

# STANDING FIRM<sup>1</sup>

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• *Sustaining women – and trans – led organisations in the context of closing space* •

## ABSTRACT

*In 2016, Mama Cash and Urgent Action Fund, two feminist funders, commissioned research to increase understanding of how closing space for civil society affects feminist organisations. Fifteen women's and trans rights organisations in China, Egypt, India, Russian Federation, Turkey and Uganda were interviewed and later met to review and validate the findings. The research clearly shows that closing space is a gendered phenomenon, with all activists reporting that their work and political voice are restricted or repressed because of their gender and/or the gender-focused nature of their work. The exclusion and repression that women and trans people experience has also built their political analysis and skills – assets that equip them to creatively resist closing space. The activists collaborated to create a series of recommendations for funders about how to support and sustain their work in challenging political contexts.*

## KEYWORDS

Feminism | Women's rights activism | Women's human rights | Trans human rights | Women human rights defenders | Gender-based violence | Closing space for civil society | Intersectionality

## 1 • Introduction

As feminist activists and funders, we know that collective action by women, girls and trans people can change – *is changing* – the world, even as we write. Yet, at the same time, the global political and social landscape is increasingly repressive, xenophobic, patriarchal and extremist. In contexts of closing space for civil society, it is urgent to sustain progressive and feminist movements led by people and communities that are most marginalised and affected in repressive contexts.

Feminist-led organisations very often experience challenges regarding their “acceptability” due to the nature of the issues they address; this becomes even more challenging as the space for activism shrinks. In the discourse on closing space,<sup>2</sup> we have observed that analyses and discussions do not consistently incorporate a gendered perspective.<sup>3</sup> This article, authored by a group of feminist activists engaged in social change advocacy and funders who support their work, is prompted by a desire to begin to address this gap.

The phenomenon of closing space has accelerated in recent years in societies around the world, but repressive and violent reactions to feminist change agendas are not new. Indeed, it is by speaking out and challenging the *status quo* that women, girls and trans people attract the repression of conservative forces. It is also by speaking out that we have developed the tactics and strategies to resist. This is particularly true for activists working on contested issues and advocating for fundamental rights that are criminalised – for example, advocating for sex workers’ rights where sex work is illegal. As activists, we have critical expertise and recommendations to share with other activists and funders; as funders, we have learning to share about supporting this work.

## 2 • Methodology

In 2016, Mama Cash and Urgent Action Fund commissioned research with activists to explore the gendered nature of closing space. The objective of the research is for it to become a tool for activists as they navigate restricted landscapes and also for it to contribute to philanthropic conversations on this issue. In-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen feminist activist groups led by women and trans people working in six countries where closing space is an unrelenting reality: China, Egypt, India, Russian Federation, Turkey and Uganda. All of the groups are grantee-partners of Mama Cash, Urgent Action Fund or Urgent Action Fund-Africa. Following individual interviews, the activists convened in February 2017 to review and validate the findings and develop shared analysis and recommendations. The research resulted in the report *Standing Firm: Women – and Trans – Led Organisations Respond to Closing Space for Civil Society*. This article presents a summary of the report’s key findings and recommendations for sustaining human rights, and particularly feminist, movements in the face of threats to civil society freedoms.

### 3 • Three key findings on the gendered dimensions of closing space

The phenomenon of closing space increasingly restricts civil society's ability to act and dissent freely in countries around the world. Closing space is characterised by state-sponsored restrictions on the fundamental rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. It further includes actions that curtail democracy and human rights activism, such as restricted access to foreign funding for human rights and advocacy organisations (India's restrictive Foreign Contributions Regulation Act, 2010, is but one of many examples of a law used to criminalise dissent). Countries throughout the world have introduced measures intended to restrict activism, such as requiring annual renewal of organisational registration. As feminist activists, we experience these restrictions impeding the work of movement building. Moreover, a repressive, hostile climate changes the inherently interactive narrative of activism by isolating activists and organisations from each other. In Egypt, for example, in the context of a relentless crackdown on homosexuality, government police track down and arrest people associated with LGBT projects and organisations. This drives activism underground, making organising in public virtually impossible.

To date, there has been much discussion of the trend of closing space, but efforts to understand the drivers, enablers, and impact of this global trend have not consistently applied a gendered analysis. Our research identified three important findings regarding the gendered nature of closing space.

**First, closing space for civil society is a gendered phenomenon.** As activists, we have experienced restrictions and repression related to our gender and/or because of the gendered-focus of our work. Significantly, the ways in which we are targeted are also gendered. 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, is having a disproportionate impact on the political voice of women and trans people. Existing discrimination within society sharpens our experience of civil society restrictions and also makes us easy targets for repression and crackdowns. Internet freedom continues to decline, and online activism is targeted by the state and extremist groups using threats, intimidation and sexual abuse. The application of legislation and policy makes clear that laws and policy are not neutral bureaucratic tools, but mechanisms used by the state to silence critical voices and reinforce the social status quo, in which women and trans people are politically marginalised. We have all seen women's and trans organisations shrink and even close down.

Very significantly for women activists and human rights defenders, the use of sexualised violence to silence or intimidate is a virtually universal experience. In highly patriarchal contexts, gendered attacks and gender-based violence are effective in silencing women and trans activists. Gender-based repression reinforces women's inferior social status and restrictive norms related to gender behaviour and roles. Gender-based violence is a powerful

silencer because of the fear it instills but also because it can undermine the support of activists' families and communities for the public role they are playing.

**Second, societies with restricted civil society space actively promote patriarchal values and traditional gender identities and roles as part of conservative, nationalist rhetoric.**

Conservative political forces often associate women's rights and LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex) rights with "Western interference". In August 2017, LGBTI activists were outraged when the Ugandan government cancelled a week of gay pride celebrations in Kampala, a clear example of state power targeting activists who challenge patriarchal and heteronormative social structures and values. Traditional notions of binary gender identity 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 political framing is not new, but we see it intensifying. In our experience, closing civil society space is increasingly being supported by state-sponsored rhetoric that prescribes narrow patriarchal and heteronormative gendered behaviour and sexual identity, and maintains and enforces them through violence, threats and stigma. In contexts of extreme stigmatisation, such as in Egypt, the arrest of LGBT activists may not even be seen by the general public as a human rights violation.

**Third, the history of exclusion and repression that we as women and trans people have experienced has built our political analysis and savvy, thereby equipping us to resist closing space with creativity.** As women and trans activists, we have deep experiences of being pushed to the margins in our communities. This history has allowed us to develop expertise in navigating restrictions and political marginalisation.

In the current challenging context, feminist activists are developing creative solutions to new challenges, and honing our strategies to mitigate risks. As one Russian activist who took part in the research commented: "When they shut the door, we come in the window." We are making strategic choices about whether to target our advocacy locally or nationally, depending on circumstances. When avenues for local and national advocacy are closed, we are also taking issues to international human rights bodies, such as the United Nations (UN) General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council. We are engaging in strategic advocacy, national and international collaboration and networking, targeted use of international legal norms and frameworks, and strategic use of the media. In many repressive contexts, social media provides an alternative channel to remain vocal on contentious issues and to stream events that otherwise would not be covered. Activists have filed complaints and lawsuits in local courts to expose office raids or the use of defamation campaigns and sexual assault by law enforcement personnel. Protective strategies include coalition-building, solidarity networks, financial planning, physical and digital security measures, and self-care and mutual support.

In consideration of the depth of the challenges that we face as feminist activists (and as donors supporting feminist activism), we felt it was urgent that we articulated our

recommendations on how best to support and sustain our movements, particularly in this global context of shrinking space.

## 4 • Activists' recommendations

The activists involved in this research met in February 2017 to share experiences about how to sustain feminist movements in the face of closing space. The research findings and meeting discussions resulted in eight recommendations for the donor community.

### 4.1 - Fund self-led groups – women's and trans people's own collective initiatives – to claim our rights and make positive changes in our communities

Self-led organisations are founded, led and staffed by people who have been historically silenced and are now speaking for ourselves. The active presence of groups led by women and trans people brings diversity and vibrancy, and is essential to ensuring a healthy civil society. In contexts of shrinking space, we need authentic narratives created by the people most affected to contest growing discrimination against women and trans people. Donor commitment to supporting the survival and sustainability of self-led groups in hostile environments is urgently needed.

### 4.2 - Support local priorities and agendas

We encourage funders to consult and dialogue with us to better understand what type of funding is most needed. Engaging in this way contributes to ensuring that grant funding supports local expertise, knowledge and priorities. Responding to local needs is crucial to keeping civil society alive. It can literally make the difference between groups surviving or shutting down. We also find that local community- and constituency-building is increasingly important in repressive contexts. This work helps us to lay the foundations for explicit political campaigning in the future when political environments become more hospitable.

### 4.3 - Fund flexibly

In contexts of closing space, flexible funding recognises the expertise of local activists and allows us to respond to relevant and pressing needs. With flexible grant support, we can set our own agendas and decide which tools or channels to use – for example, whether to go out on the streets or to advocate online. Flexibility also allows local activists to react to sudden security threats, or respond to unexpected opportunities. Flexibility includes “safe” money – i.e., money that avoids state scrutiny by either coming in regular small amounts, or into personal accounts (rather than NGO accounts), through intermediary organisations, or even via enterprise counterparts. For smaller groups, funding accessibility is an issue; we urge donors to make grant application processes simpler and proportionate to grant and organisation size. Making funding available to unregistered organisations is also very meaningful in contexts of closing space.

#### 4.4 - Fund core costs and provide long-term grants

Core funding is particularly valuable in negotiating closing space because it contributes to our longer-term survival. Core funding supports staff and operating costs, and provides a strong foundation for organisations to respond to changing realities. Hardest hit by the lack of core funding are small groups led by women- and trans people. Core funding supports institutional development, professionalisation and staff capacity strengthening, and also contributes to organisations' credibility and their ability to stay connected with others in civil society. Core funding can also enable organisations to comply with stricter administrative and bureaucratic regulations, which contributes to organisational survival. Donors interested in sustaining activists should also provide funding that takes into account organisational and personal security, and the personal care needs of staff.

#### 4.5 - Follow a partnership funding model

In contexts of closing space, genuine partnerships with funders are more urgent than ever. We are looking for respect, trust and open communication with our funders. Donors can leverage their access to a variety of spaces – bringing our voices to wider audiences, linking us with media, and inviting us and funding our attendance at international conferences. Models of reporting should also reflect a commitment to partnership; for example, reporting requirements should match the size of the organisation and scale of the grant.

#### 4.6 - 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 supporting larger organisations that are considered safer from state interference. Smaller feminist organisations are frequently the groups raising issues of marginalisation and intersectionality (i.e., the way that different forms of oppression, like gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, race, religion, ability and class, overlap and interact). In practice, intersectional feminism recognises that gendered discrimination has many dimensions and that all these dimensions need to be taken into account in order to ensure access to full rights and justice. Funders interested in supporting sustainable and healthy feminist movements need to make funding accessible to a larger number and greater diversity of organisations, including smaller groups that have a harder time accessing funding.

#### 4.7 - Fund convenings, networking and alliance building

For activists working in challenging contexts, opportunities to meet, share and network with other activists across movements and regions are extremely important. Sharing and exchange are crucial to our ability to continue to function in difficult situations. Supporting national networking and activist convenings provides crucial support to movement building and broadening public engagement with citizen-led initiatives. Convening and networking

are important tools to counteract the division and fragmentation of civil society that is fostered by states applying a “divide and rule” strategy.

#### 4.8 - Support individual activists

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

### 5 • Feminist donors affirm activists’ recommendations

Mama Cash and Urgent Action Fund know that collective action by women, girls and trans people is making the world more inclusive and just. The aim of restricting foreign funding and imposing other legal hurdles is to shut down civil society and impede its work to secure social justice. In the face of increasingly repressive landscapes, it is urgent to support progressive and feminist movements led by those most excluded and impacted.

Activists involved in the research highlighted the urgency not only of increasing funding to autonomous feminist organising, but also of making sure that this funding meets their needs and enables their survival in threatening contexts. Core, long-term and flexible funding allows them to determine their own agendas and respond to ever-shifting realities. As funders, we need to recognise activists’ needs and respond by funding flexibly, accepting increased risk, and being willing to fund unconventional arrangements so that funding reaches people organising “at the margins”. At Mama Cash and Urgent Action Fund, we are responding to activists’ requests by providing core grants (Mama Cash) and rapid response grants to respond to unanticipated opportunities or threats (Urgent Action Fund). This approach to funding allows activists to adapt to rapidly changing contexts, strengthen their organisations and movements to respond to and survive crackdowns, invest in security, well-being and resilience, and strategise for future struggles.

The above recommendations from activists also focus on the need to adapt funding approaches and mechanisms to better support 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 emerges as a key priority.

### 6 • Conclusion

As activists, we seek dialogue and are calling on funders to think beyond the immediate goal of proving the impact of their funding and, rather, to partner with us in sharing risks.

States are actively working to fragment civil society in order to silence civil society voices. As a result, intentional support for movement building and constituency building are urgently needed. This is deep, long-term work, but it is crucial for building sustainable, resilient movements for change. At the same time, we also call on funders to recognise the danger that activists face and to support the safety of individuals by funding personal and organisational security measures, raising international awareness of and support for their activist work, and respecting activists' requests for anonymity.

As donors, we see that resourcing feminist organising is arguably more important now than ever. Mama Cash and Urgent Action Fund see increasing numbers of our grantee-partners confronting state repression and being targeted for their advocacy of women's rights and gender justice. This research, which also supported a convening of activists, has contributed to our growing understanding of how to better support activists working in challenging circumstances. We need to keep listening and to use our access to donor spaces to influence our peers to step up to provide strategic and effective support that responds to the needs of local feminist groups and activists, supporting their work and contributing to their safety in the challenging years ahead.

The *Standing Firm* research was an important initial step in opening up a discussion on the gendered nature and implications of shrinking space. As activists and donors, we recognise the importance of sharing our reflections and continuing to engage with others in donor and activist spaces to ensure that we amplify the voices of the most marginalised and most impacted women and trans human rights defenders and move toward the ultimate goal of safer and more open space for feminist activism around the world.

## NOTES

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1 • This article has been adapted from a longer report to which many activists contributed: *Standing Firm: women- and Trans-Led Organisations Respond to Closing Space for Civil Society*. For security reasons, many of them remain anonymous. The full report is available at: [https://www.mamacash.org/media/publications/mc\\_closing\\_space\\_report\\_def.pdf](https://www.mamacash.org/media/publications/mc_closing_space_report_def.pdf).

2 • 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 made

considerable contributions to this conversation and to understanding the nature of closing space.

3 • There are a few exceptions. See Meg Davis, for the Global Philanthropy Project, "The Perfect Storm: The closing space for LGBT civil society in Kyrgyzstan, Indonesia, Kenya and Hungary," April 2016. See also Duke Law International Human Rights Clinic and Women Peacemakers Program, "Tightening the Purse Strings: What Countering Terrorism Financing Costs Gender Equality and Security," 2017.



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