

Changing the Rules of the Game:

A Funder's Guide to Advancing Women's Substantive Political Participation

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**COLLABORATIVE
FUNDERS for PARTICIPATORY
GOVERNANCE**





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Executive Summary

The Progress Paradox

Women's political representation has reached historic highs globally, yet this statistical progress masks the reality of women's systematic exclusion from meaningful power. This disconnect between numerical presence and actual influence is one of the most significant barriers to democratic progress, particularly across the Global South.

This research recognizes a critical distinction often overlooked in funding strategies: the presence of women in political office does not guarantee support for gender equality or feminist policies. Many women politicians operate within and reinforce systems that perpetuate gender-based exclusion. This report focuses on supporting women leaders who actively challenge structural inequities rather than simply increasing female representation, regardless of policy orientation.

Despite women making up 27% of parliamentarians globally, they face systematic exclusion from meaningful influence. Women achieve formal positions of authority but are systematically denied access to real decision-making power over policy and governance. The power gap is stark: women overwhelmingly lead gender equality ministries while men control defense, finance, and foreign affairs—the primary levers of state power. Even countries with impressive representation statistics can mask systematic suppression of women's actual political agency.

The System Excludes by Design

Three interconnected barriers are fundamental features of political systems designed to work against women's participation:

- 1. Violence as Systematic Deterrent:** Political violence targets women parliamentarians globally through death threats, rape threats, and systematic digital harassment amplified by algorithms that reward any engagement. The "exit dilemma" forces women to choose between enduring escalating attacks or abandoning platforms essential for modern political engagement.
- 2. Economic Exclusion as Gatekeeper:** Women face systematic cost premiums for viable campaigns, often requiring 40% more funding than male candidates due to additional security costs and institutional barriers. Many women never attempt candidacy again after an electoral loss due to campaign debt and lack of sustained support.
- 3. Institutional Design that Marginalizes:** Political parties act as patriarchal gatekeepers, using women when convenient and discarding them when not. Portfolio segregation ensures men retain control over national budgets, security apparatus, and international relations.

These three interconnected barriers form the foundational structure of exclusion across political systems. Additional factors—unpaid care work, reproductive restrictions, discriminatory norms, and denied civic rights—compound these challenges in specific contexts.

Understanding these barriers is essential because effective strategies must work with, rather than against, women's existing strengths and networks. Effective approaches recognize that women's political influence often originates in community organizing, civic advocacy, and informal leadership roles where they already possess significant social capital. As research demonstrates, meaningful political participation frequently begins at the local level, where women's existing social resources can be converted into political resources, creating pathways to broader influence that build on established community connections.

Technology: Democracy's New Battleground

Corporate platform power now rivals state capacity, with technology companies' annual profits exceeding entire countries' GDP. Platform algorithms systematically amplify misogynistic attacks while women's political participation increasingly depends on systems that profit from their harassment and marginalization.

Strategic Imperatives for Funders

- **Fund Systemic Transformation Over Individual Training:** While individual leadership training and fellowships help, they are insufficient on their own. Instead of investing in training women to succeed within systems designed to exclude them, support programs that build collective power and transform institutions. Fund cross-party women's coalitions, political party reform, and advocacy for electoral system change.
- **Address Structural Barriers:** Build comprehensive protection strategies against different types of violence (digital, physical, and stigmatization) and recognize violence as a systematic deterrent. Create alternative funding ecosystems that use women's existing networks rather than competing in male-dominated ones.
- **Navigate Technology's Democratic Impact:** Support democratic digital infrastructure and fight algorithmic amplification of violence. Back technological regulation and enforcement. Support efforts that push for platform accountability and regulation. Focus on building civil society's capacity to counter online violence through digital organizing tools and community-led campaigns.
- **Invest in Values-Based Leadership with Multi-Year Commitment:** Support women who champion democratic values, human rights, and policies addressing marginalized communities through sustained 10–20 year investments. Meaningful transformation requires generational change and flexible approaches that adapt to shifting political contexts.
- **Center Global South Leadership:** Trust the knowledge of those closest to the challenges while providing resources for locally developed strategies. Use funding models that encourage collaboration rather than competition between organizations. Build coordinated networks, not isolated projects.

The Window Is Narrowing

Democratic backsliding and anti-gender backlash are accelerating globally. The forces opposing women's political empowerment are sophisticated, strategic, and well-funded. The response must be equally sophisticated and strategic, and even better funded.

Success will be measured not by the percentage of women in parliament but by the extent to which governance systems genuinely reflect policies that advance gender equality and address the diverse needs of marginalized communities. This requires supporting women leaders who actively champion these values rather than assuming that female representation automatically produces feminist outcomes. Advocating for gender equality must enhance rather than endanger political careers. We will only have succeeded when women wield influence over finance, security, and foreign policy as readily as social affairs, and when political violence against women becomes not just illegal but unthinkable.

Practitioners have the experience and valuable learnings that funders can draw on to build courageous and strategic grantmaking.

For practitioner-tested strategies that work, see Section 4. For funding recommendations based on these insights, see Section 5.

01. Introduction: Beyond Counting Women

Despite unprecedented gains in women's political representation globally, a troubling paradox has emerged: women are entering office in record numbers yet remain strategically excluded from meaningful power (UN Women 2024). This gap between having a title and wielding real influence blocks democratic progress across the Global South. Impressive statistics hide the reality that women remain excluded from actual power.

Understanding this challenge requires distinguishing between descriptive representation and substantive influence. Descriptive representation refers to the physical presence of women in political office—the numbers we typically count in parliaments and cabinets. Substantive influence means women actually possess the power and capacities to shape policies that respond to women's diverse needs and interests. While global statistics show steady increases in women holding office, this numerical presence rarely translates into proportional policy influence or decision-making authority.

This gap creates what practitioners describe as an "illusion of progress"—impressive statistics that mask persistent exclusion from real power. The phenomenon can be found across diverse political contexts, from authoritarian regimes that strategically deploy gender parity metrics to claim democratic legitimacy to established democracies where systemic barriers persist despite formal legal protections.

Funders and policymakers need to move beyond simply counting women in office and start asking whether they can actually advance gender equality and challenge structural inequities. Being a woman does not automatically translate to supporting feminist policies or championing women's diverse needs, as many women politicians adopt traditional or conservative positions that maintain existing power structures. Focusing solely on representation statistics without examining the broader political environment legitimizes repressive systems and misallocates resources to symbolic rather than substantive change.

Women's political participation encompasses far more than holding elected office. Women participate as voters, civic organizers, community leaders, and advocates within both formal and informal governance structures. In many contexts, women exercise significant political influence through traditional leadership roles, market associations, religious organizations, and grassroots movements that remain invisible to conventional political analysis. Understanding this broader spectrum of political engagement is essential for developing funding strategies that recognize and build upon women's existing social and political capital.

1.1 A Double Deficit: Critical Gaps in Funding and Evidence

This systematic marginalization partly results from two interconnected problems that significantly limit efforts to advance women's political participation: critical funding shortages and substantial knowledge gaps. Research across 159 countries shows a troubling pattern. While women's life expectancy, education, and income strongly correlate with parliamentary representation, their labor force participation and access to property and financial resources show no significant relationship with political power (Sarangi et al. 2023). Therefore, women's individual capabilities are not the limiting factor. Instead, institutional barriers systematically prevent qualified women from accessing political power.

THE FUNDING DEFICIT

The first challenge is a critical shortage of dedicated funding specifically designed to support women's meaningful political engagement across the full spectrum of democratic participation—as voters, civic organizers, community advocates, and leaders in both formal government structures and informal governance systems. This funding gap is most pronounced across the Global South, where existing resources for women's issues typically prioritize economic and social development over political empowerment initiatives.

Current funding patterns often flow toward more easily measurable development outcomes, reflecting funders' preferences for different types of interventions. Legal restrictions on lobbying and electoral activities create additional barriers, while some funders prioritize other outcomes over political empowerment. The funders who do support women's political participation—including DAC member bilaterals and specialized foundations—are typically motivated by rights-based values rather than evidence requirements.

THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

The second challenge involves inadequate data evidence about women's political participation in Global South contexts. Critical knowledge gaps include:

- **Informal Governance Dynamics:** Limited understanding of how women engage within traditional and customary governance structures. Women often have significant local authority but remain invisible to conventional political analysis.
- **Intervention Effectiveness:** Ineffective attempts to apply universal blueprints or transfer strategies from one country to another. Interventions for gender parity and electoral reform are highly technical and specific to context. While the specific details of effective interventions vary greatly by context, a key finding is that successful approaches are almost always designed and led by locals.
- **Barriers Beyond Numbers:** Inadequate research on systemic obstacles to meaningful participation that persist even when numerical representation increases, including cultural resistance, institutional gatekeeping, and resource constraints.
- **Intersectional Factors:** Limited analysis of how ethnicity, class, religion, disability status, and other identity markers compound gender-based exclusion and shape different women's pathways to political influence.
- **Local Organizing Realities:** Sparse documentation of grassroots political organizing dynamics, including how women build coalitions, navigate cultural constraints, and develop political capital within specific contexts.
- **Violence Documentation:** As highlighted by Data2X, data collection standards for violence against women in politics remain underdeveloped, with no established methodology for documenting this barrier to women's political participation, hampering efforts to understand the scope, patterns, and impact of harassment and threats that drive women from political participation (Data2X 2020).

These funding shortages and knowledge gaps about informal governance, intervention effectiveness, intersectional barriers, and local organizing realities undermine both grassroots efforts and institutional support for women leaders. Without understanding how these dynamics actually work, funders and policymakers design programs and strategies based on incomplete evidence, ultimately undermining investments meant to advance women's political empowerment.

The consequences extend beyond individual programs to shape broader funding ecosystem dynamics. **Without robust evidence of what works, funders struggle to justify sustained investments in political participation over more easily measurable development outcomes.** This creates a vicious cycle where underfunding perpetuates weak evidence bases, which in turn justify continued underfunding.

1.2 Research Approach and Design

This research examines what prevents women from gaining real political power across the Global South, where these barriers are strongest. We highlight obstacles women face both as voters and as leaders, the strategies they use to overcome them, and how funders can better support women's political influence.

We pay special attention to funding strategies that support women's political participation while navigating legal limits on lobbying and election work. These legal restrictions create a major bottleneck, limiting funding for political representation compared to broader civic engagement.

PRIMARY OBJECTIVES

This research aims to:

- **Document** existing data and critical gaps in women's political participation across formal and informal governance spaces to better inform funding strategies and program design.
- **Examine** successful funding approaches and tactics that effectively support women's political participation while maintaining compliance with legal restrictions.
- **Learn** from practitioners' experiences about effective approaches, understanding both successes and challenges across different contexts.
- **Develop** practical recommendations that build on proven approaches while identifying new opportunities, drawing from contemporary funder and practitioner perspectives.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What critical data gaps exist in understanding women's political participation in the Global South, and how do these gaps compromise funding strategies?
2. Which funding approaches have proven effective in supporting women's political participation while complying with legal restrictions on lobbying and electioneering?
3. How can funders better integrate practitioners' perspectives to strengthen support for women's meaningful participation in both formal and informal governance spaces?

METHODOLOGY

This analysis draws from detailed consultations conducted between March and April 2025 with 30 practitioners across seven conversations about barriers to women's political participation in the Global South. The consultation included 24 people—women's rights advocates, civil society leaders, and political participation experts, covering Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Caribbean, and Africa—alongside 6 foundation representatives from *MacArthur Foundation, Open Society Foundations (OSF), VélezReyes+, and Colmena Fund*.

The methodology centered practitioners and people with lived experience, recognizing that community organizers and advocates working to expand political participation for all genders bring essential insights that traditional research often overlooks. Open-ended dialogues allowed participants to identify barriers, share successful strategies, and propose solutions based on direct implementation experience. We combined insights from practitioners with existing research data, ensuring our recommendations reflect both hard evidence and what actually works on the ground. This approach provides funders with actionable intelligence grounded in real-world experience while prioritizing voices from the Global South—those closest to the challenges and most knowledgeable about effective solutions



02. The Illusion of Progress: When Numbers Mask Reality



If women can't survive in constituency-based elections or emerge out of traditional authority succession processes, then we must know we've got a problem on the ground."

— Monica Geingos, Former First Lady of Namibia

Women are entering political office in record numbers, yet this statistical progress masks their systematic exclusion from meaningful power. Why does training more women leaders fail to change who actually makes decisions? The answer lies in understanding how political systems create an illusion of progress in women's political participation while keeping real power out of reach.

2.1 The Numbers Behind the Illusion: Global Patterns of Exclusion

Women now hold 27% of parliamentary seats worldwide, but they're still excluded from real power. They achieve titles and hold office but do not obtain control over the decisions that shape people's lives. The power gap is stark. Women overwhelmingly lead gender equality ministries, while men control the primary levers of state power, including defense, finance, and foreign affairs. Even impressive representation statistics can mask systematic suppression of women's actual political agency.

Table 1: Women's Political Representation—Progress and Exclusion Patterns (Inter-Parliamentary Union & UN Women 2025; UN Women 2024, 2025; Council on Foreign Relations 2024; European Parliament 2025)

Category	Global % /Count	Key Regional Leaders	Key Regional Laggards	Critical Context
Heads of State/ Government	13% (25 countries)	Europe: 12 countries	106 countries never had woman leader	Rwanda: Leads in women MPs (61%) while imprisoning women opposition leaders
National Parliamentarians	27.2% (+0.3% from 2024)	Americas: 34.5% Europe: 31.8%	Central/ Southern Asia: 17% Northern Africa/ W.Asia: 19%	Slowest growth since 2017 despite "super election year"
Cabinet Ministers	22.9% (-0.4% from 2024)	Europe/ N.America: 31.4% LAC: 30.4%	Pacific Islands: 10.2% Central/ Southern Asia: 9%	64 countries declined, only 62 increased
Gender-Equal Cabinets (≥50%)	9 countries (down from 15)	Nicaragua: 64.3% Finland: 61.1%	Most regions: 0 countries	Predominantly European phenomenon
Local Government	35.5% (145 countries)	Central/ Southern Asia: 41% Europe/ N.America: 35%	Data limited	Gains do not translate at national level

This pattern reveals deliberate barriers, not coincidence. When the same voices are consistently excluded, transparency and inclusion become impossible. Women prove themselves politically capable at local levels, where they hold 35.5% of positions, but their numbers shrink as they climb toward real power, dropping to 27.2% in parliaments and just 22.9% in cabinets. These institutional barriers prevent women from accessing positions controlling national budgets, foreign policy, and security apparatuses—a systematic exclusion that persists despite women's proven political capabilities.

However, this trend is not universal. In Mexico, for instance, robust gender parity enforcement has resulted in higher representation at the national legislative and executive levels (50%) than at the municipal level (30%). This contrast reveals that while gatekeeping mechanisms commonly prevent women from accessing decision-making positions, these barriers can be effectively dismantled through institutional reform.

2.2 The Cabinet Challenge: Barriers to Executive Power



You cannot empower women out of a system that is already created not to work for them."

— A practitioner from Kenya

iCabinet representation declined (-0.4%) even as parliamentary representation grew (+0.3%), breaking decades of steady progress that has grown women's cabinet inclusion by 22.8% globally. This reversal means gender parity in cabinets will not happen until 2077—pushing real representation decades into the future (Inter-Parliamentary Union & UN Women 2025).

This recent decline is significant for several reasons. First, cabinet exclusion matters more than parliamentary underrepresentation because cabinets control the mechanisms of governance that actually shape citizens' lives, including national budgets, security apparatus, and international relations (UN Women 2025). Second, the decline occurred during 2024's "super election year," when unprecedented electoral opportunities should theoretically have produced progress rather than regression. Third, this decline affected 64 countries while only 62 saw increases, indicating that progress toward cabinet gender equality remains highly variable and vulnerable to reversal (Inter-Parliamentary Union & UN Women 2025).

Annesley et al. (2019) argue that once countries include more women in government, future leaders feel pressure to keep those numbers up. However, while women are getting into parliaments, they hit a wall when trying to reach cabinet positions. This phenomenon creates a political ceiling that blocks women's progression from presence to actual influence.

This decline does not reflect a long-term downward trend, but rather a stalling of progress once basic inclusion levels are achieved. When cabinet appointments rely heavily on personal networks and informal relationships, these systems continue to favor men, making it increasingly difficult for women to break into the inner circles where cabinet decisions are made (Krook & O'Brien 2012). The result is that women can prove their political capabilities in legislatures but still find themselves excluded from the executive positions where national budgets, security policies, and international relations are actually controlled.

Local Government: Progress That Doesn't Translate Up

A striking paradox emerges from the data: women achieve their highest representation at local levels (35.5%), yet this success fails to translate into national influence. This pattern reveals structural barriers that prevent women from leveraging local political capital for higher office. While women's capabilities—including leadership, policy-making, and campaign management skills—are essential for political success, the primary obstacles often lie in how political systems decide who rises to leadership. This suggests that solutions focused purely on training women for higher office miss the fundamental issue. The systems themselves are designed to filter out women as they approach positions of real power.

2.3 Substantive Representation: Beyond Numerical Presence



Transactional politics and oligarchic power make women a political commodity, not a political agenda."

— **Arma Sanusi, Solidaritas Perempuan, Indonesia**

The gap between women's presence in office and their actual policy influence is one of the most significant challenges facing democratic governance today. Real representation means more than counting women in office—it means they can actually shape policies that matter to communities. Do women leaders have the power to drive change, or are they tokens?

Research consistently demonstrates that women's representation does improve certain policy outcomes, particularly in areas like child health, education, and social welfare. However, these gains are often limited to the 'soft power' portfolios where women are concentrated, while exclusion from economic, security, and foreign policy decisions limits their broader transformative impact.

The concept of "critical mass"—established initially as a 30% threshold in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action—suggests that women legislators need substantial representation before they can effectively influence policy decisions as a group. This threshold has been studied extensively since the 1970s, with Kim, Lee and Park (2025) providing recent evidence from South Korea. However, the 30% target has increasingly been contested. In 2024, the CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation 40 declared that 30% targets are "incompatible with the Convention's core aim of elimination of discrimination against women" and called instead for fifty-fifty parity, arguing that "decision-making will have real and dynamic meaning and lasting effect only when it is based on fifty-fifty parity."

Of course, achieving this numerical threshold does not automatically guarantee substantive policy outcomes. In fact, female legislators face systematic electoral penalties for championing women's interests. Supporting women's issues actually hurts politicians' chances of re-election. Research from South Korea shows this electoral penalty hits women legislators hardest (Shim 2022). This creates a political trap: women must choose between advancing gender equality and preserving their electoral viability. In Mexico, for example, Mónica Tapia points to the tension between party discipline and gender issues. When women politicians from different political parties vote on a gender-related issue, they are not primarily motivated to vote together based on their shared interests as women. Instead, the most important factor influencing their vote is the official position of their own political party.

Bolivia also illustrates this disconnect. Despite relatively high representation, women politicians have achieved minimal success advancing gender-responsive policies, largely due to persistent cultural norms such as "machismo" that have become institutionalized within political systems, constraining their political agency (Granlund 2022; Rousseau 2019). This pattern is further confirmed in Indonesia. Despite achieving 22.1% parliamentary representation, women remain treated as "political commodities" rather than substantive agenda-setters.

Practitioners across regions report how digital platforms amplify the electoral costs of gender advocacy through sophisticated and often violent targeting mechanisms. As documented in consultations, algorithms designed to maximize engagement systematically promote polarizing anti-gender content. Conservative movements have developed more sophisticated digital strategies, using artificial intelligence and platform manipulation to weaponize the concept of "gender" itself as a foreign threat to traditional values. This strategic reframing is particularly effective because the term "gender" itself has been redefined in many contexts, often deliberately narrowed to focus on LGBTQ issues rather than women's equality. This enables opponents to frame women's political participation as a foreign imposition rather than a fundamental right.

2.4 Portfolio Segregation: The Power Gap in Practice



Although they reach positions of authority, women do not necessarily have power. That doesn't mean that getting elected or taking public office is power."

— **Mónica Tapia, Cofounder and Strategy Coordinator, Aúna, México**

When we examine who controls what in government, the gender bias becomes clear. Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women (January 2025) shows that women remain concentrated in portfolios traditionally perceived as "soft" while being systematically excluded from core state functions that control real power.

The portfolio distribution reveals a clear pattern of systematic marginalization. Women overwhelmingly lead ministries focused on social issues: Women and Gender Equality (86.7%), Family and Children Affairs (71.4%), Social Inclusion and Development (55.6%), and Social Protection and Social Security (42.1%). Conversely, portfolios controlling core state functions remain male-dominated: Foreign Affairs (17.8%), Financial and Fiscal Affairs (16.4%), Home Affairs (13.2%), and Defense (13.0%).

Table 2: Portfolio Segregation - The Power Gap in Action

(Inter-Parliamentary Union & UN Women 2025)

PORTFOLIO TYPE	WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION	WHAT THIS CONTROLS
"SOFT POWER" PORTFOLIOS		
Women & Gender Equality	86.7%	Social policy, advocacy
Family & Children Affairs	71.4%	Social services
Social Inclusion & Development	55.6%	Welfare programs
"HARD POWER" PORTFOLIOS		
Defense	13.0%	Military, national security
Home Affairs	13.2%	Internal security, law enforcement
Financial & Fiscal Affairs	16.4%	National budgets, economic policy
Foreign Affairs	17.8%	International relations, trade

This marginalization is strategic, not accidental. While women's representation in social policy roles has demonstrated positive impacts, such as improving child health outcomes, education access, and social welfare programs, concentrating women in these areas while reserving economic, security, and foreign policy control for men maintains fundamental power structures while creating the appearance of gender inclusion.

The implications are profound:

- **Budget Control:** Men retain control over national and political parties' (including campaigns) budgets through their dominance of financial portfolios, determining resource allocation priorities and economic policy direction.
- **Security Apparatus:** Male control over defense and home affairs means women are excluded from decisions about military deployment, law enforcement priorities, and public security strategies.
- **International Relations:** Foreign affairs portfolios control trade relationships, diplomatic initiatives, and international agreements—all crucial for national development and global positioning.
- **Perpetuating Cycles of Exclusion:** When women lack access to high-profile, resource-intensive portfolios, they cannot demonstrate leadership capacity that might justify future appointments to more influential positions.

2.5 Cases: When Progress Statistics Deceive

The gap between women's numerical representation and their actual political power looks different across various political systems. However, these gaps consistently follow similar patterns of strategic co-optation. In fact, impressive representation statistics can be used to justify excluding women from real decision-making power. These cases show how this happens across different countries and political systems.

• AUTHORITARIAN CO-OPTION: RWANDA AND NICARAGUA

With 61% female parliamentarians, Rwanda exemplifies how gender parity metrics can conceal fundamentally exclusionary governance structures. Despite achieving the world's highest female parliamentary representation, most of these women are card-carrying members of the ruling party or its coalition partners, with women elected to reserved seats being nominated or vetted by the ruling party. Thus, most of these women owe allegiance to the ruling party rather than to the constituencies who elected them, adhering to party ideology in the policy-making process (Burnet 2019). Rwanda operates within a system that systematically suppresses opposition voices and independent civil society organizations, demonstrating how numerical presence rarely translates into significant political influence when broader democratic freedoms are constrained, as evidenced by the imprisonment of opposition leader Victoire Ingabire Umuhoza (*The New York City Bar Association 2025*).

Similarly, Nicaragua maintains high female parliamentary representation within a dictatorship that systematically suppresses broader political rights. Since 2018, the Ortega-Murillo regime has specifically targeted feminist organizations, cancelling the legal status of 24 NGOs working directly in defense of women's rights and expropriating their assets (*Redacción Confidencial 2022*). The regime closed all 13 women's shelters and dismantled women's organizations while maintaining high female representation in parliament (*Amnesty International 2024; Expediente Público 2021*). This shows how governments can suppress women's political power while appearing to support it.

• CUBA'S POWER CONCENTRATION PARADOX

Cuba has 56% women in its parliament, placing it among only six countries worldwide with 50% or more women in parliament (UN Women 2025). The National Assembly, where women achieve strong representation, has limited power compared to the Council of State and Council of Ministers. In 2013, 42% of Council of State members were women, and the Council of Ministers was 25% female with no women vice-presidents. Most critically, very few women hold high-ranking positions in the *Communist Party of Cuba (PCC)*, the *Revolutionary Armed Forces*, and other powerful institutions. From 2011–2016, just one of the 14 members of the PCC's Political Bureau was a woman, improving only slightly to four women after the 2016 Congress. Cuba also exhibits an unusual inverse representation pattern: women hold higher percentages in the national parliament than in local municipal assemblies (34.87% following the 2015 elections), despite local positions having a greater direct impact on citizens' daily lives. This paradox reveals how women can be granted symbolic representation in highly visible but less powerful institutions while being excluded from both grassroots power bases and elite decision-making circles (*Wylie & Shoker 2019*).

- **DEMOCRATIC CONTEXTS WITH SOPHISTICATED EXCLUSION**

Even in democracies, exclusion continues through institutional manipulation and concentrated power.

Taiwan's Revolving Door Effect: Taiwan achieved notable representation gains through systematic quota implementation, reaching 38.1% female parliamentarians by 2016, making it Asia's exception. However, the system's exclusionary design limits careers. Political party rules stipulated that proportional representation (PR) members could not serve for more than one term, forcing women to seek election in single-member district seats where they faced much lower success rates. Between 2004 and 2016, 61% of women elected were PR members, but the majority proved unsuccessful in subsequent district bids. This creates a revolving door effect where women achieve impressive numerical representation but cannot build the sustained careers necessary for real political influence. Taiwan's experience counters arguments about quota quality: studies showed that women elected through reserved seats usually have academic qualifications equal to or better than those of the men they unseated (Huang 2016, 2019). However, women without formal qualifications remain at a disadvantage, as they face barriers that similarly unqualified men do not encounter.

Malaysia: The Middle-Equality Trap: Malaysia exemplifies the "middle-equality trap," achieving modest gains from 10.4% representation in 2016 to 14% in 2025, yet remaining ranked 154 out of all countries globally, demonstrating how countries can make incremental progress while remaining stuck at levels that prevent meaningful transformation. The primary constraint lies in party gatekeeping: even major parties that officially support women's representation field shockingly low percentages of female candidates. In 2013, the ruling *United Malays National Organization (UMNO)* party fielded fewer than 10% women candidates, while even opposition parties claiming to support the international 30% standard failed to reach this threshold—the *Democratic Action Party* came closest at 14%. This stagnation is part of a broader polarization that has pushed women's equality "to the background behind a battle for electoral political power" (Welsh 2019, p.336). The momentum gained in the 1990s eroded as ethnic and partisan divisions sharpened, with women's organizations facing conservative backlash. Sisters in Islam, a prominent women's rights group, faced a religious fatwa labelling their organization as "deviant," illustrating how progress can be actively reversed through institutional and cultural resistance (Welsh 2019).

- **LATIN AMERICA'S ENFORCEMENT GAP: BOLIVIA AND REGIONAL PATTERNS**

Latin America's 36.6% parliamentary representation—above the global average—demonstrates how legal frameworks can be systematically undermined even in contexts with strong formal commitments to gender equality. Bolivia exemplifies both the potential and limitations of institutional reform. The country's path to achieving 50% representation in the Chamber of Deputies required a 20-year reform effort (1997-2017) that included pioneering legislation against political harassment in 2012, demonstrating the comprehensive institutional changes needed to make parity laws effective (Granlund 2022; Rousseau 2019).

Across the region, parties circumvent equal campaign funding requirements through orange candidacies—nominating token women candidates only to secretly redirect their allocated funds to male candidates. Despite laws against political violence toward women, enforcement remains "uneven and weak," allowing systematic harassment that discourages women's political participation (*Instituto Update & Better Politics Foundation* 2025).

- **CROSS-REGIONAL PATTERNS OF STRATEGIC CO-OPTATION**

These cases show that increasing women's representation can actually exclude them from real power. Impressive statistics about women in government provide cover for systematically limiting their actual political influence. Governments can point to women's presence to demonstrate progress on the international stage while simultaneously blocking those same women from advancing feminist policies or challenging existing power structures.

This manipulation serves multiple functions: diverting international attention from democratic erosion, providing superficial compliance with donor expectations, and creating false narratives of inclusive governance that obscure the persistence of male political dominance. Through authoritarian control (Rwanda, Nicaragua), institutional design limitations (Taiwan), power concentration patterns (Cuba), party gatekeeping (Malaysia), and enforcement gaps (Bolivia), the fundamental pattern remains consistent. Statistics mask the systematic exclusion of women from real political influence.

03. The Three Core Barriers: How the System Excludes by Design



There is a very important process that we have discovered, which is in the face of violence, particularly when [women] want to be candidates, they suffer from digital violence, physical violence, and stigmatization in the media."

— Mónica Tapia, Aúna, México

The disconnect between numerical representation and meaningful influence persists because three interconnected barriers exist as basic features of political systems built to work against women's participation. Understanding these barriers is essential for developing funding strategies that address root causes rather than symptoms.

Three barriers form a coordinated system of exclusion: violence drives women away from political spaces, economic constraints prevent those who remain from competing effectively, and institutional design ensures that even successful women are marginalized within governance structures. Each barrier reinforces the others, creating a self-perpetuating cycle that maintains male political dominance while creating an illusion of progress through token representation.

Additional context-specific barriers documented by CEDAW Committee General Recommendation 40 include unpaid care work, reproductive health and rights restrictions, discriminatory social norms, and denial of fundamental rights such as voting and non-discrimination guarantees. These intersect with and amplify the three core barriers identified in this research.

3.1 Violence and Security: The Primary Weapon of Exclusion



"Men also get hate. But it's not the same... There's more hate against women. But the nature of it is different, because it's focused on very misogynistic content, so sexualized content, their bodies, their roles as mothers, gender roles, etc."

— Suki Capobianco-Meinel, Better Politics Foundation

THE SYSTEMATIC DETERRENCE FRAMEWORK

Violence against women politicians has grown from scattered attacks into organized campaigns designed to drive women out of politics. Nearly half of women parliamentarians worldwide now face death threats, sexual violence, or coordinated digital attacks designed to force their withdrawal from public life (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016). This violence ranges from explicit physical threats to systemic sexual harassment within party structures, creating an environment where speaking out against abuse guarantees career destruction.

This violence intensifies when women seek power, creating what practitioners term the "candidacy trigger", where harassment escalates strategically during campaign periods to maximize the deterrent effect. Research reveals that 82% of women parliamentarians across five regions have experienced psychological violence, with 65% subjected to sexist remarks primarily from male colleagues within parliament itself. In such cases, the threats originate from within the very institutions women seek to enter (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016).

The Mexican elections of 2024 exemplified how dangerous this systematic problem can become, as 37 candidates were murdered (Diaz 2024). Practitioners across the region reported coordinated, violent disinformation campaigns specifically targeting women candidates.

DIGITAL WARFARE AND CORPORATE POWER IMBALANCES

Digital technology has transformed political violence into a sophisticated weapon of systematic exclusion. Digital platforms have become battlegrounds where corporate power now rivals state capacity, with technology companies' annual profits exceeding entire countries' GDP, creating unprecedented challenges for democratic accountability. As noted by the *Association for Progressive Communications* (2025), gendered disinformation campaigns targeting women politicians have become a prominent feature of election periods across the Global South, with research showing that in Kenya, 18% of female political candidates encountered various types of online violence.

Algorithmic Amplification of Violence: Platform designs that profit from polarization systematically boost misogynistic content. Political violence targets women parliamentarians globally through digital harassment. Coordinated bot networks amplify these attacks, while engagement-driven algorithms treat bot interactions as genuine user interest, creating an amplification cycle that rewards and spreads harassment content.

The Exit Dilemma: Women politicians face an impossible choice described by a practitioner from *Policy* as the "exit dilemma": endure escalating attacks to maintain the digital presence essential for modern political communication or withdraw from platforms and sacrifice their ability to reach constituents effectively. This is a political trap where leaving platforms means losing political relevance, but maintaining an online political presence results in systematic harassment.

Sophisticated Disinformation Campaigns: Digital platforms enable sophisticated disinformation campaigns using artificial intelligence and deepfake technology to create attacks that are nearly impossible for even experienced fact-checkers to verify. The weaponization of deepfake technology is particularly alarming—most deepfakes are pornographic and predominantly target women. Bots automate violence and hate messages against women politicians, while algorithms that are designed to polarize amplify these attacks. Research documents multiple types of technology-facilitated gender-based violence targeting women politicians across the Global South, from coordinated harassment campaigns exploiting social divisions to algorithm manipulation creating hostile echo chambers designed to force women from political engagement.

Corporate Power vs. Democratic Values: Major technology corporations now have economic power that exceeds entire national economies but operate according to profit motives rather than democratic principles. As a practitioner from *Policy* highlights: "*Consider the profits... the annual profits for this company now goes beyond our country's GDP... So when you're seated across from each other, it's one constituent to another constituent speaking.*" This immense influence extends beyond platform design into the political process itself. Corporate funding and support for certain campaigns and candidates can deter or co-opt potential regulators, such as legislators and executive agencies. This means women's political participation increasingly depends on systems that are not only incentivized to profit from their harassment and marginalization but are also insulated from democratic oversight.

INTERSECTIONAL AMPLIFICATION AND CORPORATE POWER IMBALANCES

Targeted violence becomes more severe when multiple identity factors intersect. Gender discrimination combines with racist attacks on Indigenous women and Afro-descendant women, creating greater complexity and more severe targeting.

The commercialization of digital tools essential for political organizing creates multiple layers of exclusion. Basic technology access remains unequal, compounding existing barriers, particularly for women in rural areas or facing economic constraints.

THE KNOWLEDGE LOSS CRISIS

This pervasive violence functions as more than an individual safety issue—it operates as a systematic mechanism for knowledge loss. When women are driven out by violence, their experience, networks, and potential to drive significant change are lost, preventing the development of a seasoned cohort of women leaders. *The Better Politics Foundation's* research reveals that 41% of politicians report low mental wellbeing—worse than emergency service workers—with women of color candidates enduring four times more online abuse than white politicians (Ison et al. 2023).

The "exit dilemma" ensures that even those who remain may self-regulate their advocacy to avoid attacks, systematically impoverishing the political landscape by removing diverse voices and perspectives. This creates a feedback loop that reinforces male-dominated political structures while appearing to offer women equal opportunities for participation.

3.2 Economic Exclusion: Money as the Ultimate Gatekeeper



Women in Ghana who contested previous elections, many of whom lost, said they spent 70% of their personal resources"

— **Ghanaian Practitioner**

FINANCIAL SYSTEMS BUILT FOR MALE NETWORKS

The challenge extends beyond campaign costs to encompass the entire financial architecture of politics, which was built around male-dominated networks. This creates systematic disadvantages that begin long before campaign season and persist after election day. Donors fund training programs for women but ignore the basic problem that politics requires financial networks that have blocked women for generations. Therefore, women lack the inherited wealth, business networks, and donor relationships that fuel sustainable political careers, while the additional security and infrastructure costs they face further widen this resource gap.

The financial barriers women face are both higher and more complex than those confronting male candidates. Kenya exemplifies this disparity. A practitioner shared that women need \$200,000 to run viable campaigns versus \$140,000 for men—a 43% premium reflecting additional security costs, digital protection requirements, and institutional barriers that systematically disadvantage female candidates. Even entry-level positions demand significant resources. Getting a nomination certificate for the lowest level of representation (county and regional positions) requires a minimum of 100,000 Kenyan shillings, which is around \$1,000.

STRUCTURAL ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGES

These campaign finance disparities reflect broader structural disadvantages that begin long before electoral cycles. Globally, women face a 20% wage gap (28% in sub-Saharan Africa) while shouldering unpaid care work valued at \$10-39 trillion annually worldwide (UN Women 2025; International Development Research Centre 2023). This economic dependency limits their ability to aspire to, run for, and win political office.

An African practitioner articulates the connection: "*Economic autonomy can lower entry barriers to the political sphere, while also improving prospects for women's political influence, reach, and safety. Economic dependency is at the root of political disparity.*"

This financial disadvantage creates a cycle that deters women from politics. Losing an election often entails losing a significant financial investment, and without adequate personal or party resources, the prospect of re-investing and re-running becomes daunting. This creates a negative feedback loop: financial disadvantage deters initial candidacy, and electoral loss exacerbates this disadvantage, making re-entry less feasible.

THE SUSTAINABILITY CRISIS AND POLITICAL DROPOUT

Most women entering politics are newcomers, placing them at a significant disadvantage against established male politicians who already have well-known profiles and existing networks of support and funding. This newcomer disadvantage creates a vicious cycle for women who lose elections.

A practitioner from *Future Elect Kenya* pointed out a sustainability crisis: three out of five women who lose elections never run again. When women are driven out of politics by debt and isolation, this creates negative signalling effects where unsuccessful candidates discourage other women from attempting political careers. This aligns with *MacArthur Foundation's* observations across Africa about the systemic abandonment of women politicians after electoral defeats. The pattern creates a perpetual cycle where each generation of women candidates must start from scratch, unable to build on the experience and networks of their predecessors. On the other hand, male politicians benefit from established political dynasties and support systems that survive electoral losses.

3.3 Institutional Design: Systems Architecture that Excludes by Default



The question is, why must we go through political parties, or is there a way to have political parties that are focused on gender equity and social inclusion, not just the regular traditional kind of political parties?"

— **Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, African Women's Development Fund, Nigeria**

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS REINFORCING MALE DOMINANCE

Electoral system design curtails women's political opportunities, with many countries maintaining structures that systematically advantage male candidates. In Indonesia, despite women voters slightly outnumbering men (102,588,719 women voters compared to 102,218,503 men voters in the 2024 elections, as reported by *Solidaritas Perempuan Indonesia*), representation remains at just 22.1% in parliament—a stark illustration of how electoral systems can nullify women's numerical advantage at the ballot box.

A women's rights practitioner from Fiji explained how their system inherently favors men: "With the voting system we have at the moment in my country, the D'Hondt system, it's leader-driven. So, it's like one big man gets all the votes. So, it's like how popular you are or the big men." This leader-driven approach exemplifies how electoral architecture privileges existing male networks and name recognition over policy substance or representative diversity.

Proportional representation systems generally produce higher women's representation than majoritarian systems. However, as practitioner Mónica Tapia notes, "electoral systems can be designed to include more women (through gender parity) and vulnerable groups (through affirmative actions), like the Mexican case."

Mexico's success required targeted interventions, including gender parity requirements and measures ensuring competitive districts for marginalized groups. Such inclusive design choices are deliberate, not accidental, which suggests that exclusionary electoral systems are equally deliberate design choices that create systematic barriers regardless of how qualified women are or how well they campaign.

Interventions to reform these systems are highly technical and specific to context, as the success of the Mexican case relied on a high-level, competent group of women organized within a cross-party coalition. This underscores the difficulty of simply applying such solutions internationally.

PARTY GATEKEEPING AND PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES

Across all regions, participants identified political party gatekeeping as the most critical bottleneck in women's access to power. Political parties control who gets to run for office. They control candidate selection, funding, training, and advancement through male-dominated structures designed to keep existing power in place.

A feminist organizer from KNOW in South Korea describes this as "the entrenched two-party political structure and the patriarchal political order of established parties," where "feminist women are used and discarded only when they are needed." This transactional approach reduces women to political commodities rather than agenda-setters.

Religious and cultural manipulation compounds these party-level barriers. In Indonesia, practitioners report that "politicians conduct money politics using religious symbols... making calls through campaign tools not to elect female leaders/ candidates using hadith and religious arguments." This weaponization of religious authority demonstrates how parties exploit cultural conservatism to justify women's exclusion while maintaining democratic legitimacy.





THE QUOTA PARADOX AND POWER GAP

Quota systems have increased women's numbers, as countries with quotas achieve 31.2% women's representation compared to 16.8% without. However, practitioners reveal significant implementation problems that create an "illusion of progress" (Inter-Parliamentary Union & UN Women 2025). Arma Sanusi from *Solidaritas Perempuan* notes: "Women's political capacity and barriers to gender mainstreaming through affirmative action in the political sphere are still at a quantitative level." In other words, despite affirmative action measures, progress remains focused on counting women in positions rather than ensuring they can actually influence policy and advance gender equality.

SYSTEMIC BACKLASH AND MOVEMENT FRAGMENTATION

The electoral penalties for gender advocacy documented throughout this research exemplify a broader pattern of coordinated backlash against women's political advancement. Conservative and authoritarian organizations create powerful narratives that create public anxiety by framing gender equality as a foreign imposition or existential threat to "traditional values" and national integrity (Brechenmacher 2025).

This backlash intersects with rising authoritarianism to create hostile environments for women's political participation. A practitioner from the *Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development* noted: "There's obviously a lot of authoritarianism and right-wing politics across South Asia, and also, I believe, Southeast Asia," with concern extending to how "even as more women enter politics, many are adopting the right-wing propaganda and really promoting that as well to come to the leadership," and in some cases, even adopting an authoritarian male-dominant style of leadership.

A critical problem across regions is the failure to build sustainable knowledge transfer between generations of women leaders, creating endless cycles of starting over rather than cumulative progress. A practitioner from Fiji emphasized this organizational challenge: "Funders must encourage women's groups to collaborate instead of working in silos... why are we working in silos when we're all working towards women's empowerment?"

This fragmentation prevents the development of strategies and knowledge across organizations and generations. The result is that movements must constantly rebuild rather than advance from previous gains. Áurea Carolina, Executive Director of *Nossas* in Brazil and former federal deputy, describes this challenge in stark terms, noting Brazil's current context of intense polarization and democratic crisis alongside an intensification of conservative agendas and conservative attacks against feminist, racial, climate, and gender agendas. Despite achieving representation, she observes a very low level of women—especially those defending feminist agendas or a gender perspective—in progressive national spaces, illustrating how backlash can hollow out meaningful representation.

04. What Actually Works



We're particularly interested in supporting women who champion human rights, social justice, and policies that address the needs of marginalized communities—not just women who occupy political positions without challenging structural inequities."

— **Suyen Barahona, Executive Director, Colmena Fund**

Women's presence in political office does not automatically translate to advocacy for gender equality. Across diverse political contexts, many women politicians maintain or even actively support systems that perpetuate gender-based exclusion. Some adopt conservative positions opposing feminist policies, while others use traditional leadership styles that reinforce existing power structures rather than challenging them.

Sustainable change comes not from training women to succeed within exclusionary systems, but from transforming the systems themselves. This approach shows the value of long-term investment, local leadership, and ecosystem thinking. Countries that have achieved genuine progress demonstrate the power of combining institutional reform with cultural transformation. Mexico moved from formal gender parity to women having real political influence, showing how change happens gradually. This required sustained investment in changing structures, building feminist movements, and creating women's political networks.

4.1 Transforming the Gatekeepers: Party Reform and Cross-Party Alliances



The transition from girlhood to adulthood is most likely adolescent marriage... definition about political participation or governance or power has to be transgenerational."

— **Amina Salihu, Deputy Director, Africa Office, MacArthur Foundation**

LIFE-CYCLE AND TRANSGENERATIONAL APPROACHES

The most successful programs address barriers that begin forming early in women's lives rather than waiting until campaign periods. *MacArthur Foundation's* generational approach recognizes that effective political empowerment must begin in adolescence and continue across multiple life stages. This approach moves beyond traditional campaign-focused support to address fundamental structural issues that shape women's political trajectories from an early age.

As Amina Salihu from *MacArthur Foundation* notes: *"The political participation that will be meaningful has to be at the local level, because women have a lot of social resources that can be converted into political resources."* This insight drives programs that build on existing community connections rather than creating artificial political networks.

PROXIMATE LEADERSHIP AND COMPREHENSIVE ACCOMPANIMENT

The most effective funding approaches are led by women with lived political experience. The \$25 million *Colmena Fund* represents a breakthrough in specialized funding, led by Executive Director Suyen Barahona, a former Nicaraguan political party leader who was imprisoned and forced into exile. *Colmena's* innovation lies in supporting individual leaders while building enabling ecosystems, focusing on substantive rather than numerical representation.

Mexico's Aúna platform provides complete support throughout political journeys. They are a political platform dedicated to finding women, training and promoting them, and accompanying them in both access to public office and the position itself. They accompany women through every stage of the political process, offering training programs before candidacy and providing ongoing support after elections, regardless of the outcome. This continuous support model directly addresses the post-election abandonment crisis, providing sustained engagement that prevents the dropout patterns that weaken women's collective political capacity. The communities Aúna forms have even helped women who lost to get recruited and recycled in jobs, networks, and influence positions within the teams of other women who win and get appointed.

However, coordination challenges persist across the region. Áurea Carolina from Brazil's Nossas observes that fragmented efforts among women's political organizations limit their collective strategic impact and research capacity. Despite recognizing the potential of cooperation, she notes that current fragmentation undermines effectiveness—a challenge her organization addresses through collaborative initiatives with *Instituto Update* and Aúna to develop coordinated regional approaches for advancing progressive women in politics.

CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION ALONGSIDE INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

Institutional reform proves most effective when accompanied by broader cultural transformation. Mexican experience demonstrates how sustained feminist organizing creates the social foundation necessary for moving beyond numerical parity toward policy influence. This cultural evolution enables women to leverage formal representation for meaningful governance impact, transforming political discourse and policy priorities over time.

4.2 Political Party Reform and Coalition Building

 *One of the best ways to get women to walk across political leanings... is to agree on setting their minimums as far as women are concerned."*

— Nigerian practitioner

CROSS-PARTY WOMEN'S COALITIONS

Despite weakening political parties across regions, cross-party women's coalitions are emerging as powerful tools for advancing shared agendas. African practitioners report more cross-party women's groups that can overcome partisan divides to focus on common priorities, such as women's economic empowerment, peace and security, healthcare access, combating sexual and gender-based violence, and women's political participation.

VélezReyes+ includes women's political participation within broader inclusive leadership development, deliberately bringing together diverse groups. Luciana Elmais explained their strategy: "*Making our investments in programs that were as inclusive as possible... targeting women, but also men, young people... putting them in the same group.*"

INTERNAL PARTY REFORM: THE CRITICAL UNDERFUNDDED WORK

MacArthur Foundation, OSF, and VélezReyes+ all recognize political party reform as essential yet chronically underfunded work. VélezReyes+ has worked for five years directly with political parties, trying to rebuild the way that they recruit, train, and make the possibility of women running and being in power possible. This targets middle management within political parties—people who can change how political parties work from the inside.

Despite its importance, Luciana Elmais acknowledged that "*these programs are harder to get funding. Usually they're not as sexy, they are long-term... but they're the ones that we have been most optimistic about.*"

MacArthur Foundation works directly with electoral institutions as a structural intervention. Their approach with Nigeria's *Independent National Electoral Commission* recognizes that these institutions have the legal authority and the opportunity to change the electoral system to have more meaningful women's participation.

ELECTORAL STRATEGY IN HOSTILE CONTEXTS

In contexts where democratic space is shrinking, some practitioners advocate for strategic electoral participation even without winning prospects. A Philippine practitioner described this approach: it involves occupying spaces, contesting in elections from the local to national level, even if there is no chance at all to win. This serves dual purposes: using electoral platforms to promote the kind of politics that we want and strengthening movements through organizing.

This approach recognizes that the foundation of running in elections is strengthening movements, with candidates running not only to name problems, but to promote alternative solutions in terms of policies and political direction.

4.3 Economic Empowerment and Security Innovation

 *Investing in women's financial autonomy, sustainability, and financial well-being is not just an economic strategy... But it's also a political strategy... Because women with money support, organize, mobilize themselves... money is able to buy them time to sit down and even mobilize politically."*

— Practitioner from Kenya

STRATEGIC FUNDING ALTERNATIVES

Successful programs do not compete in male-dominated funding networks. Public campaign finance systems are one potential solution, though they remain rare in Global South contexts, where alternative funding mechanisms have proven more feasible. Instead, they build alternative financial systems. These approaches use women's existing social capital and create collective funding mechanisms that avoid traditional barriers.

Ecosystem Building Over Campaign Funding: Rather than focusing solely on traditional campaign financing, successful models build comprehensive support systems. The approach involves funding and identifying the support network the leader needs to provide protection and build the network. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's strategy in Liberia leveraged endorsements from the market women—women at the periphery of the main economy, whose financial and advocacy support proved meaningful.

Collective Resource Mobilization: In Fiji, local women's organizations created internal funding mechanisms where they put money together from all organizations to distribute it evenly amongst women candidates. They did not directly fund campaigns but enabled collective support. External funders give flexible support to women's organizations, which then pool their money to support candidates. This avoids legal restrictions and keeps control at the community level.

COMPREHENSIVE SECURITY AND PROTECTION

Building on the violence documentation from Section 3.1, successful approaches address all types of threats through innovative protection strategies:

Digital Protection and Alternative Infrastructure: *Colmena Fund* supports organizations creating tech tools for monitoring gender violence, social media analytics for early threat detection, and digital organizing tools. The *Association for Progressive Communications*' community networks model demonstrates how locally controlled digital infrastructure can create safer spaces for women's political engagement (Bidwell & Diga 2024). Their Feminist Tech Exchange (FTX) provides specialized cybersecurity training that addresses the gendered nature of online attacks against women.

Collective Protection Networks: Successful approaches create networks of mutual protection where women politicians can share threat information, coordinate responses to harassment campaigns, and provide peer support during crisis periods. Individual security measures are insufficient without broader ecosystem protections. This includes platform accountability for removing harassing content, coordinated responses to disinformation campaigns, and regulatory frameworks that hold technology companies responsible for algorithmic amplification of violence. When women politicians face coordinated attacks, the solution cannot rely solely on individual protective measures—it requires systemic changes to the digital infrastructure that reward engagement over safety.

Community-Based Counter-Narrative Innovation: The Better Politics Foundation's "Elf" program demonstrates proactive community mobilization. The idea is to create internet elves to fight back against the trolls. Basically, they aim to activate communities to face hate with love, fostering a positive, hopeful tone online. This program works with young women to create positive digital content and counter online hate with supportive messaging.

Extending Workplace Protections: Monica Geingos advocates for extending workplace protections into political spaces using ILO Convention No. 190 (C190), which works toward the elimination of sexual harassment in the workplace and expanding the application of such instruments to political parties.

4.4 Breaking Funding Traps and Elite Bias



A lot of these programs on the African continent are extremely elitist and lock out the women who actually would benefit greatly, and who are actually doing the labor on the ground."

— Natasha Kimani, Regional Director, Futurelect, Kenya

THE SELF-REGULATION CHALLENGE AND ELITE TRAP

Both funders and practitioners identified a troubling pattern where women modify their positions to achieve political viability. Monica Geingos describes how women learn to "self-regulate." She explains how: *"By the time we see female political leaders, they have been shaped and molded into the face of the system."*

A Kenyan practitioner from *Future Elect* Kenya highlighted the exclusion problem in program design: *"A lot of these programs that we've designed, whether it's feminist programs and leadership programs, are inaccessible to these women. One, because of a language barrier... And just even the way these programs are designed, they don't have these women in mind."* She continued: *"A lot of these programs are not designed by Africans and for Africans. So, they don't take into consideration the unique challenges that African women face."*

OSF's senior advisor critiqued past philanthropic approaches: *"Most of that money has gone into supporting elite women who thrive in politics... Meanwhile, more diverse representation has been sort of sidelined."* This critique reflects broader patterns among the limited number of funders active in this space.

Innovative Response: Programs designed by and for women from diverse backgrounds demonstrate higher impact than initiatives focused on wealthy, educated women. The *Colmena Fund* deliberately targets *"women political leaders from marginalized backgrounds,"* including *"racialized women, people with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, queer and gender nonbinary people."*

ADDRESSING THE WESTERN FUNDING PARADOX

Western funding now faces a serious perception problem. Monica Geingos warns: *"If it's an external, Western-funded organization, particularly now, that funding might become a liability to that candidate right now on the continent."* Yet reduced funding creates problems: *"The type of women's organizations that would have defended you and given you advocacy cover are no longer operating because of the decline in donor funding."*

Innovative Response: *VélezReyes+* is developing local philanthropy ecosystems, trying to increase the number of donors in Latin America. Focused on democracy and political renewal, their efforts recruit high-net-worth individuals who do not normally donate in the sector.

THE NAMIBIAN WARNING: THE IMPORTANCE OF INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

Namibia has made progress, including its first female president and a cabinet with over 65% women. Nonetheless, it also exemplifies a crucial warning. Monica Geingos points out that these gains were the result of an internal ruling party decision, not broad-based lobbying or coalition-building. This top-down approach creates a critical vulnerability: the gains are fragile and could be reversed if the ruling party were to lose an election. This shows why institutional reform is needed to sustain progress.

4.5 Long-Term Investment and Meaningful Metrics

MULTI-YEAR INVESTMENT AND CRISIS RESPONSE

The most effective funders recognize that meaningful political transformation operates on generational timescales, not electoral cycles. *MacArthur Foundation* approaches change in this very way: "Social change happens incrementally, and it takes time... one of the things that we try to do a lot is multi-year grant making because these things will take time."

A Ugandan practitioner captured the frustration with short-term approaches: "The women politicians have said to us, 'you only come on the cusp of elections,' and that doesn't make any changes in their journeys, in their trajectory." Stop-start funding tied to elections prevents building the political relationships and knowledge needed for real change.

Latin American experiences demonstrate the scale of commitment required. VélezReyes+ acknowledges: "For this type of thing to exist, you have to have philanthropy that's a bit patient... Maybe let's see what happens in 10 years." This patience is essential—expecting democratic transformation in three-year project cycles consistently fails because it misunderstands how political systems actually change. This challenge is echoed by Áurea Carolina, a former federal deputy who returned to civil society work in Brazil. She emphasizes that many existing initiatives are "small, very good initiatives" given the "gigantic expectations" with limited resources and short timelines. Her experience underscores the need for systematic support and community spaces that recognize women's struggles to remain in these spaces without sustained backing.

MOVING BEYOND NUMERICAL REPRESENTATION

Traditional metrics miss the most critical question about women's political participation. As Monica Geingos observed: "The issue of representation of women at sub-national level... that to me is the proof in the pudding of whether we've managed patriarchy or not, because that's where the grassroots operate." Even in Namibia, with impressive national representation, sub-national leadership remains "inadequate... we only have four female governors out of 14."

This measurement challenge has led to innovative evaluation approaches that center citizen perspectives rather than elite assessments. VélezReyes+ exemplifies this evolution, acknowledging: "The programs usually increase around 40% the chances of you being elected... But are you a good leader once you're in office? We have no idea." Their response shows a fundamental shift in how they measure success. Instead of measuring symbolic impact, they survey citizens across nine Latin American countries about democratic leadership.

INTERGENERATIONAL BRIDGE-BUILDING

The fragmentation within women's political movements represents both a significant challenge and underutilized opportunity. A Nigerian practitioner identified the core problem: "Rather than building this kind of solidarity and strengthening this base... we're seeing that there's a whole lot of Balkanization and silo working."

Monica Geingos noted that "the established women's groups haven't managed succession well," while "young women-led feminist organizations are simply not getting the traction of the older advocacy groups."

Innovative Response: Successful bridge-building programs do two things: pass knowledge between generations and develop joint strategies. When each generation starts from scratch, it weakens the entire network's ability to sustain political influence.

4.6 The Financial Reality That Shapes Everything

Despite all the innovative programming and ecosystem building, financial networks that fuel political careers are exclusionary. The most successful approaches work to transform these networks. Successful funders make a key shift, moving from funding campaigns to building networks that create alternative ways to finance women's campaigns. Rather than competing within existing male-dominated networks, they build parallel systems that use women's social capital and collective organizing capacity.

Monica Geingos concludes with the most honest assessment of progress needed: "*The capacity training is the easy stuff. The hard part is when a woman leader decides they want to go into a campaign and they need to go see traditional leaders.*" Yet the innovative approaches documented in this section demonstrate that while financial barriers remain formidable, creative ecosystem-building can create alternative paths to political influence that do not depend on traditional funding structures.

The challenge extends beyond campaign costs to encompass the entire economic foundation of political power. The most successful interventions recognize this reality and work to build comprehensive support systems that address the broader economic exclusion that drives political marginalization.

05. Strategic Recommendations for Funders

 *It is very rare that private funders go straight to local actors to get a sense of what is happening on the ground."*

— Cristina Palabay, Karapatan, Philippines

Consultations with practitioners across Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Africa, and technology sectors reveal a clear consensus: advancing women's meaningful political participation requires moving beyond conventional funding approaches. The following recommendations combine practitioner insights with proven successful models to offer funders clear paths for supporting systematic change.

5.1 Fund Systemic Transformation Over Individual Training

The most successful approaches, from *MacArthur Foundation's* life-cycle investment to *Colmena Fund's* specialized leadership development, demonstrate that sustainable change requires building entire support ecosystems rather than funding isolated interventions.

TARGET INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

- **Political Party Transformation:** Building on VélezReyes+'s five-year institutional reform model, fund sustained engagement with political parties through civil society organizations and think tanks. These efforts should focus on restructuring recruitment processes, candidate selection criteria, and internal advancement mechanisms. Support women party leaders as part of wider efforts led by civil society. Women leaders, civil society, and think tanks are all essential for creating lasting change in institutions.
- **Cross-Party Coalition Building:** Support the emerging cross-party women's platforms documented across Mexico and Africa, providing the convening authority and flexible frameworks.
- **Electoral System Advocacy:** Invest in research and advocacy for electoral system designs that produce substantially higher women's representation toward parity. While debate continues about optimal targets, the evidence shows that incremental approaches often stall at inadequate levels, supporting the *CEDAW Committee's* call for fifty-fifty parity requirements. Both proportional representation systems and targeted majoritarian reforms can achieve these outcomes.
- **Comprehensive Ecosystem Support:** Fund integrated networks addressing the full spectrum of barriers, from Mexico's *Aúna* model of candidate accompaniment to *Colmena Fund's* specialized protection and mentorship programs.

BUILD COORDINATED ECOSYSTEMS

Effective funding creates networks of organizations rather than isolated projects. Mexico's *Aúna* platform demonstrates comprehensive accompaniment: "We accompany even before they become candidates with training processes... and after they win or lose elections, we are also there with them."

5.2 Address Structural Barriers: Violence and Economic Exclusion

The systematic violence and economic exclusion documented in previous sections work together to deter women, so successful approaches must address both problems. Successful approaches target the immediate safety needs of women politicians and the underlying finance models that systematically advantage male candidates.

COMPREHENSIVE PROTECTION STRATEGIES

- **Develop specialized digital security initiatives** and regulations designed specifically for women politicians.
- **Create rapid response funds** for women facing coordinated attacks during campaign periods.
- **Support intersectional protection**, recognizing how "gender discrimination combines with racist attacks" for indigenous and Afro-descendant women.
- **Address the resilience leadership skills and mental health crisis** among women politicians, who face worse conditions than first responders.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT INNOVATION

- **Build alternative funding ecosystems** that leverage women's existing social capital.
- **Support pre- and post-election sustainability strategies** addressing the resource deficits and debt crises that prevent women from running again.
- **Invest in comprehensive economic empowerment** that builds women's financial independence as a foundation for political participation.
- **Fund pooled resource models** through women-led organizations rather than direct campaign funding.

5.3 Navigate Technology's Democratic Impact

Technology companies now wield power comparable to states, controlling digital infrastructure essential for political engagement while operating for profit rather than democratic values. Platform algorithms systematically amplify misogynistic attacks while corporate power rivals state capacity.

SUPPORT DEMOCRATIC DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

- **Fund development of alternative digital infrastructure** controlled by civil society rather than corporations.
- **Invest in specialized anti-harassment technology tools** explicitly designed to address gendered attacks.
- **Support community-based counter-narrative campaigns** that organize positive digital responses, such as the *Better Politics Foundation*'s "Elf" initiative, which organizes communities to counter online trolls with supportive messaging and democratic modelling, demonstrating scalable approaches to community-based digital activism.
- **Address basic technology access inequalities** that systematically disadvantage women in rural areas.

COUNTER ALGORITHMIC AMPLIFICATION

As Paula Martins from the *Association for Progressive Communications* explains, "social media works... using algorithms that prioritize polarization," systematically amplifying misogynistic attacks through platform design.

- **Fund advocacy for platform accountability mechanisms** addressing algorithmic amplification of violence.
- **Support digital literacy and security training** specifically designed for women political leaders.

5.4 Invest in Values-Based Leadership with Multi-Year Commitment

Support women who defend democratic values, human rights, and policies that help marginalized communities through 10-20 year investments. Recognize that real transformation takes generational change and flexible approaches that adapt to changing political contexts.

PRIORITIZE TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

- **Fund women emerging from social movements and grassroots leadership** rather than defaulting to elite women who've learned to "self-regulate" their advocacy.
- **Support leaders who maintain commitments to gender equality** despite electoral costs.
- **Address intersectional dynamics** by prioritizing indigenous women, women with disabilities, and other groups facing compound discrimination.
- **Bridge generational divides** through structured mentorship, connecting experienced leaders with emerging activists.

COMMIT TO GENERATIONAL CHANGE

- **Provide multi-year core support and sustained strategies (5-10 years)** rather than project-based funding.
- **Maintain funding during setbacks** rather than withdrawing support during political challenges.
- **Establish flexible mechanisms** that can respond rapidly to democratic transitions and constitutional moments.
- **Recognize that meaningful institutional change requires 10-20 year commitments.**

5.5 Center Global South Leadership

Trust the knowledge of those closest to the challenges while providing resources for locally developed strategies. Adopt funding models that incentivize collaboration rather than competition between organizations, building coordinated networks rather than isolated projects.

- **Proximate Leadership:** As demonstrated by *Colmena Fund*, prioritize funding approaches led by women with lived experience as political leaders.
- **Ecosystem-Based Funding:** Adopt funding models that incentivize collaboration rather than competition between organizations, building coordinated networks rather than isolated projects.
- **Crisis-Responsive Security:** Address the full spectrum of violence against women in politics through specialized protection strategies, political leadership coaching, mental health support, and comprehensive workplace protections.
- **South-South Learning:** Facilitate collective dialogue between Global South practitioners and funders, while ensuring Global South perspectives are central throughout funding cycles.

The ultimate goal is not simply increasing the number of women in political positions but creating political systems that support inclusive participation by design. This requires moving beyond individual empowerment toward institutional transformation, beyond numerical representation toward values-based leadership, and beyond short-term gains toward sustainable systemic change.

06. Conclusion: Change the Rules of the Game, Not the Players



We must never be naive about backlash when there are social gains for any group outside societal norms."

— Monica Geingos, Former First Lady of Namibia

From Recommendations to Transformation

The strategic recommendations outlined in Section 5 represent a choice. Funders can continue investing in approaches that focus on training women to navigate systems designed to exclude them. Alternatively, they can support practitioners in the longer-term work of transforming those systems to be more inclusive by design. Implementing these recommendations requires funders to embrace a paradigm shift: from measuring success by the number of women elected to evaluating the extent to which governance systems genuinely reflect women's diverse needs and priorities.

This transformation will be evident when several markers emerge: advocating for gender equality enhances rather than endangers political careers; women wield influence over finance and foreign policy as readily as social affairs; political violence against women becomes not just illegal but unthinkable; and the power gap documented in Section 2.3 closes as women gain access to the "hard power" portfolios that control real state functions.

The Ecosystem Coordination Challenge

The recommendations require unprecedented coordination across funding organizations. The small number of active funders—primarily DAC bilaterals like Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, along with EU institutions and specialized foundations—often operate in silos, with limited coordination despite the constrained funding landscape. OECD DAC data shows only \$282K globally for gender equality-focused democratic participation, illustrating how minimal resources are spread across competing rather than complementary approaches. Success demands collaborative funding mechanisms that pool resources, strategies, and grantees' complementary work toward shared ecosystem goals rather than isolated projects. The same logic applies to funders themselves. The scale of transformation required exceeds what any single organization can achieve alone.

The Generational Investment Challenge

The 10-20 year investment timelines recommended in Section 5.4 are a fundamental departure from traditional grant-making cycles. This requires funders to develop new internal evaluation frameworks that can measure progress across decades rather than project cycles, while maintaining institutional memory that survives leadership transitions within funding organizations. VélezReyes+ demonstrates this patience, yet few funders have developed the institutional mechanisms to sustain such commitments through changing political contexts and shifting organizational priorities.

The Proximity-Power Balance

Balancing the need to prioritize Global South leadership with ensuring adequate resources creates challenges. Funders must develop new models that transfer decision-making authority to those closest to the challenges while ensuring sufficient resources reach the practitioners doing the work. This requires dismantling existing power structures within philanthropic institutions themselves.

Measuring Transformation: New Metrics for New Goals

Traditional metrics, such as the percentage of women in parliament or the number of women candidates trained, will become inadequate for measuring the systemic transformation these recommendations envision. New evaluation frameworks must instead be designed to track progress toward generational change.



To this end, funders should track two categories of indicators:

1. Ultimate Transformation Indicators (Long-Term Goals):

These indicators represent the fundamental, systemic shifts that signal a true closure of the power gap. These are generational goals that may take 20 years or more to achieve, but they serve as the north star for all strategic funding.

- **Portfolio Integration:** Are women gaining access to ministries of finance, defense, and foreign affairs? Do they have more control over budgets in governments and political parties?
- **Party Culture Change:** Are recruitment processes and candidate registration becoming genuinely inclusive? Are women leaders becoming party candidates and leaders by design, not by exception?
- **Electoral Violence Trends:** Is political harassment against women becoming not just illegal, but unthinkable?

2. Proximate Progress Indicators (Short-Term Metrics):

Given the generational nature of the ultimate indicators above, funders should use more immediate, tangible metrics to assess progress over 5-10 year investment cycles. These metrics show whether an investment is successfully moving a system toward the ultimate goals.

- **Ecosystem Health Metrics:**

- **Collaboration patterns:** Are women's organizations building coordinated and complementary strategies?
- **Knowledge transfer:** Are experienced leaders successfully mentoring emerging activists? Are there other strategies where generational transition and advances are taking place?
- **Sustainability indicators:** Are women remaining in politics after electoral losses?
- **Cross-party coalitions:** Are women in power and in politics able to collaborate? Are gender equality reforms being supported by a cross-party consensus?
- **Leadership styles:** Are women showing more democratic and collaborative leadership styles? Are they increasing their resilience and emotional management?

- **Substantive Influence Measures:**

- **Policy impact:** Are women in office successfully advancing gender-responsive policies?
- **Citizen evaluation:** Do communities report improved democratic leadership?
- **Long-term trajectory:** Are political systems becoming more inclusive by design?

The Window of Opportunity and Threat

The current moment presents both an unprecedented opportunity and an escalating threat. Democratic transitions and constitutional moments create windows for the institutional reforms outlined in the recommendations. Simultaneously, the sophisticated opposition forces documented throughout this research are mobilizing more effectively than ever before.

The technology sector's increasing control over democratic infrastructure represents both the greatest threat and the most urgent opportunity. The algorithmic amplification of violence against women politicians will only intensify without deliberate intervention, yet the same technologies offer potential for creating alternative democratic spaces under civil society control.

Climate change and global migration patterns will reshape political participation in ways that could either accelerate women's inclusion as traditional power structures face pressure or entrench existing exclusions as resources become scarcer and competition intensifies.

The Call for Courageous Funding

The evidence presented throughout this research, particularly from the diverse contexts of the Global South, demands a fundamental shift in philanthropic approaches to women's political participation. The practitioner insights from across Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Africa, and technology sectors deliver a clear conclusion: incremental funding approaches will not address the systematic exclusion mechanisms documented in Section 3.

Success requires funders willing to:

- **Commit to generational timescales** rather than project cycles, recognizing that systemic change is a long-term endeavor.
- **Fund coordination and ecosystem-building** rather than isolated interventions, strengthening the collective power of local movements.
- **Support structural transformation** rather than individual empowerment, focusing on changing the rules of the game itself.
- **Center practitioner knowledge and proximate solutions** rather than external expert analysis, trusting those with direct experience in their unique contexts to lead the way.
- **Address violence and economic exclusion** as systematic deterrents requiring comprehensive responses that are tailored to local realities.

The strategic recommendations offer funders a choice between perpetuating systems that create an illusion of progress and investing in the transformation necessary for genuine change. The path forward requires abandoning the comfortable predictability of training programs and capacity building in favor of the complex, long-term work of changing political systems themselves.

As practitioners across regions have demonstrated, women are already creating alternative pathways to power and redefining political participation. From Monica Geingos' transnational organizing across 18 African countries to *Colmena Fund*'s specialized protection strategies and from Mexico's comprehensive accompaniment models to the innovative collective funding mechanisms emerging in Fiji, the solutions exist and are proving effective. The practitioners have provided the evidence, insights, and roadmap. The strategic recommendations offer concrete pathways for action. Current democratic transitions and constitutional moments across the Global South create unprecedented opportunities for the institutional reforms these recommendations envision.

Practitioners have the experience and valuable learning that funders can draw on to build courageous and strategic grantmaking. The moment for transformation is now, and the partnership between funders and practitioners has never been more promising.

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