

**ALIGN BRIEFING**

# **Global feminist experiences of mobilising for norm change**



**We cannot overestimate the role of women's movements in advancing change to gender norms**

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# Key messages

- **Feminist movements contribute significantly to gender norm change** through issue-based activism in their own contexts. Issues such as femicide, environmental injustice or state-perpetrated violence are addressed through a feminist lens which centres the role of activism in bringing them to public, policy and political attention.
- **Actions big and small can make a difference.** Powerful actions by feminist activists (e.g. disruption of speeches, picket lines, mass demonstrations) can bring to life collective concerns and can have significant impacts on national debates, leading to policy or legal changes. Various forms of direct action instigate change and fit within a diversity of strategies to make sure they are 'fit for purpose' and guarantee impact.
- **Feminist movements do not always solely engage with women's issues.** Connecting two issues together (e.g. femicide and environmental justice) can help support change by improving the relevance and depth of impact of women's activism.
- **Adopting intersectional approaches is important.** Learning from other social justice struggles and with women from more marginalised backgrounds allows more privileged activists to engage in movements that are more broad-based and inclusive.
- **Feminist activists face a series of overwhelming barriers in their everyday struggles.** For example, to engage with donors, they need to present themselves according to donor wishes, and often compromise their informality or feminist values in order to access funds. They also face individual risks and costs from participating in such movements in terms of personal safety, time and energy.
- **A sense of global solidarity is a key enabler** that allows feminist movements to thrive where momentum spills across different contexts to drive change. Transnational coalitions are effective in enabling greater impact and solidarity, enhanced by the expansion of social media and communications technology.
- **Movements seek change within complex environments.** Understanding the wider environment is key to appreciating each movement and its respective aims. Feminist movements' most transformative impacts (addressing the root causes of gender inequalities) have often been the result of multi-pronged strategies that work within a complex ecosystem.
- **Funders' approaches need to meet feminist movements' long-term needs** for flexibility and adaptability as they evolve over time, with commitment to varied scales of immediate and sustained activities. Funders also need to consider the asymmetric power dynamics at play when thinking about their grantmaking, reporting and evaluation processes.
- **Donors also need to accept that feminists' movements are political,** as are their struggles against gender injustice such as standing up to rape, calling for reproductive rights and autonomy, or advocating for girls' education. Many of these areas connect to the global consensus on human rights principles and employing a rights-based approach is critical to ensuring women's inequality issues are adequately addressed.

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# 1 Introduction

Feminist movements play a critical role in advancing social justice and gender equality around the world. Their actions bring gender injustices into view, and they drive legal and policy reforms and innovations to support more gender-equal societies. These actions – from sparking conversations on previously unspoken realities, to igniting vigorous and vocal demands for feminist change – contribute to the renegotiation of gender roles in society, including the ‘unlearning’<sup>1</sup> and transformation of the gender norms that uphold them. This is critical to enabling sustainable and deeper social change. And yet, feminist and women’s rights organisations receive only a small amount of all funding directed towards gender equality – reportedly less than 1% (AWID, 2021).

On 2 December 2021, the ALIGN Platform (led by ODI) convened a group of feminist activists and leaders from different contexts around the world. The aim was to share learnings on how feminist mobilisations contribute to gender norm change, and to listen directly to the voices of activists from the frontlines of feminist movements.

The closed-door virtual roundtable, ‘**Supporting feminist movements for transformative change: a grassroots conversation**’, followed on from ALIGN’s latest research, *Mobilising for change: how women’s social movements are transforming gender norms* (Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez et al., 2021) and invited participants to take a deep dive into experiences of women’s organising from all across the globe.

This ALIGN briefing attempts to amplify the voices of those who participated by highlighting key messages from the roundtable. It is intended to spark further conversations on how best to support grassroots momentum for change, as well as encourage future research on how feminist movements drive tangible transformation. This will deepen understanding of their critical role in building fairer futures for all.

## Box 1: One in Nine campaign

Formed in 2006, the *One in Nine* campaign is a South African collective of organisations and individuals motivated by feminist principles and the desire to live in a society where women are the agents of their own lives. The campaign supports survivors of sexual violence – those who report the crimes to the police and choose to engage the criminal justice system as well as those who choose not to or are unable to report their rapes. While not an exhaustive list, some of the main activities of the campaign include: applying pressure on various branches of the criminal justice system through direct action and targeted advocacy to ensure that officials comply with existing laws and policies; working with individuals, communities, collectives and organisations to generate feminist analyses of social problems; targeting the government for its failure to protect the rights of women and other female-assigned people and force it to be accountable to its full mandates and responsibilities; and developing innovative strategies for mobilisation and mass action.

The campaign’s work is spread over five areas:

- solidarity in action and building feminist activism
- feminist knowledge production and research
- media advocacy
- justice and legal transformation
- direct action

*Note: text from SaferSpaces.org, a digital platform connecting those working on violence prevention in South Africa.*

1 A concept raised by a roundtable participant, further discussed in Section 2.

## 2 Setting the scene: a multiverse of movements

Feminist mobilisations take many shapes and together form a ‘multiverse’ of movements, where a constellation of different types and styles of activism often build on one another to support change. ODI’s research on women’s social movements has found a range of strategies that these movements use across the world. These include: sharing knowledge, creative performance, media engagement, educational workshops, street occupations, lobbying governments, advocating for new legislation, appealing to international conventions or judicial measures, building alliances (such as with state institutions or other political actors), building networks and providing needs-based services (Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez et al., 2021).

Participants shared experiences of diverse and vibrant global networks of locally rooted activist movements. Combined, their stories demonstrate the importance of appreciating and sustaining multiple forms of activism around the world. Movements take both proactive and reactive approaches to organising, and strategies are necessarily iterative adapting to circumstances through collective engagement, strategic learning, as well as planning and reflection.

### Placing feminist politics on the public agenda

Feminist movements have contributed significantly to changing gender norms through issue-based activism. Participants highlighted gender-based violence (including femicide), land rights, environmental injustices and state-perpetrated violence as examples of issues that need to be tackled from a feminist lens which centres the role of activism in order to bring them to public, policy and political attention (see Box 1).

Simamkele Dlakavu (University of Cape Town) powerfully explains how South African feminists organised against impunity for rape perpetrators. Most notably, when President Jacob Zuma was accused of rape, [anti-rape protesters](#) disrupted his speech during an official electoral announcement (Nicholson, 2016), raising signs with information about cases of rape and gender-based violence in the country. These forms of powerful in-person visual protest have driven feminist conversations forward in South Africa. They have sparked national reckonings with the prevalence of rape in the country, and challenged the view that men – and, particularly, powerful men – are entitled to impunity. In this particular illustrative case, the actions of a small number of individual female activists voiced a collective concern, having a significant impact on national debate. These women’s brave and embodied actions of physical disruption demonstrated that, despite the intimidation of victims, women continue to call out injustice and will not be silenced.

The internet and social media have also been critical to success, enabling activists to ‘bypass traditional gatekeepers’ and push back against hierarchies of power and exclusion, including the racism and sexism entrenched in traditional media (Dlakavu, 2016).

In the case of Nigeria, the State of Emergency Movement (SoEBV) implemented a strategy of naming and shaming to support the adoption of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act that aims to protect women and girls’ safety in Nigeria. This action put pressure on policy-makers, leading more states to adopt the law. Activists also offered assistance and services to victims of violence, including educational workshops, to complement this work and enhance public awareness of the existence of protective laws. This was intended to encourage people to claim

their rights and access protection in cases of gender-based violence, as well as to signal to the public that violence is a crime that should not be tolerated.

## Bringing women's rights into wider movements for justice

'There is a link between the fights for water, the intersectional fights of class and race and the theme of extractivism.'

Daniela Cáceres, *Red Chilena contra la Violencia hacia las Mujeres, Chile*

Connecting two issues together can sometimes help to support change and improve the relevance and depth of impact of women's activism. For example, women-led collectives in Latin America have organised together to defend their indigenous lands against extractive industries. In doing so, they have also integrated a complementary feminist lens to direct attention towards preventing violence against women. Mapuche-Tehuelche women engaged in this struggle in Argentina have, for example, blended feminist and environmental justice activism through the occupation and protection of their ancestral territories in Patagonia, successfully mounting an indigenous resistance against a hydroelectric dam (La Elena) (Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, 2021).

As Mapuche activist Irma Caupan Perriot, from the *Movimiento de Mujeres Indígenas por el Buen Vivir* (Movement of Indigenous Women for the Good Life) in Argentina raised, in combatting violence (often perpetrated by the state or multinational corporations), women who are impacted by these economic and ecological changes have identified links between the body and the land. In stressing the importance of naming the issue of *terricidio* (terricide), Irma demonstrates the value of deploying cross-cutting concepts that can encompass the process of 'genocide, ecocide, and feminicide.' This can effectively speak to the wider justice issue of environmental destruction at the same time as calling out gender-based violence suffered by indigenous women. Their revival of the ancestral Andean *buen vivir* (good life) philosophy is, in part, an effort to reclaim the right to self-determination and autonomy of their *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory)<sup>2</sup>. This concept acknowledges that what is experienced by the body is simultaneously experienced by the land, in a co-dependent relationship. By using this concept, women activists successfully tie together their struggles for bodily and territorial autonomy, allowing movements to work to restore their ancestral rights in ways that challenge existing paradigms of state power, gendered violence and decision-making.

## Building broad-based feminist movements

'Our own theory of change is built around the idea that autonomous feminist movements are the key to sustainable change.'

Sanam Amin, *Women's Environment and Development Organisation, Thailand*

Feminist activists often build their work as part of a larger, broad-based movement. This has allowed women to situate their work within a unified and popular call for social change. For example, the *marea verde* (green tide) movement originating in Argentina has transcended social divides and operates across different country contexts on women's reproductive rights issues. In another example, the Stand to End Rape Initiative (STER) in Nigeria works to engage with youth

2 For an exploration of how the concept of *cuerpo-territorio* has been used as a 'decolonial feminist geographical method' in research, see Zaragocin and Caretta (2020).

across different cities to teach them about gender equality. They are then invited to create new structures and movements to address issues important to them as part of a broader youth network in the country. These broad-based initiatives serve as a 'thread' from which national activists are able to position their claims and build feminist momentum through situating concerns within a larger movement.

Weaving issues into a wider feminist movement is repeatedly identified as important. The Mexican feminist collective *No Somos Medias Naranjas* (We Are Not Half an Orange) explains that being part of a larger movement and community of peer collectives working together provides a sense of strength and solidarity to address a wider set of gender justice issues. This helps to spur and contribute to a 'feminist awakening', such that local feminist movements have been able to grow and engage in multi-level activism, ranging from marches and mutual support, through to educational workshops and other nationally coordinated activities.

An open attitude to the process of 'unlearning' is also critical to broad-based feminist movements. In the case of *No Somos Medias Naranjas*, an evolution into more intersectional approaches is enabled through peer-learning and networking among activists. Connections and exchanges between groups lead activists to critically assess issues of privilege, reflecting on their own social position and power. Learning from other struggles and with women from different backgrounds (such as class, race and education) allows more privileged activists to engage in work that is more inclusive, and together propose shared claims for justice. This proactive approach to reflecting and questioning personal privileges is crucial for transformative change. Bolstered by this process, more inclusive ideas of feminism and women's rights have slowly become more 'mainstream' in Mexico and across the movement.

**'This enables us to align with all women, and not only to those who have the same level of privileges ... this is so we avoid maintaining the current status-quo structure of privilege and power within our movements.'**

Catalina Garza Flores, *No Somos Medias Naranjas*, Mexico



### 3 Feminist strategies for activism

First and foremost, participants emphasise the critical role of direct action in their activism, namely activities designed to stand up to established structures and which seek immediate change. Feminist participants at the roundtable named various forms of direct action that have successfully sparked political debate and instigated change.

This has included organising picket lines, blocking roads, presenting petitions, occupying public spaces and even occupying universities, writing songs and performing poetry, holding silent protests, as well as creating media stunts. The different actions of the Stand To End Rape Initiative in Nigeria provide more examples of powerful direct action to address men's sexual and gender-based violence (see Box 2). Bringing men and women together in this activism can also be important. Another participant raised the example of the '#TotalShutdownMovement' in South Africa in 2018, which enabled men and women all over South Africa to participate in a protest on a national scale. This can be a more broad-based strategy to complement other focused actions by small groups or individuals. These comments highlight the importance of a diversity of strategies, as each strategy needs to be 'fit for purpose' for a particular geographic, political and social context to have sufficient impact and connection to the issues and people affected.

There are diverse opinions on the degrees of formality that movements can adopt, illustrating that many different organisational styles can be effective. Many highlight the importance of informality, stressing the benefits of loose collectives and horizontal/decentralised leadership structures, and the benefits of focusing on broad-based rather than high-level activism. This helps to ensure adequate momentum for a movement and enables it to have more impact.

**'We as activists can force politicians to listen to us, to pay attention. [Movements achieve] political recognition through direct action, not lobbying and high-level meetings.'**

Simamkele Dlakavu, University of Cape Town, South Africa

Many of the strategies highlighted by participants overlapped with those discussed in [ALIGN's report](#) (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al., 2021), in which street protests, public performances and art, for example, are all identified as common strategies across countries and regions where women's movements have been active, particularly in key areas such as addressing femicide and men's violence against women. These actions are critical, though they are often combined with other complementary strategies, such as lobbying governments or disseminating and producing new information.

Participants also flagged the need for strong partnerships across actors aiming to enact feminist change. One participant reflected on the responsibility of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to work with local organisations and transnational networks without undermining their work, while at the same time treating them as equals. Other forms of support international NGOs can provide include sharing and strengthening capacities, using global platforms to highlight the work and achievements of Global South<sup>3</sup> activists and groups, as well as promoting collaborative learning from the South to the North and from South to South, as emphasised by Ximena Casas (Human Rights Watch).

<sup>3</sup> The 'Global South' is an increasingly common term used to categorise countries around the world. Often it is employed as a substitute for referring to nations that have been historically exploited through colonisation. In using this term, the authors would like to acknowledge current international debates which question whether another generalising and binary framework (Global North-Global South) is productive for reconstituting and challenging global power relations.

## Box 2: Stand to End Rape Initiative

Founded in 2014, Stand To End Rape Initiative (STER) is a multiple award-winning youth-led social enterprise in Nigeria innovating strategies to advance gender equality and eliminate sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) while providing holistic psychosocial support to survivors.

STER adopts a comprehensive approach to advocating for gender equality and eliminating gender-based violence in Nigeria. First, by working with communities to generate sustainable home-grown solutions to SGBV issues that impact broader society. Second, by partnering with local and national groups on systems-level prevention and intervention activities, and, finally, by working with survivors of sexual violence and their families on trauma-related recovery.

Since 2015, the organisation has driven advocacy for the adoption of the Violence against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act at state levels and for stakeholders to be held accountable for compliance with the law in protecting Nigerian women's and girls' rights. To aid this, STER offers training to state and non-state actors and provides assistance and services, including educational workshops, to complement this work and enhance public awareness of the existence of laws.

STER values movement building that drives collective change. It is part of the Nala Feminist Collective, the Feminist Coalition and State of Emergency GBV (SoEGBV) to develop and implement sustainable pan-African gender equality strategies. These movements mobilise and sustain public interest in gender issues through social media. STER's strategy is to strategise, organise, and sustain, spanning across four thematic areas:

- policy advocacy
- awareness-raising
- prevention
- service provision

*Note: text contributed by Oluwaseun Ayodeji Osowobi, Executive Director, STER, Nigeria.*

## 4 Flexibility, learning and adaptation

A key insight is the importance of 'organic' learning and adaptation among social movements working for feminist change. This often requires a long time frame and adequate space for reflection, so that movements can adjust and evolve to meet new challenges and 'course-correct' where strategies have been ineffective or harmful. For example, one participant stressed that 'vertical' movements with identified leaders can sometimes be at a disadvantage. In some cases, a 'horizontal' strategy of what some call 'leaderless' movements can best support feminist action, as it can protect members from harm and avoid the co-option of movement leaders, tokenism and the ability of governments to intimidate or bribe them. Horizontal movements also avoid giving power to a select few women leaders which can otherwise deny voice to an overall movement. 'We decided that the movement has no leadership, and everyone takes ownership, this just helps for sustainability to advance human rights and gender equality', as noted by Oluwaseun Ayodeji Osowobi (STER).

Considering how to frame actions in ways that ensure they remain political is critical, as well as ensuring they are effectively localised and embedded in a social context – speaking to the concept of vernacularisation (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al., 2021). For another example on the issue of framing, in the case of Palestine, Sandie Hanna stresses the crucial need of preserving the language of feminism, in order to avoid the movement becoming depoliticised and co-opted by institutions or NGOs (in a process of 'NGO-isation') (see Section 5 for further discussion).

'How we frame our struggles is important, as they get diluted. The *One in Nine* campaign wasn't women's rights, it was feminist liberation – this is very important. In terms of language, feminist claims have been depoliticised.'

Simamkele Dlakavu, University of Cape Town, South Africa

## 5 Barriers

While the energy and momentum of so many movements highlights a wide range of locally-rooted and successful strategies for feminist action, the participants also powerfully shared a real sense of the overwhelming barriers and challenges many of them face. These are outlined below.

**Lack of funding and support for grassroots movements.** One participant stressed that the international community is not sufficiently engaging with and supporting these movements, failing to adequately capture their stories or provide adequate funding or collaborative support to sustain them. Another highlighted that in order to access funding, movements have to 'give into the patriarchal system' by becoming formalised organisations and institutions:

'There exists the risk of institutionalising ourselves in order to guarantee access to funds ... You have to be a "formal" organisation in order to receive access to donor resources. How can we access funding in other ways without giving into the patriarchal system?'

Daniela Pascual, *Restauradoras con Glitter, Mexico*

**Lack of effective implementation of existing gender equality laws.** The failed enforcement of many laws and policies intended to support gender equality was also clearly felt. In India, for example, the expansion of laws to address gender-based violence has been met with constant cases of impunity for violence, indicating how strong the barriers are for enacting deeper change.

**Risks of physical violence perpetrated by the state and other actors.** Social movement leaders and participants can face risks of violence by state institutions (e.g. the police) or by multinational corporations on indigenous lands. Multiple participants felt that the state and the police presented overwhelming obstacles for activists, particularly as perpetrators of violence. As the participants stressed, stronger networks among activists – in the community as well as nationally, regionally and transnationally – are crucial for standing up to these powerful forces.

'The movements with known leaders can easily become targets. In some instances, they are arrested or killed.'

Oluwaseun Ayodeji Osowobi, *STER, Nigeria*

'Women experience a lot of violence and state repression. Feminist collectives were persecuted during the social uprising [in Chile, 2019], they were pursued by the police forces. We are scared for the trans population, for the Mapuche population, for women.'

Daniela Cáceres, *Red Chilena contra la Violencia hacia las Mujeres, Chile*

**Juggling paid and unpaid work with activism.** Activists also have to balance other gendered burdens and time scarcity in order to participate. For example, several participants were mothers, students and/or had other paid and unpaid responsibilities in addition to their activist work in feminist movements. One participant explicitly identified the nature of work under capitalism as a main obstacle for women, saying that ‘capitalism has taken time from us’.

Carine Jocelyn from the Haitian Women’s Collective stresses ‘the workload of activism’, while others further emphasise the difficulties of sustaining their self-funded work due to the number of burdens they carry, as activists, workers and individuals.

**Lobbying and engaging with government institutions.** Challenges in terms of how far each movement aims to engage with or contest existing institutions, particularly in the case of governments, was highlighted. One participant stressed the difficulties activists face when engaging with formal institutions through lobbying, raising the point that activists face barriers and challenges in doing so in the face of corruption and risks of engaging with the political sphere.

'Lobbying sometimes is problematic, stressful and may not always reflect the change you want.'

Oluwaseun Ayodeji Osowobi, STER, Nigeria

**Co-optation and depoliticisation of the feminist struggle.** Another participant cited challenges in relation to the depoliticisation of women’s movements. In Palestine, she explained, women’s movements have been co-opted through a process of ‘NGO-isation,’ whereby women’s needs and priorities have been reduced to particular state-supported agendas (such as economic empowerment initiatives, girls’ education and ending child marriage, for example). This has sidelined the collective voices, priorities and ultimately transformative potential of the wider women’s movement.

'One way the settler-colonial project eliminates resistance is through narrowing activism into the NGO space – to a great extent associated with colonial and neoliberal funding processes. Another example is the continuous attempts to individualise, and depoliticise, the Palestinian liberation and feminist movements – the lived realities, our organisation and mobilisation, and collective memory. Palestine is a political question of existence... For us, patriarchy is a political, feminist and resistance issue.'

Sandie Hanna, Purposeful, Palestine

While NGOs and state gender machineries have served critical roles in enabling partnerships for women’s movements in some settings, this comment highlights the importance of understanding these relationships in context, and of working in ways that enable and support civic mobilisation and activism beyond traditional NGO and state-based approaches. This highlights the complex dynamics and tensions that exist among different stakeholders.

## 6 Enablers

While participants detailed a number of significant barriers to feminist movement building (Section 5), they also highlighted a range of factors that enable change from below. Some of the key enablers of grassroots momentum, identified by those at the roundtable, are outlined in this section.

'We must agonise about our situation to change it. A call for imagination. We must agonise to organise.'

Simamkele Dlakavu, University of Cape Town, South Africa

**Transnational coalitions.** Despite the many barriers, activists celebrate the sense of momentum that spills across different contexts, shared on a scale of transnational solidarity. In Latin America, the *marea verde* (green tide) movement expanded from Argentina to the rest of the continent, creating a feeling of collective power. Being part of a powerful current of regional feminist awakening presents an opportunity for organisations to exchange information, share lessons and strategies across borders from one country to another. In Palestine and Chile, solidarity across national groups working towards social justice has been important to bolstering the claims of movements that are facing significant barriers, including low trust in democratic systems and institutions.

**Non-hierarchical movements.** Breaking down traditional hierarchies has been important in multiple settings, enabling more impactful feminist activism. Multiple participants stressed that horizontal movement organising is safer for activists and enables more participatory ways of working for a diversity of women's voices to be heard. This can also include crowd-funding and democratic fundraising initiatives which are conscious of informing supporters about how money is spent, creating greater transparency for the movement (such as the '#EndSARS' protests against police brutality by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad in Nigeria).

'Ensuring your movement is on a flat-line scale means everyone takes ownership of the work we are doing. This helps foster the sustainability of the movement.'

Oluwaseun Ayodeji Osowobi, STER, Nigeria

**Collective sense of momentum.** In South Africa, the building up of layered moments of activism against gender-based violence has helped provide a sense of national momentum, amplifying women's collective voice and impacting public conversations. South American participants described a sense of shared progress, suggesting that feminism has become more 'mainstream' as a result of decades of women's tireless activism, contributing to the transformation of gender norms in their communities.

'It takes time, it doesn't happen overnight.'

Ximena Casas, Human Rights Watch, Colombia/Spain

**Long-term view of goals and success.** Adopting a slow pace and a long time frame for effecting change can enable movements to create the conditions for society-wide cultural shifts around gender relations. By having longer-term goals, imagining alternative feminist futures, and connecting with other mutually supportive collectives and movements, activists can develop a socio-cultural framing for their work that delivers bottom-up progress. This ultimately targets the foundations of social relationships, such as gender norms (Harper et al., 2020), supporting slow and steady cultural change.

'A process of deconstruction, of unlearning, of checking your privileges. Being responsible for your own biases. We keep on educating ourselves and being an ally to all women.'

Catalina Garza Flores, *No Somos Medias Naranjas*, Mexico

## 7 Effecting change simultaneously on multiple levels

'As advocates for human rights and gender justice we need to perform like the best jazz band – playing excellent music without a director and inspiring diverse audiences to follow our beat by working in strategic and harmonic ways.'

Ximena Casas, Human Rights Watch, Colombia/Spain (citing a friend)

Throughout the discussion, it was clear that feminist activism contributes to gender norm change through a complex web of spaces for action (e.g. the streets, educational spaces and media campaigns). This web is critical to ensuring the actions are impactful. As Ximena Casas beautifully phrased, the work of these movements, including many successful 'leaderless' movements like those discussed in the meeting, is like the best 'jazz band', requiring strategic and harmonious engagement without a director to fully inspire change through a successful song.

Many activists have highlighted the importance of working across multiple levels to have an impact. This includes working across individual and collective spheres, from the level of the family and communities to the work of police and security forces, to influencing justice systems, to enacting national laws and policies to redress claims. It requires the work of leaders as well as everyday individuals of all genders, and it requires the contributions of people with many different social and political experiences and roles. Feminist movements' most transformative impacts (addressing the root causes of gender inequalities) have often been the result of multi-pronged strategies that work and move across these different levels of action. Due to the scale of effort required to work across so many levels, these are often long-term processes.



## 8 Ecosystems for change and the role of context

Most participants described context as key. They highlighted, for example, the need to critically assess the role that feminist movements can play in crisis and conflict settings. While the 'women, peace and security' agenda (DPPA, n.d.) has grown in recognition globally – including the critical role women play in ensuring lasting peace – less is known about how to translate this agenda to enable and expand women's voices in broader social and political movement building within these settings.

As described in Section 2, the context of ecological degradation was also a central feature of discussion, including the role capitalism and economic drivers play in driving ecological breakdown. This is particularly important for indigenous women activists, who are at the forefront of the climate crisis and mobilise their movements for the protection of their land, ecosystems and ultimately their livelihoods.

Knowledge of historical and political contexts, at both international and domestic levels, is also critical for understanding the challenges and opportunities movements face in particular national and sub-national settings. In Haiti, for example, cross-cutting issues in relation to international interventions, poverty and migration are critical to understanding how women's movements can adequately engage and support broad-based changes. Participants share the view that as long as structural issues such as poverty, discrimination or lack of equal rights and access to education, are not addressed, gender equality will be more difficult to achieve because the root causes of injustice will remain unsolved. Feminist movements can therefore be important bridge builders to engage with and inform other actors working to address these root causes (within development programmes, policy spaces and other areas).

## 9 Looking forward

'Activism is very demanding and reactive. We need to always find time to ask ourselves: what is our added value of organising to change gender and social norms?'

Ximena Casas, Human Rights Watch, Colombia/Spain

Women's and feminist movements around the world are engaging in brave, critical work that stands at the very heart of social transformations. More work to recognise the roles played by particular movements and to examine these change processes could help ensure their expansion and guide future learning.

### Box 3: Lessons in experimental feminist funding from Purposeful

Purposeful is a feminist hub for girls' activism, rooted in Africa and working all around the world. Purposeful recognises the critical role that girls play in struggles for freedom and liberation, and that their resistance has always sparked and sustained transformational change. Centring the political power of young feminists across the world, Purposeful works so that girls and their allies have access to the resources, networks, and platforms they need to power their activism and remake the world.

Purposeful's experimental feminist funding initiatives are brought into one integrated participatory grantmaking hub: With and For Girls Fund. As the world's first Africa-rooted global fund resourcing girls' resistance across the globe, it reimagines a participatory and flexible grant-making practice so that girls can define and determine resource allocation at the service of their goals and needs, and at the unique intersections of age, gender and other identities.

Interdependence in both the feminist ecosystem and the world challenges us to rethink the ways that we inherently show up in communities, networks and systems – and to question how we know what we know, and how comfortable we are in the systems we create or are part of. We believe if we're comfortable with the status quo power dynamics and asymmetries, then we're only reproducing power that is at the heart of injustice and oppression. We challenge this by adopting an intentional and radical approach in distributing resources and collectivising power with and for young activists.

Purposeful decentres the narrative of mainstream funding, putting trust at the heart of relationships with grassroots and local groups, reimagining what it means to hold movement resources with deep accountability to girls. Purposeful seeks to reframe power in philanthropic practice, showing what is possible when girls are at the centre.

*Note: text provided by Sandie Hanna from Purposeful, Palestine.*

Enhanced cross-movement learning was cited as one strategy that can support accelerated global learning and action. Mapping these organisations and encouraging the cross-pollination of ideas and learning can play a critical role. To encourage and facilitate transborder exchange and collaboration, ODI, through the ALiGN Platform, will be producing a map of global feminist movements. These efforts can help movements to 'tejer redes' (weave networks) with one another, an urgent feminist priority articulated by Mapuche activist Irma Caupan Perriot. This too will enable advocates, policy-makers, funders and researchers to better understand and connect with movements operating domestically and all over the world.

'With our sisters we continue walking and proposing the recovery of the *buen vivir* [good life], the reciprocity with nature and with the [indigenous] peoples. For this we [feminists] need to unite and find a way to weave stronger networks, because our sisters are threatened for defending life.'

Irma Caupan Perriot, *Movimiento de Mujeres Indígenas por el Buen Vivir, Argentina*

At the same time, a clear thread is visible in terms of the need for more resources to encourage the successful musical harmony of feminist change. While many of these movements engage with international funders and partners, the system requires significant improvement. This can ensure these funders' approaches are fit for purpose and meet feminist movements' long-term needs for: flexibility, adaptability, and multi-level or varied scales of immediate to more sustained action.

'Be aware of power dynamics, be aware of unequal relations and break this dynamic of North to the South. Women's rights movements need to go bottom up ... Donor commitment for the long-term is absolutely key. This includes promoting funding to local partners.'

Ximena Casas, *Human Rights Watch, Colombia/Spain*

There is also a need to 'change the dynamics' and promote more learning from those who are leading these processes of transformation. Around the world, activists are challenging the status quo in diverse contexts and environments, contributing in many different ways to the changing of norms – facing unique as well as similar and cross-cutting experiences. Advocates, policy-makers, funders and researchers can help build momentum and ignite change by providing activists with more channels and opportunities to receive thoughtful support.

Targeted dialogue alongside appreciating and working collaboratively together, within the horizontal structures in which a number of movements already operate and thrive, could be a start. This work will enable more critical reflection and action on the contextual factors discussed in this ALiGN Briefing, as well as engaging in the forms of organic learning that were cited as being so critical to the harmonic success and impact of feminist movements around the world.

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**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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