



**URGENT
ACTION
FUNDS**

Sustaining Feminist
Activism Worldwide

URGENT ACTION FUNDS RESPONSE TO SOCIAL AND HEALTH CRISIS

Urgent Action Funds



The UAF Sister Funds are made up of four equal and independent funds: UAF, UAF Africa, UAF Latin America and the Caribbean, and UAF Asia and Pacific. The UAFs' model of international philanthropy upends the paradigm of organizations headquartered in the Global North. It relies on a constructive balance of autonomy and collaboration. While each fund has its own board, staff, and budget, all are built upon a shared history and set of values, as well as a commitment to sustaining activism and providing rapid response funds. Each Sister Fund is solely responsible for receiving applications and making rapid response grants in their region. Yet, together, the network of Urgent Action Funds builds global visibility through a shared brand, provides a supportive peer network, and enables the four Sister Funds to speak collectively on advocacy issues that are relevant to all four. The Sister Funds also share a deep curiosity that drives them to learn and innovate both together and independently, as well as a political vision and values that guide our work.

Together, the Sister Funds are uplifting the power of local leadership to collectively support women, trans and gender non-conforming activism in 110 countries around the world, particularly in areas affected by armed conflict, escalating violence, political volatility and extreme repression. Across all of our programming, we apply an intersectional approach to gender justice, recognizing that there are multiple systems of oppression at work, such as racism, classism, sexism, cis-hetero-patriarchy and ableism.

Context



Viruses don't discriminate, but systems and policies do. Neoliberalism and unchecked corporate power have led to extreme wealth inequality. Rising authoritarianism, nationalism, militarization, and extremism have intensified attacks on human rights, democracy, and information. White supremacy, racism, xenophobia, occupation, colonialism, and settler violence, intersect with patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism, and other discriminatory systems, threatening the lives and security of marginalized groups. Across every region, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequities. Corporations and elites are consolidating their power and states are using the pandemic as an excuse to increase repression and surveillance, erode human rights, and persecute human rights defenders. Women, trans, and gender non-conforming human rights defenders – especially those who face intersecting forms of discrimination and violence – are particularly at risk, both because they are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and because they are disproportionately targeted for attacks and excluded from decision-making. The following is a summary of global trends the Urgent Action Funds (UAFs)¹ are currently witnessing as part of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. The Consortium of Urgent Action Funds includes Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, Urgent Action Fund Africa, Urgent Action Fund Latin America, and Urgent Action Fund Asia and Pacific.

Trends

Intensified Marginalization

Women, trans, gender diverse, and other historically oppressed groups of defenders and their communities face intensified marginalization in this crisis, in particular the groups below.

- **Activists who are racialized, indigenous, and from other marginalized ethnic and religious groups, as well as environmental, and land rights defenders** are especially at risk, both due to their unequal access to resources and due to state and non-state actors using the crisis as an opportunity to dispossess and criminalize them. Racialized activists are disproportionately falling ill and dying due to structural racism. In France, we are supporting an organization of Black and other racialized activists to provide online advice to their communities during the pandemic. In the United States, we are supporting Two-Spirit indigenous land defenders on reservations to respond to their communities' emergency needs. In Lebanon, we are funding women land rights defenders and farmers who are organizing to encourage sustainable farming practices and reclaim their land to ensure self-sufficiency. In Latin America we have supported organizations from indigenous, Black, and rural communities to strengthen advocacy and collective protection strategies, both to reinforce community health and denounce the increase of risks related to ongoing extractive activities threatening their common

goods and lives, during the pandemic. In Thailand, we are supporting women land rights and environmental defenders and their communities who have been unable to access government subsidies for survival amidst the lockdown. In Africa, we are supporting women's rights organizations working on environmental justice to influence governments to redefine 'household' based on internally displaced women's realities, who are facing double jeopardy as a result of COVID-19 and environmental disasters - Cyclone Idai (in Southern Africa) and rising levels of Lake Victoria (Kenya and Uganda). Additionally, we are supporting groups that work with isolated indigenous women and girls in the Central African Republic to demand for inclusion within national response, simplify and translate information on coronavirus into vernacular languages and disseminate it within indigenous people settlement camps at the outskirts of Bangui.

- **Disability rights defenders** report structural barriers to access and discrimination, including when it comes to triage and other healthcare practices. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan we are funding activists to provide medicine, groceries, and hygiene kits to women with disabilities, as well as accurate information on the pandemic. In Guatemala we have supported an organization of women with disabilities to carry out strategies to strengthen their autonomy. In Kenya, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, and Nigeria, we have put out a special call for proposals and are supporting women with disabilities to access PPEs and medication, replace walking aids that were destroyed as police enforced lockdowns, and translate COVID-19 information into disability friendly formats such as audio, large fonts, braille, and videos that have sign language interpretation. We have organized webinars targeting women with disabilities to share information on the type of support we are offering during the pandemic and partnering in advocacy to national governments for an intersectional national response.

- **Lesbian, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and other gender diverse defenders** experience increased violence resulting from states using the pandemic as an excuse to adopt militarized policing practices and transphobic laws. In Brazil, we are resourcing the creation of an online support network for lesbian women facing militarized state violence. In Hungary, we are funding a trans group that is raising awareness about a law that would assign gender at birth without the possibility of changing it. In Indonesia, we have supported LBTIQ activists and their communities who have lost their sources of income as drivers in transport networks due to the travel restrictions during the lockdown. We have also supported LBTIQ activist groups in South Africa and Uganda with practical needs including PPEs, food aid and dignity kits. Concurrently, we have provided support for wellbeing support spaces. For future advocacy initiatives we are currently supporting LBTIQ groups to document experiences of violence and exclusion while simultaneously co-creating safety guidelines, referral pathways and legal aid in response to homophobic violence that has escalated during the pandemic.
- **Sex worker and informal, domestic, and low-wage worker rights defenders** are experiencing threats to their livelihoods. Women are overrepresented among frontline workers, from nurses to cleaners and grocery store workers. Their care work has increased with school closures and sick family members. Sex workers face a loss of income as well as more repression and attacks. In Argentina and Colombia, we have supported sex workers organizations to ensure their integral sustainability and psycho emotional accompaniment. In Cambodia, with factories closed down and owners withholding pay, we are supporting workers to organize and to access basic needs. In Africa women domestic workers have experienced heightened violence, stigma (as they are accused of spreading the virus) and loss of livelihoods. In Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire we have supported domestic worker groups to access legal aid and credible COVID-19 prevention information. They are currently engaged in advocacy campaigns with employers and government authorities on the right to health and decent working conditions for women domestic workers. We have also supported groups

working with sex workers in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, and Kenya to provide sex workers with food aid, ARV treatment, PPEs, dignity kits; as well as monitoring violations against sex workers and providing linkages and referrals to pro-bono legal services.

- **Migrant, displaced, refugee, or stateless defenders and those affected by conflict and occupation** face severe safety and security threats. Their immigration status makes them even more vulnerable in this crisis, since they often lack access to social protections and can be trapped in unsafe situations due to closed borders and other travel restrictions – in particular those in detention centers and those living under occupation or blockade. In Israel, we are supporting an advocacy campaign to include undocumented women in the emergency pandemic response. In the Palestinian Territories, we are supporting a gender-based violence hotline for respond to women and girls. In Thailand, we have supported Shan women migrant workers and activists and their communities that continue to be discriminated upon in refugee camps, unable to access government aid because of their status as undocumented workers. In Cameroon, we funded groups supporting women in internally displaced camps with credible COVID-19 prevention information, dignity kits, food aid, gender-based violence response services and advocacy to camp leaders for a gendered COVID-19 response.
- **Defenders deprived of their liberty** also face severe health risks. The detention of defenders is increasing as states repress human rights under the guise of combating the virus. In the United States, we are supporting formerly and currently incarcerated women, trans, and gender non-conforming defenders campaigning to release the elderly and those with serious medical needs. In Colombia, we are funding an organization to supply personal protective equipment to women political prisoners and provide livelihood support to a recently freed political prisoner and her infant. Under our existing security and well-being grants, we

continue to give support to those that are arrested, detained or face threats from government forces amidst the pandemic such as activists needing legal assistance in China, Sri Lanka, and other countries in Asia. In Uganda and Egypt, we support defenders who have face online violence from the state with secure encrypted platforms as well as medical treatment. Working with regional WHRDs networks, we have collectively activated a WHRD registry documenting heightened attacks against WHRDs during the pandemic.

Gender-Based Violence

Across every region we have seen an increase in gender-based violence, within the home as a result of quarantine conditions, and in society at large, due to the rise in authoritarianism and militarism provoked by the pandemic. Social isolation is exacerbating domestic violence stress triggers such as financial and health-related concerns. Additionally, women living under authoritarian governments are facing increased gender-based violence due a rise of militarized responses to the health crisis. In Pakistan, we relocated activists who were experiencing violence and were unable to stay with their family. In Lebanon, we resourced the creation of a short-term informal shelter for vulnerable migrant workers and their families. In Brazil and Nicaragua we have supported feminist collectives that are providing information for survivors of domestic violence. In Kenya, South Sudan, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, we have supported feminist collectives and organizations to influence governments' COVID-19 response procedures and policies. In Uganda, as a result of advocacy the Ministry of Gender has set up a gender-based violence COVID-19 response committee that includes women's rights organizations we support. We are also supporting the provision of pro-bono legal, health, and psychosocial services to survivors of gender-based violence, reinforcing social safety nets for women and girls in the informal sector, rural and urban slum communities and other at-risk groups at the grassroots level, and resourcing shelters for survivors of violence.

Sexual and Reproductive Rights Violations

Systemic limitations to access basic sexual and reproductive healthcare services have increased due to the confinement measures and the crisis of healthcare systems. As there are no emergency services available, women's health and lives are at greater risk, especially in rural contexts and in countries where abortion is still penalized. In Latin America we have supported feminists collectives to provide services and accompaniment in a secure manner. In Uruguay we have supported feminist organizations for legal and psychosocial accompaniment to respond to the worsening of obstetric violence during the crisis. In the United States, we funded activists developing a litigation strategy and raising awareness about threats to abortion access.

Collective Care

Activists are feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of balancing the crisis, work, and their survival. Already living with high levels of anxiety and stress in conducting their work and dealing with emotional impacts of risks and attacks, they now face uncertain economic, social, and health concerns. The sudden closure of schools and other institutions have increased their caregiving roles, financial responsibility, and workload. Furthermore, the fear produced by the proximity of the contagious cases and the impossibility to keep carrying out funeral rituals and collective spiritual practices have affected their emotional wellbeing. The UAFs are convinced that the sustainability of activists and their communities requires not only the fulfillment of basic needs, but on integral protection and wellbeing. In the United States, we are supporting a Black sex worker collective to host a wellness space to help people cope the emotional effects of COVID-19. In Latin America we have delivered more than 20 grants specifically for Collective Care, including collective healing processes and psychosocial accompaniment for activists, and ensure connectivity for digital dialogue spaces around care and wellbeing. In the Asia and Pacific region, collective care has taken the form of community kitchens or communal gardens that women activists and their communities have initiated and we supported not only to address their basic need for food, but also to begin to put in place solidarity economies for the future. In Africa, under the auspices of the Feminist

Republik, our support for collective care includes supporting online conversations on the care culture that is compromised by the neoliberal way of life. We are also supporting and facilitating collective care and healing in person and through online spaces including our own Ubuntu Gatherings. We have supported a group that has regional presence in East, West, Central, and Southern Africa to organize monthly online conversations dubbed ‘GirlTalk’ as a way of debriefing and sharing amongst feminists, activists, and women human rights defenders.

Livelihoods

In a majority of regions where the UAFs operate, 80% to 90% of women, LGBTIQ+ and gender non-conforming individuals work in the informal sector. They are unlikely to benefit from government aid packages. It is an imperative political act to broaden the definition of security to focus on people’s loss of livelihoods and the precarious conditions for activist work in order to sustain activists and movements. In Tanzania, we supported an organization to install hand-washing facilities in high-risk environments such as markets and public transport terminals and to advocate for women’s rights through local radio and TV programs. In Thailand, we funded an LGBTI rights group to provide food and other essentials to its members and their families. In Fiji, we supported an organization to supply food and other basic needs for rural women with no government assistance.

Access to Information

Human rights defenders, journalists, bloggers, and those covering the COVID-19 response have been targeted. Additionally, the language and channels used by governments and the WHO on prevention measures often fail to reach marginalized groups, such as those with limited literacy and access to the Internet or television. There is also a need to debunk false information that could escalate the spread of the virus. This includes racist disinformation that scapegoats certain communities. In Madagascar, we funded a project to educate girls and young women on COVID-19 through radio programs. In Latin America, activists continue to question the government’s denial

of the pandemic as in Brazil, Nicaragua and Colombia and to demand better access to health and safety. We continue to support through our security and well-being grants activists who are being persecuted on allegations of “spreading fake news” now made punishable in emergency legislations enacted in countries like Cambodia.

State Accountability

Defenders are monitoring their governments and holding them accountable as they take advantage of this global emergency to erode human rights and adopt repressive measures, from limiting abortion access to contracting with private companies to increase surveillance and shrinking civic space and freedom of speech. WHRDs across regions report an increase in digital surveillance. It is critical to monitor measures taken during this emergency and their implications in the long term. The Philippines passed a law authorizing arrests for spread of misinformation on social media, which led to a mass arrest of human rights lawyers. In Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala the militarization of emergency plans is suspending fundamental rights, enforcing curfews, strengthening authoritarianism, criminalization and violence against activists and their communities. In Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Colombia, governments are using public resources to promote religious right-wing discourses and practices as solutions to the pandemic. In North Africa, governments continue to downplay the role of women frontline workers during the pandemic. We supported a group in Morocco to document and popularize the contributions of women on the frontlines, raise awareness among the general public about gender stereotypes that mainly affect professional women in the medical field, and influence policy change with regards to women frontline workers.

Digital Security

As the pandemic requires a pause in physical movement, WHRDs report a need for information on available resources, access to virtual spaces, and secure digital platforms to continue their activism. Along with a need to become aware of and gain access to online spaces, video-conferencing

subscriptions, upgrades to virtual storage and content management products, procuring VPNs, and buying laptops with cameras, WHRDs need support with digital security trainings to allow them to conduct their activism safely. Throughout our regions, many grantee partners already report an increase in digital surveillance, with governments using mechanisms in place to “control” the pandemic violating rights to privacy and non-discrimination, and augmenting online violence. In El Salvador, feminist activists are receiving attacks on their social media after denouncing the lack of gender perspective and negative impacts of measures implemented by the government. In Ecuador, we are supporting a group providing counseling to women facing digital harassment and threats and conducting webinars about holistic security and protection. In light of such increasing surveillance, we have supported activists and their organizations to set up security digital platforms to continue their work virtually. In Africa, we have supported various groups to address the increased online harassment and intimidation of women and gender non-conforming persons during COVID-19. In Burkina Faso, we are supporting a young feminist group to design visuals and videos to train girls and women, women's organizations and activists on digital security, and existing legal frameworks that protect women from cybercrime. Our partners’ interventions have encouraged victims to seek justice and publicize sanctions against perpetrators.

Recommendations



The COVID-19 pandemic and the systemic marginalization it has exacerbated pose an existential threat to women and other marginalized human rights and social justice activists and movements. These defenders are on the frontlines, providing support to their communities while overburdened with extreme care work responsibilities and facing intensified attacks. Now more than ever, it is

crucial to support them and ensure that these activists, organizations, and movements can continue their work during and after this pandemic. This requires:

- **Collective care and holistic psychosocial support:** Defenders, especially those who face intersecting forms of discrimination and violence, need support to strengthen their collective and holistic care practices, as well as robust integrated protection measures, including digital security.
- **Flexible and sustainable funding:** Women, trans, and gender non-conforming human rights defenders continue to be critically underfunded, and this pandemic is aggravating their economic challenges. States and philanthropic actors must provide flexible, core, and rapid response funding to ensure the sustainability of frontline activists and movements, especially small, informal, community feminist groups and organizations, so they can survive this crisis and continue their invaluable work. Beyond delivering funds, donors need to have a sensitive approach to activists, adapt their own requirements to meet organizations' current needs, and avoid putting additional pressure such as those related to reporting.
- **Feminist leadership and solidarity:** Despite the compound obstacles they face, women, trans, and gender diverse defenders build vital solutions to global and local crises. COVID-19 has highlighted even more starkly the urgency of the systemic changes feminist movements are working to create, from robust environmental justice measures to inclusive social protections and labor rights, and a reevaluation of care work. It is imperative to center intersectional feminist leadership and solidarity and ensure that activists are meaningfully involved in decision-making during and after the pandemic.