

**Who is the 99%? Feminist Perspectives on Occupy**  
**Vinita Sahasranaman**  
**April 2013**

After the revolution in Tahrir Square,<sup>1</sup> the Occupy movement is, perhaps, the most significant mass social movement of this decade. It brought economic justice back on the table and lent new meanings to the word “occupy”. For many, this framing was subversive, one which challenged imperialist powers. Others protested against its name as being oppressive and militant<sup>2</sup> when the movement itself advocated non-violence, democracy and social justice.

**Beginnings**

“Occupy” is an international movement that protests against current economic structures that distribute wealth unevenly. It advocates the creation of an alternative economic paradigm that will be fair in its distribution of wealth and economic power. Partly inspired by protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square and the *Indignados* movement in Spain, the first, widely publicised protest was *Occupy Wall Street (OWS)* in New York City's Zucotti Park that began on September 17, 2011. Subsequently, the movement spread across 600 communities across the United States of America and beyond American shores to 95 cities in 82 countries. The initial call to OWS was circulated by Adbusters magazine<sup>3</sup> and this call gained momentum when it was endorsed by the loose global network of ‘hacktivists’ known as Anonymous, in a widely circulated web video.



Image from: <http://www.firedupmissouri.com/node/15548>

OWS began to receive significant mass media coverage only after police brutality against protest participants. Video clips of NYC Police Department (NYPD) Deputy Inspector Anthony Bologna pepper-spraying a kettled group of unarmed young women during a march on 24 September, circulated first via social media and later broadcast on multiple TV networks,

<sup>1</sup> Tahrir Square was the focal point of the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, against former President Hosni Mubarak.

<sup>2</sup> In Protest of the term Occupy, a group called Decolonize Oakland was set up.

<http://decolonizeoakland.org/category/why-decolonize/>

<sup>3</sup> A publication that gained visibility during the height of the Global Justice Movement as an important home for high production value ad-hacking, brand contamination and de tournament

brought an initial wave of mass media attention to the movement.

Occupiers set up encampments and carried out largely peaceful demonstrations. These encampments not only helped the movement in sustaining pressure on the local and national governments, but also sparked debates on the relationship between public space and the 'public' and who is seen worthy of claiming it. Occupy organisers took several steps to ensure the protests were non-violent. Some camps even made occupiers sign resolutions on non-violence if they wished to stay, so that apart from a few isolated incidents, the movement is hailed for its peaceful resistance.

## Asks

Occupy's powerful slogan, "We are the 99%", succinctly captures the concentration of power among the top 1% of corporations and billionaires who dominate political and economic discourses. While Occupy has been criticised for not having clear demands, an end to the corrupting influence of corporations on politics, penalising financial fraudsters of the 2008 crash, and participatory democratic processes are some of Occupy's key demands. It is significant, though, that although women are everywhere in the movement, there were no specific demands related to women's economic rights.

As it spread across countries, other issues and movements co-opted Occupy to highlight their own demands and actions. Occupy Our Homes<sup>4</sup> and Occupy Patriarchy<sup>5</sup> are two examples. Several activists and organisations also began highlighting the relationship between Occupy and specific constituencies. For example, womenoccupy.org and Women Occupying Wall Street (WOW) started with a mission to provide women across occupations with resources for creating safer spaces and feminist organising.

**"Women who want to earn more on Wall Street than their male colleagues have one reliable option. They can set up a shoe-shine stand in Lower Manhattan. Out of 265 major occupations, service work such as shoe shining and personal care was the *only* one in which women earned, on average, more than men (\$1.02 to every \$1)."**

Bloomberg reporter Frank Bass after crunching Census data on the gender wage gap in various professions:  
<http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-03-16/the-gender-pay-disparity>

## Critiques

Has the feminist and queer agenda, questions of the poor, homeless, people of color been included in Occupy?

Inclusion and diversity are severely contested terms within Occupy. Many participating activists across the USA said that the focus on differences based on wealth obfuscated other differences based on gender, class, race and sexual orientation, among others, and were

---

4 Occupy our Homes is a movement that supports Americans who stand up to their banks and fight for their homes.  
<http://occupyhomes.org/>

5 Occupy Patriarchy is a group that emerged to highlight women's demands from the Occupy movement, and that if one wants true structural economic reform, issues like equal pay, access to childcare, paid maternity leave, etc. have to be an integral part of the Occupy agenda.

either subsumed or inadequately analysed in Occupy's arguments. Represented as largely 'leaderless' by the media, in practice, Occupy's leadership was largely a group of white men. By projecting itself as leaderless, Occupy lost the opportunity to interrogate and introspect on its own leadership dynamics.

For activists working with communities on issues of economic and social justice, Occupy was seen as a platform for leveraging national attention to their demands. However, the classic fault lines and tensions of many movements, such as feminist organising and labour movements, emerged from within Occupy. The tensions of how a movement frames its arguments to include women, people of color, women of color, disabled people, queer people, cis and trans gendered people, all came forward. For some, these tensions were never sufficiently interrogated or were excluded altogether. For others, Occupy was an opportunity like no other to highlight these tensions.

As people began to Occupy public spaces across the world and in the US, personal safety of women within the movement became a serious issue. Women occupiers faced harassment<sup>6</sup> while participating in protests. Safe spaces committees were set up in *Occupy Wall Street* as well as in other Occupy encampments. Safety was also brought up in General Assembly meetings.<sup>7</sup> Along with building safe spaces within a movement that, at its centre, was about space and who can claim it, women also raised key questions about the role and relation of women in Occupy. Could they remain limited to issues of sexual harassment and safety? What about their demand for economic justice, knowing they were paid less, that poverty affected them in unique, distressing ways; that women of color are acutely affected by foreclosures, and that queer/gender non-conforming people do not find jobs easily?

### **Refresh. Subvert. Engage.**

In response to these key questions, caucuses were set up for women, people of color and queer people, who voiced their concerns by intervening in General Assembly meetings. In some instances, they blocked proceedings. For example, when the "Declaration of the Occupation" was being read at *Occupy Wall Street*, a group of South Asians blocked the declaration, demanding a change in language. This move and Manissa McLeave Maharwal's Facebook note about this incident<sup>8</sup> are examples of what Occupy meant for people of color and immigrant women. At the OWS, a series of Feminist General Assemblies (FGA) were organised that not only addressed women's role in an economic justice movement, but also took up issues of patriarchy, heterosexism and transphobia. For example, one of the FGAs that coincided with the Pride month took up LGBTQ issues and groups discussed relations

---

6 Ashwini Hardikar writes about her experiences of facing harassment twice in the same day, once when she was hugged by a male participant unwillingly, and the second time when she came across a man chanting "Lady Liberty is a whore" - <http://infrontandcenter.wordpress.com/2011/10/13/the-value-of-a-safe-space/>

7 General Assemblies are the primary decision making bodies of the Occupy movement. Open to all who wish to take part, they allow for an inclusive form of direct democracy, and aim at building consensus among participants

8 Manissa's facebook note was published here - <http://www.racialicious.com/2011/10/03/so-real-it-hurts-notes-on-occupy-wall-street/>

between the feminist and queer movements.<sup>9</sup>

For feminists, challenging patriarchy within Occupy is critical to its success. Occupy Patriarchy's Lucinda Marshall said, "If you're going to occupy Wall Street, [you must] address the underlying patriarchy it represents. Obviously that is a system that depends in a large part on the exploitation, subjugation and control of women. That's really why it's so crucial for feminists to prioritise addressing this, and why feminism itself is important to the Occupy movement."<sup>10</sup>

At the 2012 Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) Forum, Maria Poblet<sup>11</sup> said, "There are visionary efforts to transform that composition (largely white and male), to expand the depth and scope of the political vision, and to grow beyond the camps into a long-term movement. Three key components of that intervention are: community organising, political education, and good, old-fashioned political struggle..."<sup>12</sup> Poblet and others also noted Occupy led to collaborations; activists working against foreclosures and reform of the prison system collaborated to challenge corporate power, in particular big banks. Maria said, "We connected people with the campaign ... against Wells Fargo Bank, a virtual foreclosure factory in California, which invests in private prisons for immigrants and does not pay its fair share in taxes. This campaign resonated with Occupy activists, and gave us an opportunity to highlight the important perspectives of communities of color who are most impacted by foreclosures, budget shortfalls, and criminalisation."

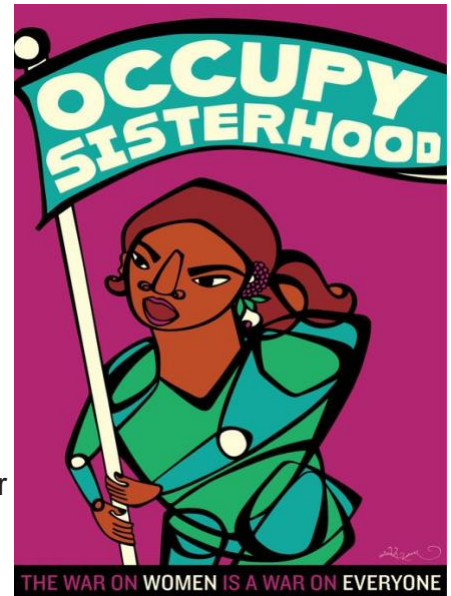


Image from: <http://favianna.flyingcart.com/>

## Moving Forward

Occupy was successful in attracting international attention to key issues of economic justice. At the same time, it threw up important lessons for the feminist agenda and for understanding the economics of exclusion and marginalisation. The classic fault lines of power and positionality that emerged are lessons on ways to envisage and mobilise a popular movement that is more accountable to the most affected. As Emi Kane<sup>13</sup> said, "The transformative

---

9 An activist blogs about her experience from this meeting here; <http://www.gender-focus.com/2012/06/25/reclaiming-hope-at-the-feminist-general-assembly/>

10 Read more: <http://www.care2.com/causes/wall-street-wage-gaps-give-women-yet-another-reason-to-occupy.html#ixzz26QF68NRC>

11 Maria Poblet is the Executive Director of Causa Justa :: Just Cause, a multi-racial, grassroots organisation building community leadership to achieve justice for low-income San Francisco and Oakland residents in USA. Maria is Chicana and Argentine, and has more than a decade of experience in Latino community organising.

12 Maria's speech can be found here: <http://cjjc.org/en/maria-poblets-blog>

13 Emi Kane is a community organiser, event producer, media-maker, and writer with over 15 years experience in California, New York, Japan, and elsewhere. She is on the national steering committee of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, and serves as an editor for various publications and blogs.

potential of a movement is only as present as the presence or strength or voice of the most marginalised.”

Now, feminists must take on the challenging task of placing women's demands at the centre of Occupy. Demands should not be restricted to issues of safety and prevention of inter-personal violence; they must be built by re-imagining the idea of economic justice from the perspective of women, as well as people who are otherwise excluded: the disabled, queer, homeless and those of color. Only then can the movement claim to represent the 99%.

### **About the author**

Vinita Sahasranaman is coordinates CREA's (an international human rights organisation based in Delhi, India) New Voices New Leaders Program in the MENA and East African region. She can be reached at [svinita@gmail.com](mailto:svinita@gmail.com)

This case study was developed as part of the BRIDGE *Cutting Edge* programme on gender and social movements. Find out more here: <http://socialmovements.bridge.ids.ac.uk>