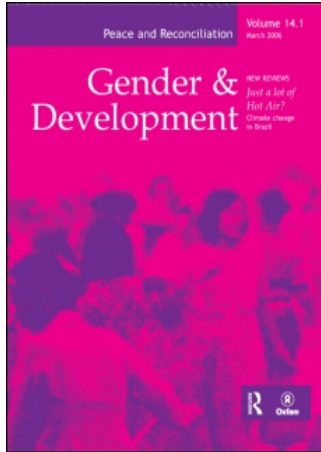


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A guide to feminist advocacy

Kristy Evans for the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)¹

Feminist advocacy is concerned with ending injustices throughout the world by advancing women's rights. It has various uses and manifestations, from lobbying strategies at the World Trade Organisation ministerial meetings to the reform of gender-discriminatory policies. Feminist advocacy strategies can be infused with the daily work of individuals and organisations to ensure that work is maximised and targeted to changing key decision-making processes and policies that infringe on women's rights. This article describes the uses, misuses, and challenges of feminist advocacy. It offers tips and useful questions to ask, and describes strategies to be incorporated into current and future work.

Advocacy must be based on an analysis of what needs to be changed and why... this analysis must be feminist because only feminism gives an analysis of patriarchy and how it is linked to the structures and relationships of power between men and women that perpetuate violence, poverty — the crises that confront us.

Peggy Antrobus, founder of DAWN
(a leading feminist network in the global South)

2005 marks a critical year for advocacy on gender equality and women's rights. With the Beijing +10 negotiations, the G8 meeting, the Millennium Summit, and the WTO ministerial meetings occurring this year, activists for women's rights have much work to do, with processes to monitor, agendas to push, and opportunities for mobilisation. Many of the key international agreements and declarations addressing women's rights were negotiated in the 1980s and 1990s, through the UN Women's Conferences. Yet implementation of these, and hence the

realisation of women's rights, has been far from universal.

New and old issues continue to surface, constantly challenging feminists to rethink strategies to ensure that women's rights are upheld, and that the issues are placed and retained at the top of international, national, and local development agendas. Because of this, there is a need for constant scrutiny and dialogue about the ways in which 'we' within the women's movement(s), and gender-equality activists, engage in these arenas. Advocacy strategies remain essential parts of the essence and evolution of feminist engagement and struggle.

This article comes from the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). AWID is an international membership organisation which aims to connect, inform, and mobilise people and organisations committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development, and women's human rights. AWID's goal is to achieve changes in policies, institutions, and individuals that will improve the lives of

women and girls everywhere. It does this by facilitating on-going debates on fundamental and provocative issues, as well as by building the individual and organisational capacities of those working for women's empowerment and social justice (AWID 2005a).

AWID's involvement in advocacy has grown in recent years to include research and analysis on key issues of concern for women throughout the world, extensive communication and information-dissemination strategies, direct participation in many meetings, conferences, and strategy sessions, as well as lobbying for women's rights in key forums.

What does 'feminist' advocacy look like?

'Advocacy' is an umbrella term which describes various strategies. These include public campaigning to challenge ideas and beliefs, and inspire a critical mass of people to demand change and put pressure on policy makers and decision makers. It also includes direct lobbying of key policy makers and decision makers. Feminist advocacy, like all advocacy, draws on a range of varied skills. These include undertaking research on the situation on the ground, communicating to particular audiences, and building alliances.

Advocacy that is specifically feminist in nature is designed to advance women's rights through reforming gender-discriminatory policies, laws, corporate behaviour, and cultural practices which affect women around the world. Feminist advocacy is intimately connected to – and grounded in – the local struggles of real women, and takes its legitimacy and direction from these women, who are experiencing injustice and inequality of different kinds at first hand.

For feminist advocates, advocacy must also reflect our political commitment to realising the rights of women in the means

that we use to achieve our goals. Doing advocacy in a feminist way implies not only working towards a good end, but infusing advocacy strategies with feminist values. What this means in practice is difficult to describe. One suggestion is that feminist advocacy consists of advancing women's rights in a way which promotes four core values. These are a belief in equality; a belief in gender justice in all its different dimensions; a belief in the universal sanctity of human rights; and a commitment to flexibility in making alliances in full realisation of the fluidity of circumstances and partnerships (Sen 2003, Leipold 2001). Another suggestion is that feminist advocacy is simply synonymous with the work of all who advocate gender equality and base their daily work on feminist analysis.

Feminist advocacy is done by individuals in women's movements, but also by individuals in mainstream organisations which include a commitment to advancing women's rights alongside other complementary goals. Many development organisations have realised that grassroots development projects which address the needs of women and men at the local level can have only a limited impact on the rights of women unless the overarching political, economic, and social structures which discriminate against women, and thereby cause and maintain gender inequality and poverty, are transformed.

In order to link local grassroots realities with a feminist political analysis of women's marginalisation, feminist advocates ask questions about women's lives in a particular context and consider the links between their daily realities and the unequal power relations, expressed in policies, laws, practices, ideas, and beliefs, which constrain their choices. The kinds of question that we need to ask include *Why are service providers offering the services that they offer? What does a gender analysis of the context tell us about their appropriateness to women's lives? What impact*

do they have on gender relations and women's rights? Such an analysis then places us in a position to connect the real issues affecting particular women to the policies and institutions that are producing and perpetuating inequalities. From there we can engage in feminist advocacy. The following case study gives an example of such work.

Case study 1: the Rape Crisis Centre of Cape Town

The Rape Crisis Centre of Cape Town was created in 1976 to provide counselling for individual women, and public education and awareness-raising. It aimed its services at the survivors of sexual assault, and at the broader community. Over the years, the Centre has been transformed from a predominantly reactive organisation, providing services to those affected by sexual violence, into one that attempts to solve the problem by challenging sexual violence at its source. It has built various different advocacy strategies into its daily functioning. Working with other organisations in partnership, it has been instrumental in policy creation, change, education, and awareness about gender-based violence in South Africa. The reason for this transformation was that workers at the Rape Crisis Centre realised that there were major stumbling blocks that interfered with effective service provision. Violations of women's rights impeded survivors' recovery and their subsequent participation in society.

The Rape Crisis Centre therefore established an advocacy branch, working in co-operation with other organisations branches in South Africa. The first task was to establish the issues that would become the focus of the organisation's advocacy efforts. Since then, the organisation has used numerous successful advocacy strategies, targeting different audiences and using different entry points into debates, to achieve various results. Some examples are summarised below.

- The production of a review of international and national policy documents related to violence against women, and detailed analysis of South African legislation related to violence against women. The organisation has made submissions to the South African Parliament, aiming to change legislation, and has participated in developing National Policy Guidelines for health services, the judicial system, the police, correctional services, and welfare in the treatment of survivors of sexual assault. It has also contributed to the production of a National Legal Manual on Violence Against Women.
- Identification of relevant NGOs and individuals who will provide legal support to victims of sexual offences. It has also developed close and mutually beneficial working relationships with other interested actors, including the South African Department of Justice, the Ministry of Safety and Security, the Department of Health, and the Department of Social Development.
- Participation in lobbying for changes in legal and medical procedures, to ensure that these give better services to women complainants. In addition the Centre has attempted to change public opinion, through the media, and to provide a counter-balance to biased media reporting of the issue. Activities have included writing letters to the press which highlight the extent of violence against women, and giving radio, TV, and press interviews on issues relating to sexual violence.²

Weaving advocacy into gender and development work

There is a misconception on the part of some people involved in gender and development work that to take up

advocacy as a part of such work requires a complete shift of focus, from giving support to women at grassroots level to engaging in lobbying and campaigning activities. It is erroneously supposed that organisations should stop doing other valuable work in which they are engaged. But in fact advocacy can be effectively combined with other types of service provision and analytical work. We must ask ourselves, rather, what are the costs of *not* weaving advocacy into our work?

Violations of women's rights are often directly connected to the failures of governments to honour the international agreements that they have signed. This, in turn, resonates throughout both the creation and the implementation of local and national policies. Issues of gender equality and women's rights are intimately and pervasively affected by policy decisions taken in local, national, and global institutions. We should not overlook the strategic significance of incorporating advocacy into other activities to support women, if we want to bring about real and sustained change. Some of the most effective and pioneering development organisations have an advocacy arm (Leipold 2001). As suggested above, the critical step for gender and development workers is to incorporate a political awareness and consciousness into all their activities, moving beyond approaches which aim to ameliorate problems rather than considering how a lasting solution can be reached.

The other key thing to realise is that advocacy work can be conducted at all levels of engagement, and in organisations with varying degrees of staff capacity. Advocacy work of different kinds can take place within a variety of different types of organisation, in different locations, ranging from local government offices, national government departments and parliaments, regional inter-government bodies, international institutions, summits, conferences or events, to less obviously 'political' settings: schools, local communities, and civil-society organisations.

Navigating advocacy spaces and places

When initiating an advocacy activity, it is important to make strategic choices about where to direct your energies, and to look for strategic entry points.

Using created spaces to plan advocacy

Advocacy activities often start by using *created spaces* – that is, spaces opened up by advocates themselves, who each bring a different and independent agenda. This offers the possibility of developing a shared – and hence stronger – negotiating position (Leipold 2001). An example of a created space in which such alliances may be built is a regional meeting of specialists in a particular area of development, and specialists in advocacy itself. People who know the issues well can then weigh the options for advocacy that are available to them, and assess which option would have the greatest impact, and for whom. All the while, they would weigh up their resources in relation to the probable impact of the various advocacy activities that they might undertake.

Given the very real problem of limited resources and the urgent imperative of reaching feminist goals, it is also important for advocates to develop some sort of *criteria for engagement* that could help us to determine where we will have the greatest impact in promoting women's rights and equality, and where our efforts can, realistically, have the desired effects. It is critical to ask questions such as the following:

- Where do we have the greatest capacity and resources to effect changes in policy?
- What risks are associated with engaging in particular spaces?
- How can we ensure that our agendas are being promoted at the national, regional, and international levels?
- In what institutions are the relevant decisions being made?

- Where will my organisation, and the expertise that we have, make the greatest impact – locally, nationally, internationally?

This type of questioning allows us to make well-considered decisions. For instance, while international events and meetings receive the greatest media attention and publicise themselves very widely and effectively, it is essential for advocacy organisations to assess the potential worth of attending and participating in these events. Is it effective, for example, for representatives from your organisation to fly to Hong Kong for the WTO Ministerial³ in December 2005, considering the cost and the impact that you are likely to have? Or would it be more effective to educate people about the impact of unfair trade on women's rights in your home countries and cities, and try to persuade them to take action? An alternative course of action would be for your organisation to lobby official representatives of your government on trade issues, in order to sway their positions, before they embark on negotiations on behalf of your country.

Advocacy in invited spaces

In some cases, you will decide that your organisation needs to participate in *invited spaces*, in order to influence the established agendas of institutions or decision makers: spaces such as government-sponsored policy consultations, stakeholder meetings with financial institutions, and local council meetings. Effective advocacy in these 'invited spaces' requires clear demands for change by skilled advocates (ActionAid *et al.* 2001:2).

A good illustration of the complexities of advocacy in an invited space is the decisions to be taken by organisations aiming to influence the outcome of the Millennium Summit negotiations in New York in September 2005.⁴ This type of negotiation takes place within a very structured environment, where heads of state meet to discuss

the progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Women's groups and organisations have limited access to this type of space, and must structure their advocacy efforts very carefully. For instance, the civil-society hearings that occurred in June 2005 were spaces where participation was by invitation only. It is questionable how effective it would be – considering their already limited time and resources – for women's organisations to send representatives to New York during the actual summit, unless they had a very well thought-out and strategic plan for their engagement in this process. There has been considerable progress over the months leading up to the summit, where civil-society groups have nominated speakers, planned strategic involvement, analysed summit documents, and petitioned policy makers. In order to participate effectively in such an event, if you or your organisation should choose to attend, it would be advisable to maximise your participation by finding out what has already been done and where the gaps are.⁵

Struggle-based issues or issue-based struggles?

There are also different types of struggle to consider. An 'issue-based struggle' is an advocacy effort designed around one specific issue or desired policy change (ActionAid *et al.* 2001: 4). In contrast, advocacy can address an issue or aim to change one policy as a single step in a longer-term struggle for social justice, referred to as a 'struggle-based issue' (*ibid.*: 5). Social change for gender equality is a slow, long-term, political process of transforming power relations. Both 'issue-based struggles' and 'struggle-based issues' can be planned so that they help to provide activists with opportunities for further advocacy efforts to change power relations and bring about gender equality and women's human rights.

Choosing an advocacy strategy

A variety of advocacy strategies can be used, either alone or in combination with each other, at different stages of particular advocacy initiatives.

Research and analysis

As suggested at the start of this article, it is imperative for feminist advocacy to be grounded in solid, up-to-date information which supports and informs a well-informed and critical analysis. You need to ensure that you have assessed existing policies and decision-making processes which have an impact on women's ability to realise their rights thoroughly and accurately. You also need to have investigated the facts about the context in which these policies were developed and decisions taken. By doing this, you can determine whether a particular policy change will contribute to the type of change that you want to bring about. Research and analysis inform decisions on the advocacy strategies that we choose, by uncovering the policy-making mechanisms on which we should focus our efforts.

Lobbying

Engaging directly with key policy makers and decision makers can be an essential part of a successful advocacy strategy. Lobbying activities are extremely focused and usually involve having direct conversations or consultations with politicians and bureaucrats. These activities can take place in various forums and with a range of people, depending on the policy and decision-making process on which you are focusing.

In deciding how to start lobbying, you need to consider the phases of the policy-making process. These start with setting an agenda for action, continue through enacting a policy, to the implementation and enforcement of it, and end by monitoring its impact. You also need to decide whether or

not a particular policy change will contribute to the type of change you want to bring about. The policy process may vary, depending on the types of issue with which you are dealing. Are they relevant to a local, national, or international context? And is there a policy solution available? Not every problem can be solved by a change in policy.⁶

Alliance building

Perhaps the most important part of any successful advocacy effort is the concerted effort of movements, organisations, and individuals to reach a single shared goal. The more people involved in an advocacy initiative, the louder the demands for change and reform, and the more difficult it is to silence them. It is vital to include as many different voices as possible in advocacy. In particular, the voices of those most affected by the policy that you want to change should be included in meetings, strategy sessions, public statements, and so on.

Communication

Effective communications are essential. The mode of communication depends on the target. For example, succinct briefings and 'urgent action' letter-writing campaigns are directed at policy makers. Techniques for raising public awareness include public demonstrations, with eye-catching banners; media campaigns, using memorable slogans; informative flyers and posters; announcements via information and communications technologies (ICTS) such as e-mail and text messaging; interviews with experts in high-profile media; and various means of creative expression, such as street theatre and poetry. You need to choose the modes of communication most likely to have an impact on your target audiences. It is also important to keep in mind that there is a wide variety of new internet and communication technologies which can have a wide reach and effect for a relatively low cost and minimal effort (Evans 2005).

Building a campaign

With most advocacy efforts comes the idea of launching some sort of campaign – that is, an advocacy strategy directed at changing public opinion and mobilising this opinion to put pressure on decision makers to respond via legislation, policy formulation, or implementation. Starting or joining a national or global campaign can be a very strategic and direct way for an organisation to influence policy makers to address gender inequality, especially if the campaign is directly challenging a specific law or policy.

Popular campaigns can fulfil numerous purposes within broader advocacy goals of policy change. They can, for example, raise public awareness of an issue and spur people into taking action, attract media attention to an issue, pressure governments during negotiations, or ensure that a policy is being implemented correctly and in a timely manner. Campaigns are most effective when a particular issue is simultaneously at the forefront of policy makers' concerns and also prominent in the public mind, as a result of existing advocacy efforts that would benefit from a unified strategy in order to make specific gains (for example, the 1993 global campaign entitled 'Women's Rights are Human Rights').⁷

Effective campaigns use well-considered strategies in pursuit of specific goals. In building a campaign, it is important to identify your target audiences and adapt your messages accordingly. If you are targeting a broad audience of the general public with your communication strategy, and attempting to build alliances to engage the public in your campaign, it is important to frame your messages in a way that is meaningful to those with no prior knowledge of the issue. This is in contrast to the kinds of message that you can use to target policy makers who already know about the issue, whose support you are hoping to attract, and in contrast also to messages designed to change the minds of

policy makers who are opposed to the changes that you are advocating. You need to structure your strategies and messages in ways that will maximise the impact on your audiences. Select strategies that are appropriate for the issues at hand, and to the goal of achieving sustainable social transformation.

Always remember to consult like-minded organisations (especially locally based organisations) about the most appropriate and effective strategy for your campaign.

These are some questions to ask when designing or joining a campaign:

- Why is my organisation joining/creating this campaign? What outcomes are we hoping for?
- Who/what is this campaign supporting?
- Who is supporting the campaign, and why?
- Is this campaign supported at different levels?
- Is it grounded in the daily struggles of people whose lives could be improved by a successful achievement of the campaign's goal?
- Is this campaign linked to a strategic moment or a particular political venue that is appropriate to the issue?
- Will the campaign raise public awareness and encourage citizen participation in decision making?
- Will the campaign contribute to the transformation of power relations?

The next case study provides an example of a campaign which is viewed by many as a campaign 'gone wrong', owing to a failure to consider such issues.

Case study 2: the Amina Lawal letter-writing campaign

Many readers may remember being bombarded by e-mails in 2002 which pleaded with members of the public to join an international letter-writing campaign to save the life of Amina Lawal, a young Nigerian woman who was sentenced to stoning to death for alleged adultery in August that year.⁸ According to the campaign, her life was in imminent danger. However, the campaign letter that was being circulated for signing contained inaccurate information and perpetuated negative misconceptions about Islam and Muslims. A Nigerian women's rights group, Baobab, was familiar with, and sensitive to, the local situation and the particular details of the case. According to Baobab, the campaign's letter-writing strategy was not appropriate in this situation, because of the volatility of the local context. They were concerned that the campaign might aggravate the situation and put Amina Lawal and her supporters in danger from vigilantes.

(See www.whrnet.org/docs/action-03-05-07.html, last checked 2 September 2005.)

This case study offers several lessons for advocates to keep in mind. First, get your facts right. Second, find out which local activists and organisations are already engaged in working on the issue, and consult them. Third, revise your plans in partnership with those who are directly involved.

Has our advocacy work been effective? How will I know?

To measure the success of your advocacy efforts, it is essential to have clearly identified the goals of your advocacy strategy in advance. From this you can then measure your outcomes. Critical questions to ask when designing advocacy initiatives include the following:

- What is the focus of our advocacy strategy?
- Who are our target audiences, and what do we want to achieve through them?
- What is the impact that we hope to achieve through these strategies?
- What are the actual policy-change and decision-making structures that we want to change/influence?

Incorporating these questions into the initial design of your advocacy efforts will not only allow careful consideration of *what* exactly you are trying to achieve, but will help you to plan *how* you will achieve your goals. In this way, you can measure your successes by the impact that your advocacy strategies have had, and you can learn from your experiences.

This approach also prompts you to ask, when assessing how you will achieve the advocacy goals, where the resources will be obtained for the advocacy strategy.⁹

Alliance building as an engine for change

Feminist advocacy can (and should) be used on the ground and in local struggles. But it can also very effectively link the global and local dimensions, by challenging the effects on women in a particular context of national and international policies and decisions.

One way of doing this is to promote the participation of grassroots groups themselves in advocacy. For instance, if a community is fighting against the privatisation of water supplies, and associated cost-recovery programmes, feminist advocacy enables communities to plan their response by using a political analysis of the impact of the policy on women, men, and children. It can also provide them with conceptual tools which help them to identify strategic opportunities to enter debates and processes, and target audiences for their messages.

Feminist advocacy initiatives can also link regional struggles with international struggles. They can provide a concrete plan of action for activists from different regions to consolidate their efforts. A good example of this is the GCAP-women's list, which is a communication mechanism that enables interested women's organisations and groups to strategise, disseminate information, and ensure that women's-rights perspectives are being included in the major negotiations both at the regional and global levels.¹⁰

This kind of alliance building enables a range of organisations from regions throughout the world to consolidate their advocacy efforts, and thereby achieve more impact. Feminist advocacy can also involve women's organisations working together with allies from mainstream development and other sectors to address issues such as trade liberalisation, food security, peace building, violence against women, and migration. Advocates from different regions and sectors can consolidate their efforts and resources in a thoughtful and strategic way, assessing goals and ensuring that advocacy strategies are used in the most effective ways possible.

Conclusion

Currently, very significant challenges remain for advocates of women's rights.¹¹ There is a concern that the intense advocacy efforts of 2005 have been expended on defending goals that had already been negotiated and 'won' in previous forums. This has left little time and few resources for developing and promoting a proactive agenda in support of women's rights. Shrinking resources and funding for work on women's rights are another source of serious concern. AWID's recent survey, entitled 'Where is the Money for Women's Rights?', has shown that advocacy activities are difficult to fund. Increasingly, the resources of international development agencies that used to fund

NGOs are now going directly to governments. This is potentially problematic for advocacy initiatives that criticise government policies.

As advocates for women's rights, we need to be mindful of how we work with allies, with the media, and among ourselves to ensure the greatest possible impact. Alliance building is a critical part of advocacy efforts, but advocates for women's rights still feel that gender equality, recognised to be critical to poverty alleviation and the elimination of injustices throughout the world, is still marginalised by many mainstream international advocacy organisations and omitted from their advocacy agendas. Another problem is the lack of capacity within the women's movement to link different advocacy issues. An example of this is the polarisation of issues relating to economic justice and sexual rights in the women's movement. Although these issues are fundamentally interconnected, they are often treated as single issues, to be pursued with single-minded strategies. A final challenge for advocates of women's rights is that strong and influential advocacy depends heavily on engaging the interest of the media, which unfortunately still promote misconceptions about feminists and portray women as 'victims'.

It is critical to secure a feminist presence in key negotiation processes, to ensure that women's rights are positively and not negatively affected. This entails work for advocates of women's rights in both mainstream development organisations and women's organisations and groups. We must focus on including women's and feminist voices not only at the actual negotiations, but also in the processes leading up to them. We must create opportunities to develop strategies of our own that integrate issues, build alliances, and implement our advocacy measures as effectively as possible. We must ensure that the public is educated by means of popular campaigning and mobilisation around the

issues; that national-level representatives promote a women's rights agenda; and that we, as advocates, are taking up and using our opportunities at the 'invited spaces'. It is via creative, careful, and well-thought strategies that we shall realise women's rights.

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Notes

- 1 I thank Alison Symington for her initial editing of this paper.
- 2 See www.rapecrisis.org.za/ for more information.
- 3 The WTO Ministerial is the highest-level decision-making body of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), meeting approximately every two years and setting the agenda of the organisation. At the Hong Kong Ministerial, delegates are attempting to get negotiations back on track to implement the 'Doha Agenda' (as articulated at the fourth Ministerial in Doha, Qatar, November 2001) (AWID 2005b). More information about the Hong Kong WTO Ministerial is available at www.awid.org/go.php?pg=year_opportunities.
- 4 To find out more about the Millennium +5 Summit, visit www.awid.org/go.php?pg=year_opportunities.
- 5 To find out what women's organisations have done in relation to the Millennium +5 Summit, consult the GCAP-women's list archives at <http://mailman-new.greennet.org.uk/pipermail/gcap-women/>.
- 6 Sisonke Msimang, personal interview, November 2003.
- 7 'Women's Rights are Human Rights' was a global campaign organised to coincide with the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in order to ensure that women's rights were taken seriously and placed on the agenda for negotiation (CWGL 2005).
- 8 The UK chapter of Amnesty International started a petition which attracted 1.3 million signatures in support of Amina (Break the Chain, 2005)
- 9 More information on resources for the women's movement can be obtained in a forthcoming report by The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), which will be found at www.awid.org. This was based on a survey called 'Where is the Money for Women's Rights?', conducted in 2005 with members of AWID.
- 10 To see the GCAP-women's list archives, go to <http://mailman-new.greennet.org.uk/pipermail/gcap-women/>.
- 11 The challenges for women's rights advocates have been highlighted in conversations with staff at AWID staff, especially Joanna Kerr.

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