAC	Territorial Administration Code
GBV	Gender-Based Violence	UEWCM	Union of Elected Women Councillors in Municipalities
IWD	International Women's Day	UN	United Nations
LGI	Local Governance Index		
NISD	National Institute of Statistics and Demography		

Introduction

Majority World countries, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa, benefit from Official Development Assistance (ODA) to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across all sectors. Despite the increase in ODA for gender equality over the past ten years in the Sahel and West Africa, rates of gender inequality remain high in the region. While many other factors, including ODA, influence progress toward gender equality in the region, it is clear that efforts to tackle the root causes of gender inequality and initiate real change have not yet yielded sufficient results.

The OECD's 2022 report, "Financing Gender Equality in the Sahel and West Africa," emphasises the importance of increasing ODA for gender equality. It also highlights the need to support local women's organisations in reaching vulnerable populations, invest in gender assessment and awareness programs, and promote sex-disaggregated data collection for more effective action.

According to the National Institute of Statistics and Demography (NISD), Benin, a West African country, had an estimated population of 12,506,347 in 2021, with over 50% of the population comprising women and girls. Its socio-cultural diversity constitutes its wealth. In their cultural practices, these groups sometimes compromise the future of girls through gender-based sexual violence, particularly forced and early marriage.

In Benin, a 2023 report revealed that women operate the majority of businesses (66.3% compared to 33.7% for men). Notably, the food sales, accommodation, and catering sectors have a significantly higher proportion of women, with 6,855 women for every 100 men. Despite their relative importance, women's rights movements often face resource constraints.

Methodology

This research examines the constraints, opportunities, and possibilities for funding feminist organisations using public resources collected at both local and central levels. The scope of the research encompasses the temporal, geographical, and stakeholder dimensions relevant to the study. This study covers twelve (12) departments of Benin, namely Atlantique, Alibori, Atacora, Borgou, Collines, Couffo, Donga, Littoral, Mono, Plateau, Ouémé, and Zou. At least one municipality is reviewed, prioritising municipalities run by women from ES. Stakeholders included women's associations and organisations, executive secretaries, members of parliament, and staff from the decentralised departments of the Ministries of Social Affairs, Economy and Finance. Three questionnaires were designed for feminist organisations and associations, local authorities, ministry officials, members of parliament and prefects².

Table 1: Distribution of targets and numbers reached during the research

N°	Category of Respondents	Planned workforce	Maintained workforce	Percentage
01	Women's associations and organisations	23	23	100 %
02	Mayors / Executive Secretaries	23	23	100 %
03	Prefects	6	5	83 %
04	Members of Parliament	6	5	83 %
05	Heads of Social Affairs, Economy and Finance (decentralised agents of ministries)	6	5	83 %

Source: Sampling

2. According to the Oxford dictionary, a prefect is a chief officer, [magistrate](#), or regional governor in certain countries.

Literature Review

Overview of Feminism in Africa

According to UN Women (2020), feminism is a movement calling for equal social, political, legal, and economic rights for women and men. According to Fatou Sow, African women writers grapple with the complexities of asserting their womanhood, rights, and freedoms while retaining their African identity in modern societies. These societies have been significantly reshaped by historical forces such as colonisation, decolonisation, and globalisation, leading to continuous shifts in long-standing values of identity. Sow adds: Feminism is one way of challenging these orders, their representations of the social roles of the sexes, and the resulting inequalities to the detriment of women. It enables us to analyse the conditions faced by women and to deconstruct the mechanisms of gender inequality. To be a feminist is to strive for change in these power dynamics, to advocate for equality under the law, and to promote access to citizenship for all. Feminism (or should I say feminisms) has theorised, to varying degrees, the centrality of women's "oppression". It makes sexism the source of their oppression, marginalisation, invisibilisation, and even exclusion. Indeed, activists have questioned the causes, forms, and acts of sexism differently, and the changes that have taken place throughout history, as much as the language (notably gender) used to understand and describe them³.

Aminata Mbengue, a Senegalese clinical psychologist and feminist, posits that feminism entails dismantling patriarchy. She defines patriarchy as a system in which men hold the power to dictate the functioning of society. Moreover, Beninese feminist Prof. Yvette Onibon Doubogan (2002) states, "Feminism, to put it simply, is an international political and intellectual movement to confront the subordination of women. It has many roots and trajectories, some of which are indisputably transnational, in the sense that they reveal the relationships between local and global manifestations of present-day subordination". This definition emphasises the dependent and subordinate relationship of women to male authority. Feminism seeks to liberate women from this dependence and enhance their autonomy.

In recent years, new concepts have emerged, particularly "**Feminism 2.0**," as described by Africa Moussou in 2021, which refers to the end of women's silence on social networks. In West Africa, 2020 was undoubtedly the year when

3. Fatou SOW, Representations of femininity and civic demands in Africa: More than a political debate (International African Institute Biennial Lecture, Edinburgh, UK, June 11, 2019). (Représentations de la féminité et revendications citoyennes en Afrique : plus qu'un débat politique)

women grasped and leveraged the opportunities presented by social networks for feminism. Previously timid and unresponsive to specific topics and debates on the web, women are increasingly speaking out on issues that concern them (Moussou 2021). They promote women's rights and amplify the voices of victims of physical and sexual violence.

It is posited that these actions are not amenable to individual implementation. Consequently, evaluating the activities undertaken by women's organisations in Benin to advocate for women's rights is deemed necessary. Onibon Doubogan (2022) notes that to promote gender equality in education, many Beninese feminist organisations rely on local, endogenous knowledge to bring about behavioural change in local communities. Although the patriarchal context appears to be a factor of resistance to inclusive education, our research shows that concrete actions centred on women's strategic roles are being implemented by various local organisations.⁴

Legal Basis for Taking Feminism into Account

Several texts and laws form the legal basis for defending women's rights. For example, Article 18 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights specifies that "the State must ensure the elimination of all discrimination against Women and to ensure the protection of the rights of women and children as stipulated in international declarations and conventions". This includes the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which came into effect on September 03, 1981.

Also, Article 19 of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights reveals that, "Women have the right to enjoy their right to sustainable development fully. This article specifies that States shall take all appropriate measures to introduce a gender perspective into national development planning processes and ensure women's equitable participation at all levels of the design, decision-making, implementation and evaluation of development policies and programmes." This article reinforces the notion that feminist organisations can now be financially supported to intervene at all levels of decision-making.

Women's equality and empowerment are key themes of one of the 17 SDGs, but they are also integral to all aspects of inclusive and sustainable development. In short, all the SDGs depend on achieving SDG 5: to achieve gender equality and

4. Yvette ONIBON DOBOUGAN, 2022, *Feminist Movements and Endogenous Local Knowledge in Education in Benin: A Relationship of Alterity for a Decolonization of African Feminism*. (Les mouvements féministes et les savoirs locaux endogènes en matière d'éducation au Bénin : une relation d'altérité pour une décolonisation du féminisme africain)

empower all women and girls. *The targets note* that women's full and effective participation, as well as equal access to leadership roles, must be ensured at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life. States must undertake reforms to grant women equal rights to economic resources and access to ownership and control of land and other forms of property, as well as financial services, inheritance, and natural resources, through domestic law.

All these provisions promote the financial support of feminist organisations in Africa and worldwide. On a local level, the law establishing the Constitution of the Republic of Benin stipulates that "Every human being has the right to development and to the full blossoming of his person in his material, temporal, intellectual and spiritual dimensions, provided that he does not violate the rights of others or infringe constitutional order and good morals".⁵ The law gives full authorisation to women and women's organisations to enjoy resources and act on behalf of their peers.

Furthermore, the constitution guarantees equality before the law for all, regardless of origin, race, sex, religion, political opinion or social position. Men and women are equal before the law. It should also be noted that the law may establish special provisions to enhance the representation of women in public life.

The Local Governance Index (LGI), which measures performance in good governance at the local level, also serves as a self-assessment and learning tool for municipalities, enabling the State and support organisations to target capacity-building themes for municipalities. In Benin, the LGI considers the gender approach and the financing of feminist actions. It is measured by indicators grouped into five main areas, including Participatory Governance and Gender. The Participatory Governance and Gender domain has five indicators, particularly the number of specific actions favouring women during the year (description: Count of actions carried out by the municipality in favour of women over a year). This indicator requires Benin's municipalities or local communities to undertake actions specifically targeted at women.

Financing Feminism

Drawn up in April 2011, the Istanbul Convention was previously known as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. This convention emphasises that Parties must allocate appropriate financial and human resources for the effective implementation

5. Law 90-32 of December 11, 1990

of integrated policies, measures, and programs. These initiatives should aim to prevent and combat all forms of violence covered by the Convention's scope, including those undertaken by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and civil society.

This Convention specifies that Parties shall *“recognise, encourage and support, at all levels, the work of relevant non-governmental and civil society organisations that are active in combating violence against women, and establish effective cooperation with such organisations.”* Thus, the Istanbul Convention acknowledges the central role of feminists in promoting equal rights for men and women through their organisations.

Likewise, UN France argues that women's rights organisations play an essential role in combating gender-based violence, achieving progress towards a more equitable world, and eliminating violence against women and girls.

While feminist activism has demonstrably played a critical role in the mitigation of violence against women, a discernible global resurgence of anti-rights movements and a concurrent backlash against defenders of women's fundamental rights has been observed. The following three rationales underscore the imperative of funding women's organisations in the pursuit of eradicating violence against women and girls:

Providing Survivors with Life-Saving Services

Women's organisations play a vital role in providing services to survivors and victims of gender-based violence, which remains the most widespread form of human rights violation in the world, affecting at least one in three women. According to a United Nations study, only 40 per cent of women seek help after experiencing violence, making the advocacy work of women's rights organisations all the more critical. Women's rights organisations enable women and girls to assert their rights and seek help when they are victims of violence.

Fostering Political Change

Research shows that the presence of a strong, autonomous feminist movement is the most critical factor in advancing the fight against violence against women and girls at both national and international policy-making levels. Countries with more substantial feminist movements tend to have more comprehensive policies on violence against women than countries with weaker movements, thanks to the tireless advocacy of women's rights organisations that often receive very little funding.

Reducing gender-based violence

There is growing evidence that the efforts of women's rights organisations are reducing gender-based violence. Despite this, they remain chronically underfunded, emphasising the urgent and significant need for a sharp increase in funding for women's rights organisations.

AWID: Where's the Money for Organising Feminist Movements?

According to the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), women's rights organisations receive just 0.13% of official development assistance (ODA), and only 0.42% of foundation grants are directed towards women's rights projects. AWID's 2020 analysis shows that of the \$99 billion in grants awarded by private foundations in 2017, only \$422.3 million—or 0.42%—went to women's rights organisations.

An examination of governmental funding patterns reveals a parallel disparity. Analysis of the USD 153 billion allocated in international development funding by multilateral and bilateral donors in 2018 indicates that a mere USD 198 million, representing 0.13% of the total, was directed toward women's rights organisations. These figures show that feminist organisations do not yet have the full attention of governments to achieve an effective fight against violence against women.

Findings

Information gathered from all 12 departments indicates that gender mainstreaming remains a distant reality, and progress in integrating gender perspectives into decision-making bodies is slow at the authority level.

Table 2: Assessment of feminist associations and organisations

N°	Elements taken into account	Number of associations/ organisations (a)	Number of positive responses from organisations (b)	Percentage (b)/(a)
1	Does the municipality involve you in its activities?	23	5	21,74%
2	Does the municipality bring you together to hear your opinions on actions to be carried out in the municipality?	23	5	21,74%
3	Does your local authority fund your activities?	23	2	8,70%
4	Is your organisation self-sufficient when it comes to taking action to defend women's rights?	23	2	8,70%
5	Should town halls provide financial support for feminist organisations?	23	23	100%

Source: Database collected for 2024 survey

Analysis of the survey results in this table reveals that 21.74% of respondents are invited and occasionally involved in municipal activities. Most of these organisations are women market traders' associations or cooperatives of food producers or processors who are invited to participate in specific projects that involve them. Apart from this, no women's organisations are involved in municipal activities.

At the time of the study, 91.30% of the surveyed women's organisations did not receive any funding from the municipality. Only 8.7% of the recipients, including one in Cotonou and one in Porto-Novo, have received funding for their activities, which support the purchase of craft materials for a women's association and

participation in activities outside the country by an association leader. All the women's organisations interviewed in the surveyed municipalities agreed that their organisations should be financed by the municipalities.

Research findings also showed that in some municipalities, initiatives aimed at women were already underway. However, for the most part, the actions were carried out directly by the town halls, rather than by feminist organisations.

Table 3: Level of consideration given to actions specific to women

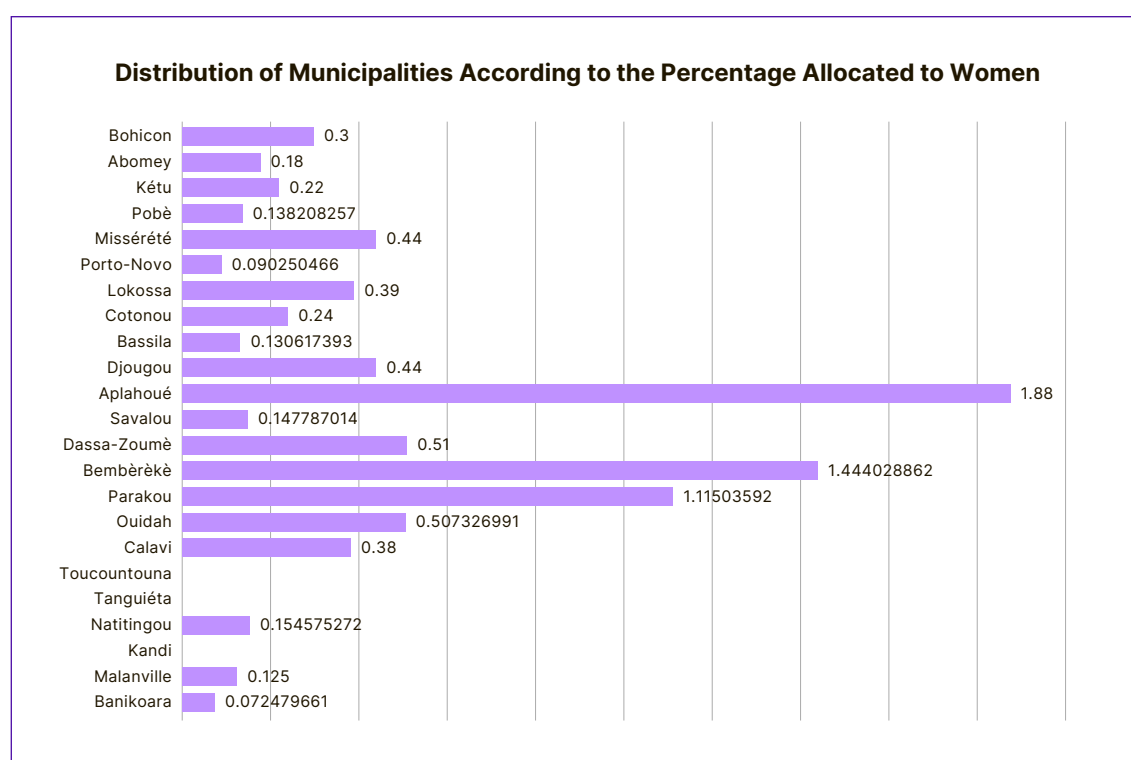
N°	Departments	Municipalities	Actions specific to women	Amounts allocated from equity (a)	Total own resources (taxes collected) (b)	Percentage (a)/(b)
1	Alibori	Banikoara	Subsidy to SPC for GBV and care for survivors/	600,000 XOF	827 818 441 XOF	0,07%
		Malanville	GBV	500,000 XOF	400 000 000 XOF	0,13%
		Kandi	-	-	456 800 711 XOF	0%
2	Atacora	Natitingou	Support for girls' high school	500,000 XOF	323 467 004 XOF	0,15%
		Tanguiéta	-	-	113 307 835 XOF	0%
		Toucountouna	-	-	47 014 289 XOF	0%
3	Atlantique	Calavi	Issuance of cards to canteen cooks/ Women's Day/ Women's literacy	10,000,000 XOF	4 000 000 000 XOF	0,38%
				4,000,000 XOF		
				1,000,000 XOF		
		Ouidah	Support for craftswomen in Ouidah/ Support for the girls' hostel	5 000 000 XOF	1 379 780 717 XOF	0,50%
				2,000,000 XOF		
4	Borgou	Parakou	Construction of hangars and stores for women's markets	24,000,000 XOF	2 152 397 027 XOF	1,11%
		Bembèrèkè	Women's empowerment	5,000,000 XOF	346 253 467 XOF	1,44%
5	Collines	Dassa – Zoumè	JIF / Indigent funds for women at the SPC	1,000,000 XOF	391 147 381 XOF	0,51%
				1,000,000 XOF		
		Savalou	Support for girls in Savalou	400,000 XOF	270 659 776 XOF	0,15%

N°	Departments	Municipalities	Actions specific to women	Amounts allocated from equity (a)	Total own resources (taxes collected) (b)	Percentage (a)/(b)
6	Couffo	Aplahoué	Tutoring for girls in middle school exam classes/ Tutoring for girls in primary school exam classes/ Consideration of GBV/Funds for girls' high school.	2,500,000 XOF	303 745 886 XOF	1,88%
				2,000,000 XOF		
				700,000 XOF		
				500,000 XOF		
7	Donga	Djougou	Grant to the social promotion centre for GBV/ Grant to the girls' high school in Natitingou	500,000 XOF	383 237 245 XOF	0,44%
				1,200,000 XOF		
		Bassila	Support for GBV at the SPC	500,000 XOF	382 797 411 XOF	0,13%
8	Littoral	Cotonou	Support for the girls' hostel	10,000,000 XOF	17 313 311 887 XOF	0,24%
			Raising awareness of unwanted pregnancies in Cotonou secondary schools/ Funding for a family planning project/ Raising awareness of the International Day of the Girl	5,000,000 XOF		
				25,000,000 XOF		
				2,500,000 XOF		
9	Mono	Lokossa	Awareness-raising and care for GBV/ Support for the girls' high school / Care for HIV carriers	1,000,000 XOF	510 504 388 XOF	0,39%
				500,000 XOF		
				500,000 XOF		
10	Ouémé	Porto-Novo	Support for organisations fighting against GBV	2,000,000 XOF	2 216 055 040 XOF	0,09%
		Misséréte	Support to the SPC for GBV / Social assistance for pregnant women	1,000,000 XOF	452 886 064 XOF	0,44%
				1,000,000 XOF		
11	Plateau	Pobè	JIF	517,000 XOF	374 073 164 XOF	0,13%
		Kétou	Support for gender promotion/ Support for girls at the Tofa 1er high school	300,000 XOF	230 777 384 XOF	0,22 %
				200, 000 XOF		

N°	Departments	Municipalities	Actions specific to women	Amounts allocated from equity (a)	Total own resources (taxes collected) (b)	Percentage (a)/(b)
12	Zou	Abomey	Support for the girls' high school / Gender and GBV consultation framework	500, 000 XOF	413 115 094 XOF	0,18%
				250,000 XOF		
		Bohicon	Support for the schooling of disadvantaged girls at the girls' high school, / Financial support for the organisation of the market women's festival	450,000 XOF	1 142 786 901 XOF	0,30%
				3,000,000 XOF		

Source: 2023 municipal budgets (2024 survey)

Figure 1: Consideration of actions specific to women in tax revenues



Source: Data collected in the 2024 survey

Overall, 89% of the surveyed communities have a feminist-sensitive budget. Among these, the amounts allocated remain very low, often less than 1% of overall resources. On the other hand, the municipalities of Kandi, Toucountouna, and Tanguiéta do not have resources for women.

Table 4: Assessment of feminist-sensitive criteria in the municipalities

N°	Labels	Total number of municipalities subject to the criterion	Number of municipalities meeting the criterion	Percentage
1	Gender-sensitive budget / Gender-sensitive own resources	22	19	86,38%
2	Planned activities to promote gender equality in the municipality	22	19	86,38%
3	Discussion and collection of the periodic needs of women's associations in the municipality	22	10	45,45%
4	Measures taken at the local level to protect women and ensure the effective application of laws in favour of women's rights	22	15	68,18%
5	Do you ever gather information on the needs of market women or craftswomen from whom you collect taxes?	22	7	31,82%
6	Evaluation of the amount or overall rate of taxes collected from market women, artisans, or roadside stores	22	0	00 %
7	Knowledge of the share of women traders in the municipal budget	22	5 ⁶	22,72%
8	The municipality may agree to vote for or set aside a specific heading to fund feminist organisations for gender equality actions.	22	22	100%

Source: 2023 municipal budgets (2024 survey)

No municipality could estimate the proportion of its revenues or taxes from women annually. Also, no municipality disaggregated the data regarding taxes collected from women and men.

Approximately 22.72% of municipal executives estimated that women contributed 60-70% of tax revenue. This estimation was based on the gender of individuals most active in the markets. Some estimates, even without exact figures, suggest that women account for a significant proportion of the municipalities' resources collected.

6. Estimation by some municipalities based on the gender of the majority of taxpayers (no exact figures)

However, the municipalities do not yet fund women's organisations, except for Cotonou, Porto-Novo, and Calavi, which tend to support organisations run by men in general. Bembèrèkè, for example, has scheduled funding for women's organisations for 2024 but has postponed this until 2025.

Town hall planners, responsible for listing civil society organisations, explained that they have difficulty identifying women's organisations in their municipalities. For some, they are virtually non-existent, as they are either non-functional or unknown to the town hall departments. They also mentioned the difficulty of making substantial recoveries from the town hall's funds, considering many things.

Consequently, all municipalities agreed to either vote for or make provision for a heading dedicated to gender equality activities. Furthermore, they committed to financing women's activities in their 2026 budgets for the majority, and as early as 2025 for a few. For its effectiveness, pleas or motivational communications had to be made to the municipality supervisory boards from the beginning of 2025.

Integrating Women into Decision-Making Bodies

Table 5: Assessment of the level of integration of women in municipal decision-making bodies

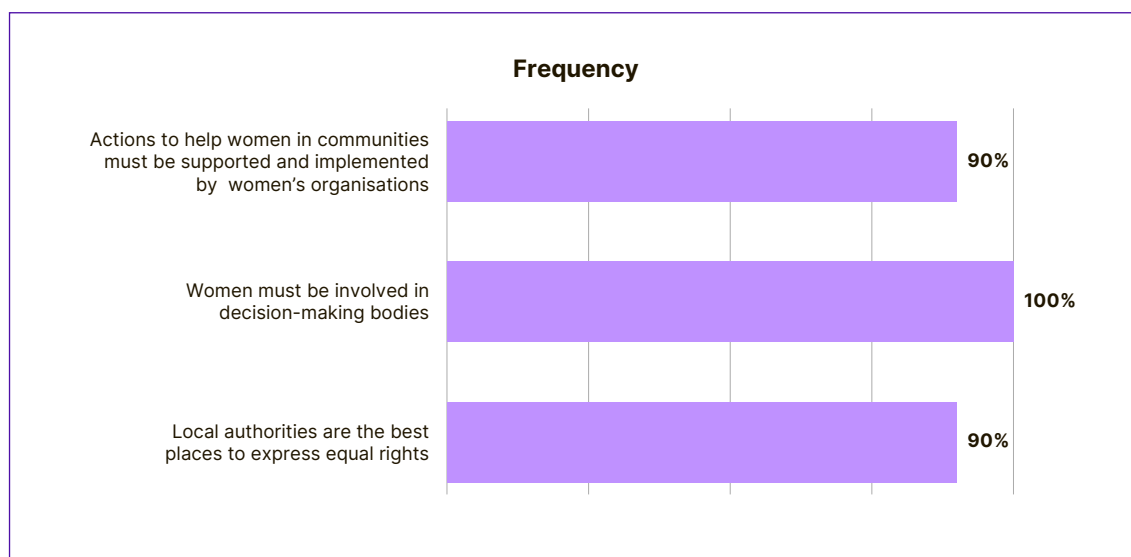
N°	Municipalities	Number of advisors (a)	Number of women (b)	Percentage (b)/(a)
1	Abomey	19	2	10,53%
2	Ouidah	29	3	10,34%
3	Calavi	49	5	10,20%
4	Porto Novo	33	4	12,12%
5	Aplahoué	28	3	10,71%
6	Lokossa	25	1	4,00%
7	Bohicon	29	3	10,34%
8	Dassa	25	1	4,00%
9	Djougou	33	0	0,00%
10	Cotonou	48	7	14,58

11	Parakou	31	4	12,90%
12	Tanguiéta	34	3	8,82%
13	Toucoutouna	27	3	11,11%
14	Natitingou	25	1	4,00%
15	Bembèrèkè	25	1	4,00%
16	Malanville	29	1	3,45%
17	Banikoara	33	2	6,06%
18	Savalou	25	0	0,00%
19	Bassila	25	1	4,00%
20	Kandi	29	1	3,45%
21	Kétou	22	2	9,09%
22	Pobè	25	1	4,00%
23	Missérété	25	1	4%
	TOTAL	673	50	7,42 %

Source: Municipal councils (2024 survey data collection)

Women are underrepresented in decision-making bodies, which would help ensure that actions specific to women are considered. Local public financial resources are essential to enhance the role of women in our societies, which also involves integrating women's organisations into municipal development initiatives. The municipalities where the rate of women present in municipal councils reaches 10% are 8 out of 23 municipalities surveyed, i.e, 34% of the target municipalities.

The majority of departmental authorities, including the prefects and members of parliament interviewed, were committed to feminism. They have proposed introducing grassroots funding for feminism and are available to support it.

Figure 2: Assessment of the theme by departmental and parliamentary authorities

Source: Municipal councils (2024 survey data collection)

Departmental officials hold differing views on the importance of equal rights for women and men. A significant majority (90%) consider municipalities as the most effective level for promoting gender equality and protecting women's rights. In comparison, a smaller proportion (10%) believe the central state should take the primary role. There is a strong consensus (90%) that municipalities have the capacity and responsibility to create channels for women's organisations to access funding for local development initiatives. One member of parliament said, "We shouldn't wait for Official Development Assistance for everything before taking action."

To address violence against women, feminist efforts require public financial resources. This research examines the perspectives of local authorities and ministry officials on the importance of public funding for gender equality initiatives. A questionnaire was used to evaluate their comprehension of feminism, their present engagement, and their openness to incorporating dedicated budgets for women. The objective was to understand their perspectives on allocating specific financial resources to advance women's roles in society.

Feminist organisations advocate for municipalities to allocate specific funding for their initiatives, arguing that this would greatly benefit the local governments. They contend that women's organisations possess a deep understanding of grassroots communities and can effectively contribute to the reduction of violence against women through targeted actions. Furthermore, these organisations would actively participate in the development of municipalities and assist in the execution of community projects, thereby enhancing local governance and social well-being.

Women from feminist associations would help municipalities raise awareness among market women and other businesses of the benefits of paying taxes and contribute to tax collection from women traders and entrepreneurs. The unemployment rate among women in the municipalities is expected to be reduced, as women's organisations will be able to recruit women and collect income taxes from them. These organisations will promote laws in favour of women's rights, such as *Law 2021-11 of December 2021, which provides special provisions for the repression of offences committed on the grounds of gender and the protection of women in the Republic of Benin*.

Many municipalities (11%) fail to dedicate resources or collect taxes to women's initiatives. Even among the 89% that undertake specific actions, the level of consideration is minimal, with town halls primarily leading these efforts. Few municipalities provide funding to civil society organisations for development and social activities. This situation indicates that gender equality is not a priority, highlighting the necessity for a systematic approach and guidelines for incorporating funding for women's CSOs into budgets.

Women's organisations are rarely asked to participate in defending women's rights. The limited impact of women in local municipal decision-making is evident, with an average representation of only 7% in these bodies, as demonstrated in Table 5. This level of involvement is practically negligible. In general, municipality officials are in favour of including lines for funding feminist and women's organisations in their forthcoming budgets, provided that advocacy communications are made in good time at the level of final decision-making bodies, such as supervisory boards and municipal councils.

Initiatives and good practices developed at national, regional, and local levels

In Benin, the government has implemented measures at the ministry level to support women's organisations. The ministries that work closely with women's organisations are the Ministry of Social Affairs and Microfinance and the Ministry of Health. They must approve feminist organisations receiving direct funding from these ministries. Approval is obtained by submitting an application and paying a fee. The organisation must be in good standing and justify its involvement in the field in its official documents and experience. Many other ministries collaborate with civil society organisations, including the Ministry of Sport, Agriculture, and Fisheries, where women's organisations are underrepresented.

The Association for the Development of the Borgou Municipalities (ADeCoB) organises the Best Governance Award, which serves as a precursor to the Local Governance Index (LGI). This initiative aims to guide Borgou municipalities towards embracing sound governance principles and prioritising actions that promote women's rights. The LGI further motivates these municipalities to enhance their integration of gender considerations.

Research in Benin suggests that municipal taxes could fund feminist initiatives, with prefects and town hall staff demonstrating a commitment. Survey respondents suggested two local financing options: competitive calls for proposals where organisations propose projects for funding, and direct subsidies to registered feminist organisations presenting well-justified projects before the annual budget vote.

Recommendations

This section allows for the formulation of recommendations to strengthen the involvement of public resources in the fight against violence against women.

Municipalities and supervisory bodies

- ➔ To advance the role of women in the Majority World, local and regional authorities should allocate funds for feminist initiatives within their yearly budgets, irrespective of their financial capacity, ensuring inclusivity. It is advisable to dedicate a segment of municipal income or taxes to feminist groups. These organisations implement local projects aimed at safeguarding the rights of the most marginalised and fostering sustainable development.

For feminist organisations

- ➔ To secure consideration in municipal budgets, women's organisations should actively engage at the local level and demonstrate their effectiveness and visibility to gain community trust and confidence. Survey findings indicate a municipal willingness to fund feminist organisations through annual tax revenues. Therefore, these organisations should strategically organise and conduct motivational outreach to advocate for substantial budgetary allocations. To facilitate this, research partners should continue to support the implementation of budgeting mechanisms for women's organisations within the identified municipalities in 2025.

Conclusion

This study cannot be concluded without acknowledging the efforts already underway in various municipalities of Benin regarding women's rights. The possibility of including lines in the budgets of municipalities, as gathered during the meetings, already favours the apprehension of feminism in Benin.

Declarations, texts, conventions, and international, regional, and national laws favour the implementation of the financing of feminist organisations in Benin through taxes collected from local governments, represented by municipalities in our country.

This research can be scaled up in other African countries and achieve similar results if the legal provisions, such as those found in Benin, are in place.

The researchers hope that advocacy will be conducted with relevant decision-making bodies, such as supervisory boards and municipal councils, at the local level in subsequent initiatives. The aim is that the majority of the selected municipalities will include specific budget allocations for subsidies to feminist organisations by the 2026 fiscal year.

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Annex: Roadmap

Roadmap for effective local funding of feminist organisations in Benin

(Developed by stakeholders at the end of the validation workshop of the research report)

N°	Actions	Responsible	Associates	Deadline
01	Advocate to the National Association of Benin Municipalities (NACB) for the creation of a systematic municipal budget line to fund feminist organisations and associations	Team of researchers	ES/ Director of Local Development and Planning (DLDP)/DAFA of town halls	January 2025 at the earliest
02	Train elected women councillors on the importance of budgeting funding for women's organisations in municipalities	Team of researchers	Mayors / Councillors	February 2025
03	Meet with mayors to introduce communication to the supervisory board to convince them of the need to create budget lines for funding feminist organisations	Team of researchers	ES	January / February 2025
05	Raise awareness of the need for organisations to register with town halls	ES	DLDP/ Director of Information Systems (DIS)	Permanent
04	Raise awareness of and support for women's associations/groups in municipalities to formalise and collaborate with town halls	ES	Prefecture /ATDA/ Town Hall Official Journal	permanent
05	Train women's organisations on the importance of paying royalties	ES	Director of Administrative and Financial Affairs (DAFA)/ DLDP	permanent

Care for the future, fund feminist action



Debt2Health 4-Gender Equality

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December 2024



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Advocacy Summary

■ Background and research question/objective

The sovereign debt crisis in sub-Saharan Africa disproportionately affects women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals, as austerity-driven policies prioritise debt repayment over public health and human rights (Chipunza and Ntsalaze 2024). These budget cuts deepen existing inequalities, compounding financial constraints that intersect with gender-based violence, economic disempowerment, and social marginalisation (United Nations 2023). Despite various debt relief mechanisms, mainstream approaches remain blind to gendered realities, prioritising macroeconomic stability over social justice (Hawkins and Zucker-Marques 2024).

This research critically examines sovereign debt relief frameworks through a feminist lens, questioning how leveraging debt forgiveness and restructuring can advance gender justice. Structural adjustment programs mandated by financial institutions have historically entrenched gender disparities by prioritising debt servicing over investments in essential services (Ghosh, 2021). While mechanisms like the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative and the Debt Service Suspension Initiative have provided temporary relief, they fail to address the

disproportionate impact of debt crises on women and marginalised communities (UNDP, 2022). A feminist debt relief model is imperative—one that links debt restructuring to gender-responsive health investments, ensures accountability, and channels freed resources toward feminist movements and community-led solutions.

■ Key Findings

This research confirms that sovereign debt policies systematically de-prioritise gender equity, resulting in tangible consequences for women and marginalised communities. Analysis of debt relief frameworks reveals that countries receiving debt restructuring rarely allocate freed-up resources to gender-transformative programs, with health budgets remaining stagnant or declining despite financial relief. The absence of gender conditions in debt relief agreements means that economic stabilisation efforts continue to undermine maternal healthcare, reproductive rights, and protections against gender-based violence, reinforcing cycles of inequality.

Additionally, findings indicate that debt governance discussions structurally exclude feminist movements and grassroots organisations, despite their frontline role in addressing the health and economic crises caused by austerity. Where feminist advocacy has managed to influence debt negotiations, such as in targeted debt-for-health swaps, there is evidence of improved health equity outcomes, yet these models remain underutilised. The research also highlights that gender-blind fiscal policies disproportionately affect women in the informal sector, limiting their access to economic resources, social protection, and healthcare services. Without explicit mechanisms to link debt relief to gender justice, debt restructuring will continue to reinforce, rather than alleviate, systemic inequities.

■ Key Recommendations

- ➔ **Integrate Gender-Transformative Approaches into Debt Relief:** Ensure that debt relief frameworks prioritise the health and social needs of women, girls, and marginalised populations.
- ➔ **Adopt Feminist Debt Relief Models:** Mandate reinvestment of unlocked debt relief funds into gender-equitable healthcare, reproductive rights, and gender-based violence prevention.

- **Implement Gender-Transformative Debt Swaps:** Establish debt-for-gender swaps to channel funds toward feminist movements addressing intersectional health inequities.
- **Advance Inclusive Debt Governance:** Promote participatory decision-making that elevates women's leadership in debt negotiations and financial policymaking.
- **Prioritise Investments in Women's Health:** Use debt relief savings to strengthen gender-transformative healthcare infrastructure and expand access to sexual and reproductive health services.

Authors and Acknowledgements

About the Authors

Dr. Stellah Bosire is an intersectional feminist medical doctor, lawyer, global health practitioner, and author. She is the Executive Director of the [Africa Centre for Health Systems and Gender Justice](#), an African women-led organisation focused on transforming health outcomes by addressing gender-based disparities through gender equity, innovation, sustainable investment, and philanthropy advisory. Stellah also serves as Amnesty International Kenya's Chairperson and a CIVICUS Alliance Board Member. She holds Medicine, Healthcare Management, Global Health, and law degrees.

Memory Kachambwa is an intersectional feminist and women's rights activist with over 18 years of experience in gender and development, women's empowerment, and human rights at national, regional, and international levels. She is the Executive Director of [FEMNET](#) and a pan-African feminist, strategist, and thought leader passionate about social justice and gender equality. She holds a Master of Philosophy degree in Management, Integrated Water Resources, focusing on women in leadership. She is pursuing a second Master's in Peace, Human Rights, Gender, and Development.

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This research honours the resilience and courage of all women leading the fight for justice, equality, and freedom. From grassroots to global movements, their efforts challenge oppressive systems and pave the way for gender justice. Their voices, both heard and unheard, inspire the continuation of feminist activism, solidarity, and collective resistance. Thank you to all past, present, and future leaders in this struggle. Your collective power drives every movement for change.

Acronym List

GBV	Gender Based Violence
HIPC	Heavily Indebted Poor Countries
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MDRI	Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative
SAPS	Structural Adjustment Programs
SDR	Sovereign Debt Restructuring

Introduction

The intersection of sovereign debt and gender inequality in Sub-Saharan Africa remains a pressing yet systematically ignored issue. Debt-driven austerity policies reinforce patriarchal economic structures, worsening disparities for women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals. As governments divert public funds toward debt servicing, essential social services—healthcare, education, and economic opportunities—are sacrificed, forcing already marginalised communities into deeper poverty. The global financial system prioritises creditor interests over human well-being, failing to account for the structural inequities that make debt a uniquely gendered crisis.

This study applies a feminist lens to sovereign debt crises, analysing their intersectional health consequences. It interrogates how current debt relief mechanisms sustain, rather than alleviate, gendered economic oppression and explores alternative models that link debt forgiveness directly to gender justice. In particular, the research examines the Debt2Health initiative as a potential framework for transforming debt relief into a mechanism for redistributing resources toward feminist movements and gender-transformative public health investments. The study calls for reimagining sovereign debt as a financial constraint and an opportunity to disrupt systemic inequalities. It advocates for a radical shift in debt governance that prioritises gender equity, ensures accountability, and redirects financial power to those most affected by austerity.

Methodology

A comprehensive literature review was conducted, drawing from academic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, PubMed, and SCOPUS. The selection criteria prioritised studies published in the last decade that explicitly examined sovereign debt, gender equality, debt relief mechanisms, and feminist economic models, with a particular focus on health outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa. The researchers used academic and policy sources to ensure a balanced perspective, and studies were assessed based on author expertise, methodological rigour, and institutional credibility.

Data extraction was thematically structured, focusing on three core areas: (1) the gendered impacts of sovereign debt, (2) the effectiveness of existing debt relief mechanisms, and (3) feminist alternatives to debt governance. Thematic and comparative analysis were applied to identify key patterns, gaps, and structural barriers within current frameworks. The findings provide critical insights into how restructuring debt relief can advance gender justice, ensuring financial policies actively contribute to equitable and sustainable development rather than reinforcing systemic inequalities.

Literature Review

Debt Burden in Sub-Saharan Africa

The sovereign debt crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa has deepened due to a combination of vulnerabilities and external economic shocks. Large-scale infrastructure financing has significantly increased public debt, often with misaligned repayment timelines, resulting in higher costs as short-term debt is used to fund long-term projects (Were 2024). Additionally, global crises—including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, rising interest rates, and exchange rate volatility—have further strained African economies, exacerbating reliance on external borrowing (Tsutsunashvili, Yela Aránega, and Castaño Urueña 2024). As shown in Figure 1 below, Africa’s external debt has more than doubled over the past decade, with an increasing reliance on bilateral, multilateral, and private creditors, including Chinese lenders (World Bank 2024). The rising debt burden raises concerns about fiscal sustainability, particularly as interest rate fluctuations and currency depreciation escalate debt servicing costs, limiting government investment in critical social sectors (Fontanier 2023).

Figure 1: Africa’s Rising External Debt

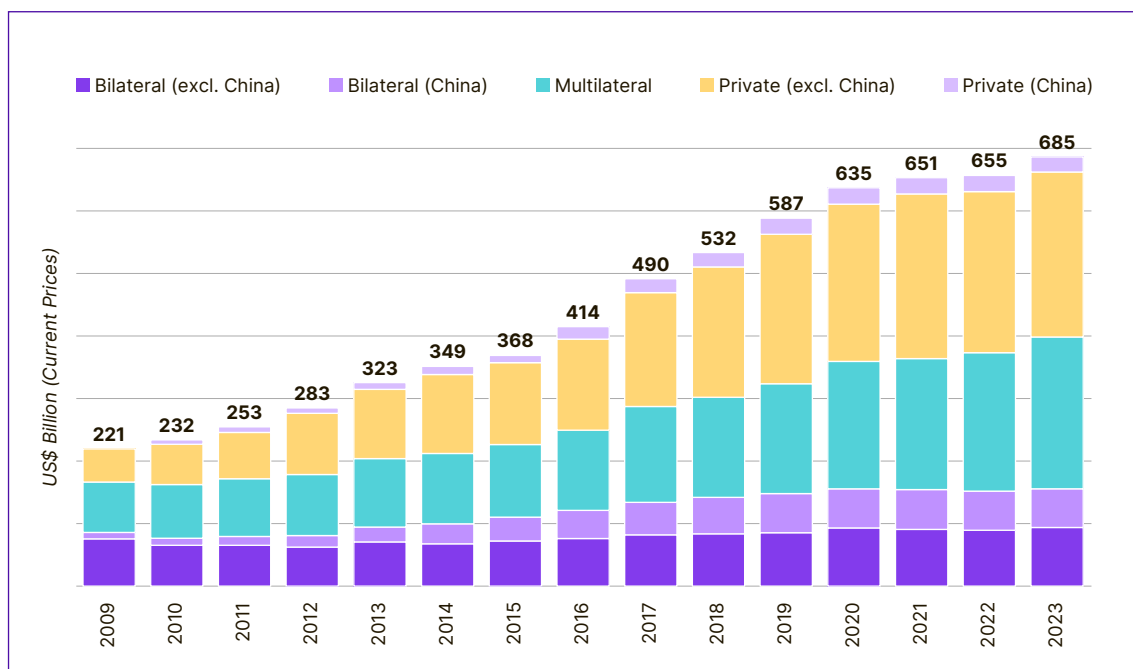


Figure 1 illustrates the sharp rise in Africa’s external debt over the past decade, highlighting the growing reliance on bilateral, multilateral, and private creditors, including Chinese lenders. While governments have sought diversified financing, exchange rate volatility and interest rate fluctuations have worsened economic vulnerabilities. The data does not account for recent debt rescheduling or restructuring in 2024, underscoring the need for gender-responsive debt governance that prioritises social investments over austerity. (Source: World Bank 2024).

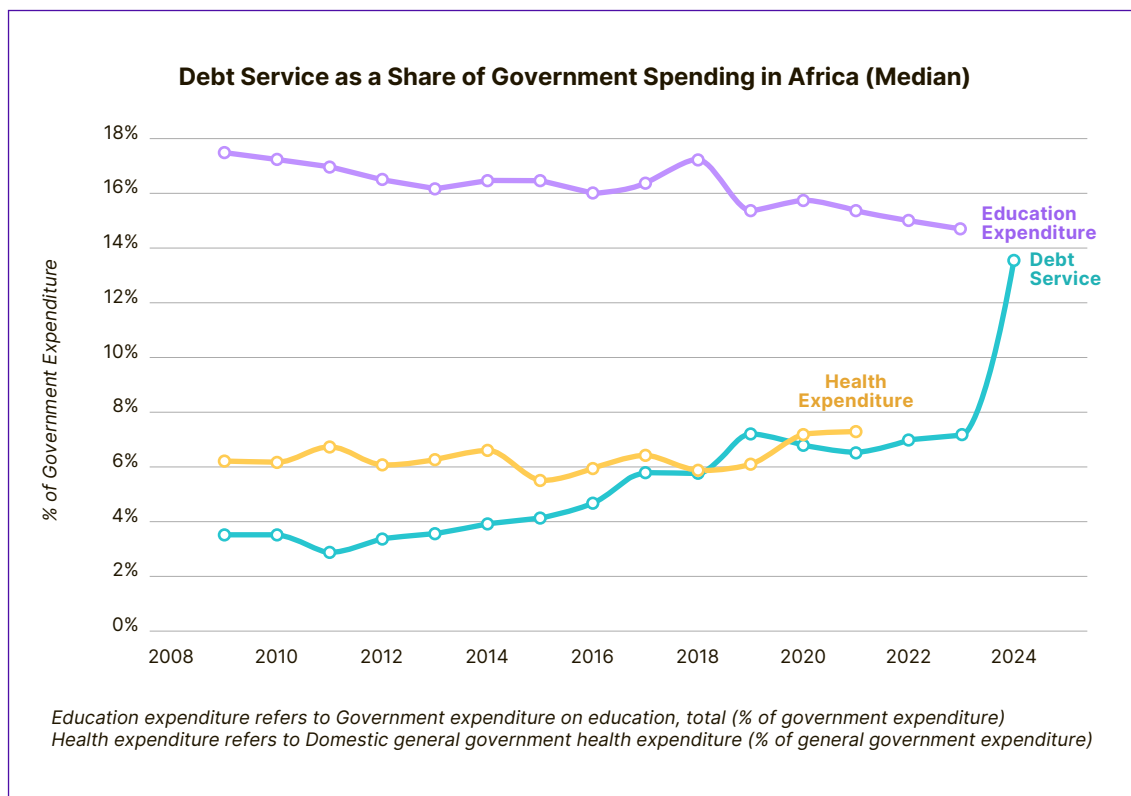
A growing body of literature highlights the gendered impact of debt-driven austerity measures, particularly on women, girls, and marginalised communities. As governments allocate an increasing share of revenue to debt repayment, healthcare, education, and social protection are often reduced, disproportionately affecting those who rely on public services the most (Hawkins and Zucker-Marques 2024). Fiscal constraints also intensify unpaid care work burdens, as women are expected to compensate for state service reductions (FEMNET 2022). Despite these documented consequences, gender considerations remain largely absent from mainstream debt governance frameworks, reinforcing the need for a feminist approach to debt relief.

Debt Relief Strategies

Responding to rising debt burdens, various debt management strategies have been implemented, ranging from temporary relief measures to comprehensive restructuring initiatives. Debt rescheduling, which modifies repayment terms without reducing the overall debt burden, has been widely used. For example, Ghana successfully negotiated rescheduled debt in the early 2000s, securing more favourable terms from international creditors (Inidayo 2000). Similarly, standstill agreements, allowing countries to suspend interest payments temporarily, have provided immediate relief, as demonstrated in Zambia during the 1990s (Stein and Chitonge 2025). However, deferred payments under these arrangements often result in continued financial pressure, as obligations accumulate rather than being reduced.

Other approaches, such as debt refinancing, involve replacing existing obligations with loans at lower interest rates or extended repayment periods. South Africa employed refinancing in the late 1990s to lower its debt servicing costs and ease fiscal pressures (IMF 2003). More substantive relief mechanisms include debt forgiveness, exemplified by the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative, which enabled Uganda to redirect resources toward essential social services following partial debt cancellation (Amnesty International 2023).

Debt-for-development swaps, such as debt-for-nature or debt-for-equity swaps, have been introduced to align debt relief with broader policy goals. Madagascar's debt-for-nature swap, for instance, reduced its financial burden while channelling funds into environmental conservation, offering a dual benefit of economic relief and sustainability (Paddack and Moyo 2003). However, the effectiveness of these debt relief mechanisms depends on each country's financial structure, debt composition, and governance capacity.

Figure 2: Debt Service vs. Social Expenditure

The figure illustrates the sharp rise in debt service payments, which have surpassed government spending on education and healthcare in Africa. This shift indicates that critical social investments are being squeezed, disproportionately affecting women and children by limiting access to maternal healthcare, reproductive services, and education. Without targeted debt relief and gender-responsive policies, this trend risks deepening long-term inequalities and undermining socio-economic development. (Source: World Bank 2022)

Debt Relief Schemes and Their Limitations

International debt relief programs have provided some financial reprieve but remain insufficient in addressing systemic inequalities. The Debt Service Suspension Initiative, launched in 2020 to ease financial strain during the COVID-19 crisis, freed up \$13 billion in debt-service payments (World Bank 2022). However, its focus on short-term liquidity support failed to incorporate gender-sensitive measures that could have mitigated the disproportionate impact of debt crises on women, girls, and marginalised communities. By overlooking the social consequences of austerity-driven budget reallocations, the program worsened financial hardships for already vulnerable populations.

In response to persistent liquidity challenges, the Common Framework for Debt Treatments, introduced by the G20 in 2020, aimed to provide more coordinated debt restructuring (Talero 2022). This program brought together bilateral creditors, including the Paris Club, to evaluate debt sustainability and determine appropriate restructuring terms. While the framework allowed for nominal debt

adjustments and extended repayment periods, it failed to address gendered economic realities, failing to integrate safeguards to ensure that women and marginalised groups benefit from debt relief measures.

The Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI), launched in 2005, represents one of the most comprehensive efforts to reduce sovereign debt. Emerging from a G8 proposal, the MDRI cancelled debts owed by countries that had completed the HIPC process, particularly those owing to the IMF, World Bank, and African Development Fund (IMF 2023). While the MDRI contributed to poverty reduction and helped advance the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), its gender-blind approach neglected the structural barriers that limit women's access to economic and social resources. Without explicit gender-responsive provisions, these debt relief mechanisms have primarily failed to alleviate the gendered consequences of fiscal austerity, leaving women and marginalised communities with continued economic and social vulnerabilities.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal the structural flaws within sovereign debt relief mechanisms, particularly their failure to address gendered and socio-economic inequalities in Sub-Saharan Africa. While financial transfers under initiatives such as the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative and the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative have provided temporary fiscal relief, their stringent conditionalities—rooted in fiscal discipline, austerity, and market liberalisation—have systematically undermined social progress (Raffinot and Ferry 2018). These debt relief frameworks, dominated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, prioritise macroeconomic stability over social investment, perpetuating cycles of economic dependence without addressing the underlying injustices of global financial governance. Evidence demonstrates that these mechanisms fail to consider the realities of marginalised communities, particularly women, who disproportionately bear the consequences of public spending cuts, declining access to essential services, and increasing economic precarity (FEMNET 2021).

Debt and the Deterioration of Women's Health Outcomes

Austerity measures—often mandated as part of debt restructuring agreements—have reduced healthcare expenditure, particularly in maternal and reproductive health services (Coburn, Restivo, and Shandra 2015). SAPs have been particularly damaging, as debtor governments are required to cut public spending, leading

to the deterioration of health infrastructure, medical supply shortages, and declining access to life-saving services (Thomson, Kentikelenis, and Stubbs 2017). Empirical evidence from Ghana and Zambia illustrates the devastating impact of these austerity policies, with Ghana experiencing an additional 360 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births following the implementation of fiscal reforms (Coburn, Restivo, and Shandra 2015). The inability of heavily indebted nations to maintain publicly funded health systems has resulted in an over-reliance on donor-driven health initiatives, which are often externally dictated, fragmented, and unsustainable (IPPF 2016).

The economic constraints imposed by sovereign debt further influence adolescent pregnancy rates across the region because debt-induced budget cuts to sexual and reproductive health programs have limited access to contraceptives, family planning services, and comprehensive sexual education, exacerbating early pregnancies and maternal health risks for adolescent girls (Maharaj 2022). The lack of investment in adolescent reproductive health programs, coupled with socioeconomic barriers and early marriage practices, perpetuates cycles of poverty and gender inequality (Maharaj 2022).

Debt, Education, and Gender Inequality

Diversifying financial resources toward debt servicing obligations also has detrimental implications for women's education, a critical determinant of long-term health and economic security (UNESCO 2024). Evidence from the UN Global Education Monitoring Report demonstrates that in low-income countries, debt servicing costs often exceed national education budgets, reducing school enrollment and retention rates for girls (UNESCO 2024). Gendered social norms, such as early marriage, unpaid care responsibilities, and gender-based violence, further compound the barriers to education for girls. With declining public investment in education, fewer girls complete secondary schooling, limiting their economic mobility, restricting access to stable employment, and increasing their vulnerability to poor health outcomes (Amnesty International 2024). The reduction in educational opportunities has intergenerational effects, as women with lower education levels experience higher maternal mortality risks, reduced contraceptive use, and increased economic dependency (Amnesty International 2024).

Debt, Gender-Based Violence, and Economic Disempowerment

Sovereign debt crises also exacerbate gender-based violence by eroding social protection mechanisms and crisis intervention services (Magwegwe 2024). The prioritisation of debt repayment over social investment has significantly weakened state-led responses to GBV, reduced shelter funding, and diminished access to psychosocial support for survivors (Bamisaye 2023). Economic instability within households—often a result of job losses, wage stagnation, and declining public services—correlates with rising levels of intimate partner violence, as financial distress exacerbates power imbalances and heightens the risk of exploitation and abuse (Ghosh 2021). The failure to integrate gender-sensitive safeguards into debt restructuring programs has deepened women's economic precarity, with limited access to land, credit, and economic resources restricting their ability to escape cycles of abuse (Shen et al. 2023).

Legal and socio-economic barriers to property ownership further reinforce women's economic vulnerability, as land and housing ownership remain critical determinants of financial security and independence (Remme et al. 2020). The inability to own property reduces women's access to formal credit markets, limiting opportunities for entrepreneurship and economic advancement. This lack of financial autonomy, coupled with gender-based wage inequalities, has profound implications for women's access to healthcare, as financial instability restricts their ability to afford maternal and reproductive health services (Cornish et al. 2019).

Country-Specific Case Studies: The Impact of Debt on Women's Health

Several case studies illustrate the gendered consequences of sovereign debt distress across the region. In Zambia, the country's 2020 default on Eurobond debt, exacerbated by falling copper prices and the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in drastic reductions in public healthcare funding, particularly for maternal and reproductive health services (Amnesty International 2023). In Ghana, where the debt-to-GDP ratio was projected to reach 83% by the end of 2024, fiscal reforms prioritising debt repayment have already begun to limit healthcare spending, further restricting access to life-saving interventions for women (Amnesty International 2023).

In Kenya, the government's high dependence on Chinese loans and multilateral borrowing has constrained fiscal flexibility, diverting funds from essential public services, including reproductive healthcare and GBV survivor support programs (Wemos and Nweti 2024). In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), increasing external debt burdens have raised concerns that women's health programs may face severe budgetary reductions (Amnesty International 2021).

The case of Zimbabwe, classified as being in “debt distress” with \$21 billion in unsustainable public debt, illustrates how fiscal reforms implemented to restore debt sustainability often come at the cost of essential services, further limiting women's access to maternal care and GBV support systems (Chiwariidzo 2024). Similarly, Mozambique's hidden loans crisis, which led to currency depreciation and rising inflation, redirected fiscal resources away from public health services, worsening access to gender-specific health interventions (Wemos and Nweti 2024).

The Structural Inequities of Debt Governance

The exclusionary nature of debt governance frameworks continues to reinforce power imbalances between creditor institutions and debtor countries, limiting the agency of women and marginalised communities in economic decision-making. Traditional debt relief mechanisms are designed to ensure financial stability, yet they systematically exclude the perspectives of feminist movements, civil society actors, and communities most affected by austerity-driven policies (Christel 2024). Women, in particular, are rarely included in high-level debt negotiations, despite bearing disproportionate socio-economic burdens resulting from debt servicing priorities that erode public investment in health, education, and social protection. Their lived experiences—shaped by unpaid care work, informal labour, and restricted access to economic resources—must be centred in discussions on debt restructuring and fiscal planning (FEMNET 2021). Without integrating gender-responsive decision-making into debt governance, existing frameworks will continue to exacerbate economic inequalities, limiting women's access to financial security, healthcare, and social mobility (CESR 2024).

Structural Failures of Debt Relief Schemes

A critical shortcoming of existing debt relief programs, including the Debt Service Suspension Initiative, the Common Framework for Debt Treatments, and the MDRI, is their failure to address the gendered dimensions of economic

crises. While these initiatives have provided temporary fiscal relief, they have not fundamentally altered the systemic inequalities that place women and marginalised groups at the periphery of economic recovery efforts (Raffinot and Ferry 2018). These debt relief mechanisms often operate within narrow macroeconomic stabilisation models, prioritising fiscal discipline, austerity, and privatisation—policy prescriptions that have historically worsened social inequalities rather than alleviating them (Ghosh 2021).

By prioritising creditor interests over social investment, these frameworks sustain cycles of debt dependency, leaving low-income countries with little fiscal space for long-term, gender-responsive development planning (Ghosh 2021). The result is an entrenched model of financial subordination where countries divert scarce resources toward debt repayment rather than investing in inclusive economic recovery and essential public services (UNFPA 2023). The persistence of these structural inequities demonstrates the urgent need to shift from debt sustainability frameworks toward a feminist economic justice model that centres on the well-being of people over financial obligations to creditors (Christel 2024).

Debt Relief and Its Limited Developmental Impact

Evidence from countries that have undergone repeated cycles of debt relief illustrates how existing frameworks fail to promote inclusive economic development. In Mozambique, debt relief under the HIPC and MDRI frameworks did not reduce economic vulnerabilities, as the country remained highly dependent on foreign direct investment and large-scale resource extraction projects (Moss et al. 2016). Rather than supporting broad-based economic transformation, these projects benefited external investors, while agricultural workers, women, and small-scale entrepreneurs remained economically marginalised (Hanlon 2017). By 2009, Mozambique had returned to unsustainable debt levels, demonstrating that without structural reforms promoting economic diversification and gender-equitable policies, debt relief fails to create sustainable development pathways (Moss et al. 2016).

Similar patterns can be observed in Zambia and Niger, where debt relief efforts did not prioritise investments in human development, such as healthcare, education, and social protection programs (Ghosh 2021). In Zambia, a significant portion of the national budget continues to be allocated to debt servicing, even as the country faces one of the highest HIV/AIDS burdens in the world, limiting resources for life-saving health interventions (Ghosh 2021). Despite receiving debt relief under the HIPC framework and having some of the highest child mortality and

illiteracy rates globally, Niger spends more on debt repayment than on healthcare. (UNDP, 2022). These examples underscore how debt relief, when structured solely around fiscal targets rather than human development goals, perpetuates cycles of social deprivation and does not address structural inequities.

Ghana's experience with debt relief further exemplifies the failures of existing debt sustainability frameworks. Despite receiving substantial debt relief, Ghana's debt-to-GDP ratio continues to rise, forcing the government to reallocate resources from social investments toward debt servicing obligations (Coburn et al. 2015; Thomson, Kentikelenis, and Stubbs 2017). The country's economic vulnerability, rooted in an overreliance on external debt and exposure to volatile global commodity markets, highlights how debt relief programs have failed to equip economies with the resilience necessary to withstand economic shocks (Coburn et al. 2015).

Debt Swaps: An Untapped Opportunity for Feminist Economic Transformation

Debt-for-development swaps present a potentially transformative approach to debt relief, but existing frameworks lack intersectional and gender-responsive mechanisms. Traditional debt swaps, such as debt-for-nature agreements, have been heavily critiqued for prioritising environmental conservation at the expense of social equity, often displacing local communities, particularly women farmers and Indigenous groups, without providing viable economic alternatives (Gallagher et al. 2024). Debt swaps must be redesigned to integrate feminist economic principles, ensuring that resources redirected from debt payments are explicitly allocated toward gender-transformative policies, achieving economic and social justice (Global Fund and African Union 2016).

The education sector is one critical area of concern. In many Majority World countries, debt burdens continue to limit educational investments, with girls disproportionately affected due to early marriage, gender-based violence, and household economic constraints (Ito, Sekiguchi, and Yamawake 2018). While debt-for-education swaps could potentially expand access to schooling, they often fail to prioritise marginalised groups, such as rural communities and girls from low-income backgrounds (Alvarez and Khundadze 2022). Without an intersectional approach that explicitly addresses gender disparities in education access, debt swaps risk perpetuating existing educational inequities, leaving the most vulnerable populations behind.

Similarly, though widely advocated as a mechanism to bolster public health financing, debt-for-healthcare swaps often fail to address the unique health needs of women and marginalised groups (Global Fund 2016). Many of these agreements prioritise large-scale infrastructure projects, such as hospital construction, while underfunding community-led health solutions, sexual and reproductive healthcare, and gender-based violence (GBV) prevention programs (Hu et al. 2024a). Without explicit mandates to ensure gender-equitable health investments, debt-for-healthcare swaps risk reproducing the same inequities that debt exacerbates.

Debt swaps linked to food security initiatives similarly expose systemic gaps, particularly in their failure to integrate social and gender considerations (Martin and Hurley 2024). Food security is deeply intertwined with education and health, particularly in regions where malnutrition and hunger hinder children's learning ability and maternal health outcomes (Martin and Hurley 2024). Without a holistic framework that connects debt relief to food security, women's access to resources, and economic decision-making power, these swaps fail to challenge the broader gendered inequalities embedded in debt dependency.

The findings of this study demonstrate that current debt relief models remain entrenched in a system that prioritises financial stability over gender and social justice. By ignoring the gendered impacts of austerity, public spending cuts, and economic disempowerment, these frameworks have failed to create long-term solutions for indebted nations and marginalised communities (Christel 2024). A feminist approach to debt justice requires moving beyond narrow macroeconomic stabilisation targets toward a human-centred economic model that prioritises social investment, gender equality, and inclusive economic development (UNFPA 2023). Redesigning debt relief mechanisms to include feminist economic principles—such as participatory decision-making, gender-responsive fiscal policies, and targeted investments in healthcare, education, and social protection—is imperative to disrupting cycles of debt-driven inequality (CESR 2024). Without such a shift, sovereign debt will continue to perpetuate gendered poverty, exclusion, and economic subordination, reinforcing structural inequities across Sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusions and Way Forward

This study highlights the urgent need to reframe sovereign debt not merely as a financial obligation but as a social justice and human rights issue. The current global debt architecture prioritises financial stability over the well-being of people, disproportionately affecting women, girls, and marginalised communities through austerity-driven policies that erode essential public services. Without a fundamental shift in debt governance, low-income countries, particularly those in the Majority World, will remain trapped in cycles of economic dependence, underfunded social sectors, and worsening gender inequalities. A feminist economic justice approach demands that debt relief frameworks be redesigned to prioritise gender equality, social investments, and economic justice over creditor-driven fiscal constraints.

Key Recommendations

→ **Integrate Gender-Responsive Fiscal Policies into Debt Relief**

Sovereign debt restructuring must include explicit gender-responsive fiscal measures to ensure that debt relief expands social investments rather than perpetuates austerity. This requires:

- Allocating debt relief funds to critical gender-equitable sectors, including maternal and reproductive healthcare, education, and gender-based violence prevention programs.
- Strengthening gender-budgeting mechanisms within national financial planning to ensure that women and marginalised groups benefit directly from debt relief programs.
- Implementing debt-for-gender swaps ensures that freed-up resources support women's economic empowerment initiatives.

→ **Advance Feminist Leadership in Debt Governance**

A fundamental limitation of existing debt relief mechanisms is their exclusion of feminist perspectives and the voices of those most impacted by debt-related austerity. To disrupt top-down, technocratic decision-making structures, the way forward must include:

- Ensuring that women, gender-diverse individuals, and feminist economic experts are actively involved in debt negotiations at national and international levels.

- Expanding the role of civil society organisations and feminist movements in shaping debt governance frameworks.
- Requiring creditor institutions such as the IMF and World Bank to embed gender impact assessments in all debt relief and restructuring programs.

→ **Reform Global Debt Architecture for Economic Justice**

Current debt relief mechanisms fail to address the root causes of economic inequalities, reinforcing power asymmetries between creditor nations and debtor countries. A genuinely transformative approach must:

- Shift the focus from short-term debt stabilisation to long-term economic resilience, prioritising gender-sensitive economic recovery strategies.
- Demand greater transparency and accountability in debt restructuring negotiations, ensuring that borrowing countries can negotiate fairer terms without sacrificing essential public investments.
- Challenge the market-driven logic of debt governance, advocating for a human rights-based approach to sovereign debt that prioritises well-being over financial markets' interests.

→ **Strengthen Debt-for-Development Swaps to Promote Gender Equality**

Debt-for-development swaps present an opportunity to redirect financial resources toward gender-transformative investments, but existing models remain inadequate in addressing intersectional inequalities. Future debt relief strategies must:

- Establish debt-for-health swaps that specifically invest in community-driven healthcare solutions, maternal health services, and access to reproductive healthcare.
- Ensure that debt-for-education swaps prioritise historically excluded groups, particularly girls, rural communities, and marginalised populations.
- Expand debt-for-social protection mechanisms, linking debt relief to universal social safety nets, child care provisions, and economic support programs for women in the informal economy.
- The current global financial system is not neutral—it is deeply political and structured to favour creditors while undermining the fiscal sovereignty of debtor nations. This has led to systemic economic subjugation that continues to exacerbate gender inequalities, weaken public institutions, and limit the ability of governments to fulfil human rights obligations. The way forward is clear:
- Sovereign debt governance must be restructured to prioritise people over profits, ensuring that financial institutions and creditor states are

held accountable for the socio-economic harm caused by unsustainable debt burdens.

- Feminist economic principles must be central to global financial reforms. Economic policies must not reinforce gender-based exclusions but actively work to dismantle them.
- A just economic recovery must prioritise redistributive policies, ensuring that debt relief does not merely free up resources but actively contributes to social equity and gender-transformative economic systems.

Without a deliberate and structural rethinking of debt governance, sovereign debt will remain a tool of economic domination rather than an instrument for inclusive and sustainable development. The path forward lies in challenging the entrenched inequalities of global finance, reimagining economic policies through a feminist lens, and building a financial system that truly serves the needs of people, not just the demands of creditors.

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Creating Fiscal Space to Secure Funding for Feminist Policies: Guidelines for Promoting Fiscal Reform in Latin America

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Advocacy Summary

■ Background and research question

The current context presents democratic, climate, economic and financial challenges. It is marked by a polycrisis that more intensely affects countries in the majority world. As a region deeply affected by colonialism, poverty and inequality, people from the most socially marginalised groups in Latin America pay the highest price for these crises. The women and LGBTQI+ people who are the lifeblood of the community are spending an increasing share of their time on care as the state flees from key spaces in society. This study, therefore, asks how governments can create fiscal space to fund genuinely transformative feminist public policies that are aligned with grassroots fiscal justice, gender and feminist agendas.

■ Literature review

This literature review is based on studies in gender, feminist economics and public policy to establish a conceptual framework for care, fiscal policy and the role of civil society organisations. It mainly highlights the direct relationship between

austerity and gender inequality. This link can be explained by the unequal social organisation of care, which falls primarily to families and to women and LGBTQI+ people in particular. Cuts in public spending negatively affect women's lives because they reduce the provision of care services. The analysis acknowledges care as a dual entity, encompassing labor and a fundamental entitlement, and underscores its instrumental role in the optimal operation of economic systems. Furthermore, it posits that the social structuring of care, distributed across familial, governmental, market, and organisational domains, constitutes a pivotal determinant in income distribution and serves as a conduit for perpetuating gender and socioeconomic disparities.

The social organisation of care influences how much free time people have and how they can save and accumulate wealth. This paper, therefore, reconsiders the state's role in providing public services. Within this framework, fiscal policy is understood as a technical and political discussion about the distribution of resources. It should take a gender-sensitive approach to assess whether the measures implemented reduce or exacerbate inequalities.

■ Key findings

Mexico and Argentina are experiencing periods of austerity that affect gender inequality through the regressive redistribution of income and tax systems that continue to perpetuate structural inequalities, especially gender and socioeconomic inequalities. The tax burden falls disproportionately on lower-income populations, where women are overrepresented. If budgets reflect governments' real priorities, this work shows that women and LGBTQI+ people have never been a priority, nor are they allowed to participate effectively in decisions about where public money is spent. Debt, spending cuts and regressive taxation are widening the gender gap in access to rights and resources. This is because, among other things, they increase the burden of care on women and the time that local organisations must spend looking for resources to continue their activities. Grassroots actors are not calling for solutions based on financialisation or philanthropy, but for the premise of individual responsibility to be replaced by one of collective responsibility, in which the state plays a leading role.

■ Key recommendations

- **Shift the tax burden from those who have the least to those most able to contribute:** Strengthen direct taxation by increasing capital gains tax and penalising income from non-productive sources and sources harmful to the environment.
- **Drive forward global taxes on wealth and corporate revenue,** expanding the tax base and increasing the minimum tax rate to at least 25% to cover more multinational companies.
- **Lessen the regressive effects of indirect taxes** by redesigning the tax structure to protect the populations with the lowest incomes, in which women are overrepresented.
- **Redirect public spending to feminist objectives:** Reform fiscal policy to protect people with lower incomes and earmark resources for gender-responsive public policies, recognising and valuing care work.
- **Deepen international cooperation:** Strengthen transparency and accountability mechanisms to tackle tax avoidance and evasion, and democratise forums where taxation is discussed to ensure all countries and civil society can participate.

Authors and Acknowledgements

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Authors' position statement

The analysis acknowledges care as a dual entity, encompassing labor and a fundamental entitlement, and underscores its instrumental role in the optimal operation of economic systems. Furthermore, it posits that the social structuring of care, distributed across familial, governmental, market, and organisational domains, constitutes a pivotal determinant in income distribution and serves as a conduit for perpetuating gender and socioeconomic disparities.

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Acronym List

DNElyG	National Directorate of Economy, Equality and Gender of the Ministry of Economy of Argentina
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
GDP	Gross domestic product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MMGyD	Ministry of Women, Genders and Diversity of Argentina
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ODA	Official development assistance

OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SBG	Sustainability Bond Guidelines
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VAT	Value added tax

Introduction

The current global polycrisis has many facets: the climate crisis, geopolitical tensions, the fragility of Western democracies, and the debt and care crises. Paying the highest price of this crisis are the most socially marginalised, including women and LGBTQI+ people, especially in the majority world.

With only six years left to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), more than 80 countries have yet to achieve even one target under Goal 5 on gender equality. Faced with this reality, global debates about how to fund development are intensifying. One such debate will take place at the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4), to be held in Seville, Spain, in June 2025. The discussions centre around how to reform international financial institutions to make them more inclusive and efficient; the sustainability of external debt; official development assistance (ODA) commitments; and – the main inspiration for this work – how to make international taxation fairer.

Achieving gender equality in key areas of the SDGs will require USD 6.4 trillion per year across 48 countries in the Majority World and an additional USD 360 billion per year (UN Women, 2023). However, gender is still not a priority in global financing discussions. In this context, this research explores how to promote progressive feminist fiscal models that tackle the inequalities between the majority and minority world, creating fiscal space for governments to sustainably fund feminist public policies.

Methodology

This work supports efforts to join fiscal justice agendas with gender justice and feminist agendas. To this end, it demonstrates how progressive tax reforms can create fiscal space to fund public policies to reduce inequality.

This overarching objective breaks down into three specific objectives:

1. Develop a conceptual framework that integrates the contributions to this work and allows us to establish, from a feminist perspective, how governments could create fiscal space for feminist futures.
2. Map how taxes are collected and spent in two Latin American states, Argentina and Mexico, to propose new models that ensure equitable spending and sufficient resources to guarantee human rights.
3. Strengthen calls for progressive and fair fiscal systems by building relationships with people who form part of the feminist collective. To this end, we explore perceptions of fiscal justice from a gender perspective and synergies that could be developed between governments and the feminist movement.

Mindful of these objectives, we adopt a comprehensive methodological approach inspired by the multidisciplinary tradition of feminist economics. It, therefore, combines theoretical approaches with a holistic and systematic examination of the economy. This approach is based on a conceptual and theoretical framework that questions i) the relationship between the social organisation of care and income distribution and ii) the overuse of technical arguments in discussions about fiscal policy (hypertechnification) to depoliticise and distance it from real people's lives. Such arguments are instrumental to implementing conventional fiscal policies whose regressive effects are particularly acute for people from socially marginalised groups. In contrast to technification, this paper seeks to define key concepts in the area of fiscal policy didactically and to document the main contributions of feminism to debates about fiscal policy and its impact on social justice. This approach challenges the "strategic silence" of economic policies regarding gender relations (Bakker, 1994). The study employs a dual methodological approach, incorporating quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Based on statistical data, the quantitative analysis examines the economic characteristics and direction of fiscal policy in Argentina and Mexico since the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the socioeconomic characteristics of the social organisation of care and paid work; the tax structure of both countries, analysing the levels of tax collected compared to the region and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries; and how the

functional structure of public spending changed before and after the pandemic. Our main objective is to characterise fiscal policy – spending and taxes – in Latin America, focusing on Argentina and Mexico. The data for this analysis was gathered from various secondary sources, including government databases, international organisations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and national time-use surveys conducted in the region.

The qualitative analysis is based on in-depth interviews with representatives of civil society organisations, politicians, activists, contact persons and former officials from Argentina and Mexico. Through these interviews, the researchers sought to elucidate contributors' perceptions of fiscal policy decisions and their tangible ramifications on the quotidian existence of individuals. The interviewees explicitly aligned with feminist agendas or, if they did not formally identify as feminist, promoted actions aligned with gender justice. The study also explored how stakeholders perceive and manage the tensions between fiscal policies designed in institutional spaces far removed from local realities and the needs of the most socially marginalised sectors of society and local feminist agendas. Incorporating these voices allows us to increase the visibility of structural inequalities perpetuated by fiscal decisions. This methodological approach augments the analysis of the impact of public policies on community spaces and feminist movements. The researchers structured the interviews around seven distinct dimensions. This framework facilitated the customisation of interview questions to align with the specific profile of each interviewee, as detailed in Annex 1. The study involved eleven interviews, encompassing seventeen women with affiliations to social organisations, political spheres, activist groups, intellectual leadership, or former governmental positions.

Literature Review

Care as work, a need and a right: The organisation of social care, income distribution and fiscal policy

Unpaid care work carried out in the home enormously contributes to the economy, even when it is not linked to monetary compensation. As shown by the time-use surveys conducted in different Latin American countries (Serafini Geoghegan and Fois, 2021; Vaca Trigo and Baron, 2022), these tasks are unequally and unfairly distributed between men and women. Conversely, work is paid in areas such as education, health and domestic labour (Esquivel, 2011), as well as the support services needed to provide long-term care to people with higher support needs, such as young children, people with disabilities and older adults. This work is crucial for human development and facilitates people's participation in productive activities. However, despite its importance for social reproduction, care work continues to be devalued, and receives lower recognition and pay than other economic activities.

Care is not just work; it is a need and a right (Pautassi, 2023). Throughout their lives, all people care for others and depend on the care of others to survive. The right to receive care and provide care entails doing so in line with one's own needs and desires, on equal terms and in decent working conditions (Pérez Orozco, 2009; 2014). The interrelated way that families, the state, the market and community organisations produce and distribute care – called the “social organisation of care” – reproduces and exacerbates inequalities. Care falls to families and is feminised and socioeconomically stratified (Rodríguez Enríquez, 2015). The commercialisation of care and the lack of universal public provision of care services compound this reality, which is particularly stark in regions like Latin America. The injustices inherent in the production and distribution of care must be rectified as a matter of urgency. This is necessary to mitigate the adverse effects experienced by women from socially marginalised groups.

The production and distribution of care not only affect people's incomes,¹ but also influence the distribution of wealth. The organisation of care within families directly affects people's labour market access (Esquivel, 2011) and, therefore, their capacity to save and accumulate wealth. The government plays a leading role, both as a provider of public services that lighten the load of care for households and as a regulator of labour markets and social protection, shaping the responsibilities of families, the community and the market in the provision of care.

1. As mentioned above, this is due to the subsidiary contribution to the market of unpaid care work by households.

Drawing upon the research of Esquivel (2011), Rodríguez Enríquez (2015), and Elson (2012), it is argued that the social organisation of care represents the inverse of income distribution. Its influence on primary and secondary income distribution² is key to understanding the state's and fiscal policy's role from a feminist perspective. When the state does not guarantee the provision of high-quality universal public education, health and long-term care services, responsibility for these needs is redistributed to other actors:

- I. The market occupies the gap in state provision and makes a profit by meeting the demand for care for those who can pay. This is especially detrimental to women, who are overrepresented in the lowest income deciles, and to single-mother households, which are usually the poorest.³
- II. Households and communities – and within them, mainly women – cover care needs without pay. However, their capacity to do this depends on a finite resource: time. Elson (2012) recognised that, they (women) cannot be considered a bottomless well from which others can drink without consequences. Human capacity deteriorates without sufficient public and private provision, especially in low-income communities that cannot close the gap left by the lack of state provision or sustain private profit. Even progressive income redistribution policies, such as reducing taxes on consumption or subsidising the demand of those with the lowest incomes, can have regressive effects on the distribution of care. Without free public provision, families have to pay for care or provide it unpaid, both options that perpetuate gender inequalities.

Concepts to Intersect Fiscal Policy and Feminist Contributions

Fiscal policy concerns the decisions and actions taken by governments to manage their revenue and spending, deliver essential services (such as education and social security), and provide subsidies and tax breaks. Far from being a simple accounting exercise, fiscal policy is a technical and political debate about managing and distributing a society's resources. Its design directly impacts access to basic rights and the effectiveness of public policies. One of its most significant dimensions lies in its capacity to foster equality, thereby diminishing social inequalities.

2. Primary income distribution occurs through the process of production, and determines how added value is divided between employees and capital (owners/investors), while secondary income distribution is the redistribution of the income available through fiscal policy. Secondary distribution centres around the payment of taxes, transfers from the government to families and redistribution through public services.

3. The commercialisation of care can be a deliberate strategy by governments, particularly those with a neoliberal slant, which favour the idea of a minimal state.

A progressive system redistributes resources to those who need them most and requires those with the most to contribute more. Conversely, a regressive system disproportionately taxes those sectors of society with the fewest resources or mainly benefits the most well-off. It is, therefore, crucial to observe the impact of fiscal policy from a gender perspective by questioning whether a specific measure can transform it somehow (Rodríguez Enríquez, 2008). A gender perspective facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the actual ramifications of fiscal policy by prompting an inquiry into whether it mitigates, exacerbates, or leaves existing gender inequalities unchanged.

Finally, the relationship between government revenue and spending gives what is known as the fiscal balance, which can be in surplus or deficit. When revenue exceeds spending, there is a surplus. Conversely, a deficit occurs when tax revenues are too low to cover spending. A deficit obliges the government to borrow to finance its commitments, which leads to a **debt burden**. In this context, fiscal space – defined by Roy, Heuty and Letouzé (2007) as financing made available by concrete policies to mobilise resources and create an enabling institutional and economic environment – becomes a critical tool for implementing equity and gender-responsive development policies.

Spending

The public budget is the instrument through which the government establishes how it will spend its resources in a given financial year. By establishing how much, how, and when the government will spend money on each activity, the budget determines whether it will achieve its different public policy objectives and targets (Izcurdia, Monza, and Ryan, 2020). The government regards the budget as gender neutral, but it usually ignores the differences in roles and responsibilities between men and women (Jubeto, 2008).

Elson (2002) asserts that cutting the deficit by cutting services is generally achieved at the cost of increasing women's working time because their labour is used "to make up for lost public services". Spending cuts have non-monetary and time-use-related hidden costs. What appears to be an exercise in efficiency, in reality shifts costs from the public sector budget (where they are quantifiable and visible) to the budgets and time of women in families and communities, where they are generally invisible. Determining the impact of such fiscal reductions on diverse social groups necessitates both time-use data and precise information regarding the scope of said reductions.

Resources

To provide public services and implement public policies, the government mobilises resources in different ways: taxation, government borrowing, ODA⁴ and partnerships with the private sector or community organisations. None of these financing strategies are neutral when it comes to gender. The subsequent subsections provide foundational definitions for the primary concepts and delineate the key contributions of feminist economics.

Taxation

Taxation is a crucial tool because it is the most stable source of revenue for financing public goods and services. There are three main ways that taxes are collected from individuals: income, consumption and assets (Benítez, 2018). A tax is progressive if its level increases with a taxpayer's capacity to pay and regressive if it decreases. While each country arranges its tax system differently, three revenue sources are common to most tax systems worldwide: i) direct taxes, ii) indirect taxes and iii) social security contributions. Two other revenue sources depend on the country's productive structure: iv) taxes on foreign trade and v) natural resource concessions. Each revenue source mobilises different amounts of resources and affects equity differently. This work focuses on direct and indirect taxes, which usually contribute the majority of taxes collected, and on the main discussions about them internationally.

Indirect taxes apply to producing, selling, and consuming goods and services. The tax burden of indirect taxes is usually built into the final cost of the product, such that the end consumer bears it. Given that people with lower incomes spend a much higher share of their income on consumption than those with higher incomes, indirect taxes are generally regressive (Grown and Valodia, 2010). For example, value-added tax (VAT) is indirect and regressive because it taxes people at the same rate whether they are rich or poor. This means that people on low incomes contribute more as a proportion of their total income than those on high incomes (Izcurdia and Vivanco, 2020). However, because indirect taxes are easy to collect and broaden the tax base, governments often rely on this tax form. When indirect taxes are the primary source of government tax revenue, this disproportionately affects the poorest households, in which women are the majority (Joshi, Kangave and van den Boogaard, 2024).

4. Middle- and high-income countries like Mexico and Argentina do not have access to ODA, so it is not included in this work. For an in-depth analysis of ODA financing, we recommend looking at the other work carried out as part of the Walking the Talk project.

The higher the relative share of indirect taxes in the tax structure, the more regressive the tax system will – in principle – be. Feminist approaches assert that public treasuries should avoid depending too heavily on VAT as their main source of revenue (Elson, 2005). Based on this theory, they propose reducing VAT rates on products on which poor households spend a large share of their incomes or “correcting” regressive taxes by focusing spending on these households (Grown and Mascagni, 2024). Given that VAT rates, applicability, and the technical capacity of tax collection agencies differ greatly, no single solution can be implemented in all countries to mitigate its regressive effects (Larios Campos and Méndez Santolaria, 2024). When seeking solutions aligned to each context, several factors should be considered: the loss of tax revenue, existing guarantees that a reduction in the VAT rate will lead to a drop in prices and mechanisms for the most disadvantaged sectors, which are often centred around informal supply chains.

In contrast, direct taxes improve equity by applying to specific people – rather than anonymous acts like consumption – and tax people’s income⁵ and wealth,⁶ representing their capacity to contribute. They are, however, more prone to tax avoidance and evasion because they are based on voluntary declarations. From a feminist justice perspective, taxing wealth is essential to reduce inequality and redistribute resources to benefit women’s human rights and economic autonomy (Larios Campos and Méndez Santolaria, 2024). Many proposals have been suggested to: i) improve direct taxation, based on the principle of solidarity, ii) to increase the tax rates applied to the profits of large corporations (ICRICT, 2020), iii) apply a minimum global tax to high-wealth individuals (Zucman, 2024) and iv) more rigorously share information on assets and their owners (Lorenzo et al., 2023).

The researchers raise a query regarding the adequacy of these measures, considering the disproportionate distribution of global wealth and income. Specifically, they highlight that the wealthiest 10% of the population possesses 76% of global wealth and receives 52% of global income. In comparison, the poorest 50% holds only 2% of global wealth and receives 8.5% of global income.⁷ Much more ambitious measures could be needed to redistribute wealth effectively. Otherwise, we risk doing “too little, too late” (Guzmán, Ocampo and Stiglitz, 2016).

5. This includes income from labour, profits, state transfers (such as subsidies), private transfers (such as remittances), and rental income (such as rent payments).

6. This refers to the ownership of physical assets, such as property and cars, and financial assets such as money, shares and bonds. Recent studies show that wealth inequality and the concentration of wealth are higher than income inequality (ECLAC, 2019).

7. Credit Swiss World Inequality Report (Chancel et al., 2022)

In contrast, income taxes contribute more resources to tax systems but also have some biases. They unfairly favour people who obtain their income from capital and more heavily tax income from work (Piketty, Saez and Zucman, 2023). Feminist analyses propose increasing capital gains taxes to the same level as taxes on income from labour (Coelho et al., 2022) and applying higher rates when income originates from non-productive financial transactions or activities that jeopardise the sustainability of life on this planet, such as mining and fossil fuel industries (Larios Campos and Méndez Santolaria, 2024).

Tax breaks, also called tax expenditures, can reduce the tax burden,. Tax incentives usually encourage investment, economic growth, foreign exchange and job creation. Rodríguez Enríquez and Itriago (2019) show, based on case studies in three Central American countries, that these incentives tend to be taken up by large companies, with very modest results in terms of decent job creation, and that they, therefore, make the tax system more regressive. Feminist approaches maintain that avoiding tax breaks would be more effective and instead using the resources collected to provide public social and care services (Rodríguez Enríquez and Méndez Santolaria, 2021).

Public debt

“Public debt”, “sovereign debt”, and “national debt” are terms used for the amount of money a country has borrowed. Although debt can inject large volumes of money, it also commits future resources to the repayment of capital and interest, which reduces fiscal space for investment in essential areas such as health, education and infrastructure. The currency of both public and private debt and the applicable legislation are increasingly significant factors for assessing the risks of taking on and managing more debt. External debt⁸ usually has the most significant effect on countries and puts them at greatest risk because it must be paid in a foreign currency and is typically subject to foreign legislation.

Many low- and middle-income countries are in a vicious cycle of excessive dependence on external debt – particularly relying on overseas lenders. In contexts of economic crisis, it is common for countries to have insufficient resources and have to renegotiate loans or suspend payments. In both cases, states lose access to the private debt market, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) acts as a lender of last resort (CESR, 2022). Far from correcting models favouring financial activities, the IMF applies strict and prescriptive contractionary fiscal policy

8. Based on trends observed in upper-middle income countries, in this work we distinguish between external and internal debt according to the currency in which the debt is issued and the applicable legislation without distinguishing whether the creditors are local or foreign economic agents. External and internal debt are, however, defined differently in different countries. For more information, see Berdeja and Bejarano (2024).

conditions to guarantee the repayment of the debts they issue and countries' "reentry" into – private – international debt markets ([Shadlen, 2003](#)).

Austerity measures are then adopted, and debts are often serviced at the expense of social investment: the rights of international creditors come into conflict with the human rights of the people who live in indebted countries ([Bohoslavsky and Rulli, 2023](#)). When creditors' rights prevail, public assets are privatised, social protection programmes are cut, essential public services are disinvested, and other labour, social security and tax reforms are implemented. In this vein, Gago and Cavallero ([2020](#)) link the increase in sovereign debt to the rise in household debt, which shifts the social problem of indebtedness to individuals. As the state withdraws social services to pay the debt, many families are forced to borrow to maintain their standard of living.

Neither the agreement nor the design or repayment of these loans is contingent upon – or jointly responsible for – achieving countries' development goals. The Sustainability Bond Guidelines (SBG), which restrict fund allocation to environmentally or socially oriented projects, including those with gender-responsive components, are deemed insufficient as a comprehensive solution. Far from ensuring that objectives are achieved or making creditors jointly responsible if targets are not met, they make the situation worse by encouraging a system of fines that only increases returns for lenders (Bohoslavsky and Lavinias, 2023). Incorporating a Human Development perspective into discussions about debt is crucial. Such an approach would make it possible to question both the legitimacy of a loan, i.e. whether it was agreed in the public interest, and the sustainability of the debt, including, for example, an analysis of whether the payments mean the government is unable to invest in the fulfilment of people's rights (CESR, 2022).⁹

In this vein, Diane Elson and Corina Rodríguez Enríquez ([2021](#)) assert that, although the IMF has begun to adopt a gender-sensitive narrative, this continues to be limited and instrumental and fails in practice to do anything to genuinely advance women's human rights. On the contrary, they highlight the persistent contradiction between the measures needed to reduce gender inequalities, the tight public policy margins imposed by IMF agreements, and the harmful social and economic effects of the austerity measures the IMF demands.

9. To do this, international financial institutions, including intergovernmental bodies that form part of the United Nations system, need to accept that international human rights law applies to them and that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights should govern their operations, something that the IMF has explicitly rejected (Bohoslavsky and Rulli, 2023).

Partnerships with private entities and community organisations¹

Finally, the government can mobilise resources to provide public services by partnering with private entities and community organisations. When partnerships are for profit, private entities usually contribute resources from their capital and, in particular cases, provide know-how, i.e. the technology needed to carry out the project. The most common co-financing models are public-private partnerships. International financial institutions encourage using these financing mechanisms to secure funding when there is little fiscal space. However, governments should approach these options cautiously when increasing resources affects gender equality.

Rodríguez Enríquez and Llaveneras Blanco (2023) note that governments usually use these mechanisms to carry out major infrastructure and public service projects. While public-private partnerships are typically presented as solutions to a tight fiscal situation, feminist critiques of these instruments maintain that they are a means of corporate capture of the state. They also identify several risks associated with corporate capture: i) weakening of fiscal constraints; ii) worsening working conditions; iii) restrictions on access to social services due to the growing costs of public-private partnerships; iv) lack of transparency and public participation; v) loss of access to land, water and other shared resources; and vi) higher risk of violence, including sexual violence, when women resist or demand justice in the face of public-private partnership projects.¹⁰

When a partnership with community or civil society organisations is not for profit, the partners' contribution is usually in-kind. This might be in the form of time through volunteer work or the provision of community spaces where services are delivered to meet the community's needs. While these partnerships present no conflicts of interest related to profiting from the provision of public goods and services, this does not mean that there are no risks involved nor that these partnerships are free from tensions. These strategies can, for example, be problematic when the government outsources its responsibility to guarantee basic rights to the community. Likewise, when funding activities is improper, partners may be unable to ensure decent working conditions for the people involved in the partnership. These points will be examined in more detail in the qualitative analysis.

10. There is abundant evidence of the risks of public-private partnerships. In addition to the case studies presented in the study on public-private partnerships cited, see EURODAD (2022a; 2022b).

Findings

Quantitative Perspective: Socioeconomic Context and Fiscal Policy in Argentina and Mexico

Mexico and Argentina are two of the biggest economies in the region, and although they are both middle-income countries, there are substantial differences between them. At the macroeconomic level, Mexico's GDP is more than double Argentina's, while Mexico's population – 126 million people – is 2.7 times higher than Argentina's – 47 million people. However, both countries have a similar GDP per capita: USD 13,926 for Mexico and USD 13,730 for Argentina. They are both above the regional average – USD 10,681 – although far below the average for OECD countries USD 46,280.

In both countries, unpaid work is estimated to be among the highest contributors to the economy. Data from 2022 show that unpaid work accounts for 16.8% of the GDP in Argentina, while in Mexico, it accounts for over a quarter (25%) of the GDP. Women are the primary contributors of unpaid work: their work accounts for 11.8% of GDP in Argentina and 18.2% in Mexico.

A more granular disaggregation by income level reveals further inequalities. While women spend more time than men on unpaid work in all income quintiles in both countries, the difference varies by income strata: women in Mexico and Argentina in the lowest income quintile spend 1.7 hours per week more on unpaid work than those in the highest income quintile. Because women do more unpaid care and domestic work in the home, they spend less time working in the labour market: employed women account for only 42.11% of total employment in Argentina and 38.89% in Mexico (ILOSTAT, 2022).¹¹

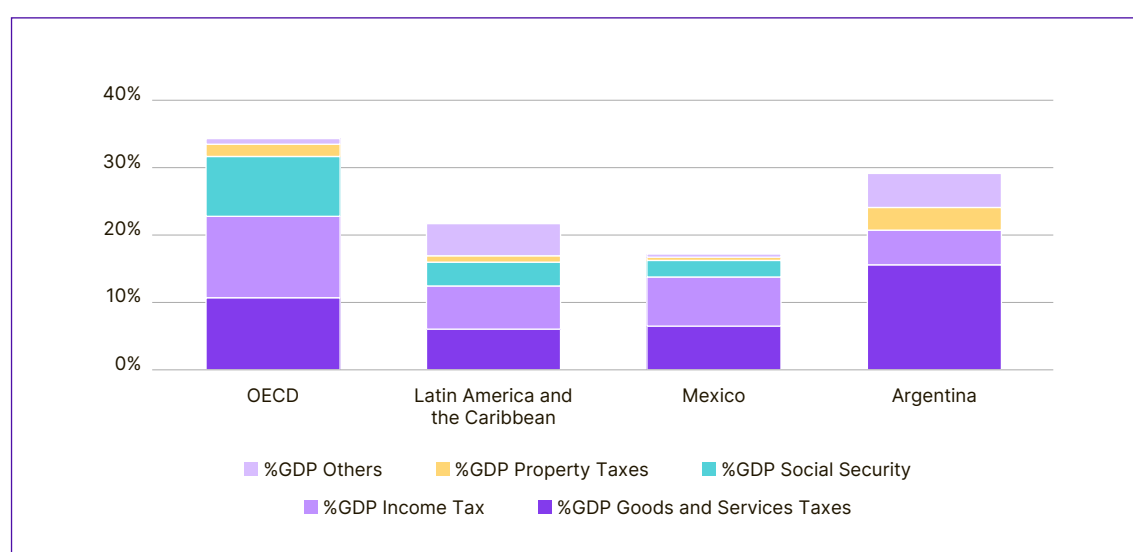
The landscape described above shows how inequalities are self-reinforcing. Indeed, the Latin America and the Caribbean region is characterised by a highly unequal income distribution: the richest 10% of the population receive 58% of the income. Mexico has higher than average inequality at the national level, with the richest 10% of people receiving 64.6% of the income. Argentina, meanwhile, is more equitable, with the richest 10% receiving 43.9% of the income. Tax structures can play a strategic role in reducing high levels of inequality to the

11. Information from the International Labour Organization (ILO) Statistics Database, available at <https://ilostat ilo.org/es/data/>

extent that the burden falls more on those who have the most and generate high tax revenue.

According to OECD (2024) data, tax revenues in Latin America and the Caribbean account for an average of 21.5% of the GDP. This level is far below the average for OECD countries: 34%. Comparing the regional average reveals a significant difference between Argentina and Mexico. Argentina ranks among the top three countries for tax revenues as a percentage of GDP (29.6%), while Mexico has the sixth lowest (16.9%).

Figure 1: Tax revenue by revenue source as a percentage of GDP (2024)



Source: Prepared by the authors based on OECD et al. (2024)

As regards the source of tax revenues, studies on taxation in Latin America have noted the regressive nature of the region's tax systems (Pereira Viecei [pending publication]). Likewise, the collection of taxes has done very little to reduce inequality compared to other regions worldwide.

As shown in Figure 1, the tax structure in Latin America and the Caribbean is regressive on average, given that most of the tax revenue comes from indirect taxes (OECD, 2024). In Argentina, taxes on goods and services are the primary source of tax revenues, meaning the country's tax structure has a large regressive component. Mexico is an anomaly in comparison with other tax systems in the region given that income taxes – on both individuals and legal entities – contribute the highest share of the country's tax revenue, exceeding revenue from indirect taxes. However, the persistent use of income tax breaks undermines the progressiveness of this direct tax.

On the flip side of tax revenues, how public resources are budgeted and spent reveals the governments' public policy priorities. Another relevant dimension of public budget analysis measures how much money is spent on gender equality, generally called gender-responsive budgeting or "gender-tagged" budgeting (*presupuestos etiquetados* in Spanish) (Budlender and Sharp, 1998). These tools were introduced in both countries due to strong public demand, particularly from feminist movements. Despite this, the share of resources tagged as advancing substantive equality accounts for scarcely 4–5% of programmable expenditure in Mexico, while in Argentina, gender-responsive budgets are set to disappear during Javier Milei's presidential term.

Two key periods provide insight into the evolution of public spending: in 2019, before the outbreak of COVID-19, and in 2020, once budgets had been adjusted in response to the economic shock.

Before the pandemic, although Argentina was dealing with a fragile economy due to high external debt and high inflation, the government prioritised social protection policies to reduce inequality. To this end, the government created two gender-responsive agencies: the Directorate of Economy, Equality and Gender (DNEIYG) and the Ministry for Women, Genders and Diversity (MMGyD). The creation of these bodies aimed to ensure that the effects of the crisis did not worsen existing gender gaps. Mexico, for its part, sought to implement what it called "republican austerity".¹² This approach aims to increase public resources by tackling corruption and reducing "unnecessary" public spending to strengthen the budget for social policies.

The two countries responded very differently to the outbreak of COVID-19. While Argentina increased direct taxation and allocated more resources to social protection, maintaining formal employment and health care provision in response to the pandemic, it did not prevent a significant drop in incomes and an increase in poverty. This led to socioeconomic instability, which has continued to intensify. In contrast, Mexico's response was pretty moderate, in line with the government's decision not to increase public spending or debt. The government focused on reallocating its budget rather than increasing overall spending or debt. While it redirected resources to health and social protection, these changes were insufficient. Failing to implement more social programmes or countercyclical fiscal measures led to a significant increase in multidimensional and in-work poverty.

12. Federal Law on Republican Austerity, published in the Official Gazette of the Federation on 19 November 2019. Available at: <https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/LFAR.pdf>

Both countries are still dealing with the pandemic's social, economic and political effects. For instance, the prolonged crisis of loss of purchasing power due to inflation in Argentina paved the way for the emergence of new right-wing political movements, like that headed by Javier Milei. On becoming president, he popularised anti-feminist and anti-social policy discourses, seeking to undo the progress made under previous governments. Despite a slow post-pandemic recovery in Mexico, poverty levels dropped significantly, even in comparison with pre-pandemic levels. The government continued strengthening its political movement, backed by high presidential approval levels. As a result, Mexico marked a historic moment when it elected its first female president in 2024.

Qualitative perspective: interview findings

The collected evidence furnishes crucial information, enabling an examination of the interrelationships between tax policy and its democratic dimensions, as well as an analysis of fiscal policy's impact on feminist organisations and the daily experiences of women and LGBTQI+ individuals.

The conversations shone a light on different dimensions of these relationships:

3. The lack of funding for feminist organisations, especially when fiscal austerity policies are being implemented.
4. The lack of fiscal space and budget cuts increase the burden of unpaid work, mainly among women. The interviews highlighted the lack of funding and the absence of a gender perspective in the few care-related policies.
5. The Argentinian people are discontent with the tax structure, given that public financing needs are met through the overrepresentation of regressive taxes in tax revenues.
6. There is strong recognition of civic engagement as a key means of influencing decisions on fiscal policy. A pattern was noted in the demand for training on how to advocate for resources and democratise access to information about the political and technical aspects of fiscal policy.
7. Strong criticism of neoliberal policies that have driven the commercialisation of care and strengthened austerity policies has a significant impact on women's bodies. For example, public debt limits public investment and affects human rights enjoyment.
8. In Mexico, concerns were raised about the role of public-private partnerships.
9. Fiscal policy must be designed and implemented taking into account a gender perspective and advancing development strategies centred on care.

For this research, it is worth highlighting three critical facets that underpin grassroots feminist strategies to transform reality:

- A. The role of feminisms in advocacy on resource allocation and public spending priorities.
- B. The transformative contribution of civil society organisations, the feminist movement, and their influence on fiscal policy.
- C. The state and the community: does fiscal policy meet women's needs?

A. The role of feminisms in advocacy on resource allocation and public spending priorities

When the care economy is taken as a “given” rather than as produced by cooperative conflicts and societal power relationships (Folbre, 2021), the status quo – i.e. the patriarchy – persists. More specifically, families, the state, the market and the community are potential care agents, even though in practice, most care work falls to families (Rodríguez Enríquez, 2015). Therefore, when the state flees the scene, the unequal burden of unpaid care work grows, especially in austerity (Elson, 2002). This explains why times of economic crisis, accompanied by fiscal policies focused on spending cuts, shape priorities and frameworks and justify decisions about where to cut spending. These processes, which are usually conservative, **jeopardise** women's rights and assume that their bodies and time can be used as adjustment variables to fill gaps in the public provision of services.

The interviewees, with their extensive feminist backgrounds, quickly identified these phenomena. One former DNElyG official warned that, when talking about the fiscal balance, it is important to consider funding priorities:

If only debt, flight and speculation are financed, obviously accumulating debt causes the economy to deteriorate and development problems to emerge. However, if the deficit is used to build infrastructure, connectivity and technology investment, the economy will flourish. That raises the question of what we mean when we talk about an economy that works. (Interview with the authors, 15 January 2025).

Heterodox approaches to boosting demand are not enough to reverse the patriarchal order of societies, especially when they do not increase the public and community supply of care. Policies must incorporate feminist perspectives that emerge from feminist movements to achieve real change. In Mexico, we

interviewed a legislator who advocated for introducing gender budget tagging and the law reform that abolished VAT on menstrual products. She explained:

We've always had the idea that fiscal policy is completely removed from people that aren't involved in economic issues. Particularly when it comes to women, we have been distanced from these topics because we are taught that money is men's concern and men are the ones who make the decisions about how it is managed. (Interview with the authors, 16 January 2025).

Similarly, in Argentina, a former MMGyD official recounted her experience in the government to provide evidence of inequalities in public institutions, a key reason underlying the masculine bias in decision-making. This former official also served in one of the most male-dominated departments – the Ministry of Economy – where part of her work involved mediating discussions between these two entities to advocate for the allocation of resources. On this point, it turns out that the MMGyD had a very tight budget: the majority (90%) was allocated to transfers to people experiencing violence, and this left virtually no room to fund other policies. She added:

Discussions between the economic office and the gender office were very unequal. It taught us to learn about the budget, but not how to advocate for resources. Social policy is very feminised and has a lot of resources, but they are not allocated with a gender perspective. On the other hand, the gender policy has no budget and cannot achieve the objectives set. (Interview with the authors, 16 January 2025).

Therefore, feminist economists' contributions to fiscal debates and participation in the government are key to the resistance and the fight for the respect of human rights.

The interviewees in Argentina recognised the path trodden by the feminist movement and the achievements of femocrats¹³ in the government. They cited examples like the DNElyG in the Ministry of the Economy and the MMGyD, which put Argentina at the top of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ranking of gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19¹⁴ for its work finding alternatives to benefit women during the crisis. The creator of DNElyG noted other achievements, such as the first measure of how much care contributes to GDP in Argentina and the first gender-responsive budget.

13. Feminists who work in government institutions (Rodríguez Gustá, 2024)

14. <https://data.undp.org/insights/covid-19-global-gender-response-tracker>

Feminism says and does a lot. It has a drive that moves it forward and we shouldn't waste time on trivial things, we need to go back to its roots and delve deeper with that, why shouldn't we be utopian and go mad? With so many real-world experiences and successes. (Interview with the authors, 15 January 2025).

B. The transformative contribution of civil society organisations and their influence on fiscal policy

The participation of feminists in the state apparatus and much of the progress in gender-responsive fiscal policy has been achieved thanks to the experiences and demands of civil society (Juárez, 2023). In Latin America, feminist demands have garnered much popular support and success regarding the recognition of rights. Yet, some of these demands are undermined in practice by the lack of financial resources to implement transformative measures ([ECLAC, 2023](#)). Examples from Argentina and Mexico illustrate this dynamic, where synergies between civil society organisations and public policy – or their absence – manifest very differently.

Firstly, we consider the case of gender-responsive budgeting in both countries, where the adoption of gender budget tagging was achieved thanks to the efforts of the broad women's movement through civil society organisations and feminist leadership. In the case of Argentina, gender-sensitive budgeting was adopted at the national level in response to demands from civil society organisations for the government to allocate the resources needed to implement the National Action Plan against Gender-based Violence ([Fernández Erlauer, 2023](#); [Ryan, 2021](#)). Similarly, adopting gender budget tagging in Mexico was also the result of efforts by the broad women's movement. It was civil society organisations and the leadership of their feminist members that drove the adoption of this budget tool at the federal level. Yet, as recognised by a feminist legislator involved in the process, the existence of gender-tagged budgets is not necessarily synonymous with commitments to gender equality:

The tagged budget is a tool that enables us to identify how and on what the government is spending, to determine whether it is actually seeking to create the conditions for equality. In reality, it continues to spend very little on women or for equality. Women have never been a priority for any government, whether that's the party in power or the opposition. (Interview with the authors, 16 January 2025)

The same legislator highlighted an often forgotten aspect when analysing gender-responsive budgets: income and how taxation can widen or reduce inequalities. This is discussed in the conceptual part of this work. She made the following observation about Mexico's first experience of bringing together taxes and feminism:

We hadn't looked much at the other side of it, at revenue, at the administration of public wealth. I mean, at analysing how and who the government taxes. We were able to have public debates about how taxes also imposed a sexist burden. VAT on menstrual products was a tax only paid by women and it mainly affected women in more vulnerable situations. By continuing to have these discussions and advocate, we were ultimately able to pass the zero VAT rate for these goods. (Interview with the authors, 16 January 2025)

While feminist thought leaders have set out the redistributive power of tax reforms, these reforms have not yet been explicitly recognised by feminist movements. As the interviewee notes, the exception to this is menstrual activism. For example, the collective #MenstruaciónDignaMx (Dignified Menstruation, Mexico) and the #MenstruAcción (Menstrual Action) campaign by the Argentinian NGO Ecofeminista called for the abolition of VAT on menstrual products. At the end of 2021, the Mexican Federal Congress reformed the relevant law to reduce the tax rate on these products to 0% (Juárez, 2023).

Kornhauser (2005) suggests that tax matters are particularly intangible, making it difficult to link these topics to social demands. Along these lines, a member of the Argentinian cooperative movement highlighted the need to strengthen participatory models: *It seems to me that the local economy must steer the course.* (Interview with the authors, 16 December 2024). In parallel, one contact from a social organisation recounts:

It's not just that we actually pay taxes, which is a huge share of the poorest people's incomes, but that we are also never part of discussions about what to do with the money, which never goes where low-income neighbourhoods need it. (Interview with the authors, 14 January 2025)

Another contact from a feminist civil society organisation noted the importance of tackling the structure of tax breaks by prioritising the care sector and recognising its value. She also highlighted the need to consider how to use fiscal policy to develop a comprehensive care system and how to position it as a driver of economic growth, centred around people's real lives: *"This support concerns*

the most vulnerable sectors of society and affects our development model.” (Interview with the authors, 19 December 2024).

The implementation of national care systems has faced institutional barriers, alongside barriers related to poor uptake of the call for such systems within the feminist movement. The bill on this topic in Argentina did not get through the required parliamentary commissions. In Mexico, the bill has still not been subject to a vote in the Pleno, and the inequitable distribution of care is still poorly understood, which leads to partial and exclusionary solutions. A Mexican legislator working on these issues indicated that there is a misconception about what is meant by care. She explained that this leads to policies that fail to address the structural causes of its inequitable distribution:

Instead what they are doing is tagging existing programmes as part of the system, when in reality they aren’t. These programmes are funded by tripartite contributions (worker, employer and government), that means they can only be accessed by women in formal work, which entrenches gender roles and excludes women in informal work. (Interview with the authors, 16 January 2025).

Moreover, funding mechanisms tend to be overlooked, meaning that policies purportedly intended to address care have not – to date – been implemented effectively. In Mexico, for example, the national legislator cited above described the situation of 12 early years education and care centres announced in Ciudad Juárez – where many women work in the city’s factories – as part of the new care system:

They are going to set up 12 daycare centres, only 12. Of these, five will be run by the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS), so users will have to have formal employment, and five will be private, meaning they will be in workplaces. The last two are the only ones that will take children whose mothers do not have social security because they will be under the DIF-IMSS scheme. So we can see that, in reality, nothing has changed. (Interview with the authors, 16 January 2025)

It is worth noting that in Argentina, some local experiences use the theoretical framework of feminist economics to recognise unpaid care work, promote its demands and influence care systems. For example, Argentinian community organisations have called for the women who work in community kitchens (*comedores* and *merenderos*) to be paid in recognition of their work providing community-based food and care services in low-income neighbourhoods. A

bill to this effect was put forward thanks to the joint efforts of various social organisations. It garnered some attention on the political agenda but did not make it to debate in parliament. The researchers now present a quotation from a national contact person representing the social organisation that proposed the legislative bill.

She believes that this political awakening and greater engagement with economic issues inspired them to ask a series of questions and take stock:

Something that made me think a lot about the question of where this money came from was the law on the kitchen workers. As neighbours, members of kitchens and dining halls, we thought about this policy. Not only did we have to think about the law and its scope, whether a registry should be set up, what percentage the cooks should get, how they should be paid and so on, but we especially had to think about where the money would come from to pay for this. How much would it affect the country's GDP? How much money were we "taking" from the state? Because it was seen as though we were taking it from someone's pocket. So we started to learn more about this. (Interview with the authors, 14 January 2025)

She also explained that these questions helped them recognise the contribution that low-income sectors of society make to the public purse through VAT and the tax breaks that people with high levels of wealth enjoy:

We felt very bad that community work isn't recognised. We are called "benefit scroungers" [planero/planera in Spanish] and "people who live off the state", as if we just take from the pockets of those who have more, because they always pay. "You're living off my money", they tell you. Where does the government get the money to survive? What is this fiscal policy? If taxes are collected, who from? Who pays taxes? And from there, we started to dismantle what they put in our heads. (Interview with the authors, 14 January 2025)

Finally, the third set of feminist fiscal policy demands relates to campaigns based on academic arguments. However, policymakers often fail to take a holistic approach to their implementation through public policy. The Ni Una Menos collective, for instance, is one of the key organisations of the social feminist boom that took place in Argentina in 2015. Since 2018, when the country took out its biggest-ever loan with the IMF, the collective has begun discussing the link between the debt and women's lives. The slogan "We want to be alive, free and unindebted!" (¡Vivas, libres y desendeudadas nos queremos!) aims to

shape the debate on the debt, which has led to fewer resources to guarantee fundamental human rights, constrained women's autonomy and exposed them to more misogynist violence. These are substantial urgent demands, but they are rarely featured among public policy priorities.

Often, fiscal rules lead to a loss of resources to tackle gender-based violence, reproductive health and access to care services in the countries affected. The abolition of VAT on menstrual products shows how taxation can function as a redistributive tool. On this point, the director of a feminist NGO explains:

(These policies) have a regulatory and redistributive capacity, which is what gives meaning to the state. Basically it has to balance differences and inequalities, to apply positive action policies and implement more systematic distributive models that are better at reaching the whole of the population. (Interview with the authors, 16 January 2025)

To ensure these demands reach beyond national borders, it is necessary to highlight the global dimension of discussions about fiscal policy. A contact from a civil society organisation working on human rights emphasised that, when it comes to the debate on international taxation, Latin America has a role to play in raising the question of inequality:

We have a great opportunity to raise the issue of the impact of inequality between people in Latin American countries. Without cooperation on taxation, there are people who get rich through tax avoidance and evasion, and these levels of wealth are obscene. Obviously, this agenda has a lot in common with the gender agenda. How many women billionaires are there? These men are all in the same club, and I think there's a clear connection there. (Interview with the authors, 19 December 2024)

C. The state and the community: does fiscal policy meet women's needs?

The interviews revealed a consistent perception among participants that fiscal policy is a powerful instrument for securing human rights, notably economic, social, and cultural rights. They viewed it as essential for poverty reduction, including the eradication of extreme poverty, the lessening of socioeconomic disparities, encompassing gender inequalities, and the establishment of an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable economic development framework. However, although feminist demands have garnered much popular support and success in the region regarding the recognition of rights, some of these demands are undermined in practice by the lack of financial resources to implement transformative measures.

The community contact from Argentina quoted above highlighted some of the weaknesses of public policy in this area. She suggested that partnerships could be established between the government and community or non-profit civil society organisations:

People need to understand that the government should find ways to fund the places where rights are being guaranteed. If we are in a place supporting older adults, helping people to report gender-based violence, feeding many children, teens, women and older adults at a cultural centre that operates as a community kitchen, we are fulfilling a huge range of rights and on top of that we have to have to work out how to pay the rent on this place because we don't have a public premises? (Interview with the authors, 14 January 2025)

According to the head of a local organisation, income transfer policies are insufficient in Mexico, like in Argentina. She added that if resources are allocated, but measures are withdrawn, it is feminist organisations that replace them to provide support:

Even though they say they have increased spending on social programmes, we don't see it in the community. I think that for the grassroots organisations that we closely support in the community, we see that the budget cuts to health spending are restricting access to abortion: there are only 11 clinics that provide this service in a state with 570 municipalities. (Interview with the authors, 19 December 2024)

She added that cultural aspects are not considered, which also has harmful effects: “That’s what’s missing: having a fiscal policy that responds to the specificities of the context and that sees the diversity of the people who live in this country.” She went on to explain that, due to the disconnect between people’s real needs and the public policies implemented by the government:

There are no translators in health centres and here people speak lots of indigenous languages. That’s why we say that the government has a debt to pay Indigenous women and Afro-Mexican women. And what this homogeneous fiscal policy is doing is widening these inequalities by not addressing either the causes or the consequences of the exclusion we experience [...] fiscal policy needs to offer a genuine response to these specific needs and seek to include these voices. (Interview with the authors, 19 December 2024)

In Mexico, public policies to provide care to people who have experienced violence are poorly aligned with the needs of women and communities. As a

consequence, local feminist organisations have stepped in to provide these services in the absence of public provision. According to the director of a group of organisations that provide care to women who have experienced violence: The Mexican State is undermining the defence of human rights. *Faced with this reality, we are doing the work, and we are the first line of response, unlike the government. But everything we are doing gets ignored.*

Austerity and the ongoing lack of links between the national government and local feminist organisations harms both. The director of a feminist organisation, which has dedicated over three decades to raising awareness of gender inequality, was interviewed.. She explains:

We are heavily dependent on external funding from international organisations, and the private sector, but not national funding, more so regional or transnational. Think about the social movements that seek concrete solutions for social reproduction in low-income communities. They used to get compensatory policies like the Universal Child Benefit or the almost universal pension that has just come in, as well as from the distribution of resources, personal subsidies, subsidies for organisations, food distribution, etc. But now these cuts are huge and have a big impact, but there's no solidarity movement to compensate. Quite the reverse, the massive cuts the government is making to this type of organisation are normalised and applauded. (Interview with the authors, 15 January 2025).

The interviews also highlighted the impact of fiscal policies on the funding of feminist and social organisations. It is clear that the tools available to feminist organisations to raise the profile of their demands and realise a lack of funding undermines them. The director of a feminist digital media outlet explained that she faces bureaucratic barriers and a lack of public financing, which require her to raise funds from other private and international sources:

The reality is that since Javier Milei took office, all the information campaigns (revenue from advertising space for campaigns) have been cut, even in the province and the municipalities. While we're still getting by on municipal revenue, the reality is that even that from the province of Buenos Aires, where there is a government that is perhaps more in favour of the rights of minorities, other places get priority. (Interview with the authors, 17 January 2025)

Despite the buzz inspired by the first woman-led government in Mexico, interviewees from the country warned that it was unwise to get too excited or lower their guard. One interviewee explained: *“Even now we have a woman as*

president for the first time, spending on women hasn't even gone up in line with inflation. Nor are equality programmes substantial; instead, they are more like clientelist programmes. (Interview with the authors, 19 December 2024)

Moreover, in Mexico, the interviewees agreed that funding for their organisations is a constant challenge and that the lack of funding limits their capacity to reach their objectives. They also agreed on the need to have more flexible multi-year funding that adapts to the changing needs of their organisations:

This is a fundamental reality in our country, that between short-term political ambitions and long-term government projects, people overlook the need for multi-year funding that doesn't stop when the government or party in power changes. But we don't have that, so our work is really heavily affected. (Interview with the authors, 19 December 2024)

While they celebrate the improvement in women's status, they know that the situation will not necessarily improve enough to give them the support they need.

Finally, we found that in both countries analysed, there is a disconnect between people's real needs and high-level public policy decisions. This disconnect is the result of a predominantly top-down approach that ignores gender inequalities. It limits the effectiveness of public policies by failing to adapt them to the specificities of the context and the populations they seek to support. To reverse this trend, it will be crucial to strengthen communication between feminist movements and the government. Without adequate and sustainable funding, social organisations are forced to seek alternative funding from the private sector or international donors, which not only jeopardises their work but risks stalling the feminist agenda. It is necessary to secure funding and establish genuine bottom-up alternatives that are better able to meet the needs of people and put forward a genuinely democratic fiscal policy agenda, with the guarantee of human rights at its heart.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Three central themes were identified based on the literature review, the quantitative analysis, and the participant interviews.

1. If their budgets reflect governments' true priorities, women and LGBTQI+ people do not feature among those priorities. Moreover, approaches based on privatisation (public-private partnerships), financialisation – for example, through gender bonds – and philanthropic mechanisms – which ignore organisations' long-term needs – do not respond to grassroots demands and may not be effective. Beyond tagging spending on gender equality, it is crucial for policies to i) consider their effects on the redistribution of care, ii) take an intersectional and intercultural approach tailored to the specific realities of women and LGBTQI+ people, and iii) have sufficient and sustainable funding.
2. The tax policies observed in Argentina and Mexico are far from lessening inequality; they are deepening it. Governments must prioritise the collection of direct taxes and wealth taxes over indirect taxes. They must tackle tax avoidance and evasion to protect human rights and gender equality through stronger international cooperation. These measures should be ambitious and seek to transform the distribution of wealth rather than merely cushion its effects.
3. Countries' debt burden directly and indirectly affects social investment, prioritising debt repayment over the fulfilment of human rights. We should push back against this prioritisation of resources and advocate for it to be inverted.

In translating this into specific demands for the incorporation of an intersectional feminist perspective into fiscal systems, which acknowledges the unique characteristics and specific needs of Latin American populations, a call is made to governments to:

→ Strengthen direct taxation:

- Increase capital gains taxes and apply higher tax rates to income from non-productive activities – such as speculative finance – or activities that jeopardise the sustainability of life on this planet – such as fossil fuel extraction.
- Take a more ambitious approach to global proposals on wealth taxes by seeking to expand the tax base and increase tax rates.
- Promote more aggressive global corporation tax schemes: i) expand the tax base to cover more multinational companies, and ii) increase the minimum tax rates proposed to at least 25% globally.

→ **Deepen international cooperation:**

- Strengthen global transparency, accountability mechanisms, and tools to effectively tackle tax avoidance, tax evasion, and illicit financial flows.
- Democratise discussions on international cooperation and taxation under the United Nations Platform for Collaboration on Tax. This means guaranteeing that representatives of all countries have a voice and vote and that civil society can participate in discussions.

→ Lessen the regressive effects of indirect taxes on the lives of people with low incomes and care workers through measures tailored to each context.

→ **Improve public spending and ensure that fiscal policy serves women and LGBTQI+ people**

- Recognise the role of care at the heart of primary and secondary income distribution and design fiscal and development models that are fairer regarding the social organisation of care.
- Allocate specific tax resources to policies that promote women's rights, such as policies on the public provision of:
 1. High-quality universal care services
 2. Gender-responsive cash transfers
 3. Gender-based violence prevention and support
 4. Access to sexual and reproductive rights
- **Strengthen public-community partnerships** that enable local feminist organisations to access sufficient, flexible, long-term funding when needed. This funding should be commensurate with their work in the community and guarantee that they can offer their workers decent working conditions.
- Reject initiatives that seek to financialise public policies for gender equality, such as gender bonds, public-private partnerships, and debt swaps.

→ Advance debt relief to guarantee rights:

- Cancel sovereign debt for low and middle-income countries and reform international financial institutions to ensure human rights principles guide their activities. This includes setting up new institutional frameworks where all countries can have a voice and a democratic vote.
- Increase indirect taxation, make tax systems more regressive, or cut government spending on social policies to prevent countries from repaying international debt.

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Decolonising Feminist Foreign Policy for Economic Justice in Free Trade Agreements – Case of Africa Continental Free Trade Area

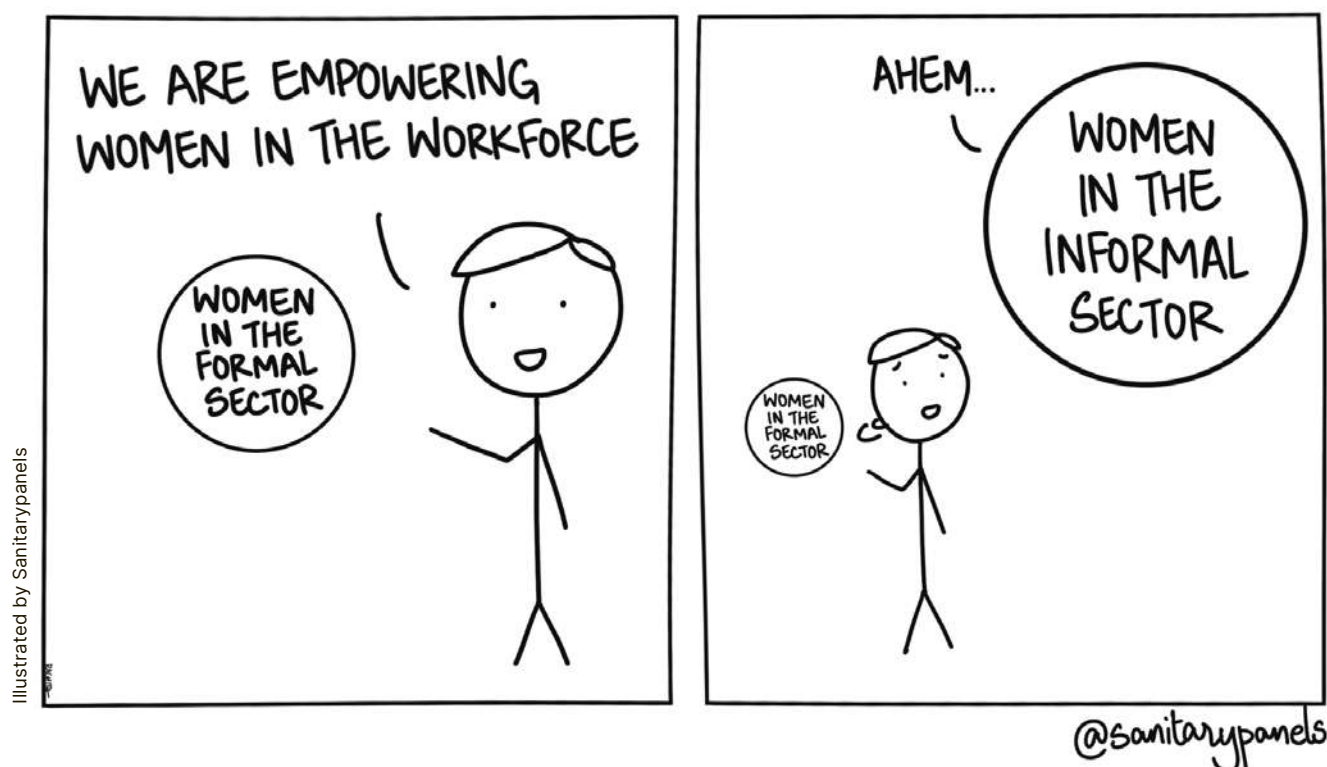
Memory Pamela Kadau

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Advocacy Summary

■ Background and Research Question/Objective

The paper investigates the necessity of a decolonial Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) framework to mitigate concerns about Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and enhance women's economic empowerment within the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) context. Focusing on four Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries—Angola, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe—the study critically examined existing FFP frameworks and how they interact with FTAs in the Majority World. The need to bridge the gap between feminist ideals and the lived realities of women in informal economies drives this inquiry.

■ Literature Review

Existing literature highlights the significant role of women in Africa's informal economies, contributing to local livelihoods and regional trade despite systemic barriers such as limited market access, lack of social protection, and discriminatory policies (Chen, 2012; ILO, 2018). Feminist frameworks often overlook these structural inequities, necessitating an intersectional and decolonial approach

to policy design (Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 2003). By addressing these gaps, AfCFTA has the potential to foster equitable economic participation for women in informal economies (UNECA, 2020).

■ Key Findings

1. The informal sector is the backbone of most African economies and is often women-dominated. However, trade frameworks often exclude women from this sector due to bureaucratic barriers, limited financial resources, and inadequate representation in policy-making processes. These systemic issues perpetuate economic disparities and hinder access to opportunities created by initiatives like AfCFTA.
2. Grassroots feminist movements in the SADC region have demonstrated the ability to advocate effectively for women's rights and economic inclusion. However, underfunding and limited access to strategic platforms hinder their influence in regional and international policy decision-making. Strengthening these movements through technical and financial support is crucial for amplifying their impact.

■ Key Recommendations

→ Specific recommendations to the European Governments and Institutions

- **Enhance collaboration** with feminist grassroots movements in Africa to understand particular challenges faced by women in informal economies.
- **Create** dialogue and fair knowledge exchange platforms to share best practices in integrating gender perspectives into trade and foreign policy.
- **Promote** fair trade practices that prioritise environmental justice,
- Ensure that trade agreements do not undermine local economies or exploit vulnerable groups, particularly women in informal sectors.

→ Governments

- **Simplify** cross-border trade regulations and reduce bureaucratic barriers.
- **Allocate** funding for capacity-improvement programs tailored to women in informal economies. These programs should address the structural barriers women face in informal economies, such as access to education, financial resources, and market opportunities. They should also address challenges such as digital literacy and access to technology, as these can enhance women in the informal economy's trade capabilities, increase their economic independence, and contribute to broader economic development.

- **Establish** consultative mechanisms to engage women's organisations in trade policy development. This participatory approach ensures that women's voices in informal economies are recognised and addressed.
- **Monitor and evaluate** gender inclusivity in trade policies and make necessary adjustments.

→ **Regional and Multilateral Institutions**

- **Harmonise** priorities across Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to address regional disparities.
- **Facilitate** accessible platforms for grassroots advocacy in policy discussions.
- **Provide** technical assistance to member states to engage women's movements in trade policy implementation.

→ **Private Philanthropy**

- **Fund** feminist movements to strengthen their advocacy capacity.
- **Invest** in research and training initiatives for women in informal economies.
- **Support** programs that address structural barriers to women's economic empowerment.

→ **Private Sector**

- **Partner** with governments and civil society for capacity-improvement initiatives.
- **Develop** innovative financial products tailored to the needs of informal sector participants.
- **Adopt** gender-responsive corporate policies to promote economic inclusion.

→ **Civil Society**

- **Strengthen** grassroots coalitions to advocate collectively for inclusive trade policies.
- **Use** narrative-driven advocacy to highlight women's contributions to regional trade.
- **Enhance** grassroots participation in policymaking through training and resource support.

Authors and Acknowledgements

Author Biography

Memory Kadau is a Pan-Africanist and Project Management Specialist with a background and over 17 years in grant-making, human rights, governance and democracy, gender justice, leadership, Early Childhood Education (ECD) and Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), with a focus on sexual violence. Memory is pursuing an LLB with the University of London, United Kingdom, a Higher Diploma in Systemic Family Therapy (2022), Zimbabwe Institute for Systemic Therapy, Harare, Zimbabwe, a Postgraduate Diploma in Project Management (2017), Roehampton University, London and a Bachelor of Science Honors Degree in Journalism and Media Studies, National University of Science and Technology, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (2008).

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To the women in the informal sector, your daily victories and struggles are acknowledged. The researcher hopes the paper's findings and recommendations will contribute to the fight for economic justice.

"I am because we are!"

Acronym List

AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AfDB	African Development Bank
AU	Africa Union
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
EAC	East African Community
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment

FFP	Feminist Foreign Policy
FTAs	Free Trade Agreements
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ODA	Official Development Assistance
REC	Regional Economic Communities
SADC	Southern African Development Community
UN	United Nations

Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents a monumental economic opportunity for Africa, uniting 54 countries with a collective GDP of approximately US\$3.4 trillion (World Bank, 2022; AfCTA, 2024). A key objective of the AfCFTA is to lift 30 million people out of extreme poverty by 2035, contingent on implementing substantial policy reforms and trade facilitation measures that inclusively address marginalised groups, particularly women. With projected increases in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Official Development Assistance (ODA), the AfCFTA aims to elevate women's incomes by 11.2% by 2035 (World Bank, 2022). However, concerns persist about its impact on gender equality, especially for women in the informal sector (Oxfam, 2010). This research paper focused on Track four (4) - Changing the story - and specifically seeks to address the question: How do we build a decolonial framework for Feminist Foreign Policies? What lessons can be learned from diverse experiences around the world? The paper investigates the necessity of a decolonial feminist foreign policy (FFP) framework to mitigate concerns about FTAs and enhance women's economic empowerment within the AfCFTA context. Focusing on four Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries—Angola, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe—the study critically examined existing FFP frameworks and how they interact with FTAs in the Majority World. Often, Western-centric frameworks fail to address the unique challenges faced by women in developing regions, potentially perpetuating colonial legacies and prioritising corporate interests over equitable labour practices and empowerment. This research aims to analyse how FTAs, such as the AfCFTA, may exacerbate gender inequalities by neglecting the significant contributions of women in informal economies. The proposed decolonial FFP framework, rooted in the lived realities of African women, will emphasise:

- Fairtrade agreements that incorporate social and environmental justice.
- Enhanced access to education and financial resources for women.
- Value chain linkages that benefit women in the informal sector.
- Secure land ownership rights for women.
- Recognition and support for unpaid care work by women.

Methodology

Research questions

The research sought answers to the following key research questions:

- To what extent do existing Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) frameworks influence the implementation of FTAs in Africa, particularly regarding their impact on women's informal work?
- How can equitable and decolonial feminist foreign policy frameworks shape AfCFTA to better address the needs of women working in the informal sector within the SADC region (Angola, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe)?
- What advocacy initiatives and platforms can grassroots feminist movements in the SADC region most effectively leverage to influence the implementation of the AfCFTA for equitable and feminist outcomes?

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are as follows:

1. Analyse the influence of existing Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) frameworks on implementing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) in Africa, focusing on their impact on women's informal work through a comprehensive review of policies and case studies in the SADC region by September 2024.
2. Conduct a comparative analysis of the AfCFTA's impact on women in the informal sector. By December 2024, identify necessary reforms within the AfCFTA framework guided by equitable and decolonial feminist principles in Angola, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.
3. Identify and evaluate the effectiveness of at least three advocacy initiatives and platforms used by grassroots feminist movements in the SADC region to influence the implementation of the AfCFTA by December 2024. Use interviews and surveys to gather data on outcomes and impact.
4. Create a set of actionable recommendations for policymakers and feminist organisations on leveraging equitable and decolonial feminist frameworks in AfCFTA negotiations, tailored to the informal sector in the SADC countries, supported by data from field research and case studies by January 2025

Conceptual framework – This paper focuses on the Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), an approach that integrates gender equality and the protection of women's rights across all areas of a country's foreign relations, including trade, defence,

diplomacy, and development cooperation (International Centre for Research on Women, 2021). The paper covers the core principles of FFP, which prioritise gender equality, actively challenging patriarchal structures, and ensure the inclusion and representation of women and marginalised groups in decision-making processes. In this study, the framework was applied to assess the extent to which it promotes gender equality as a fundamental objective and a strategic means to achieve broader foreign policy goals with a focus on trade agreements. The Swedish government pioneered the world's first explicitly feminist foreign policy in 2014, focusing on removing barriers to gender equality and incorporating a gender perspective in all policy development and decision-making processes (Government of Sweden, 2014). Sweden's comprehensive approach extends across all foreign policy domains, including national security, development co-operation, and trade promotion. "The four Rs": Rights, Resources, Representation and Reality underscore the Swedish framework.

- **Rights** – Protecting and promoting women's rights is a core objective.
- **Resources** – Allocating sufficient resources to achieve gender equality goals.
- **Representation** – Ensuring women's representation is at all levels of decision-making, particularly in foreign policy.
- **Reality** – Reflecting the lived experiences of women and the ongoing challenges they face.

These four "R's" provided part of the broader framework which informed the analysis of the findings of this paper.

Data collection approach – This study used a qualitative approach to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the topic. The research utilised desk review, interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies to gather in-depth insights, perspectives, and experiences from relevant stakeholders, including policymakers, government officials, civil society organisations (CSOs), and members of the feminist movement in the target countries. A total of 64 respondents were reached through interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). These qualitative data collection methods facilitated a deeper exploration of the existing FFP, economic, and political dynamics underlying the AfCTA's implementation, allowing for identifying key challenges, opportunities, and recommendations. Additionally, the study design prioritised ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' rights throughout the research process..

Data analysis approach –The data analysis was done by integrating quantitative and qualitative data to understand the research topics comprehensively. The

data gathered from interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies were analysed using thematic analysis, focusing on key aspects of the research questions. This involved coding the data to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to stakeholders' experiences and perceptions of FFP, trade policies, and the AfCFTA's impact on women in the informal economy. The data was then organised and interpreted to produce a working transcript. This phase enabled an in-depth understanding of the socio-political and economic dynamics that quantitative data from document review could not capture. Findings were then written based on the analysis of the data.

Literature Review

FFP frameworks and principles

The International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) defines Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) as a state's policy that guides interactions with other states and movements, prioritising gender equality and the rights of marginalised groups. FFPs integrate gender equality and the protection of women's rights across all areas of a country's foreign relations, including trade, defence, diplomacy, and development cooperation (International Centre for Research on Women, 2021). The overarching goal of FFP is to prioritise gender equality, actively dismantle patriarchal structures, and ensure the inclusion and representation of women and marginalised groups in decision-making processes. Since Sweden adopted FFP in 2014, over 15 other countries and the Latin American region have developed their versions, each bringing unique elements to their policies while still sharing a common focus on gender equality and human rights (Whipkey et al., 2024). Although the number of countries adopting FFP frameworks has grown, there is still significant room for improvement, particularly as the space for gender equality continues to shrink. A review of the existing policies highlights several key areas for development. Feminist organisations argue that countries need to apply a feminist approach consistently across all elements of foreign policy, including aid, trade, defence, and diplomacy, rather than limiting it to development cooperation alone (CFFP, 2021). UN Women (2018), ICRW (2020), and World Bank (2021) concur that there is a need for countries to allocate more resources specifically toward gender equality as a principal and fully funded goal rather than as a secondary or symbolic objective. Investing more resources in women closes the gender gap, which is a key step towards a strong FFP framework. CFFP (2022) notes that many existing FFP frameworks lack rigorous, independent mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning tied to their intended outcomes.

They argue that effective FFPs should include ongoing assessments to measure impact and make evidence-based adjustments.

The discourse on FFP often takes place within a global system marked by the exclusion and oppression of marginalised groups. Recently, there has been growing recognition of the gendered nature of inequality, leading to an interrogation of sexism and patriarchy and creating space for feminism to intersect with foreign policy processes and debates (ICRW, 2023). However, focusing solely on gender is insufficient for addressing the root causes of structural inequality. According to the theory of intersectionality advanced by Crenshaw (1989), gender interacts with multiple social categories, such as race, class, age, disability, and sexual orientation, forming complex layers of discrimination (Gouws, 2017). Colonial legacies in policymaking have historically prioritised the interests of dominant racial and economic groups, leaving African women at the intersection of racial and gender-based discrimination (CFFP, 2021). This aggravates their exclusion and intensifies their experiences of injustice and oppression. African women, much like other Black and Indigenous women of colour, often challenge patriarchal norms and systems of domination. However, they continue to face structural retaliation and discrimination for defying these norms.

In Africa, the adoption of FFP principles remains limited. Most efforts are tied to international instruments and conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Maputo Protocol, as well as regional frameworks like the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Guidelines on Gender Equality (UN Women, 2020 and Chingarande, 2020). While these instruments provide some basis for integrating gender perspectives, they do not explicitly embody the comprehensive, transformative approach envisioned by FFP. Many African governments have yet to integrate feminist principles into their trade policies fully, and their commitments to gender equality remain largely rhetorical, with limited tangible outcomes (Vhumbunu, 2022). A practical FFP framework should disrupt patriarchal and male-dominated power structures across all aspects of foreign policy (aid, trade, defence, and diplomacy) and be informed by the voices and activism of feminist groups and movements (ICRW, 2022).

FFPs in Trade and gender provisions

In analysing the application of FFP frameworks to trade policies, it is evident that while countries like Canada and Sweden have made strides in integrating gender perspectives into trade agreements, many policies remain limited in scope. Most focus on improving conditions for women entrepreneurs or workers but overlook the more profound structural inequalities women face in informal sectors (see below section), particularly in developing regions like Africa (Vhumbunu, 2022). Understanding these gaps is crucial for shaping more inclusive and impactful frameworks, such as the AfCFTA, through a feminist and decolonial lens.

AfCFTA includes provisions to promote women's empowerment and gender equality (AfCTA, 2021). While AfCFTA protocols on women and trade are significant, they often prioritise gender inclusion over transformation. The mechanisms for implementing gender equity are insufficient. The protocols acknowledge the need for a more inclusive trade environment for women but do not obligate governments to facilitate access to capital or education. These provisions often exist within broader policy frameworks that remain skewed against feminist ideals. For instance, while the AfCFTA aims to create economic opportunities and facilitate trade for women, it operates within a neoliberal paradigm that may not adequately address the specific needs and challenges women face in the informal sector (Randriamaro, 2012). The policy's approach to gender equality tends to be instrumental, viewing women's empowerment as a means to economic growth rather than a fundamental objective in its own right. As a result, the AfCFTA's provisions, though progressive on paper, lack the transformative focus needed to rebalance deeply ingrained power structures and inequalities within the continent.

Women in the informal sector

The informal economy is a vital source of income for many African women, who face structural barriers like limited education, discrimination, and restrictive legal frameworks (Chen et al., 2012). Engaged in activities such as street vending, small-scale trading, and domestic work, these women sustain local economies while navigating precarious conditions, including the absence of social protection and market access. However, policies often marginalised their contributions. FFP frameworks lack the localised strategies necessary to address these challenges, as they prioritise formal economic structures (Thompson, 2019; Molyneux et al., 2020). This disconnect underscores the need for tailored, intersectional approaches.

Intersectionality reveals how overlapping identities, such as class and race, shape women's experiences in the informal sector, compounding exclusion (Crenshaw, 1989). Policies informed by intersectional feminism can better address these diverse realities, ensuring inclusivity for marginalised groups, including rural women and those with disabilities (Chant & Pedwell, 2008; Davis, 2008). AfCFTA presents opportunities to boost economic empowerment but often lacks actionable measures for women in informal economies (ILO, 2018; UNECA, 2020). Integrating intersectional and decolonial feminist principles into AfCFTA can enhance social protection and market access, fostering equitable growth (Kebede, 2021).

Decolonial feminism highlights the systemic inequalities stemming from colonial legacies, advocating for trade policies rooted in African women's lived realities (Mohanty, 2003; Lugones, 2010). This paper builds on Lugones's (2007) theory of coloniality of gender, which argues that colonialism imposed a rigid, Eurocentric gender system that continues to shape socioeconomic inequalities for women in the Majority World. Equitable feminist approaches, expanding beyond gender equality to address systemic injustices, have successfully empowered women in informal economies (Thompson, 2019; Molyneux et al., 2020). Grassroots feminist movements in the SADC region are pivotal in bridging policy and practice, using advocacy and regional collaboration to amplify women's voices (Phiri et al., 2024). However, these movements require substantial financial and structural support to maximise their impact (Mama Cash, 2018).

The literature review shows the urgent need for adapting FFP frameworks and trade policies to the realities of African women in the informal sector, ensuring inclusivity and empowerment through decolonial and intersectional approaches.

Findings

AfCTA, FFP and national policies

The AfCFTA holds significant promise for enhancing intra-African trade and promoting economic growth. However, national policies, which can either facilitate or hinder AfCFTA's gender equality objectives, shape its impact on women's participation in informal economies. FFP frameworks provide a valuable lens for analysing these dynamics, as they advocate for inclusive economic policies that prioritise gender justice and address structural barriers. Findings from the target countries demonstrate that national policies play a crucial role in shaping how trade agreements impact women. All four countries are signatories to progressive policies such as the Maputo Protocol, which align with FFP principles of gender-responsive governance. However, translating these commitments into lived realities requires deliberate national policy interventions. This section examines individual country experiences to assess the interplay between trade agreements, national policies, and FFP principles in advancing gender-equitable trade.

The data table below provides an overview of the economic and demographic profiles of the four countries: Angola, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. It highlights each country's estimated Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in billions of US dollars, reflecting the size and performance of their economies and their respective population sizes, illustrating their demographic significance. These combined statistics give insights into these nations' collective economic output and population, emphasising their regional importance to the continent.

Table 1: GDP and population breakdown – Source: WHO and World Bank

Country	GDP (Billions USD)	Total population (Millions)	Male population (Millions)	Female population (Millions)
Angola	113.29	32.87	16.43	16.44
South Africa	403.05	64.01	31.60	32.41
Tanzania	79.87	68.56	34.28	34.28
Zimbabwe	35.92	18.38	8.73	9.65

Total GDP: US\$632.13 billion

Total population: 183.82 million

Total male population: 91.04 million

Total female population: 92.78 million

Angola

The extractive industry sector, particularly oil, predominantly drives the Angolan economy, constituting a substantial portion of its GDP. As of December 2023, Angola's GDP was approximately \$84 billion (Trading Economics, 2023). Despite this wealth, the informal sector employs a significant segment of the population, with women playing a crucial role. However, national policies have historically prioritised the formal mining industry, which is male-dominated, while neglecting the informal economy where many women operate. This policy bias contradicts key FFP principles, which advocate for economic frameworks that actively dismantle structural inequalities and ensure inclusive development. Although Angola passed a National Gender Equality and Equity Policy in 2023, its practical implementation remains limited. A respondent from Angola highlighted this disconnect, stating,

“National policies exist, but in reality, there is disproportionate support towards big industry, which men dominate. Women continue working in the informal sector with limited support, despite many gender equality national policies.”

This gap shows the need for FFP-aligned trade and economic policies that go beyond symbolic commitments to redistribute resources and opportunities and actively ensure that women in the informal sector thrive in Angola's economic development.

Tanzania

Tanzania is a central import hub with bustling ports facilitating the influx of goods from countries like China and Türkiye. As of December 2023, Tanzania's GDP was \$79 billion (Trading Economics, 2023). However, the dominance of inexpensive imports has placed immense pressure on local small SMEs, which predominantly employ women. These SMEs struggle to compete with the low prices of imported goods, reducing market shares and profits. This economic imbalance provides insights into a critical challenge in trade policy. At the same time, liberalisation creates growth opportunities, but its benefits are not equitably distributed, particularly for women in informal and small-scale trade. A student from the University of Dar es Salaam, currently studying at the University of Agder, Norway, observed, “Tanzania has a sprawling SMEs sector which accounts for over 80% of employment of women, which is a good opportunity to grow the sector under this agreement, at least on paper.” However, while national policies

formally recognise women's rights, representation, and access to resources, the realities of open market economics produce different outcomes. This gap between policy intent and actual economic impact reflects a broader failure to incorporate FFP principles into trade governance. A feminist approach to trade policy would require mechanisms that mitigate the disproportionate burden on women-led SMEs, such as targeted financial support, fair competition policies, and strengthened regional value chains that prioritise gender equity. This means national policies must complement the AfCTA's provisions to realise its implementation targets effectively.

South Africa

As the region's largest economy, South Africa had a GDP of approximately \$400 billion in December 2023 (Trading Economics, 2023). It shares the Beitbridge border with Zimbabwe, one of the busiest cross-border trading points in Southern Africa. However, despite its economic strength, South Africa's national policies on immigration and border control have increasingly become restrictive, creating barriers for informal cross-border traders, many of whom are women. These policies, often shaped by security concerns and economic protectionism, limit women traders' mobility and economic opportunities, undermining the inclusive aspirations of the AfCFTA. A respondent noted, "South Africa is open for global business and white capital, but it is increasingly closing for women cross-border traders in the region. The consistency exposes how national policies connect with aspirations of trade agreements." This statement highlights the contradictions within South Africa's trade and economic policies; while the country champions regional economic integration on paper, its inward-looking policies disproportionately impact women in the informal sector. From an FFP perspective, the design of trade policies should include dismantling structural barriers that marginalise women in cross-border trade. This requires shifting from rigid border policies towards gender-responsive trade facilitation measures, including simplified customs procedures, accessible financial instruments for informal traders, and legal protections against harassment and exploitation at border posts. By aligning national policies with feminist trade principles, South Africa can ensure that AfCFTA's commitments to gender equality translate into tangible economic benefits for women across the region.

Zimbabwe

A substantial informal sector characterises Zimbabwe's economy. As of December 2023, the sector contributed approximately \$26 billion to the GDP (Trading Economics, 2023). Despite national policies and organisations advocating for women's economic rights, there remains a significant gap between policy and practice. The desire to expand the tax base in this multi-billion-dollar sector drives the government's push to regulate the informal sector. However, this approach fails to account for the gendered dimensions of informality, where women, who make up the majority of informal workers, face structural barriers such as limited access to credit, exclusion from decision-making, and heightened vulnerability to exploitation. While Zimbabwe has progressive gender equality policies, their implementation remains inconsistent, limiting women's ability to participate fully in national and regional trade. An FFP lens would advocate for policy reforms prioritising economic justice for women in the informal sector, including adopting gender-responsive taxation policies, ensuring that there is reinvestment of revenue from the informal sector into social protections for women traders, and fostering participatory policymaking processes where informal women traders have a voice. Without such an approach, the aspirations of the AfCFTA risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than dismantling them.

In summary, while AfCFTA provides a framework for enhancing trade and promoting gender equality, the actual impact on women in informal economies is heavily influenced by national policies. To fully realise AfCFTA's potential, member states must align their national policies with the agreement's objectives, ensuring that the needs of women in informal sectors are adequately addressed and supported.

Minimal direct impact on informal economies

Findings from this study indicate that while feminist foreign policy (FFP) frameworks have influenced gender discourse around rights, representation, and resources for women on the continent, trade agreements remain heavily patriarchal and neoliberal in orientation. The negotiation of the AfCFTA involved various stakeholders, including government representatives, regional economic communities (RECs), business entities, international trade organisations, financial institutions, and sections of civil society. However, male voices dominated these negotiations, representing neoliberal ideals of free markets and patriarchal institutions of capital.

The AfCFTA Protocol on Women, Youth and Trade is significant, yet it often prioritises inclusion over transformative change. The Preamble and Article 3(e) recognise gender equality, aiming to “promote and attain sustainable and inclusive socioeconomic development, gender equality, and structural transformation of the State Parties.” Furthermore, Article 27(2)(d) of the Protocol on Trade in Services emphasises “improving the export capacity of informal service suppliers, with particular attention to micro, small, and medium-sized women and youth service suppliers.” These provisions acknowledge the importance of gender equality; however, their integration into actionable policies is still lacking. While the protocols highlight the need for a more inclusive trade environment for women and youth, they do not compel governments to facilitate access to capital or education. Gender-responsive policies should extend beyond mere inclusion; they must fundamentally transform power structures in trade to ensure equal participation for women in both formal and informal economies. Influential theorists stress the necessity of redistribution and recognition of women’s contributions.

Provisions in the AfCFTA related to customs cooperation, trade facilitation, elimination of tariffs, and management of sanitary and phytosanitary measures theoretically hold the potential to empower women in trade. Women-owned SMEs and informal businesses are crucial players in the production of goods, identification of markets, and clearance of imports and exports. The African Development Bank (AfDB, 2015) and UNECA (2020a) highlight women’s significant contributions in agriculture, manufacturing, and services sectors that stand to benefit from increased intra-African trade under the AfCFTA. According to UNECA, the agreement could increase intra-African exports of agricultural and food products by 20-35% (US\$ 10-17 billion), particularly in labour-intensive sectors such as dairy, vegetables, and rice, where women dominate.

However, despite these theoretical benefits, the AfCFTA and SADC trade policies have had minimal tangible impact on the informal economy, which employs over 60% of women in the region. Women in cross-border trading continue to face significant barriers, including restrictive movement regulations, cumbersome border clearance processes, and prohibitive costs. Additionally, women in SME manufacturing struggle to compete with cheap imports from countries such as China and Türkiye that benefit from low or zero tariffs. As a respondent from Tanzania highlighted, “Cultural products and artefacts once dominated by women are now mass-produced by foreign manufacturers, eroding local industries and appropriating cultural identities.”

In Zimbabwe, initiatives such as women’s banks and gender-responsive financing have had limited reach in addressing the financial challenges faced by women

in the informal sector. According to a respondent, “The policy white papers and subsequent structures created are all good, but the implementation is lacking. The informal sector remains largely unsupported and criminalised.” Similarly, in Angola, respondents noted that trade agreements prioritise mainstream sectors like mining and imports, marginalising informal women traders. South Africa has not fared any better, with local SMEs struggling to keep up with cheap imports and women in the informal sector not receiving policy, financial and institutional support to grow their economic activities.

Ultimately, while the AfCFTA has the potential to address gender inequalities and promote women’s economic empowerment, its current design and implementation remain insufficient to overcome systemic barriers faced by women in informal economies. To achieve meaningful change, intentional policy reforms that integrate gender-responsive measures and amplify women’s voices in trade negotiations and implementation processes are needed.

Disconnect between FFP and African realities

Existing FFP frameworks are predominantly steeped in globalised Western paradigms, which significantly limit their resonance with and applicability to women’s lived experiences and struggles in the SADC region. This misalignment arises because these frameworks are informed by international and multilateral agreements deeply influenced by Western conceptualisations of work, entrepreneurship, and economic participation. As a result, FFPs fail to adequately address the nuanced realities of women in Africa’s informal economies.

FFPs, in their current iteration, place a significant emphasis on issues such as equal pay, closing the gender pay gap, and workplace rights—concepts that are undoubtedly crucial. However, these priorities are framed within formal economic structures typical of the Minority World. In contrast, the informal economy dominates the landscape in much of Africa, including SADC, employing over 70% of the region’s workforce, with women comprising a significant majority. Focusing on formal-sector issues often neglects women’s distinctive challenges in informal economies, such as cross-border traders, street vendors, and small-scale producers. A South African respondent observed, “Moving away from a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model towards approaches grounded in localised experiences and solutions is important. We are not seeking to reinvent the wheel, but frameworks for feminist foreign policy also need to reflect our own experiences and lived realities.” This statement stresses the need for FFPs to

shift their focus from universalised frameworks to ones rooted in decolonial and context-specific perspectives.

Angola, Tanzania, South Africa, and Zimbabwe share histories shaped by colonialism and, in the case of South Africa, apartheid. These systems entrenched inequalities, shaping today's political, economic, and social structures. For example, colonial and apartheid policies disproportionately excluded black and coloured women from access to land, capital, and formal employment opportunities, forcing many into precarious roles in the informal sector. Despite these historical injustices, existing FFP frameworks often fail to account for these structural inequities, reinforcing their marginalisation. A decolonial feminist approach offers a pathway to address these shortcomings by acknowledging and addressing African women's historical and socio-political contexts. This involves recognising the informal sector as a legitimate economic arena and understanding how it intersects with global trade policies such as the AfCFTA.

Rights, representation, resources and reality, the cornerstone concepts of FFP, are often narrowly interpreted within formal decision-making platforms. However, SADC's grassroots organisations and civil society actors highlight these concepts' interconnectedness in informal networks and value chains. Findings reveal that many women in the informal sector, particularly cross-border traders, have their own associations and systems of cooperation. However, formal trade policy discussions frequently exclude these networks. A key informant emphasised,

“Women from informal sector networks and value chains are underrepresented, and their voices often go unheard in existing frameworks of feminist foreign policy. It is important to deconstruct this and have frameworks which better reflect their lived realities and experiences.”

Funding models employed by donors and philanthropic foundations further exacerbate the disconnect between FFPs and the realities of African women. These models often operate within rigid interpretations of rights, representation, and resources, focusing on measurable outcomes tied to formal platforms rather than the more diffuse, community-based impacts of informal economic participation. This narrow focus limits the ability of grassroots movements to engage meaningfully in policy-making processes and to amplify their struggles for economic emancipation. Moreover, it perpetuates a hierarchical approach to development, sidelining local knowledge and agency.

Bureaucratic bottlenecks in trade policy implementation

Developing and implementing trade policies across the target countries is highly technical and bureaucratic. It involves coordinating multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, private sector representatives, international financial institutions (IFIs), and think tanks. While these stakeholders play critical roles, the complexity of aligning the objectives of trade agreements with national and regional priorities creates significant bureaucratic bottlenecks. These bottlenecks, in turn, marginalise key actors in the informal economy, particularly women. Implementing trade agreements like the AfCFTA relies on a range of legislative reforms and regulatory alignments at the national level. However, by their very nature, bureaucracies engage primarily with organisations and institutions operating at similar formality and structure levels. This dynamic disproportionately favours the formal sector and more prominent private sector players, excluding informal sector actors like women traders who lack the institutional capacity and resources to navigate these processes effectively.

A historical example of this challenge is evident in the implementation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), adopted by the African Union (AU) in Lusaka in 2001. NEPAD was a bold initiative to eradicate poverty, foster sustainable development, and empower women through inclusive economic growth. While these objectives were commendable, the initiative encountered significant bureaucratic bottlenecks that hindered its execution. For instance, NEPAD's institutional framework relied heavily on centralised decision-making processes dominated by state actors and large development agencies. This structure limited the involvement of grassroots organisations and women's groups, whose perspectives and experiences were crucial to addressing the localised realities of poverty and gender inequality. According to Bostan (2011), NEPAD failed to effectively integrate women into its programs or provide adequate platforms for their participation in decision-making. This exclusion perpetuated systemic barriers to women's economic empowerment and undermined the initiative's ability to achieve its stated goals.

Lessons from NEPAD's shortcomings are particularly relevant for the AfCFTA. Despite its potential to transform trade dynamics across Africa, the AfCFTA risks replicating similar patterns of exclusion if it fails to address the inherent biases and inefficiencies of bureaucratic systems. Meaningful participation of informal sector actors, particularly women traders, must be prioritised through targeted interventions that simplify bureaucratic processes, enhance accessibility, and incorporate the voices of marginalised groups into policy design and implementation. Without such measures, the transformative promises of initiatives

like NEPAD and the AfCFTA may remain unrealised. Evidence from the study reveals that women's engagement in the informal sector during trade policy development often serves more as a symbolic gesture than a genuine effort to promote their economic empowerment. These token engagements are primarily designed to "tick the boxes," presenting a facade of inclusivity that aligns with international obligations for gender equality. A respondent observed, "Many of these engagements are performative. Women's voices are acknowledged but not integrated meaningfully into the decision-making process. The focus remains on meeting international compliance standards rather than addressing local realities."

The bureaucratic management of the AfCFTA further compounds these challenges. The AfCFTA Secretariat, based in Accra, Ghana, collaborates with Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to facilitate implementation. However, each REC operates with distinct priorities, creating a fragmented approach that limits the pace and coherence of implementation. Additionally, the technical nature of trade policy engagements and the financial and human resources required to participate mean that only governments and large businesses can effectively influence the process. Women's grassroots organisations and feminist civil society groups cannot often follow the intricate details of these negotiations and policy rollouts. Respondents from across the four countries studied noted that despite public celebrations of the AfCFTA's launch on July 7, 2019, its implementation remains confined to bureaucratic channels. These channels often exclude CSOs and women's grassroots movements, leaving them on the periphery of critical discussions. "Real power lies in the bureaucracy," an expert noted, "and it is not easy to engage or follow up with the technical details of implementing trade agreements like the AfCFTA. Most CSOs and women's organisations have barely scratched the surface of what is being proposed and operationalised in SADC. Governments, the SADC Secretariat, and big business run the show."

Moreover, the financial and logistical barriers to engagement cannot be overlooked. Women in the informal sector, who make significant contributions to regional trade, are often constrained by limited resources and capacity, preventing them from participating in bureaucratic processes. This exclusion perpetuates systemic inequalities, as the informal economy remains underrepresented in trade policy implementation. For the AfCFTA to achieve its stated goals of inclusivity and gender equity, deliberate efforts must be made to simplify bureaucratic processes and lower the barriers to participation for informal sector actors. This includes creating more accessible platforms for dialogue, providing technical support to grassroots organisations, and ensuring that trade policy frameworks reflect the lived realities of those they aim to empower. Without such interventions, the

AfCFTA risks becoming another initiative that benefits the formal sector and entrenched power structures while leaving behind the groups it aims to uplift.

Opportunities from existing FFP frameworks and trade policies

Findings reveal that while FFP frameworks are often criticised for being Western-centric, they also offer critical windows of opportunity for women in Africa's informal sector to engage meaningfully with trade agreements like the AfCFTA. These frameworks challenge dominant narratives and create platforms for advancing African women's economic participation and addressing entrenched inequalities. Importantly, this opening allows grassroots feminist movements to build more substantial, cohesive advocacy efforts in the SADC region and across the continent, fostering inclusion in trade policy processes traditionally reserved for elites.

Leveraging rights frameworks

Instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Maputo Protocol establish women's economic, social, and political rights. . These frameworks mandate state parties and regional bodies to uphold women's rights, including access to information, freedom of assembly and movement, non-discrimination, and socioeconomic opportunities. These rights are foundational for women's full citizenship and participation in the public sphere. Respondents highlighted the importance of these instruments as tools for advocacy and transformation. A Tanzanian respondent emphasised,

"The existence of international instruments to which governments in SADC are party is a significant step. Women in the informal sector and CSOs can leverage these rights to push for changes in how FFP frameworks are constructed. Rights are fundamental because they empower advocacy and demand accountability."

Recognising these rights within FFP discussions also informs the broader discourse on decolonising trade agreements, ensuring that they reflect the lived realities of women in the informal economy. These frameworks provide the legal and moral foundation for advocacy efforts to ensure women benefit equitably from economic integration initiatives like AfCFTA.

Representation and gender equality

Political representation is key in amplifying women's voices in decision-making spaces. While the SADC region has made progress, with the proportion of women in political leadership increasing over the last two decades, the regional average remains at 24%, below the global average of 30% (SADC Parliamentary Forum, 2023). This underrepresentation limits the potential for women's issues, particularly those in the informal sector, to be prioritised in trade agreements and other economic policies. Respondents from the study underscored the importance of representation.

"The increase in the number of women in public leadership over the last 20 years is important for challenging existing power structures. It creates a platform to redefine how FFP is constructed, ensuring it aligns with the lived realities of African women, particularly in the informal economy."

Representation in parliaments, cabinets, and key government agencies helps shape narratives around FFP, ensuring that policies address women's specific challenges in the region.

Access to resources and economic empowerment

Trade agreements like AfCFTA are fundamentally about improving access to resources, markets, and raw materials. Historically, women in the informal sector have faced significant barriers to accessing capital, land, and other critical resources. However, evidence shows that access to these resources improves economic outcomes, reduces poverty, and promotes social progress.

Existing FFP frameworks highlight the importance of these issues, and AfCFTA's objectives provide an opportunity to integrate women's participation into the economic benefits of trade agreements. As one respondent pointed out,

"Access to resources is critical. When women are empowered with capital or land, the ripple effects on economic growth and poverty alleviation are undeniable. FFP frameworks should prioritise this as a core objective."

However, barriers persist. Grassroots feminist movements face challenges accessing funding, networks, and platforms to engage effectively with these trade agreements. Findings indicate that addressing these systemic issues is key to leveraging FFP and AfCFTA's opportunities for African women.

Capacity-building and philanthropic support for grassroots movements

Findings underscore the critical role of capacity-building initiatives and philanthropic support in bridging the gaps within feminist foreign policy (FFP) frameworks. Transformative strategies include strengthening women's financial literacy, enhancing business acumen, and creating pathways to transition from subsistence-level enterprises to commercial ventures. Empowering women to engage effectively in policy discussions through targeted support can drive significant changes in trade policy outcomes.

Capacity-building efforts

Existing capacity-building programs equip women in informal sectors with the tools to understand and engage with trade agreements like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). These programs combine skills training with monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to measure their impact and amplify advocacy efforts. A key informant noted,

“Training programs are giving women the knowledge to understand trade agreements and how they can be leveraged for economic benefit. This is critical for their inclusion in spaces traditionally dominated by men and big business.”

At the national level, organisations such as WALPE in Zimbabwe and Mwana Pwo in Angola are leading efforts to elevate women's participation in leadership and policymaking. They work closely with women in the informal sector, encouraging their active involvement in policy dialogues and leadership roles. A respondent highlighted the importance of political engagement, stating,

“Politics is where priorities are brokered and defined. Women must actively and effectively participate to challenge and change the status quo.”

Role of philanthropic support

Philanthropic organisations are pivotal in advancing economic justice for women in the informal sector. Mama Cash, a feminist funder, exemplifies this support with a focus on capacity building and advocacy. In a recent report, Mama Cash noted,

“We have distributed €21.5 million in more than 1,100 grants to organisations advancing economic justice in 120 countries. With this support, feminist

activists have won labour protections and social security, reformed land, property, and inheritance rights, secured minimum wages, fought employment and housing discrimination against trans and intersex individuals, and protested the gendered impact of trade policies.”

Mainstream donors such as the European Commission (EC), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) have supported training programs, advocacy initiatives, and grassroots coalitions. These partnerships have enabled grassroots feminist movements to form regional coalitions, engage civil society organisations, and use tools like documentaries and narrative-driven campaigns to highlight women’s contributions to trade and economic justice.

Regional and national advocacy

Regional umbrella organisations, including FEMNET and Gender Links, provide sub-granting services to grassroots associations, strengthening the feminist movement’s capacity to influence economic and trade policies. These organisations support local networks in conducting campaigns and dialogues with policymakers, ensuring women’s voices from the informal economy are heard.

Governments collaborate with development partners and civil society organisations at the national level to align trade policies with FFP principles. They aim to engage marginalised women directly in policy formulation, adapt policies to diverse local contexts, and implement monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress. While these efforts are progressive, bureaucratic bottlenecks remain a significant challenge. A respondent observed, *“Engagement with government structures is important for women to reform cross-border regulations and trade policies. Governments may not always listen or act, but sustained engagement ensures these issues remain in policymaking corridors.”*

Grassroots impact

These initiatives enable grassroots movements to leverage international platforms like the UN Commission on the Status of Women to amplify women’s voices and influence global policy discussions. Despite their limitations, respondents acknowledged that these platforms provide opportunities to challenge existing narratives and advocate for inclusive trade policies.

Addressing systemic barriers, building capacity, and fostering partnerships enable women in the informal sector to shape trade policies and actively leverage

opportunities like AfCFTA. As one respondent aptly summarised, *“Grassroots capacity-building and engagement are key to ensuring women in the informal economy not only benefit from trade policies but also have a hand in shaping them to reflect their realities and aspirations.”*

Recommendations

Specific recommendations to the European Government and Institutions

- **Support capacity strengthening:** Invest in capacity-strengthening initiatives for women-led organisations and African grassroots movements. This support should enhance their advocacy skills, enabling them to engage effectively in trade policy discussions and negotiations. It should also help women in the informal sector strengthen their value chain networks and advocate for changes to rigid colonial trade policy institutions and practices.
- **Promote fair trade practices:** Encourage fair trade practices that prioritise social and environmental justice and address structural inequalities created by historical injustices like colonialism and apartheid. This includes ensuring that trade agreements do not undermine local economies or exploit vulnerable groups, particularly women in informal sectors. Also, it supports solidarity economies, which characterise the informal sector in Africa.
- **Facilitate knowledge exchange:** Create platforms for knowledge exchange between European and African countries and civil society to share best practices in integrating gender perspectives into trade and foreign policy. It is also important to support localised research and development of economic value chains that can grow trade in the informal sector and transition them into SMEs.
- **Commit to transparent practices:** Foster transparency in trade negotiations and agreements. Make the processes accessible to civil society and stakeholders, allowing for informed public engagement and scrutiny.
- **Enhance collaboration with grassroots movements:** European Governments should actively engage with grassroots feminist organisations in Africa to understand the specific challenges faced by women in informal economies. This involves creating platforms for dialogue that allow these organisations to influence trade policy discussions. By prioritising the perspectives and expertise of local women’s groups, governments can ensure that trade agreements, including those under the AfCFTA, are designed to promote economic inclusion and address the unique barriers faced by women.
- **Integrate gender-responsive economic policies:** European governments should advocate for and implement gender-responsive policies within their

trade agreements with African countries. This includes establishing frameworks that ensure women's economic contributions are recognised and supported, particularly in the informal sector. By aligning trade policies with gender equality objectives, such as access to financial resources, capacity-building programs, and protection against discrimination

National governments

- **Integrate informal sector perspectives into trade policy design:** Ensure that women's voices in the informal sector are incorporated into trade policy development, including AfCFTA implementation. Establish consultative mechanisms that engage grassroots women's organisations and informal trader associations as key national policy development and implementation stakeholders.
- **Simplify cross-border trade regulations:** Reform onerous border procedures and reduce bureaucratic barriers disproportionately affecting women traders. Provide streamlined processes for small-scale traders to access regional markets and feed into export value chains.
- **Allocate funding for capacity building:** Dedicate national budgets to support training programs for women in financial literacy, business development, and understanding trade agreements. Establish gender-responsive budgeting practices to ensure resources reach women in informal economies and improve the infrastructure for the informal sector. Address challenges such as digital literacy and access to technology, as these can enhance women's trade capabilities in the informal economy, increase their economic independence, and contribute to broader economic development.
- **Monitor and evaluate gender inclusivity in trade policies:** Develop robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track the gendered impacts of trade policies. Use these evaluations to inform future policy adjustments and ensure continuous policy improvement.

Regional and Multilateral Institutions

- **Harmonise priorities across Regional Economic Communities (RECs):** Align the implementation of AfCFTA with the specific needs of women in different regions by ensuring that RECs collaborate effectively through shared platforms. Create interlinked gender-focused working groups within RECs to address women's economic participation.
- **Provide technical assistance for grassroots engagement:** Support member states with resources and expertise to engage women's grassroots movements

in trade policy implementation. Develop toolkits and guidelines tailored for informal sector inclusion.

- **Facilitate accessible platforms for advocacy:** Use regional and global forums to amplify women's voices in informal economies. Provide platforms for grassroots representatives to present their priorities directly to policymakers.

Private philanthropy

- **Fund feminist movements:** Establish flexible funding mechanisms for grassroots feminist organisations to strengthen their capacity for advocacy and engagement in trade policy—Prioritise long-term funding commitments to ensure sustainable impact and support internal resource mobilisation initiatives.
- **Support economic justice initiatives:** Channel resources into programs that advance women's access to capital, land, and markets. Focus on addressing structural barriers that hinder women's economic empowerment so they are independent.
- **Invest in training and research:** Fund initiatives that help women understand trade agreements and their economic implications. Support research highlighting women's contributions to regional trade in informal economies.

Private sector

- **Engage in public-private partnerships for capacity building:** Partner with governments and civil society to train women traders on business development, digital skills, and financial literacy.
- **Facilitate access to credit and markets:** Develop innovative financial products tailored to the needs of women in informal economies. Create supply chain programs integrating informal sector goods and services into formal markets.
- **Adopt gender-responsive corporate policies:** Ensure corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives explicitly address gender equity. Support policies that promote women's economic empowerment, such as equal pay, parental leave, and anti-discrimination measures.

Civil society

- **Strengthen grassroots coalitions:** Build networks of women's organisations across SADC to advocate collectively for inclusive trade policies. Facilitate cross-border collaborations to amplify advocacy efforts.
- **Use narrative-driven advocacy:** Develop and disseminate documentaries, case studies, and storytelling initiatives highlighting women's lived realities

and contributions to informal economies. Use these narratives to influence policy discussions at the national and regional levels.

- **Enhance participation in policymaking:** Train grassroots leaders to effectively engage with policymakers and participate in trade negotiations. Provide resources and platforms for continuous advocacy at local, national, and regional levels.
- **Monitor government commitments:** Hold governments accountable for gender and trade commitments under AfCFTA and other frameworks. Publish periodic reports evaluating progress and highlighting gaps in implementation.

Conclusions and Way Forward

This research highlights the critical importance of integrating women's perspectives, particularly those from the informal sector, into Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) frameworks and trade agreements like the AfCFTA. The findings reveal the challenges and opportunities inherent in this process, emphasising that genuine inclusivity requires dismantling structural barriers, amplifying grassroots voices, and aligning policies with the lived realities of African women.

Stakeholders have a unique opportunity to use this research as a roadmap for action. Governments can lead the way by reviewing and reforming bureaucratic processes and ensuring that trade policies are accessible and beneficial to women in informal economies. Regional and multilateral institutions can play a pivotal role in harmonising priorities and providing technical assistance to grassroots organisations. Private philanthropy can drive long-term change by funding feminist movements and investing in capacity-building initiatives. Meanwhile, the private sector can foster economic inclusion through innovative partnerships and gender-responsive policies. Civil society remains a cornerstone for advocacy and monitoring, holding all actors accountable to their commitments.

The way forward involves fostering collaboration across these sectors and ensuring that trade agreements and FFP frameworks are theoretical constructs and practical tools for economic justice. Findings show that by prioritising the voices and needs of women in informal economies, stakeholders can create a more equitable and sustainable future in which trade and foreign policy truly empower and uplift marginalised communities.

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