

The invaluable role of women's rights activists, their movements and organisations in responding to development and humanitarian challenges.

Overview:

Efforts to advance gender equality and women's empowerment lead to faster achievements in human development, environmental sustainability, sustained peace and good governance.

But while there is stronger commitment than ever before to advance gender equality and women's rights, for the global community to deliver on these commitments it must support and resource women's rights activists, and their movement and organisations, which have been at the forefront of efforts to advance gender equality and women's empowerment, and enable greater political, social, economic development for all.

Global recognition and commitment: SDGs

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides the development community with an exciting opportunity to make real progress on gender equality and women's rights, including efforts to end gender-based violence. This is reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which assert gender equality as a fundamental human right, a development goal in of itself - Goal 5 - and also as a driver of progress across all 17 goals. Never before has it been so clear that where gender equality and women's rights are compromised, development and the wellbeing of nations, communities and individuals - including men - is undermined.

But for progress to be made we need these commitments to be translated into real substantive action. Of course, this is no easy feat and has no single solution.

However, one of the most constructive things we can do to deliver on these commitments is to look to the contributions made and the challenges faced by women's rights activists, women's organisations and women's movements, which have been crucial to the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment and bringing about the transformative change we need to realise our shared global goals.

Women's rights activists, their movements and organisations as agents of transformative change

By placing gender equality, women's or girls' rights or feminist purposes at the core function of their work, women's rights activists, women's organisations and women's movements (women's rights groups) have been at the [forefront of efforts to advance gender equality](#); they were the first to push authorities to take women's rights seriously, advocate for public awareness of violence against women, introduce refuges and crisis centres, challenge negative attitudes that condone and perpetuate gender inequality and violence, and initiate activities to enable women and girls to understand and feel empowered to claim their rights.

Evidence also shows that women's rights groups play a crucial role in holding governments and parties accountable for the implementation of international and regional treaties. Lauren Weldon and Mala Htun's research is one example in which women's rights groups are key drivers of legal and policy change to address gender inequality.

Worldwide, the most important factor influencing government responses to violence against women is the presence of a strong, autonomous feminist movement.

[In their ground-breaking study of 70 countries over a 40-year period Weldon & Htun](#) found that the presence of a strong autonomous women's movement was the most important and consistent factor mobilising progressive **change** and influencing and achieving a broad range of government responses¹ to violence against women. The presence of such a movement made more of a difference than the number of women legislators, left-wing parties, or national wealth.

¹ Responses included, for example, critical law reform or funding for refuges, shelters and rape crisis centres, or training for workers such as police.

The study also found that strong local feminist movements [bring home the value of international and regional treaties](#). That is, they use these treaties as levers to influence policy-making, and to call for and mobilise compliance with goals for equality in their national and local context.

On the other hand, it was found that where a strong, autonomous feminist movement was absent, ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) actually had a negative effect on the adoption of violence against women policy. So while the presence of a strong autonomous women's movement was key to whether international and regional treaties have impact, the absence of such a movement not only stalls impact (and transformative change) but also has the potential to reinforce (or even reproduce) inequality and undermine women's social, economic and political rights. It is important to note that in the context of [the development sector seeing the increasing influence of conservatism and severe backlash to women's rights](#), this is most concerning. For instance, without these basics rights, women's ability to participate in decision-making at all levels of society is compromised and their ability to challenge and transform (and not reinforce or exacerbate) the inequalities and violence they face is undermined. This includes at all levels of society such as in legal frameworks, policy, investments, services, work places, household spending, individual and family healthcare, education or marriage.

In addition (but just importantly!), Htun and Weldon's research also emphasises the importance of feminist organising in creating substantive agendas in which structural inequality and the normalisation of violence can be challenged and women's rights can exist. For example, when women organise as and for women they are able to come together to understand and prioritise gender equality issues and their "women-specific" experiences, needs and contributions and they can do this without being subsumed within broader priorities that are not focused specifically on their goal of equality, which would otherwise be perceived as being important "only" to women and sidelined (or often excluded) in existing priorities.

This is also true for women with intersecting forms of marginalisation and discrimination, who have overlapping but different experiences, needs and contributions. Because these groups of women often face issues of exclusion and representation their intersectionalities can be subsumed within mainstream women organisations. For example, women with disabilities often face violence in different ways and in different contexts to women without disability. As such, efforts to address the violence women with disabilities experience need to prioritise the specific (and different) types of violence they face, in the context or setting where this violence occurs, and in a way that is effective for women with disabilities; efforts taken to tackle violence for women without disabilities may not adequately or effectively do this. As such, it is important that efforts are made to support women from and of diverse backgrounds organise as and for their own nuanced issues.

Women organising as women has been crucial to naming and prioritising issues such as, but not limited to, sexual and domestic violence, child and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, unequal leadership opportunities, unequal pay and unequal access to economic resources, including access to land and property. It has also raised awareness of the different and often heightened impacts these have of women who have multiple intersecting forms of marginalisation. In light of such, it is unsurprising that [normative advances to women's rights or gender equality tend not to happen without women's rights groups pushing for them](#).

In this context, it seems obvious that it is more critical than ever that efforts are taken to support and build the capacity of women's groups at all levels and across all sectors. But while women's rights groups play an invaluable role in advancing gender equality and bringing about the transformative change that is crucial to realising the 2030 Agenda, they continue to face insufficient funding to support and upscale the invaluable and diverse work they do.

Undervalued and under-resourced

A recent [report by Gendernet, a subsidiary body of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's \(OECD\) development assistance committee](#), found that out of the money (approximately \$9.8bn) allocated to civil society groups to promote gender equality in 2014, only 8% of the funds earmarked for civil society went directly to groups in developing countries, and only a fraction (0.5% (\$192m)) went to local women's groups. The report also highlighted that when funding was allocated to local women's groups it was not done in a way that supports the long-term social change work that is necessary to advance their work:

“where resources are reaching women's rights organisations, they are typically small-scale and short-term. Small amounts of money can stimulate learning and innovation, but they do not enable vital expansion, scale-up and strengthening of organisational and operational capacity.”

While this report is new, the findings are not; for decades women's rights organisations and advocates have been severely underfunded. [AWID's research found that, in 2010 the median budget for 740 women's organizations all over the globe was a disheartening US\\$20,000 a year](#). And although new actors are prioritising gender issues or increasing efforts to mainstream gender into programs and policies it should not be assumed that this has led to new avenues of funding (or just as importantly that their work is connected to interventions that address the roots of gender inequalities and not just surface manifestations). [Previous research into the implementation of gender mainstreaming](#) has found that “while strategies initially increased the legitimacy of focussing on gender and improving policy and practice within institutions, over time the opposite effect began surfacing, which resulted in ‘business as usual’.” It also highlights that this has even led to women's organisations being less likely to be funded as they now have to compete for the same funding pot (see page 7-11 of hyperlink).

Without specific ways to channel resources to women's rights and feminist organisations, funds - including those allocated to civil society groups for the purpose of gender equality and women's rights - don't reach the groups that have the most impact at all local, national and global levels.

Where to from here?

Given the catalytic role gender equality plays in advancing sustainable development and the crucial role women's rights groups play in achieving gender equality, all development actors should be focussing more on supporting women's rights activists, organisations and movements. Gender equality and women's empowerment is a central component of [DFAT's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy](#), but [funding for women's rights organisations only makes up less than 2% of the aid budget](#). And given that gender equality is also a fundamental component of Australian development NGO's efforts to respond to the most pressing development and humanitarian challenges we face, could the sector do more to support and stand in solidarity with organisations entirely focussed on women's rights in the countries where they work? Do mainstream NGOs, who address gender as one of many aims, need to think carefully about how they interact with women's rights groups - or even women's rights activists in their organisations - to ensure their efforts are building momentum to advance women's rights and gender equality and are not taking up space or funding from organisations who may be better placed to create transformative change for women?

With all of this in mind it will be more crucial than ever to ensure our efforts not only link up to interventions that address the roots of gender inequalities, but that they also support and build the capacity of women's groups at all levels and across all sectors. Understanding the most effective ways to channel resources to women's rights activist, their organisations and movements is one practical step in towards achieving this.