



Feminist Movements and Lasting Change: What We Know and Where Next

A webinar conversation

Summary and Recommendations

By demanding new rights and connecting women with those rights, strong, autonomous feminist movements work across issues to advance global gender equality. On April 22, 2021, the Equality Fund convened a [conversation](#) to highlight feminist movements' achievements and explore how funders and allies can best support them.

Following opening remarks from the Honourable Karina Gould, Canada's Minister of International Development, Dr. Laurel Weldon [presented her research](#) on the power of feminist mobilization. Moderated by Josh Lozman ([Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#)), Solange Kibibi ([Queer African Youth Network](#)) and Jess Tomlin ([Equality Fund](#)) complemented Dr. Weldon's findings with further insights and examples.

What are feminist movements?

Feminist movements are hard to define. They include **diverse organizations**, from women's cooperatives to protest groups to political theatre and music, and more. They are made up of multiple organizations and interests. Dr. Weldon described a **coalition model** of organizations that take special measures to include groups and interests that would otherwise be excluded or even silenced. They can intersect with other movements (for example, the Indigenous rights, climate justice, and feminist movement nexus). Jess Tomlin pointed to the need to better understand this "**connective tissue**," or areas of shared interest among movements.

Dr. Weldon's [research](#) offered the following definition of feminist movements:

Collective action aimed at improving the status of women (or some subset of women) and/or challenging patriarchal values, practices, systems, and power relations that maintain structures of male domination on the basis of gender.

According to Dr. Weldon's [Feminist Mobilization Index](#), feminist mobilization is a function of **strength** (the ability to exert influence over the public agenda, popular discourse, and powerholders) and **autonomy** (independence from male-dominated organizations, including the

state). The Index shows a global growth of autonomous feminist movements from 1975 to 2015, but with variation across countries— and some reversals.

One way to grasp the concept of feminist movements is to look at an example. Examples are important because there is **not one but many feminist movements**, a point underlined by all panelists. Solange Kibibi described QAYN’s trajectory from a loose network of queer West African youth in 2010 to today’s movement of youth and women-led, queer, feminist organizations in nearly all West African countries. Solange highlighted the particular concerns of queer, bisexual, lesbian, and transgender West Africans, such as forced marriage, the pathologization of lesbianism, correction violence, and even the exclusion of trans women from feminist movements.

How do feminist movements advance gender equality?

In Dr. Weldon’s nutshell, **“Feminist movements demand new rights, and connect women with those rights.”** Feminist mobilization is correlated with: reduced gender inequality; expanded economic rights (e.g. land titling, bank accounts, rights for domestic workers); and expanded social rights. Strong feminist movements:

- Articulate women’s perspectives;
- Transform public opinion;
- Insert issues into public and policy agendas;
- Resist rollbacks on women’s rights; and
- Indirectly, change institutions and norms about what women and men do.

Similarly, Minister Gould framed a role of feminist movements as influencing **“the repositories of power”** (policies, laws, norms, institutions, and systems). She provided the recent example of Argentina, where women-led organizations “made feminism a part of the conversation,” which led to a historic bill to legalize abortion. Jess Tomlin added the Canadian example of childcare; a powerful coalescence of feminist leadership and a strong feminist movement led to the 2021 federal budget commitment of \$30 billion for accessible childcare Canada-wide.

The power of feminist movements comes in part from being rooted in specific realities. According to Minister Gould, grassroots organizations know the context and culture, what change needs to happen, and how to apply gender and intersectional lenses. This is exemplified by QAYN, which works at the intersection of gender equality and LGBTI rights and protections in the specific contexts of a number of West African countries.

Feminist movements are also powerful because they are **cross-cutting**, tackling any number of manifestations of gender inequality. Just as individual lives are not siloed, movements are not siloed. They provide solutions to the pressing needs of the girls, youth, women, and non-binary people who lead and are served by them. They steadily confront what Jess Tomlin called the “hot

issues,” such as sexual and reproductive health and rights and climate justice (as well as those issues that are equally important but attract less donor attention).

Recommendations: How can funders most effectively support feminist movements?

Informed and inspired by the “Feminist Movements and Lasting Change” event, the Equality Fund recommends the following for funders, and allies, to more effectively support feminist movements.

- **Safeguard the autonomy of feminist movements.** Feminist movements are more effective if they are autonomous, or independent of male-dominated institutions. Dr. Weldon found that while some parts of movements may join governments and other institutions for the “insider” benefits, full movements should not be absorbed. The criticism and conflict generated by outsiders are important for progress. Funders can protect autonomy by:
 - Providing core, flexible funding rather than project-based, restricted funding.
 - Lightening the application and grant administration burden as much as possible.
 - Funding women’s funds, who are embedded in the feminist movements they serve.
 - Establishing participatory grantmaking approaches that shift power and accountability to feminist movements themselves.
 - Funding advocacy efforts, even if positions diverge from those of the donor.
- **Use funding modalities that encourage cooperation, not competition.** Traditional calls for proposals pit organizations against each other for scarce funds. Solange Kibibi called for funding opportunities that bring movements together, rather than divide. Funders can encourage cooperation by:
 - Increasing the amount of funding dedicated to feminist organizations and movements (currently [less than 1%](#) of official development assistance for gender equality and women’s empowerment).
 - Giving applicants the time and financial resources to convene and develop joint proposals.
 - Requiring lead applicants to demonstrate whom they represent and how they are inclusive of historically excluded voices.
 - Ring-fencing funding for historically underfunded feminist organizations, so they do not have to compete for the same resources as larger, more established organizations.
 - Offering accompaniment to grantee partners, including linking them to other organizations, initiatives, and funding opportunities.
 - Funding the “connective tissue” between movements. For example, the Equality Fund’s upcoming *Connect* funding stream will provide funding to coalitions, consortia, and networks for movement building and organizing.
- **Offer long-term funding and support sustainable funding mechanisms.** Jess Tomlin emphasized that achieving gender equality is a “marathon, not a sprint.” It takes time to shift attitudes, behaviours, norms, policies, systems, and laws. Over 50 years in the case of the

childcare agenda in Canada, included in the Royal Commission on the Status of Women's recommendations in 1970. Funding should be multi-year.

- **Capitalize on the cross-cutting nature of feminist movements.** Feminist movements can be called upon to tackle a number of gender equality issues. Addressing a single issue should be treated as an entry point to meet the diverse needs of the girls, youth, women, and non-binary people feminist movements serve. Donors should respect and make the most of feminist movements being uniquely placed to understand and address interconnected issues, even if their interventions transcend the donor's primary agenda.
- **Fund transnational spaces and feminists' participation in them.** Dr. Weldon's research found that transnational spaces like the World Conferences on Women catalyzed domestic feminist organizing. They allow feminists to network, share ideas, establish legitimacy, and advocate to decision-makers. Moderator Josh Lozman flagged the importance of the Generation Equality Forum, currently underway. Donors can support feminists to participate in such forums, or even host one.

