

Working Paper 2016-13

## **Feminist Activism and the Politics of Reform**

*When and Why Do States Respond to Demands for  
Gender-Equality Policies?*

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prepared for the UNRISD project on  
When and Why Do States Respond to Women's Claims?  
Understanding Gender-Egalitarian Policy Change in Asia

September 2016



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# Acronyms

<b>ANC</b>	African National Congress
<b>CCT</b>	Christian Council of Tanzania
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
<b>CENGOS</b>	Coalition of Eastern NGOs
<b>CONTAG</b>	Confederation of Agricultural Workers
<b>CSO</b>	Civil society organization
<b>CWO</b>	Catholic Women's Organisation
<b>ELCT</b>	Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania
<b>ERA</b>	Equal Rights Amendment
<b>FENATRAHOB</b>	Federación Nacional de Trabajadores del Hogar de Bolivia (National Household Workers' Federation of Bolivia)
<b>FIDA</b>	Uganda Association of Women Lawyers
<b>FWODE</b>	Fund for Women in Democracy
<b>GEP</b>	Gender-equality policy
<b>GLTF</b>	Gender Land Task Force
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>INCRA</b>	Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform)
<b>KNWC</b>	Korean National Council of Women
<b>MAS</b>	Movimiento a Socialismo (Movement Towards Socialism)
<b>MP</b>	Member of Parliament
<b>MST</b>	Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Rural Workers Movement)
<b>NALAF</b>	National Land Forum
<b>NF</b>	New Feminism Movement
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>TAWLA</b>	Tanzania Women Lawyers Association
<b>ULA</b>	Uganda Land Alliance
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>UWONET</b>	Uganda Women's Network
<b>VAW</b>	Violence against women

# Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Lindsay Cornelio and Ignacia Simonetti for research assistance.

## **Abstract**

Under what conditions is gender-equality policy advocacy successful? This paper examines a segment of the growing quantitative comparative political science literature that seeks to answer this question. Recent scholarship emphasizes such factors as the strength of women's movements and the forms of opposition to which their policy demands gives rise. Variables such as the nature of the state or the economy, are also seen strongly to influence whether women mobilize to make claims on the state, the issues they politicize and their chances of success. However, one consequence of focusing on institutional factors is that the role of strategic choices made by feminist policy advocates is underestimated in explaining their successes. The article argues that understanding variation in the outcomes achieved by women's rights advocates requires close attention to the strategic capacity of policy entrepreneurs, assessed in terms of three inter-related political skills: (i) "framing" policy demands; (ii) forming and managing civic alliances; and (iii) engaging with state entities without compromising organizational autonomy.

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*Keywords:* feminism, policy reform, civil society, social movements



# 1. Introduction

Identifying a globally applicable set of conditions under which feminist claims making is successful is a daunting challenge, to say the least. It may be impossible to know with any degree of certainty why policy or institutional reforms to advance gender equality are implemented in some places and not others, at some times and not others, and through some means and not others. Molyneux observes that the capacity of women's movements to contribute to a "workable formula for the delivery of social justice within which women's interests, diverse though they be, are given recognition" depends on the existence of "favourable political circumstances" (2001: 160). The nature of these circumstances is left unspecified, but clearly included are elements that transcend such conventional variables as regime type, the nature of party competition or the formal legal environment.

While fully identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for successful feminist claims making may be too tall an order, the search for patterns is nevertheless useful. It can focus attention on enabling factors such as the structure of women's movements, the alliances and tactics they pursue, the types of resistance that reform proposals encounter, and the political and institutional environments in which claims making efforts are embedded. This paper therefore has the more limited goal of reviewing some of the ways in which various combinations of "political circumstances", which resist attempts at classification, create opportunities for women's rights advocates to succeed in advancing at least parts of their agendas.

Women have sought to advance claims in a wide range of institutional settings—including in most variants of democratic and authoritarian regimes. They have pressed for favourable treatment from traditional and religious authorities, private-sector actors, voluntary associations, the executive, legislative and judicial officials of national (and subnational) governments, and within international institutions of multilateral governance, such as the African Union and the World Bank. The focus in this paper is on claims made with respect to public authorities of all kinds: demands for legislative and policy reform, changes in public expenditure patterns, the redesign of institutions and improved methods for implementing laws and programmes. These claims may be advanced at any tier of governance—from the local to the global—though our primary focus is the national level.

We examine a small segment of the wide-ranging literature on comparative gender-equality policy (GEP) analysis, paying particular attention to research that attempts to derive broad generalizations about the nature of successful claims making.<sup>1</sup> Some of this scholarship stresses enabling factors such as the existence of autonomous women's civil society organizations; economic and political conditions that enable women to control assets; rule by left-of-centre parties; the cultivation of allies and champions within state bureaucracies; positive extra-national influences such as international human rights conventions; the erosion of local and national cultural norms that deny

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<sup>1</sup> The article is also based on a literature review of comparative gender equality policy studies from around the world, with a particular focus on claims making in areas that arouse the most intense resistance from patriarchal interests – claims making to legalize abortion and to expand women's land rights. Space constraints mean the cases cannot be presented in detail here (the main comparative studies are summarized in the annex). They were analysed to assess differences in the tactics used by women's groups, their alliances with other social movements, the influence of national histories of women's claims making on a country's "gender regime", the role of "spoilers" such as traditional interests and the impact on claims-making of features of public sector institutional configurations, including the implications of working at different levels of government. The study was conducted for the research project *When and Why do States Respond to Women's Claims? Understanding Gender-Egalitarian Policy Change in Asia*, coordinated by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

women equal rights; and high capacity among public institutions (Mazur, 2015; Weldon, 2002).

A country's long-standing characteristics—including its social structure, institutional framework, legal system, economic profile, and the history of prior policy battles—influence the prospects facing feminist claims makers. But determining the extent of such influences through statistical methods is often extremely problematic—for instance, because of the unavailability of data or the incommensurability of national contexts. Most importantly, however, statistical methods tend systematically to downplay, or even exclude, the conscious strategic decisions of feminist claims makers themselves. Because of fundamental disagreements over strategy in most cases—notably, whether it motivated action—consistently applying classification criteria to empirical events is nearly impossible.

This does not mean that there is not excellent quantitative scholarship to consider. We examine two different approaches to identifying the determinants of successful claims making. First, we draw on Htun and Weldon's (2010, 2012) work, which addresses, among other things, the links between the policy domain within which a claim is located and the character, intensity and/or effectiveness of the opposition its advocates face. A shortcoming of this otherwise impressive body of research is its limited consideration of what we call “political practice”—the political strategies used by claims makers to overcome the forms of opposition that arise in response to their specific policy and institutional reform proposals.

The second analytical approach we examine does focus on political practice, and for this reason, we argue, is a useful guide to the real world struggles for influence that play themselves out in the country contexts considered by this branch of the literature. Political practice encompasses the range of strategic choices made with respect to the three inter-related activities: (i) “framing” policy demands, (ii) forming and managing civic alliances, and (iii) engaging with state entities. The discussion of *issue framing* notes the tension between the feminist principle that the social foundations of gender inequality must be confronted head on, and the pragmatic impulse to articulate policy ambitions in politically less threatening terms—in some cases, based on more traditional understandings of gender relations—in order to win short-term policy battles. A key form of *alliance building* for feminist policy champions are “issue networks”, coalitions that connect movements with senior officials, policy analysts, human rights lawyers, elected legislators and other stakeholders. Engagement with transnational feminist movements and international norm-development processes such as those created under CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against

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