

IN brief

Gender and Social Movements

Social movements worldwide are a critical force for progressive social transformation, and have proven effective in generating change at levels that policy, law and development interventions alone have not achieved. Women's rights activists and feminists globally have been active both in building women's movements and participating in other progressive social movements. However, women's active participation in social mobilisation does not guarantee that movements will take on the struggle for women's rights or embrace more just forms of gender power relations in their politics and practice.

This *In Brief* explains why it is so important for all progressive social movements to commit to thinking about and transforming women's rights and patriarchal power relations, both in their external-facing activism and their internal cultures and practices. It considers some of the challenges that movements face in doing this, and sets

out some 'routes to gender-just movements' that can be tried and adapted in different mobilisation settings. The two case studies, produced collaboratively with activists and movement leaders, illustrate some of these routes in action: in the global human rights movement, and the CLOC-Via Campesina movement in Latin America.



Gender and Social Movements: An Overview

Why are women's rights and gender justice an important concern for social movements and what does a gender-just movement look like?



A Tale of Two Movements: How Women's Rights Became Human Rights

Where and when have human rights movements and women's movements converged and how have they informed and changed one another?



Gender Equality and Women's Rights in the CLOC-Via Campesina Movement

What strategies have women leaders in the CLOC movement used to integrate gender equality into the movement's external work and internal dynamics?

Gender and Social Movements: An Overview

Jessica Horn



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

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 related organisations.

What are social movements, and why are they important?

Progressive social justice movements emerge in response to situations of inequality, oppression and/or unmet social, political, economic or cultural demands. They comprise ‘an organised set of constituents pursuing a common political agenda of change through collective action’ (Batliwala 2012: 3). They are a significant force for challenging inequalities and exclusions in society and in proposing new models and visions for more egalitarian and just social, economic and political power relations.

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

For any action or intervention around rights, democracy and equality to be successful, it must include and value women’s rights and gender justice as part of its analysis and methodology for change. Without this, interventions are unlikely to succeed in their goals of contributing to full equality 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.

How do different social movements think about 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. However, movements of male gender equality activists have developed insights into the ways patriarchal power affects men and boys and how men can relate to women in more egalitarian ways.

Most mixed-gender social movements have not embraced a commitment to consider gender inequality from the outset, although many have women as active members. There are some mixed-gender social movements with gender justice as a foundational axis, although they are less common. These movements are founded on intersectional politics, including analysis and action on gendered power as central.¹

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

Resistance to integrating women’s rights and gender justice as key movement priorities can take the form of dismissing the significance of gender equality – for example, arguing that women are already active in a movement and do not require specific attention, or that targeted actions on women’s rights and gender justice are not necessary because the movement is already about democracy or inclusion.

Additional challenges arise from the ideas and behaviours existing at an informal level within a movement’s ‘deep structure’.² Within movements many women face the expectation of playing caring or administrative roles. Deeply ingrained ideas on gender roles can lead to, and allow impunity for, sexist, discriminatory and even violent behaviour towards women and minority groups.

¹ ‘Intersectionality’ is a conceptual framework that makes visible the multiple discriminations that people face and the ways in which systems of oppression (such as gender, race, class, sexuality, ability) interact with each other.

² ‘Deep structure’ describes hidden layers within organisations and movements where unconscious or even conscious but hidden processes occur, including assumptions that are taken for granted about gender roles and the place of women.

There are particular challenges around making gender inequality in the private sphere visible and recognised in movements. Ideas about tradition, culture and religion can be used to marginalise and silence those who speak up about gender power relations in areas such as the family, and on topics such as abortion.

Integrating women's rights and gender justice into movement agendas is made more difficult where gender justice is seen as a moveable priority. Women activists are often told that gender issues will be dealt with 'after the revolution', and 'trade-offs' take place in movement agendas, with gender equality issues dropped where their presence threatens solidarities with other constituencies or demands.

Problems arise in keeping up momentum on change. Even as movements succeed in attracting women members and building women's leadership, it is often difficult to sustain progress 'after the revolution', to maintain an intersectional approach or to build on initial achievements to ensure that women's rights and gender justice remain a constant area of focus.

What does a gender-just social movement look like?

A gender-just social movement:

- Affirms the importance of tackling gender inequality 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.
- Takes 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?

Recognise and transform culture, power dynamics and hierarchies within movements

By making visible the way that gender power is practised in the 'deep structure' of movements, we can challenge the hidden power dynamics that make movement participation uncomfortable or unbearable for women and gender minorities.

Support internal activism for change

Getting behind initiatives on women's rights by movement members might involve supporting both women's collective power and individual change-makers, building feminist leadership or developing platforms and caucuses on equality.

Draw the line on impunity for gender-based violence

Holding movement members to account for unethical conduct around gender relations includes issues such as domestic violence or sexual harassment, as well as challenging movement leadership to take a stand against discrimination or violence within movements.

Develop the politics and make the arguments

Taking a strong position on gendered injustice might include making women's rights and gender justice clearly visible in movements' agendas and creating spaces for discussions on what a gender focus will mean in different movement contexts.

Build inclusive alliances and common cause

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.

Expand inclusion within women's and feminist movements

Challenging inequalities and the exercise of discriminatory power within women's movements needs to be ongoing and will strengthen solidarities with other movements, contributing to pushing progressive politics forward.

Operationalise gender justice in movements and movement-linked organisations

A movement's central body can play a key role in ensuring that progress on women's rights and gender justice is made. Organisational change strategies and auditing and evaluation approaches, if adapted and developed for specific movement contexts, can be useful tools.

Remain attentive to movement-organisation power relations

Many organisations share social movements' demands for women's rights and gender justice. Organisations dedicated to movement-building can encourage and support movements to be inclusive, tackle new forms of oppression and recognise emerging constituencies.

Stay with it, and support change over time

While shifts in how movements engage with gender are important, the real test is sustaining progress and working on the full integration of women's rights and gender justice over time, anticipating and dealing with backlash.

A Tale of Two Movements: How Women's Rights Became Human Rights

Manjima Bhattacharjya



Women march for gender equality in Dakar, Senegal, 2011.

Photographer: Marie Devers

“When the politics of feminism are combined with the tools of the human rights framework, great progress can be made.”

‘Human rights’ was first defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948. The decades that followed saw movements around the world powerfully using human rights to address arbitrary detention and torture of people imprisoned for their beliefs or for challenging the State, and in documenting abuse by dictatorial regimes.

This period also saw a parallel rise in feminist and women’s movements. However, experience in recent decades has shown that the global human rights discourse can ignore or marginalise women’s rights unless women’s movements consciously and continuously engage with and challenge human rights movements. This case study, based on a review of key documents and interviews with global and regional women’s rights advocates, looks at the points of convergence of human rights movements and women’s movements, and how they have informed and changed one another.

Redefining ‘human rights’

Article 1 of the UDHR makes clear that ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.’ It decries discrimination on the basis of sex, stating ‘Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.’ However, the core concept of human rights and its ability to recognise gendered identities has continued to be contested, as has its relevance and applicability across different global regions, cultures and contexts.

A real enquiry into the status of women’s rights globally came with the UN Decade of Women (1975–1985), when the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was created, and rising numbers of feminist activists came together over three world conferences, leading to a coalition, the Global Campaign on Women’s Human Rights.

At the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, in 1993, there was a Women’s Tribunal on the theme of violence against women. Radical new ideas were put forth, emphasising the importance of the private sphere and non-state actors in human rights abuses for women. The slogan ‘Women’s Rights are Human Rights’ resonated as women’s testimonies moved the UN General Assembly to pass the Declaration to End Violence Against Women.

Next stop was Cairo in 1994, where sexuality and reproductive rights were put onto the agenda, then Beijing in 1995, where the concerns of women’s movements were cemented into a plan of action for governments to take back and translate into policy and legal reform. The outcome: widespread and voluminous documents and policies on gender equality holding governments accountable for the status of women, and a slew of national domestic violence legislation.

From global rights to local realities

Local movements were differently affected by these global shifts. Regions had their own human rights machineries, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, and the European Commission on Human Rights. Women’s groups could advance their own agendas within these. For example, in the early 2000s, a coalition of activists, academics and lawyers from across Africa came together to push for an African women’s charter, the Maputo Protocol, intended to expand and contextualise the rights set out in the CEDAW for the situation of African rural women.

International successes

All of these changes, in combination with continuing lobbying and advocacy by feminist activists, meant that as the 1990s drew to an end, an unmistakable feminist presence made its way into international human rights law. With evidence of mass sexual violence in conflicts, rape was recognised as a weapon of war. Women's rights advocates ensured the inclusion of gender-based crimes in the Rome Statute of 1998 that set up the International Criminal Court. Other successes included Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000 which established women's rights as a matter of national and international security, and a re-defining of the 1998 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders to include the specific retaliation faced by 'women human rights defenders'.

Meanwhile, major human rights organisations began to commit to long-term work on women's rights. Some human rights organisations set up a gender unit or a women's rights desk, although these were often under-resourced. Some adopted a more intersectional approach, looking at how class, sexuality, ethnicity and disability as well as gender blocked access to rights.

Working together

As women's rights and human rights movements began to work together more, mutual learning took place. Women's movements achieved good results when they used human rights tools, and human rights movements became more grounded and alert to multiple discriminations.

Human rights organisations continue to challenge women's movements to translate their broad concerns into specific demands for change from the State, while women's movements constantly call for human rights activism to address questions of bodily integrity, cultural relativism and religious fundamentalism without selling out on women's rights.

A group of key organisations from both human rights and women's movements came together in 2005 to form the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition. Since then, the concept of women human rights defenders has found increasing resonance. Working together in coalition has helped the actors to embrace the concept and expand its interpretation to include the less visible, but still harmful, effects of the stigma and backlash experienced by many women human rights defenders.

Continuing challenges and lessons learnt

There has been uneven progress on women's rights and gender equality since Beijing. High levels of violence against women continue, and the gendered aspects of issues such as economic rights and poverty remain underexplored. Working on sexuality and reproductive rights, sex workers' rights, religion and fundamentalism has become more difficult, due to the organised opposition and backlash mounted by conservative forces.

Resistance remains to changing patriarchal organisational cultures. Within the human rights movement and related organisations, evaluations of women's rights work have shown that while there has been success in establishing 'gender mainstreaming' at strategic level, challenges to implementation remain in practice.

The work is certainly not yet complete, but it is clear that feminist and women's movement activism has, in a number of ways, been responsible for 'gendering' the strategic direction of much human rights activism. The box below contains some strategies that have been successful in this process.

Successful strategies

- Working together across movements to highlight links between women's rights and other movement priorities and issues.
- Recognising the inter-connectedness of women's rights and broader human rights issues.
- Increased efforts to understand context and to think through issues of identity-based politics, culture and intersectionality.
- Internal and external champions working together to create stronger transformation.
- Using feminist evaluation to highlight gaps and illustrate successes of movements and the organisations that build them.
- Committing to the long haul, and recognising that the journey towards change can take great strides forward but also steps backward.

Looking to the future of human rights and women's rights activism, we can see that the best results are likely when the strengths of both movements can be used; when the politics of feminism are combined with the tools of the human rights framework, great progress can be made. And when both sets of movements work in tandem, each others' voices can be amplified.

The following people were interviewed by the author and/or provided inputs to this case study: Alda Facio, David Kelleher, Everjoice Win, Gita Sahgal, Hazel Reeves, Heather Barclay, Jenny Birchall, Joanne Sandler, Lina Abou Habib, Lydia Alpizar, Mallika Dutt, Meenakshi Ganguly, Pia Oberoi, Roshmi Goswami, Sara Hossain, Srilatha Batliwala, Suneeta Dhar, Sunila Abeysekera, Sylwia Tamale, Vijay Nagaraj

Read the expanded version of this case study

Watch and listen to the author talking about the case study

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Gender Equality and Women's Rights in the CLOC-Via Campesina Movement

Pamela Caro



Francisca Rodriguez, founder and international spokesperson for the National Association of Chilean Rural and Indigenous Women (ANAMURI).

Photographer: Pamela Caro

“The women leaders of the CLOC are seen by their peers as hardworking, creative, bold and brimming with ideas and proposals for dealing with crises.”

The *Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo* (CLOC – Coordinating Network for Latin American Rural Organisations) is the Latin American branch of the global Via Campesina movement, which connects the social and economic struggles of community-based organisations on four continents. The CLOC was constituted in 1994, involving 84 organisations from 18 countries. These organisations defend access to land, territories, water and seeds. Just over 10 per cent are rural women's organisations, with the vast majority being mixed organisations.

This case study looks at the strategies that the CLOC movement has used to integrate gender equality into both its external work and its internal dynamics. It discusses some of the movement's successes on this, as well as the challenges that remain. The study is based on interviews with ten women leaders of CLOC member organisations in seven countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Honduras, Paraguay and Peru) and with male leaders in Chile.

The CLOC and gender equality

In 1997 the CLOC held its first Women's Assembly. This was an initiative of women leaders in the movement, and was intended to place the particular problems and demands of rural women on the table. At this assembly an agreement on gender parity was signed, stating that 50 per cent of those in decision-making spaces must be women. At the second assembly in 2001 the Continental Women's Network was established as an organic part of the CLOC structure. This network brings together women from all the different member organisations. Its aims are to defend rural women's rights and to promote a gender focus in all of the movement's documents, proposals and actions.

Today women are a central force in the CLOC movement. They have succeeded in making their presence felt, and the majority of CLOC member organisations now have women in leadership positions. These leaders are seen by their peers as hard-working, creative, bold and brimming with ideas and proposals for dealing with crises.

Strategies for success

One strategy used by women to gain visibility in the CLOC has been to form autonomous women's groups within the mixed organisations that are CLOC members. These groups have been crucial in building and strengthening women's opinions, enabling them to gain space within the movement and linking women leaders with young leaders and other groups not traditionally part of the movement's power structures.

Another successful strategy has been to organise training schools, inviting women from both within and outside the CLOC to explore the links between gender equality and class equality. Through this process, women recognise each other as the owners of rights, and empower themselves. They go on to act as role models for the empowerment of other women, teaching them how to confront discrimination and speak in public.

CLOC members at a local level have collaborated with other groups on International Women's Day and the International Day for Non-Violence against Women, using creative media such as theatre and cinema to address issues ranging from sexual harassment to land tenure. Access to the internet has brought new opportunities for staying connected and informed, and has helped some women to participate, link up and grow stronger.

Over the last 15 years these strategies and engagements have led to a range of successes, including: the visibility of the Women's Network; the establishment of gender parity in decision-making spaces; a clear anecdotal increase in women participating in the organisations that are part of the CLOC and in delegations at CLOC conferences; a strong position against sexual harassment within the movement; and the successful campaigns 'From Seeds', 'Food Sovereignty' and 'Enough Violence', which were begun by women members but were later taken up by the whole organisation.

Challenges ahead

Beyond these considerable gains, women continue to face difficulties. Despite increasing numbers of women, masculine organisational models and behaviours persist. Women are often seen as 'complementary'; their views are regarded as useful but not fundamental.

Another challenge is that some men in the movement do not recognise themselves as in need of training, and they consider themselves to have greater knowledge than women and young people. As there are many more women than men participating in the CLOC gender training school, the potential for debates on equality between men and women is not realised.

In indigenous and rural communities in Latin America it can be hard to talk about feminism and gender equality. Some see feminism as an idea imported from elsewhere, which could destroy family-based agricultural production. Women CLOC leaders are thinking about how to address these tensions between ideas on gender equality and those on complementary roles in indigenous and ancestral thinking on the family and Mother Earth.

Action for the future

The CLOC still faces the challenge of taking its declarations on gender equality from theory into concrete practice. The CLOC Women's Network has decided on some actions to advance progress towards gender equality. These include:

Raising awareness of the naturalised inequalities within cultural constructions of the family, in organisations and in communities

Women CLOC leaders are developing the concept of 'popular rural feminism' as a key strategy for raising awareness of these inequalities. The concept means accepting oneself as a woman, being proud of it, desiring equality, preventing abuse, taking the opportunity to think differently, valuing oneself and demanding respect – all important in building a new society where both women and men can thrive.

Building joint political processes within the movement to transform internal cultures and practices

Women leaders in the CLOC are working hard to denounce injustice and unacceptable behaviour, challenging sexual harassment and questioning the undemocratic use of speech in meetings.

Involving women, men and young people in wide-ranging debate on gender issues

CLOC leaders have found that small groups, workshops and informal events are often better arenas for the promotion of equality than large assemblies. Engaging men and young people in these initiatives is important so that they can understand the need for equality as a genuine priority and can speak out about gender, sexual and reproductive rights.

The women of the CLOC are convinced that the future is promising. They feel there is no possibility for going backwards on their achievements, because women's awareness of their rights cannot now be taken away. They are creating a movement that can incorporate the demand for gender equality in the Latin American rural world, even though gender was not included in its original definitions. This change has come from systematic, constant work by visionary women filled with conviction, who have progressed enormously but who have no doubt in recognising all the challenges that remain.

The following women leaders were interviewed by the author as part of this case study: Loyda Olivo (Ecuador), Adriana Mezadri (Brazil), Esperanza Cardona (Honduras), Cinthya Gonzalez (Paraguay), Mirta Coronel (Argentina), Lourdes Huanca (Peru), Francisca Rodriguez, Alicia Muñoz and Florencia Aróstica (Chile). In addition, interviews were held with three male leaders from a mixed Chilean Rural Confederation (Confederación Campesina) and with Nalú Farias of the World March of Women (Marcha Mundial de Mujeres – MMM).

Watch video interviews with seven of these leaders

Read the expanded version of this case study

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- **Gender and Social Movements overview report**, outlining the main issues, examples of innovative practice, and routes to change
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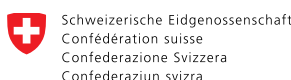
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This *In Brief* has been produced with the financial support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the UK Department for International Development's (DFID) Mobilising Knowledge for Development Programme. Thanks also to the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and Irish Aid for their ongoing support of the BRIDGE programme. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the official government policies of our funders.



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ISBN 978-1-78118-125-6