
The Power of Movements

GEETANJALI MISRA

ABSTRACT *Following a tribute to Miriam Makeba or as she was popularly called 'Mama Africa' whose voice and extraordinary leadership has contributed greatly to the women's movement, Geeta Misra, outgoing President of AWID and Executive Director of CREA opened the AWID Forum with a strong statement on the power of movements.*

KEYWORDS *social justice; resistance; heteronormativity; collectivity; NGOization; organizations; change*

Power to the people

I want to start with a word. A word that was born in South Africa, where we are gathered today to talk about the power of movements. A word that captures both the sting of injustice – and the power of movements, social movements, in overcoming oppression, discrimination and injustice. A word that evokes one of the most monumental struggles in the world: against apartheid, or the system of racial segregation that was in place in South Africa for almost 50 years.

The word I want to open this AWID plenary with is *Amandla*, a Xhosa and Zulu word that means 'power', and that when combined with *Awethu* – *Amandla Awethu* – means power to us, or 'power to the people'.

These are words that had the power to shift power, like other words that come to mind. *Azaadi* or the Hindi word for freedom is another such word. It was the rallying cry for India's struggle for independence from the British, and is now part of the lexicon of the Indian women's movement in India, where I come from. Of course, words do not bring about social change just by themselves, but as the British playwright Tom Stoppard once said, 'Words are sacred. If you get the right ones in the right order, you can nudge the world a little.'

People fighting for social justice

I would like to evoke the power of movements that have nudged the world a little through words. I would like to share some of the popular slogans we associate with diverse movements. These slogans are not just words – they represent the claims of people fighting for social justice on various fronts.

- Workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains! (That's from the labour movement, the granddaddy of social movements)

- Make love not war. (The peace movement)
- The personal is political. (That's from the early consciousness-raising days)
- Women's rights are human rights. (And that's from the Vienna conference days – both from the women's movement of course)
- Women unite. Take back the night. (The stop violence against women movement)
- My body, my choice! (The reproductive rights movement)
- Pleasure me safely. (That's from the sexuality rights movement in the time of HIV)
- Love is a human right. (The human rights movement)
- Silence = Death. (The struggle against HIV)
- We're here. We're queer. Get used to it. (The LGBT rights movement)
- Good girls go to heaven. Bad girls go everywhere.
- Don't talk to me of sewing machines. Talk to me of workers' rights. (The sex workers' rights movement)
- Yes we can! (The Barack Obama 2008 campaign)
- Another world is possible. (That's the popular World Social Forum slogan as part of the larger movement against corporate global capital)

As these slogans tell us, social movements are rooted in fighting a diversity of oppressions and injustices. Many movements emerged out of the liberation struggles for Independence in the countries of the global South – but what are called the new social movements can be local, national, regional or transnational. They can spark off or be seeded anywhere – on the streets, in shanty towns like the South African Shack Dweller movement, in university coffee houses like the student movement against the Vietnam War, in workplaces like the Solidarity movement in Poland, in areas where people are being displaced by so-called 'development' projects like the Narmada dam in India, or on the Internet through sites like moveon.org which channelled global resistance and outrage against the war in Iraq.

They can take place where there is democracy, in situations of occupation like Palestine, and in countries where we assume there is no space to

create a struggle. Women, in Iran, for instance started building a movement in the early 1980s when Khomeini's regime had dismantled nearly all the rights that women had secured between 1900 and 1979. All they had left was the right to vote; but even in this small crack, they organized themselves. Disabled women in New Zealand and India have organized to make sign language an official language in those countries.

Global creative resistance

In the public imagination, social movements are often associated with simple acts of resistance: women hugging trees in northern India rather than allowing them to be cut down in the environmental Chipko movement; a black woman Rosa Parks travelling in the whites-only section of a bus as part of the American civil rights struggle; students going on hunger strikes in China to protest the murder of a sympathetic general secretary; anti-nuclear activists mounting vigil at radioactive sites like Chernobyl; protesters against HIV chaining themselves to fences so that they cannot be dragged away, etc. While these acts of resistance become the public face, the movements they are part of run much deeper. In this sense, movements are like icebergs...a bit of it visible on top, the rest of it held together as an invisible mass.

There are many ways to think about, understand and conceptualize social movements:

- As a major vehicle for ordinary people's participation in public politics.
- As a process by which ordinary people make collective claims on others.
- As politics by other means, often the only means open to relatively powerless groups.
- As collective challenges – or mobilization from below.

Regardless of how we understand them, what all social movements share in common are at least five things:

- A feeling of injustice.
- An understanding of oppression as a political condition.

Development 52(2): Upfront

- A desire to change political conditions – or shift power.
- A belief in the power of many.
- The presence of the powerless.

A feeling of injustice

No movement has ever begun without a rage against oppression and a refusal to accept it, even when it is presented as natural, inevitable, destined, the way things are... since it's been that way for centuries. When the African-American author Alice Walker says, 'I have a rage in me to defy the stars', she is talking the language and concepts of social movement.

But a rage and a refusal are not enough. The heart is not enough. The head must be allied to this, the intellectual understanding of oppression as a political condition. This is the second thing that all movements have: a political analysis of oppression. When a black woman says she lives where she does, not because of a 'resource gap' but because of a 'deep asymmetry of power between different classes', that's a statement of a political condition. When a dalit or low-caste woman says she cannot love someone outside her own caste not because of 'purity' issues, but because she is not free to make her own sexual choices, she understands her political condition. When a lesbian woman says she cannot introduce her lover to her mother because of the stranglehold of heteronormativity, she understands her condition politically.

The good thing about political conditions is that they can change. All social movements are about overcoming asymmetries of power, about shifting power – from the powerful to the powerless whether we see the 'power axis' in terms of class, gender, race, caste, sexuality, religion, ability or what have you. But when social movements aim to shift power they do so with the goal of equity in mind. The aim of making women powerful is not to make men powerless, but to ensure that women also have power. The power to make our own decisions. The power to ensure that political, social and economic resources and opportunities flow to us. The power to set agendas.

But it is not enough for us to shift power outside of our movements: we need to ensure that power is shared within our movements today, that our movements do not become monoliths presiding over hierarchies of oppression. Whose struggles do our movements represent? Do they represent all our collective struggles – or those of the more powerful amongst us? Do our movements include those at the margins: lesbian women, sex workers, indigenous women, young women, Muslim women, Roma women, disabled women, etc?

Collective change

Which brings me to the last two things that all movements share: a belief in the power of many, not one. A belief in we, not just I. While a single act of resistance can spark a movement, it is not in itself a movement. Movements are about collective claims. But whose collective claims are we talking about? Whose peoples movements? The powerless, or those directly affected by oppression. Can we think of a women's movement without women? A labour movement without workers? A young people's movement without young people? An LGBT movement without lesbian gay bisexual and transgendered women? A student movement without students? A dalit movement without dalits? No.

Many of us enter movements through the organizations we work in. As feminist activist Srilatha Batliwala reminds us – 'Organizations are sites from which movements are built and supported. But organizations, even though they are part of movements, are not in themselves movements – movements operate at a scale that no single organization can operate at. Since so many of us belong to NGOs, here is a question for each of us: How do we locate ourselves? Do we see ourselves as part of an organization? Or do we see ourselves as part of a movement? Or as parts of both?'

This is an important question because it relates to what we see as our final goal: are we working on sexual harassment or domestic violence or access to land and water or whatever we do as an end in itself? Or is it both an end in itself and a means to transform power relations between men and women? Is it enough for us to site water

resources near a low-income community and increase access to water – or do we also question who is responsible for collecting that water? And why that is the case? And what we can do about it? Is it enough for us to ensure that land is redistributed to a landless family – or do we stop and wonder why that land cannot be placed in a woman's name? Is it enough for us to ensure that a woman has a job – or do we ask ourselves why she cannot decide how to spend the money that she earns? Or why she could she not get a job for so long? And how can we change all of that?

Internal challenges

All of us work to change things, but the question is really this: how far do we push change? Upto what level? Many of our organizations provide services, valuable services, to our constituents. But do we see these services as ends in themselves? Or do we see them both as ends and as means to actualize rights? In our own NGOs, do we see ourselves as doing the work of movements, getting to the roots to create radical, fundamental change? Or do we see ourselves tinkering with the symptoms without pushing through to the roots?

Many activists feel that NGOization is an internal challenge to the process of building movements. Another challenge, this time external, is fundamentalism – of all kinds. Whether it is the fundamentalism of the market which takes away the sovereignty of the nation-states we live in, that of religious forces who try to recreate medieval forms of womanhood, or sexual fundamentalism which day in and day out pushes heterosexuality down our throats, this is something that erodes the power of movements. And yet, this is something we can only tackle as movements, not as organizations standing alone. As movements

working together we can do this. To go back to the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa – this was not the work of one movement alone, but movements working hand in hand.

An emerging challenge to movements is 'philanthrocapitalism', or the belief that business principles can be applied to the search for social transformation. Philanthrocapitalist donors (and we know who they are) have money and are prepared to put it into social change – but they are impatient for solutions, data and results – and they believe that change can happen like that! Instantly! In a jiffy!

Creating change

Everything we know tells us that what creates lasting change – is the slow lasting power of movements, but that creating this change takes generations. My grandmother was married when she was 16 and never worked for a living. My mother got married when she was 24 and worked for a living till she got married. Marriage is not on my agenda and I cannot imagine a situation where my livelihood depends not on my own two hands, but on someone else's.

A century ago who would have thought that women would vote, something we take for granted in some places today? That's the power of movements. Or even that women are human? That's the power of movements. Half a century ago, when slavery had ended but segregation was in place, who would have thought that the next President of the United States would be an African-American man? That is the power of movements – the power to use the power we have, but do not always know we have.