REDEFINING RISK

The Cost of Not Funding Women's Rights Organisations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alliance for Feminist Movements

EQUAL MEASURES 2030

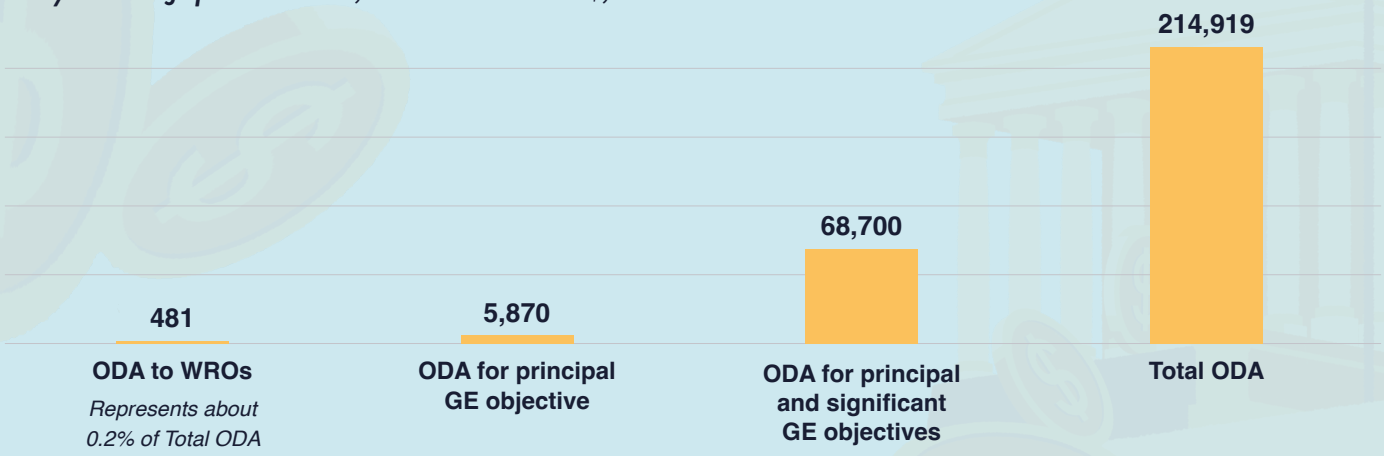
Overview

As philanthropy and official development assistance (ODA) shrink and face heightened scrutiny, funding practices tend to shift away from smaller women's rights organisations and feminist movements (WROs) to larger, more mainstream organisations that have traditionally been perceived as less risky because of their size and profile. But what are the risks to gender equality and broader development outcomes of allowing robust, well-funded and well-supported WROs to disappear?

WROs are key drivers of progress on gender equality – few of the advances in women's rights would have been possible without the advocacy of WROs to raise public awareness, to pressure governments and to hold governments to account for implementing laws and policies[1]. Their achievements are despite receiving a negligible proportion of available funding and often turbulent environments, showing their extraordinary resilience.

Figure 1: Only 0.2% of total ODA goes directly to WROs – despite their proven impact.

Two-year average for 2022-2023, in constant 2023 US$, millions



Notes: *ODA to WROs* includes spending marked with sector code 15170 (Women's Rights Organizations and Movements, and Government Institutions).

Source: OECD, 2025.'

But resilience can only take WROs so far. As aid budgets are slashed worldwide and gender equality attacked to consolidate political gains, available funding and civic space for WROs is likely to contract threatening to push even the strongest to the brink of extinction.

The challenges:

- Financing small, grassroots organisations is especially difficult for institutional donors, specifically large foundations and ODA providers.
- Funding is increasingly only available for short-term projects, rather than the long-term movement-building work needed to achieve systemic shifts in gender power relations.
- This constricting funding ecosystem sits within a period of prolonged global democratic backsliding and closing civic space, in which WROs' hard-won gains in gender equality are being systematically eroded.

Across four country case studies – Bangladesh, Nicaragua, Turkey and Zimbabwe – we found that without funding and a supportive environment feminist movements fade into silence. This leads to adverse outcomes for gender equality and tangible impacts on people's lives, from reduced economic freedom to increased violence.

[1]OECD (2016) Donor Support to Southern Women's Rights Organizations. OECD DAC Committee on Gender Equality (Gendernet).

Key findings

Following the period of UN-backed global conferences in the 1990s, increased funding and support for civil society powered WROs to boost progress on gender equality and defend rights. But amid political volatility and growing extremism a period of decreased funding and altered methods has followed – as have negative outcomes.

Funding for WROs has become less available, less flexible and more restricted

Activists in each country highlighted several common challenges: decreased availability of flexible funding; increased competition for funding; excessive bureaucracy to secure international funding; and impact measurement requirements unsuited to work for long-term change, particularly in contexts of shrinking civic space.

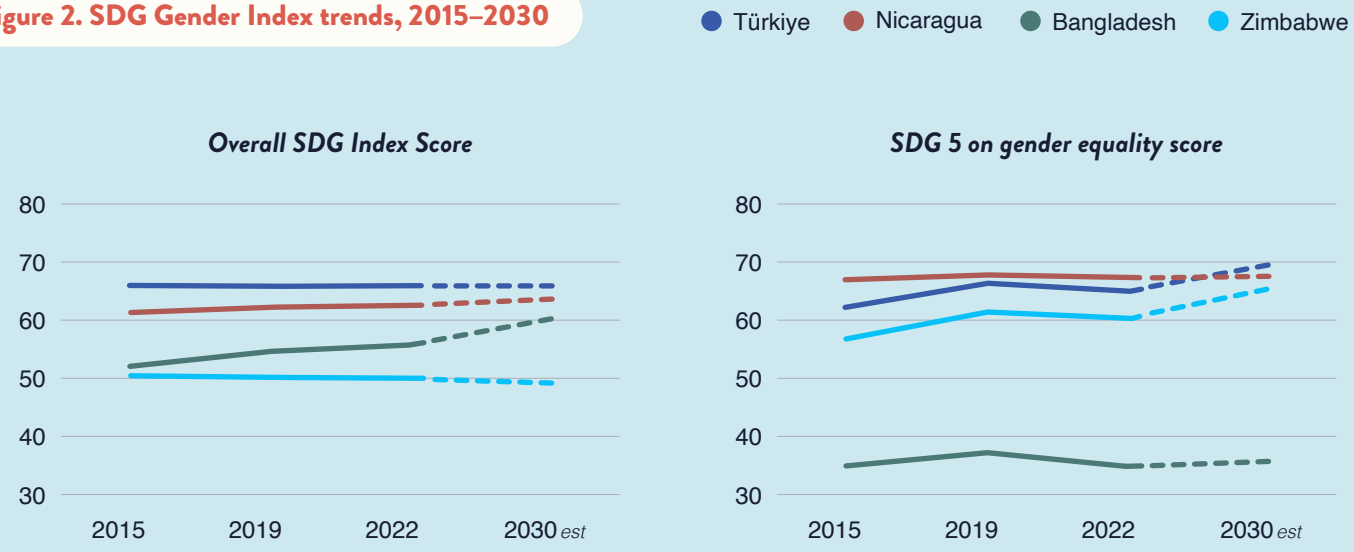
Without funding, movements fade into silence

Defunding of or reduced funding for WROs commonly goes hand in hand with social repression and decreasing civic space. In such contexts, repressive governments often place direct restrictions on receiving funding or donors withdraw or restructure funding because of increased risk. To access funds, WROs often shift from advocacy to service provision, or stop work on politicised issues such as gender-based violence, abortion or LGBTQI+ rights.

Weakened movements lead to adverse outcomes for women and girls

All countries we studied show worrying trends in gender-equality measures. Key indicators crucial to women's wellbeing and progress – such as freedom and autonomy, political participation and gender-based violence – either stagnate or are getting worse. In each country, governments have either rolled back or attempted to roll back progress on gender equality, especially on gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health and rights. WROs can sometimes 'hold the line' in these contexts, preventing some measures from slipping backwards as much as they might otherwise, but only if they are well funded and supported.

Figure 2. SDG Gender Index trends, 2015–2030



A country's index score is based on a scale of 0 to 100 points where 0 is the lowest score and 100 points is the highest.

0-60 = Very Poor
60-70 = Poor
70-80 = Fair
80-90 = Good
90-100 = Very Good

Source: Equal Measures 2030. 2024.

Key recommendations

Funding feminist movements matters. WROs are an essential buttress to women's rights, especially when governments oppose progress and suppression takes hold. They ensure invaluable protection of the rights of women and girls and crucial progress on gender equality – vital to achieving wider development goals.

How can you change the tide and support WROs to continue the push for gender equality?

All donors

- Support legal and compliance teams to engage with grantee partners and their contexts and 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 organisations' and activists' ability to safely organise, receive and distribute funds and demand accountability.
- Report funding data to the OECD Creditor Report System, using the Development Assistance Committee gender equality policy marker, especially direct funding to WROs.

Government donors

- When direct funding of local groups is not possible, consult and cooperate with local WROs to identify the most appropriate intermediary funder. Recognise that different types of intermediaries offer different political and programming benefits.
- Support intermediary funds, especially women's and feminist funds, that are embedded in local contexts. These funds provide long-term, unrestricted support and protective support such as legal help to local WROs and activists.
- When advised by local activists, speak out against and resist measures that restrict civic space and limit organisations' and activists' abilities to safely organise, receive and distribute funds and demand accountability.
- Embed support for collection and use of gender data into official development assistance, to monitor projects and contribute to building sustainable and comprehensive gender data ecosystems.

Philanthropy

- Use philanthropy's unique position to support diaspora WROs that may otherwise be unable to access official development assistance 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 funding portfolios support the full range of organisations crucial to healthy movements, including established organisations, emerging networks and groups led by young people. Whenever possible, build this complementarity with other donors, including government donors.

About us

Equal Measures 2030 is a coalition of national and international leaders from feminist networks, civil society and international development. We connect data and evidence with advocacy and action on gender equality, to transform the lives of women and girls and realise the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Alliance for Feminist Movements is a collaborative multi-stakeholder initiative with members from governments, philanthropy, women's and feminist funds, civil society and other allies. The Alliance and its members are dedicated to increasing and improving the quality of resources and political support for diverse feminist movements, agendas and policies.

Read the full report and recommendations at equalmeasures2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Redefining-Risk-The-Cost-of-Not-Funding-Womens-Rights-Organisations.pdf

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Authored by: Sinéad Nolan, Coretta Jonah, Rachel Jacobson, Alison Holder, Albert Motivans
Edited by: Rebecca Heald
Translation by: Maiten Vargas (Spanish), Émilie Brochard (French)
Design by: Ben Korda

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Equal Measures 2030 and the Alliance for Feminist Movements
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Alliance for Feminist Movements

EQUAL MEASURES 2030