

# NEWS

## Safe spaces for women’s human rights defenders in Zimbabwe

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By Womankind Worldwide and Women's Action Group



EDINAH MASIYIWA, DIRECTOR OF WOMEN'S ACTION GROUP

**Women's Action Group (WAG)** is a feminist organisation that promotes and defends women's rights in Zimbabwe. We spoke to Edinah Masiyiwa (Director), Fiona Tinarwo (Programmes Manager) and Clara Mhlaba (Programmes Officer) about how WAG came to be the feminist institution that they are today and how Womankind's **Her Voice Fund (HVF)** is contributing to their work in creating safe spaces for women's human rights defenders in Zimbabwe.

### The herstory of Women's Action Group

"We began as a pressure group in 1983. At that time, women who were found to be working without the company of men were arrested during an operation called 'Operation Clean Up' and these women were accused of soliciting for sex work. Women came together from all walks of life to question this inequality. Zimbabwe had gained independence in 1980 but three years later, women still did not have the freedom to walk on the streets of Harare or any other town without being harassed by police." – Edinah Masiyiwa

From starting as a pressure group, WAG grew into a fully-fledged organisation in 1987. Since then, they have been at the forefront of the women's rights movement in Zimbabwe, working on issues ranging from legal reform to advocacy for issues around health and sexual and reproductive health rights.

"Today we are known for promoting women's rights in the areas of gender equality, gender-based violence prevention, promotion of sexual and reproductive health rights, bodily autonomy and transformative leadership." – Edinah Masiyiwa



WOMANKIND / CHARMAINE CHITATE, EDINAH MASIYIWA (DIRECTOR OF WOMEN'S ACTION GROUP), WADZANAYI VERE (WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER SUPPORTED BY WAG), FIONA TINARWO (PROGRAMMES MANAGER, WAG).

### Creating safe spaces through Her Voice Fund

"Womankind have been a loyal friend of WAG for many years. Since 2017/2018 they supported us under the **Building Bridges project** where we worked to build intergenerational feminism in Zimbabwe. Our work is centred around using the feminist approach, so Building Bridges helped us to create those generational linkages with young feminists. Today, we continue to celebrate the young women who are now vibrant activists within the movement because of the work that we have started with Womankind." Fiona Tinarwo

"Over the years, we have continued to see you supporting our work and now through HVF where our initiative has been shaped by the political environment; from the 2023 general elections in Zimbabwe and the post-election period.

During the elections we saw cyber harassment of female politicians and candidates. There was even intra-party political violence and differences. Our HVF initiative is to try and create that safe space where women are able to come together despite our differences, share more about feminist ideologies and talk about our different experiences. Whether you're a women's human rights defender, female politician, counsellor or an MP, we are coming into the same space where we just get to reflect on what we want to achieve within the feminist movement in Zimbabwe. When we speak of feminism, it has to be across the political divide, it has to bring us together as women at the end of the day." – Fiona Tinarwo

Through HVF, WAG is also holding feminist self-care sessions which as Clara Mhlaba, Programmes Officer at WAG puts it is "key to ensure that women's human rights defenders and politicians have that time to reflect on the work that they are doing. Through this, we also ensure that new parliamentarians get to know issues around feminism and feminist ideologies."

"Women's Action Group is a key feminist institution in Zimbabwe. They celebrated their forty-year anniversary last year and looking back we see the work that they've done in terms of pushing back, pushing boundaries for women and going where no other women's organisation is going." – Wadzanayi Vere, women's human rights defender supported by WAG.



### The importance of flexible funding

"In feminist and advocacy work, there is a lot of change. For example, after the elections, we were not aware that some of the Members of Parliament who had won the elections would be recalled. This speaks to the need for flexible funding because even if they've been recalled, because of the emotional trauma they've gone through, they still need that support and if funding is flexible, it allows us to really shape and respond to their needs." – Edinah Masiyiwa.

For Fiona Tinarwo, "flexible funding is important because it enables us to respond to various issues affecting women, girls and women's human rights defenders. Issues that you can never really plan for just emerge. We talk about politically motivated violence and the current climate crisis. It is important to have those flexible funds in place because you can never really plan for these emergencies."

"It's also part of feminism and feminist principles that we promote on a daily basis. Giving decision making power to grantees to decide on how they want to utilise funding and where they think the need is – builds mutual respect and trust."- Fiona Tinarwo

Flexible funding is central to Womankind's feminist ethos. We continue to make flexible funds available for feminist organisations and activists as we believe they are always the experts in how to defend the rights of women, girls and communities within their countries.

With thanks to Edinah Masiyiwa, Fiona Tinarwo, Clara Mhlaba and Wadzanayi Vere for their time and words.

[Read Wadzanayi's story](#)

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