



Defending Democracy: Why feminist movements are essential to democratic resilience

Executive Summary

As democratic backsliding accelerates across regions, funders and policymakers continue to grapple with the question of how to defend and sustain healthy democracies over the long term. The evidence is clear: democratic resilience relies as much on organised civil society as elections and formal institutions. As this brief will demonstrate, feminist movements are an essential building block of democratic resilience. They are not simply beneficiaries of democracy; they help create, protect, and sustain it.

Feminist movements have shown that democratic resilience is built through long-term relationships, community organising, coalition-building, and shared learning across borders. By connecting individuals, organisations, researchers, funders, and movements, they strengthen the capacity of democratic actors to respond to

increasingly coordinated authoritarian threats. Recognising and investing in their work is essential to defending democracy itself.

This requires a fundamental shift in how policymakers and funders understand democracy support. Long-term investment in autonomous feminist movements should be viewed as a core strategy for safeguarding and strengthening democratic infrastructure. Drawing on strategies and success stories from Mama Cash's grantee-partners across the world, this brief shows that feminist movements are not peripheral to democracy but among its most effective defenders. Support for feminist movements is not just an investment in gender equality; it is an investment in democratic resilience, stronger civic infrastructure, and more peaceful, inclusive, and accountable societies.

Introduction: Democracy is changing

Across the world, democratic backsliding, shrinking civic space, and rising authoritarianism are accelerating. For people and their communities, the consequences are profound: attacks on fundamental rights, declining trust in public institutions, restrictions on civic participation, and growing barriers to freedom of expression and collective action.

The scale of this challenge is significant. According to the V-Dem Democracy report, the number of autocracies now outnumber democracies, with 74% of the world's population (six billion people) living under autocratic rule.¹ Across many contexts, democratic erosion is reflected in efforts to weaken democratic institutions and judicial independence, roll back hard-won rights, restrict independent media, and limit civic freedoms. Repression of civil society further undermines participation, accountability, and the ability of communities to advocate for their rights and interests.

These trends are unfolding at a moment of growing global instability. Armed conflict has reached its highest levels in four decades,² while evidence suggests democracy is a critical security asset, remaining an important foundation for managing conflict, addressing instability, and building more resilient societies.³ The challenge is no longer only how to achieve democracy, but how to sustain it and protect it under pressure. Understanding

how democratic resilience is built, sustained, and defended has therefore become more urgent.

Democracy is not under threat from isolated incidents or individual actors. The forces seeking to dismantle it are increasingly coordinated, sharing narratives, strategies, and resources across borders and issue areas. Yet democracy support remains fragmented, constrained by national boundaries and issue-specific approaches, with a primary focus on protecting formal democratic institutions.

This disconnect creates a strategic gap. Efforts to defend democracy must be as connected and adaptive as the threats they seek to address. As policymakers and funders look for effective responses to democratic backsliding, there is an opportunity to support the movements already building resilience across communities, sectors, and borders.



In this brief, we understand democracy to be measured not only by the quality of a country's institutions, but by the extent to which people can meaningfully participate in decision-making, influence policy outcomes, and hold power holders accountable.⁴

Democratic resilience depends on organised communities

Democracy is a practice, not a project.

It requires active participation to be sustained over time. Civic infrastructure refers to the people, networks, and coalitions that sustain democratic participation and enable democratic systems to function, adapt, and self-correct. Every day, across the world, people organising in their communities form the backbone of this infrastructure, holding governments and institutions accountable, protecting civic freedoms, and creating the conditions for healthy, vibrant democracies.⁵ Civil society organisations and social justice movements are a critical part of this ecosystem, helping to safeguard civic space and expand opportunities for citizen participation. Their impact is well documented: mass movements grounded in non-violent action are estimated to increase sevenfold the likelihood that democratic institutions survive periods of crisis.⁶ This is not only a question of values but effectiveness. Non-violent organising enables movements to remain broad-based, disciplined,

and legitimate even in the face of repression or provocation, helping collective action endure under pressure. Authoritarian actors understand this. Restricting civic space, including through laws restricting foreign funding and other measures targeting NGOs and independent media, has become one of the most common tools used to weaken civic infrastructure and undermine democratic accountability.⁷

It is no accident that autonomous feminist movements are among the most effective builders and defenders of strong civic infrastructure. Comparative research reveals that feminist movements contribute to democratic resilience by acting as a brake on authoritarian rollbacks, often providing early warning of democratic threats and helping to prevent harmful outcomes before backsliding becomes visible.⁸ At the same time, they actively generate political participation and engagement, mobilising communities and building broad cross-sector coalitions and alliances, leadership and funding systems.



This brief will explore how gender inequality is both a driver of democratic backsliding, and a tool weaponised by authoritarian actors. It will also examine how feminist movements are responding with powerful strategies, and how their work strengthens the wider defence of democracy, human rights, and peace.

1. Democracy is under pressure - and gender is one of its frontlines

Persistent and growing inequalities (social, economic, gender, racial) serve as a key driver of democratic backsliding, fuelling the rise of authoritarianism and autocracy.⁹ Combined with political exclusion and digital polarisation, rising inequalities contribute to 'hollow citizenship', a sense of powerlessness where citizens have little to no engagement with decision-making processes or democratic institutions.¹⁰ This reality provides fertile ground for anti-democratic actors to deploy exclusionary narratives and authoritarian playbooks that stoke fear and division, undermine trust in government, and weaken democratic norms.¹¹

These actors are not united by a shared ideology or set of values, but by a determination to undermine democratic values and institutions, consolidate power, and weaken communities' ability to resist.¹² Framing economic, political, and social issues as conflicts over values is a deliberate tactic used to camouflage a broader anti-democratic agenda. Beneath this rhetoric lies a political project that seeks to construct social hierarchies, define clear enemies, and fuel polarisation. It is in this context that gender becomes a critical faultline in processes of democratic erosion. Attacks on gender equality and the institutions that uphold it are used strategically to cause moral panic, mobilise political support, and justify restrictions on rights and participation.¹³ Gender is a target precisely because gender equality redistributes power, while anti-gender narratives are particularly effective because they tap into deeply held

beliefs about family, identity, and social order.¹⁴

Gender is not merely a target of democratic erosion but an increasingly important tool through which it is advanced. The weaponisation of gender has become a common strategy of authoritarian actors,¹⁵ with efforts to roll back rights and restrict participation used to consolidate power and weaken democratic institutions.¹⁶ Across many contexts, democratic backsliding has been accompanied by a rollback of reproductive rights, protections against gender-based violence, and institutional commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. In Poland, for example, the weakening of democratic safeguards, including judicial independence and constitutional oversight, paved the way for the 2020 abortion ruling - one of the most significant restrictions on reproductive rights in Europe.¹⁷ Similar backlash is visible via the reversal of Roe versus Wade in the United States and curtailing of abortion access in countries across South America.¹⁸

Gender is weaponised not only through formal restrictions on rights but also through coordinated disinformation and harassment campaigns. Narratives centred on "protecting children," "pro-family values", and opposition to so-called "gender ideology" are amplified through state-sponsored media and digital spaces to perpetuate anti-gender rhetoric, target women, LGBTQI+ communities, and racialised minorities, and fuel wider social and political polarisation.



Perkumpulan Lintas Feminis

These strategies increasingly migrate across borders through transnational networks of authoritarian and anti-rights actors who share tactics, resources, and political messaging. In doing so, they contribute to the exclusion of targeted groups from public discourse and weaken the conditions necessary for democratic participation.¹⁹ Women and LGBTQI human rights defenders face increasingly alarming levels of harassment, defamation, and threats, reflecting a global shift towards the silencing of critical voices and the shrinking of civic space.²⁰

Crucially, attacks on gender equality rarely occur in isolation. Rather, they are often used as an entry point for broader efforts to reshape the political and cultural environment and weaken support for pluralism and equality.²¹ For example, research found that fossil fuel billionaires were funding anti-trans efforts in the United States to sow distrust and undermine climate action.²² This illustrates how anti-gender narratives and disinformation can

be mobilised strategically to fragment civic solidarity and obstruct wider social, political, and environmental reforms.

Countering this threat requires building broad coalitions and solidarity, shared narratives and a politics of hope. Yet it is precisely those building this critical infrastructure who are deliberately targeted through legal restrictions, disinformation campaigns, and funding cuts, reflecting a broader backlash against gender equality and human rights. As authoritarianism rises and shrinking civic space constrains the ability of civil society and feminist movements to operate, Official Development Assistance (ODA) and philanthropic funding are increasingly redirected away from the actors best placed to challenge democratic erosion. At a moment when authoritarian actors are investing heavily in division and polarisation, sustained support for feminist movements and broader coalitions for equality is not a peripheral concern but a democratic imperative.

2. Feminist movements are already defending democracy

For decades, feminist movements have served as a powerful force against authoritarianism. Women's demands for political and economic inclusion help catalyse democratic transitions, make mass movements more likely to lead to egalitarian democracy, and contribute to deep and lasting social change.²³ **As a core part of civic infrastructure, feminist movements are often among the first to identify and respond to democratic backsliding.**²⁴ They sustain civic participation, build broad coalitions, distribute leadership, laying the foundations upon which democratic systems rely to function and self-correct.

Today, in coalition with other social justice movements, feminist civil society is finding new ways to resist and renew democratic space in the face of growing attacks on open society and human rights.²⁵ Their work to protect, defend, and strengthen democracy is

extensive, particularly as the terrain shifts and new threats emerge. Their proximity to communities, combined with decades of experience analysing and challenging power, and resisting attacks on gender and identity, enables them to recognise emerging threats at an early stage. The same qualities that make them effective defenders of democracy also make them frequent targets of authoritarian actors.

Mama Cash's experience in funding their leadership over the past four decades shows that these actors are critical to democratic resilience: they protect civic space, enable political participation, hold power accountable, respond to emerging threats, and build collective resilience.

The following section examines these five functions that, together, constitute critical democratic infrastructure.



Protecting civic space and defending rights

Across diverse contexts, feminist and LGBTQI+ activists and organisations are confronting a common pattern of efforts to suppress resistance and erode civic freedoms: increasing restrictions on association, surveillance, limits on freedom of expression, anti-gender narratives, anti-NGO legislation including laws restricting foreign funding,²⁶ and restrictions on independent media. In many cases, surveillance leads to criminalisation and political repression, including detaining protestors and disrupting protests, targeted attacks on journalists, and excessive force.

In response, **feminist movements are finding bold and innovative ways to resist and organise.** They are confronting the threats first hand by supporting detained activists and human rights defenders, monitoring elections, and documenting abuse and violations against civil society, while also building alliances with communities and activists to advance alternative visions of development rooted in human rights and democratic participation.



SPOTLIGHT

Across parts of Central America, communities and activists are labelled terrorists, interventionists, and enemies of the state.²⁷ In El Salvador, the state of emergency since 2022 allows for arrests without explanation or due process, while the Foreign Agents Law, adopted in 2025, imposes significant financial and administrative burdens, including a 30% tax, on groups receiving international funding.²⁸ Rather than withdrawing, feminist organisations in El Salvador maintain a local presence, and foster and preserve spaces for civic participation and exchange. They continue to navigate political, financial, and administrative barriers targeting CSOs, adapting their strategies and ensuring women and gender-diverse people remain visible in public debate on the preservation of democracy.

” *They called us foreign agents in our own territories. Activists on political issues are forbidden because of presupposed threat to national security or social and political stability of the country.*” – **Anonymous grantee partner, Central America.**

In Uganda, the 2023 anti-homosexuality act has intensified threats to gender-diverse communities, part of a growing trend across East Africa where anti-gender politics become a vehicle for broader democratic exclusion.²⁹ **Trans Youth Initiative (TYI-Uganda)** documents the abuses– including arrests, evictions, violence, and reduced access to services– and presents them before Ugandan courts. The initiative supports affected communities through legal aid and access to justice, while leading campaigns and workshops with public authorities, police officers, community leaders and healthcare workers to improve institutional responses to violence, and ensure LGBTQI+ people are supported to claim their rights in an increasingly hostile political environment.

Expanding participation and representation

At a time of sustained and coordinated attacks on women and gender diverse people, the question of who has access and a seat at the table is critical to the safeguarding of democracy and the right to self-determination. Across the world, feminist movements are leading political education efforts, actively observing and monitoring elections and influencing participation in environmental

governance on land and resources. By ensuring the inclusion and representation of historically excluded communities – including women and girls, LGBTQI+ persons, Indigenous and rural women, and persons with disabilities – feminist movements strengthen democratic engagement and equal participation in decision-making, elections, governance, public debate, and other aspects of political and civic life.



SPOTLIGHT

In Peru, **Rosa Rabiosa** monitors elections to hold governance systems accountable for the inclusion of trans and gender diverse people, to safely exercise their right to vote and participate. Since 2022, the collective has challenged discrimination faced by trans voters and observers and worked with electoral monitoring initiatives to promote the implementation of trans voting protocols. Despite the 2025 anti-NGO law in Peru that restricts advocacy by organisations receiving foreign funding, Rosa Rabiosa has continued to organise. In 2026, their community efforts helped deploy 55 trans and non-binary election observers across 18 regions of Peru, strengthening electoral inclusion and visibility for historically excluded communities.

In Malawi, **Green Girls Platform** is a youth-led advocacy organisation that ensures young women's voices and demands are included in official delegations and environmental policymaking forums. Since 2016, the movement has expanded from 150 to 10,000 girls and young women. Its advocacy led to five of its representatives being included in Malawi's COP27 delegation, giving young women a link to government policy processes.



Green Girls Platform

Holding power accountable and defending democratic norms

Democratic resilience relies upon feminist movements not only pushing for change but also protecting it. As well as expanding participation, feminist movements question *how* power is exercised - holding governments, institutions, and public authorities accountable for upholding rights, respecting the rule of law, and responding to citizens.

The work of Mama Cash partners shows that legal victories and constitutional protections can be fragile without civil society to defend, monitor, and ensure their implementation over the long term. Judicial transparency, open

courts, and public hearings are essential to advancing justice and accountability. They enable civil society to pursue strategic litigation, monitor proceedings, document evidence, and apply pressure to ensure that rights are protected, and public authorities fulfil their responsibilities. Where these democratic safeguards are weakened, feminist movements adopt creative advocacy strategies, mobilising to secure and defend legal and policy gains, raise public awareness of rights and access to justice, and ensure that justice is realised not only through formal institutions but in people's daily lives.



SPOTLIGHT

Karama, a regional feminist network based in Egypt, uses international accountability mechanisms to ensure the government responds to citizen demands and upholds its public commitments. This included securing legislation against family violence in Jordan, where they used the CEDAW³⁰ process to ensure that the Jordanian government committed to action and delivered legislation within six months.



Semia Fondo delle Donne

In Italy, **Semia** strengthens resistance to anti-rights movements through research, knowledge sharing and coalition building. Their Action4Choice project maps anti-rights actors and provides educational resources to strengthen feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations' collective advocacy. Their newsletter - *Intelligenza Femminista* - provides political analysis of anti-rights actors and funding flows. Semia has also established a resource centre for civil society across Italy to identify common priorities and strategies to counter shrinking democratic space.³¹

Protecting democratic freedoms in the digital sphere

Surveillance technologies, algorithmic discrimination, and online hate are just some of the emerging digital threats shifting the playing field in the struggle for democracy.

Increasingly, feminist movements are shaping more accountable and rights-based approaches to digital governance –

tackling online surveillance, disinformation, digital violence, anti-rights narratives, and discriminatory facial recognition systems, as well as recruitment bias. Their work shows them to be critical partners in confronting emerging threats and ensuring democratic freedoms are protected as technology evolves.



SPOTLIGHT

One organisation in South Asia is helping shape more accountable and rights-based approaches to digital governance through advocacy on freedom of expression and protections against online surveillance. Its engagement with the Ministry of Justice contributed to amendments to the Online Safety Act, while its leadership of a national community of practice on hate speech and disinformation strengthened collaboration between civil society and policymakers. Through this work, the organisation is promoting more transparent and inclusive technology governance, challenging restrictions on digital rights and participation, and resisting efforts to expand state surveillance powers.

“ *As the global shift towards right-wing ideology in both national governments and corporate entities, and the active collaboration between conservative political forces and Big Tech companies continues into 2026, we have redoubled our commitment to grounding our work on technology-facilitated gender-based violence and technological and digital rights and freedoms in queer and feminist principles and values.”* – **Anonymous grantee partner, South Asia.**

As the struggle for rights and democracy is constantly evolving across Europe, **CONNECTME@ Human rights and Technology** in the Netherlands is confronting new threats emerging from AI and technologies: online violence, digital discrimination, and algorithmic bias.

Using their background in law, intellectual property rights, government, and academia, the group challenges discriminatory facial recognition systems and recruitment algorithms that reproduce gender and racial bias.

This includes legal advocacy through court cases related to social media ads and digital surveillance, and public education to combat the negative impact of technologies on structurally excluded communities.

Building broad cross sector alliances for solidarity

Democratic resilience depends not only on institutions, but on the strength of the networks, relationships, and solidarity systems that help communities withstand repression and respond to crises. Sustaining this civic infrastructure depends on informed citizens, independent information, historical memory, and spaces for public debate. At a time when progressive organising is increasingly fragmented, feminist movements are building broad coalitions and alliances grounded in shared values and purpose, fostering solidarity across movements, and developing new forms of mutual support that enable long-term collective action.

Through independent information, research and narrative change, feminist movements are building the cultural, informational, and knowledge infrastructure that democracy needs to survive, leading counter-narratives to authoritarianism and ensuring the ability of marginalised groups to tell their own stories. By challenging fear-based narratives and creating space for alternative visions of the future, they help cultivate the collective hope and solidarity necessary for democratic renewal. These efforts help movements and communities survive shrinking civic space, sustain advocacy over time, and maintain pressure for change even in increasingly hostile environments.



SPOTLIGHT

Acuerpadas was forced into exile following escalating restrictions on civil society, state surveillance, and the persecution of dissidents in Nicaragua. It has since built a strong regional network of feminist and LGBTQI+ activists organising across repressive contexts and from exile in Central America to confront violence, human rights abuses, and stigmatisation, and to create accessible spaces. Through narrative change, community dialogue, and holistic security approaches – including the development of security protocols and systematised messaging tools – Acuerpadas challenges exclusionary and anti-rights narratives while documenting the essential strategies, expertise, and connections of activists in exile.

“ We have come to realise that it is alliances that underpin the fabric of the community work we sustain. We have embarked on a regional journey and approach, beginning to propose regional actions and initiatives. In recent months, we have managed to forge important alliances and build a network of support, affection, and solidarity across the region.” – Acuerpadas, Central America.

Women's and feminist funds globally play a crucial role in building and sustaining civic infrastructure by providing feminist and social justice movements with the financial resources necessary for long-term civic action, while supporting leadership development, organisational resilience, and movement continuity. After more than a decade of shrinking civic space, the **Hungarian Women's Fund** helps sustain feminist organising by resourcing local groups, convening activists, and strengthening connections across the feminist movement. In the lead-up to Hungary's 2026 elections, the fund supported activists involved in the Women's Minimum campaign³² and has since brought together partners and funders to identify emerging opportunities for collective action. Its work demonstrates how feminist funds play a quiet but essential role in building solidarity across civil society, creating the relationships, trust, and financial infrastructure to endure repression, remain organised, and seize opportunities for democratic change when they emerge.

3. What feminist movements teach us about democratic resilience

The rise of authoritarianism and democratic backsliding should not be understood as a reflection of civil society's limitations. Rather, it represents a coordinated effort by authoritarian and anti-rights actors to capitalise on social and economic inequalities, deepen divisions, and push back against the gains that civil society movements have made in advancing rights, inclusion, and accountability. Feminist movements have spent decades defending democratic space under conditions of repression, conflict, and political instability. Their experiences offer inspiring and actionable lessons for societies confronting democratic backsliding globally.

The work of our partners reveals that democracy is a practice, not a project.

Institutions matter, but democracy survives because people and communities organise collectively to protect it. Democratic resilience is sustained through relationships, mutual support, solidarity networks, community roots, and long-term organising capacities, all of which is being championed by feminist movements in every corner of the world. Feminist movements have consistently proven the effectiveness of their approach: protecting civic space, expanding participation, holding institutions accountable, while establishing and sustaining the networks, leadership, funding systems, and collective capacity that make democratic resilience possible. Put simply, they build the essential civic infrastructure that healthy democracies rely on to survive and thrive.



Top five lessons from feminist movements for democracy

1. Democratic resilience depends on organised communities

Resilience is built through the people, networks, and coalitions that democratic systems need to function and self-correct. When institutions become less protective, organised communities often become the first line of defence. They provide safety, legal support, documentation, and mutual aid that enable people to continue participating in public life despite threats and repression.

2. Coalitions matter more than silos

Feminist organisations rarely work alone: they build alliances across movements for social justice, human rights, labour and the environment, establishing regional solidarity networks and organising alongside journalists, lawyers, and youth movements. Their success shows that democratic resilience is built through broad-based coalitions.

3. Democracy requires participation

Whether through electoral observation, the participation of historically excluded groups in governance and decision-making, or the creation of safe advocacy spaces, we repeatedly encounter the same lesson: inclusive governance produces more resilient institutions. Democracy is stronger when all people and communities can influence decisions that affect their lives.

4. Hope is a democratic strategy

Feminist movements deliberately challenge fear and exclusion through narrative change, whether using public art to reclaim civic space, promoting visibility and collective imagination, or combating historical erasure by documenting queer histories. These approaches show that building hope, belonging, and collective agency are essential strategies in countering authoritarianism.

5. Democracy is practised every day. Not simply during elections.

Democracy extends beyond elections to defending digital rights and independent information, protecting activists and rights defenders, influencing legislation, and creating opportunities for community participation. Feminist movements strengthen democracy not only at moments of political transition, but through everyday acts of organising, accountability, and collective action.



In a time when the wider context often feels dystopian and emotionally tiring, we have intentionally leaned into creative approaches that centre hope, resistance, and imagination”- – **Anonymous grantee partner, South East Asia.**

Conclusion:

Defending democracy together

As democratic backsliding accelerates across regions, funders and policymakers continue to grapple with the question of how to defend and sustain healthy democracies over the long term. Feminist movements are critical to achieving this goal. **As this brief demonstrates, feminist movements are not just beneficiaries of democracy; they help create, protect, and sustain it. Recognising and investing in this work is essential to defending democracy itself.**

This requires a fundamental shift in how policymakers and funders understand democracy support. Too often, democracy is treated as a project rather than a practice, with support fragmented by geography, sector, or issue area. Yet the feminist movements highlighted in this brief demonstrate that democratic resilience is built through long-term relationships, community organising, coalition-building, and shared learning across borders. By connecting individuals, organisations, researchers, funders, and movements, they strengthen the capacity of democratic actors to respond to increasingly coordinated authoritarian threats.

Investing in relational infrastructure is essential to collective resilience. Civil society will still be there when a regime falls or a project ends.

Feminist organisations continue to organise through political transitions, repression, and democratic renewal. They support communities, hold government institutions accountable, protect freedom of expression, and build the trust and solidarity that democracy depends on. This contribution is especially important as authoritarian actors organise across borders, and share strategies, narratives, and resources. Feminist movements have long done the same, building transnational networks and coalitions that protect activists, resist democratic backsliding, and respond collectively to emerging threats.

The evidence is clear: feminist movements do not merely contribute to democracy, they help sustain it. The question now is whether governments, funders, and international institutions are prepared to recognise and invest in them accordingly. Feminist movements continue to organise, resist, and build resilience under increasingly difficult conditions, defending democratic values and institutions in the process. Supporting them is not simply an investment in gender equality, but in democratic resilience, and more peaceful, inclusive and accountable societies. Democracy cannot survive on institutions alone. It depends on the people, movements and relationships that defend it every day.

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