

Feminist activism works!

A review of select
literature on the
impact of feminist
activism in achieving
women's rights

Introduction

The genesis of this review on the impact of feminist movements in achieving women's rights and greater gender justice lies in conversations that began in April 2018 at the Money & Movements convening in Naivasha, Kenya. The meeting was organised by Count Me In!¹ (CMI!), a consortium of international women's funds and feminist organisations led by Mama Cash. With Money & Movements, CMI! aimed to organise a space for activists and funders to come together to share and strategise about the future of resourcing feminist movements.

One key take-away from the convening was a consensus among the funders in attendance about the need for further research or evidence to 'prove the concept' that *funding feminist activism works*. The funders at the meeting shared a conviction that 'feminist activism works' and were already funding collective feminist action to secure greater justice and equality for women, girls and trans people around the world. However, many of the funders at the meeting also acknowledged being challenged by others in the funding community, and sometimes within their own organisations, to show evidence that feminist activism works. These conversations surfaced an interest in working collectively to better coordinate existing and emerging work to build the evidence base that supports the case for funding feminist activism.

Subsequently, Mama Cash and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation continued to discuss our desire to build the knowledge base that demonstrates the transformative power of feminist activism. Growing out of these discussions, and building on the conversation at Money & Movements, Mama Cash convened two

1. CMI! is a strategic partnership with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, initially funded from 2016-2020, and consisting of Mama Cash (lead partner), AWID, JASS (Just Associates), CREA, and the Urgent Action Fund-Africa (representing UAF and UAF-Latin America and the Caribbean). The Red Umbrella Fund, a participatory fund led by and for sex workers, and the Dutch gender lobby platform, WO=MEN, are strategic allies of CMI!. As June 2020, we have learned that CMI!'s partnership with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs will be extended from 2021 through 2025. CMI!'s membership remains the same, except that the Urgent Action Fund (UAF) has joined the consortium as a member, and UAF-LAC has left the consortium.

meetings in 2019 to continue the conversation among feminist funders about how to advance research and learning that supports the case for funding feminist activism: the first in March, in New York, during CSW, and the second in June, in Vancouver, during Women Deliver. On both of these occasions, a group of about fifteen funders² came together to move forward our collective thinking. We discussed the audiences that need convincing, the types of evidence that would be meaningful, and the ‘value-add’ of this group of women’s rights funders. Emerging from the second meeting, several possible next steps were identified, including a mapping of existing research on the impact of feminist movements. In late 2019, Mama Cash decided to undertake a literature review of studies that contribute to the evidence base regarding the impact of women’s rights movements. This paper is the result of that review.

The review begins with a brief statement of the key findings drawn from the research we reviewed. It then discusses the literature by topic or thematic area (e.g., violence against women, economic rights, reproductive rights, etc.), and ends with conclusions and some notes on limitations.

Mama Cash hopes that this review of literature will provide useful background for funders seeking evidence to make the case that feminist activism works and that funding feminist activism is an effective use of resources to secure social change.

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² These funders included both private and public foundations, including women’s funds, other grantmaking organisations, and at Women Deliver, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Attendance was not exactly the same, but most of the organisations that took part were present at the two meetings.

Key Findings

Women's rights and feminist movements matter significantly in securing and advancing women's rights across a wide range of issues, including violence against women; economic rights, including access to childcare, inheritance and land rights; reproductive rights; and, political representation.

This literature review examines findings from select quantitative and qualitative studies on the impact of transnational, national and local women's rights and feminist movements in securing progress on women's rights. Across the variety of studies surveyed, one cross-cutting finding is clear: women's rights and feminist movements matter significantly in securing and advancing women's rights across a wide range of issues, including violence against women; economic rights, including access to childcare, inheritance and land rights; reproductive rights; and, political representation.

However, other factors in addition to the presence of women's rights movements matter as well. The literature shows that factors such as the political party in power, the influence of the Left, the legacy of communism, the relationship between state and religious actors and the degree of influence wielded within a society by institutionalised religion, and the number of women elected to national parliaments also influence progress on women's rights.

Additionally, securing social change and increasing access to rights and justice for those who have been discounted and oppressed is a constant, ongoing process. As a result, progress on women's rights is not set in stone; progress made can be challenged, and sometimes reversed. Indeed, activists may spend a lot of time holding the line and protecting gains made. As this review makes clear, this is particularly the case in areas that are extremely contested, like reproductive, and especially abortion, rights. In the case of abortion, it is clear that gains (e.g., progressive legislation protecting women's rights to bodily integrity and choice) can be reversed when there are shifts in political parties in power.

Methodology

Among the studies reviewed, Mama Cash gave priority to the quantitative, cross-national, longitudinal studies that we identified, but we also included a few qualitative studies that explore the impact of feminist movements and women's rights movements across countries and across time.

Given Mama Cash's theory of change and the goal of understanding whether and how feminist and women's rights movements make a difference in bringing about women's rights, the studies reviewed were selected due to their ability to speak to the three areas of change in our Theory of Change: legal and policy reform, social norms, and access to decision making and resources across national contexts, a range of women's rights-related issues and time (longitudinally). Studies were selected to the extent that they speak to "making a difference" in regards to changes in these areas of change. Finally, studies were selected due to their focus on the impact of movements, not just individual organisations.

It was difficult to find quantitative research that showed the contribution of feminist movements to securing social norm change, likely because this type of change is more challenging to measure, and it is particularly difficult to show the specific contribution of one actor or set of actors to changing norms and beliefs. Most of the literature reviewed here focuses on movements' impact on legal and policy reform.

Copious qualitative literature exists on the impact of women's and feminist movements in contexts around the world, often documenting in extensive detail the efforts of movements over a specific time period to create cultural, legal, policy-related, political and social change to advance women's rights. In contrast, *relatively few* quantitative studies that take a cross-national or transnational/global look at the impact of women's rights movements and feminist movements exist. Nevertheless, quantitative work does exist, and most of the studies reviewed in this review are either cross-national (analysing data from 50 or more countries) or transnational in that they look at the impact of *global* women's rights movements on a particular area of women's rights in a given country. A few country-specific qualitative case studies have been included to further substantiate or nuance the findings from quantitative studies.

Thematic Review of the Literature

This paper is divided by issue area and discusses findings related to various areas of women's rights and women's rights activism³. Each section delineates what the findings say about the contribution of women's and feminist movements to securing greater rights for women in the areas of violence against women; economic rights, including family leave and childcare; reproductive rights; and, political participation and representation. As already noted, most of the studies that we found are focused on change in the domain of legal and policy reform.

Violence against women

In their cross-national study of 70 countries across six continents and four decades, Htun and Weldon (2018) found that “a strong, autonomous feminist movement is both substantively and statistically significant as a predictor of government action to redress violence against women across all models.” In fact, national autonomous feminist movements are a stronger predictor of legal and policy reform at the national level related to violence against women than the number of women in parliament, the presence/influence of Left parties or national wealth. The large number of countries and the period of time covered allows this study to draw robust conclusions about the impact of movements.

Analyzing data from 1975 to 2005, Htun and Weldon further explain that “[m]ovements are critical catalysts for policy development in all years, though their efforts are supplemented by policy machineries, international norms, and other factors.” With regards to violence against women, [national] autonomous feminist movements ensure that institutional reforms live up to the potential imagined by activists who demanded them and ensure that “words become deeds.” Indeed, as Htun and Weldon (2012) describe, these autonomous feminist movements “develop oppositional consciousness, imagine new forms

3. Mama Cash provides funding not only to self-led groups of women, but also self-led groups of girls, trans people and intersex people. It was beyond the scope of this review to seek out literature addressing the efficacy of girls' rights, trans rights and intersex rights movements. As a result, this paper focuses on women's rights movements.

of social organization, and mobilize broad societal action to generate understanding and support. They are essential to catalyzing the process of progressive social policy change and for its continuation.”

Cornwall and Edwards (2015) found this to be the case in Brazil where Lei Maria da Penha, one of the most comprehensive pieces of domestic and family violence legislation in the world, was passed in August 2006. Its passing marked the culmination of three decades of women’s and feminist activism on domestic violence, reframing the issue from one of private to public concern through research, public education and collaboration with legislators.

True (2016) finds a similar impact of transnational feminist movements on legal and policy reform related to violence against women at the national level. In a cross-national study across Asia, she examines the transnational political and economic opportunity structures that both enable and constrain state responses to violence against women, including the advocacy repertoire and learning across transnational feminist networks. She found that “women’s movements in the region draw upon a broad slew of strategies to promote greater awareness and action to end violence against women, including mobilising international law, global campaigning, innovative use of social media, building partnerships with corporations, and community actors that connect violence against women to women’s social and economic rights. Transnational feminist networks have played key roles in supporting women’s claims-making vis à vis the state through awareness-raising campaigns about violence against women” (18).

True found that transnational networks or alliances for gender equality present in China, Indonesia and India bolstered the resources open to local organisations focused on eliminating violence against women in cities and rural communities. She explains, “the majority of women’s international NGOs frame their anti-violence against women claims using women’s rights, human rights and CEDAW. For example, local activists in India mobilised the language of gender equality and women’s rights embedded in CEDAW, prompting changes to state laws on violence against women in 1992.” For example, “[d]espite the lack of a local or national law on sexual assault, women’s NGOs used CEDAW, which India ratified in 1978, to have a local group of social workers arrested for gang-raping a woman colleague.”

Over the past fifty years, feminist activism has fundamentally reconceptualised and altered our understanding of the phenomenon of violence against women. As the studies cited here show, the work of both national and transnational women’s movements has been critical in developing new consciousness, reframing violence not as a personal issue, but rather as a matter of human rights, and developing the concepts and language to support feminist advocacy to shift perspectives about violence.

Economic rights

According to Htun and Weldon (2018) and Weldon, Forester, Kelly-Thompson and Lusvardi (2020), national autonomous feminist organising, combined with support from international activists and international intergovernmental authorities, has advanced women's legal status with regards to economic equality and brought about legal and policy reform. International and regional norms as expressed in conventions and other agreements fortify domestic actors seeking change, including autonomous feminist movements. In most countries, however, changes in legal status, i.e. whether women workers are equal to men workers under the law, are insufficient to achieve actual economic equality, in part because they don't alter state-market relations. Specifically, equal legal status doesn't ensure that women have parity with men in pay, organisational hierarchies or meaningful work. It also does not ensure that care work, which is done primarily by women, is valued in relation to other work. And legal status does not address the social conditions outside of wage work that shape women's choices and employers' decisions.

Nevertheless, Weldon, Forester, Kelly-Thompson and Lusvardi (2020) show that feminist movements contribute to women's economic empowerment. In contrast to neoliberal understandings of economic empowerment, which focus on enriching individual women while leaving broader hierarchies and systemic inequalities intact, these authors posit an aggregate feminist definition of economic empowerment that includes:

- Women's legal rights as full and equal participants in economic life;
- Women's right to work free from sexual harassment;
- Support for women's unpaid domestic and care work and for informal work;
- Women's participation in property ownership (primarily land rights); and,
- Women's access to financial institutions.

In their review of a database of over 120 countries over the period 1975 to 2015, their research showed that feminist mobilisation is "associated with more expansive economic rights, better support for both paid and unpaid domestic work, and better protection from sexual harassment," though action on sexual harassment takes time to manifest. Feminist mobilisation is also associated with smaller gender wage gaps and, indirectly, is positively associated with improved access to land rights and women's access to financial institutions, including access to their own bank accounts.

In Egypt, Cornwall & Edwards (2015) found that women's movements, working in tandem with a woman politician, who functioned as a "gate opener", helped bring about a feminist conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme with "women's entitlements as citizens at its core" that the authors characterised as one of the most progressive CCT programmes internationally. The policy, designed with input from participatory research that factored in what women said would make a difference in their lives, granted women cash transfers to make up shortfalls in household income, and to access schools for their children, information about services and opportunities, shelter and decent work.

Weldon, Forester, Kelly-Thompson and Lusvardi (2020) also argue that a combination of strong national women's movements and CEDAW ratification appear to be particularly influential in fostering more expansive economic rights for women. Filgueira, Gutiérrez & Papadópulos (2011) found this to be the case in Uruguay, where feminist movements worked in concert with civil society and human rights organisations, academics, trade unions and progressive political parties to reposition care as a collective, societal and human rights issue and push for changes to the health system, social security and tax reform.

In their work on the connections between feminist mobilisation and economic empowerment, Weldon, Forester, Kelly-Thompson and Lusvardi (2020) also found that feminist mobilisation has a strong relationship with securing women's inheritance rights, which are in turn, associated with women's greater agricultural land-holding, so feminist mobilisation directly increases women's rights to land. This study also found that feminist mobilisation indirectly contributes to women's access to financial institutions. Specifically, "feminist activists demand legal reforms that permit women to have bank accounts, and they assist women in accessing these legal rights once they exist, but these impacts on access to financial services are indirect effects that depend on legal change" (10).

Furthermore, Htun and Weldon (2018) and Weldon, Forester, Kelly-Thompson and Lusvardi (2020) suggest that more egalitarian legal frameworks governing inheritance, property, financial access and the like are associated with greater equality, and that feminist mobilisation, in turn, drives changes in these laws and policies. They observe that, "in the developing world, where women's economic activity is disproportionately focused in the informal economy, (...) unions, legal bodies, traditional leaders and other traditional mechanisms for enforcing labor rights may not be reliable advocates for women's rights, and/or may not be as influential in the informal economy... [W]omen's movements may be critical for articulating the needs for change to advance women's rights, and for enforcing the rights that women do have under the law" (3).

Boris and Fish's (2014) study on the achievement of global labour standards for domestic workers shows that feminist movements at the national and international level acting in coalition and overlapping with domestic worker movements, labour unions and international labour federations were instrumental in securing an international set of standards that acknowledged domestic workers' rights to decent work. They explain, these coalitions' "transnational networks and activist practices [were] forged in more localised struggles and applied to an international campaign" (426). The first transnational network gathered in 2006, four years prior to the inclusion of domestic labour on the ILO agenda in 2010 and five years before the achievement of global labour standards in 2011. They elaborate, "by drawing on national movements as a means of developing a collective voice, the International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN) had established a tangible presence that challenged the formal boundaries of the International Labor Organization, absent from previous considerations of domestic work" (427).

Family leave and childcare

Over the past half century, feminist movements have worked to raise awareness about the failure of societies and political systems to recognise and compensate the labour involved in caring for the home and family as work. In most countries, public policy provides family leave or time off, which may be paid for by governments, employers or a combination of the two, for workers who give birth or care for children, though leave varies considerably by country. With regards to family leave, Htun and Weldon (2018) found that national autonomous feminist movements have influence on legal and policy reform and access to resources, but that their influence is less significant than Left political parties, which are the primary factor associated with welfare state expansion in advanced democracies⁴.

Htun and Weldon (2018) explain, “the relationship between Left Power and the overall generosity of family leave was strong, and the impact of a communist legacy was also important.” Contextual factors such as GDP per capita were also important; in contexts with a greater revenue base, publicly paid family leave is more likely. Htun and Weldon also found that feminist movements had a small negative effect on family leave generosity, or how long family leave is granted in a given country, because family leave generosity and duration are more heavily influenced by governments’ and corporations’ resource allocation – two areas in which feminist movements do not yet have significant decision-making power.

In many countries, family members care for children of working women, while in other contexts, women rely on institutional childcare supplied by the market, the state, or a combination of the two. Of course, the availability, quality and affordability of childcare vary dramatically worldwide. Htun and Weldon found that national autonomous feminist movements “play a decisive role in promoting childcare” (195) by advancing a reconceptualisation of women’s lives beyond their roles as mothers who must care for their own children and demanding government-run childcare centers, cash transfers to pay parents for children, tax credits for money spent on childcare, subsidies to childcare centers and employer mandates to provide (onsite) childcare services for their workers. “Left parties were also important [in advancing the availability, quality and affordability of child care], especially in established democracies, but the effects were not global or uniformly strong” (194). Overall, Left parties have a stronger influence on overall family leave policy, but feminist movements have a stronger role in promoting and demanding childcare.⁵

4. “Advanced democracies” is a term used by the authors.

5. It is interesting to note, though outside the scope of this review to discuss at length, that the advocacy around issues of childcare focuses on demanding support that allows working women to manage the demands of work and caring for children, rather than arguing that taking care of children is work (and should be compensated) or that the work of caring for children should not fall disproportionately to women.

In sum, recent research shows that feminist mobilisation contributes to securing more expansive economic rights for women, including smaller gender wage gaps, access to childcare for working women, stronger legal protection for domestic workers and stronger sexual harassment laws. Data also shows that feminist mobilisation is associated with inheritance rights and, indirectly, is positively associated with improved access to land rights and women's possession of their own bank accounts.

Reproductive rights

Advocacy to secure reproductive rights is another key area of feminist advocacy. The data shows that feminist movements have made key contributions to securing reproductive rights, but also that this is an area where other factors, like the presence of religious institutions and the influence of these institutions on the state, are very powerful. Htun and Weldon (2018) found that the legality of abortion is more determined by the closeness of institutionalised relations between the state and religion rather than the influence of autonomous feminist movements. Nations with the closest relations between state and religion have less liberal policies while communist and post-communist regimes that marginalise religious power have more liberal policies around abortion, as do advanced democracies where religiosity is relatively low (227-228).

Still, while there is no significant association between the strength of national autonomous feminist movements and more liberal abortion laws, feminist movements make a *statistically significant difference to reproductive rights over the long-term*, including securing reproductive rights funding for access to contraception, abortion and reproductive care when acting with women in parliament. In other words, national feminist movements haven't had as much success overturning repressive abortion laws in countries where religion and state are tightly intertwined. However, when feminist movements have worked together with women lawmakers, they have had success in bringing about a better climate for reproductive rights and funding for reproductive health services. Ratification of CEDAW was also positively correlated with state funding for reproductive rights.

In the case of abortion, a comparative analysis of qualitative case studies from eleven countries⁶ by Klugman & Budlender (2001) corroborates Htun and Weldon's (2018) findings about the influence of the tight relationship between religion and state. Consistent with Htun and Weldon's findings, Klugman and Budlender explain "where there is not a clear divide between church and state or where the church has supporters in key institutions of state, such as parliament, education structures or the media, religious institutions become a much more powerful force in undermining access to abortion...[as] specifically illustrated by the Polish and Mexican cases."

6. These eleven case studies look much more deeply at the country context than other studies cited in this review; as a result, this section pays more attention to specific analysis of political dynamics within individual countries.

In Poland, according to Nowicka (2001), abortion was legalised in 1956 and remained legal for almost 40 years. In the 1980s, anti-abortion ideas began developing within the Church, the Solidarity movement and in medical and legal communities. When communism collapsed, the social power of the Church increased significantly, and it used its political influence to promote an anti-choice agenda. Women's movements have organised continuously since the Anti-Abortion Act was passed in 1993, winning, and then again losing, ground depending on the political party in power.

Similarly, in Mexico, feminist movements have struggled for legalisation of abortion for more than three decades, according to Cortes & Bissell (2001). In the Mexican context, even sympathetic legislators have faced, and succumbed to, strong pressure from the Catholic Church to oppose legalisation. Still, feminist movements have gained some ground when abortion was framed as part of "a wider debate on the separation of Church and state, within the context of increasing participation of Catholic Church hierarchy in political affairs and an uncertain future of the secular state."

However, as a counterpoint, Klugman and Budlender show that, "in contrast, the Italian case illustrates how the ideological force of feminism and socialism in the 1970s, coupled with women's limited access to contraception and increased desire to control fertility, collectively undermined the power of the Catholic Church which had, until then, prevented access to both contraception and abortion."

According to Cilumbriello & Colombo (2001), feminists in Italy worked closely with socialist MPs to introduce, and then to continue re-introducing, legislation to legalise abortion, rallying massive support from Italian women, including those identified with the Catholic Church. As the authors note, "in a country that is supposed to be almost 100% Catholic, there were many families in which a mother, sister or daughter had undergone an unsafe, clandestine operation." Eventually, "Communist Party women who had been influenced by feminist ideals succeeded in changing their party's position on the issue and a compromise was made... [in 1978] making abortion permissible and more widely available in safe conditions."

With regards to a focus on the legality of abortion, Klugman and Budlender's analysis shows that measuring legal and policy reform as quantitative variables obscures the impact of movements in contexts where victories are both gained and lost and where a progressive law is in place, but access is still limited (for example by anti-abortion social norms). They explain, "sometimes victories are lost, so it can be a case of moving forwards and backwards. Thus, in Poland a liberal abortion law was in place, then lost, then won, then lost again. Each development was linked to a change in political party, so the focus is currently on winning legal reform."

Klugman and Budlender continue, "[in] contrast, there has been a liberal abortion law in India for decades, but with limited access. Indian activists are focusing on seeing the law implemented by ensuring access to quality services. In Brazil, the law limits access in the case of rape or maternal risk, so activists are focusing

on making abortion available to the extent of the law, since even that is not available at present. They meanwhile retain a longer-term goal to improve the law. These examples show that one cannot assume that the first goal will be liberalisation of law, followed by efforts at implementation.”

Klugman and Budlender’s analysis also contrasts with Htun and Weldon’s findings by delineating what happens when multiple types of legal and policy reform are pursued concurrently. For instance, “In some cases a number of different goals are being pursued in one country at the same time, sometimes by different groupings, sometimes by single groupings operating a multi-pronged strategy. In Kenya for example, the focus for some is on equipping private sector providers to perform safe and cheap abortions despite the illegality. For others, it is on improving the quality of post-abortion care in public health institutions.”

They add, “[in] the United States of America one focus is to hold onto the legal rights which are under threat. Another is to improve access for poor women and women of colour by changing funding regulations, health professionals’ attitudes and other access oriented strategies.” So while feminists in the U.S. continue to fight against the rollback of legal rights and funding cuts, they are also working to change social norms by training more providers, expanding the provider pool, expanding abortion services and providing support for existing providers. Likewise, “in South Africa, while some groups are focusing on holding onto the law which is being challenged in the constitutional court for the second time, others are focusing on building clinical skills and yet others on strengthening the capacity of the public health system.”

All in all, feminist mobilisation varies in different contexts, based on what is strategic and necessary, and particularly in the highly embattled area of abortion rights. Nevertheless, the literature shows that the impact of feminist movements is indeed significant to bringing about reproductive rights across national contexts, though an array of other political and social factors are also significant.

Political participation and representation

In a study on how the growth and discourse of the international women’s movement affected women’s acquisition of political power over time, Paxton, Hughes and Green (2006) surveyed data from more than 150 countries over 110 years. They looked at political representation in terms of multiple political outcomes, including female suffrage, first female parliamentarian and achievement of 10, 20 and 30 percent of women in a country’s national legislature.

Paxton, Hughes and Green found that “as the international women’s movement worked to institutionalise women’s equality in world society, it generated global pressure on nation states to incorporate women. Thus, the international women’s movement did help women attain political power over the past century, one of its primary goals. The international women’s movement was largely responsible for getting the world community to consider the issue of women’s political disenfranchisement, and later for setting standards governing women’s incorporation. Through international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), women’s international non-governmental organisations (WINGOs),

intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), and conferences, the movement spread these messages around the globe and used the strong voice of the world polity to turn the ears of individual nations” (916).

Paxton, Hughes and Green demonstrate that country-level political, social structural, and cultural characteristics cause countries to act in conjunction with, or in opposition to, these global pressures. Specifically, they found that “colonial history, religion, industrialisation, democracy, Marxist-Leninist ideology, proportional representation, and country-level linkages to the world polity in the form of WINGO memberships all have had an impact on women’s achievement of political power over time” (916). The significance of country-level linkages to WINGO memberships is perhaps interesting to highlight, as it is an indication of the importance of cross-border feminist movement building for achieving women’s political power.

In a study exploring data from 50 African countries, Kang and Tripp (2018) found that “when domestic women’s organisations form a coalition for quotas within parliaments, governments are more likely to adopt them and do so more quickly. This correlation holds when controlling for international aid, involvement of international women’s movements, and whether countries recently emerged out of major armed conflict, complementing recent scholarship that highlights global influences.” In other words, domestic women’s movements and coalitions were the most influential factor in securing political support for gender quotas within parliaments.

In their study tracking the evolution of key constraints on women’s and girls’ equal rights to property and restrictions on their legal capacity over 50 years across 100 countries, Hallward-Driemeier, Hasan and Bogdana Rusu (2013) found that women’s movements mobilising around CEDAW and for greater political representation had a different impact on securing equal rights to property and reducing restrictions on women’s legal capacity. Specifically, their analysis shows that “the ratification by states of the CEDAW convention is linked to reform within a short-term period, benefiting unmarried women in particular. The average pace of reform within the 5 years after ratification is almost double the pace in the 15 years prior to ratification.” Also, “increased female legislators at the national level (25% and over) has catalyzed the reform of discriminatory laws. Thus, CEDAW and higher rates of women in parliaments are associated with more reforms closing legal gaps in women’s economic rights.”

In sum, the studies reviewed show that women’s movements have had an impact on women’s access to formal political rights, though this political change was also influenced by other national political and social characteristics. Women’s groups working together in coalitions have been able to exert an influence on governments to adopt gender quotas in parliaments. In contexts where feminist movements mobilised around CEDAW and higher rates of women were present in parliaments, women’s access to property rights was accelerated.

Family law

National autonomous feminist movements have had less impact on Family Law, according to Htun and Weldon (2018). Family Law is a set of codified laws that define women's agency and autonomy in the context of the family. These laws stipulate access to land, income, education, property and inheritance; legal age of marriage; guardianship of children and whether women can initiate a divorce, among other things. The Napoleonic Code, Muslim personal status laws, the Hindu Code Bill and Anglo-American common law are examples of Family Law. Typically, stipulations around family leave and provisions for child-care are *not* part of Family Law.

According to Htun and Weldon (2018), "most countries liberalized their family laws over the course of the twentieth century to promote equality and expand individual rights," but "states' approach to religion is a major factor associated with the degree of sex equality in family law."

Htun and Weldon found that "when state power and religious power are fused, particularly in highly devout societies, it is difficult to reform family law and patriarchal norms endure, regardless of the strength of autonomous feminist movements" (157), making legal and policy reform, social norm change and access to resources and decision-making processes difficult. They suggest that in order to be effective "equality advocates should seek not to marginalize religion or erase its influence from the polity, but to delink religious power from state power." (157)

Limitations and Gaps in Analysis

Feminist scholars, researchers and data analysts have long acknowledged the scarcity of reliable quantitative data, which in turn leads to a paucity of quantitative studies. Historically, data hasn't always been collected or disaggregated by gender, and in many places in the world, relevant data is still unavailable. Even when available, data can be incommensurate and is not easily comparable across national contexts. Moreover, even when available or commensurate, data has limitations in how meaningful it is vis à vis actual realisation of women's rights. Many types of indicators are used as proxies for change that in real life is much more nuanced and complex. Some indicators can even obscure what is actually trying to be measured.

For example, descriptive statistics such as the number of women in parliament in a given country are widely available and usually comparable across national contexts but may not mean much as proxies for women's rights. For example, all women elected to parliaments are not necessarily feminists or feminist allies. Also, for a variety of reasons, greater numbers of women in parliaments don't necessarily translate into women's rights being reflected in policy change. Even when policy is positively impacted towards women's rights by increased numbers of women in parliament, it doesn't mean that policy is enforced, implemented or programmatically funded. For example, even in countries where abortion has been legalised, there may be little public funding for public health education and abortion services, clinics and facilities, and training of providers.

Moreover, sometimes law and policy changes exist only on paper and, in some cases, function as a smokescreen to let governments and other institutions "off the hook" for not tangibly addressing violations of women's rights. For example, even with the passage of the Maria da Penha Law in Brazil, women's movements recognised that the struggle was not over. Cornwall and Edwards (2015) explain that as the law's implementation fell to state and municipal agencies, it was obstructed by residual patriarchal attitudes, and lack of resources or political will; nevertheless, women's movements have responded. They recognised the need for robust monitoring of how the law was applied and put out a call for civil society organisations to conduct a monitoring exercise. They also

raised awareness of the law, collected information about its impact and identified obstacles to and successes in its implementation. Their findings informed procedures within police stations and the formulation of policies for cross-agency coordination. In contrast, in Ghana, the implementation of the domestic violence law has been hampered by a lack of resources and capacity within the women's ministry, lack of coordination amongst state agencies and a lack of support for monitoring (Manuh & Dwamena-Aboagye, 2013).

So policy change doesn't necessarily translate into changes in public attitudes and beliefs (social norm change) or increased access to resources and control over decision-making processes, and therefore meaningful improvement in how women experience their daily lives, especially without pressure from feminist movements. Nevertheless, numbers of women in parliament, policy changes, and new laws on the books are still important for both scholarly analysis and women's lived experience, and quantitative studies at a global level offer evidence of the impact of autonomous women's and feminist movements in these areas.

The select quantitative and qualitative studies reviewed demonstrate that women's and feminist movements matter significantly for women's rights, but they matter in different ways depending on the specific issue at hand, and as a part of a constellation of actors and factors that come together to "move the needle" in different ways. They show that changes that can be more readily measured (i.e., changes in laws and policies) are indeed important factors in advancing women's rights. What these studies don't show as clearly – and what is harder to measure – is social norm change: changes in attitudes and beliefs, and cultural shifts at-large. Measuring changes in norms is difficult, especially when it comes to showing the contribution that a movement, for example, has made to shifting the norm. Yet norm change is necessary in order to disrupt and end the deeply-rooted attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and values that hold sexism, patriarchy and misogyny in place and reproduce them over time.

Nevertheless, the gaps in research don't detract from the larger cross-cutting finding that autonomous women's rights and feminist movements matter distinctly for women's rights, specifically in the areas of violence against women, economic rights, reproductive rights, and political representation.

Conclusion

As stated at the outset, the studies reviewed in this paper demonstrate that women's rights movements and feminist mobilisation have a significant effect in securing women's rights. The studies reviewed demonstrate this particularly in the domain of legal and policy change. There is significant academic literature to support the contention that "feminist activism works", and these are important findings for funders seeking evidence to support their resourcing of feminist and women's rights activism.

While the evidence is convincing, the number of studies, particularly quantitative studies, that show the impact of social and feminist movements is limited. We need to continue to build the evidence base because social change is constant, and we need to continue to learn and to document the factors, including the work of feminist movements, that contribute to change. We need more studies that look at the role played by feminist and other social movements in improving the lives of women, girls, and trans and intersex people so that we can continue to root our arguments not just in our *convictions* about what works, but also in *evidence that documents what works*. We particularly need more work that demonstrates the effect of activism not only in legal and policy change, but also in the longer-term, critical work, of securing social norm change and change in access to resources and decision-making.

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