Introduction
By Emily Bove
Executive Director, Women Thrive Alliance

A few weeks back, I was discussing the U.S. election during a call with a Women Thrive Alliance member organization – one of 250 grassroots women’s rights organizations in 50 countries – and I asked them, “If you could share one message to the candidates, what would it be?” The idea for this letter was born.

In the lead up to this pivotal election, there has been little discussion about the candidates’ vision for achieving gender equality by 2030 and how they would engage grassroots gender equality advocates in the process. There needs to be opportunities for grassroots advocates to speak directly to the candidates, and the candidates need to hear them.

At Women Thrive Alliance, we hope the next administration will not only champion the impact and potential of women and girls, but also recognize the crucial importance of grassroots advocates in creating transformative change at the local and national level. We ask the next administration to support and implement a grassroots-led and bottom-up vision of social change grounded in the priorities and perspectives of those who know what is best for them, their families, and their communities.

In this letter, 31 grassroots gender equality organizations from 21 countries have shared their priorities and recommendations in the most honest and straightforward way. These are the things they want the next president to know.

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1 This letter presents messages from advocates in Afghanistan, Argentina, Burundi, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, India, Iraq, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Nepal, Palestine, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Vanuatu.

2 The 2016 State of Civil Society report by CIVICUS illustrates how civic space around the world is under attack and rapidly shrinking, with the right...
Women Thrive Alliance members organizations urge the next administration to take leadership in the following areas:

1. **Strengthen democratic institutions.**

Grassroots women’s organizations ask the U.S. government to provide direct support to strengthening just government institutions and supporting democratic transitions through foreign assistance and diplomatic pressure. The next administration must better integrate women and girls’ rights within its diplomatic strategies and actions. It must also invest in supporting civil society so that it can hold governments accountable to democratic values. Women’s rights organizations, in particular, must be afforded a safe, enabling environment to advocate for legislative reform in order to secure women’s rights and the implementation of international human rights and women’s rights conventions and agreements. The United States must also take a stronger stance against dictatorial regimes and the human rights violations that occur on a daily basis in their countries. Sexual violence is a key violation that must be addressed through technical and financial support to grassroots women’s rights organizations, so that they can impact laws and policies that perpetuate these atrocities.

2. **Ensure adequate financing for women’s rights and gender equality, especially financing of grassroots women’s rights groups.**

Women’s rights groups around the world face incredible barriers to accessing financial resources and funding. Women Thrive Alliance members call for the direct financing of grassroots women’s organizations by the US government, so that they can provide needed services and support to communities, advocate for policy changes that improve the lives of women and girls, and bring women’s voices into decision-making. While women’s rights groups are key drivers of equality and anti-poverty efforts, their share of development funding is miniscule. The U.S. can change this, by being a leader in directly financially supporting women’s rights organizations to carry out their important work.

3. **Support women’s leadership at all levels and in all decision-making processes and spaces.**

The next administration must strongly support women and young women’s leadership and representation within decision-making processes. Special focus should be put on supporting women’s political participation and access to elected office. But supporting women’s leadership also means protecting women leaders in the women’s rights movement. In regions like the Middle East and North Africa, women human rights defenders are experiencing an upsurge of violence against them and governments are targeting their organizations. The protection of women human rights defenders should be a top priority for the next administration.

*NB: The Women Thrive Alliance consists of more than 250 members in 50 countries. This letter only represents the views of the organizations having submitted their messages and cannot be said to be representative of the entire Alliance.*

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2 The 2016 State of Civil Society report by CIVICUS illustrates how civic space around the world is under attack and rapidly shrinking, with the right to association, to peaceful assembly and to freedom of expression under renewed and sustained assault. These trends are particularly concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa, despite similar trends being present around the world.

3 A 2016 study conducted by Gendernet reviewed financial support given by major donor countries and found that just 0.5% ($192m) of the billions of dollars allocated to promote gender equality in poorer countries in 2014 actually went to women’s rights organizations (Gendernet is a subsidiary body of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) development assistance committee).

4 The Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition has already identified a holistic approach to protection that USG agencies can use to better identify increased involvement in their support of women human rights defenders.
From: Members of the Women Thrive Alliance  
To: the next President of the United States  

Messages collected in October 2016

Dear Madam/Mr. President,

Women Thrive Alliance is a global network of close to 250 women’s rights organizations in 52 countries. As the U.S. presidential election draws near, we want to let you know what is important to us. We believe that gender equality can become a reality in all communities and countries, but we know that there is a lot of work to do. That is why we want you to know that:

From Afghanistan:

- We urge the U.S. government and other international donors to persuade Afghan lawmakers to pass the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) bill into law to provide Afghan women much-needed legal protection. The legal system of Afghanistan has long failed to protect women from rape, domestic violence, under-age/forced marriage, and other common human rights violations. The EVAW bill has been on the floor of the Afghan Parliament for a long time without being passed into law due to conservatism of some MPs and political differences of others.
- We urge the next President to continue officially showing support for Afghan women and in particular continuing to support the Promote Programme and Bonn II and Tokyo Conference for Afghan women, which sent a very strong message to the world and the Afghan government about the importance of Afghan women’s roles in rebuilding and governing Afghanistan.

From Argentina:

- We are looking forward to working with the United States, as a country that is open to the world, willing to listen, and eager to work together as President Obama has been doing in the last years, inspiring us all. Public and private sectors need to think and work articulately on the design and reinforcement of public policies to assure equal access to education, the labour market, and the health system, so women will be able to fully participate in society. In Argentina, the female population overtakes the male population, as it does in most Latin American countries. Women and girls are raised and born in a cultural context highly influenced by paternalistic stereotypes that results in them being victims from all types of violence: physical, economic, obstetric, and the worst form: femicide. In spite of the efforts made by governments, statistics show that no international pact or law has been enough to eradicate gender inequality and violence against women. Moreover, the numbers of violence against women are increasing in a disturbing way. But violence is only one of the main problematic issues for women in Argentina. A recent investigation shows that in the last three years there has been stagnation and a great fall of women’s participation in the labour market. It is also remarkable that in the last decade teen pregnancy has become one of the biggest problems to Argentinian females. From 700,000 births a year, 16% are from teenage moms aged 15 to 19 years. This percentage increases in some provinces (Salta, Jujuy, Tucumán, Corrientes, Misiones) to 20% or 25%, affecting education or future incomes.

From Burundi:

- We encourage you to act forcefully towards dictatorial regimes with shocking records in human rights abuses,
muzzling of the press, and the harassment of civil activists. Some U.S. political decisions in some developing countries affect directly or indirectly the lives of thousands of millions of people in general, and women, girls and children in particular. As advocates of women’s rights, we’d ask you, during your time at the White House, to review the relationships between the U.S. and some countries, including ours, Burundi.

- We want to ask you to support, and to help us pressure our leaders to modify the discriminatory texts towards women so as to have a legal arsenal in line with the international texts on human rights, especially with regard to succession rights. Please support African states like Burundi so that there is good governance and a pledge to regular democratic transfers of power, in which respect for the Constitution guarantees personal freedoms and human rights. Your support can help us influence the implementation of a law on inheritance and matrimonial practices.

From Cameroon:

- We want you to know that grassroots women and girls are mobilizing in the most fragile region of the country, the Far North, and continuing the fight against sexual violence and discrimination despite increased threats such as Boko Haram. We want you to know that women and girls in our province are living through forced and early marriages, and that this harmful practice will not end unless our country equips itself with national tools such as rights-based family codes, as well as other laws against sexual violence. We commit to building a women’s centre in Maroua, Far North region of Cameroon, next year and hope that the U.S. will not forget us and the challenges we face.

From Ethiopia:

- We need the new President of the United States to stand with us to advocate for gender equality in Ethiopia, increased female parliamentarians and the end of harmful practices that are keeping girls out of schools such as arranged marriages and female genital mutilation. In the rural parts of Ethiopia where the majority of people are living, the rights of women and girls are still being denied (like access to education) because of societal attitudes, harmful traditional practices, and bad infrastructures. There is also an epidemic of arranged marriages in Afar region with the cultural practice of ‘Abusema’ through which young girls become the fifth or sixth wife of someone. The girls are forced to stop education before their eighteenth birthday. Female genital mutilation is also rampant in different parts of the region. The number of women in parliament has improved but those women face constraints in being active on issues like women’s rights.

From Gambia:

- We would want the next American president to work closely with our government to improve the condition for freedom of expression and free press in the country. Release of all political prisoners, particularly women who were arrested while protesting for the release of their party leader and his entire executive, will not be only appreciated by the whole Gambian population but will also serve as respect to their political rights and rights to assemble, as well as right to protest without arm as enshrined in the 1997 Gambian constitution. We will really call on the next American president to work with our government to ensure that.

From Ghana:

- Please ensure trade, investment, financial, and intellectual policy rights and policies that do not impede countries’ abilities. We want to see policies that provide economic opportunities and services to their people without undermining their right to development.
• Guarantee universal social protection for all, including income security for the unemployed and those whose livelihoods depend on precarious work, the sick, the disabled, pregnant women, children, and the elderly.
• Provide adequate and stable financial support and capacity development to civil society organizations to enable effective and substantial public participation in policy dialogues and in implementing agreements and legislation at all levels.
• We wish to suggest that your trade policies, especially those concerning agricultural products, should be a win-win agreement for both your government and the governments of developing nations, because 70% of the actors in the agricultural sector in the developing economies are women. We greatly acknowledge the efforts you play in the democratization of institutions in the world including the liberalization of the status of women and girls. However, permit me to state here that your trade policies are unfair to developing nations including our dear country Ghana, thereby worsening the already precarious living conditions of our rural women and girls, the same target group that the targets of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal 5 seek to protect.

From India:
• We urge the next president to encourage the government of India to provide better laws for girls and women’s safety. Crimes against women are rampant in India and the laws and system inefficient and weak. In specific, make marital rape a crime in India. Millions of women are raped in the name of marriage and our government doesn’t recognize it as a crime. Women and girls should feel safe in their country and have the freedom to live and walk the streets without any fear. The Government of India needs to actively ensure that our girls and women are safe and justice is provided to victims through its policies, programs, and laws.

From Iraq:
• Please support gender equality in Iraq through stronger diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Iraq and through the promotion and encouragement of more participation of women in the government. Once the country is liberated from ISIS, which is still controlling Mosul, we will need the U.S.’s support to reopen the universities and schools that have been damaged and to get girls and women back into classrooms. I also hope the U.S. can have a role in stabilizing the region and ensuring peace for all and women and girls’ rights in particular.

From Kenya:
• We ask the next President of the U.S. to consider supporting women and girls’ leadership opportunities through equal sporting opportunities. We believe that sports can offer a framework for empowerment of youth and girls in particular. Having the U.S.’s support to develop and scale up such an approach will be important to ensure the next generation of Kenyan leaders and change-makers understand the benefits of collective solidarity and equal opportunity.

From Morocco:
• We ask the next Mr. or Madam President of the United States to use its influence to the Moroccan State with:
  o The consolidation of the separation of powers (legislative, executive and legal power);
  o The promotion of individual and public freedom;
  o The promotion of freedom of expression;
  o The encouragement to the institutionalization of equality between men and women in all public areas;
  o The respect for the constitution in equality between men and women as mentioned in its article 19;
o The compliance with international conventions that Morocco has adopted;
o The establishment of a functioning democracy;
o The combating of all forms of discrimination against women; and
o The promotion of the rights of men and women to citizenship.

- We would like the president to also support civil society in:
o Advocacy;
o Female leadership;
o Economic empowerment of women; and
o Combating all forms of discrimination against women.

From Nepal:

- We urge the U.S. Government to continue to work alongside Nepal to promote education opportunities for all girls to contribute towards an improved economic and political future. International investment is invaluable to improve standards of living and the ability of girls and women to actively contribute towards their futures and those of generations to come. Nepal has been struggling with severe levels of poverty for many decades. Despite the work of the government and support from countries across the globe, Nepal is still plagued with vulnerable living conditions for young girls and women, especially in rural areas. Two in every three women experience domestic violence and often do not get a chance to be educated - approximately 54% of women are considered literate. Most are financially dependent on male members of the family and are unaware of their human rights. Women remain isolated from political and social activities due to a lack of education, financial independence, confidence and patriarchal attitudes.
- We urge the U.S. to continue promoting women’s leadership regardless of the outcome of the election and encourage women and girls to be included in key policy decisions, like its post-earthquake efforts. The past year has been a historic time for both the U.S. and Nepal in terms of women’s leadership. While Hillary Clinton became the first women to represent a major political party as candidate for president of the U.S., Bidhya Devi Bhandari became the first female president of Nepal. The potential for young women to be a strong force for change in Nepal is huge, but their voices and experiences remain marginalized, despite the fact that women now hold three of the highest political positions in the country. Nepal will need the support of the international community as it rebuilds, following the 2015 earthquakes. It is critical that the United States ensure that women are at the decision-making table and that the needs and concerns of women and girls are taken into account as it aids in the rebuilding process.

From Nigeria:

- Please ensure that U.S. government foreign assistance funding directly supports grassroots civil society and non-governmental organizations in Africa. This will create positive impact in the implementation of gender equality, health, and wellbeing of women and girls, including achieving the Sustainable Developmental Goals by 2030.
- Please monitor the security issues to maintain peace in Africa and around the world for the creation of safe and violence-free environments for women and girls.
- Please ensure that access to free or affordable sexual and reproductive health services, including access to information, are achieved to reduce maternal mortality in Africa. Also, create friendly refugee and migrant policies.

From Palestine:

- It’s a great and historical opportunity for us, women in Palestine, to reach out to you through Women Thrive Alliance and to make our voices heard to your Excellences. We are encountering a great violation of our human rights; we are arbitrarily killed at the Israeli military checkpoints and barriers, arrested and jailed without any justification. Our
homes are demolished and our lands are confiscated. We are forbidden from moving freely in our country and from picking the fruits of our trees. It is very sad that the world doesn’t see the truth; it only sees Israeli stories. However, we love our country, freedom, and life. So we are asking you to have our rights protected. We believe in equality and we will never give up claiming our rights.

**From Rwanda:**

- We wish to see the U.S. government invest in capacity-building in technology in Africa and Rwanda. There needs to be better allocation of technical and financial support towards empowering girls in technical and vocational training institutions and also ensuring the curriculum is practical and competence-based. There is not a one-size fits all approach to making sure girls have access to Information and Communication Technologies.

**From Sierra Leone:**

- Madam President/Mr. President, please we would like you to support the promotion of women and girls’ rights in all aspects. We are tired of all legislation/laws/policies being well written but not actually implemented in Sierra Leone; there is nothing like law enforcement. We want to see the launch of the National Strategy for the reduction of female genital mutilation, which has been put on hold by the current Minister of Social Welfare.

**From Somalia:**

- We need the next U.S. president to use his/her influence in Somalia to change the continued perpetration of abuse against women. As advocates against gender-based violence, we have found that many perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence happen to be members of the armed forces, including Somali and other soldiers. It is our hope that your dollar in Somalia will not be a further burden to our girls and women, and that you will use all your power to press the Somali government to change its indifferent policies on sexual and gender-based violence.
- We also hope that upcoming U.S. funds to Somalia will prioritize women’s needs including obstetric care.
- Somalia has suffered prolonged unrest and chaos for over two decades, which has resulted in the most catastrophic disaster in the world. Women and young children are the ones who often pay the heaviest price of these conflicts. Sexual and gender based violence has been occurring with impunity as perpetrators often get away with their crimes. The justice system is ill functioning, weakened from high levels of corruption. Gender equality is another big challenge that has been a standing agenda for years. Traditionally, Somalia is a male dominated patriarchal society that puts women as second-class citizens in socio-cultural and economic aspects. On the other hand, the country has been lately affected by the rise of terrorist groups, which has turned into a regional crisis. These groups have committed grave human rights violations against civilians including but not limited to: killing, kidnappings, beheadings, and imposing strict versions of their own laws, which are far from the interpretation of the Islamic teachings. As civil society organizations, we are kindly requesting from the next president to help us in the following areas:
  - Support civil society as watchdog and monitoring for the human rights violations committed by both the state and non-state actors;
  - Protect human rights defenders with the establishment of strong protection mechanism such as national laws and policies;
  - Support civil society in achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment both at national and at grassroots levels;
  - Strengthen cooperation and advocacy networking among Somali civil societies;
  - Support civil societies in countering violent extremism (the soft approach); and
  - Support civil society organizations for the achievement of Peace building and State building Goals (PSG 3
From Sudan:

- We urge the next president to address the on-going genocide against the Darfuri people in western Sudan, which includes bombings, the use of chemical weapons, and the use of rape as a weapon of war. The next president must take action to end this atrocity and bring Sudanese President al-Bashir to justice, who is indicted for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court (ICC).

From Tanzania:

- We ask the next President of U.S. to join hands with Tanzania in fighting Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) which is still predominant in some of the regions in Tanzania.
- We also ask the next President of the U.S. to play a great role supporting the education system for girls. Our education has been favourable to boys as opposed to girls and the majority of girls rarely access technical skills. We still have a high unemployment rate in Tanzania as the education provided is more theoretical than practical. We would like to have access to education among girls, which provides a more practical education.
- We ask the next President to work with our government to fight child-girl marriage. Early marriage inhibits the development of girls and women as many of them take on family responsibility immaturity.
- We need strong institutions able to protect the interest of women in Tanzania and around the globe.
- We need advocacy and women and children’s rights to be strengthened. This can be only possible with a massive collaboration from the donor community in the U.S.. They have a major role to play considering their economic power and the interest that the U.S. has shown in supporting different projects to promote the rights of women and children. Now more than ever, the country has to set strategies to ensure enough funding to the developing countries, Tanzania being one of them, as we face women and children being deprived of their rights in the grassroots level.

From Uganda:

- Our message to the next president of the United States focuses on vulnerable women: the next president should look at a small scale assistance fund for rural women in developing countries through which livelihood grants can be granted to the women in grassroots community based organizations. Currently, we don’t have such a fund in Uganda and our women living in poverty, especially mothers, are too poor to afford loans at the current inflated interest rates.
- We urge the next U.S. president to look into the issue of sexual and reproductive health rights among adolescents in Uganda. There has been serious neglect of sex and gender related issues at primary and secondary level as the government says such young people should not be exposed to sex education yet. A change in policy would greatly shape their lives.
- We would like to request that the U.S. government pay much more attention to rural women and girls, and their access to information regarding their rights and opportunities. Women and girls in rural settings are particularly vulnerable since they not only lack information, but also lack the means to have their voices heard - having hardly any access to modern channels of communication for advocacy. Most of the violence committed against rural women and girls goes unreported and thus continues to increase. We wish to see the U.S. government help a country like Uganda overcome the rural vulnerability of girls and women. We would like to see the U.S. government provide more efforts in uplifting women’s and girls’ lives in Uganda especially the rural women and girls who are left out by many programs offered by both government and NGOs. Their rights are always violated because they do not know that they
have those rights and need to demand them. Additionally, much needs to be done to overcome cultural, economic, and health burdens borne by both young and elderly women in rural and urban areas.

- The biggest challenge we face in Uganda as a country is on how to retain the girl child in school. The highest number of the Ugandan population is young, unemployed, and very poor: most families live on less than a dollar a day. The USA can help by making sure that young people’s voices are heard and that their needs are met. We would also request that the next president uses their power to advocate to other presidents the need for gender policies and to implement them. We need policies that encourage and support young girls to participate in development activities. We also want the next president to support the creation of spaces that will give girls a chance for their voices to be heard (at local and national levels). Many girls enrol to early primary school but very few complete school.

- We want the next President to highlight the importance of the provision of sanitary pads in schools to reduce dropouts and teenage pregnancy. Most of the girls drop out of school because they can’t afford sanitary pads. The next administration should work directly with local organizations and support their advocacy around health issues and menstrual hygiene. We also wish to see the next administration commit to a constant supply of pads to girls in schools in the most marginalized, rural and vulnerable communities.

From Vanuatu:

- Mr. or Madam President, we would like you to support our government’s efforts to assert local control over financial institutions (such as foreign banks) in order to ensure accessibility of financial products to women and girls. Specifically, we want to make sure that they make micro-loan schemes easily accessible for women and girls’ income-generating activities and women-led businesses. We also wish to see the U.S. government work with our government to ensure that no girl child is left at home without attending school.

We thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Women Thrive Alliance members:

Some of the authors of these messages cannot state their organization’s identity for fear of backlash in their countries. The following organizations have agreed to be named:

1. Abibiman Foundation, Ghana
2. Action for Hoima Women Rights Association (AHOWORA), Uganda
3. Action for Women and Children (AWCC), Somalia
4. Afghan Women Skills Development Center, Afghanistan
5. Association de Lutte contre les Violences faites aux Femmes, Cameroon
6. Codr Ubuntu, Burundi
7. Darfur Women Action Group (DWAG), Sudan
8. FAWE, Rwanda
9. Foundation Fundara, Argentina
10. Generation Initiative for Women and Youth Network (GIWYN), Nigeria
11. Girl Child Network, Sierra Leone
12. Girls’ Voices, Uganda
13. Himiza Social Justice, Tanzania
14. Initiative for the Promotion of Democracy and Good Governance (IPDG), Gambia
15. Iradah – the First Business Women Incubator, Palestine
16. Iraqi Organization for Women and Future, Iraq
17. JS Fund For Hope, Ghana
18. Mouvement Alternatives Citoyenne, Morocco
19. Palestinian Center for Communication and Development Strategies, Palestine
20. Rural Women’s Network Nepal (RUWON), Nepal
21. Sayfry, India
22. Vanuatu Young Women For Change, Vanuatu
23. Visionary Lady Foundation, Uganda
24. Vijana Amani Pamoja, Kenya
25. Voice of Wilderness Developmental Organization (VWDO), Ethiopia
26. Witness Somalia, Somalia
27. Women LEAD Nepal, Nepal
28. Women Wake Up, Tanzania
29. Women For Afghan Women, Afghanistan
30. Youth Coalition Against Gender-Based Violence, SEMERERA, Burundi
31. Anonymous, Ethiopia