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**“Women’s Informal Participation in Political and Public Life and Space:**

**Global Trends and Challenges”**

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

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## INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in public life - through associations, networks and organizations, in the media, in protests, demonstrations, and public symposia, through cultural events (such as street theater and poetry) and everyday activism - has increased over the last hundred years in every region of the world. This informal realm of participation often receives short shrift in assessments of women's role in public life, as scholars and analysts of politics tend to focus on the more obvious roles women take in political life, such as voting or holding elective office. As important as these formal roles are, they are limited in their ability to promote gender equality without a concomitant shift towards equality in the *informal* political realm, particularly the broader context of social practices and norms relating to gender. These practices and norms screen out some people, ideas and perspectives from electoral and policy processes while letting others enter. The informal realm is characterized by both barriers to and opportunities for women's full and equal participation in public life. These remain invisible if we focus only on the formal sphere of elections and legislative policymaking.

In this paper we assess women's participation in this broad sphere of public life. First, we trace some long-term trends in women's informal participation in the public sphere (which we define as being roughly equivalent to civil society) before turning to focus on the emergence of women's movements for gender equality, especially feminist movements, beginning in the last quarter of the twentieth century. We focus on these movements - which encompass human rights defenders focused on women's rights, civil society organizations, protests and cultural events, loose networks of activists, columnists and bureaucrats focused on redressing women's subordination, among others - because when these activities come together to constitute a feminist movement, they are the most powerful forces for gender equality in civil society. For this reason, this paper takes delineating the emergence and accomplishments of such movements as a central task. We assess the global and regional trajectories of such movements over the past four decades, tracing areas of activism, success and setback. We show that after decades of global expansion, women's participation in civil society, especially in terms of the autonomous women's and feminist organizations that the Beijing Platform for Action emphasizes, is either stalled at a low level or in decline.

We show in this paper that participation in the public sphere is a critical avenue for advancing gender equality. Charting the relationship between informal representation and gender equality reveals that this avenue of influence is complex, varying considerably by issue and context. To catalogue and clarify the impact of women's participation on gender equality, we offer a typology of the ways that such movements influence formal politics and gender equality in Section 3. We point to the ways that such movements inspire more women to run for office, provide more leadership opportunities for women, put gender equality issues such as violence against women on national policy agendas, and offer information and expertise on gender equality that would not otherwise make its way into the public discussion. Movements change the social norms that keep women shackled to domestic responsibilities and that devalue women's contributions and humanity. These norms, in spite of being seen as "beyond politics," present barriers to women's entry to the public sphere.

The critical role played by these movements means that the indications of declining numbers of women's organizations and women's weakening position in civil society is a cause for concern. Even a flattening of current levels of participation is a problem since overall levels remain low and progress on gender equality is stalled. How can women's participation in civil society in general, and in feminist movements in particular, best be strengthened?

Our analysis leads us to focus our recommendations on four ways in which to counter further decline. First, the UN World Conferences were crucial moments of increased activism, providing a focus as well as funding for women's movements, especially in the global south. For this reason, we propose that a Fifth World Conference would reinvigorate women's participation in civil society. Second, we emphasize the extensive evidence that women's movements with more autonomous feminist organizing make the biggest impact on transformative policy-making, and point to the importance of funding such movements. Third, we show that new forms of activism - those using exclusively digital technologies and transcending borders - bring new kinds of issues into focus and expand the reach of campaigns. We also suggest that when these new forms of activism become too disconnected from

efforts to make institutional change (as opposed to effecting a sort-of “one-off” reckoning), and do not build alliances with other norm-changing organisations they are less effective avenues for effecting lasting gender equality. Fourth, we make a link between the ability for women to organize and express themselves in civil society and the political rights to expression and association affirmed in the ICCPR, and we stress the importance of a renewed commitment to protect these rights for all gender-equality seeking actors from state members of the UN to civil society groups. We conclude that old and new forms of activism may productively be combined to address the contemporary challenge of the rise of anti-feminist forces in many parts of the world.

## II DEFINITIONS AND NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

### Public life, the Public Sphere and Civil Society

What does it mean to affirm women’s right to participate equally *in public life*? The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) guarantees to all individuals –without regard to sex or other distinctions (article 2)– the right “to take part in the conduct of public affairs” (article 25), affirming this right *alongside* the right to vote and stand for office, thus underlining the separate importance of each as well as the broader scope of “public affairs” as compared to electoral processes. This suggests that “public life” should not be read as being coterminous with participating in elections or formal legislative processes. Rather, *public life* includes the realm of associational life and political contention in which such formal political processes are embedded, encompassing the media, civil society organizations, networks of activists and other public figures, celebrities in their public roles, cultural events and symposia, affinity groups, protests, and the like.<sup>3</sup> These activities are public in that they are accessible to a broad group of interested people.

Public life, and participation in the public sphere, signals participation in this broader realm of associations and expression, or *civil society*. *Civil society* is the space of engagement of citizens outside the space of political parties and state institutions, encompassing a wide range of activities from formal organizations and public protest to informal gatherings and discussions (Young 2002; Chambers and Kymlicka 2002). Rather than being equated with a single site or form of organization (such as an interest group) or activity (such as street protest), civil society is a de-centred set of overlapping discussions or public spheres, including both dominant discussions that define the terms of public debate (dominant publics) and counter publics (Fraser 1992). The space of civil society is one where marginalized groups develop alternative narratives and frame issues differently to dominant discourses. The media (both old and new) are a central part of this public discussion, playing a role in cohering identities and framing demands. Further, civil society provides a mechanism for amplifying issues of concern to marginalized economic and social groups, and creating constituencies for particular policy positions/ demands, leveraging new forms of expertise in policy making, framing issues and defining policy alternatives.<sup>4</sup> Civil society best performs these roles when people are able to congregate without fear, have the ability to critique governments, and can rely on fair judicial systems. Thus, the public sphere and civil society are roughly equivalent.

### Public Affairs, Public Policy and Participation in Decision-making

*Public affairs* generally refers to matters of interest to a broad public. What is of interest to the public will depend on *which* public (meaning which group of people) is referenced, and which issues occupy the limelight is often a matter of political contestation. For example, though violence against women was long considered a private issue, over several decades of activism, feminist movements fought to have the issue considered a public and political issue, an appropriate subject for government intervention (Weldon 2002). Today, violence against women is considered an issue of fundamental human rights of women, an area in which governments are obligated to act (Htun and Weldon 2018; Weldon 2006). It is an issue subsumed under the umbrella of public affairs.

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<sup>3</sup> Political parties are a grey area: In some instances they are defined as civil society by law, while in other cases they seem to be clearly part of the state.

<sup>4</sup> For a definition of marginalized groups see Williams (1998).

The ICCPR recognizes foundational rights of association and expression: Signatory states pledge that all individuals under their jurisdiction shall have the right of public assembly (article 21) and “freedom of association” (article 22) without regard to sex. CEDAW similarly affirms the right to participate in “public and political life”(section 7c), again affirming this right in addition to rights to participate in formal electoral and policy formulation processes, and specifying the right “To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.” Thus, participation in public life includes the ability to join in non-governmental organizations and other opportunities to associate with others, regardless of sex. It also encompasses a right of participation in the expression of political views, in arenas as diffuse as the media and public discussions of cultural, religious or economic issues to deliberations more tightly tied to political life, like public consultation, negotiations with political parties regarding their platforms, or participation in advisory or lobby groups.

The Beijing Declaration (1995) affirms this normative commitment in proclaiming that “Women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace” (Section 13). This broad definition of participation emphasizes “all spheres of society,” pointing to an understanding of the interconnections between formal political spheres and other arenas of operation. Again, note that women’s empowerment is seen as contingent on equal participation in *all* spheres of society, suggesting a broad scope for participation across a range of social, economic, cultural, religious and political activities.

Why the emphasis on the broader context of associational and expressive life in these documents? These activities are important because of their demonstrated influence on public policy and decision-making, driving policy change for women, racial minorities and the poor. This is further affirmed in section 20 of the Beijing Declaration, which recognizes the importance of civil society actors, especially women’s groups, underlining ‘full respect for their autonomy’. In section 26, the Platform for Action further elaborates the importance of *women’s organizations and feminist groups* in driving change.

How do these groups drive change? If these groups are, by definition, outside the legislative process, how do they “change” policy or decision-making? Analysts of policy processes point to the ways that ideas in broader circulation are taken up from public discussion in the media and other such arenas by the formal political process; Issues tend to migrate from the “public agenda” of issues considered important to people in general to the “government agenda” or list of issues important to those in formal positions of policymaking power (e.g. Kingdon 1984). Indeed, for women, protest and social movement organizing is a key catalyst for change, pushing new ideas onto the public and government agendas. Ideas and demands formulated in civil society are sometimes quite visibly taken up in the processes of formal policymaking (leading some scholars to liken civil society to a transmission belt for taking ideas from citizens to government) and sometimes in less direct ways, as new groups and identities form, creating new constituencies (Chambers and Kymlicka 2002; Goetz and Hassim, 2003; Weldon 2011; Williams 1998).

For example, the #metoo movement prompted unprecedented attention to sexual harassment. Similarly, recent protests of high-profile sexual assaults in Delhi, India drew new public attention to issues of sexual assault and harassment, prompting policy action at least within universities (Phillips et al 2015; Roy 2016). Even in relatively closed political contexts, where activists can expect repression, protest can be effective at prompting an official response, as we can see in the example of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who for decades were effective in demanding that the government give an account of what had happened to their family members (Goñi, 2017). Advocacy groups, human rights defenders, CSOs and other groups offer expertise and unique perspectives that enrich public policy processes, improving decision-making through their participation.

If *public policy* is a course of action pursued under the authority of government (Hecló 1974), and *public decision-making* involves making authoritative decisions that shape the lives of those living under the jurisdiction of government, then, as these examples suggest, participation in the informal aspects of the public sphere, ranging from protest to writing newspaper columns to networking, can influence policymaking “from the outside” of formal systems.

## Equality in the Public Sphere and Public Life

Equal participation in public life requires not only free or voluntary participation, but also equality. In the words of the Beijing Platform for Action, equality, development and peace require nothing less than “full participation *on the basis of equality* in all spheres of society.” But such equality may be difficult to attain. The public sphere is not an even playing field: Rather, these arenas of public engagement are ridden with power, and the more central or powerful the space and participants, the more likely it is to be constituted as a space in which only particular voices are heard (Cornwall 2002 at 51; see also Fraser 1992; Young 2002). More privileged perspectives and voices, those of the most powerful men – and some women – find expression in these dominant public spheres. This is easy to see in the formal institutions of government, but it is also true even in informal political relations. In these settings, deeply rooted conventions about gender roles sometimes exclude women and conceal, or uphold, gender hierarchies. For most women, economic status, race/ethnicity and sexuality also shapes participation. As long as poor women are not organized, opening for participation might become occupied by elite women who elide differences of class among women and speak on behalf of all women while not necessarily taking up the needs of women who lack access to the political institutions.

Women’s participation in public life is restricted by a range of factors. First, their disproportionate domestic burdens – their everyday household duties, and the tasks of care for children, the aged, and the ill – create time poverty. That is, the amount of time spent on these tasks limits the time available for participation in civil society activities (Walby 2011; Addati et al. 2018). Second, the gendered conception of public life remains strong in most societies. The public sphere is seen to be the domain of men. Third, while women contribute more on average than men on community and voluntary activities, much of this is a contribution of unpaid time (Molyneux 2002;). Women may lack the resources to participate effectively in political activities and to run for office. Fourth, new research suggests that violence against women in politics is a widespread problem that includes physical violence (assassinations, beatings, kidnapping); sexual violence (sexual harassment, rape and threats of sexual violence), and psychological violence (character assassination, social shaming, online abuse and stalking) (Krook 2020). While this is directed at specific women human rights defenders and political candidates, it also acts as a broader, longer-term deterrent to women who may otherwise be interested in participating in public life.

Though the public sphere of civil society is riven with many of the same inequalities as other dimensions of political life, it may be more accessible to women, particularly marginalized groups of women, than formal avenues of political life such as electoral office or even voting (Weldon 2011).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the Beijing Platform for action recognizes that the exclusion of women from formal political processes is part of what makes civil society a critical avenue of influence, noting that “women have gained access to power through alternative structures, particularly in the non-governmental organization sector. Through non-governmental organizations and grass-roots organizations, women have been able to articulate their interests and concerns and have placed women’s

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<sup>5</sup> On gender inequalities in civil society, see O'Neill and Gidengil (2013), where several analyses suggest that men and women participate in civil society in different areas, and women participate in some aspects of civil society more than their male counterparts. However, outside of feminist organizations, women’s participation in civil society organizations may not be reflected in their presence in leadership or acquisition of political knowledge and as a result, women’s greater participation in civil society may reflect an additional type of unpaid work and may not translate into gains in political knowledge, engagement or leadership (e.g. Kennedy et al 2020; Djupe et al 2018; Feldman 1997; Molyneux 2002; Sullins 2000). See also Dawson and Cohen (1993) showing that African Americans have less access to social capital than their white counterparts, and for work on the ways that socio-economic inequality is reflected in a wide variety of civic and political activities see Walker 1991; Schlozman et al 1999). Minkoff (1997) shows the ways that social movements reproduce inequality in civil society and Strolovitch (2008) focusses on the ways intersectionally marginalized groups fall through the cracks of the interest group system in the United States. This is what we mean by saying that in many ways, civil society reflects the inequalities that structure other areas of political life.

issues on the national, regional and international agendas” (section 182; see also 228). This broad understanding of the right to participate in public life points to the importance of these informal processes of participation.

Thus, in the PFA, states have affirmed that women’s organizations are an important part of civil society. But many signatory countries are still characterized by societies- no matter how democratic in formal terms- that *informally* resist the idea of women as public actors with full, equal rights to public space.

### **Women’s Organizations and Feminist Movements**

Extant research shows that the form of participation in the informal aspects of public life that most advances gender equality is participation in *feminist movements* (Goetz and Hassim, 2003; Weldon 2002; Weldon 2006a, 2006b; Htun and Weldon 2018; Weldon 2011; Nazneen, Hickey and Sifaki, 2019). Feminist movements should not be read narrowly as being equivalent to a particular, singular face-to-face, official organization, or even a set of such organizations. Though such organizations can be important, movements are much broader than this. As noted above, movements are diffuse phenomena, encompassing wide range of people and events, both digital and face-to-face, that can include protests, loose networks of experts and activists, organizations, journalists, poets and playwrights, cultural productions, domestic workers’ unions, religious organization and symposia.<sup>6</sup> Stronger movements are more diverse and attract significant attention in the media and other arenas.

Feminist movements are one type of *women’s movement*, that is, a movement in which women organise as women, whose membership and leadership are comprised primarily of women. Not all women’s movements are feminist movements: Even when women’s movements organize around issues that arise from their gendered status and burdens, they may seek, in Maxine Molyneux’s terms, to address the practical needs of women, without going beyond those to address systemic issues (Beckwith 2001; Molyneux 1998).

Some scholars emphasize that feminist movements challenge women’s subordination to men, others cite the importance of challenging patriarchy, while others argue that feminists need only aim to improve the condition of women or some sub-group of women (Alvarez 1999 ; Hawkesworth 1994; Moghadam 2005; Ferree and Mueller 2007; Tripp and Ferree 2006; Waylen 2014; Weldon 2002). We emphasize that, as each of these definitions suggests, *feminist movements seek transformational change in gender structures*: They do more than draw on gendered identities and structures in their organizing, and go further, to *transform* the patriarchal or male-dominated or unequal underpinnings of these issues (Molyneux et al 2020). Feminist participation in civil society, then, is distinguished from other forms by its explicit focus on gender equality as a goal.

A distinction between feminist and women’s movements is not necessarily reflected in the type of issue or tactic these movements confront. Both types of movement may deploy a wide repertoire of tactics, encompassing protest, petitions, cultural events, symposia, and other forms of political expression. Both women’s and feminist organisations may exist in a single space and collaborate (or not) on specific campaigns. Also, feminist organizations may have many priorities, including fighting racism, furthering decolonization, or ending poverty. Women of color and intersectional feminists seek to build solidarity by simultaneously addressing race, gender, class, sexuality, imperialism and other axes of oppression and domination (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991; Townsend-Bell 2012). Feminists in the global south argue that feminist organizing cannot be separated from struggles for decolonization (Mohanty 2003; Jayawardena 1986; Ray and Korteweg 1999; Tripp 2006). Last, some activists shun the label ‘feminism’ for political or cultural reasons even when they are working to alter power relations that devalue and subordinate women (Alvarez 1999; Tripp 2001). “Feminist” movements cannot be defined only as those who self-identify as feminists. Rather, identifying feminism requires an assessment of the degree to which actors seek feminist ends (Forester et al 2020).

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<sup>6</sup> In general, *social* movements are a form of contentious politics marked by sustained, collective action that challenges an established state, religious, or familial authority (Meyer 2015; Meyer et al 2005; Staggenborg 2011; Tarrow 2011; Zald and Ash 1966). Social movements may include formal organizations, but they also include a wide range of diffuse, informal activities and forms of expression.

As noted, section 20 of the Beijing Declaration, which recognizes the importance of civil society actors, especially women's groups, underlines the importance of "full respect for their autonomy." We also emphasize autonomy in our analysis, asking about the degree to which feminist movements are able to articulate issues independently of, and even critically of, government institutions and other established, male-dominated, authorities (Goetz and Hassim, 2003; Molyneux 1998; Tripp 2000; Weldon 2002). This feature of feminist movements is important because it is what allows them to articulate and bring pressure to bear on formal political actors regarding gender equality. Note that autonomy, far from precluding alliances with other movements and organizations, makes them possible. For example, feminist organizations cannot offer to ally themselves on equal terms with established political parties, religious organizations or trades unions unless they first exist independently of those organizations.

### **III OVERVIEW OF GLOBAL TRENDS IN WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC LIFE**

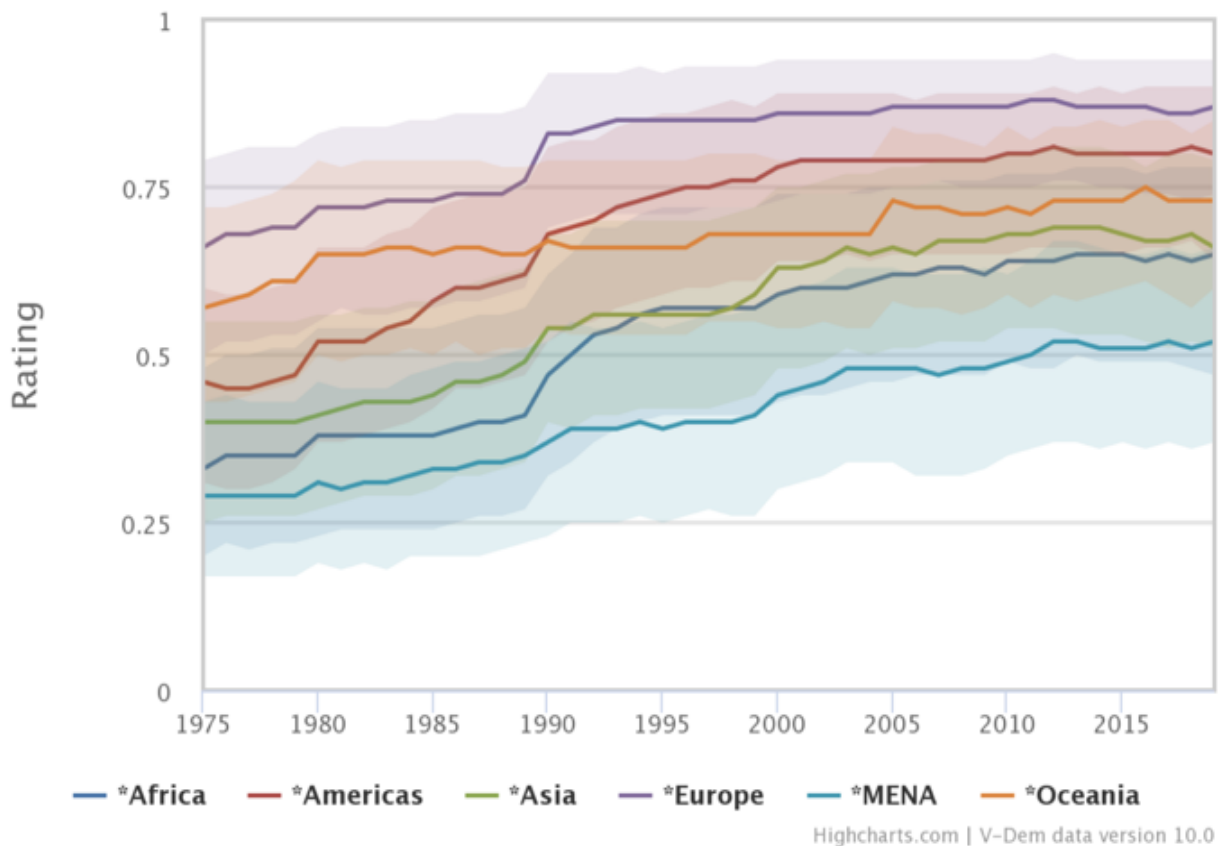
In this section, we examine trends in women's informal participation in public life. We begin by examining participation in civil society before turning to an overview of women's participation in women's and feminist movements. We then consider new forms of participation such as digital activism.

#### **Women's Participation in Civil Society: Global Trends and Regional Variations**

While the broader phenomenon of civil society is critically important, like many diffuse but vital concepts, it can be difficult to measure, a challenge that is exacerbated by the lack of gender-disaggregated data. Still, data from the Varieties of Democracy Project provides a long view of women's participation in civil society (Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) 2020; see also Norris 2020). Women's participation in civil society, as captured by: 1) their access to free discussion, 2) participation in civil society organizations and 3) presence as female journalists, has expanded over the last 100 years in every region of the world (Figure 1). However, this participation appears to be leveling off in East Europe and Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa since the early 1990s, in Latin America and Asia Pacific since 2000, and in the MENA region in the past decade (since 2010). In North America, West Europe and Oceania, it may actually be on the decline since 2016, and in Asia Pacific it may be declining since 2013. As this suggests, though women's participation has expanded over the last 100 years, progress may have stalled or even begun a reversal in some regions. As we explain further below, this is likely due to a weakening of state protection of political rights to association and expression, a lack of transnational opportunities and resources for organizational development and networking, and a resurgent opposition or backlash in both civil society and formal politics against the progress towards gender equality in public life.

Figure 1: Women's Participation in Civil Society, 1975-2019

## Women civil society participation index



**Note:** The index is formed by taking the point estimates from a Bayesian factor analysis model of the indicators for freedom of discussion for women (v2cldiscw), CSO women’s participation (v2csgender), and female journalists (v2mefemjrn) **Source:** Varieties of Democracy V10.0 (September 2020)

### Feminist Mobilization: Global Trends and Regional Variation since 1975

We now turn to examine the broader context of women’s informal political mobilization specifically aimed at gender equality, namely, the extent of women’s participation in feminist movements. Like civil society, a feminist movement is an amorphous and complex phenomenon, but we can get some inkling of global trends by examining the *Feminist Mobilization Index* (FMI), a measure that encompasses a wide range of civil society activities including organizations, protests, digital activism, symposia, cultural events, and religious organizations among others. Higher scores reflect movements that have a stronger, more independent voice in civil society or public discussion (Forester et al 2020). As measured here, strength reflects the ability to attract attention in the media, from public officials and other authorities, and expressed support in public opinion surveys (where available). *Very strong* feminist movements, command the attention of the *powerful*, attract *significant* attention in the press or enjoy on *high* levels of support from public opinion. These very strong movements may stand out internationally and attract attention from activists and advocates beyond their borders, or serve as aspirational models for other movements in their region. They typically get regular and repeated access to powerful figures or are able to muster impressive and sustained feats of mobilization (Forester et al 2020). As noted, we focus on this form of women’s participation



because it is the form of civil society activity most tightly tied to advances in gender equality and redressing gender-based violence.

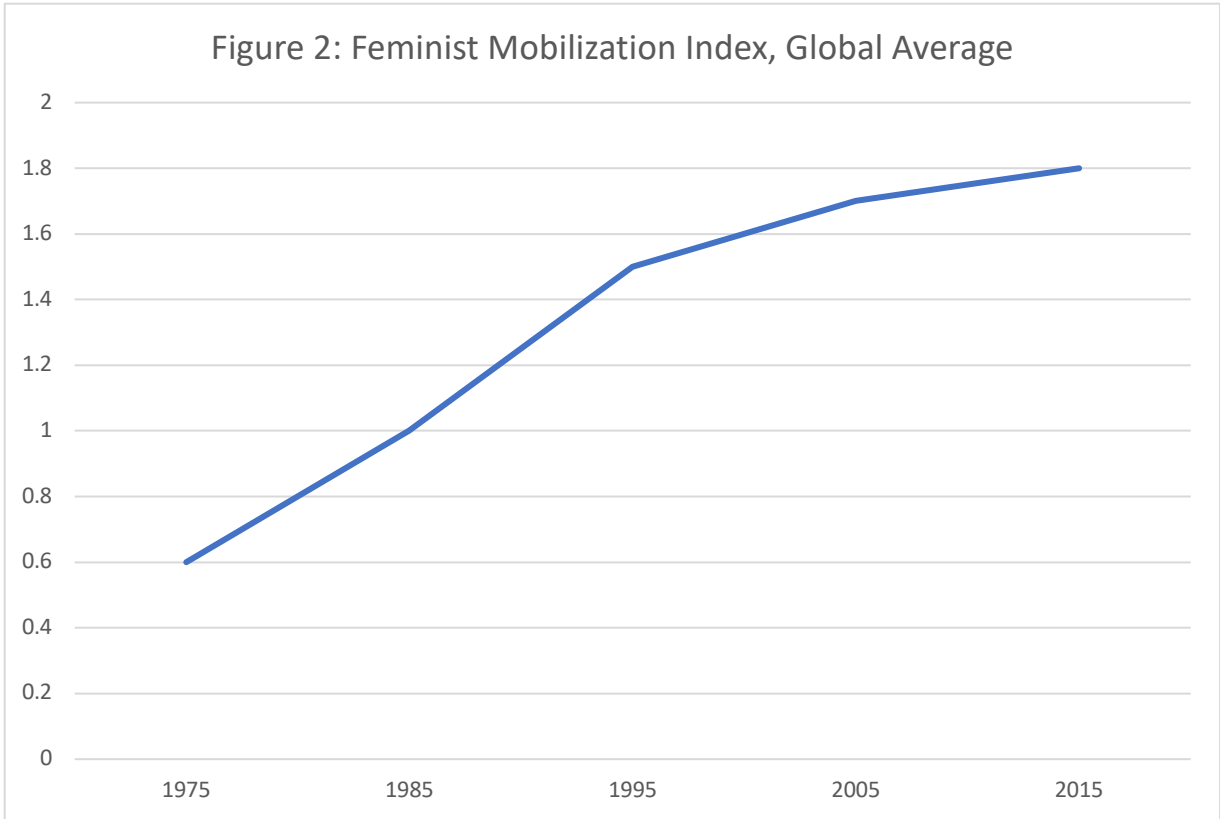
The FMI, which assesses the state of feminist mobilization in a given country, ranges from 0 to 3, where 0 means there is no feminist mobilization and 3 indicates a situation in which we would expect feminist mobilization to be most influential. The database covers 126 countries from 1975 to 2015. The dataset encompasses a wide range of types of feminist mobilization over an expansive temporal and geographic scope including coverage of the global south, especially Africa. This measure reflects the emphasis on strength and autonomy in the literature (Fallon et al 2018; Htun and Weldon 2018 Mazur et al 2016; Tripp 2006). It also reflects an effort to take the diversity of feminist mobilization into account (Cohen et al 2018; Irvine et al 2019). The data employed as the basis for measurement include traditional measures related to face-to-face organizations (e.g. number of organizations) and protests (e.g., size, subject and salience of reported protests) as well as on-line activities (webpages, social media participation) and less formal or typical forms of activity. Both qualitative and quantitative data are drawn from a wide range of primary and secondary data sources. (For more on the definitions, sources of data, coding rules, intercoder reliability and other questions regarding this dataset, please see Forester et al 2020).

These data show that globally, feminist mobilization- broadly defined- has emerged or re-emerged in all regions since 1975, growing in strength over the following four decades. Until the last couple of decades, *feminist* movements were less ubiquitous than *women's* movements. For example, in 1975, 73% of countries had women's movements, but only 40% had *feminist* movements and only 37% had *autonomous* feminist movements present. Even fewer countries (17 countries, 13%) had strong feminist movements, and only eleven countries- about 9% - had very strong movements (Forester et al 2020).

Feminism emerged most dramatically on the world stage during and after the first UN Decade for Women (1976-1985) (Figure 2). Mobilization in feminist movements around the world increased by half in the first decade for women and then by half again in the subsequent decade (85-95). By 2015, every country had an active women's movement,<sup>7</sup> and nearly every country had a feminist movement, the sole exception being Cuba. By 2015, the vast majority of feminist movements were autonomous (96%) and strong. In a quarter of countries (31), these movements were very strong (Forester et al 2020).

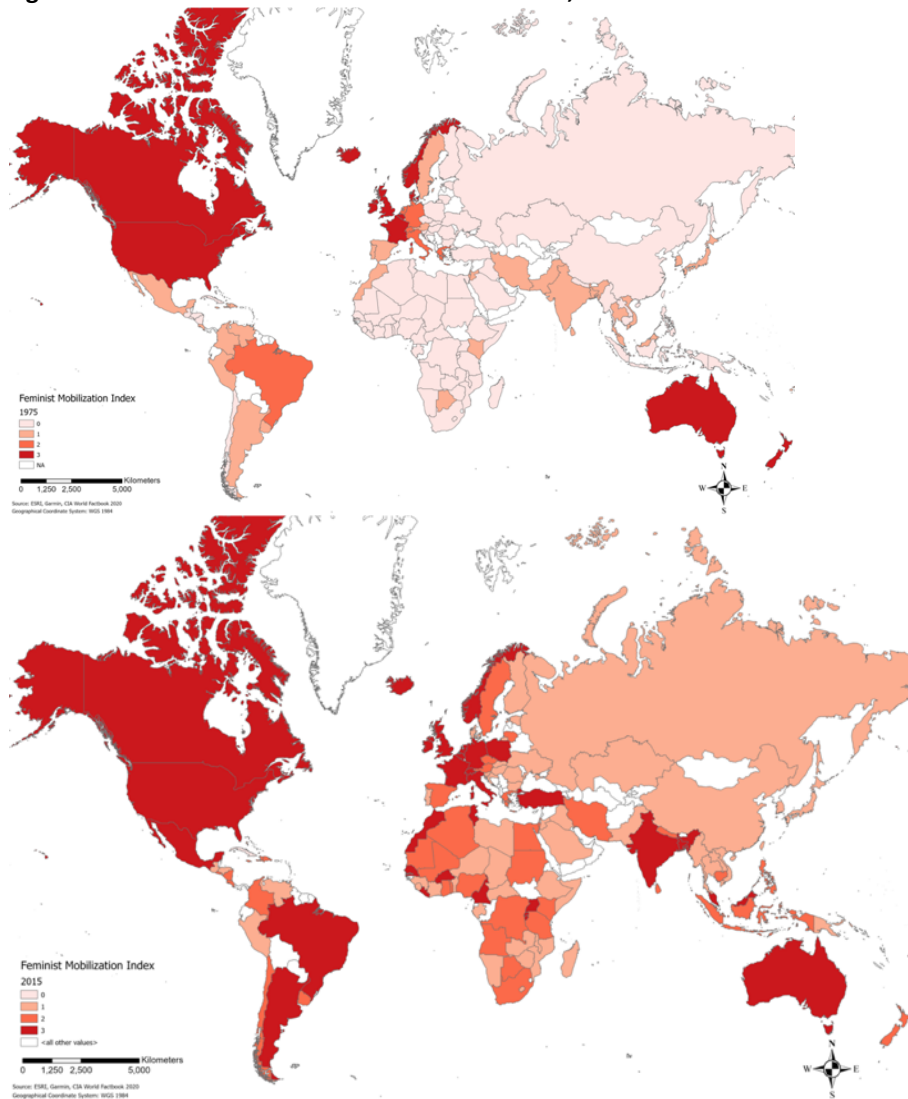
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<sup>7</sup> Especially in the late 1980s and 1990s, scholarship on what were called the 'new social movements' emphasized the significance of women's participation not only in women's movements but in aligned movements for social transformation (such as the environmental movement). A foundational argument of this type was Fuentes and Gunder Frank (1989).



*Note: The Feminist Mobilization Index (FMI) encompasses movement activities including organizations, protests, digital activism, symposia, cultural events, among others. Higher scores reflect movements that have a stronger, more independent voice in civil society or public discussion. Source: Forester et al 2020*

**Figure 3: Global Overview of Feminist Mobilization, 1975 and 2015**

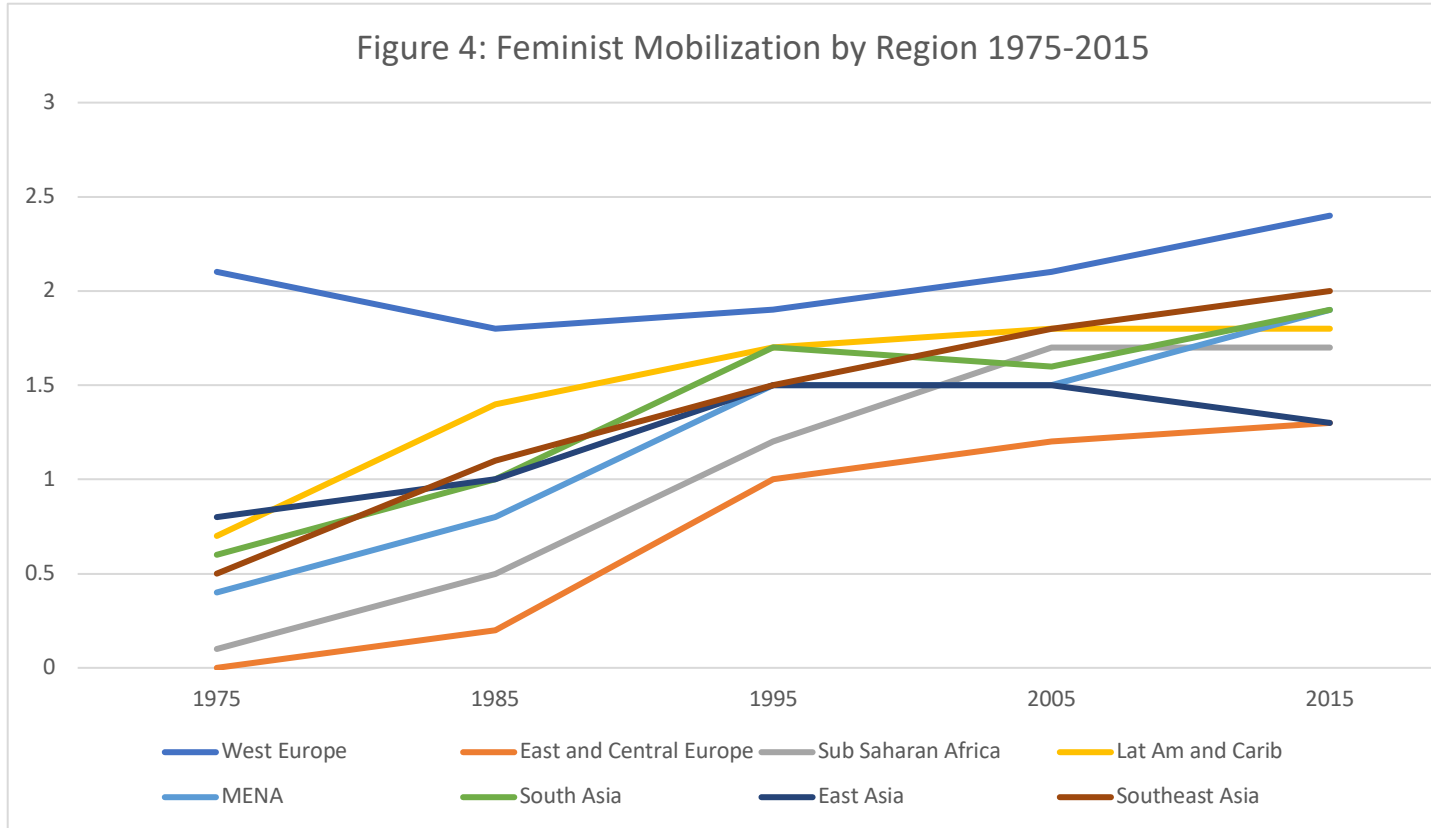


*Note: The Feminist Mobilization Index (FMI) encompasses movement activities including organizations, protests, digital activism, symposia, cultural events, among others. Higher scores reflect movements that have a stronger, more independent voice in civil society or public discussion. Source: Forester et al 2020.*

Even though the big picture of global patterns of feminist mobilization from 1975 to 2015 is one of growth and convergence, disaggregating the picture by region (Figure 4) reveals that different regions travelled different pathways to increased mobilization. Reasons for cross-regional variation include different periods of democratization, the impact of UN Conferences on the regions in which they are held, and the degree to which feminism is organized inside formal political institutions (such as political parties and women's commissions) versus the degree to which it is able to operate autonomously (cf. Baldex 2003).

Interestingly, 1995, the year of the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women in Beijing, is a clear point of convergence across regions. After 1995, however, some regions (West Europe, East and Central Europe and Southeast Asia) see slowly but steadily increasing feminist mobilization while East Asia stands out for a marked decline after 2005. Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America level off after 2005 (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Feminist Mobilization by Region 1975-2015



Note: The Feminist Mobilization Index (FMI) encompasses movement activities including organizations, protests, digital activism, symposia, cultural events, among others. Higher scores reflect movements that have a stronger, more independent voice in civil society or public discussion. Source: Forester et al 2020

What is going on in these different regions? In sub-Saharan Africa, MENA and Europe, waves of women's and feminist mobilization pre-dated the study period and by 1975 had either had run their course or encountered repression stemming from rising state control (Adams 2006; Bergman 1999; Tripp 2006). For example, the Egyptian Feminist Union was founded in 1923 by prominent feminist activist Huda Sha'arawi. In some countries (Algeria, Egypt), movements were repressed or otherwise dissolved by 1975 (Al-Ali 2000; Badran 1996; Hatem 1992, 1993). In other countries, feminist organizing was less visible in 1975 because it had peaked earlier, as with *Organization 9* in Finland which ended around 1970 (Forester et al 2020).

Why these regional differences? Why these over time patterns? Certainly, some of this change can be attributed structural shifts in the workforce and economy or to broader cultural shifts with respect to women's rights (Ingehart and Norris 2003), though it is likely that feminist movements also drove normative and structural change in turn (Raymond et al 2013; Weldon et al 2020), in a mutually reinforcing pattern. But global trends and modernization approaches provide less leverage in accounting for cross-regional differences. Differences across regions are more likely attributable to changes in the political context at both the domestic and international level (Baldez 2003; Waylen 1994). Domestically, increasing political opening and democratization encouraged movements in some cases, while in others, changes in states, in institutional structures (such as the creation of women's policy machineries or the election of left parties) absorbed previously autonomous movements, dulling their critical edge and sapping the vitality of feminist civil society. At the same time, global conferences and agreements created regional and international pressures for change as well as resources that catalyzed or strengthened autonomous movements where these were existing or emergent. We explain these political factors further in the sections below.

In Western Europe, the decline from 1975 to 1985 reflects the ways that feminist organizations and activists became

less publicly engaged and salient (e.g. Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy and France). In some of these countries (e.g. France), public contention was absorbed by sections within political parties or government agencies, moving from civil society onto the terrain of the state, with advantages in terms of proximity to policy making but disadvantages in terms of directing feminist energy to internal ideological and policy disputes and less to public engagement. In Iceland, the feminist Redstocking movement fell apart over ideological disputes and formally disbanded in 1982 (Styrkársdóttir 1986: 145), while the Women's Party (KF) became involved in internal disputes between several factions, a conflict from which it did not recover until the mid 1980s. In other countries, such as Germany, feminist organizations remained weak and fragmented in spite of remaining autonomous. Some observers characterized the 1990s as a "post-feminist" era in Europe in which movement activities had subsided (Bergman 1999). However, the anti-feminist backlash of the early 1990s prompted renewed mobilization (Bergman 1999). The development of stronger regional feminist networks in Europe after the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing also contributed to regional resurgence of feminist movements.

As Figure 4 shows, feminist movements emerged later and remained weaker in Eastern Europe than in other regions, increasing only between 1985 and 1995. Democratization across the region- beginning with the thawing of the Cold War and the symbolic fall of the Berlin Wall after 1989 -facilitated autonomous feminist organizing, which had appeared in all countries in the region by 2005. However, the legacy of officially imposed "feminism" in the Communist era created challenges for post-Communist feminists, and few movements achieved the strength that movements in Latin America or Africa achieved so quickly (Avdeyeva 2010; Fabian 2010). In addition, by 2015 trends towards political opening had reversed, with growing hostility to feminist activists from political leaders (e.g. in Russia and Hungary). Trends towards authoritarianism in Central and Eastern Europe have been resisted by both feminist movements and women's national movements for democracy (Roggeband and Kriszan 2019).

In sub-Saharan Africa, the increasing liberalization of many of these societies after 1975 was accompanied by a marked increase in feminist activity. The trend away from single party states created political openings that allowed women's organizing, and especially its autonomous, feminist variation, to flourish (Adams 2006; Tripp 2006). In fact, between 1975 and 1985 in Sub-Saharan Africa, we see one of the biggest increases in feminist mobilization we see in any region in the world (a strengthening by more than 500%) (Forester et al 2020). The explosion of feminist activity was enhanced by national and regional preparations for the 1985 UN World Conference on Women in Nairobi (Adams 2006).

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the 1975-1985 decade was the biggest decade of growth in feminist activism, which plateaued after 1995, staying roughly the same until 2015. The 1975 First World Conference on Women in Mexico City likely sparked the regional explosion of feminist activity over the 1975-1985 decade. Transnational, regional organizing represented by the *Encuentros* likely also played a role (Alvarez et al 2003). The wave of democratization that began in the 1970s also enabled more feminist mobilization, though increasing democratization after 1985 was not associated with a similarly large increase (Booth and Heras-Gomez 2015). In addition to the opportunities presented by political opening, movements needed organizational resources and international connections (Baldez 2003).

In the MENA region, increasing feminist movement strength can be attributed to political opening combined with the influence of regional networking. In 1975, repression ensured that *feminist* organizing was not prevalent in the region, though women's movements were common: Eight countries had women's movements (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Turkey), but only half of these were *feminist* movements (Forester et al 2020). And while these feminist movements were mostly autonomous, they were not strong. The strength of these movements increased from 1985 to 1995, enhanced by the growth of regional and transnational feminist networks over this period (Moghadam 2009). For example, Women Living Under Muslim Laws was established in the mid-eighties (Moghadam 2009). The decade that saw the emergence of the Arab Spring (2005-2015) saw an uptick in feminist mobilization (Forester et al 2020). By 2015, autonomous feminist movements were present throughout the region, constituting a significant presence in Algeria, Iran, Israel, Morocco and Turkey (Moghadam and Gheyntanachi 2010; Htun and Weldon 2018).

Why the differences between South and East Asia? Women long organized and engaged in various forms of activism across Asia (Jayawardena 1986), and by 1975, feminists were active across the whole region. Feminist mobilization was stronger in this early period in South Asia and weakest in East Asia. These starting differences were magnified over the next four decades as the South Asian region moved (in fits and starts, and with reversals) towards greater liberalization and openness. Today, in spite of COVID-related and other new restrictions on activism in India and other South Asian nations, feminist and other protests continue, and these differences remain. In China, it is difficult for feminist organizations to become officially registered, a requirement for civil society organizations, and some standard movement activities are prohibited (HRW 2014, np). For example, only an international outcry forced the release of feminist activists jailed for their efforts to raise awareness of sexual harassment on public transport (Wee 2015). Another factor is that the prevalence of women's organizations (as opposed to feminist organizations) can, counterintuitively, crowd out political space for feminist organizations, taking up women's energy and attention as the low rates of feminist mobilization in Japan illustrate: although women's organizations flourished in Japan, they rarely took up feminist issues and lack gender consciousness, overshadowing the weaker and less influential feminist movement (Gelb 2003; LeBlanc 1999). However, feminists have been more influential and active in Taiwan and South Korea, where movements grew in strength by 1995.

As this suggests, these regional differences are powered by trends towards stronger political and civil rights, opportunities and resources for regional and transnational organizing (especially associated with the UN Conferences on Women), the extent of autonomous organizing, the relationship between movements and established authorities, such as political parties and religious organizations, and the impact of backlash or resistance in both official political processes and civil society.

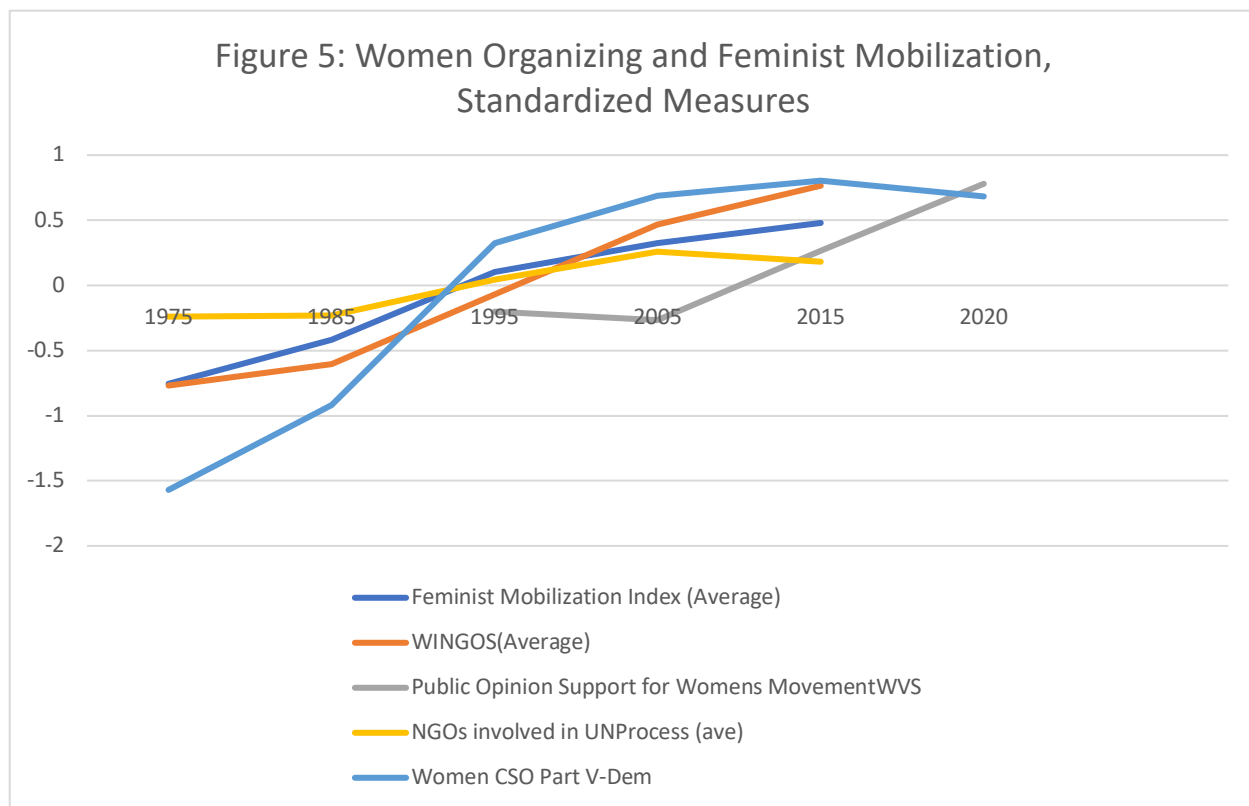
Patterns of political opening, leading to stronger protections to political rights like the right to assemble and express oneself, enabled women to form feminist movements that critiqued the status quo. This happened at different times in different regions because political opening tended to happen at different times. These political rights enable, but do not guarantee feminist organizing: In Latin America, democratization sometimes empowered traditional religious and conservative authorities, resulting in reversals of policy advances towards gender equality made under less democratic regimes (Htun 2004). And feminist mobilization has increased while civil society participation in general has not (Figure 7). General participation in civil society is less closely related to feminist mobilization than women's participation in civil society (Figure 7). Such civil society participation is likely necessary, but not sufficient for organizing in support of women's rights.

As noted, the UN Conferences on Women fueled an upswing in feminist movements in Latin America and Africa, but such an effect was less visible in Europe after the Copenhagen Conference of 1980 or in East Asia after Beijing Conference of 1995. Why? Where regional feminism tended to be more oriented towards political parties and established political institutions (such as in West Europe around the time of the Copenhagen Conference in 1980) or where state control over feminist organizations is tight (as in China, the site of the 1995 World Conference on women), the regional impacts of the UN conferences were more attenuated, though they still provided an opportunity to network and strengthen organizing bonds and strategies for women in other regions. The lack of such a conference in the decades after 1995 likely contributed to a lack of resources and opportunities for feminist organizing. More generally, transnational feminist networks—especially regional networks—jumpstart feminist organizing.

Since 2015, we have seen both the rise of opposition to feminist organizing in civil society and the ascendance of political parties with agendas that oppose further expansions of women's role in public life in countries from Brazil to Belarus. While this represents a challenge for contemporary feminists, it also can galvanize a renaissance of feminist organizing, as in Europe in the mid-1990s or in the United States today. In the short term, however, there is no question that these developments have made the expansion of women's participation in public life more fraught. We return to this theme below.

Patterns of global expansion and levelling off over the past four decades seem remarkably similar regardless of the measure of feminist activity or strength used (Figure 5). For example, one measure of transnational organizing, the number of Women's International Non-Governmental Organizations (WINGOS) has been increasing since 1975 but

slowed after 2005. Looking just at the last decade, the number of WINGOs increases only slightly (5%), and by some measures decreases slightly. The number of women’s organizations participating in UN processes is declining even more markedly. This likely reflects the lack of a major World Conference on Women which would provide resources and opportunities for such organizations. Many countries still have very few or no internationally-oriented organizations, and in some countries, the number of such organizations has declined (France, Italy). This suggests that transnational feminism, which strengthens domestic campaigns for gender equality (Swiss and Fallon 2017), is in decline, especially in its intergovernmentally-oriented form (Kelly-Thompson et al 2020). Figure 5 also shows that the level of support for women’s movement generally lags their organizational strength, as reflected in the increasing support reflected in the WVS even as late as 2020.



Note: Measures standardized to allow comparability in trends.

These data suggest that future continuation of trends towards increasing feminism are by no means inevitable. According to Freedom House, 2019 was the 14<sup>th</sup> year of consistent decline of freedom in the world (Repucci 2020), and our analysis would lead us to expect a concomitant decline in feminist mobilization over the period. Indeed, since 2015, the data on civil society participation, as noted, point to very slight increases in the numbers of women’s journalists, a leveling off of women’s participation in civil society organizations and a decrease in women’s freedom of expression around the world (Figure 5). While the systematic analysis of all forms of feminist activity represented in the FMI are not available for the past five years, the data we do have on women’s organizations and the ability of feminists to attract media attention suggest that the trends detailed from 1995-2015, with participation in feminist movements leveling off or declining, continue in most regions. For example, the number of mentions of “feminism” in the media remained constant in Africa and Latin America over the period, increased slightly in Europe, and declined slightly in the United States. While support for women’s organizations as expressed in public opinion surveys remains strong, as noted, this measure of movement strength tends to lag strength in associational activity, reflecting the impact of feminist organizing in earlier periods (Figure 5). In addition, low and declining levels of funding for women’s organizations, especially core funding, is well

documented, with, for example, direct funding of women's organizations accounting for less than 1% of ODA funding (Hessini 2020; OECD 2020).

The impact of newer forms of organization over the period is less clear. Numbers of transnational women's organizations may have increased very slightly or declined, depending on the measure (Yearbook of International Organizations). Digital activism is the one area of distinct and significant growth for feminists over the past five years. We now turn to an assessment of these newer forms of activism and their significance for women's participation in public life below.

### **New Forms of Feminist and Women's Organizing: Digital Feminism**

The #metoo movement represents one of the most powerful examples of the impact of digital feminism in contemporary public life. Though digital activism has existed since the mid 1990s if not before (Friedman 2016; Norris 1995), activists use of social media to coordinate their actions and start new campaigns is as new as these new forms of communication. The Hashtag #MeToo, initially coined by Tarana Burke around 2006, took off in 2017 after being tweeted about by actress Alyssa Milano, who appealed to women who had been victims of sexual violence to use the hashtag (#metoo) to highlight their experiences of sexual harassment and violence (France 2017; Sini 2017). One day after Milano issued her call, the hashtag had been used half a million times, and Facebook reported that just under half (42%) of Americans using the platform had used the hashtag. In addition, the hashtag spread to some 85 other countries.

This movement to make sexual harassment more visible resulted in reprisals, including resignations or termination, for powerful men in cultural fields (including film, television, radio, and theatre), the technology industry, academia and many other sectors.<sup>8</sup> As the #metoo campaign came to focus on those serving in elective office, representatives in the U.S. Congress – including both main parties - were accused of violations from sexual assault to groping. As a result, the longest serving member of the US House of Representatives resigned his position on Committee and in Congress (Vieback and Weigel 2017; Rhodan 2017). The U.S. House of Representatives reviewed its procedures for handling complaints of workplace harassment was undertaken, and a bipartisan group of lawmakers introduced an act to improve the process of complaints, the so-called the *Me Too Congress Act*, and a new resolution mandates training for members (Rhodan 2017). The movement is not confined to the United States, but rather, spread globally, albeit in many forms and languages. In the UK, sexual harassment allegations were raised against thirty-six members of the governing Conservative Party in the British Parliament, and the European Parliament also reported "Me Too Moments".<sup>9</sup> These events led some observers to declare the end of the era of silent acceptance of the sexual exploitation of women, and the end of immunity from sexual harassment allegations that men in positions of power previously seemed to enjoy (e.g. Barnes 2017; Klein 2017).

Movements in other countries and regions have similarly used social media to highlight sexual harassment. An earlier Latin American campaign, #NiUnaMenos aimed to highlight femicide began in 2015 when Argentinian feminists organized to address patriarchal violence holding protests across Argentina (Blanco 2019). Similarly, #lifeinleggings aimed to draw attention to the problem of sexual harassment in the Caribbean in 2016, and #MiPrimerAcoso (my first harassment), which began in Mexico, first appeared in the same year (2016). #MiPrimerAcoso was used that year by more than 100,000 women to describe the first time they experienced sexual harassment.

These campaigns do more than raise awareness of sexual harassment and violence, important as that is. They have impacts on party political agendas and legislation as well. The Delhi gang rape incident in 2012 (the 'Nirbhaya' case) may be an archetypal case, though it is an example of digital campaigns that builds on a traditional protest. While some anti-rape campaigns in India preceded the brutal 2012 gang rape, other campaigns stemmed from it (Rao 2013). The first round of campaigns was mostly led by middle-class youth as a response to high-profile cases

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<sup>8</sup> For an overview of multiple fields see Kramer 2017; On Academics see Remnick 2016; Brown 2017; Mervis 2017.

<sup>9</sup> On the British Parliamentary allegations see Castle 2017; On Europe see Schreuer 2017. This paragraph draws on Weldon (2018).



of violence against women like the murder of Jessica Lal,<sup>10</sup> or the *Mathura rape* in 1974.<sup>11</sup> These cases became well-known, widely referenced cases but they were unstructured and mainly constituted a one-time reactive protest (Roy 2016). Other earlier, protests, even if less widely referenced today (such as the activities of the Forum Against Rape in the 1970s and early 1980s) developed important foundations for recent protests by introducing the concept of violence against women as a category that encompassed a wide range of phenomena, from rape to *sati* to domestic violence, and raising awareness (Katzenstein 1989). In response to this and other protests of other cases (eg. Shiela Devi) the rape law was reformed in 1983 to address custodial rape.

Like the Mathura case, the 2012 Delhi anti-rape protests were national in impact and scale, prompting national discussions and responses from formal political organizations and actors (Poell and Rajagopalar, 2015). In the aftermath of the violent 2012 gang rape, thousands of people took the street in Delhi, in other Indian cities and abroad demanding stricter anti-rape laws and safe public space for women (BBC 2013; Ellis- Peterson, 2019) Digital media helped organize these protests, connecting people and channelling middle-class dissent (Rao 2013; Sen 2013) Twitter in particular helped to maintain gender violence at the forefront. This continued interaction built a solid foundation for activism and a vital form of political engagement around which to unite (Poell and Rajagopalar, 2015). An analysis of over 15 million tweets between 16 January 2013 and 16 January 2014 combined with 15 semi-structured interviews with Indian feminist activists and journalists, showed that connectivity on social media linked journalists and a wide variety of feminist activist groups (Poell and Rajagopalar, 2015). These new campaigns challenged the government demand and cultural expectations for women to be responsible for their own protection by limiting their access to public spaces. In doing so they politicized women's public safety by putting pressure on government to better protect women. The campaigns have thus become instrumental in eliciting a more effective government's response to sexual violence, at least in public spaces. By bringing the discourse of freedom into the public realm, this protest- sparked in reaction to the 2012 event, even if it drew on pre-existing networks and meanings- forced the government to respond to sexual assault in a more effective (if limited way) (Edmunds and Gupta, 2016). Specifically, amendments recommended by the Verma Commission expanded the legal definition of rape, introduced harsher punishments for rapists and criminalized voyeurism and stalking (Kurian, 2018)

Women's digital activism on social media has not been confined to campaigns about sexual violence or harassment. The Pinjra Tod (Break the Cage) campaign was founded by female college students at Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi (Pinjra Tod Facebook Page). The campaign was named after the refusal of women students to abide to the discriminatory college practices against women, in particular the refusal of permission to stay out after 8 pm. Through a variety of events including graffiti and marches, alongside Twitter, the campaigners pressured the Delhi Commission of Women into challenging discriminatory practices against women in all twenty-three Delhi registered universities. The campaign achieved considerable success in getting a government authority to acknowledge the existence of sexism and making universities accountable. It has also drafted guidelines and recommendations on how better address sexual violence on university campuses (Roy, 2016)

In this case, as in the earlier reform in the 1980s, feminist lawyers and judges offered expertise in drafting effective proposals for legal changes better to advance women's rights. This is also evident in rape law reform in Canada (Weldon 2011), Uganda and other instances of legal change. This avenue of impact points to the important role movements can play in offering expertise and additional information enabling improved policies and laws.

As this suggests, though these campaigns begin in one country, digital media now allows them to spread nationally and even internationally quite quickly. A global example is the Women's March- a world-wide reaction to the US election of 2016- which was primarily organized digitally, encompassing somewhere between 194 and 603 marches in 2017 across more than 80 countries. Similarly, the Women's Strike of 2017, which inspired women around the world to cease both paid and unpaid work for one day, grew out of organizing by Polish and

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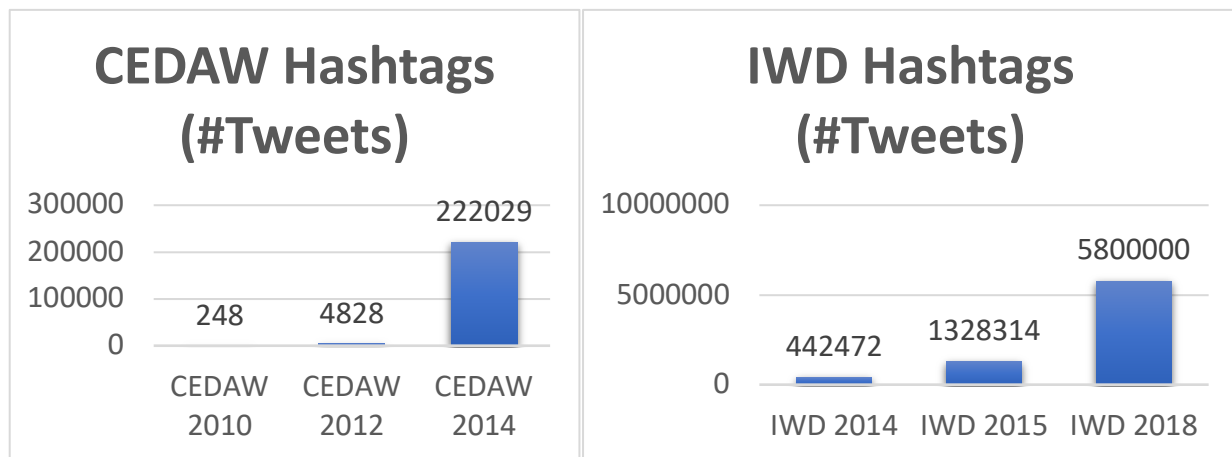
<sup>10</sup> Lal, an Indian model, was shot to death in 1999 inside the pub where she worked (The Hindustan Times, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> A fourteen-year-old *Adivasi* girl, Mathura, was raped by two policemen while in custody, prompting massive public response and legal changes moving burden of proof from accuser to accused (Basu, 2013).

Argentinian feminists (ParodeMujeres, 2020). After their second strike on October 24, Polish organizers reached out transnationally to supporters of their strike leading to the development of an international organizing group from Poland, South Korea, Russia, Argentina, Ireland, Italy, and Israel who laid the groundwork for a global strike (Blanco 2019; Kelly Thompson et al 2020). The organizers grew to include activists from other countries as the strike was planned (ParodeMujeres, 2020). In the end, 35 countries were involved in the 2017 IWD strike, and on the ground organizing was combined with hashtags #WomensStrike and #WhyIStrike to publicize and promote the day of action.

Feminist Twitter, which is about a decade old, has also been a place for more institutionally-oriented campaigns, and increasingly so (Figure 6). From a few hundred tweets in 2010, the number of tweets related to CEDAW grew to more than 200,000 by 2014. Similarly, hashtags associated with International Women’s Day campaigns have seen the number of tweets increase more than seven-fold from 2014 to 2018, with nearly 6 million tweets in a two week period in 2018.

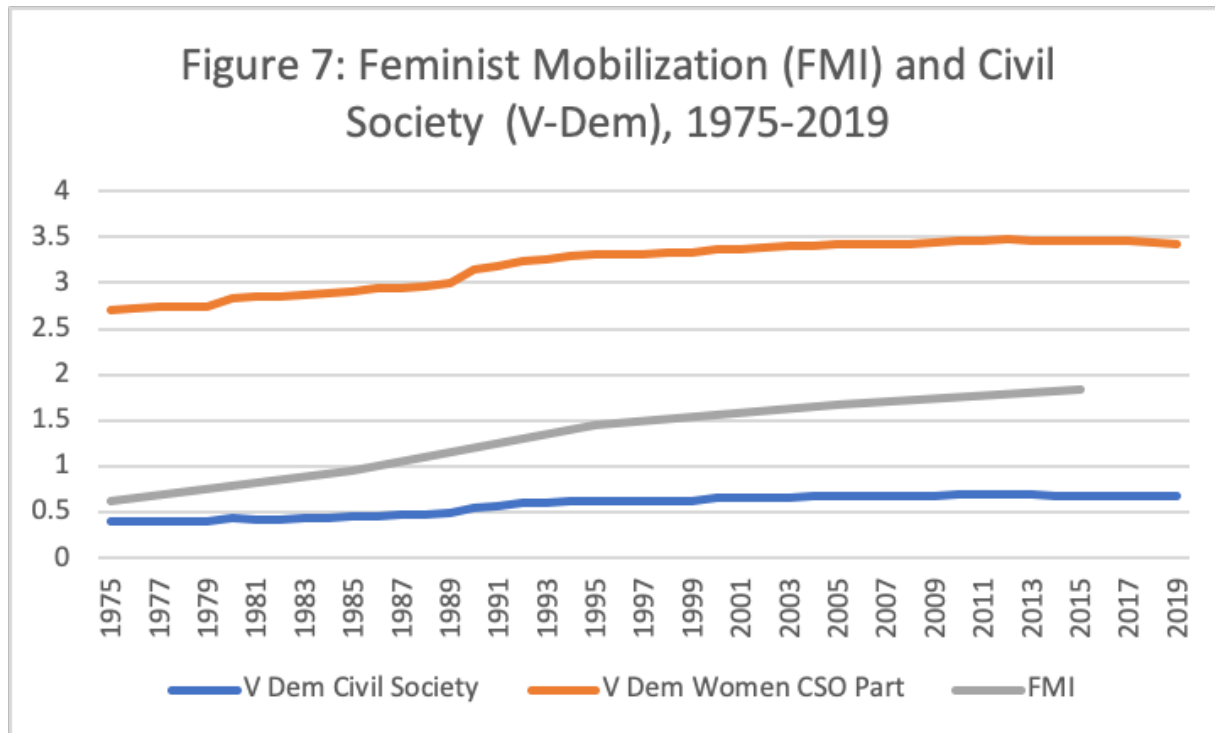
Figure 6: Frequency of Twitter Participation by Tweet related to CEDAW and International Women’s Day



Source: Kelly Thompson et al 2020.

As this suggests, digital activism has become an important part of feminist activism, and increasingly so over the last decade. In the past, digital activism and traditional forms of action have been closely linked: Rather than displacing traditional activism, contemporary protesters and organizers are adding digital strategies to their “toolkit” (Norris 2002). But digital activism, and the internet more generally, may be more than just a tool- It may constitute a new arena or space, with distinctive norms and identities, in which activists may forge distinctive strategies and identities, even create new meaning (Friedman 2016). Whatever the past relationship between digital and traditional activism, it appears that as women’s organizations are in decline, digital activism is taking off.

In summary then, women’s participation in public life in general, and feminist mobilization in particular, has expanded in global terms over the past century, with significant expansion of feminist mobilization from 1975 onwards. However, in the past decade, emerging evidence points to a lack of continued progress, and a decline in women’s participation in public life in terms of traditional organizations, both domestic and transnational. Digital activism, as noted, is the one area of growth, and the significant impact of many purely digital campaigns inspires optimism in some quarters. Others worry that digital activism is replacing face to face activism, and that digital activism does not have the same benefits or staying power in terms of building community or transforming participants.



Research on earlier periods sees digital activism as a tool, and finds that it does not replace traditional activism (Norris 2002). Contemporary movements use a wide range of tactics that nearly always include digital activism, sometimes to great effect, as is evidenced by movements from #metoo to the #women’s march. If digital activism is still strengthened by its face to face counterpart, as earlier research suggests, then the decline of traditional organizations will not be fully compensated for by growth in digital activism. But nor is there a need for concern that digital activism displaces traditional activism; Instead, it seems more likely that it creates new opportunities and arenas for activists (and their opponents) to connect. Nevertheless, as traditional organizations decline, the potential synergy or dynamism that could result from the interaction between these forms of activism may be lost. Future research will have to assess if this is the case.

#### IV IMPACT OF INCREASED ACTIVISM ON “PUBLIC LIFE AND POLITICS”

As we have shown in the previous section, women’s participation in public life expanded significantly after 1975. In this section, we address the impact and significance of this activism on advancing gender equality, arguing that there are multiple pathways that shape equality outcomes, and that there is variance across issues, regions, institutional settings, modes of action, and over time (Htun and Weldon 2018). As this section will show, women’s movements use a variety of strategies from reframing discourses, to networking across domains of civil society, to building coalitions, to spectacular and large-scale public protests. Some of these strategies impact normative change, while others result in the greater inclusion and visibility of women in public life. Importantly, the alliances built between civil society actors and political actors in state institutions are central to effecting policy change.

Space does not permit a review of the extensive literature on the complicated relationships between protest, the presence of women in government, femocrats, international norms, and the like. Rather, to answer a narrower question about whether women’s presence in public life generally, and their participation in organised civil society specifically, affects formal processes of legislative change, policymaking or electoral processes, we draw on extant literature to show that they do. Specifically, we point to four major ways that civil society activities by feminists and their allies advance gender equality in a variety of contexts by shaping electoral contests and public policy processes. These are:

- a) Women's participation in various arenas of civil society encourages their participation in formal political life, such as engaging in political campaigns and running for office
- b) Feminist activism puts new issues on public and governmental agendas and prompts policy change
- c) Feminist activism changes social norms and practices, leading to changes in policy implementation and practical changes in street-level policy enforcement that advance gender equality
- d) Feminist organizing builds coalitions in civil society with other political actors, bringing allies on board and sometimes transforming other institutions through activism inside religious, military, corporate or other structures, mitigating opposition to gender equality that might otherwise come from these quarters.

We explain each of these sets of relationships and impacts below.

### **Activism in Civil Society Encourages Women to Run for Political Office and Transforms Public Spaces**

The relationship between civil society participation and political participation can be disaggregated in two ways. First, women's participation in community affairs and local level government builds skills and confidence for competitive politics and leadership. Second, protest and social movement campaigns, which are more visible forms of collective action, encourage women to seek formal office to press the demands for gender equality.

There are many social and cultural norms that hold women back from political participation and that create a vicious cycle: the political arena is seen as male, women stay out, or are kept out, and they do not feel capable as leaders. Research has shown how important women's participation in voluntary community activities can be in breaking this cycle (Domingo et al, 2015). Through such everyday, non-spectacular, action entrenched social norms can be shifted. For example, in Tanzania, an interesting campaign run by CEWOD (Women Centre for Communication and Development) encouraged women to participate in madrassahs and other community and religious associations as a way to break through the entrenched beliefs that women could not be leaders. Although CEWOD's ultimate goal was to increase the number of women running for local government office, they used civil society avenues as crucial training ground both to increase women's self-confidence as well as to demonstrate to reluctant male authority figures that women were capable of political leadership. Although this not guarantee that women who enter politics via civil society will necessarily take up gender issues, breaking the association between public life and maleness expands the public sphere in the long term.

Protest and social movement organizations may inspire and/or support women candidates to run for political office (Kelly-Thompson 2020; Smith et al. 2011). Protest and participation in social movements can be a space where women, especially women from marginalized groups, acquire political experience and connections (Kelly-Thompson 2020). Protests can open space for women to run for political office in two ways, by empowering participants from dispossessed groups to claim political power by running for office, and by creating a political context that is more open to candidates from dispossessed groups (such as women) (Kelly-Thompson 2020).

A recent study of the Women's March across more than 300 cities in the United States examined the impact of these protests on local elections (Kelly-Thompson 2020). Kelly-Thompson (2020) finds that the presence of a local Women's March was statistically significant and associated with greater numbers of women and women of color running for city council and Mayor in elections immediately following the protests. This finding held controlling for a wide range of explanatory factors and rival explanations.

Why is this? Social movements have this impact because of their role in forming new political identities and in providing non-traditional, more accessible opportunities to gain political experience, a phenomenon that may be of particular importance for women of color and other marginalized groups. Protest itself may also bring women into public spaces from which they have previously been excluded, transforming the meaning of those public spaces and signaling new possibilities for participation.

Participating in social movements can be a way for women whose backgrounds do not fit a traditional path to political involvement can emerge as candidates and even win against well-funded incumbents (Kelly-Thompson 2020; Fandos 2020). Take the examples of Asya Elmas, a Turkish candidate for public office, and the more recent case of Cori Bush, Democratic Candidate for Missouri's First Congressional District in the United States, as just

two examples. Asya Elmas, a Kurdish trans woman, was inspired by her experience in the Gezi Park protests of 2013 to run for elective office. She used her campaign for elective office to continue to hold her allies within her political party (Halk Demokratik Partisi or HDP) accountable to their commitments to the rights of the trans community (Kelly-Thompson 2020; Rudnitzki, 2014). Similarly, Cori Bush decided to run for office after becoming a leader in the Black Lives Matter Movement in Ferguson, MO and built her campaign around being accountable to her community (Fandos 2020). Both Elmas, a Kurdish trans woman, and Bush, a Black working-class woman, appear to be unlikely political candidates. However, through participation in protest and organizing, both women were able to bring their perspectives as women who have been historically excluded to a broader public. So protest can be an important pathway for women who experience multiple forms of oppression to build their political power, network, access to resources and become political candidates.

Beyond empowering individual candidates, protest activities can expand the public space for women. The Women's March brought many women into public life in their local context in a highly visible way. Other women in the community, even those who did not participate in the Marches, saw these women as role models and trailblazers, opening up public space and paving the way for their later candidacies. Similarly, there is evidence that following the Gezi Park protests the strengthening of the LGBT movement led some political parties (the HDP and the CHP) to compete with each other for support from LGBT people and their allies in the 2015 parliamentary elections (Kelly-Thompson 2020).

### **Civil Society Activism Puts New Issues on Public Agendas and Prompts Policy Change**

It is well established that autonomous feminist movements are critical for policy change on violence against women, working through both domestic and transnational forms of activism (Goetz and Hassim, 2003; Weldon 2002; Weldon 2006a, 2006b; Htun and Weldon 2018; Weldon 2011; Nazneen, Hickey and Sifaki, 2019). Feminist movements create women as a constituency to which policymakers must respond and are central to policy action including violence but also encompassing women's reproductive rights, workplace rights, and family law and policies (Htun and Weldon 2018; Weldon et al 2020). Feminist movements likely also shape financial inclusion and land tenure (Weldon et al 2020). They bring new expertise into decision-making because of their attention to needs and interests of women.

Such movements prompt policy change by putting and keeping issues on domestic policy agendas and by ensuring that there is national compliance with agreements that are signed at the transnational level (Htun and Weldon 2018). Compliance ultimately lies in the power of local organizations: trade unions, social movements and their local allies. The poor domestication and failure to comply with international norms is tracked by NGOs that monitor and assess implementation. The meetings of the CSW, as well as the regular five-year assessments of progress on the Beijing Platform, have provided opportunities for domestic women's organisations to amplify their concerns about the pace of progress. For example, shadow reports on CEDAW have revealed disagreements between governments and citizens about the ways in which women's rights have been prioritized in budgeting and planning. In other cases, such as the Rural Women's Movement in South Africa, social movements of poor and marginalized groups are networked into legal rights NGOs to ensure that the rights achieved in moments of political opportunity, such as constitution-making, extend into the future (Hassim, 2014).

Here we discuss two examples that show how these policy effects are achieved: Violence against women in Mexico and domestic workers in India.

#### *Harassment and Violence in Mexico*

In Mexico, the bonds formed by women in both digital and physical protest spaces have pushed what was long a private, personal struggle into the public sphere. Feminist movements in Mexico have struggled to draw attention to the issue of violence against women in all of its dimensions, including in the public sphere, for decades. According to Mexico City-based women's rights advocates, addressing violence against women is the backbone of all struggles for gender equality (Interviews in Mexico City, 2019). Mexico is second only to Brazil in absolute numbers of femicides among Latin American and Caribbean countries (United Nations 2018). Approximately seven

women are murdered in Mexico every day (UN, 2017), and some estimates say as many as 8 or 9 in 10 women have experienced sexual harassment (Senthilingam and Markarious 2017). However, these violations long remained an unfortunate fact of private life, and were generally suffered in silence. Women suppressed their stories and found little recourse under the law. Existing violence against women laws include loopholes that protect perpetrators of violence (Human Rights Watch 2020). Violence against women who participate in politics has generally not been seen to be part of gender-based violence, but is subsumed under general criminal violence (Krook 2020). A new generation of advocates and protestors have shattered this cultural taboo and pushed it to the front of the collective consciousness through campaigns that acknowledge women's common experiences with harassment and violence. Feminists were partially effective in bringing their message of widespread harassment and violence against women to the public sphere through the use of social media campaigns that called for women to reveal their personal stories from the home and workplace. The hashtag #MiPrimerAcoso (my first harassment) first appeared in 2016 and was used that year by more than 100,000 women to describe the first time they experienced sexual harassment, according to data from one feminist researcher.

The fact that harassment and violence was an everyday part of women's lives was made plain and became part of regular public discourse. As one Mexican researcher put it "All those concepts that in the past were just concepts playing only in the feminist field have become social concepts." The internet was not the only place where women voiced their new intolerance for harassment and abuse. Not long after the emergence of the #MiPrimerAcoso social media hashtag, tens of thousands of women across Mexico protested in more than 40 cities against patriarchal violence, carrying signs saying "Ni Una Mas" (not one more) and "Estado Femicida" (femicidal state) in what was dubbed the "purple spring" for Mexican women (Linthicum 2016; teleSUR 2016). These campaigns have also been influenced by other transnational feminist campaigns such as #MeToo from the United States, marea verde (green tide) from Argentina, and Ocho de Marzo from Spain (Interview in Mexico 2019).

### *Domestic Workers in India*

Similarly, organizing by domestic workers in India has been critical to putting their concerns on the public and policy agenda. Domestic workers' unions and organizations initiatives have enjoyed broad support from other women's groups (e.g. All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA)), economic justice organizations (e.g. Nirmala Niketan and SEWA) (Neetha and Pariwala 2011), and the National Council of Women. This has helped to form the National Platform for Domestic Workers (Singh 2017). Although most legislative initiatives at the federal level have not been adopted, two legislative successes stand out. First, the *Unorganized Workers Social Security Act 2008*, providing social security and welfare benefits to domestic workers (Singh 2017), and the *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013*, prompted by feminist protest and specifically addressing abuse and harassment of domestic workers (Kumar 2017; Jain 2014). Both pieces of legislation were introduced after sustained mobilization work by women's organizations, civil society organizations and trade unions. The 2008 Act and the 2013 legislation on sexual harassment not only enjoyed the support of a strong, autonomous feminist movement, they also were passed under left-party-led coalitions, following a familiar pattern for class-based gender issues (Htun and Weldon 2018). Left-leaning governments or coalitions who were otherwise responsive to workers' organisations tended to overlook the feminised and undervalued occupation of domestic workers.

Advocates for domestic workers gain public attention for domestic workers' rights through both public demonstrations and by pressuring and providing information to elected officials. For example, they directly lobby members of the Rajya Sabha (the upper house of the Indian Parliament) sometimes by camping outside their homes, "doorstopping" them at their residences, and distributing pamphlets with specific policy demands. As a result, several electoral candidates adopted these demands as campaign promises. Regardless of the delivery on those promises, these strategies enable advocates to legitimize domestic workers' rights and keep them in focus.

Domestic workers and women's organizations have been monitoring implementation of these legal measures protecting their rights. In 2018, when it became clear that the provisions for registering domestic workers under the 2008 legislation were not carried out by most states, an NGO working with "unorganized" women workers (Shramjeevi Mahila Samiti) filed a petition at the Supreme Court to redress the situation. The Supreme Court

responded by ordering the Central government to stop disbursing funds allocated under the act to those states that failed to meet the provision (Anand, 2018). Advocacy groups continue this work improving policy implementation on other issues of concern to domestic workers, even during the current pandemic: Locally advocacy groups have the know-how to push for their local demands at district offices, and they are effective in pushing for better access to subsidized food under the public distribution scheme and for clean water.

Domestic worker's advocacy has been more successful in obtaining policy change at the state level, especially when they enjoy the support of influential allies such as strong national unions or feminist organizations. Ten state governments have so far set minimum wages for domestic workers (Chigateri, Zaidi, & Ghosh, 2016) while three additional states and Delhi designated domestic work as scheduled employment so that domestic workers could benefit from the Minimum Wages Act (Kerala did both) (Mann, 2015). In Karnataka, it took years of sustained campaigning by the women's organization Women's Voice and the domestic workers' union Karnataka Gruha Karmikara Sangha to get the act passed (Chigateri, Zaidi, and Ghosh 2016). Additionally, the Maharashtra Domestic Workers Welfare Board Act 2008 was passed after 20 years of continuous organizing by domestic workers of the state, with massive protests seen in 2007 by thousands of domestic workers (Kulkarni, 2010).

### **c) Feminist activism changes social norms and practices, changing policy implementation**

The role of women's movements can be seen in the way in which compliance has been successfully pursued through the courts in many countries. Litigation can be effective in forcing governments to implement provisions in constitutions and in law; the number of cases involving women's rights has risen in many countries. Litigation has long term consequences that can be extremely useful for developing social consensus on rights. Among these benefits is that through specific cases, the content of entitlements can be debated and clarified in the particular context that it is applied. That is, questions of affordability and scope can be addressed in concrete terms rather than posed as generalized arguments against rights. Governments that claim to be hamstrung by fiscal considerations have to show that they are unable to provide the content in a right, and to defend that claim. Citizens are able to engage with the normative arguments about which needs about to be supportive by public policy. And executives can be held accountable for not meeting the minimum guaranteed by a legal right. Governments may sign agreements and let them languish. These accountability mechanisms have been used very effectively in global discourses and in local strategies, and they suggest that strengthening women's movements and NGOs is crucial for substantive democracy.

But civil society activism can also change the way policy is implemented, the way it is enforced, or not enforced, by changing social norms or attitudes. And in this regard, women's activism need not be spectacular or overtly political to make an impact. In countries where open participation of women in public life is discouraged, and protest actions are rare for any groups, creative new ways are found to effect change. For example, Iranian women who campaigned and lobbied parliament to reverse the ban on women entering sports stadiums were in effect pushing for women's public presence to be expanded. The ban is enforced by the sports authorities through placing police and security guards to stop women from entering stadiums. Previously, some women's sports fans have had to disguise themselves as men to avoid these blunt discriminatory restrictions (Times of Israel, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2019). On September 2019, Sahar Khodayari (also known as the "blue girl") was detained for dressing as a man and attempting to sneak into the Azadi soccer stadium to cheer for her favourite team. Months later, dogged by courts and threatened by imprisonment, she set herself on fire in front of a court house. Her tragic death prompted an outrage and outpouring from women, advocate, journalists and football players both in and outside of Iran (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

This tragic incident shifted public opinion and led to a small and yet significant change with regard to women's right to be in public spaces previously seen to be male. Leila Joneydi, the vice president for legal affairs to Hassan Rouhani, also an Iranian woman lawyer and associate professor of private law at University of Tehran, stated that the government "sees no explicit legal prohibition on the presence of women in stadiums" and argued that "The Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution in its regulation 427 refers to "all-men sport halls" and that national stadiums such as Azadi stadium with over 10,000 people capacity, are not designed to be an "all-men sport space", and thus do not fall under this ban" (IRNA, 2019). With that, on October 2019, women were finally allowed to

enter football stadiums for the first time in years (IRNA, 2019). The impact of these actions on shifting norms and values, one of the most stubborn aspects of political culture, can only be measured in time.

Some activities of women's movements traverse the space between NGO-type service delivery and feminist activism. For example, women's organizations are in the frontline of providing services neglected by the state, such as setting up and staffing hotlines for abused women, creating shelters, and offering legal services, often using voluntary labor. These kinds of roles may be a form of social work, but they also break the taboos that require women to stay within family structures that are abusive.

**d) Feminist organizing builds coalitions in civil society with other political actors, bringing allies on board and sometimes transforming other institutions through activism inside religious, military, corporate or other structures, mitigating opposition to gender equality that might otherwise come from these quarters.**

The success of feminist movements in changing policy, law and practice is often largely determined by the quality and vigor of the opposition they face, as well as those who they can rely on as allies (Htun and Weldon 2018). The opponents of feminist initiatives vary across issue, country, and over time. At times, labor movements, religious organizations and business organizations have been both allies and opponents of feminist groups and initiatives.

For example, in many places, trade unions and the left parties with which they were associated resisted gender equality initiatives focussed on equal pay or sexual harassment (Weldon 2011). The 1978 equal status law in Norway was opposed, for example, by organized labour, but supported by the conservative party. Indeed, left parties were rarely reliable allies on issues of violence against women across Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. Feminist activism inside these parties may have changed this fact. In 2010, representatives from socialist and social democratic parties in Europe partnered with a Progressive Foundation to highlight the issues of VAW and to discuss best practices and avenues for legal reform. Similarly, in Morocco, feminist reforms of religious personal law in the Muslim world were first opposed by Islamists in the country. Later, the most sweeping reforms of Muslim personal law in the MENA region were undertaken with cooperation from both feminists and cleric, and religious opposition was greatly diminished. As this suggests, feminist activism, public debate and deliberation over these issues can change minds inside and outside institutions. Even parties that were broadly and formally committed to gender equality had to be pushed to make the commitment concrete. In South Africa, for example, women's NGOs and feminist movements collaborated to ensure that legislative reform on domestic violence would be the marker of the party's commitment to gender equality (Meintjes, 2003; Artz and Grandmaison, 2019).

There are also other, seemingly unlikely, allies. The Tunisian Penal Code provided that a perpetrator of sexual violence may avoid prosecution by marrying his victim (Advocates for Human Rights/ MRA, 2017). On 26 July, 2017 this article was repealed in full in landmark legislation consisting of 43 articles in five chapters addressing gender-based violence. The broad scope of the law includes violence in public *as well as* private life, and specifies the measures necessary to protect women, as well as prosecute abusers (Human Rights Watch, 2017). In addition to physical violence, the law recognizes other forms of violence against women and girls, including economic, sexual, political and psychological. The broad definition used in the legislation includes the key elements of the definition of domestic violence recommended in the United Nations Handbook for Legislation on Violence against Women (Human Rights Watch, 2017). These positive developments were enhanced by the Tunisian government finally abolishing a 44-year ban on Muslim women marrying non-Muslims. These gains came in the wake of 2014 Arab Spring and post-revolutionary women's rights movement. Importantly, the changes were made possible because it was not only activists on the left who were involved, but also women from Islamist parties who were very much active in policy-making, whether through the parliament or by lobbying the presidency directly. Thus, activism changed attitudes within extant political institutions, creating new allies and transforming the landscape of opposition.

## **V CURRENT PROSPECTS FOR WOMEN' PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC LIFE**

After decades of expansion, no matter how uneven, progress in expanding women's participation in civil society may be faltering. The explosion of digital activism notwithstanding, women's participation in global civil society is



in decline. Women's participation in face-to-face feminist groups and protests appears to be levelling off, while new forces seek to thwart their success and roll back prior policy wins.

Multiple discussions and renewed transnational and domestic commitments to gender equality in public life have not produced the equality envisioned in these commitments. There has not been a continuous, linear movement towards incrementally greater equality. Instead, the contemporary moment is characterised by concerted, well-funded pushback by conservatives against women. This is to be expected; new norms undoubtedly challenge the settled distributions of power between different social groups. Indeed, the Beijing Conference (1995) was itself marked by an almost immediate concerted conservative, often illiberal, response. In the past five years, however, this response to feminist gains is better organized, and its programmes more clearly authoritarian. Electoral victories of right-wing populist parties in a number of countries has put state power at the service of anti-feminist agendas. Multilateralism is under threat; highly influential nations, most notably the United States and China, no longer appear committed to concerted collective action in relation to human rights.

While conservative movements always deployed gender as part of their ideological framework – most typically, by defending traditional families and gender-differentiated roles in society, the attention to feminism in contemporary right-wing movements is distinctive and illiberal. The Covid19 pandemic has created a crisis that allows political opponents of women's rights to reframe threats to the traditional social order and restrict or pull back from the rights of women to sexual autonomy by animating the frame of pronatalism and maternal responsibility. In the United States, for example, the right wing is now far more active in pushing against reproductive rights by using their newly-won majorities in state governments to restrict abortion rights. East and Central Europe is gripped by a new 'gender fear,' the idea that gender ideology (meaning feminism) is as much a threat to national order as war (Korolczuk 2020). This is an elevation of the stakes of government; the war analogy not only projects an urgency but places feminism on the terrain of sedition. In the place of egalitarian programmes, there is now a vision of society resting on a traditional family system. In political discourses, there is a return to a fictive past of stability and order, when men held their rightful place, women looked after the children, and families were protected. They claim a kind of masculinity that often invokes a father-figure and/or traditional machismo at the same time as they denigrate women and emphasize traditional masculine values-keeping order, protecting families, disciplining unruly women.

Poland and Hungary have become the focus of global attention as developments in those countries have represented a kind of extreme outcome of what could result from a resurgent right wing. In Hungary, the conservative Fidesz and Christian Democratic Party (KDNP) came to power in 2010. Since then Hungary has experienced a backlash on women's and minority rights that has gone as far as outlawing gender studies as university courses. The KDNP has an explicitly anti-abortion platform, directly challenging the EU for its position on abortion. Initial campaigns, ironically using the EU funds to promote work-life balance, described the EU as the enemy. Under pressure from the EU, the campaign was moderated to one focused on family values, under the seemingly-benign slogan "Every child's place in the family" (Vida, 2019). In 2012, the government modified the Constitution to protect the fetus. The amendment was coupled with a new Family Protection Act aimed at reinforcing conservative family values (Vida, 2019; Bucur, 2020). That same year the medical abortion pill, promoted by the EU, was banned. These attempts to weaken women's sexual and reproductive rights went along with reforms of the national core curriculum for schools, where gender ideology was removed to promote traditional family values (Kaszas, 2018; Bucur, 2020). Gender-related questions were canceled from exams and the concept of gender identity was replaced by the stress on the biological nature of sexes.

In Poland, the ruling conservative Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) which came to power in October 2015, has taken incremental steps to consolidate control at the expenses of human rights. There, too, the government has adopted pronatalist family policy as its declared priority. The systematic erosion of institutions and policy on human rights and equality, lack of comprehensive and coordinated services for survivors of violence, restriction on reproductive rights, backtracking on sexual and reproductive health education, centralization of funding for civil society, are some of the measures introduced by the PiS government to publicly smear women's rights organizations and mis-portray their work as threatening to families and traditional values (Human Rights Watch, 2019). These restrictive measures were confirmed by a 2018 European Parliament Report on women's

rights and gender equality. Funding to women's organizations and women's centres has been cut and NGOs working on gender issues in schools, came to be considered antipatriotic political organisations aimed at transferring western ideology (Juhász and Pap, 2018). At the international level, the Polish government withdrew from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence on the grounds that the Convention promoted 'gender ideology' and represented a danger for family values. The concept of 'gender ideology' "explicitly links homosexuality, abortion and the alleged threat of arbitrary sex change with the West and the European Union" (Graff and Korolczuk, 2017, p. 178). Notably, the most restrictive of all measures undertaken by the government against gender equality are the restrictions on women's reproductive rights and the proposed absolute prohibition of abortion. Poland is among the European countries with the most restrictive abortion laws, whereby it is allowed only under specific circumstances. However, restrictions became even more severe after 2015 (Paprzycka, Dec-Pietrowska, and Lech, 2019). In 2016, the government withdrew from the state program that refunded assisted reproduction and in 2017, the purchase of over-the-counter emergency contraception was banned (Human Rights Watch, 2020a).

Government efforts to further limit sexual and reproductive health and rights have been met by protest. There was a highly successful email campaign, in which citizens sent almost three million emails to members of parliament to protest the proposed changes. Mass demonstrations began in October 2016 and came to be known as #CzarnyProtest (Black Protest) and #StrajkKobiet (Women's Strike). These protests – involving, it is estimated by Korolczuk (2020), up to 200 000 people - led to the rejection of the government bill that would have enacted a total abortion ban. Thousands of people participated in the protests in big cities as well as smaller towns. The protesters were active feminists but also very young women and celebrities who had never marched before (Wisniewska, 2018). The Black Protests received a wide coverage and international support in the foreign media. Pictures of Black Protest posters became popular on social media with the hashtags #czarnyprotest and #blackprotest, which made protesters in Poland feel that they were not alone (Wisniewska, 2018). On October 4, 2017, a day after the first anniversary of the Black Protest, police raided various NGOs, including three offices of the Women Rights Centre. Activists said the raids discouraged survivors of violence from seeking services, contributed to public distrust of the organizations, and created fear amongst the staff and volunteers (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Despite these attempts at intimidation and retaliation, the feminist movement has made many new allies and the government path to further tighten Poland's restrictive abortion laws will not be an easy one. Overall, the Black Protests have changed Poland (Wisniewska, 2018). Necessity has given rise to new ways of civil society engagement and growing awareness among Polish women, ready to take to the streets to defend gender equality.

As bleak as this description is, it is nevertheless important to note how powerful the protest movement of feminist activists has been in Poland. Even a total lockdown imposed because of the coronavirus did not shut down the protests. Furthermore, the developments in Poland have galvanised civil society across Europe, partly in solidarity with Polish women and partly as the spur to raising local issues.

These are two limited and yet instructive examples. They show that local social movements work with a variety of scripts through which to articulate their interests. These scripts may be rooted in local cultures, as Kandiyoti (2004) suggests, but they may also be rooted in the growing global recognition of the importance of women's rights as human rights. Consensus texts like CEDAW can play a meaningful role for women who are grappling with unresponsive elites, because they can be a resource to appeal to a government's sense of its global standing and its status as a democracy. They also show that the prior decades of activism and global networking have created a strong foundation of support for gender equality that is not easily dislodged by contemporary setbacks. Networks of global solidarity, and of shared visions, that were enabled by activists congregating in common spaces such as CSW, have been enhanced by new forms of digital communication. In difficult times, these are sources of hope.

## **VI CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) articulated a more substantive claim for the role of women's movements than had been made in any transnational platform before, and with greater endorsement around the globe and by member states within the United Nations. Reiterating the importance of women's full citizenship, including their

participation and representation in elected bodies, the BPfA looked towards long-term sustainability of the equality agenda. It made the case for the involvement of civil society in advancing gender equality by working with political parties and allies in civil society. Inclusion in formal structures of the state is a necessary but insufficient condition for realising the commitments made in the various conventions from the ICCPR to CEDAW to the Beijing Platform for Action. Full participation in public life requires finding ways to reverse current declines in women's associational activities, especially feminist organizing, and to counter the growing opposition to women's rights.

Our overview of women's participation in public life points to several conclusions that in turn suggest new directions for action. First, feminist organization in its autonomous form is a powerful avenue for political influence, especially when activists and organizations are able to ally with other authorities and groups. Second, such organizing grows and flourishes when women's political and civil rights are strengthened, and weakens where these rights are restricted. Third, transnational organizing in general has the capacity to strengthen women's participation in public life and gender equality domestically. More specifically, the UN World Conferences were crucial moments of invigoration of activism, providing a focus as well as sources of funding for women's movements, especially in the global south. We have shown how feminist mobilization spiked after the Beijing Conference, but has begun to plateau. The last agenda-setting conference organized by the UN is now 25 years ago, and there has not been a rejuvenation of the BPfA or a proper attempt at assessment (Sandler and Goetz, 2020). Fourth, we have also shown the emergence and spread of digital activism across the globe. This form of activism has used new technologies of communication to link movements in different countries, and to energize the complex issues of violence against women by highlighting sexual harassment as a dramatic and ubiquitous form that is shared by women across the world. In a number of instances, digital activism has prompted authorities (governmental, employers and public institutions) to adopt new codes of conduct and institutionalize new regulations. The new technologies have allowed activists to transcend limitations that stem from more closed public spheres and, indeed, as the case of Poland shows, enable new forms of transnational activism.

**Recommendation 1:** Strengthen transnational feminist organizations and networks by convening global and regional meetings on gender equality, and especially by convening a Fifth World Conference on Women.

The time may be ripe to bring together the longstanding actors in the gender arena with the new generation that is emerging. In our view, the UN system offers unique opportunities for this. We agree with Sandler and Goetz (2020, p.242) that what is needed is: 'far more powerful and accessible CSW, more – and more critical – civil society monitoring of the UN's performance, institutionalizing a voice in decision-making for feminist civil society in the CSW and UN Women, and more reliable financing for women's organizations.' Building towards a major global UN conference would be an opportunity to link digital activist networks with movements that work at the grassroots and face-to-face levels, as well as with feminist actors inside the state, to craft sustainable interventions that reclaim the equality agenda that is currently hostage to fluctuations in political will. To this end:

Member governments that support gender equality should push for a *Fifth World Conference on women*, to be convened by the United Nations and the United Nations, and UN Women, should work towards convening a Fifth World Conference on Women.

Foundations, donor agencies and other funding groups should support regional conventions of women's organizations focused on gender equality, both globally and in specific regions. They should also consider convening official virtual or digital meetings, ideally linked to the face-to-face versions but possibly as solely digital.

**Recommendation 2:**

There should be concerted funding and convening of opportunities for women's organizations to reflect on gains and setbacks, to recommit to equality and to set new agendas relevant to the current moment. All forms of women's participation in public life matter, and not only those which are explicitly political. A demand for independent presence in public spaces, whether in sports stadiums or driving a car, breaks cultural stereotypes about the gendered domains of public and private, and normalizes women's visibility. We have shown how important these small and incremental changes can be in shifting norms. To this end:

Member governments that support gender equality should establish new programs providing resources and opportunities for women's mobilization in support of gender equality. Public support, via *government budgets*, for arts and culture are important in developing independent and locally relevant forms of autonomous expression. These should be directed especially at offering opportunities for women's creative work.

Foundations, donor agencies and other funding groups should support regional conventions of women's organizations focused on gender equality, both globally and in specific regions.

**Recommendation 3:** The expansion of women's participation in public life requires strengthened protections for political and civil rights. Public life that is open to all and free of intimidation is crucial. There are already a range of global commitments in place that spell out the importance of securing the underlying systemic conditions for equal participation and representation, and the affirm the importance of the voice and agency of all social groups in decision-making. We recommend renewed attention by *member governments* to the provisions of the 1996 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. We have also demonstrated the importance of women's ability to organize in civil society across a range of sectors. In addition to these general political and civil rights, women's security in public life needs to be defended across all sectors, whether this relates to their presence at sporting events or when they are running for political office. To this end:

Member governments that support gender equality should work to strengthen their commitment to civil and political rights, and help to monitor and promote those rights around the world. The United Nations and regional intergovernmental bodies should also work to monitor and strengthen such rights.

Civil society groups should cooperate and form alliances to ensure that public spaces remain open to all, and that civil and political rights are a reality and not just a formality.

Member states must put in place measures to protect women from violence when they enter new arenas- be they sports or political arenas. The United Nations and regional intergovernmental bodies should also work to monitor and strengthen such measures. Specifically, *governments* need to include violence against women in public life in legislation criminalizing gender-based violence, to specifically include sanctions in electoral codes of conduct for political parties and other actors that demean, insult or assault women candidates, and other support interventions to protect women from harm.

**Recommendation 4:** Fourth, while all forms of women's movements are important in expanding voice and agency, they frequently need the support of sympathetic allies inside legislatures and bureaucracies. These allies may not always be women, but there is no doubt that increasing the numbers of women in elected office is both an effect of the continuing mobilization of women in civil society after 1975, as well as an important guarantor of sustainability. We have shown how women have been increasingly important as constituencies for candidates for election, and how women's issues can be important even to male representatives. We have also shown the ways in which digital activism has succeeded in winning new allies, and in making ending violence against women an issue for the whole of society, and not just feminist movements. To this end:

*Political parties* should recommit to various programmes for including women in their electoral lists and policy platforms.

Religious organizations, universities, and other civil society organizations should consider developing programs for gender equality including encouraging women's organizing alongside or within their walls, as appropriate.

**Recommendation 4:** Fourth, we have summarized the extant research which shows that autonomous feminist organisations makes the biggest impact on transformative policy-making across all issue areas, but especially violence against women. We see worrying evidence that grassroots women's organizations may be stagnant or declining in traditional (as opposed to exclusively digital) campaigns and networks that include face to face meetings. Concomitantly, the research shows that while bilateral aid to support gender equality is important,

gender mainstreaming is not as effective in the absence of strong, autonomous mobilization in civil society that provides insight and political support to these agencies while simultaneously pressuring them and holding them to account. Support is especially needed for autonomous feminist organisations to advance transformative social change.

To this end:

We recommend that greater funding for gender equality should be directed to women's initiatives for gender equality, feminist initiatives, at all levels. Specifically, women's movements should be supported by *foundations and donor agencies* to create creating sustainable movements for gender equality that go beyond episodic campaigns, and that link long-standing organizations to new generations of activists. This requires increasing *core funding* to women's organizations.

*Sector specific* donors, such as those working in the area of gender-based violence, need to increase support to women's movements working to develop policy platforms, articulate demands and develop the expertise for effective and impactful policies. Such support needs to extend beyond the successful achievement of policies to include processes by which civil society organizations can hold governments accountable in the long term.

*Feminist funds* should be enhanced by further financial infusions, and, where absent, created at domestic and international level, under the control of women's movements. Governments as well as corporations can play a role here. A higher proportion of public funds could be earmarked to support feminist work, both domestically and internationally as is done in Norway and Denmark. Financial support should go directly to women's movements and should be long-term.

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