

Grass roots women's movements and donors

Friday 2 March 2018, by [MOOSA Zohra](#), [MUSINDARWEZO Dinah](#), [WEBSTER Lee](#) (Date first published: 6 November 2017).

Donors and CSO leaders encourage the depoliticisation and marginalisation of women's political struggles. Donor pressures reshape the feminist movement as a social work project of service delivery to the most vulnerable.

A global backlash against women's rights is on the rise. Women's movements have pushed long and hard for women's rights to be enshrined in international policy frameworks, and the current global political landscape risks a serious regression on progress made.

Specifically, we know that the women, girls, trans people and intersex people we work with, and their organisations and movements, have unparalleled understandings of the issues affecting them and their constituencies in their contexts. We also know that **progressive change is created when diverse and independent women's movements have the means to build on these understandings and develop their own vision, strength, resilience and collective power to make the changes they think are needed.** And finally, we know that such progressive change is sustained over time when these same diverse and autonomous women's movements are also supported to thrive and flourish.

Lee works with [Womankind Worldwide](#), a UK-based women's rights organisation working internationally to support women's movements, and influencing UK and global policy as it relates to women's rights internationally. Womankind Worldwide's new briefing, *Standing with the changemakers* explores the roles of women's movements in bringing about advances in women's rights, and finds that they drive change in three key ways. First, they ensure policies and laws that tackle discrimination and protect and advance women's rights are developed, adopted and implemented. Second, through mobilisation and the building of movements and solidarity, they work to transform the structures and systems of oppression, including social norms. And third, women's rights organisations provide vital services that support the realisation of women's rights, including for instance, shelters for women survivors of violence, and savings schemes for women small business owners.

Dinah works with [the African Women's Development and Communication Network \(FEMNET\)](#), which has been instrumental in building the women's movement in Africa and ensured that African women voices are amplified and influence decisions made at national, regional and global levels, which have direct and indirect impact on their lives. For example, FEMNET played a key role in mobilising African women to influence the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs) ensuring that issues affecting them most such as child marriages, FGM, maternal mortality, unpaid care work and limitations in property ownership were brought to the fore and included in the agenda. FEMNET as a founder member of Solidarity for African Women's Rights Coalition (SOAWR) led the advocacy for the adoption of the African Union's first legally binding instrument dedicated to advancing the rights of women and girls in Africa, the Maputo Protocol, and continues to mobilise and advocate for its ratification. Regional instruments such as the [Maputo Protocol](#) do not only set standards for national policies and laws, they are used to hold governments accountable, especially

where national laws fall short. A case in point is a 13-year-old girl in Zambia who was raped by her teacher and sued her Government for failure to protect her against gender based violence and cited Maputo Protocol Article 4 (1) and (2) which commits State parties to protect women and girls against sexual violence. The girl won the case, and the Government of Zambia paid her for the damages. In addition, the Court instructed the Zambian Government to put in place guidelines to address sexual violence in schools.

Zohra works with [Mama Cash](#), the oldest international women's fund in the world, based in Amsterdam. Mama Cash exists to support feminist organizations and movements by mobilizing resources for them, and channelling these resources through grants and other types of support. Its experience over three decades, shared in the IDS Bulletin, has shown that providing core, flexible and longer-term support to groups and movements led by and for women, girls, trans people and intersex people facilitates some of the most paradigm shifting social change that we have ever witnessed or could hope to imagine. For example, the Home-Based Women Workers Federation, a grantee-partner of Mama Cash, has been organizing to secure the labour rights of home-based workers in Sindh, Pakistan since 2001. With a membership of 4500, the Federation has recently secured a victory that means that home-based workers, of which there are five million in the province, can now be legally recognized and registered as workers – allowing them to access government social security schemes and benefits such as education, healthcare and housing. This legal recognition could in addition set a precedent for the rest of the country's home-based workers; 80% of Pakistan's 12 million home-based workers are women.

We know then that the activism of women, girls, trans people and intersex people brings about tangible results, changes whole societies for the better, and impacts the lives of millions. Yet instead of receiving broad-based support from the development community, this work is generally carried out with the barest of resources, and against immense resistance.

First, women's movements are operating on a shoestring, and consistently highlight the lack of core, flexible, long-term funding as a serious impediment to increasing their impact. With limited funds and a lack of donor government support for their agendas, they are often operating in survival mode, and as such are led by the agendas of donors and large development organisations, rather than having the space to set and follow their own priorities, based on their knowledge of the challenges facing women in their countries and communities.

Second, advocacy work, often the backbone of women's rights organisations, is given little attention or priority by donors, who prefer to focus on service delivery models. Yet without advocacy for political and structural change, we know that service delivery alone will never be enough.

Third, in the rush to include the 'gender agenda' into mainstream development and corporate social responsibility strategies, women's rights have been depoliticised, resulting in a focus on individual empowerment and quick wins, overlooking the need for the necessary, long-term systematic and structural changes.

In addition, the work they do often comes at a high price with low recognition. In 2015, at least 31 women human rights defenders (WHRDs) were murdered as a direct result of their activism. WHRDs are targeted for violence both because they are women and because of the work they do, whether it is defending women's rights, LGBT+ rights, indigenous rights, the environment, land or democracy. Their work is often not recognised as political or human rights work, which prevents them from accessing existing protections for human rights defenders. And they are targeted in gendered ways, for example through sexual harassment or reputational attacks on their roles as mothers, wives, etc. Although many international commitments exist to protect the rights of WHRDs,

including the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998), political will to defend WHRDs is lacking and accountability for violations is woefully insufficient.

Recent [research](#) conducted by Mama Cash and the Urgent Action Fund, on the gendered impact of the so-called closing civil society space phenomenon confirms these realities, and confirms that donors can make a significant difference to the incredible work of women's rights movements –if they **fund organizations and movements for longer-term resilience, rather than short-term 'results'**.

Funding women's movements and allowing them to follow their own agenda is a matter of both urgency and necessity. We have the enormous honour to stand with women changemakers as they carry out their work, and we call on all those with the power to reach out and support them – in iNGOs, donor agencies, governments and multilateral agencies – to join us in this journey.

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P.S.

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<http://www.ids.ac.uk/opinion/still-rising-women-s-movements-in-a-changing-world>