

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY****MOBILISING FOR CHANGE****HOW WOMEN'S SOCIAL MOVEMENTS ARE  
TRANSFORMING GENDER NORMS**

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## Credits

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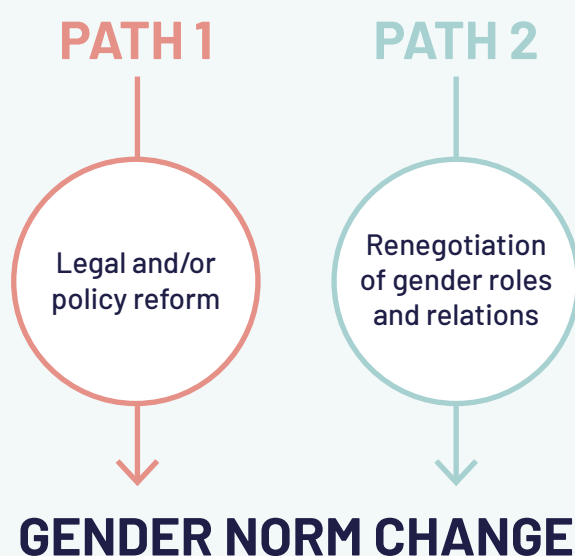
## Introduction

It is well recognised that social movements are key agents of social and political change, and especially in transformations towards social justice. This Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN) Report reviews current research and literature on women's leadership and participation in feminist and social movements across the world. Drawing on evidence largely from the Americas, across Northern Africa and the Middle East, as well as the rest of the African continent, South and Southeastern Asia, the report seeks to understand the ways in which women-led social movements contribute to the transformation of gender norms towards equality and justice. This is particularly timely, as sources suggest that funding for women's rights and feminist organisations is well below 1% (OECD, 2020; AWID, 2021).

'Gender norms' refer to the different sets of formal and informal rules that shape gender roles and relations across society, generally based on a binary understanding of gender and sex (masculine-feminine and male-female). These categories are projected onto individuals according to their (perceived) gender identity, influencing and constraining the ways in which people behave and relate throughout their lives.

For example, gender norms in some contexts may involve women's role as those in charge of domestic and care work within their families and communities (and men's role as breadwinners), women's subordination to male authority in the household and other spaces, and women's limited mobility beyond the private sphere. Gender goes on to shape people's experiences in the world in both overt and less visible ways. Gender norms also intersect with social norms related to other oppressive categories, such as race, sexuality, class and and so on.

Figure 1: Pathways to changing gender norms





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Women raising symbolic green smoke bombs take part in a rally at the National Congress, defending their legal right to safe and free abortion in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2020.



Gendered norms and expectations are therefore often different across groups of women (and men) and communities. For instance, gender norms shape formal and informal rules about the kinds of jobs and social roles women and men are expected to take up, where they can and cannot go, how they should dress and present their bodies, the kinds of emotions they are allowed to express publicly, and so on. As these norms are embedded in, and shape, formal and informal institutions, gender norms act as the basis on which sexist oppression and gender (in)equality is enacted and (re)produced (George and Samman, 2020; Harper et al., 2020). Focusing on how gender norms are transformed can thus offer a lens to understand how social movements can achieve long-term social change and the complexity of producing these changes.

While existing literature on women's political mobilisation does not tend to focus on 'norm change' directly, research does suggest that women's political mobilisation has an impact on gender norms. This report argues that such an impact is achieved through two main pathways:

1. promoting legal and/or policy change, which institutes new normative orders, and thus provides incentives or disincentives for attitudinal and behavioural change
2. encouraging the renegotiation of gender roles and relations within society, targeting gendered attitudes and behaviours directly (whether held by men or women) that underpin gender injustice.

To analyse how women's political mobilisation aims to change gender norms through one or both of these paths, the report first examines the activities of women's and feminist movements, and then considers the impact that women's participation in other social justice movements has on gender norms (see Box 1 for definitions of each type of movement).

#### Box 1: Definitions of different types of social movements

**Women's movements:** Social movements mostly comprised of and led by women, where women participate on the basis of their gender (that is, their identity and interests as 'women'). Women's movements may have feminist, non-feminist or even 'anti-feminist' interests and goals.

**Feminist movements:** Social movements seeking to improve the situation of women by resisting gender inequality and injustice, while at the same time challenging gendered expectations and roles, to demand an end to sexist oppression. As a result, feminist movements tend to work mostly with women and for women. However, they may also work with men.

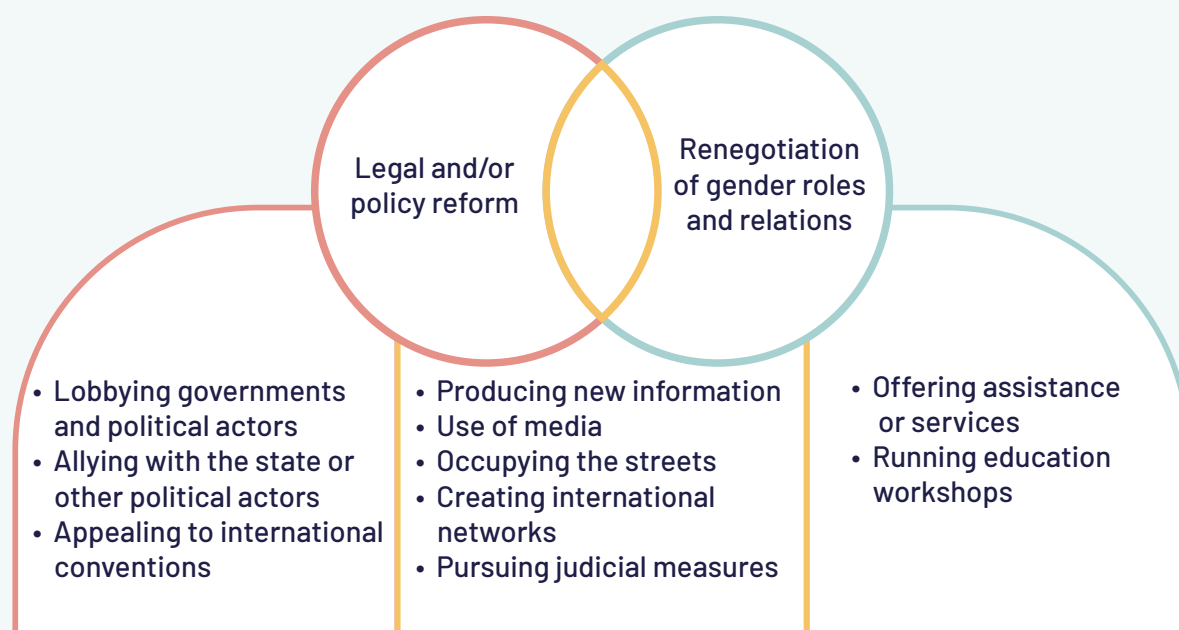
**Social justice movements:** Movements aiming to address and transform societal inequalities and injustices. They may focus on a single issue (for instance, environmental protection, peace and democracy, workers' rights or land rights) or have a wider scope that links various issues. They may include gender equality as an area of focus, but usually within a broader agenda.

*Sources: hooks (1984); Molyneux (1998, 2000); Beckwith (2000); Weldon (2002); Bhattacharjya et al. (2013); Horn (2013); and Weldon and Htun (2013).*

## Adapting struggles and strategies for change

The ways in which feminist and women's movements frame their struggles tend to be the result of negotiations between diverse constituencies of women within a given movement. Movements also tend to 'vernacularise' – or adapt – their struggles to local contexts. This process seems to be crucial to a movement's success, as it enables activists to present meaningful and localised approaches, thereby increasing support for their demands.

Figure 2: What strategies are used in each pathway to gender norm change?



Note: While use of media is mentioned, the role of social media and online activism as a strategy to shift gender norms is beyond the scope of this report, and instead forms the focus of a complementary upcoming publication (ALIGN, forthcoming). In addition, the strategies identified are not exhaustive but based on the evidence search, meaning tactics like the feminist strike do not feature.

To bring about change, feminist and women's movements use a rich and creative variety of strategies. These include:

- occupying public space, such as through performance or protest
- producing new information to build feminist consciousness
- offering assistance and services
- running educational workshops
- using social and broadcast media to raise awareness about issues
- lobbying governments
- creating alliances with state or political actors
- forming networks and coalitions
- appealing to international conventions
- pursuing judicial measures and offering assistance or services.

While most of these strategies are used in both pathways outlined in Figure 2, some are unique to each pathway. Activists primarily occupy the street, lobby governments, create alliances with the state or political actors, and appeal to international regimes when pursuing legal and/or policy change. Strategies like offering assistance and services, and running educational workshops, are more likely to be used to contest and renegotiate gender roles and relations.

## Pathway 1: Legislating for norm change

Women's and feminist movements pursue legal and/or policy change in relation to a wide range of issues. For instance, activists have sought legislative reforms to address men's violence against women (see Box 2), land ownership rights, women's representation in government, constitutional rights, family law, labour rights, menstrual rights, and, of course, abortion, and health and reproductive rights.

### Box 2: CIDEM's work against community gender-based violence in Bolivia

The Centro de Información y Desarrollo de la Mujer (Information and Development Centre for Women, or CIDEM) has been a crucial actor in Bolivia's feminist movement against gender-based violence. Alongside offering integral psycho-socio-legal support services to survivors, since its establishment in 1983, CIDEM has also been documenting feminicides and the government's response to them. The research and archival work carried out in a project called Observatorio Manuela has been vital to CIDEM's efforts to raise awareness, influence law reforms and pressure for the prosecution of gender-based violence crimes. Besides producing information, the organisation was also embedded in feminist networks, which allowed it to work with grassroots assemblies, the *Defensoría del Pueblo* (a state-funded ombudsman), international cooperation agencies and other feminist organisations.

From 2008, CIDEM ran a national campaign to criminalise femicide, which culminated in 2013 with the reform of Law 348 in Bolivia's Penal Code to include femicide in Articles 83 and 84. CIDEM also ran various campaigns, such as 'Campaña por el Derecho a la Educación' ('Campaign for the Right to Education'), 'Alianzas' ('Alliances') and 'Campaña Bolivia ¡Ya! Libre de Violencia' (Bolivia Campaign Free from Violence Now!).

CIDEM's work highlights the importance of having and/or producing gender-sensitive data, and especially data on gender-based violence, if legal or policy reform is to be pursued. It also highlights the importance of monitoring law enforcement, as legal and policy reform alone often fails to accomplish transformative goals. CIDEM's work shows that the existence of legal frameworks is not sufficient to deliver change, but that organisations need to continue their monitoring activities. Unfortunately, CIDEM closed its doors in 2015 due to a lack of funds.

Source: Miguel-Lorenzo (2020: 24).

Legal change to tackle gender-based violence is not only crucial because of the potential justice and/or supporting mechanisms it may provide, but also because it contests deeply rooted gender norms that are the bedrock of male violence towards women. (Although beyond the scope of this report, this includes norms that perpetuate violence towards transwomen, and other gender non-conforming people, as a result of their LGBTQI+ identity).

Stubborn patriarchal notions that underpin ideas about public and private spaces, namely the ‘sovereignty’ of the private sphere as a separate space where male authority reigns and violence is a dominant conflict resolution mechanism. Norms related to the family and sexuality (such as ideas about honour and shame) lying at the core of patriarchy and heteronormativity, are also reproduced inside the home.

Likewise, legal mechanisms to promote women’s representation in public institutions and women’s constitutional rights challenge gender norms that have traditionally placed women in the private sphere, alienating them from public life. Changes to land rights and family law, achieved by women’s social movements in Brazil and across the African continent, the Middle East, and Central, South and Southeast Asia, contest women’s political and economic subordination to male authorities within the family or their household.

Anti-discriminatory labour rights can dismantle the gender norms that underpin the devaluation of female labour – which results in pay gaps and lack of labour rights for women. They can also call into question the notion of women’s work, which is perpetuated in part by norms that reproduce a racialised and gendered hierarchy of labour that further undervalues the work of black and indigenous and/or women of colour.

Changes to menstrual rights and policies that address ‘period poverty’ contest assumptions of gender issues as ‘private’ as well as the longstanding perception of the male body as the default in policy making. The struggle for women’s rights to abortion contests gender norms that do not respect women’s bodily autonomy, as well as challenging norms related to women’s fertility, motherhood and instinctive nurturing.

**Sex education to decide.  
Anti-contraceptives to not  
abort.  
Legal abortion to not die.**

Protest slogan from Ni Una Menos  
movements in Argentina





## Pathway 2: Renegotiating gender norms

In this pathway, feminist movements attempt to renegotiate gender roles and relations. Activism against male violence and femicide seeks to explicitly contest and reshape gendered behaviour and expectations that serve to perpetuate such violence. For example Las Tesis, the Chilean feminist collective, created a performance called *Un Violador en tu Camino* (A Rapist in Your Path) which was performed for the first time in Valparaíso on 20 November 2019. This initiated a viral social media phenomenon, which became iconic in the region at feminist street protests that demand an end to male violence against women and femicide (Serafini, 2020).

The patriarchy is our judge  
That imprisons us at birth  
And our punishment  
Is the violence you **now** see

It's femicide.  
Impunity for my killer.  
It's our disappearances.  
It's rape!

And it's not my fault, nor where I was, nor how I was dressed.  
And it's not my fault, nor where I was, nor how I was dressed.

And the rapist **was** you.  
And the rapist **is** you.

*Las Tesis: A Rapist in Your Path (Un Violador en tu Camino)*

In response, women in other countries around the world, such as the Philippines, Colombia, Mexico, Canada, Turkey, among others, created their own versions of the intervention. Often, the performance was translated into its local language – a clear example of 'vernacularisation' at work.

Movements also produce new information about violence against women, which can help break cultures of silence that are complicit in its reproduction. For example, they work to destigmatise menstruation, call out violence against women and campaign against female genital cutting. Likewise, menstrual activism in places like India and South Korea has sought to challenge, through workshops and campaigns, the stigmatisation of women's bodies, and has promoted messages about women's bodily autonomy and body positivity. Activism against female genital cutting, such as the Anti-Female Genital Mutilation Network (AFNET) based in Tanzania, similarly has sought to educate women on genital anatomy, female sexual function and reproductive health. This has often been accompanied by discussions on gendered notions of honour, family responsibility, dignity and sexual decency.

Participation in feminist and women's movements can in itself instigate emancipatory changes for those who take part. Women who are active in social movements tend to become more self-confident, take on leadership roles and participate more in public spaces. More generally, being part of an activist movement can indirectly support women to renegotiate gendered roles and relations in their own lives.



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Feminist demonstrators at the National University of Colombia perform 'A Rapist in Your Path' to protest against violence against women and femicide in Bogotá, November 2019.

## Challenges faced by women mobilising for norm change

Women's and feminist movements must overcome significant challenges to achieve gender norm change through either pathway. These barriers include the pervasiveness of patriarchal attitudes or practices in society and a country's institutions, as well as the rising backlash and violence against women's social and political participation and their achievements.

Further obstacles to achieving norm change, among others, include: a lack of institutional capacity to adequately implement new legislation; tensions within alliances that hinder a movement's stability; political co-optation of women's movements by the state or international bodies; and unsuccessful framings of women's rights or gender justice goals. Other challenges include the increased risk of violence towards women in politics, which is explored in an ALIGN Briefing on violence against women in public life (George, Tøraasen and Domingo, forthcoming).

The question of whether to include men as co-participants remains a divisive issue within feminist movements, as the involvement of men can both enable positive change and act as a barrier to it. There are successful examples of men-only spaces, for example GENDES in Mexico or the international MenEngage Alliance, which autonomously organise to challenge patriarchal gender norms.

## Factors that support women's mobilisations for norm change

There are many important factors that support the capacity of movements to transform gender norms. Often, women who participate in feminist and women's movements have been enabled or supported by women's growing access to resources. Other elements that impact a movement's chances of success include the presence of a long-term perspective, the existence of feminist alliances and the ability to mobilise elites and other political actors. The existence of a democratic civic space for action is also significant, along with international political consensus or agreements serving as supportive frameworks.

## Norm change via activism in broader social justice movements

Women's participation in broader social justice movements, such as environmental movements, has also played an important role in changing gender norms. Women participating in broader social justice movements are often marginalised because of their gender – as a result of which women may choose to form separate women-only groups as a strategy to contest these exclusionary dynamics. In order to have their claims heard, women are then compelled to frame their demands for gender equality or justice as crucial to the movement's goals (see Box 3). Research shows that this framing is vital if women's claims are to be perceived and addressed as politically important within the agenda of broader movements.

Women's main strategy for gaining space within mixed-gender social justice movements has been to appeal to existing gender norms. In the case of environmental movements, this has meant, for example, appealing to notions of care, women's roles as mothers, and their responsibilities within their families as caregivers. However, in some cases, women may have begun to participate in compliance with gendered divisions of labour – such as by cooking, cleaning and performing 'backstage management' – and then have gradually expanded their participation to 'non-feminine' roles.

### Box 3: Framing gender demands within movements: the Bodhgaya movement for land rights

The struggle of Bihari landless labourers and sharecroppers for land rights began in 1978. It was the first movement in India where women's land rights were explicitly addressed, and where young women played a visible and key role in land occupations and street protests. Women's participation in the Bodhgaya movement promoted changes in gender roles and relations, as women began to organise *shivirs* (camps) to discuss their concerns and experiences within the movement. The shivirs resulted in the collective denunciation of violence against women and demands for land rights for women.

However, achieving land rights for women was not a straightforward process. Women had to convince men of the importance of their gender claims, with men arguing that these claims fostered division in the movement's class unity. To transcend this, women emphasised the movement's commitment to equality and male/female complementarity. As Manimala (1983, in Agarwal, 2002) documents, women maintained that:

Equality can only strengthen, not weaken an organisation, but if it does weaken our unity, that will mean that our real commitment is not to equality or justice but to the transfer of power, both economic and social, from the hands of one set of men to the hands of another set of men.

When the men asked: 'How can you cultivate the land on your own? Who will plough it for you?' the women replied: 'Well, who will harvest your crop in that case? We are ready to cultivate the land with hoes instead of ploughs, but we want it in our names'.

Moreover, when gender demands were recognised within the movement, this did not translate into gains in practice, because of prejudice on the part of state officials. Women's ability to overcome such opposition was aided by several factors: men's eventual recognition of women's role in the movement and thus of their right to land; the recognition of gender equality as an inherent goal of the movement; solidarity among women; women's recognition of their interests as women; and the support of middle-class feminist activists.

In 1985, women received one acre of land through individual, joint, widowhood and destitution titles (even unmarried adult daughters received land for the first time in modern Indian history). As Agarwal highlights, the Bodhgaya movement not only stands out for this achievement, but also for the discussions it prompted within communities on issues such as women's rights to economic independence, gender-based violence, female education and post-marital residence. This resulted in women's greater participation in decision-making, the social condemnation of gender-based violence and the redistribution of domestic labour, as male partners began to get involved in meal preparations and childcare while women participated in discussions.

Source: Agarwal (2002: 8–9).



Women participating in broader social justice movements mainly impact gender norms indirectly, through embodying changes in gender roles and relations. Women's political participation can disrupt the social expectations that others have of them. They may gain political capital, which can empower them to demand equality in other spaces (such as state institutions) and/or to demand more changes within the movements themselves. They may also gain more knowledge, self-confidence and self-esteem, which may make them feel more capable of speaking up against gender injustice. Participating in social movements can also prompt women to renegotiate gendered divisions of labour. Lastly, when women's participation is justified and sustained through gendered norms, such as expectations that they will take up care-giving roles, then it may also lead to a reappropriation and revaluation of female labour and feminine attributes in such contexts.

The presence of feminist bridge leaders (influential women who support other women to join movements), feminist mentoring opportunities, a supportive context, and women-only spaces all enhance the potential for women's participation in social movements to create gender norm change. Still challenges often remain in the form of exclusion, violence, and a lack of capacity and support for women's sustained participation.

## **Social movements and women's triple burden**

It is important to keep in mind, however, that while participation in social movements has a transformative momentum, it is both time consuming and emotionally demanding. As a result, women's involvement in social movements may contribute to an either permanent or temporary increase in their workload. Thus, while it is important to recognise and celebrate women's political work and achievements, all the responsibility for transforming gender relations should not be placed on women.

Relatedly, overt participation in social movements is not the only indicator of resistance to patriarchal norms, as 'one woman's practice of feminism is not another's' (Dawjee, 2018 : 65). The report cannot fully do justice to the entirety of women's political participation across the world; rather, it aims to offer an insight and a framework for understanding the ways women have been approaching and bringing about change.

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# ALIGN

## About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms. Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best of available knowledge and resources have a growing impact on harmful gender norms.

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