

Advancing Democracy, Development, and Peace Through Women-Led Activism

Women’s movements are key to catalyzing global progress and strengthening social, economic, and political outcomes.

The year 2025 is a critical juncture for global stocktaking, marking 30 years since the launch of the Beijing Platform for Action, 25 years since United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, and five years until the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) deadline. At present, none of the SDGs is on track to be fulfilled by then and progress on gender equality, which is a cross-cutting theme, has been especially uneven. The [2024 Global Gender Gap Report](#) indicates that, at the present rate, it will take 134 years to achieve gender parity.

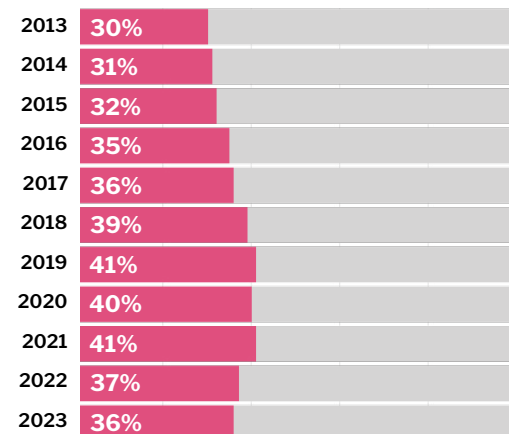
Concurrently, the global community is experiencing an [uptick in authoritarianism](#), the hallmarks of which include growing [backlash](#) against gender equality and minority rights, representing an unprecedented threat to cross-border solidarity and progress achieved to date. In 2024 alone, rollbacks in political rights and civil liberties were [tracked](#) in 52 countries. Additionally, protectionism and isolationism are increasing: since a historic peak in 2022, official development assistance (ODA) has [decreased](#). A two percent (USD 4 billion) drop in 2023 affected an estimated three billion people in over 70 low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), despite a [surge](#) in humanitarian emergencies. Against this backdrop, innovative pathways to leverage sustainable financing for strengthening democracy and catalyzing international development are crucial.

Share of overseas development assistance disbursed by OECD Development Assistance Committee

2013-2023

The share of ODA with one or more objective targeting gender equality and women’s empowerment has stayed relatively steady, but is decreasing, with minimal funding for projects where gender equality is the primary goal.

- Share with one or more gender equality objectives
- Share with no gender equality objectives



Data Source: OECD Data Explorer, Creditor Reporting System (2025)

Despite demonstrated positive impact on economic, social, and environmental outcomes, funding for gender equity and women-led movements is declining and thereby undermining progress

Gender equality is a force multiplier that improves outcomes across sectors, from economic growth and climate change to peacebuilding and democracy. Locally led feminist activism is correlated with greater economic equality between men and women, including smaller wage gaps, more equitable land and inheritance rights, and protection against workplace harassment and domestic abuse, which can adversely impact well-being and earnings.

Indeed, decades of research have shown that women are critical leaders and participants in all kinds of social movements. The involvement of local women in conflict resolution leads to longer-lasting and more inclusive peace agreements, while feminist activism in autocracies and democracies alike is linked to greater public support for civil liberties, religious freedom, and political reform. Women's leadership has additionally been found to lead to more equitable sharing of natural resources such as water, which is key to enabling climate-resilient agriculture and protecting biodiversity. Finally, women's funds are more likely to support locally led, autonomous, women-led organizations than any other type of non-governmental donor.

Yet, financing for women-led organizations, and for gender equality more broadly, is declining, which risks undermining decades of social, political, and economic progress. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported a decrease in the share of ODA from OECD donors for projects with at least one gender equality objective in 2021–22, compared to 2019–20, a trend sustained across different donor types. In 2023, only 39 percent of financing reported to OECD from all donor types had one or more gender equality objective, while a UN review of gender-related aid across the institution found that only 10 percent focused primarily on gender equality in 2022. There has also been a significant drop in gender-related humanitarian aid, despite women's and girls' disproportionate vulnerability in conflict and disaster settings.

OECD aid to women's rights organizations specifically remains stalled at around USD 500 million per year, representing a shrinkingly small share of overall foreign aid. This share is likely to decrease even further and to be exacerbated by the suspension of U.S. foreign aid announced in early 2025 and by planned U.S. withdrawal from certain multilateral institutions. These announcements are part of a broader trend in cuts to international aid, with the Dutch government announcing an end to ODA for gender equality in February 2025. The combined cuts to U.S., Dutch, and Swedish foreign aid, for example, will total nearly USD 78 billion per year, equivalent to over one-third of global annual foreign aid.



LOOKING AHEAD

Supporting women's movements to accelerate momentum on the sustainable development goals

Women-led movements demonstrate multifold returns on investment across a variety of issues and sectors and can accelerate progress toward global targets such as the SDGs, yet funding for these movements remains stagnant. Safeguarding, sustaining, and increasing funding and resources to support feminist and women-led movements will help the global community to course correct toward the SDGs and to deliver the visions laid out in the Beijing Platform and UNSCR 1325. Stakeholders seeking to expand support to women-led movements can effectively leverage their resources by emphasizing certain proven approaches, including:

- Supporting locally led and autonomous organizations that are best placed to understand, target, and transform local challenges;
- Deploying flexible funding, including through women's funds, that can be quickly and dynamically utilized where most necessary; and
- Supplying technical assistance and in-kind resources to help the funding go further and address root causes of instability and inequality.