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# Standing Firm

## Women- and Trans-Led Organisations Respond to Closing Space for Civil Society

Executive summary, Key findings  
and Recommendations

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## Mama Cash

Mama Cash funds and supports women's, girls' and trans people's rights organisations and initiatives around the globe that challenge the root causes of injustice. Mama Cash's role is to provide the money and support that will enable our grantee-partners to strengthen their organisations, build their bases of support, shape agendas for change and collaborate with others to build collective movements for change. We mobilise resources from individuals and institutions, make grants to women's, girls' and trans people's organisations, and help build the partnerships and networks needed to successfully defend and advance women's, girls' and trans rights globally.

## Urgent Action Fund

Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights is a global women's fund that protects, strengthens and sustains women and transgender human rights defenders at critical moments. UAF intervenes quickly when activists are poised to make great gains or face serious threats to their lives and work. We use online, text and mobile funding applications to respond to requests from women human rights defenders within 72 hours and have funds on the ground within 1-7 days.

## Credits

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**Author**

Kate Bishop

**Mama Cash contributing staff**

Vanina Serra, Sarah Baes, Zohra Moosa, Susan Jessop and Esther Lever

**Urgent Action Fund/UAF Africa contributing staff**

Shalini Eddens, Kate Kroeger, Meerim Ilyas, Huong Nguyen, Olivia Trabysch and Masa Amir

**Design**

Zeppa.

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# Executive summary

**The global phenomenon of ‘closing space for civil society’<sup>1</sup> has accelerated over the past several years. ‘Closing space’ is characterised by state-sponsored restrictions on the fundamental rights of freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly.<sup>2</sup>**

Closing space includes actions that curtail democracy and human rights activism, such as efforts to restrict access to foreign funding for organisations working on these issues. To date, efforts to understand the drivers, enablers, and impact of what has become a global trend have not consistently applied a gendered analysis.<sup>3</sup> This report seeks to contribute to the current discourse by addressing this gap.

The report is based on fifteen interviews with activist groups led by women and trans people working from a feminist perspective in six countries where closing space is a pressing reality: China, Egypt, India, Russian Federation, Turkey and Uganda. All activists interviewed are grantee-partners of either Mama Cash or the Urgent Action Fund. Following individual interviews, the activists later came together in a separate convening to review and validate the findings and develop shared analysis and recommendations. As such, the report documents the perspectives and experiences of these women’s rights and trans rights activists, and provides examples of the gendered impact of closing space. The report includes activists’ recommendations to the funding community on ways to support their organising and counter the closing space trend, and shares lessons and strategies that may be useful to other activist groups facing threats.

## Three key findings

**Closing space for civil society is a gendered phenomenon.** All groups reported that their organising has been restricted or repressed in ways that are related to the activists’ gender and/or because of the gendered-focused nature of their work. In addition, and significantly, the ways in which they are targeted are also gendered.

The majority of the activists stated that the cumulative impact of formal and informal state interventions to control civil society, as well as lack of state action to defend activists and protect rights, has a disproportionate impact on the political voice of women and trans people. Existing discrimination within society not only affects their experience of civil society restrictions, but also makes them easy targets for state crackdowns. The varied application of legislation and policy in the six countries included in this research has shown that laws and policy are not neutral bureaucratic tools, but mechanisms for the state to silence critical voices and reinforce the social status quo—which is characterised by the systematic political marginalisation of women and trans people. Activists spoke of the closure and retrenchment of many women’s and trans organisations. Most significantly for women activists, women-led organisations, and women human rights defenders, the use of sexualised violence to silence or intimidate them is a virtually universal experience.

**Societies with restricted civil society space actively promote patriarchal values and traditional gender identities and roles as part of conservative, nationalist rhetoric.** Activists in all six countries report that increasingly conservative political forces openly frame women’s rights and LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Intersex) rights as products of ‘Western interference’. Traditional binary gender identities and roles are promoted as part of nationalist rhetoric, and women’s bodies and behaviours are expected to function as repositories of conservative ideas about society’s culture and morality. This trend in political framing is not new, but for many of the activists interviewed it is clear that they experience closing civil society space as being driven, at least in part, by an increase in state-sponsored rhetoric that prescribes and enforces narrow patriarchal and heteronormative gendered behaviour and sexual identity, and which is maintained through violence, threats and stigma.

<sup>1</sup> For a useful discussion, including reflections on why this term is contested, see the Transnational Institute’s framing paper: On “shrinking space”

<sup>2</sup> CIVICUS, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Fund for Global Human Rights, and the Ariadne European Funders for Social Change and Human Rights, among others, have all made considerable contributions to this conversation and to understanding the nature of closing space. For example, the new Funders’ Initiative for Civil Society (FICS) has set out to facilitate and coordinate a response by private philanthropy to the closing of civil society space.

<sup>3</sup> With a few exceptions, including the excellent analysis by Global Philanthropy Project - Global Philanthropy Project (2016) *The Perfect Storm: The closing space for LGBT civil society in Kyrgyzstan, Indonesia, Kenya and Hungary*, Global Philanthropy Project, New York, and the report *Tightening the Purse Strings: What Countering Terrorism Financing Costs Gender Equality and Security* carried out by the International Human Rights Clinic at Duke University School of Law and the Women Peacemakers Program, 2017.

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## **The history of exclusion and repression that women and trans people have experienced has built their political analysis and savvy – assets that equip them to creatively resist closing space.**

Most women- and trans-led groups have deep experience of having been pushed to the margins in their communities. This history provides them with vital experience and expertise in navigating restrictions and political marginalisation. In the current, challenging context, feminist activists continue to employ creative solutions to new challenges, and hone their strategies to mitigate risks. They engage in strategic advocacy, national and international collaboration and networking, targeted use of international legal norms and frameworks, and inventive use of the media. For example, activists who work in a community center have filed a complaint in the relevant local courts to expose the use of defamation campaigns and sexual assault by law enforcement personnel. Another feminist group has filed a local lawsuit against a national security commission for raiding its office. Activists are also taking local issues to international human rights bodies, such as UNGASS and the UN Human Rights Commission. Protective strategies include financial planning, physical and digital security measures, and self-care and mutual support.

These are all important findings, and the research suggests that more can be done to bring these lessons learned, good practices, and expertise to the fore in both civil society and the funding community.

## **Recommendations**

**The message from activists is clear: it is crucial that donors continue funding in difficult contexts.** The so-called ‘strategic withdrawal’<sup>4</sup> of funders that activists have observed is strategic only in the short-term, and seems out of step with the widely shared assessment that the phenomenon of closing space is here for the foreseeable future. The activists interviewed stated that they expect feminist activism will be further stigmatised in the current global political landscape. They expressed concerns that the rise of conservative, right-wing and populist forces will continue to negatively impact not only the level of the funding they receive to support their work, but also their personal and organisational security. They look to donors to stand with them in these challenging times and to maintain their funding.

**The report presents a series of interlinked recommendations developed by these activists for donors to consider in their responses to the closing space phenomenon.** Activists highlight the urgency not only of increasing funding to autonomous feminist organising, but also of making sure that this funding is core, long-term and flexible. Adopting this approach to funding allows activists to adapt to rapidly changing contexts, strengthen their organisations, networks and movements in order to swiftly respond to and

survive crackdowns, invest in security and wellbeing, as well as strategise around future political struggles.

Recommendations also focused on the need for funders to adapt funding approaches and mechanisms to better support particularly marginalised sections of civil society, whose voices are increasingly being targeted and silenced. The need for genuine partnerships with groups led by women and trans people to support locally-driven change emerged as a key priority. Activists seek dialogue; they call on donors to share some of the risks that they face and to go beyond focusing primarily on ‘good stories and numbers’ to prove the impact of funding support.

Finally, activists highlight the importance of resourcing networking and convening to create spaces of exchange and mutual support between activists as a strategy to counteract the fragmentation of civil society. This fragmentation is fostered by states applying a ‘divide and rule’ strategy as part of their efforts to close space. As a result, intentional support for movement building and for building constituencies of support for citizen-led<sup>5</sup> alternatives to current power structures and ideologies are seen as urgently needed. At the same time, activists shared that they need funders to recognise and support the safety of individual activists by funding personal and organisational security measures, raising international awareness of and support for their activist work, and respecting activists’ request for anonymity.

## **Conclusions**

**Donor support for feminist organising is arguably more important now than ever.** Mama Cash and Urgent Action Fund see increasing numbers of our grantee-partners experiencing state repression of their activism and being targeted as feminist advocates of women’s rights and gender justice. This research, including a convening of activists, has supported our learning of how to better support activists working in challenging circumstances. Listening to activists sharing their experiences of closing space as well as their suggestions of how donors can be good allies and stand with them has contributed valuably to our learning.

As funders, it is important that we continue to take steps to understand the gendered enablers, narratives and impact of closing space for civil society in different contexts. Deepening our understanding of the gendered dimensions of closing space for civil society will help the funding community provide strategic and effective support that is responsive to the local needs of women’s and trans groups and activists, supporting their work and contributing to their safety in challenging years ahead.

<sup>4</sup> The practice of withdrawing from funding an issue or geographical area in anticipation of problems in order to avoid state scrutiny and protect long-term interests.

<sup>5</sup> By use of the term ‘citizen-led’, we include all people in a country or particular location, not limited to those possessing formal citizenship.

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# Key findings

**These findings emerge from research with 15 activist groups led by women and trans people working to secure women’s and trans people’s human rights. The groups are located in six countries – China, Egypt, India, Russian Federation, Turkey and Uganda – where closing civil society space is a pressing problem. The groups are all grantee-partners of Mama Cash or the Urgent Action Fund. The full report is available on Mama Cash’s and UAF’s websites.**

## 1. Closing space for civil society is a gendered phenomenon.

- Women and trans activists experience repression and violence **because of their gender** and **because of their gender-focused feminist advocacy**. As women and trans people, their activist work defies patriarchal norms (e.g., speaking out is not appropriate for women). Similarly, the change they advocate directly challenges power relations in their contexts. For example, Egyptian activists have faced verbal and physical attacks, to the point of having to relocate their offices, for not conforming to ‘modest’ dress codes. Activists also point to a lack of state action to defend and protect feminist activists; for instance, activists in India say they have curtailed fact-finding missions because of the risk of violence from right-wing political groups that operate with impunity. Sex worker activists in Russia face violence from both the police and right-wing gangs who organise brothel raids to ‘protect public morality’. Feminist activists also report feeling isolated because male-dominated civil society does not take their leadership seriously and sees issues of gender equality and sexuality as being of secondary importance to ‘broader political struggles’ that are interpreted as gender-neutral.
- Women and trans activists are **targeted in gendered ways**: sexualised violence, or the threat of sexualised violence, is virtually universal. These gendered attacks instill fear and are effective in silencing women and trans people. They also serve to reinforce women’s inferior social status, and discriminatory and stigmatising gender roles. Reports of rape and sexual assault, both by state and non-state actors, against feminist activists have become common in contexts of closing space. In Turkey, for example, changes in law through statutory decree imposed after the July 2016 coup mean that activists can be arrested, subjected to strip searches and held for five days without access to a lawyer. Reports of torture and rape of activists by state agents is a strong deterrent to public protest.
- In societies where the political space for citizen-led<sup>6</sup> activism is shrinking, women and trans people, who have always been forced to the margins politically, are **easy targets for crackdowns**. Law and policy are implemented not as neutral bureaucratic tools, but as mechanisms for the state to silence critical voices and reinforce the social status quo—which is characterised by the political marginalisation of women and trans people. New restrictions on the foreign funding on which politically marginalised groups often rely are likely to have a significant impact on organisations led by women and trans people. This is especially true where groups are working on issues perceived to be politically sensitive by the state, or are already working with the minimum resources required to survive. A number of activists said that they expected new legal restrictions and intimidation of donors to lead to the closure of their organisations in the next one to three years. Activists also speak of the de-politicising impact of legislation that prohibits political activity and pushes them toward service provision and prevents them from holding their governments to account. Broader public disillusionment with political elites also makes it harder to mobilise citizen action.

<sup>6</sup> By use of the term ‘citizen-led’, we include all people in a country or particular location, not limited to those possessing formal citizenship.

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## **2. Societies with restricted civil space actively promote patriarchal values and traditional gender identity and roles as part of conservative, nationalist rhetoric.**

Women's bodies and behaviours are expected to function as repositories of conservative ideas about the culture and morality of a society. Many activists have observed a correlation between increasing state repression of civil society and increasing state rhetoric that prescribes and enforces patriarchal and heteronormative gender norms and sexual identities. In 2016, Turkish president Erdoğan condemned the use of contraception as a Western plot against Turkish society. Activists in a variety of contexts have faced defamation and smear campaigns for stepping outside of traditionally prescribed roles and behaviours. As one activist said, work on "...sexuality could get you killed."

## **3. The history of social exclusion that women and trans people have experienced has built their political analysis and savvy, assets that equip them to creatively resist closing space.**

Both funders and activists grappling with closing space and political restrictions can learn lessons and gain tremendous insights from the tenacity and political creativity of women and trans-led groups. Women- and trans-led groups have deep experience of having been pushed to the margins of their communities, and this familiarity with how power operates contributes to their ability to navigate restrictions and political marginalisation. Despite the challenging contexts in which they operate, feminist activists use their long experience of political marginalisation to remain creative and to mitigate risk. As one activist remarked: "When they shut the door, we come in the window."

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# Recommendations

**These recommendations emerge from research with 15 activist groups led by women and trans people working to secure women's and trans people's human rights. The groups are located in six countries – China, Egypt, India, Russian Federation, Turkey and Uganda – where closing civil society space is a pressing problem. The groups are all grantee-partners of Mama Cash or the Urgent Action Fund (UAF). The full report is available on Mama Cash's and UAF's websites.**

## Activists' recommendations to funders

### 1. Fund self-led groups (women's and trans people's own collective initiatives) to claim their rights and make positive changes in their communities

Self-led organisations are founded, led and staffed by people who have been historically silenced and are now speaking for themselves about their lived experiences of stigma, violence and exclusion. The active presence of groups led by women and trans people brings diversity and vibrancy, and is essential to ensuring a diverse and healthy civil society. In contexts of shrinking civil space, there is a clear need for authentic narratives from within civil society to contest the growing discrimination against women and trans people. Donor commitment to supporting the survival and sustainability of self-led groups in hostile contexts is urgently needed.

### 2. Support local priorities and agendas

Activists encouraged funders to dialogue with them in order to understand what type of funding is most needed. This type of engagement contributes to making sure that grant funding supports local expertise, knowledge and priorities. In contexts of closing space, responding to local needs is crucial to keeping civil society alive because it can make the difference between groups surviving or shutting down.

### 3. Fund flexibly

In contexts of closing space, providing flexible funding recognises the expertise of local activists and allows them to respond to the needs they identify as most relevant and pressing in their contexts. Flexible grant support allows groups to set their own agendas and deciding which tools to use – for example, whether to go out on the streets or to advocate online. Flexibility also allows local activists to respond to sudden security threats, or react to unexpected opportunities. This includes a need for 'safe' money – i.e., money that avoids state scrutiny by either coming in regular small amounts, or

into personal accounts (rather than through registered NGO accounts), through intermediary organisations, or even via enterprise counterparts.

### 4. Fund core costs and provide long-term grants

Activists spoke about the particular value of core funding to them in negotiating closing space; core funding contributes to their chances of surviving beyond the next one to two years. Core funding supports staff and operating costs, and it provides a strong foundation for organisations to respond to changing realities. They noted that the lack of core funding hits small women's and trans people-led groups hardest. While international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) manage to support 'a huge number of staff', grassroots groups are often unable to find donors willing to support salaries. For all partners, whose work was already challenging to fund, closing space brings additional fundraising challenges. In these difficult times, long-term funding is even more vital.

### 5. Follow a partnership funding model

Activists are looking for genuine partnerships with their funders – in contexts of closing space, this is more urgent than ever. Beyond a financial relationship, grantee-partners are looking for respect, trust and open communication with donor-partners. Funders can also play a role in bringing the voices of their partners to wider audiences, through linking them with media, and through inviting and funding them to attend international conferences to represent the populations they work with or to participate in global movement building. Models of reporting should also reflect a commitment to partnership. Activists suggest a reduced level of paperwork appropriate to the size of the organisation and scale of the grant, rather than applying standard reporting requirements that may add to the burden of already stretched organisations.

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## **6. Increase funding for feminist organising**

It is important to maintain and increase funding for feminist organising in contexts where space is closing. This includes going beyond providing large grants to organisations that are considered safer from state interference. Funders interested in supporting sustainable and healthy feminist movements need to make funding accessible to larger numbers of organisations, including feminist groups, who may be in conflict with patriarchal power structures.

## **7. Fund convenings, networking and alliance building**

Activists highlight the importance of having opportunities to meet, share and network with fellow activists across movements and regions as key factors in their ability to continue to function in difficult situations. A critical reason for supporting national networking and convenings of activists and organisations is to support movement building, broadening public support and engagement with citizen-led alternatives to current power structures and ideologies. Convening and networking are also mentioned as tools to counteract the fragmentation of civil society that is fostered by states applying a 'divide and rule' strategy as part of their closing space efforts.

## **8. Support individual activists**

Supporting individuals to stay safe through funding personal and organisational security measures, building international support and visibility for their work, and supporting them to build local alliances with other groups for mutual support, can help them to keep organising in the face of intimidation.

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## Reflections and further recommendations to the donor community

Reflecting on the recommendations from the activists and conversations with a number of funders working closely with groups affected by closing space, some key recommended practices and actions emerged. The aims of restrictions on foreign funding and of other legal restrictions are to shut down civil society or control it by fragmenting it and isolating groups from their support networks. It is critical that funders do not react to increasing challenges by ‘strategic withdrawal’<sup>7</sup>, but work to find ways to continue funding and supporting activists for as long as possible. In doing so, it is important to have an increased awareness of activists’ security needs and the possibility of putting them at risk, even inadvertently.

**Philanthropic funders, such as women’s funds, and private and public foundations,** that are working directly with women- and trans people-led organisations, can:

1. Equip activists with the ability to deal with pushbacks by ensuring legal compliance and correct documentation in line with the requirements indicated by activists themselves, as far as possible. This gives them confidence to do the riskier work, knowing they are on solid footing if they get investigated;
2. Increase the flexibility of their funding, accepting a level of risk, to fund unconventional arrangements that can reach feminist groups organising on the margins of society, and to make funding adaptable to rapid contextual changes;
3. Raise and allocate unrestricted funding with which to fund the difficult issues, the most marginalised groups, core support, advocacy work and movement building.

**Bilateral donors and multilateral agencies,** can:

1. Work with foreign policy counterparts in their own governments to combine influence with funding, by speaking out or sanctioning restrictions on freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and challenging abuses against women human rights defenders;
2. Move towards more core support and longer-term funding;
3. Disburse more funding for women’s rights and gender equality through intermediaries, such as women’s funds, who have genuine links with, and can fund, self-led grassroots organisations, and who disburse significant funding in the global South, prioritising the agendas of these movements;
4. Influence other international and regional funders to appreciate the importance of supporting women- and trans people-led groups, and leverage networks to bring support to under-funded issues and populations;

5. Analyse which groups are no longer directly accessing funding – in which geographical areas and on which issues – as a result of closing space. Look to continue support in different ways, or through intermediaries.

**The funding community as a whole** can:

1. Work together to find practical ways to work around funding restrictions that make it difficult to reach groups under threat;
2. Make grants more accessible and more flexible to reach smaller groups through simplifying application procedures – especially big funds aimed at women’s organising, such as the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women;
3. Work to fill research and knowledge gaps on the gendered nature and impacts of closing space for civil society – including by connecting and interrogating the analytical frames used in development, human rights and other fields;
4. Adapt funding strategies, mechanisms and frameworks to address the gendered drivers and enablers of closing space;
5. Be aware of, and aim to mitigate rather than inadvertently reinforce, the fragmentation of civil society that is a deliberate outcome of closing space;
6. Engage with local philanthropists and corporate funders on the importance of supporting human rights issues, and help to shift their paradigm of charity or service delivery-focused giving to rights-based giving.

<sup>7</sup> The practice of withdrawing from funding an issue or geographical area in anticipation of problems in order to avoid state scrutiny and protect long-term interests.

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## Further areas for research and knowledge gaps

In addition to the recommendations made by activists and the funders who regularly work in partnership with them, the research behind this report has pointed to a number of research and knowledge gaps on the gendered nature of closing space. Funders, academics and allies can work to fill and thereby enhance their strategies to respond to closing space.

These research and knowledge gaps include:

1. The impact of general civil society restrictions on feminist organising, feminist leadership (or new models and approaches to transformational leadership and voice), and on the diversity of civil society as a whole.
2. The impact of closing space on LGBTQI groups, and especially the experience of trans activists and groups, needs further research and attention within response strategies.<sup>8</sup> Trans activists spoke of their marginal position within LGBTQI rights movements, and the need to understand transphobia independently of homophobia. Similarly, lesbian activists mentioned the need to increase the understanding of lesbophobia and its influence in the reduction of civic space and the distribution of funding for their activism.
3. The impact of closing space for civil society on national women's organisations and movements.
4. The increasing fragmentation of civil society as a result of closing space – what deliberate tactics are driving it, how can it be addressed, and what is the likely long-term impact on different sections of civil society, including the participation and voices of women and trans people.

<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding excellent analysis by Global Philanthropy Project - Global Philanthropy Project, *The Perfect Storm: The closing space for LGBT civil society in Kyrgyzstan, Indonesia, Kenya and Hungary*, Global Philanthropy Project, New York, 2016.