

ADVANCING GENDER JUSTICE IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS:

An approach for social movement leaders **David Kelleher**



Bhopali activists, protesting against the Dow chemical company, December 2012, Photographer: Reena Shadaan

There is strong evidence from around the world that progressive social movements are a critical force for creating vibrant participatory democracies and for promoting social justice. Still, despite global progress in putting gender ‘on the agenda’, many seemingly progressive social movements do not consider gender equality fundamental to achieving social justice. They have yet to make it a consistent priority in either their internal policies or their external change strategies. In some cases there is strong ideological resistance; in most cases, experience shows that gender justice is recognised as important but hasn’t received the attention or priority it deserves.

As discussed in the recent BRIDGE Gender and Social Movements report,¹ 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 as a political objective. Gender justice may be positioned

as a divisive topic that detracts attention away from other issues perceived as more important or fundamental to the movement. It may be argued that women already actively participate in the movement, which in turn suggests that they are satisfied with the movement’s focus. As Srilatha Batliwala states in the foreword to the report,

“[...] even as social justice movements engage in struggles for a diversity of economic, social and political rights, the aspirations and interests of women within these are either forgotten, assumed to be the same as men’s, or [assumed to be] equally advanced by the movement’s strategic agenda.”
(Horn 2013: iii)

But there can be no social justice without gender justice. Domingo Hernández Ixcoy,² a Mayan leader of the indigenous rights movement in Guatemala, made this point forcefully,

1 To download the BRIDGE Gender and Social Movements Overview Report, see <http://socialmovements.bridge.ids.ac.uk>.

2 Domingo Hernández Ixcoy is a Maya-Quiché leader and Coordinator of the Association Maya Uk’ux B’e.

"I do not think that one can speak of advances or setbacks in the exercise of human rights in general if, at the same time, they do not speak of the advances and setbacks of the specific rights of women."
(Ardón 2012: 2)

There are inspiring examples of movements that have integrated gender justice into their agenda and ways of working. For example, Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) has made important efforts to recognise women's leadership and respond to women's needs as well as men's.

"At the very heart of this work has always been women — poor women, abused women, illiterate women, pavement-dwelling women — who are vital to the creation, maintenance and growth of every settlement." (SDI 2014)

This *Policy Brief* is intended to support leaders in deepening their efforts to bring gender justice to their movements by sharing the learning from the collaborative BRIDGE Gender and Social Movements *Cutting Edge* Programme.³

What does a gender-just social movement look like?

1. It sees gender inequality as an integral component of justice for all and names this as an explicit priority for action.
2. It is a positive environment for internal reflection and action on women's rights.
3. It formally supports women's participation and leadership in all areas of movement practice.
4. It establishes zero tolerance for sexual harassment, discrimination or violence among/between movement members and in movement spaces.

(Source: Horn 2013)

³ The Gender and Social Movements *Cutting Edge* Programme has championed a collaborative approach, actively involving activists and scholars from a range of global regions to exchange ideas and co-construct knowledge on gender and social movements. See a collection of all resources at <http://socialmovements.bridge.ids.ac.uk>.

Community defenders from Cusco in Peru taking an organised stand against violence, November 2003, Photographer: Annie Theriault





At the start of the march during the World Social Forum in Dakar, February 2011, families unite to demand equality. Photographer: Marie Devers

How do we build gender-just movements?

Movements that have become more gender-just have engaged in a conscious learning process to undertake change and transformation, in both their internal culture and their political agenda. The following strategies are key for such transformation.

Strategies:

1. *Political strategies* to elect women to senior positions, ensure sufficient resources for work on gender equality, provide practical support for women leaders and to get key policy mechanisms in place.
2. *Learning strategies* that will allow women and men in the movement to understand gender equality in terms that make sense to the movement and that will equip women to be full participants in the movement.
3. *Cultural change strategies* which collectively examine the deeply held and often invisible cultural practices that disempower and exclude women — and possibly other identities — from full participation in the movement.

1. Political strategies

Political strategies build power by developing knowledgeable and empowered constituencies and alliances, in order to influence the agenda, re-direct resources and develop policy. Building strong women's caucuses is a key approach.

In the CLOC-Vía Campesina⁴ movement, leaders have invested in developing and strengthening women's caucuses so they can challenge traditional gender norms within the movement. In the Occupy movement, women's caucuses were instrumental in ensuring that issues of patriarchy were included in discussions of economic justice. A good political strategy needs a clear rationale and programme for change that can attract broad support. This programme may be built with the assistance of feminist allies outside the movement who can help identify priorities for change. In Amnesty International, feminist allies from outside Amnesty brought both knowledge and pressure to change.

⁴ Latin American Coordination of Rural Organisations (Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo -CLOC Vía Campesina)

Early achievements for some movements are:

- An anti-sexual harassment policy.
- Resources to support the development of women's caucuses.
- Resources for the development of women's leadership and participation, including the funding of child care facilities.
- Inclusion of women's rights in the movement's strategic plan.
- A gender policy which spells out how gender equality is central to the movement's goals in terms that the movement can accept, along with the steps that can actually be implemented.

2. Learning strategies

First, movements need to learn precisely how gender justice can be incorporated in their movement. Amnesty was not able to simply import feminist understandings of women's rights; it needed to digest those ideas in its own terms. In the early days, Amnesty had many committed and knowledgeable members who believed that including women's rights would dilute Amnesty's objectivity and effectiveness. They needed to learn that, in fact, the opposite was true: their work on human rights could be enriched and improved by bringing an understanding of the type of human rights abuses that are experienced by women differently from men.

The second type of learning required is building women's capacity for leadership. For example, the National Coordinating Committee of Indigenous Women (CNMI), which is part of the larger Zapatista movement, has invested heavily in women's leadership training. Their focus is on helping potential women leaders understand women's and indigenous rights and the various conventions such as the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention of the Rights of Aboriginal Peoples. Critical to this training is the alliance with various feminist movements. These efforts have resulted in indigenous women's increased voice and influence within their movement, as well as their ability to take up leadership positions within groups such as the National Plural Indigenous Assembly for Autonomy (ANIPA) (López Cruz 2012).

3. Cultural change strategies

All social groups have a collection of (largely unconscious) cultural norms or understandings about gender roles that feel 'natural' to the people within the group. These norms are often imported into movements.⁵ Discriminatory norms are not always challenged and can be used to justify restriction of women's access to resources such as land, restriction of mobility and opportunity and a devaluation of family and care work. In India, the SDI campaign for tenancy rights for illegal settlements assumed that such rights would be held in the names of the male head of household. But women in the movement, with the support of some key male leaders, challenged this and successfully negotiated for joint titles.

Movement decision-making can also reflect traditional, gendered, cultural expectations. For example, it makes sense for many movements to hold meetings in the evening after work. Although these spaces are theoretically open and equally accessible to all movement members, they are actually excluding women, who must typically care for children and do other household work in the evenings. Although members may realise this, there is no effort to meet in ways and at times accessible to women. In addition, women are often assigned care roles within the movement — making tea or preparing food — limiting their influence and opportunity for full participation.

As a woman leader from Via Campesina (Brazil) said, *"Our organisations are organisations of men. We ask women to enter organisations of men, and this is difficult. Men's habits and ways of working are not the same as women's habits and ways of working."* (Guttal 2014).

⁵ This collection of unspoken yet deeply held beliefs about gender power relations is sometimes referred to as 'the deep structure'. See Rao, Stuart and Kelleher (1999).

There are three critical strategies required to make movement cultures more equitable, just and non-discriminatory:

Modelling by leadership

This strategy was well illustrated in 1993, when the Secretary General of Amnesty took a public stand on the importance of women's rights as human rights. This was supported by his deputy, who led the production of Amnesty's first report on women's rights (Kelleher and Bhattacharjya 2013).

Respectful and persistent dialogue

Along with the learning described above, movement members need to engage in dialogue regarding how practices and norms prevent women from being full participants in the movement and how the movement takes on (or not) women's concerns. These conversations need to be carefully structured and facilitated as members (men and women) come to grips with their history, internalised and embedded biases, and how these are related to the work of the movement. This dialogue has been referred to as 'politicising the personal'.

Cultural innovation

Cultures, like individuals, learn by doing. What is needed are spaces where members can experience gender-equitable norms. For example, the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU) built 'mall committees' made up of union members who worked in the same mall. The committee meetings were set up with explicit norms to ensure women's participation and leadership. These became spaces where local members discussed issues important to women such as the spread of HIV through unprotected sex, sexual harassment and other issues affecting women members. They also helped elect women as shop stewards. The committees were unlike any other structures in the union, which were dominated by the agendas and concerns of male members of the union (Meer 2013). Similarly, CLOC-Via Campesina's Women's Assembly allowed women to take leadership roles in a safe space and build the confidence and skills they needed to challenge the larger movement.

Conclusion

In many progressive movements, women's issues have not been central priorities, yet the examples of SDI, Amnesty, CNMI, CLOC-Via Campesina and others all point to immense social and political benefits of gender-just movements. It is only by integrating gender justice that movements will be able to fully achieve social justice in such areas as human rights, housing, the environment and secure livelihoods.

Domingo Hernández Ixcoy points to the rewards to movements of examining gendered power relations:

"To rethink and rethink again these power relations can give us a way to act and express ourselves, with more of the boldness that young people and women bring to the social movement." (Ardón 2012: 2)



Representatives from women's movements and wider social movements at Gender and Social Movements *Cutting Edge Pack* launch in Guatemala City, March 2014. Photographer: Julia Hamaus

About the *Cutting Edge Pack on Gender and Social Movements*

This briefing draws on findings from the *Cutting Edge Pack on Gender and Social Movements* created with input from over 150 social movement activists, scholars and supporters from around the world. This approach has resulted in the multiplicity of voices, experiences, ideas and previously unpublished insights that you can find in the *Cutting Edge Pack*, and it means that the findings and recommendations have been developed as part of a rich participatory process.

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Also available in the *Cutting Edge Pack on Gender and Social Movements*:

- Gender and Social Movements *Overview Report*, outlining the main issues, examples of innovative practice, and routes to change
- Gender and Social Movements *In Brief*, summarising the main issues of the *Overview Report*
- Gender and Social Movements *Policy Brief* containing key messages for donors
- Gender and Social Movements website, including summaries of key supporting resources, case studies, a multimedia library and contact details for relevant organisations

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