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## ORGANISING FOR WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION | Challenges and pitfalls

**Christina Schwabenland; Chris Lange; Jennifer Onyx**

**Abstract** | The oppression and devaluing of women is a significant problem all over the globe. Exploring forms of gender oppression as well as different kinds of responses by civil society organisations is at the core of this article. Women have persistently struggled for their rights and emancipation: in social movements, women's organisations and by challenging discrimination in organisations employing both women and men. But their success is often limited due to deep-seated cultural patriarchal norms.

**Zusammenfassung** | Die Unterdrückung und Abwertung von Frauen ist weltweit ein großes Problem. Formen der Frauenunterdrückung und zivilgesellschaftlich organisierte Reaktionen darauf zu erkunden, steht im Zentrum dieses Artikels. Frauen kämpfen schon lange für ihre Rechte und für ihre Emanzipation: in sozialen Bewegungen, Frauenorganisationen und indem sie Diskriminierung in Organisationen benennen, in denen Frauen und Männer arbeiten. Jedoch ist ihr Erfolg aufgrund tiefssitzender kulturell-patriarchaler Normen oft begrenzt.

**Schlüsselwörter** ► Frauenemanzipation  
 ► international ► soziale Bewegung  
 ► Frauenorganisation

**Introduction** | Fifty years since the second wave of feminism women's rights their right to self-determination, safe domestic as well as environmental living conditions and non-violent relationships are far from being reality. In the new millennium, even those rights that have been achieved have been challenged in many countries. A prominent example is that of reproductive rights, especially the right to choose a safe abortion, which is being challenged in the US, in Poland and in Argentina. This tells us that even achieved rights cannot be taken for granted but need to be fought for, over and over again. These struggles can only happen when women organise to

fight for their rights and to gain influence. But organisations are not neutral spaces either and struggles also need to identify gender specific biases in organisations, be they public, market or not-for-profit.

These issues are at the core of the anthology "Women's Emancipation and Civil Society Organisations – Challenging or maintaining the status quo?" published in 2016 (Schwabenland et al. 2016). The anthology was a project initiated by the Affinity Group on Gender (AGG), a special interest sub-group of the International Society of Third Sector Research (ISTR)<sup>1</sup>. ISTR was founded in 1994 as a forum for practitioners and researchers in the field of third sector/civil society organisations (CSO) meeting in biannual global and regional conferences. The special interest group on gender was established at the 2002 conference in Cape Town, South Africa, by a few women and men from various continents, because they considered gender issues to be underdeveloped in ISTR. The AGG has had significant impact; it meets regularly at the ISTR international conferences, it has advocated for female keynote speakers and organised pre-conference workshops as well as panels and sessions focussed on gender issues. At the 2012 conference in Siena, Italy, the German professor Annette Zimmer from Muenster University, the then President of ISTR, suggested that the AGG should compile an anthology on the achievements and challenges for CSOs addressing gender concerns. Now, four years after the publication of the anthology, we review some of its major findings and consider their ongoing relevance.

**The anthology** | Contributions were solicited from researchers and women's organisations from around the world. Authors were asked to analyse some of the factors that contribute to or hinder the emancipation of women, taking into account the socioeconomic and political conditions and the possibilities for CSOs; to make visible the roles and achievements of women in CSOs; to investigate and critique the experiences of women working within CSOs and, through these activities, to contribute to theory building. Forty-five abstracts were submitted, many from activists, some from researchers. For most of them

<sup>1</sup> "Third sector" is one term that is used to identify organisations that are non-profit making, independent of the state and constituted for some social purpose. There are debates about the definitional distinctions of similar terms such as "voluntary", "non-profit", "non-governmental" or "community" organisations which, however, are beyond the scope of this article.

English was not their first language. The final selection included a global analysis of feminist organisations alongside thirteen case studies.

We organised the anthology into two sections; the first presenting examples of women's activism through organising, and the second looking at the processes of organising within CSOs that assist or impede women's emancipation. These two sections bring together two bodies of literature that are often treated as discrete: political science and community sector studies on the one hand and feminist organisation studies on the other. Research into CSOs is a relatively new field and most work focusses on social movements and the nature of the demands they make (Kenny et al. 2015, Mayo 2006, *Della Porta; Diani* 1999) and on the political and social reasons why people come together to create change. Alongside, but rarely intersecting with this work, is the stream of feminist inspired research into the very processes of organising and the ways in which these can institutionalise dynamics of discrimination (Gherardi 2003, Nentwich; Kelan 2013). Both groups of researchers should be interested in talking to each other, but this happens rarely.

**Women's activism** | The global analysis mentioned above serves as an introduction to the anthology by providing a context for the more local case studies. This analysis, the only one of its kind, presents the results of a global survey of women's organisations on contrasting understandings of emancipation and empowerment and how they are best achieved. 283 women's CSOs responded. The findings were sobering, demonstrating that achievements in the struggle for gender equality have been insufficient, notwithstanding all efforts. The authors of the survey conclude with a suggestion for "a return to more radical feminist approaches, which may be the only way to address the relationship between power and domination" (Phillips 2016, p. 42).

The case studies present inspiring instances of women's activism in many parts of the globe. Clearly, women are strong, resilient and continue to struggle for emancipation. However, these are not stories of the triumphant overcoming of oppression nor of a recognition of women's rights within patriarchy. In some cases, new forms of oppression are identified alongside new expressions of ancient and continuing

forms. Fraser (2009) argues that domination can occur within economic, cultural or political dimensions. While each of these dimensions can independently create injustice, each also impacts on the others. These case studies of activism present examples of domination on all three dimensions. Economic domination represents class-based oppression in which women fare badly. The political dimension is evident in the collusion of the state to promulgate or enhance powerful interests against the rights of women. But in nearly every case it is the underlying cultural dimension that creates the continuing justification of oppression. This cultural dimension is historically, profoundly embedded and resistant to change. Consequently, while women may achieve minor or temporary recognition, this makes little difference in the long run.

The best example of extreme economic oppression given in the anthology occurs in the Niger Delta region in Nigeria (Asey 2016). Here women have traditionally been responsible for supporting the family through fishing, agriculture and food production. However, this area has proved to be a very rich source of oil which is a major resource of the country. Consequently, much of the traditional land has been taken over by multinational companies. Significant levels of pollution of soil and waterways have rendered the land incapable of producing food. This environmental destruction is caused by the unethical and at times illegal actions of oil companies, and corrupt government practices that support them. The position of women has significantly deteriorated. Women have responded through multiple strategies. Some have engaged in organised forms of civil disobedience such as occupying oil platforms, shutting down crude oil production and denying oil companies access to oil facilities. Others initiated empowerment strategies such as improving women's education, job opportunities and welfare. None have been successful in overturning the destruction of the environment or securing a decent livelihood – not least due to the traditional cultural values of women owing obedience to their husbands. Therefore, only few women are able to reach leadership positions or indeed have control over their own income.

Another chapter documents Uruguayan women's organisations' ongoing struggle to demand legalized abortion through the democratically elected parliament (Pousadela 2016). While the women's organisa-

tions have successfully mobilised more progressive social attitudes through consistent demonstrations and media actions and did gain significant rights through working with progressive elected members, nonetheless the concerted efforts of the powerful Catholic church have been sufficient to block fully legalized abortion. Yet Uruguay is well ahead of most strongly Catholic states in South America.

"Se non or quando" ("If not now, when?") is a new social movement in Italy, founded in response to rapidly escalating cultural shifts in politics and the media which overwhelmingly objectify and denigrate women's bodies as sexual objects to be exploited at will (Elia 2016). This level of public exploitation goes beyond anything seen in recent history in Europe. Here we see domination by the state, supported by the corporate media, but also supported by deep seated cultural assumptions of the role of women.

These three cases dramatically illustrate a central, recurring theme. The lack of progress in women's emancipation is not the result of complacency or inaction on the part of women, but rather the result of misogynistic and increasingly strong forces of domination and new forms of gender oppression. Another example: in both rich and poor countries there has been a global escalation of urban street harassment of women. Much of this street harassment has long existed under the radar. But its effects can be very serious indeed, impacting on women's sense of decency and respect, on their capacity to move freely in the city, and increasingly on their personal safety. The levels of street attacks on women appear to be growing exponentially. One chapter describes how the internet can be used to mobilize women against this harassment and also to support its victims (Keyhan 2016).

The different contributions revealed differing understandings of women's emancipation, with a critical question being whether it can ever be a matter for individuals or whether it has to be considered in the context of systemic cultural and environmental change. Another debate is that between the "separate but equal" position, which, at least to some extent, relies on an understanding of gender as essentialised and immutable (a position taken by many religious feminists); and the more "rights-based" approach which endorses the principle that women and men

have the same human rights including political, social and economic rights, and are entitled to the same opportunities.

**Women in organisations** | Our main question, expressed in the subtitle of the anthology, is whether civil society organisations reinforce or challenge the status quo. Not surprisingly, the evidence is mixed. We distinguished three contrasting ways in which organisations are understood: as a means to an end, as the manifestations of values and as instruments of domination (Morgan 1997).

For many of the contributors, especially those in the first section whose case studies focus on women's activism, organisations are seen as unproblematic – a means to an end. Sometimes the "ends" require different and newer forms of organising, most notably those that utilise the internet/social media; viral organising that has been criticised for promoting mainly "weak" forms of solidarity, but nonetheless it makes possible the mobilisation of support at a global level. One example is the international campaign against street harassment mentioned above, whose CEO commented that the "unbounded nature of street harassment [...] calls for a similarly unbounded response" (Keyhan 2016, p. 85). Diaspora "meso" organisations that provide a bridge between more established CSOs in more "developed" countries and grass roots associations in the homeland are another example of an emergent form of organising (Tavanti et al. 2016). In these examples, organisations provide structures through which women can take up agency and work together to achieve shared aims.

Organising in ways that manifest their values included a Nepali NGO that described itself as an "incubator" – a deliberate choice of a maternal metaphor – to smaller associations working to prevent women being trafficked into slavery and prostitution and supporting returned survivors; this chapter is redolent with family metaphors such as "sister" organisations (Tanaka 2016). Family metaphors were also used in a chapter on Portuguese Roma women's organisations (Rego 2016), while several chapters were critical of organisations that failed to manifest their values in their operating practices. One critique from an African feminist perspective was of the co-option of an originally radical organisation in Kenya into effectively operating as an arm of the state and the

ways hierarchy and elitism was emerging in the organisation of a formerly large, nationwide feminist social movement (Lutomia et al. 2016).

One theme that featured in several case studies was the tension between those holding to the original founding values of the organisation, which were often informed by feminist and democratic, or collectivist ideals, and more hierarchical forms of organising and decision making, especially when a loose social movement "coalesced" into a more formal association.

Finally, two chapters explored women's experiences working in larger, service providing organisations. Contrary to expectations, they concluded that the formal policies of these organisations were maintaining, rather than challenging the stereotype of woman as carer and of care itself as a poorly valued or remunerated occupation.

**Strategies of response** | According to Phillips (2016) the United Nations Development Goals and the majority of programmes in feminist organisations that these goals support are primarily focused on empowerment rather than emancipation. Empowerment is largely concerned with assistance to individual women who may then be better able to survive and prosper. Emancipation is a more systemic and structural strategy to go beyond supporting individual women to challenge discrimination and instead to tackle the root causes of that oppression. So, we need to ask: are women being empowered or emancipated? And, faced with the challenges we have discussed above, how do civil society organisations respond?

We identified four quite distinct types of response to the growing oppression. The first we labelled "picking up the pieces". This occurs when organisations respond not to the source of the oppression, but rather to the fallout from it and the impact on individual women. The best example of this strategy is found in the story of trafficked women of Nepal who were sold as children for sexual or manual labour in India, but as adults gradually return to Nepal. On return they find themselves isolated, scorned and discriminated against. However, feminist based CSOs have created a strong network and supported trafficked women to develop their own association. Its programmes are aimed at the progressive empowerment of trafficked women from repatriation to training

and employment, income generation, education and legal support. It involves awareness raising in the wider community through education and street drama. While the organisation provides the basis for individual women's empowerment by creating an organisational voice and self-representation, the impact is much wider as hitherto entrenched attitudes to trafficked women underwent considerable change. Nonetheless, this strategy did not address the root causes of this form of gender oppression.

The second type of organisational strategy identified was "to work within existing cultural practices". Here the aim is to operate within existing political and cultural norms in order to modify the negative impact of these on women's lives. This appears to be the dominant strategy adopted by feminist organisations that may involve accepting the traditional roles of women as mothers and housewives but working to reinterpret civil statutes that are particularly oppressive, for example against genital mutilation and improving girls' rights to education. While these actions may lead to the empowerment of some women, they do little to modify the dominant cultural, religious, political structures that continue to oppress women in fundamental ways.

The third type of organisational strategy involves a "direct challenge to the dominant cultural regimes". This strategy adopts the most dramatic and sophisticated action possible in order to call attention to and deny the validity of the dominant norms and patterns of behaviour. Often these groups adopt cultural modes like theatre and art. Two examples in the anthology are *Pussy Riot* (Hinterhuber; Fuchs 2016), who held pop concerts in Russian churches, and a French feminist organisation that uses parody to challenge the dominance of men in leadership positions (Hildwein 2016). This is done by "invading" board meetings wearing false beards and standing silently with placards that congratulate the members of the board for their total exclusion of women. These strategies of direct action are the most likely to address the root causes of discrimination and oppression, thus furthering the cause of emancipation. But they also entail the highest risk of direct counter action by the dominant forces.

Finally, in those countries that have achieved some degree of gender emancipation, a fourth strategy is used which is "to work in organisations of their

choice". Many women in post industrialist societies choose to work in organisations with feminist practices. These may entail family-friendly work practices which are flexible, collaborative and non-hierarchical in style, particularly those working in care services or children's services. However, these same organisations invariably provide lower salaries and limited opportunities for career progression. While much is gained in some ways, the gains are limited and it seems to be very difficult to challenge the de-valuing of "women's work" that these organisations perpetuate, even if unintentionally.

**Newer examples** | The anthology was published in 2016 and it seems appropriate to ask whether the schema we describe above is still helpful in analysing more current initiatives aimed at emancipating women. As our previous analysis suggests that the first strategy "picking up the pieces" and the fourth strategy "working in organisations of their choice" offer opportunities for empowering individual women, but are less successful at challenging underlying systemic oppression, we specifically focus here on organisations working within, but also challenging existing cultural regimes.

Our first example is the campaign *One Billion Rising*, which has organised annual mass dancing events against sexual violence for the last seven years. It is now active in over 200 countries worldwide. In Germany alone, women and men in more than 80 cities participated in the event last year<sup>2</sup>. Although mobilising exclusively through social media, there is a loose but effective organisation behind the campaign: a director located in the Philippines and national coordinators in many countries, many of them experienced feminists. This campaign is working within existing cultural practices by encouraging people to exercise their civil right to demonstrate in public – albeit through singing and dancing. The Chilean activists' group *Las Tesis* also use arts-based methods of organising: furious about the sexual violence carried out by policemen during the preceding social protests in Chile they choreographed a mass performance. Their choreography was adopted in many countries and their recitative song "Un violador en tu camino, el violador eres tú" ("A rapist on your path, the rapist is you") has mobilised flash mobs worldwide.

<sup>2</sup> [www.onebillionrising.de](http://www.onebillionrising.de)

In Turkey, the women's rights organisation *We Will Stop Femicides Platform* was founded by the families of femicide victims, independent women and women from various political parties, but also by legal associations, business associations, trade unions and others. Femicide, including infanticide and sex trafficking, is recognised by the United Nations as the most extreme form of violence and discrimination against women and girls. It may be dowry related, carried out in the name of "honour", it may be intimate or non-intimate. This Turkish organisation is fighting femicide by collecting data and reporting about the killings of women (two-thirds of whom are killed by a close relative), by supporting endangered women and by advocacy for example for the inclusion of the term "femicide" in the Turkish Penal Code. The wide publicity they are generating for an issue, which traditionally belongs to the private sphere, demonstrates that this organisation's strategy falls under the third category, challenging the existing cultural, patriarchal regime.

Similarly, our fourth example is an organisation in Tanzania, a country in which girls are expelled from school and cannot return when they get pregnant. The CSO *Msichana* (Swahili for "girl") advocates for the right to an education for all girls, and fights for an end to genital mutilation and early marriage. In 2019 they celebrated when Tanzania's Supreme Court of Appeal confirmed a ruling of 2016 which had declared Tanzania's marriage act unconstitutional. This Act had allowed parents to marry off girls as young as fourteen. This success demonstrates how a traditional cultural "norm", which had before been legalised by the state, could be overcome.

Our final example is the Lebanese women's CSO *Kafa* (Arabic for "Enough"). *Kafa* has been active at the forefront of the ongoing political protests which spread rapidly through Lebanon in fall 2019. *Kafa* thus seems to also be an organisation striving to challenge existing cultural regimes. But this work is more recent; for many years it has been working quietly, in a more "picking up the pieces" -manner on many women's rights issues such as rape (including rape in marriage), domestic violence and the rights of domestic workers. Simultaneously, it has been fighting entrenched cultural (patriarchal) norms and regulations by advocacy and street actions, for example, demonstrating against the rule that a rapist goes unpunished if he marries his victim. We find this

example interesting because it suggests that strategies can be combined, that organisations can move in and out of different forms of action and response as circumstances allow; taking an incremental approach when that is all that seems possible, but moving into a more confrontative approach when there are opportunities to do so.

**Conclusions** | The anthology identifies and explores many different forms of gender oppression and many different kinds of organisational responses to it. It is clear from these narratives that the oppression of women is still a very significant problem, often manifesting itself in new and dangerous ways. Equally clearly, women are not passive; women's organisations show courage and persistence in challenging that oppression. However, while they do have some successes, these are always limited.

The state is invariably implicated in women's oppression, sometimes directly, but always in collusion with other forces. Yet any long-term solution must also involve the state. The state is most likely to support programmes of individual empowerment. Such programmes superficially meet women's demands but are politically "safe" because they are not challenging the underlying sources of oppression. Meanwhile market forces, particularly multinational corporations, are too costly for most governments to challenge politically and economically.

Underlying all cases of continued oppression there are deep seated cultural values and practices that devalue women, many of them having a religious base. But even without a strong religion-dominated resistance to women's equality, most societies have powerful, patriarchal traditions that enforce the right of men to dominate women for their own interests.

None of this should lay blame on women or women's organisations for their failure to achieve gender equality. Indeed, women's organisations have achieved much, both for individual women and for improved legal and moral rights for all women. Without the continued struggle for emancipation, women around the world would be much worse off. But the struggle is not over.

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