



Feminists on the frontline of defending human rights and democracy:


how can funders make an impact?





About Us

The Observatory on the Universality of Rights (OURs) is a collective of rights-affirming organizations committed to intersectional feminist principles. We monitor, analyze, share information, and lead collaborative advocacy to respond to the anti-rights threats undermining regional and international human rights systems. Based on our shared values, combined with the strength of our diversity, we have been working together to sound the alarm and collectively push back against rising fascisms, fundamentalisms, and anti-rights trends for the last decade.




Context

As a coalition, we see that all regions are impacted by advancing authoritarianism, organized opposition to the rights of people in marginalized groups, and broader challenges to the universality of human rights and the erosion of democracy.

Anti-rights groups deploy various strategies to undermine rights linked to gender and sexuality and to limit the participation of progressive civil society. Whether at the global level at the United Nations, in regional environments such as the African Commission and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, or at the local and national level, right wing governments and their fundamentalist civil society partners are using myriad strategies to limit civic engagement, expression, and organizing.

At the national level, anti-NGO bills, such as those passed in Paraguay (2024) and Egypt (2019), illustrate the devastating impact of these agendas on the ability of feminist, women's rights, and gender justice organizations and movements to organize. Elsewhere, such as in Argentina, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States, hard won human rights advances are now at risk following elections which shifted governments away from universal rights.

Anti-rights actors are conservative, fascist, and fundamentalist state or non-state groups and individuals who are increasingly dominating narrative, political, and cultural power in spaces of political governance, including multilateral human rights systems. These actors, while nationalist in their discourse, are also often part of a transnational anti-rights ecosystem that shares ideological underpinnings, political alliances, and financing networks. Backed by opaque funding trails, these actors build tactical alliances across issues, regions, and faiths to increase their impact. They deploy cultural, religious, and nationalist arguments that rest on myths and fear-mongering, and which result in catastrophic undermining of human rights.





How funders can make a difference

In January 2025, the sudden and unprecedented USAID Stop Work Order – issued by the Trump administration under the auspices of the Elon Musk-headed Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) – sent shockwaves through the development, humanitarian, and human rights ecosystems.

As the sector scrambles with the fallout of this, we are met with worrying signs from other states who have traditionally supported gender equality and rights-affirming work globally, who are also reducing Overseas Development Aid and slashing funding for gender equality.

Before these developments, feminist movements and rights defenders were already contending with a changing resourcing ecosystem influenced by the global shift rightwards: the redistribution of resources from civil society to government, significant reductions in foreign aid, and even closure of private foundations who held up much of the support for our shared work. Before 2025, we were already concerned that there was no clear funding stream or institution who could “fill the gap” for our vital work.

We note the positive trend of funders turning their attention to the concerns of backlash, anti-rights, and anti-gender threats. Some donors have allocated resources to support groups researching, tracking, resisting, and responding to the opposition. AWID’s 2024 *Where is the Money for Feminist Organizing*¹ survey found that nearly 30% of feminist groups received funding for work to counter anti-rights trends between 2021 and 2023. This kind of support has made significant contributions to expanding the base of informed advocates who are better able to anticipate risks and prepare to respond.

Yet much more needs to be done to bring this work to scale and create a sustainable movement that can resist for the long term. The feminist resourcing ecosystem must mobilize collectively, to defend hard-won rights and to fuel ambitious and transformative feminist agendas. Now is the time to increase support for proven strategies that support local feminist movements, opposition research, feminist investigative journalism, and collective, intersectional - working across racial and gender justice, transnational organizing, movement-building and advocacy.

¹AWID’s flagship survey, “[Where is the Money for Feminist Organizing?](https://www.awid.org/witm2024)” (WITM), was conducted between May and August 2024. Its sample includes nearly 1,200 diverse groups, organizations, and movements working for women’s and LBTQI+ rights and gender justice. These groups provided data about their financial situations from 2021 to 2023. Nearly 90% of respondents operate in the Majority World (Africa, Latin America & the Caribbean, Asia & the Pacific), with 80% working at national and/or local levels. For more information, visit www.awid.org/witm2024.

The OURs coalition's messages to funders



- Achieve the most impact by supporting and strengthening intersectional alliances and coalitions with a track record of advancing human rights and resisting fascisms and fundamentalisms.
- In order to bring this work to scale, support emerging intersectional movements, particularly at the local and national level. Both these funding tracks should be long-term and sustainable.
- Intra- and inter-regional and cross-movement dialogue is integral to building resistance to anti-rights actors. It takes time and painstaking effort to nurture trust-based, effective coalitions. Be realistic about time and expectations.
- Continue supporting national, regional, and international advocacy work to protect our hard-won gains in multilateral spaces. In restrictive national contexts, these advances are the only accountability tools to maintain rights advancement and oppose setbacks.
- Advocacy relies on timely, reliable, and accurate intelligence. Support organizations who dedicate their time to tracking, sharing, and developing response strategies to mitigate and ultimately prevent the success of the anti-rights movement.
- Advocacy work takes time and involves sustaining participation through changing political tides. Results are often in the medium or long term, so short-term "indicators" and grants are misleading. Donors must support multi-year strategies.

While the opposition plans for the long term, with 20-year advocacy strategies, often with sustained funding, many feminist groups usually receive grants with a duration of between 6 and 12 months.² The feminist movement needs long-term flexible financial support to match and outpace the work of the anti-rights movement - with the sufficient resources, they can!

"We want multi-year funding so we focus on projects instead of mobilizing resources."

"Multi-year grants make us work more effectively and safely. Please do not shy away from it."

- WITM survey respondents



- Prioritize support for historically marginalized groups, such as trans people, sex workers, Indigenous, migrant, disabled, Black, and anti-caste feminists among others. We must continue to support these groups in the face of attacks from opposition groups, including exclusionary currents within feminism.
- Recognize the efforts of those most affected to defend their communities and hold the line, as well as their work creating just alternatives, as part of the global response to anti-rights movements.
- With the rise of global fascisms and fundamentalisms, we are moving into partly unknown territory and security is paramount. Consider focusing on:
 - Data security: Ensure the safety of your grantee information - we are only as safe as your systems are.
 - Legal defense funds: Authoritarian governments are increasingly emboldened to prosecute their perceived enemies. Human rights defenders working on reproductive rights, climate justice, and LGBTI rights are in the cross hairs, facing arrest, jail, or even worse. These defenders need legal support that is free and readily available.
 - Funding for safety and security: Many authoritarian governments bypass legal law enforcement channels to harass and intimidate feminist organizations and human rights defenders. Dedicated funding must be allocated to defenders' security.
- We all must view attacks on gender as just one entry point for the anti-rights movement. Therefore, a broad approach to responding to these threats must be undertaken, and should include protecting democracy and civic participation - particularly the right to freedom of expression and assembly.
- While we recognize that the funding ecosystem overall is challenging, those at the frontlines will continue to face the most danger. Recognize partners who work in challenging situations, don't walk away from them when you are most needed.

Those at the sharp end of anti-rights attacks also have the solutions and alternative visions needed to win.

“We have the knowledge, skills, lived experiences and track record to know and deliver what works: believe in us - fund us, long-term with core costs and we will prove this.”

- WITM survey respondent

² According to AWID's 2024 WITM survey, nearly 40% of respondents received grants with an average duration of between 6 and 12 months. Only 12% and 3.5% received grants that last for between 2-3 or between 3-5 years, respectively.

“We hope you talk with other funders – both those directly aligned with your work, and those whose missions intersect in explicit and implicit ways. Identify funding gaps, find opportunities for collective investments, cover for one another when there will be shifts, share what you’re learning, interrogate shortcomings in approaches together, and create collective accountability.”

- Jen Bokoff and Celia Turner ³

- Heed the calls to rethink risk. Now is the time to be more creative in moving money, recognising that “There’s also risk in philanthropy not taking bolder action to meet this moment – the risk of losing our rights, a habitable planet, and so much more.”⁴
- When we combine the decades-long feminist expertise and knowledge of anti-rights with well-resourced and empowered feminist movements, we can turn the tide against fascisms and fundamentalisms.

³ [Open letter of hope to funders of feminist and human rights movements](#), Jen Bokoff and Celia Turner, Alliance Magazine, 29 November 2024

⁴ [Funders, it’s time to change how we think about risk](#), Shalini Eddens and Kate Kroeger, Alliance Magazine, 15 November 2022