

Executive Summary



Young Tunisian woman at the opening march of the World Social Forum, Tunis, March 2013.

Photographer: Jessica Horn

Why gender and social movements?

Across the world there is an active, mass-based demand for an end to gendered injustice in all domains of our social, economic, political and cultural lives. Social movements – led by feminist, women’s and gender justice activists and movements – have been pivotal in demanding, making and sustaining these changes. However, while women’s rights and gender justice are ‘on the agenda’ in many arenas, activists still encounter strong resistance to changing gendered politics and practices within movements and allied organisations. When it comes to making an impact on transforming gender power relations, social movements matter.

Social movements are forms of collective action that emerge in response to situations of inequality, oppression and/or unmet social, political, economic or cultural demands. They are comprised of ‘an organised set of constituents pursuing a common political agenda of change through collective action’ (Batliwala 2012: 3). Social movements are not inherently progressive. Religious fundamentalisms, neo-Nazism and ethnic nationalism have all been rooted in and propagated by social movements. Drawing on first-hand examples from different global regions, this report considers enabling factors and barriers encountered when attempting to integrate women’s rights and gender justice into progressive social movements that have a base of common politics that affirms inclusion, rights and the equitable redistribution of power.

Why are women's rights and gender justice important concerns for social movements?

In order for any action or intervention around rights, democracy and equality to be successful, it must include and value gender equality as part of its analysis and methodology for change. Without this, interventions are unlikely to succeed in their goals of contributing to equality¹ for all and more holistic and complete social transformation.

Integrating gender perspectives is not just about 'including' women or 'thinking about' men and gender minorities but, rather, considering what a gendered politics provides in terms of alternative ways of being, seeing and doing that in themselves serve to transform patriarchal power relations.²

How do progressive social movements think about and act on women's rights and gender justice?

There is great diversity in the ways that women's rights and gender justice issues have been approached in movements with different gender constituencies³ and political foci, as the box below demonstrates.

Women's rights and gender justice across the social movement spectrum

Women's movements for women's rights and gender justice

The majority of historical and contemporary activism on gender justice has been led by women and in all-women movements for change. Progressive women's movements are united around a common cause of challenging gender inequalities and injustices in society, although there is diversity in perspectives on this, including from the vantage points of race, class, ability, age and sexual orientation.

Women-led movements for broad social justice agendas

Women have also led activism for broader social and political change using approaches that acknowledge both gender inequities and political, social or economic issues, resulting in broad societal or political change and increased rights and justice for women.

Men's movements for women's rights and/or gender justice

Male gender equality activists have developed theoretical and practical insights into the ways patriarchal power affects men and boys, questioning definitions of masculinity, including social norms, expectations and behaviours around men's labour, relationships in the family, sexuality, self-care and violence and aggression; and considering how men can relate to women in more egalitarian ways.

1 An equal society is one in which everyone can flourish. The diverse needs, situations and goals of individuals are recognised, discrimination and prejudice are removed, and the economic, political, legal, social and physical barriers that limit what people can do and be are tackled (Burchardt and Vizard 2007).

2 The term patriarchy is used to describe systemic and institutionalised male domination and the cultural, political, economic and social structures and ideologies that perpetuate gender inequality and women's subordination (Just Associates 2012).

3 The term movement constituencies means the individuals and groups that make up the membership of a social movement.

Mixed-gender movements that do not have women's rights and gender justice as a foundational focus

Historically, most progressive social movements have not embraced a commitment to consider gender inequality or challenge patriarchy from the outset. Frequently, gender analysis and action begins in mixed movements when women activists start to question why they are being left out of movement visions or not acknowledged in movement leadership.

Mixed-gender movements with women as active leaders and members but without a central focus on gender justice

There are many examples of progressive social movements where women play active roles by making up the majority of movement membership or acting as movement leaders, and yet the movements do not have an explicit gender focus. This underscores the point that the presence of women in a movement does not guarantee that they or the movement will have an explicit focus on women's rights and gender justice.

Mixed-gender social movements with gender justice as a foundational axis

Although less common, there are movements that are founded on intersectional politics, including analysis and action on gendered power as central. These tend to be movements that have a direct political continuity with spheres of action where feminism has broken ground – for example, on bodily integrity and autonomy and gender identity – and movements where feminists have been influential as founders.

Alliances between women's movements and other movements for change

Women's movements may form short- or long-term alliances with other social movements in the context of campaigns, uprisings and protests or as part of general solidarity and seeking common cause. Positive results can emerge from such alliances, although women's movements sometimes face the challenge of reciprocal solidarity – where women's movement actors often stand 'side by side' with broader movements, other social movement actors will not always step up in defence of women's movement agendas.

What are the challenges for social movements in integrating gender perspectives?

Women's rights and gender justice advocates experience some common challenges when working to build commitment in their movements to gendered political concerns. These can be grouped into the following areas:

Barriers around the recognition of gender equality and women's active participation as key issues in movements

Resistance to integrating women's rights and gender justice as a key movement priority can often take the form of dismissing the significance of gender equality – for example, it is argued that there are already plenty of women movement members; therefore, gender can't be a problem; or specific actions on women's rights and gender justice are not necessary because the movement is already about democracy or inclusion.

Gendered attitudes, behaviour and stereotypes ingrained within the ‘deep structure’ of a movement

The ideas and behaviours existing at informal level within a movement’s ‘deep structure’⁴ can create profound challenges for the realisation of women’s rights and gender justice as external and internal priorities. Within movements many women face the expectation of playing caring roles, providing emotional support for movement members or taking on the ‘back office’ administrative tasks. Deeply ingrained ideas on gender roles can lead to, and allow impunity for, sexist, discriminatory and even violent behaviour towards women and minority groups. Such behaviour is political in its impact, with the effect of re-entrenching deeply held normative beliefs around gendered roles.

Barriers posed by ideas around gender, culture, tradition and the private sphere

Advocates for women’s rights and gender justice within movements face particular challenges around making gender inequality in the private sphere visible and recognised. Ideas about tradition, culture and religion can be used to marginalise and silence those who speak up about gendered power in areas such as the family and on topics such as abortion, making it extremely difficult for such areas to become accepted and common topics in movement agendas and discussions.

Disparities and competition in movement priorities, allegiances and alliances

Integrating women’s rights and gender justice into movement agendas is made more difficult where gender equality is seen as a moveable priority. Across history, women who have participated in community struggles have faced the suggestion that women’s rights are issues to be dealt with ‘after the revolution’. It is also often the case that ‘trade-offs’ take place in movement agendas, with gender equality issues dropped when their presence threatens solidarities with other constituencies or demands. Even within women’s and feminist movements there are disagreements and hierarchies, particularly around recognising and acknowledging women’s diverse identities. This inhibits the potential for women’s and other social justice movements to build strong, progressive alliances.

Difficulties in maintaining change in the long term

Even as social movements succeed in attracting women members, building women’s leadership and encouraging thinking about what gender equality means in the context of their agendas, challenges arise in keeping up momentum. It is often difficult to sustain progress after a shorter change goal is achieved, to maintain an intersectional approach⁵ or to build on initial achievements to ensure that women’s rights and gender justice remain a constant area of focus.

4 ‘Deep structure’ describes hidden layers within organisations and movements where unconscious or even conscious but hidden processes occur, including assumptions taken for granted about gender roles and the place of women (Rao and Kelleher 2005; Srilatha Battiwala, BRIDGE e-discussion March 2012).

5 Intersectionality is a conceptual framework that makes visible the multiple discriminations that people face, the ways in which systems of oppression (e.g. those framing gender, race, class, sexuality, ability) interact with each other, and thus the activist imperative to name and challenge multiple inequalities as part of seeking justice for different constituencies of women.

What does a gender-just social movement look like?

While social movements vary in their outlook and methods across contexts, there are similarities in how movements respond to the question of gender and the emergence of challenges to patriarchal power both within movements and in the external environment that they are situated in. The following box suggests some possible components of gender-just movements. These components function like enabling conditions, creating a supportive environment that allows for deep reflection, revision and action, and sustains commitment to women's rights and gender justice over time.

A gender-just social movement

- Affirms the importance of tackling gender inequality and patriarchal power as an integral component of justice for all and names this as an explicit priority for action.
- Creates a positive environment for internal reflection and action on women's rights and gender justice.
- Provides active and formalised support for women's participation and leadership in all areas of movement practice.
- Consistently tackles gender-based violence and establishes zero tolerance for sexual harassment in movement spaces.
- Assesses gender bias in movement roles and redistributes labour along gender-just lines.
- Enables full participation of both women and men, taking into account care work and reproductive roles.
- Appreciates the gender dimensions of backlash and external opposition faced by activists.
- Engages with norms and notions around gender, taking into account context-specific gender identities, trans and intersex identities and shifting understandings of gender in social life and activism.

How can we build gender-just social movements?

There is tremendous diversity in social movement practice across contexts, so there is no straightforward 'recipe for change'. But experience shows that change is easier if a number of elements are in place to help alter both internal power dynamics and external strategies so that they are more inclusive of gendered politics.

Recognise and transform culture, power dynamics and hierarchies within movements

By making visible the way that gendered power is understood and practised in the 'deep structure' of movements we can challenge the hidden and invisible power dynamics that make movement participation uncomfortable or unbearable for women and gender minorities, allow gender-based violence to continue within activist spaces, and undermine the lived politics of a movement.

Support internal activism for change

The most powerful accountability mechanism in any movement is its own constituency. It is, therefore, vital to consider and support initiatives by movement members that call for women's rights and gender justice to be addressed in their movements' politics and practices. This might involve supporting both women's collective power and individual change-makers, building feminist leadership, developing platforms and caucuses on equality, and anticipating and responding to backlash.

Draw the line on impunity for gender-based violence

Holding movement members to account for ethical conduct around gender relations – be it in public or private – is essential in creating gender-just movements. This includes issues such as domestic violence or sexual harassment by movement members, be it to others in their movements or in their personal lives. It also includes challenging impunity and the failure of movement leadership to take a stand against discrimination or violence within movements.

Develop the politics and make the arguments on gender and movements

Political visions are what make a movement, and taking a position on gendered injustice and oppression is a necessary component of building gender-just movements. Elements of this process may include making women's rights and gender justice clearly visible in movements' external agendas, and creating spaces for learning and for open discussions on what a gender focus will mean in different movement contexts.

Build inclusive alliances, shared analysis and common cause

The important process of building alliances and finding common cause between feminist and other social movement politics involves openness to critique and a desire to listen and to change. Intersectional analysis is a useful tool for movements to help identify how different axes of power intersect and to define areas of common struggle between social movements. Common cause may be built around a need to unite against common adversaries, but in the process, movement actors may build longer-term relationships.

Expand inclusion within women's and feminist movements

Women's movements are not static; they emerge, grow and change in response to internal and external factors. Challenging inequalities and the exercise of discriminatory power within women's movements needs to be ongoing, as movements self-critique and work towards increasingly inclusive politics of transformation. This in turn strengthens solidarities with other movements that women's movement members are a part of, and contributes to pushing progressive politics forward.

Operationalise gender justice in movements and movement-linked organisations

In many cases movements have an organisational base or platform relevant to or influential in guiding movement thinking and practice. This base can play a key role in determining whether and how women's rights and gender justice are embraced. Organisational change strategies and auditing and evaluation approaches, if adapted and developed for specific movement contexts, can help to support this process, with senior-level commitment a key driver for strategies to transform internal culture and external political agendas.

Remain attentive to movement–organisation power relations

Relationships between movements and organisations are multifaceted: organisations may support movements; movements may be allied with organisations or even create them. It is critical to be alert to the tremendous opportunities as well as tensions involved in these interactions. Organisations explicitly dedicated to movement-building and support should consider how they can encourage and support movements to be inclusive, tackle new forms of oppression and recognise emerging constituencies. Donors should take steps to align their practices with requirements for gender-just movement-building and longer-term transformation.

Stay with it, and support change over time

Time is an important factor in social movement development and success. While individual campaigns or instances of uprising for change may take place within a fixed timescale, the broader struggle for women’s rights and gender justice remains ongoing. Success can bring backlash, and new forms of injustice, marginalisation and inequality emerge as mainstream power takes on new forms or extends its reach in new domains. While shifts in how movements engage with gender are important, the real test is sustaining this respect and working on the full integration of women’s rights and gender justice over time.

Areas for further exploration

While this report begins a process of discussion on routes for gender-just change in social movements, it is clear that, going forward, further work in a number of areas would be extremely useful. These include:

- Practical guidance on methods and practices for transforming deep structures in social movement contexts.
- Discussions on ways to formalise accountability mechanisms on gender justice in movements.
- Deeper analysis on how to build effective and equitable alliances.
- Work to support and invest in the development of gender-just social movements.
- Further research, documentation and analysis on the history of women’s and feminists’ activist involvement in progressive social movements across the world.

It is hoped that the process begun in this report can continue and grow, and that more gender-just movements can be built, supported and experienced, ultimately contributing to changing our societies towards full justice and equality.