

# STORIES OF FEMINIST MOBILISATION

How to Advance Feminist Movements Worldwide



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# Foreword

2022 was a challenging year on numerous fronts. The increase in nationalism and authoritarianism, the shrinking spaces for action, the anti-feminist and right-wing populist rhetoric, political tensions and wars, a worldwide refugee crisis, and rising inflation that threatens to turn into a global recession have affected, in one way or another, the whole world. These developments, some recent and some in the making for decades, have the most concerning effects on vulnerable and marginalised groups such as women, especially Black women, Indigenous women, women with disabilities, women with non-conforming sexual orientation, and individuals with non-conforming gender identity. This is not merely because marginalised groups are further disadvantaged and/or criminalised by society and the laws of their respective countries, where the aforementioned circumstance are an additional burden to their existence. It is also due to the fact that, when politics fail, these vulnerable groups are not on the minds of policy makers, they are often not active participants in decision-making processes, and therefore, they are repeatedly left out of response measures in times of crisis.

In these circumstances, it is often that feminist and LGBTIQ+ organisations and activists take matters into their own hands, although their own work is also challenged. They provide educational opportunities, fundamental support, and crucial knowledge, while at the same time pushing states to take more responsibility for their actions and change oppressive and discriminatory laws. They work in solidarity and mobilise for change. Yet, with the dominant anti-gender and anti-rights discourse worldwide, feminist movements tend to be silenced. According to UN Women, despite the aforementioned global developments, more people are mobilising for gender equality; women have never been so resilient and resistant; peace agreements include more women than ever; more people can be their true selves and express their sexual orientation and

gender identity openly; women are on the forefront of the climate justice movement; and even more men are doing their fair share of work. So why do we not hear more about this?

The truth is that the anti-gender and anti-rights narrative is dominant. It is in all mainstream media and feminist success stories and strategies are often disregarded. It is evident that women's rights, LGBTIQ+ rights, and human rights in general, have entered a period of immense risk. Nevertheless, it is also evident that there has never been such a strong global stream of feminist action. The mobilisation in the US against racism, gender-based violence, and for reproductive rights; the feminist mobilisation in Brazil for democratic principles; the spill-over feminist mobilisation for reproductive rights in Eastern and Central Europe; the support of refugees in times of conflict and war; the fight against religious fundamentalism and for a secular society in Iran. All of these are only louder movements in a myriad of mobilisation attempts worldwide. The Global Feminist Pitch aims to give young feminists the opportunity and support they need to become actors of change. Under the slogan "For Feminist Mobilisation", the Global Unit for Feminism and Gender Democracy wanted to give attention to feminist movements that do not get the deserved space in the public discourse. This publication is a result of this idea, and it is to serve as a response to the growing anti-gender and anti-rights narrative, as an alternative narrative of its own, written and presented by young feminists from the Global South and (South) Eastern Europe.

Sharing an online space with feminists from Brazil, Jamaica, Venezuela, The Philippines, Syria, Nepal, Kenya, Hungary, Belarus, Nigeria, and Romania, has resulted in insightful and emotional discussions about feminist stories and strategies from these countries. The aim of "Stories of Feminist Mobilisation" is to make feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements, however

small, weak, or on a global scale insignificant, they may seem, visible. The work on this publication has enabled us to experience feminism from different perspectives and in different contexts. In one moment, we have been to countries where women's and LGBTIQ+ rights are somewhat respected, while in another we have seen how feminist and LGBTIQ+ organisations and activists are mobilising to challenge capital punishment for the LGBTIQ+ community. We have seen reproductive rights being taken away through abortion restrictions, while at the same time witnessing inclusive laws that decriminalise abortion, broaden the terminology, and rethink access to abortion so that vulnerable and forgotten groups that are often left out of these discussions can take their rightful place. We have also witnessed how gender-based violence is approached. While in one corner of the world, feminist organisations and activists have lost the trust in the state and taken matters into their own hands, in another, all members of society have decided to pressure the authorities to take certain actions. We have also seen the implications of leaving marginalised groups out of the discussion in one country, while also having an intersectional perspective and realising that only with the inclusion of all groups the feminist fight can be achieved in another country. Above all, we have seen the rethinking of democratic values, colonialism, war, and the refugee crisis, and how democratic processes are shaped through active engagement and mobilisation.

Although this publication shows that there is not one place in the world where human rights, and especially women's and LGBTIQ+ rights are fully protected and respected, it also shows that the streams responding to the anti-rights rhetoric are resilient and growing stronger by day. We hope that this publication will prove this.



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# Amefrican Alliances for Shifting Powers

Renata Saavedra

Brazil has the second largest Black population in the world after Nigeria (Love, 2016). The institutional and political spaces do not reflect this. Black women make up the largest demographic group in the country – 28%. Yet, they make up only 2% of the National Congress (Oliveira, 2022). Black and Indigenous activists strive to change this imbalance as it is not just about changing the face of Brazil's politics, but changing power relations deep within the system. In the attempts to achieve this, the inclusion of other groups such as LGBTQIA+ people, peripheral people, and people with disabilities (PWD) is crucial. The alliances go beyond the borders of Brazil and form a powerful network that has social justice and *Buen Vivir* as its main links. Black women are radically reimagining politics in Latin America through Amefrican alliances.

## A Challenge with Many Layers and Deep Roots

At the time of writing this article<sup>1</sup>, Brazil is in the midst of a historic election that will determine its future. The re-election of far-right populist leader Jair Bolsonaro is at stake.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the outcome, the election has already sparked further support of right-wing politics in Brazil and consolidated its power. There was a small increase of Black women elected to Congress in the first round of the election – 19 women, compared to 13 in 2018, although more than half of these women are members of right-wing parties. In addition, four Indigenous women and two trans women were elected to the Federal Congress (Bruno & Régia, 2022). Nevertheless, the rise in racial representation may not be accurate. In 2022, 42 elected officials changed their official “colour” and “race” registration from White

to Black. One potential reason for this might be the fact that Brazil distributes more funding to political parties that elect more women and Black candidates. In addition, parties in 2022 were required to allocate resources from the electoral fund in proportion to the number of Black and White candidates (Ribeiro et al., 2022).

The measures, instituted by the country's Superior Electoral Court (TSE), are an attempt to increase female and Black participation in politics. However, candidates changing their racial self-declaration undermine these efforts. In addition, there were several complaints that nominated women did not actually run for office but were on the list to fill the minimum quota required by parties (Marzullo, 2022). To tackle this issue, the women-led initiative Tendas das Candidatas (Candidates' Tent) created the “The count does not close!” campaign with the goal to pressure parties to comply with the rules, and they developed a toolkit in support of women candidates.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, building a political campaign continues to be more difficult for women in Brazil.

“Women face many barriers when entering politics, from financial barriers to institutional, psychological, anthropological barriers,” said Karin Vervuurt, Co-Founder of the NGO *Elas No Poder* (Women in Power)<sup>4</sup>. Vervuurt worked with political campaigns and was bothered that her clients were often the same: rich white men well connected within their parties. She wanted to support women, especially Black, Indigenous, Quilombola, PWD, and LGBTQIA+ women who could not afford professional support for their political campaigns.<sup>5</sup> As a response, Vervuurt created the NGO

<sup>1</sup> The article was written in October 2022, before the second round of the election.

<sup>2</sup> As alerted in Nature magazine: there's only one choice in Brazil's election — for the country and the world: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-03388-y>

<sup>3</sup> Further information: <https://atendadascandidatas.org/campanhas/a-conta-nao-fecha>

<sup>4</sup> *Elas no Poder* (Women in Power) aims to make women's electoral campaigns more competitive and prepared, breaking down barriers that prevented them from reaching power. For further information see: <https://elasnopoder.org/>

<sup>5</sup> Most Black and Indigenous women community leaders come from poorer backgrounds (Pereira & Aguilar, 2022).

Elas no Poder in 2019, offering training courses and reaching about 500 women candidates. A while later, the Impulsa platform<sup>6</sup> was created, which had 30.000 users in its first year. The Impulsa platform is now present in five countries in Latin America. “I started taking a lot of electoral campaign courses and the teachers were always white men, and the campaigns they presented were completely out of touch with the reality that I lived with the women candidates. Women had low-cost campaigns, the uncle does the social media, the brother does the agenda, and the mother helps. It made perfect sense to have something for women, content they could access that was done within the reality of women.”

**“...the dehumanisation of Black and Indigenous people was perpetuated through several systems – legal, medical, cultural, the media – and all instances of power continue to oppress and criminalise these communities.”**

The underfunding of Black women’s campaigns shows the relevance of initiatives like this. Black women in Brazil received only 20% of the resources white men received in the 2022 elections. White men are the champions of campaign funding<sup>7</sup>: they account for 33% of candidacies but hold more than half of the revenue destined for candidates, which totals around USD 1 billion. A recent change in electoral law allocates more money to the election fund, and companies can no longer support candidates, only people.<sup>8</sup> Public financing of campaigns helps to reduce gender and race gaps, but the distribution of resources still needs to improve (Boueri & Soares, 2022). Campaigns and active political participation demand resources beyond money – especially time and a support network. Women, particularly Black women, have less time to dedicate to politics due to domestic and unpaid care work (Mas-suela et al., 2020).

Barriers to the political participation of Black and Indigenous women have deep roots. Brazil is among the 10 most unequal countries in the world, accord-

ing to the GINI index. Inequality has reached its highest threshold during the Covid-19 pandemic (Neri, 2021). Racism structures inequality in Brazil. As Silvio Almeida explained, racism intrinsically integrates the economic and political organisation of Brazilian society and provides the meaning and technology for the reproduction of inequality and violence (2019). The colonisation of Brazil, which started in 1500, was based on the enslavement of Africans and the genocide of Indigenous communities. Since then, Brazil spent more time under slavery than without it. It has been 134 years since the abolition of slavery, which lasted over 300 years and ended without policies to integrate formerly enslaved people into society. In fact, the dehumanisation of Black and Indigenous people was perpetuated through several systems – legal, medical, cultural, the media – and all instances of power continue to oppress and criminalise these communities.

The dominant institutional politics today is led by rich white men who are career politicians, occupying positions for years – some families for generations – without effectively contributing to the improvement of society. Jair Bolsonaro is an example of this. In 26 years as a deputy, he took three children into politics with him, and only approved two bills (Lindner, 2017). When a woman manages to overcome so many barriers to be elected, she arrives in a hostile environment. Political violence, deeply connected to gender-based and racial violence, is a constant challenge. There are several examples of women parliamentarians threatened and persecuted, sometimes by elected men parliamentarians. Trans women and travestis are particularly affected by these attacks, as shown in recent violence against Councillors Benny Briolly<sup>9</sup> and Lari Bortolote<sup>10</sup>.

In the case of Councillor Benny Briolly, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) issued a resolution noting that the series of death threats on grounds of her identification as a Black travesty, and her work as a human rights defender, left her and her team with their rights to life and personal integrity at risk.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the Superior Electoral Court upheld a complaint against a state deputy for the crime of political gender violence, which was historic. The Councillor was included in the Programme for the Protec-

6 Further information: <https://www.impulsa.voto/>

7 See also 72 horas (72 hours), a platform for monitoring the distribution of campaign funding resources declared by the candidacies: <https://72horas.org/>

8 The Electoral Fund was created in 2017, after a decision by the Federal Supreme Court and Law 13,165, both from 2015, prohibited donations from companies and legal entities to election campaigns.

9 Benny Briolly faz denúncia ao TRE após novo ato de transfobia de vereador condenado (Benny Briolly makes a complaint to the TRE after another act of transphobia by a convicted councillor): <https://oglobo.globo.com/blogs/ancelmo-gois/post/2022/09/benny-briolly-faz-denuncia-ao-tre-apos-novo-ato-de-transfobia-de-vereador-condenado.ghhtml>

10 Vereadora trans é resgatada após ser sequestrada no Espírito Santo (Trans Councillor is rescued after being kidnapped in Espírito Santo: <https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/brasil/2022/08/5031349-vereadora-trans-e-resgatada-apos-ser-sequestrada-no-espirito-santo.html>

11 The IACHR resolution is available (in Portuguese) at: [https://www.oas.org/pt/cidh/decisiones/mc/2022/res\\_34-22%20\\_mc\\_408-22\\_br\\_pt.pdf](https://www.oas.org/pt/cidh/decisiones/mc/2022/res_34-22%20_mc_408-22_br_pt.pdf)



tion of Human Rights Defenders, Communicators, and Environmentalists from the federal government, who ordered police escorts and other security measures to guarantee their physical integrity and the continuity of their mandate. This type of violence, as well as attacks against human rights defenders in general, is stimulated by the impunity of the aggressors. A striking example is the murder of Councillor Marielle Franco in 2018, which had international repercussions, and the perpetrator of the crime has not yet been identified.<sup>12</sup>

“Bolsonarism has as its political method the practice of violence mainly against Black and LGBTQIA+ bodies. It is essential that whenever we talk about gender-based political violence, we remember that it is not just about female candidates or parliamentarians. We are talking about violence against the democratic process itself,” said Tainah Pereira, Articulation Coordinator of the Black Women Decide movement.<sup>13</sup> One of the achievements of the Black Women Decide movement was the 2021 law to combat political violence against women. It was the result of years of political articulation with Black deputies such as Áurea Carolina and Talíria Petrone, with the aim of qualifying this legislation and addressing more explicitly trans women and travestis, as well as Black women.

Racial and gender-based political violence is one of the biggest challenges for activists and organisations working to elect more women. How to encourage women to run for elections, when it is not possible to guarantee their safety? “It’s hard to say to these women “go, be in the dispute, have courage”, if we don’t go together. It is an essential condition for the end of political gender violence that more of us are in that space, so that they do not abandon their political projects even if they suffer threat or attempt to coerce them, even if they are not elected,” Pereira shared. New laws are not enough; to end political violence, it is necessary to have diverse women in politics. Only in wider and denser networks can women create safe spaces for the political construction of Black, Indigenous, and trans women. These networks are built through hard, resilient, and collective work that connects women from all over Latin America.

## Weaving Resistances through African Connections

The barriers for women to access institutional politics are collectively addressed by feminist movements, with actions that involve research, advocacy, political formation, promotion of candidacies, and strengthening of national and regional networks. Candidates articulate themselves on collective platforms such as the Marielles Forum<sup>14</sup> and Quilombo in Parliaments<sup>15</sup>. Several campaigns drew attention to the lack of representation of women and diversity in politics, and to the political violence based on gender and race. There were increasing examples of initiatives focused on expanding women’s political participation<sup>16</sup>, and thanks to these actions, laws were revised and advanced, and the existing issues were made visible in the public discourse. “Since 2018, we have seen the creation of many organisations with the purpose of training women, bringing women into politics. This year, several polls have already shown that the issue of women is the big issue of the election in Brazil. In the last presidential debate, two or three questions were about women. That never happened. We insisted so much that it finally became a topic on the agenda. Women will decide Brazil’s presidential election,” said Vervuurt.

Decades of feminist struggle have brought a greater understanding of the importance of electing diverse political representatives who are capable of proposing and implementing diverse policies. For Pereira from Black Women Decide, the time to engage in this debate is now: “From 2018 onwards, we are qualifying this debate, showing that it is not enough to elect women, Black women, lesbians, trans and travestis, we need to elect women who are committed to the anti-racist and feminist agenda, who come from social movements, and who build politics collectively.” In this sense, exchanges and regional alliances woven by Black and Indigenous women have been crucial. In recent years, Black and Indigenous women’s movements have expanded their shared agendas and events, renewing their “Afro-Indigenous Kinship Alliance”<sup>17</sup>. Black women’s movements have closely followed mechanisms of innovation and political participation that seek to ensure

12 Deputadas cobram justiça para assassinato de Marielle Franco e Anderson Gomes (Deputies demand justice for the murder of Marielle Franco and Anderson Gomes): <https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/858174-deputadas-cobram-justica-para-assassinato-de-marielle-franco-e-anderson-gomes/>

13 Mulheres Negras Decidem (Black Women Decide) movement is dedicated to qualifying and promoting the agenda led by black women in institutional politics, strengthening Brazilian democracy using as a strategy to overcome the lack of representation of black women in instances of power: <https://mulheresnegrasdecidem.org/>

14 Fórum Nacional Marielles (Marielles National Forum) is a permanent forum to strengthen the struggle for representation and occupation of Black women in spaces of power and decision: <https://www.instagram.com/forumnacionalmarielles/>; <https://www.youtube.com/c/F%C3%B3rumMarielles/videos>

15 Quilombo nos Paramentos (Quilombo in Parliaments) is an initiative to support more than 100 candidates of people linked to the Black movement who ran for positions in the National Congress and Legislative Assemblies throughout the national territory in 2022: <https://coalizaonegrapordireitos.org.br/2022/06/04/quilombo-nos-paramentos/>

16 Other examples are Observatório Feminista do Nordeste (Northeast Feminist Observatory) and Instituto Alziras (Alziras Institute): <https://www.instagram.com/obsfeministanordeste/> and <https://www.alziras.org.br/>

17 A recent document that affirms this Afro-Indigenous Kinship Alliance is the letter produced during the Meeting of Black Women in the Northeast-Amazon: What is our Nation Project?, organised by Odara – Instituto da Mulher Negra in July 2022: “Carta aberta à sociedade: Questões inegociáveis para Mulheres Negras e Indígenas na disputa por poder” (Open letter to society: Non-negotiable issues for Black and Indigenous Women in the dispute for power), available at <https://institutoodara.org.br/carta-aberta-a-sociedade-questoes-inegociaveis-para-mulheres-negras-e-indigenas-na-disputa-por-poder/>.

greater renovation, especially in legislative houses. Learnings and best practices are crossing women's movements and countries' borders.

The *Estamos Prontas* (We are Ready) programme, led by Black Women Decide and the Marielle Franco Institute<sup>18</sup>, supported 27 Black women candidates in Brazil in the 2022 elections.<sup>19</sup> It was inspired by *Estamos Listas* (We are Ready)<sup>20</sup>, an independent and feminist political movement from Colombia. The Colombian movement, in turn, had as a reference *Gabinetona*<sup>21</sup>, a collective mandate that began in 2017 in the city of Belo Horizonte, in Brazil. The *Gabinetona* was an innovative experience in the occupation of institutional politics, which brought parliamentarians from the three spheres of the legislative branch together (local, state, and federal), through the sharing of teams, actions, and common strategies, in dialogue and cooperation with popular leaders and movements.

Among the lessons learned, feminists share the perception that Black women in Latin America have more in common than imagined. They highlight the power of networks to innovate and go beyond their own ideas. They exchange knowledge about mobilisation, communication, self-care, and collective care strategies. They share instruments and processes that led to the formation of laws that guarantee quotas for women and that address political violence. They build communities of political learning, where they produce collective knowledge and renew perspectives for joint action. "The meetings become support networks, and those networks save us. They are sustained by virtual means, and in the presence, and through feelings and ancestral connections" Mijane Jiménez<sup>22</sup>, Articulador of the *Aúna* platform<sup>23</sup>, highlighted. Nevertheless, there are some challenges such as language<sup>24</sup>, Brazil's continental dimension, high travel costs that often prevent meetings, and a lot of unfamiliarity about the context and reality of each country.

Many alliances between movements and countries are stimulated and realised by foundations and organisations. Instituto Update<sup>25</sup>, for example, maps and supports the articulation of political innovation

experiences in Latin America. The *Aúna* platform in Mexico promotes meetings between women from Mexico and other countries, for mutual strengthening and the building of common agendas. The strategy of the groups and collectives that receive support go beyond the funders' agenda and they take advantage of these spaces and opportunities to forge alliances with organisations with which they have a synergy. In these connections, these women are triggering and moving what Lélia Gonzalez called *Amefricanity*<sup>26</sup>. Gonzalez noted similarities in language and speech, music, dance, and belief systems, and showed that Latin America is Amerindian and Amefrican: "The political and cultural implications of the category of *Amefricanity* are, in fact, democratic; precisely because the term itself allows us to overcome territorial, linguistic and ideological limitations. In addition to its purely geographical character, the category of *Amefricanity* incorporates a whole historical process of intense cultural dynamics (adaptation, resistance, reinterpretation and creation of new forms) that is Afro-centered" (Gonzalez, 2020, p.134-135).

Black women's political movements show that Amefrican connections, which restore and renew ancestral ties, are growing and moving structures in the region. The movements for more Black women in politics are inspired and referenced by Gonzalez and *Amefricanity* as a worldview and philosophy of life. It is in this ancestral key that the political agendas of Black and Indigenous women human rights defenders in Latin America meet.

**"Black women's political movements show that Amefrican connections, which restore and renew ancestral ties, are growing and moving structures in the region."**

### The Horizon: *Buen Vivir*

Amefrican women share a heritage and a political, world, and life project. The basis of this project is *Buen Vivir*, the perspective cultivated by Indigenous

18 Instituto Marielle Franco was created by Marielle Franco's family with the mission of inspiring, connecting, and empowering Black, LBTQIA+, and peripheral women to continue moving the structures of society for a more just and egalitarian world: <https://www.institutomariellefranco.org/>

19 Further information about *Estamos Prontas* (We are Ready): <https://www.emosprontas.org/>

20 *Estamos Listas* (We are Ready) is a women's political movement founded in Medellín in 2017 to build a feminist collective political project: <https://estamoslistas.com/>

21 Further information about *Gabinetona*: <https://gabinetona.org/site/>

22 Mijane Jiménez Salinas is an Afro-Mexican lawyer, teacher, founder of the Network of Young Indigenous and Afro-Mexican Women, and director of the Guerrero chapter of the *Aúna* platform. The starting point of her struggle to lead more Afro-Mexican women to politics was knowing leaders like Epsy Campbell, former Vice President of Costa Rica (2018-2022) and two times Congresswoman.

23 *Aúna* is a platform for new political representations of women, to build an egalitarian, fair, and sustainable Mexico: <https://www.auna.org.mx/>

24 The fact that Portuguese is the official language in Brazil, while Spanish is the official language in other countries in Latin America, makes communication difficult, and meetings and publications are not always translated.

25 Further information: <https://www.institutoupdate.org.br/>

26 Lélia Gonzalez (1935-1994) was a pioneer intellectual in Brazil, activist, and proponent of Afro-Latin American feminism. The category of *Amefricanity* was created by Gonzalez to define the common experience of Black people in the Americas.



and African communities in the diaspora that can take different names, such as the Quechua expression *sumak kawsay*, *teko porã* in Guaraní, or *ubuntu* in African philosophy (Acosta, 2016). All refer to life in harmony and the coexistence of all beings. All propose a world where differences are perceived as a source of prosperity and learning, where the separation between humanity and nature does not exist, and community life, reciprocity, and interdependence guide our existences. One of *ubuntu*'s translations is "I am because we are," the motto of the political campaign and the prematurely interrupted term of Marielle Franco, Black feminist and Councillor, executed in Rio de Janeiro. *Buen Vivir* is also in the victory and journey of the first Black woman Vice-President of Colombia, Francia Marquez, whose campaign slogan was *Vivir sabroso*. "Vivir sabroso refers to live without fear, live with dignity and rights", she explained (Haczek, 2022).

**"Brazilian Black feminists are bringing *Buen Vivir* to the fore, placing it at the centre of their political projects."**

Brazilian Black feminists are bringing *Buen Vivir* to the fore, placing it at the centre of their political projects. In November 2015, more than 50 thousand Black women from the five regions of Brazil came together to carry out the March of Black Women against racism, violence and for *Buen Vivir* (Articulação de Organizações de Mulheres Negras -Brasileiras, 2016). On the occasion, they delivered a letter to then-President Dilma Rousseff, which announced: "From *Buen Vivir*, a new socio-political code emerges in which justice, equity, solidarity and well-being are non-negotiable values consolidated by the multiple voices that cohabit the planet and that must jointly decide the destinies of society."<sup>27</sup> It is not just about changing the face of politics; it is about changing politics in itself, shifting power dynamics, and regenerating relationships between people and communities. It is a work, as advocated by Black Women Decide, of Black women's radical political imagination: "The protagonism of Black women is not a new wind on the horizon, but a storm that has been brewing in the narratives of ancestry, in the day-to-day work, in the celebrations and parties, in the pain of each loss, in the daily struggles and in the memory of those who preceded us" (Lourenço & Franco, 2021, p. 18). Speaking of the radical political imagination of Black and Indigenous women is to speak of revolutionary politics towards democracy, social justice, and equity.

The path is long, barriers are maintained and updated, and advances do not take place in straight lines. The growth of the far-right movement around the world proves this. Nevertheless, Amefrican women teach us that the struggle is continuous and much longer than mandates and electoral cycles. They teach that it is possible to occupy institutional politics without moving away from the everyday politics inseparable from ancestral community practices. More importantly, they teach us that *Buen Vivir* is perhaps the most inclusive political project and the greatest technology of connection and articulation of all time.

27 Available (original version in Portuguese) at: <http://fopir.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Carta-das-Mulheres-Negras-2015.pdf>

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Sincere acknowledgement and gratitude to Karin Vervuut, Mijane Jiménez, and Tainah Pereira, who generously shared their time, knowledge, and experiences in individual interviews for the production of this article.

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# Where are we in the Fight for Women's Human Rights in the Philippines?

## Shiphrah Belonguel

In his first State of the Nation Address (SONA) in 2022, the Philippines newly elected president, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., spoke solely about the state of the economy. His address ignored an important challenge the country faced in the wake of the global pandemic — that of human rights and gender equality. His rise to power coincided with an economic downfall in the Philippines, which experienced one of the longest lockdowns in the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under his predecessor, President Rodrigo Duterte, the pandemic became a pretext to roll back on human rights. The populist leader increased military and police presence in communities (Yusingco & Pizzaro, 2020) and through his allies in the Congress, passed a law that threatened organisations and individuals with prolonged detainment in jail without charges.

Even before the pandemic, President Duterte had already started to crack down on activists, with arbitrary arrests and charges against opposition and government actors openly engaging in red-tagging or communist-tagging of activists (Beltran, 2020). In fact, human and political rights repression came as soon as Duterte rose to power. He declared a “War on Drugs” that resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killings, specifically targeting those from poor communities (Human Rights Watch). Gert Libang, Chairperson of GABRIELA, a national alliance of grassroots women’s organisations, sees the Marcos administration as a continuation of Duterte’s anti-rights regime: “They are also repressive. Since they came into office, three of our women leaders, all seniors, have been detained. People that are fighting for the rights of women, right to better health and education, right for higher employment and wages — they are the ones being jailed.”

The spectre of human rights violations looms large for Marcos Jr. He is the successor of President Duterte, and the son of late dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos who

installed Martial Law in the 1970s and enabled widespread human rights violations, cronyism, and corruption during his protracted administration (Juego, 2022). “Some children of dictators and their cohorts would distance themselves. We all have the feeling that he idolised his father,” said activist Etta Rosales, Chairperson Emeritus of a political party called Akbayan. “His success is anchored from the good things he could get from his father’s legacy. His whole point in governing is to clean the name of the Marcoses, to show that the Marcoses were not the bad people after all and could make this country great again.”

For Rosales, the return of a Marcos in the seat of power meant historical revisionism on a large scale. Previous fringe narratives portraying the older Marcos’ years as a golden age and the Marcoses as protagonists in Philippine history are now perpetuated on social media. “It’s insidious — the disinformation. We need to know the human rights violations of the past. Otherwise, there will be impunity not just for past abuses but for this administration and future administrations,” said Clara Rita Padilla, lawyer and executive director of EnGenderRights. According to Padilla and Rosales, young people are a potential base for countering disinformation and taking on the human rights agenda amid the Marcos presidency. Affirming this, environmental activist Jill Banta said that “young women and queer people are reaping the fruits of the older generation’s activism and they are just as emboldened to continue the fight. [...] During martial law, the women’s rights movement was at the forefront of activism.”

Since then, the Philippines has had progress in many areas because of women’s rights activism — women’s social and economic rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and environmental justice. Still, problems persist and returning to a repressive regime not only hinders progress for all, but also threatens to





Photo of advocates taken during the “Free Our Sisters, Free Ourselves” programme organised by GABRIELA to raise awareness on women political prisoners in the Philippines. Shiprah Belonguel, All Rights Reserved.

harm marginalised communities. “The power Marcos and his allies hold goes beyond securing the highest post in the country. It’s the ability to perpetuate and make even more devastating systemic violence against the most vulnerable sectors that of course includes workers, community environmental defenders, women, and the LGBTQIA+ community,” said a climate justice organiser Bea Tulagan.

### Women’s Economic and Social Rights

The Philippines is a state party to many international human rights agreements. It is the first ASEAN state to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), also known as the International Bill of Rights of Women. In addition, the Philippines ratified all eight fundamental conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). In 2012, the Philippines also ratified ILO Convention 189 or the Domestic Workers Convention, an important step towards upholding the rights of millions of women domestic workers, often quipped as the Philippines largest export product.

The Philippines’ labour migration and its remittances account for approximately 10% of GDP (Pacete, 2021). Nevertheless, since the pandemic many women migrant labourers have been forced to return home. These migrant labourers have been unable to find employment in the Philippines and could not return abroad because of pandemic-related travel bans (Reuters, 2020). The pandemic also shrunk industries that were made up of women, i.e. tourism or retail wholesale trade. This also contributed to women’s unemployment and forced them into the informal economy just to make ends meet. “Unemployment is high, especially for women. When we say women are employed, we

usually mean in the informal sector. [...] That means they do not have a regular income and they may earn well on some days, but much less during other days,” said Gert Libang of GABRIELA. Women in the informal economy constitute a majority (57%) of all women who are employed (Bersales & Ilarina, 2019). The reproductive and care work that women are expected to do i.e. child-rearing and homemaking also prevent them from pursuing stable employment.

In other sectors, the work women do is often unpaid, undervalued, and unrecognised. Women in the agricultural sector are hardly recognised and are not registered in government databases. Those databases often inform government programmes that could impact land ownership; access to credit, inputs, training, and information; and agricultural extension services (Alqaseer et. al., 2021). This reinforces the invisibility of women in agriculture, which is historical and systemic due to the lack of ownership of land and the prevailing gender division of labour, which sees their farm work as an extension of their reproductive work.

“It is important that women are able to access regular and formal employment, where their wages are equal to men and increase at the same rate,” Libang said. However, contractualisation continues to plague formal labour arrangements. Workers are denied security of tenure, as many companies revert to employing workers through third-party agencies that allow them to disavow an employer-employee relationship with workers under their jurisdiction (Sicat, 2017). Employees under this scheme do not receive the same benefits as regular employees and cannot exercise their right to join trade unions. Women workers are additionally impacted, because they are unable to access benefits such as paid extended maternity leave (Alqaseer et. al., 2021).



Through community organising, GABRIELA has been able to raise awareness on the situation of Filipino women across various sectors and to encourage them to act on their situation. GABRIELA chapter organisations mobilise to respond through protest as well as policy advocacy. “We cover all avenues. [We believe in the] parliament of the streets, but we are also seeking dialogue from the local government upwards, whoever is open to us. Within the framework of the parliamentary struggle, we have a legislative agenda in Congress and Senate via the GABRIELA Women’s Party,” Libang said. GABRIELA also conducts budget monitoring and accountability initiatives to ensure that health, social services, housing, and education are prioritised in the national budget. Apart from engaging formal politics, GABRIELA chapter organisations are also a source of mutual support for members. At the height of the pandemic, GABRIELA members organised community kitchens, pantries, and gardens amid livelihood and employment loss. According to Libang, this is emblematic of how women are the ones that make sure the needs of their families are met, especially in times of crisis.

### Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Despite having ratified the CEDAW, which affirms the reproductive rights of women, and having committed to the 1995 International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action, the Philippines has had an uphill battle when it comes to fulfilling the obligations. It was only in 2012 that the Philippines enacted a Reproductive Health Law, which still serves as the country’s legal framework for reproductive rights. The law was passed after more than a decade in the Philippines’ legislative chambers. Since then, the Supreme Court has also issued temporary restraining orders on procurement of implants and contraceptive (Caliwan, 2017). While these have been lifted, many conservative forces within and outside the government continue to challenge its provisions and contribute to delays and the non-implementation of programmes and services (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2022). Until now, young people were unable to access contraception without parental or third party consent despite early initiation into sex and alarming adolescent pregnancy rates in the Philippines. “The Reproductive Health Law is not a perfect law, given concessions and the Supreme Court decision allowing third party authorisation. Hence, there is a need to amend it,” noted Padilla of EnGenderRights.

“There’s still fear of the Catholic Church. Even our own champions (in Congress) are wary of crossing a line. When we passed the Reproductive Health Law, abortion was not in the discussion because at the time even contraception was controversial,” said Director of Likhaan

Women’s Clinic<sup>1</sup> Dr. Junice Melgar. The Philippines remains a country with some of the most restrictive abortion laws worldwide. Women, service providers, and anyone involved in inducing an abortion may be punished with up to six years of imprisonment. There are no express provisions allowing exceptions. However, feminist groups have produced a draft bill to decriminalise abortion or remove the criminal provisions on abortion from the law. The push to decriminalise abortion in the country has gained enough traction to become an election issue. During elections, Marcos said he would support the legalisation of abortion on the grounds of rape or incest. “During the SONA, we called attention to his [earlier] pronouncement that abortion should be available on certain grounds. But he did not mention it,” Padilla said. In his SONA, violence against women was the lone sexual and reproductive health issue tackled by President Marcos, and none of his priority bills included legislation on women or LGBTQIA+ people.

**“In the absence of political will among elected leaders in relation to sexual and reproductive rights, civil society organisations and feminist groups fill many gaps.”**

According to Eda Catabas, executive director of the LGBTQIA+ organisation Cebu United Rainbow LGBTIQ+ Sector, Inc. (CURLS), her fellow advocates continue to push for the passage of a national anti-discrimination against LGBTQIA+ law or a sexual orientation and gender identity and equality (SOGIE) bill. Different versions of the bill have been filed in Congress for the past two decades. In terms of the prospects for the bill, she shared that she does not “know what to feel and [she feels] that this administration will just be a continuation of the previous one,” which did not prioritise the law despite positive signals on LGBTQIA+ rights during election time. For trans rights activists Eda and Kyn Mallorca, a real challenge is low levels of SOGIE awareness among decision-makers and the general public: “We come from a history of people with diverse SOGIE - from babaylan to Mentefuwaley, to asog, bayok, bayogin, and now to bakla and bayot. And then we have trans, trans people, transpinay, transbakla — we have these words, evolving and it will continue to evolve. But we’ve not remembered all these. I think it is our responsibility to know our history, to know where we are coming from, to know these are not western concepts.”

In the absence of political will among elected leaders in relation to sexual and reproductive rights, civil so-

<sup>1</sup> A non-governmental organisation comprised of community-based clinics focused on sexual and reproductive health.



Photo of advocates taken during an International Safe Abortion Day event held September 28, 2022. Shiphrah Belonguel, All Rights Reserved.

ciety organisations and feminist groups fill many gaps. Likhaan directs commodities and resources from the government to communities through their community-based clinics. Other groups make use of social media to share information on sexual and reproductive health. One such group is Lunas Collective, a volunteer-driven chat service, which responds to queries and requests related to reproductive health and gender-based violence. The chat service went live a few weeks into the first COVID-19 lockdown in the Philippines. This was the response of feminist founder Sabrina Gacad to pandemic-induced barriers in reporting on gender-based violence and accessing sexual and reproductive health services and commodities. Another group led by feminist Shebana Alqaseer, Bantay Bastos, moderates Facebook groups where gender-based violence, particularly incidents of online sexual violence against women, can be reported. Meanwhile, LGBTQIA-focused clinics like Love Yourself provide access to HIV medication and other sexual health services.

## Environmental Justice

The Philippines is a climate-vulnerable country. Women feel the impact of climate the most, because they shoulder the burden of care for children, households, and communities. “Women’s rights and gender equality activists understand that women and queer people from the peasant and working class are most heavily burdened by the socioeconomic and climate crisis, that’s why they also campaign for workers’ rights and security of tenure, farmers’ right to till and own their land, and people’s right to a pollution-free environment,” said Jill Banta, regional coordinator for Mindanao of the Plastic-Free Pilipinas Project.

Climate change was flouted by President Marcos Jr. as a priority issue, addressed in both his SONA and his in-

tervention at the 77th UN General Assembly. Advocates, however, are not convinced. “President Marcos Jr.’s policy pronouncements, both about the climate crisis and gender equality, are just lip service pronouncements that attempt to appease advocates but fall short simply because they’re deliberate efforts to protect the interests of the most privileged,” said Bea Tulagan, climate justice organiser. “His intention to revive a nuclear power plant project and institutionalise the use of fossil gas under the guise of a progressive energy agenda has all but put the interests of frontline communities at risk first. His push for climate action is grounded on strengthening the fossil fuel industry, as if oblivious to the reality of climate impacts, the need for accountability for carbon majors, and the urgent need to shift to renewable energy.”

**“Many environmental defenders are women that belong to communities whose livelihood and wellbeing are tied to their ecosystems, such as peasant, fisherfolk, and Indigenous peoples’ communities, and have acted as defenders against land grabbers and corporate-backed paramilitary groups.”**

The Philippines is a signatory to a number of climate agreements. Yet it is also known to be the deadliest country in Asia and third deadliest in the world for environmental defenders (Greenpeace, 2021). Many environmental defenders are women that belong to communities whose livelihood and wellbeing are tied to their ecosystems, such as peasant, fisherfolk, and Indigenous peoples’ communities, and have acted as defenders against land grabbers and corporate-backed paramil-

itary groups. Defending their communities and environments have also made them vulnerable to “terrorist-tagging” by state actors protecting vested interests.

As feminists, Banta and Tulagan organise within the climate movement with particular sensitivity to gender, unpacking the intersections between gender and climate justice beyond the leadership of women in these issues. Banta joins environmental and mass organisations in lobbying for increased support for zero waste communities. She also takes part in urging the government to seek accountability from corporate plastic polluters, and campaigning against false solutions such as a proposed waste-to-energy incinerator in her local hometown of Davao. She does all this while implementing projects related to climate and sexual and reproductive health of Indigenous young women through the Liyang Network. Meanwhile, Tulagan trains and connects young activists and organisations across Asia. In 2021, Tulagan designed and facilitated a training and gathering called the Asia Solidarity Lab, where climate, gender justice, health, and human rights movements came together to explore their intersections as people-powered movements.

### What are our Prospects?

Despite positive signals across various policy areas, it remains unclear whether President Marcos Jr. will have a progressive human rights agenda and the political will to back it up. While advocates have their reservations about the current administration, they understand that part of their job is to maximise any space to influence their agenda. “As activists working on policy reform and access to services, we have no choice but to engage the administration,” Padilla of EnGendeR-rights said. According to Maya Tamayo of Bayi Inc., the hesitation to engage the administration may come from not wanting to contribute to the restoration of the Marcoses while still wanting to ensure policies provide relief for marginalised communities.

“There are problems that are persistent so we should focus on those. [...] We don’t want the government to fail and we can still insist that we don’t erase our history,” said Dr. Nathalie Africa-Verceles, executive director of the University of the Philippines Center for Women and Gender Studies. Sabrina Gacad, founder of the Lunas Collective<sup>2</sup>, agreed that the work of myth-busting and ensuring people have access to services does not have to be at odds and different efforts can go towards both objectives.

There are those like Maya Tamayo and Aella Potestas from Bayi, Inc. who are working with local gov-

ernments. They attest to how allies are won through feminist leadership and formation programs for women leaders. Others choose to work with local activists at the grassroots level. “We are focusing on activism work that is led and shaped by communities and activists. We see the fight as something that is linked to other social justice issues such as democracy, humanitarian, and human rights. We do our work with solidarity at its centre,” said LGBTQIA+ activist Faith Sadicon. Unfortunately, resources remain scarce for grassroots organisations and community organising work across different intersectional identities. “It’s always us competing with other intersectional identities. We compete with other youth, we compete with other women, we compete with other people from other marginalised communities. We have so few opportunities for funding trans-led initiatives as it is,” Mallorca said.

**“Through community organising and building support networks, feminist groups are unpacking intersectional realities and influencing the institutions and larger social movements they are connected to.”**

Funding for youth organisations is also scarce and many do not have the skillset to seek funding, which according to one feminist Mia Howell, makes intergenerational collaborations important. Feminist activists recognise the structural barriers (economic inequality, patriarchy) and contemporary challenges (anti-terror law, mass disinformation) that make it difficult to pursue a human rights and gender justice agenda. This agenda also has many iterations depending on which women’s group one approaches. “There is no unified women’s movement in the Philippines, but a mix of women’s groups that are part of mixed political groups often dominated by men, and there are autonomous women’s groups that come together on common women’s issues, such as misogyny and divorce, but disagree on others, such as abortion, sex work, and attitude towards the government,” said Dr. Melgar. Despite their differences, the different women’s groups all centre community in their work. Through community organising and building support networks, feminist groups are unpacking intersectional realities and influencing the institutions and larger social movements they are connected to.

Working at the community level requires activists to be intersectional. According to Dr. Melgar, “because we work in the communities, we cannot avoid being

<sup>2</sup> A group of volunteers providing reproductive health and gender-based violence advice via online chat.



intersectional because you work with all people there, you work with women with disability, you work with men.” There is also recognition of opportunities for a common struggle, especially with respect to human rights. “At the end of the day, even if [Marcos] pursues climate and gender justice points by organisations, activists and communities must not stop the crucial work in continuing to campaign for justice on all fronts: respect for human rights, most importantly those who dissent, should be central to any progressive policy agenda,” said Tulagan.

Vashti of the trans rights organisation STRAP speaks to young people’s participation and how they provide good pressure for those working in advocacy spaces to come together. “There is pressure outside because younger generations are on our side. It empowers us and strengthens our coalitions and solidarities and also informs each other of our diversity and how we can work with each other in terms of human rights.”

While the current administration’s agenda for human rights and gender justice remains unclear, feminist groups are bullish about continuing their work regardless of the policy environment. Community is central to the strategies of feminist activists as they take their work forward. Young feminists play an important role as the ones who not only articulate the need to be intersectional and collaborative, but offer innovative solutions to immediate problems. There may not be a singular movement or agenda to which Filipino feminists identify, but a common commitment to human rights, gender justice, and intersectionality inevitably binds them together. For now, we can appreciate the Filipino feminist movements for what they are and have always been – dynamic, resilient, and evolving.

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# Syrian Feminist Movement: In Becoming

Rula Asad

Everything in a Syrian woman's life is political. This is not just a statement, it is a reality I learned through my conversations with four Syrian women. They were from Damascus, Qamishli, Northeastern Syria, and one in exile. It surfaced through the questions I asked about logistics, such as access to internet, and when and what to talk about. I tried to open a space with this article, to reflect collectively on how women's and feminist movements operate, in which areas they are active, the challenges that the activists face, how the reality under the de facto forces looks like, and how feminism is manifested in today's Syria.

**"Everything in a Syrian woman's  
life is political."**

Last year, many Syrian opposition groups were remembering ten years of the revolution. Some narratives say that what happened was a foreign conspiracy, whether that be imperialism, Zionism or reactionism, as opposed to the narrative of a popular revolution against tyranny and for freedom, dignity, and justice (Darwish, 2021). The growth and existence of Syrian women's and feminist movements is one of the results of the uprising. I use the terms feminist and women's interchangeably (Asad, 2020), for security and political reasons, related to how the movements present themselves, and for theoretical reasons. The movement is still in a state of formation from being a women's movement to becoming a feminist movement. The conversations I had with these women resemble a collective reflection on where we stand today as Syrian feminists and as part of the women's movement.

## A Feminist Reflection

Vyan Muhammad is a Kurdish activist and journalist from Qamishli, Northeast Syria, and the manager of a local centre in Northeastern<sup>1</sup> Syria. According to her "the movement does exist, but it has declined in recent years. Four years ago, the movement was more active. Currently, there is stagnation for many reasons; firstly, the social stigma that is associated with feminism and LGBT rights (LGBT, n.d.), so there is a reservation, some activists fear for their lives. Secondly, feminism has not crystallised clearly among many women activists. Thirdly, the activists in the past did not reach their demands in general, there was no interest in raising awareness from the authorities to help these activists in their work, in addition to the lack of funds to support them."

On the other side of the country, I talked with Nour (pseudonym) who is an Arab woman from the Northwest<sup>2</sup> of Syria. She works as a team leader that focuses on women's rights. She explained that calling the movement a feminist one might put activists in that part of the country in grave danger: "It is more convenient to call the movement a movement for defending women's rights, because if it is called a feminist movement, it will be rejected from the local society and will be fought. At the same time though, to call the movement a women's movement, is unfair to the movement." Nour explained the tactics she uses to strengthen the feminist cause, which are characterised by stating that they work on the education of women. She added: "We do not promote what we really want to achieve, which is for women to be independent, because that might put us at risk under the charge of sabotaging society and we may be prevented from being

<sup>1</sup> Northeast is the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (commonly referred to as Rojava) that consists of a network of self-governing structures in the areas of Afrin, Jazeera, Euphrates, Raqqa, Tabqa, Manbij, and Deir Ezzor (Burchfield, E., & Stein, A.).

<sup>2</sup> Northwest is northern Aleppo and the Idlib area (Northwest Syria - Factsheet, 2022). See also (Baker, 2021).

anywhere.” In the regime-controlled areas,<sup>3</sup> the activists are trying to change things from within the system, but in my personal opinion, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 1984). In the past (before the outbreak of the 2011 protests), the feminist movement was present at the political level (SFJN, 2019). Currently, it is not more than a few small campaigns, a group of activists scattered here and there. For Zeina Shahla, a journalist from Damascus, “the involvement of the younger generation is greater in this movement, which is a good sign, but there is a gap between the older feminist generations whose issues were on a higher level. There was more interest in the laws, and they had more space to move, they were organised and knowledgeable, probably because most of them came from political backgrounds, and political struggle, and therefore were able to work”.<sup>4</sup>

The start of the Syrian revolution and the upsurge in civil society, made many people join the civil society, and led to the establishment of several small organisations and associations. This was reflected in the increased interest of the younger generation (both women and men) in feminist issues, however, not with the same level of awareness comparing to older generations. She said that “the discussions and campaigns about discriminatory laws do almost not excite anyone anymore and if there is any, it is done by the same people (old generation), who have been defending these rights for more than 15 years”. From her perspective, the (political) atmosphere has made it more difficult to defend rights, while fears and concerns have increased, and priorities have changed.

**“The start of the Syrian revolution and the upsurge in civil society, made many people join the civil society, and led to the establishment of several small organisations and associations. This was reflected in the increased interest of the younger generation (both women and men) in feminist issues...”**

I spoke with Thuraya Hejazy, who studies economics, and is the executive director of Release Me<sup>5</sup>. Thuraya is from the countryside of Damascus, a mother of two

children who lives in exile in France. She thinks that the feminist movement was confined to the circles of the founding civil society and the activists within civil society institutions. She added that “women outside these circles are often treated as recipients of feminist thought and not as participants in its formation. If we were able to form a broader grassroots movement, we would have been able to develop better and have a more acceptable form.”

### A Closer Look at the Movements

The materiality of the movement in the Northwest becomes visible in spaces where women are allowed to work and be in public, i.e. within administrative jobs, as teachers and nurses, and sometimes as shop assistants. However, women are not allowed to be part of a local council, a service office, or to be present in meetings with the military.<sup>6</sup> Women can only reach leading positions within women’s rights organisations. In the Kurdish Self-Administration region (Northeast), women are allowed to work on gender issues, just because it is acceptable and aligned with the authority’s meaning of equality between men and women. Also, they are allowed to work on rights of women detainees in the areas under the control of the National Army — supported by Turkey and located in Ras al-Ain, Afrin, and Tal Abyad (Taşkömür, 2018), and issues related to Yazidi women (HRW, 2016), as those also resonate with the authorities’ priorities.

During my conversations with the activists, I wondered how they perceive the movement after more than ten years of working explicitly on women’s rights and social justice inside and outside the country. From exile, Thuraya does not see that the movement has evolved: “For me, until today, I do not find that the movement has an organised form, it is still in a state of chaos. The Syrian feminists have not been able to create a situation that makes us say that today, as a Syrian feminist movement, we have a framework within which we exist despite our differences, because I believe feminism is not one form, but rather multi-directional and current, with agreement on equity, equality, gender, access to resources and presence.” From her perspective, the lack of a tangible movement is because of a new generation of activists who still need to learn how to organise themselves. In addition, a part of the movement is not flexible enough to open to communities that look different. She added

<sup>3</sup> (Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia, Tartus, Deraa, and Deir al-Zour), as well as 12 million people out of an estimated resident population of 17 million (another 7 million Syrians are still living abroad as refugees) (Balanche, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> An example of what the older generation of Syrian feminists were working on was changing discriminatory laws against women such as the law of nationality and the personal status law (WILPF, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> “Release Me works to present a distinguished work model within a circle of diversity and harmony within its cadres for a real societal change by confronting all aspects of oppression such as capitalism, patriarchy and discriminatory laws, and [they] focus on women’s issues against all kinds of violence and oppression, to reach a leading position in achieving feminist peace, social justice and decision-making centers in Institutions and political bodies” (Ahmado, n.d.).

<sup>6</sup> If they are, they can only talk about women’s issues.

that “this part is concerned with indoctrination only and not listening and learning from others.”

According to Zeina, there is no clarity of thought or ideology in the regime areas. She said that “today, no one is engaged in politics. The old generation of feminists were more organised. No one talks about politics today within my social circle or within the younger age group, and there is no room to work on politics or raising awareness about that. At the same time, there is no interest.” Terms related to social change can be a trigger for trouble and shunned because of the association with politics, and thus the foci of activists are less problematic or vague issues. Against this background, women focus on specific small projects, such as campaigns launched within the 16 days of activism to stop violence against women.<sup>7</sup> Once the campaign ends, there is no more work. The reason is clear; the government allows this campaign in terms of coverage and funding. Zeina added: “I assume that a large part of a generation — I am in my forties — did not have enough political awareness, except for families that were politically involved or affiliated with a particular party.”

In the past, there were women’s associations operating in the Kurdish area, but their presence has largely decreased. Migration has affected civil work in North-eastern Syria. Today, activism is only among the women’s civil organisations, some of which are affiliated with the authorities and not entirely neutral, according to Vyan. “This is what made society associate feminist work with the authority or ideology promoted by the Self-Administration. But these groups do not explicitly declare that they are affiliated with the Self-Administration, and these groups have great access because the administration has facilitated access for them in the field of awareness, and their work is limited to the issue of equality from the perspective of the Self-Administration.” The reason these organisations do not link themselves openly with the Self-Administration is because it affects how local society accepts their work and it gives them more opportunities to get funds.

For safety and logistical reasons, many groups and collectives have established an entity outside of Syria. Inside Syria, particularly outside the control of the Syrian regime (Northwest), there are de-facto forces, extremist forces, and traditional societies that have experienced war for more than eleven years. Within these circumstances, there were attempts to organise, but they were “scattered attempts.” Nour sees the movement inside and outside the county in a state of schizophrenia, because activists outside of Syria have more space to express themselves and their

ideas, while feminists inside the country stay behind the red lines that are drawn by the de-facto forces. In the Kurdish region, movements or organisations need a permission, and activists have to be persuasive, as according to Vyan Muhammad, “persuasion is the key to action, especially when it comes to introduce your work, to explain what gender or feminism is.” Thus, movements and organisations simplify their work and focus on equality in line with the way it is propagated by the Self-Administration, withdrawing the political dimension from their work.

### Challenges on the Way

Being an activist inside Syria is a double-edged sword, especially when the activism involves topics not approved by the authorities’ social justice propaganda. The risks range from arrest or suspension, to defamation, kidnapping, or murder.

Last year, a sermon by Sheikh Al-Rifai in the Northwest went viral. In the sermon, Sheikh Al-Rifai attacked women who were working on gender, linking their work to Western culture trying to sabotage the local morale (Shami, 2021). Because of that sermon, some women collectives and organisations had to put their activities on hold or change the narrative around their work to avoid connection to gender or feminism.

However, Thuraya has a different analysis of what happened. She said that “we are in the stage of direct confrontation with society. In the past when we were active as women, we were partners in the (traditional) political movement or with war tragedies”. In the Northwest, women’s organisations are targeted from time to time because of the Islamic Council and the Army of Islam. The organisations’ presence is much more tangible and stronger in the region according to Nour: “I feel that Jaysh al-Islam (the Army of Islam) is preparing to fight women, women’s organisations and other organisations, by mobilising university students through small grants to fight female university students and excluding them from any gatherings.”

For women collectives in this region, there is no authority to request support from. Therefore, they must deal with these groups if they need security support, but as feminists, as Nour explained, “we do not want to sit with the military at the same table, so we inevitably need to ally with men to negotiate”. To keep working in the region, Nour and other activists evade “feminism” and focus their energies on opening some spaces for women. Unfortunately, recently feminists and women human rights defenders have been accused

<sup>7</sup> The 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence is an annual international campaign that kicks off on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and runs until 10 December, Human Rights Day (UNW).

of sabotaging society, promoting and defending homosexuality, offering trainings on sexuality and women's sexual rights. Since these topics are not welcome, activists need to focus on more practical issues.

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### **Feminism - Is it Important within the Syrian Context?**

After years of struggle for social justice and constant compromising to create Syrian feminist spaces and thoughts, it was necessary to look from a distance and think about how important feminism in public Syrian life is. For Thuraya, without doubt, it is because "at first, we were talking about women's activities, women's participation in many fields, but today we are talking about a Syrian feminist movement." From Damascus, Zeina, agreed and commented that "even in less complex contexts, where the level of freedoms and rights is better, feminism is important." She continued: "in the Syrian context, there is a need for all human rights movements, not just feminism." In addition

to its importance, giving feminism local and contextual meaning is essential today, according to Nour. She said that "we need to redefine feminism, many women are with feminism, but when feminism starts to discuss Islam, they are no longer interested." Nour believes that there should be a way to create a feminism that resembles Syrian women today with their customs and beliefs, and to expand feminist currents to avoid internal exclusionary battles.

Yet, for Thuraya, everything in Syria today without exception is political, "including the women themselves and their activities, in the end everything that women do, their resisting to exist in public spaces is political." Vyan sees that there are attempts by individuals and organisations to change, not only legally, but also to change the living situation. However, change does not happen fast enough, the movement is unorganised and does not receive enough support. Zeina Shahla from Damascus touches on the alternatives that feminism has offered in many daily situations. For example, she mentions the many discussions that have occurred in recent years on social media, conversations that are raising awareness related to women's issues and their spaces, discussions focusing on violence or harassment, and women's safety. All of these have allowed discussions that were not there before, and have led people, who might not want to discuss certain topics, and/or might disagree on certain points, to engage with those issues. Zeina concluded that "awareness is slowly rising like everything in Syria."

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My appreciation to Vyan Muhammad, Nour, Thuraya Hejazy and Zeina Shahla, Thank you all for your openness.

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# Disappearing Reproductive Rights in Central and Eastern Europe

Júlia Bakó

“I would be so glad if a time came when the main question about abortion was not whether it is good or not, but why it is good. When it is generally recognised that for women who are in their reproductive age, abortion is a natural part of life. When it is acknowledged that abortion can emancipate and liberate women and it can lift them up from bad circumstances,” said Hungarian women’s rights advocate Krisztina Les. Things, however, seem to be moving in the opposite direction in many countries all over the world. In June 2022, the US Supreme Court voted to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark ruling that legalised abortion in the US. This marked a major setback for reproductive rights, which already disabled millions of Americans to access safe abortions. These recent developments in the US are part of a trend that has been getting stronger in Central and Eastern Europe as well. In recent years, the region’s conservative parties and organisations often linked to likeminded counterparts in the US, have been pushing for stricter abortion laws, and in many cases, have succeeded.

The most drastic example is Poland, where a near-total abortion ban was enforced in 2020. The ban only allows abortion in cases of rape, incest or when the pregnancy endangers the life of the mother. The introduction of the new abortion law sparked huge protests in Poland and spread to the surrounding countries. The strengthening anti-abortion views within the region also had visible effects in Romania. Here, conservative politics, religion, and international funding have united to forge a movement that threatens access to abortion. Doctors can cite moral reasons, such as religious beliefs, for refusing to perform procedures.

In Hungary, according to a new decree, those who seek an abortion will be obliged to listen to the foetal heart-beat before they can access the procedure. With this, the Hungarian government took a legal step to restrict the right to abortion – a move that feminist organisations have been dreading for years.<sup>1</sup>

Poland, Romania, and Hungary are only but a few examples. The “abortion question” is on the political agenda all around Central and Eastern Europe, where the situation is further complicated by the ongoing war in Ukraine. Since the beginning of the war, refugees have been arriving in the region in great numbers, among them individuals who would want to terminate their pregnancies — some of them rape victims. When crossing the borders, however, they often realise that their reproductive rights are non-existent. Feminist and women’s rights organisations and activists continue to fight for reproductive rights in hostile environments like Ukraine. There are groups that provide legal aid, that organise protests, finance abortions, and take serious efforts to advocate that the access to safe and legal abortion is a fundamental human right.

## Poland: “A Woman is Like an Incubator”

“During this short hearing my friends helped over 20 people,” said Justyna Wydrzyńska at her court hearing in July 2022. “Once I leave the court, I am turning on my phone and will continue taking calls from people in need, informing them how and where to get an abortion (Parker, Jeznach & Morris, 2022). Wydrzyńska is one of four human rights defenders from the Abortion Dream Team, a Polish grassroots initiative helping

<sup>1</sup> This is the most common interpretation of the new decree, however, it leaves room for other interpretations. In practice, it added a new passage to the form that women use to apply for an abortion that states that the “medical record presented establishes that the pregnant woman was provided with a clearly identifiable indication of foetal vital signs by the health care provider.” It is widely understood as women having to listen to the foetal heartbeat.

women<sup>2</sup> access abortions. In 2020, a woman named Anna reached out to the organisation wanting help to terminate her pregnancy. Her abusive husband had forcibly stopped her from going abroad for an abortion. Wydrzyńska offered to share her abortion pills with her. Because of the pandemic, organisations such as Women Help Women were unable to send abortion pills as usual to women via post on time. Although, according to Polish law, it is not illegal for women to have abortions on their own, it is prohibited to help them with the procedure. When he discovered the pills, Anna's husband called the police, and Wydrzyńska was accused of illegally assisting in an abortion, even though the abortion itself did not take place. As a result, Wydrzyńska is facing three years in prison.<sup>3</sup> Her unprecedented case had been nationally and internationally followed by feminist organisations.

**"...several organisations help Polish women get abortions by supplying them with abortion pills or supporting their travel abroad..."**

Poland's strict laws that even prohibit abortions in cases of severe foetal abnormality have led to multiple tragedies. In September 2021, Isabela Sajbor was admitted to the hospital after going into premature labour. For weeks, she knew her baby was not going to live long since it was diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder. Her doctors, however, refused to perform an abortion citing the law, even though her life was in danger. "The doctors can't help as long as the foetus is alive thanks to the anti-abortion law. A woman is like an incubator" (Vandoorne & Bell, 2022), she wrote to her mother from her hospital bed. Soon after, she went into cardiac arrest and died. Her case sparked nation-wide protests, highlighting the life-threatening dangers that the abortion ban carries for Polish women, and calling for access to safe and legal abortions.

Meanwhile, several organisations help Polish women get abortions by supplying them with abortion pills or supporting their travel abroad, mostly to Austria or the Netherlands, to access the procedure. "We do not ask people how they got pregnant, or why they want abortions. We only ask them what the obstacles between you and your abortion are, and then we smash these," Mara Clarke said. Clarke is the founder and director of the Abortion Support Network, a charity that provides information, financial assistance, and other practical

support to those forced to travel for abortions.

Both, the organisations helping women and their clients themselves face various threats. "We have people calling and threatening us. We have partners taking away travel documents from women we want to help. We also have to protect our volunteers and our clients from pro-life people standing in front of abortion clinics in Austria," Clarke explained. Meanwhile, Polish women that are against abortion, but still rely on the aforementioned organisations to help them terminate their pregnancies show the controversies of the Polish anti-choice narratives that heavily stigmatise women for wanting to get abortions. "We have many clients who are against abortion, who will tell us that we are going to go to hell, but they are still going to have the abortion. I am doing this work because this is the right thing to do, I am not doing it because I want this woman to give me anything," Clarke explained. "She might not even say thank you. She doesn't fucking need to."

### **Romania: International Pro-Life Allies**

The societal, religious, and political pressures regarding abortion is not unfamiliar in Romania. In Romania, from 1967 until the regime change in 1989, abortion was completely banned by a decree resulting in many women having illegal, unsafe, and painful abortions. One of these women is Daniela Draghici, who had a "tabletop" abortion back in the 70's. "The woman who was performing it put a rag in my mouth so the neighbours would not hear anything. There was no anaesthesia, and she was risking a lot. Back then, she could have been sentenced to 12 years in prison for helping me," she recalled. Since her abortion, she became more interested in women's rights, and now she is one of the loudest abortion rights activists in Romania, raising awareness of the harms of the abortion ban by telling her own and other women's stories from the decades of the decree. "People do not talk about these cases anymore. If it were up to me, I would have an army of women talking about this. People try to forget about these incidents, and the younger generation has no idea what happened in the past, what their mother, aunt, grandmother went through," Draghici said.

Remembering the past tragedies and raising awareness of the current ones seems especially important considering how the pro-life movement is gaining momentum in Romania. Although, according to the Romanian legislation, abortion is legal until the 14<sup>th</sup> week, many organisations and activists are warning about abortion being phased out. According to Centrul FILIA's 2019

<sup>2</sup> The term "pregnant women" is used in this article as it is more representative of the cases encountered in Eastern Europe and the laws of the countries discussed, while in other contexts "pregnant persons" would be the more appropriate term.

<sup>3</sup> Her next hearing is scheduled for October 2022, after the writing of this article.

research, at least one-third of Romanian hospitals do not perform abortions at all, either because none of their doctors are willing to perform it or the hospital's management forbids it entirely. Many doctors are invoking a conscientious objector clause, citing moral or personal reasons such as their religious beliefs. These reflect the public and political sentiments of the country, where religious institutions are leading the anti-abortion movement. "We have seen cases where doctors were sending women who were asking for abortions to the church to talk to a priest instead. There was also a church that literally put a sign on its door saying that it was the hospital's family planning office," explained Andrada Cilibiu, an abortion advocate working for Centrul FILIA, a Romanian women's rights organisation.

**"Romanian women's rights organisations are taking up the fight against the shrinking abortion rights in various ways. One of their most important tasks is to counterbalance all the websites and helplines operated by pro-life organisations, which provide non-factual, ideologically driven, and often misleading information."**

It is not just the Orthodox and Evangelical Church, however, but also various NGOs that are pushing strong pro-life narratives. Many of them operate pregnancy crisis centres, they own "information" websites, and operate help lines for women in crisis. "I call these lines from time to time, and they are telling women wanting to get information about abortion that they are going to die because of terminating their pregnancies, that they are going to dream about the child they had killed, that they will not be able to get out of bed because of depression", Cilibiu said angrily. Anti-abortion organisations that have proliferated in Romania in the past decades have strong support from American conservative organisations, not just ideologically, but financially as well. A support that local women's rights organisations cannot compete with. "What I am afraid of is that now that Roe v. Wade has been overturned, they are going to invest more and more resources in Eastern Europe."

Romanian women's rights are taking up the fight against the shrinking abortion rights in various ways. One of their most important tasks is to counterbalance all the websites and helplines operated by pro-life organisations, which provide non-factual, ideologically driven, and often misleading information. If someone wanting to terminate their pregnancy googles

"abortion" in Romania, the chances are high they will end up on a website that will try to scare or convince them to change their mind. That is why women's rights organisations have websites and helplines of their own, with actual fact-based information about abortion for individuals who need it. They have trained volunteers and colleagues picking up the phone and answering messages, providing not just information, but also emotional support for those on the other end of the line.

One of their most important assets, however, is their list of allies. Women's rights organisations are reaching out to hospitals and private practices to identify obstetricians and gynaecologists who are willing to perform abortions despite the pressure they face. This way, when someone who wants an abortion reaches out to them, they can effectively and quickly direct them to the nearest professional who can help. This can spare the person a lot of humiliation that they would face reaching out to hospitals randomly. In recent years, there has also been a growing number of articles in the international media about the abortion situation in Romania. Women's rights organisations and activists are using these platforms quite consciously to raise awareness of their causes, not just in their own country, but internationally as well. "We are going to need help from the international community, because we are not going to be able to handle this alone. We need to stick together with organisation on local, national, and even on the regional level, because we see the same thing happening all around us," explained Cilibiu.

### **Hungary: Sneaking Restrictions**

On September 28, the International Day for Safe Abortions, thousands of people showed up next to the Hungarian Parliament for what was the country's biggest feminist protest in years (Mérce, 2022). They were raising their voices against a newly introduced decree, which stated that women who seek abortions would be obliged to present a document issued by a gynaecologist that verified they had been presented "indications of the foetus' vital functions" which means they had listened to the foetal heartbeat. The crowd was much bigger than the PATENT Association, organiser of the event, had expected. There were young women telling the government to get out of their uterus with well-made signs, there were mothers with small children, feminist activists, and men, standing in solidarity. On the stage, there was a speech from a gynaecologist who criticised the new decree not just from a women's rights, but also from a healthcare perspective. She was one of the few from her profession who dared to speak up publicly against the heartbeat rule.

**"...feminist organisations in Hungary have more or less consciously chosen not to push for more rights – for example to bring back abortion pills – but for the existing legislations to stay intact."**

The popular support for abortion in Hungary is relatively high. 79% of people say that women should be able to access abortion, which is higher than the world's average (D. Kovács, 2021). Nevertheless, apart from the most recent heartbeat rule, the Hungarian government has been gradually reducing reproductive rights for years, with what Hungarian feminist organisations call "sneaking restrictions." In 2012, the government banned the distribution of abortion pills, and self-induced abortion is illegal even if the abortion pill is acquired from abroad. Before undergoing the surgical procedure, women also must attend two consultation sessions, where they are often humiliated and shamed for wanting to terminate their pregnancies or pushed towards changing their minds. "They are introducing and maintaining such obstacles for women who want to get abortions that would be easily avoidable and eliminated. I cannot see another reason for these than the humiliation and shaming of women," said Krisztina Les of the PATENT Association.

Despite these restrictions, reproductive rights in Hungary are more respected than in the neighbouring countries. Thus, feminist organisations in Hungary have more or less consciously chosen not to push for more rights – for example to bring back abortion pills – but for the existing legislations to stay intact.

This strategy, however, needs to be reconsidered, now that the government modified the abortion law, which has been unchanged since 1992.

Besides organising the protest, the PATENT Association – in cooperation with other feminist organisations – is preparing various projects that could counterbalance the growing pro-life sentiments. They will launch a research project that enables women, doctors, nurses, and others to share their experiences of abortion in the new system. The organisation hopes that these personal stories will show how the new legislation works in practice, and serve as a powerful tool for advocacy work. PATENT is also reaching out to influencers to support their cause, they are giving interviews nationally and internationally, and similarly to Romania, they are reaching out to feminist organisations in the region to share tactics of fighting for reproductive rights.

## **Ukraine: The War and Its Victims**

While reproductive rights are regularly violated in all three countries, Poland, Romania, and Hungary also have Ukrainian refugees arriving in great numbers, among them those who would want to terminate their pregnancies – some of them rape victims. Numerous feminist rights organisations within the region have been involved in the Ukrainian crisis response, including supporting refugees in getting abortions. This is not easy, especially in Poland where women arriving from Ukraine see their reproductive rights disappearing. Clarke from the Abortion Support Network pointed out the grey zones of the Polish abortion law:

"Let's say that I am a nice Polish woman letting a nice Ukrainian refugee woman sleep on my couch. Say she wants an abortion. At what point am I a criminal? When she uses my laptop to order abortion pills, when she orders them to my address? What constitutes as helping?"

With the new heartbeat rule, and abortion pills not being legal, the situation is getting more complicated in Hungary as well. "At this point, it is just easier and more humane to help Ukrainian women to travel to Austria for abortions. There are no compulsory consultations there, no heartbeat rule, you just make an appointment, and they carry out the procedure", Ágnes Szalóki, the coordinator of the Ukrainian response team at the PATENT Association, said. Despite the hardships, feminist organisations are taking an immense part of aiding Ukrainian refugees whose particular needs are often ignored by certain aid organisations.

According to the PATENT Association, whose staff is often doing field visits at refugee shelters assessing the needs of women living there, it can take multiple visits for refugee women to be able to trust them enough to share their problems and to ask for help. That is why they are constantly training their members and volunteers on trauma conscious communication, on the language to use when talking about abortions and gender-based violence, and on the skills to build a safe and intimate environment for women in which they can open up. Many organisations in the region do not just give out information on how to access abortion, but make appointments and accompany refugee women to hospitals as well. This personalised service follows individual needs and often does not stop when the actual medical procedure is over. It does not only respond to reproductive health needs, but to emotional needs as well.

## The Fight Does Not Stop

“I think it is going to get worse”, said Andrada, when asked about the future regarding abortion and reproductive rights, and she is not alone in her opinion. Women’s rights organisations and feminist activists in Central and Eastern Europe are not optimistic. They are fighting for reproductive rights in a hostile political and social environment where resources are channelled to organisations and political powers that attack them, discredit them and which, according to them, work towards gaining total control over reproduction. The example of Romania and Hungary shows that abortion does not need to be illegal for it to be increasingly more difficult to access. Anti-abortion organisations and politicians use various advocacy tools and lobbying to propagate their views, and they have considerably more financial and human recourse than most feminist organisations in the region.

**“Let’s say that I am a nice Polish woman letting a nice Ukrainian refugee woman sleep on my couch. Say she wants an abortion. At what point am I a criminal? When she uses my laptop to order abortion pills, when she orders them to my address? What constitutes as helping?”**

Although facing growing hardships, feminist organisations and activists keep advocating for safe and legal abortions, fighting the social stigma surrounding abortion and against the anti-abortion narratives and legislations that claim to save lives while forgetting about those they harm. Among them women, who are putting their own experiences, faces, and voices in the frontline of the fight: “I am always telling myself, if I am ever in the situation of having an unwanted pregnancy, I will put myself out there and take Romania to the Human Rights Court”, Cilibiu said. “Reducing abortion is a form of violence against women, and I am seeing a lot of suffering because of what is happening. And this, for me, is unacceptable.”



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This article could not have been created without the input from amazing women who were willing to give me interviews about their own and their organisations' work. A special thank you to Ágnes Szalóki from the PAT-ENT Association, Andrada Cilibiu from Centrul FILIA, for Daniela Draghici, Krisztina Les from the PATENT Association, and Mara Clarke from the Abortion Support Network.

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# A Voice for the Criminalised: Feminist Mobilisation in Kenya

Edna Asesa

In April 2022, Sheila Lumumba, a 25-year-old non-binary lesbian was found dead in their house in Karatina, in Nyeri County, Kenya. Sheila's post-mortem report revealed that they were raped and murdered. The initial laxity of the police in regards to the murder did not go unnoticed. Sheila's family accused the police of dragging the case to the point that the family decided to carry out their own investigation. The family discovered CCTV footage, which proved instrumental in the police case (Kilbride, 2022). The inaction of the police showed the discrimination women with non-conforming sexual orientation and gender non-conforming persons in Kenya face due to the failure of the legal system to protect them.

In response to the situation, feminists in Kenya mobilised to seek justice for Sheila, to call on the relevant authorities to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators, and to highlight the present legal and societal discrimination. Four months after the murder, the police arrested and charged a suspect with the aggravated assault and murder of Sheila (Wepukhulu & Madegwa, 2022). The work of feminist activists did not end there. With the trial still active, they advocated for Justice for Sheila through legal strategies. Organisations and collectives such as the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (NGLHRC) and the Initiative for Equality and Non-Discrimination (INEND) were at the forefront of this case, attended court sessions, and monitored the process to ensure that justice is served. This case not only offered a glance into the discrimination and violence women with non-conforming sexual orientation and gender non-conforming persons face, but also into the strategies that feminist organisations and activists use to address these present issues in Kenya.

## The Realities of LGBTIQ+ Persons in Kenya

Kenya is a hostile environment for women with non-conforming sexuality and gender non-conforming persons. Feminist and LGBTIQ+ organisations and activists have emphasised the discrimination and violence these persons face through adequate research and formal reporting.

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According to the NGLHRC 2020/2021 Annual Legal Aid Report, the commission provided legal aid in 345 incidents of violence and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ clients (NGLHRC, 2021, pp. 9-24). Reported incidents included physical assault, verbal assault, eviction from rental homes and business premises, conversion therapy, police extortion, and arbitrary arrests (Ibid). However, many cases of discrimination and violence go unreported because of a lack of trust in the systems intended to protect victims.

In August 2021, just a few months before Sheila's murder, Erica Chandra, a transgender woman, was found dead in a ditch in Nairobi, in a suspected transphobic attack (Jinsiangu, 2021). To this day the perpetrators have not been arrested. In May 2022, a 50-year-old intersex woman, Rose Mbesa, was murdered in Trans Nzoia County. Her body was discovered by the roadside. The preliminary investigations by the

police established that she had been raped before the murder (Wepukhulu & Madegwa, 2022). These cases, however, are just the tip of the iceberg. Discrimination of the LGBTIQ+ community and homophobic and transphobic violence are deeply rooted in Kenya's legal system and society, which makes the work of feminist organisations and activists all the more challenging.

The homophobic laws in Kenya have created a thriving environment for violence and discrimination. Article 27(2) of the Constitution of Kenya recognises that every person is equal before the law and protects them from discrimination on various grounds. However, it excludes gender identity and sexual orientation as grounds for discrimination, thus excluding women with non-conforming sexuality and gender non-conforming persons from protection. The Kenyan Penal code under sections 162 (a) and (c) explicitly criminalises all same-sex relations. It states that "any person who has "carnal knowledge against the order of nature" or permits a male person to have "carnal knowledge against the order of nature against them has committed a crime." Carnal knowledge against the order of nature refers to any sexual activity the lawmakers believe to be unnatural. Persons found guilty of these "unnatural sexual acts" face up to 14 years in prison.

This homophobia in the legal system is reflected in politics and the views of society, all of which have contributed to a climate where cases such as Sheila's could occur. In this particular case, Sheila's rape can be characterised as corrective rape, i.e. the rape of a person of non-conforming gender identity or sexual orientation with the aim of "correcting" and inflicting gender-based and homophobic violence (Gaitho, 2022, p. 331). Mieses (2009) stated that women with non-conforming sexuality and gender non-conforming persons are raped because they are going against the "traditional gender representation" and challenging the dominant and normative African ideals on gender identity. Waruguru Gaitho, an academic who has done extensive research on corrective rape in South Africa, argued that corrective rape is not just about "correction," but there is also a punitive element. In Sheila's case, they were punished for not conforming to the gender identity and sexual orientation that Kenyans believe to be right.

### Feminist Legal Strategies

The criminalisation of women with non-conforming sexual orientation and gender non-conforming persons further exposes them to violence. However, it is not just the legal system that needs to be changed, but also the societal and cultural views. While the law is one of the best tools for facilitating social change, there are instances where social change preceded legal change.

**"Feminists in Kenya have adopted a legal strategy to fight the existing oppressive legal system. Their aim was to advance social justice by seeking recognition and protection of the human rights of a larger group through the change of existing and adoption of new laws..."**

Gaitho stressed that if society does not change with the legal system, there can be no meaningful change. South Africa is a good example of this, as same-sex relations were legalised and yet women with non-conforming sexual orientation and gender non-conforming persons continued to experience violence (Gaitho, 2022, pp. 335-339).

Feminists in Kenya have adopted a legal strategy to fight the existing oppressive legal system. Their aim was to advance social justice by seeking recognition and protection of the human rights of a larger group through the change of existing and adoption of new laws (Anabtawi, 2022, p. 2). LGBTIQ+ movements in authoritarian, anti-feminist, and homophobic countries and systems have encountered some success using the legal system. Lebanon, an authoritarian regime with dominant conservative views is a good example of this. The legal strategies of LGBTIQ+ activists there have proven successful in securing legal victories such as courts declining to prosecute "homosexual conduct" (Ibid). These significant strides in rigid non-democratic systems have been an inspiration to LGBTIQ+ activists in Kenya who decided to use legal measures to change oppressive and outdated laws. One great success for the movement was a 2018 judgment by a Court of Appeal in Mombasa, Kenya, that found forced anal examinations on persons accused of engaging in same-sex relations to be unconstitutional (Human Rights Watch, 2018). This suit had been filed by the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (NGLHRC), which wanted to challenge this violent and discriminatory practice (Ibid).

Nevertheless, not all legal fights have proven successful, and feminist organisations and activists have occasionally faced drawbacks. The most recent hurdle was the 2019 High Court decision in the case of *EG & 7 Others v. the Attorney General; DKM & 9 Others v. the Attorney General* (2016) that upheld sections 162(a), (c) and 165 of the Penal Code, which criminalises same-sex relations. The court held that these laws are not in violation of the constitution. The petitioners, including organisations fighting for the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons in Kenya, filed this suit on the ground that these sections were vague and ambiguous, and therefore

violated the constitutional rights of LGBTIQ+ persons (*EG & 7 Others v. the Attorney General; DKM & 9 Others v. the Attorney General*, 2016). The petitioners in this case testified to the discrimination and violence they have been exposed to based on their sexual orientation, not just at the hand of their communities, but also authorities such as the police. They also testified to the stigma and discrimination that the law has exposed them to as they have been denied housing, public services and employment, in addition to being shunned from their communities (Ibid). They stated their constant fear of being arbitrarily arrested by the police or persecuted by their communities. The legal argument for the repeal of these laws was that they violated the inherent constitutional right to dignity and privacy of LGBTIQ+ people by criminalising their private and intimate sexual relationships. They also argued that these laws were unconstitutional because they, directly and indirectly, discriminated against a specific group of people, LGBTIQ+ persons in this case (Ibid).

However, the court was not convinced by the petitioners' argument and held that their right to equality and freedom from discrimination was not violated by sections 162 and 165. It stated that these laws did not specifically target LGBTIQ+ persons but rather targeted "any person" (Ibid). The court also argued that the testimonies of the petitioners on the discrimination and violence they experienced were not supported by "credible evidence" (Ibid). This judgment was a disappointment to feminists and the LGBTIQ+ community in Kenya, who had hoped that this case would mark a new beginning for human rights in the country.

Gaitho believes that this judgment was not made on legal merit, but was instead influenced by societal and cultural attitudes. She added that this was evident from the fact that the concept of marriage was present in the court's judgment, despite the petitioners making it clear that they were not seeking to legalise same-sex marriage, but rather to challenge the criminalisation, punishment, and discrimination of a particular group. The judges, however, feared that decriminalisation would open the door to recognition of same-sex marriages in Kenya. They argued that "Article 45(2) only recognises marriage between adult persons of the opposite sex. In our view, decriminalising same-sex sex on grounds that it is consensual and is done in private between adults, would contradict the express provisions of Article 45 (2). The Petitioners' argument that they are not seeking to be allowed to enter same-sex marriage is in our view, immaterial given that if allowed, it will lead to same-sex persons living together as couples. Such relationships, whether in private or not, formal or not would be in violation of the tenor and spirit of the Constitution" (*EG & 7 Others v. the*

*Attorney General; DKM & 9 Others v. the Attorney General*, 2016).

While the court purported to defend the "tenor and spirit of the Constitution", it was clear that there remained an existing fear that decriminalisation would erode the traditional marriage ideals present in Kenyan society. The court chose to uphold the current laws rather than defend the humanity and dignity of LGBTIQ+ persons, and with that, underestimated the effect that decriminalisation would have on this marginalised group. Although this was a huge setback for feminist organisations and activists in Kenya, there is continuous hope that their legal mobilisation efforts and strategies will result in legal changes in the future.

### Feminist Strategies Online

Feminist organisations and activists in Kenya face great challenges in organising due to the dominant anti-feminist rhetoric. The view that feminists are "toxic", men-hating, lonely, and bitter women who want to emasculate men and erode traditional norms and gender roles in society is still dominant (Nyabola, 2018, p. 261). This view, also present in media, has been an obstacle for feminist organisations and activists. Nevertheless, as Nyabola pointed out, feminists in Kenya have countered this hostile anti-feminist rhetoric in traditional media and public spaces by taking advantage of new media formats and creating their own spaces on digital media platforms. Social movements #JusticeforSheila and #JusticeforErica illustrate how feminists in Kenya do that.

**"Through change.org, feminists in Kenya have successfully empowered other Kenyans to actively pursue social change."**

I learned about Sheila's case on Twitter through #JusticeForSheila. Created by queer human rights activists, the hashtag has been used to mobilise the public, raise awareness of the murder of queer people in Kenya, and call on relevant authorities for action. Without these attempts by feminists to mobilise social media, the majority of Kenya would not know about cases such as Sheila's. This is primarily due to mainstream media in Kenya continuing their silence on these cases, while at the same time highlighting femicide as an epidemic. As a result, the intersectionality of the victims is neglected with media often ignoring the additional layer of identity that exposes certain marginalised groups to a higher risk of violence and discrimination.

Feminists also utilised other digital avenues to support Sheila's family in getting justice. They started petitions on change.org such as "Investigation transparency from DCI and Arrests made to Sheila Lumumba's Rapists & Killers", #justiceforsheila#RIP, and sheila#-justiceforsheila (Change.org, 2022). There was a lot of initial scepticism, even among feminists, on whether petitions on change.org could translate to meaningful social change. The position has since changed after the public has been exposed to more interactions with these petitions. Through change.org, feminists in Kenya have successfully empowered other Kenyans to actively pursue social change. Each of the petitions on Sheila's case garnered over 8000 signatures. This means that 8000 people had learned about the case and wanted to actively engage in seeking change (Ibid).

Group meetings have also been a way for feminists to strengthen their solidarity and mobilise to achieve their goals. While historically, these meetings were in-person, social media has created platforms for online and virtual meetings. One such assembly is the "Young Feminist Leaders and Organizers Convening 2022" organised by the Kisumu Feminist Society. These meetings provide a rich and safe space for feminists in Kenya to discuss the complexities of organising around queer issues in a hostile environment. It gives them a chance to engage on critical issues, such as the rising cases of violence against LGBTIQ+ persons, and to develop effective responses. Different collectives get to collaborate for a common goal and promote the intersectionality and intergenerational nature of the feminist movement in Kenya through the collaboration with different identities and discussions on various issues including sexual and gender identity. As such, the value of these meetings cannot be understated.

Nevertheless, there are challenges within the feminist movement. Afrika, a young, queer feminist organiser in Kenya, stated that, in her observation, feminist movements in Kenya were becoming intergenerational with more young people involved in feminist issues. The older and younger feminists were engaged in impactful conversations to understand their varying experiences better. However, as Afrika observed, there is an existing rift in the feminist movement that undermines solidarity and efforts to enact change for sexual minorities in Kenya. This rift is due to some feminists not fully embracing intersectionality in terms of sexual and gender identities. This was also evident from the deafening silence by major feminist organisations and activists, often vocal about femicide, but silent on Sheila's murder.

Unfortunately, this demonstrated that women with non-conforming sexual orientation and gender non-con-

forming persons were often excluded from feminist discussions and responses in Kenya. Afrika said: "One of the main reasons that I decided to take a more leading and active role in feminist organising is because I was part of feminist spaces where some of my identities were erased or ignored. The language and discussions of these spaces would focus on the cisgender-heteronormative point of view, for instance, discussions on intimate partner violence would be centred around the relationship between a man and a woman, completely ignoring lesbian relationships. I, therefore, struggled to see myself in these spaces." Afrika is part of the young feminist revolution in Kenya that is committed to making feminist movements more progressive, inclusive, and intersectional.

**"... there is an existing rift in the feminist movement that undermines solidarity and efforts to enact change for sexual minorities in Kenya. This rift is due to some feminists not fully embracing intersectionality in terms of sexual and gender identities."**

### The Way Forward

Feminist organisations and activists in Kenya have their work cut out for them. There is a concern that the growing political homophobia and religious fundamentalism will expose women with non-conforming sexual orientation and gender non-conforming persons to more discrimination and violence. Statements by political leaders are worrying as they demonstrate a lack of political will to promote and protect the human rights of all. However, given the resilience and commitment that feminist organisations and activists in Kenya have shown over the years, there is hope that they are fit for the challenges ahead. The digital and social media strategies have already proven effective in raising awareness on the aforementioned issues and engaging with society. These strategies have the potential to not just mobilise allies, but also reframe the social and political ideologies in Kenya. The legal mobilisation strategy has been effective in challenging the discrimination and violence marginalised groups face, and while it has had some setbacks, it has the potential to create meaningful legal and social change in the future. Eventually, through feminist group convenings, there is room for feminist movements to further strategise, mobilise and build solidarities. After all, feminist movements in Kenya have and continue to play a major role in fighting for the rights of marginalised groups.



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Thank you Gaitho Waruguru and Afrika for your valuable time and input.

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# Recognising the Right not to Reproduce: Story from Nepal

## Shuvangi Khadka

In 1997, Min Min Lama, a teenager living in the mountains of Nepal was raped by a relative. Terrified and ashamed, Min Min did not disclose it to her strict Hindu family until another relative found out that she was pregnant. An illegal abortion was arranged. At that point, abortion was equated with infanticide in Nepal. There were no exceptional circumstances under which abortion was permitted even in cases of rape, incest or if it threatened a woman's life (Thapa, 2004, p. 85). Min Min survived the abortion but the incident was reported to the police. She was arrested and sentenced to 20 years in prison.<sup>1</sup> After her arrest, Min Min's family abandoned her. Her only visitors in prison were charity workers and advocates. Some of them were from the Family Planning Association of Nepal (FPAN) and the Forum for Women, Law and Development (FWLD). Min Min's story reenergised the abortion fight in Nepal, a fight that was in the making for three decades (Ibid, p. 86).

In 1990, after its first parliamentary elections post 30 years of absolute monarchic rule, Nepal ushered in democracy (Gaige & Scholz, 1991). Many feminist activists and leaders returned after attending influential international conferences. Those conferences signalled a global shift in the way women's rights were perceived and this percolated to Nepal. One of the individuals at the helm of this was Sunil Bhandari, then the FPAN president and a National Assembly member, who lobbied with the government to submit a bill to legalise abortion after attending the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 (Forum for Women, Law and Development, 2003, p. 52).

Eventually, the Eleventh Amendment Bill to the then general country code, i.e. Muluki Ain 1963, was proposed, incorporating provisions on abortion (Limbu,

2002). "However, the proposed bill was not comprehensive. It allowed for abortions until 12 weeks for married women with the consent of the husband," said Sabin Shrestha, the current executive director of the FWLD. The problem with the proposed amendment was that it did not protect unmarried teenagers like Min Min. A team of lawyers from the FWLD then travelled to different prisons of Nepal. According to Shrestha, their journey revealed that only 40% of women held in the prisons for abortion or infanticide were married. Others were unmarried, single, and divorced women. Many married women were separated from their husbands or their husbands were out of the country. This was used as evidence by civil society groups to advocate for removing the terms "married" and "consent of husband" from the proposed bill (Upreti & Katzive, 2002, p. 41).

The fight for Min Min's freedom and to change the laws around abortion eventually led to her release in September 1999 (Limbu, 2002). Three years later, the Eleventh Amendment Bill, which included abortion provisions, passed as law. The new addition permitted the termination of unwanted pregnancies "on request" to all women regardless of their marital status up to 12 weeks, in case of rape or incest up to 18 weeks, and at any time if the pregnancy posed a danger to the woman's life or her health, or in cases of foetal abnormality or impairment.

In the beginning, abortion was rationalised as a public health issue. Advocating for abortion mainly hinged on curbing the high maternal mortality ratio that existed during that time. The 1996 national survey had found maternal deaths to be 539 deaths per every 100,000 live births (Pradhan et. al., 1997, p. 157). Unsafe abortion accounted for at least half of all pregnan-

<sup>1</sup> For further information see: Hearing before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (Statement of Dr. Nirmal K. Bista, Director General, Family Planning Association of Nepal, Kathmandu, Nepal) <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-107shrg75604/html/CHRG-107shrg75604.htm>

cy-related deaths (Thapa et. al., 1992, pp. 315-316). Anand Tamang from the Center for Research on Environment, Health and Population Activities (CREHPA) agreed.

"We advocated for abortion legalisation as a health issue, to prevent maternal mortality and not as a women's right. If we had approached it purely as a right then it would have been much more difficult to legalise abortion."

**"We advocated for abortion legalisation as a health issue, to prevent maternal mortality and not as a women's right. If we had approached it purely as a right then it would have been much more difficult to legalise abortion."**

The Nepalese society did have its own set of inhibitions against the controversial issue. Dr. Aruna Upreti, a public health specialist who turned into a staunch advocate after witnessing unsafe abortions, said: "Initially when I published an article arguing that abortion should be legalised, the editors received many letters saying that I was trying to impose Western ideas and, as a Hindu Kingdom, Nepal could not tolerate such murder, and so on" (Upreti, 1998, p.113). However, the opposition never came in a collective manner. Despite a few critiques on abortion as a Western idea, people in Nepal, including the government, were aware that unsafe abortions were the leading cause of maternal deaths in Nepal. Nevertheless, unsafe abortions were not the only threat to women's lives. If a person survived a clandestine abortion, there was a looming risk of arrest.

Min Min's release was a celebratory moment, but at the time there were still 99 women languishing in prisons of Nepal (Lloyd-Roberts, 1999). The convicted women had limited legal support and representation (Upreti & Katzive, 2002, p. 63). There were unaccounted violations of due process. Meera Dhungana from the FWLD explained that "most of those women in prisons were from low income, poor, and marginalised groups. No one from their families would come to visit them in prison so they had no information about their case. They would be completely isolated. Some would even spend more time in prison than needed." Such scenarios prompted activists to frame abortion from a women's rights angle (Forum for Women, Law and Development, 2003, p.14). But it would only be the case of Laxmidevi Dhikta in 2009 to recognise abortion as a human right.

## The Right Not to Reproduce

In 2006, Laxmidevi Dhikta traveled from her home to a public hospital in Dadeldhura to get an abortion. The service fee of NPR 1130 was more than the average monthly salary at the time – a fee she could not afford (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2007). She was forced to continue her pregnancy, with the child being her sixth offspring (Parajuli, 2020, p. 56).

Dhikta's case was taken to the Supreme Court as a public interest litigation. One of the petitioners was Melissa Upreti from the Center for Reproductive Rights (CRR). Upreti talked about how the case was just a step in a larger strategy of bringing systemic legal reform and how it built on years of groundwork and sensitisation programmes done with legal professionals, one of them Judge Kalyan Shrestha who later presided over the Dhikta case. "We thought it would be a great case to bring to court to push for enforcement of the new abortion law as Laxmi's situation was representative of many women then in Nepal," Upreti said. Despite being legal, abortion was not affordable or accessible for many. What helped the case was the Interim Constitution of 2007, promulgated before the verdict, which for the first time recognised women's reproductive rights as fundamental rights<sup>2</sup>.

In the judgment, Judge Kalyan Shrestha wrote that "reproductive rights cannot be only understood as creating an obligation to reproduce, it includes within the scope the right not to reproduce." The judgment spoke at length on abortion from a human rights perspective expounding on reproductive rights, the question of legal personhood of the foetus, decriminalisation of abortion, a woman's bodily autonomy, and other related issues (Laxmidevi Dhikta, et. al. v. the Government of Nepal, 2009).

After more than a decade, the situation has drastically changed in Dhikta's hometown. Health centres in rural municipalities, providing medical abortion up to 10 weeks, have been established. While in a few places there still is a shortage of trained personnel or commodities, there is an influx of service seekers. The government mobilised female community health volunteers (FCHV) to help create referral networks to nearest accredited health posts to provide safe abortion services to rural women (Panday et. al., 2017, p. 7). Janaki Saud, who has been working as an FCHV in Dadeldhura for more than 15 years now, has even accompanied women to nearest health posts for abortion. The distance, which was 2-3 hours a few years ago, has been reduced to half an hour. Another FCHV, Dhaneshwori Pant, said that "today if someone does not have money to go to the hospital, we help through

<sup>2</sup> For further information see: Article 20 of Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007



Notice for free and confidential abortion services up to 9 weeks in a rural health post in Dadeldhura. Shuvangi Khadka, All Rights Reserved.

our *ama samuha*<sup>3</sup> fund.” Pant added that earlier there were many cases of poor women who were not able to travel even to the district hospital on time and as a result, passed the gestational limit.

In rural areas, FCHVs are often the first point of contact for women who plan to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. Their services are crucial to spread awareness. A survey in 2016 found that only 41% of women aged 15 to 49 were aware of the legal status of abortion, while just 23% knew that abortion can be obtained up to 12 weeks for any reason (Ministry of Health et al., 2017, p. 161). Counterparts of FCHVs are MS ladies, working for Marie Stopes Nepal, who are often navigating difficult terrain to provide contraception and safe medical abortion services to women in rural areas (Rigby, 2022). In a mountainous country like Nepal, specialised health service providers are often concentrated in urban and semi-urban areas (Rogers, et. al., 2019, p. 10). But over the years, Nepal has evolved as one of the best examples of countries providing safe abortion services through expanding roles of existing mid-level health care providers like staff nurses and midwives (Shrestha et. al., 2018, p. 95). Today, abortion is part of the basic healthcare service in Nepal and it is provided free of cost in public healthcare facilities.<sup>4</sup>

“Today, abortion is part of the basic healthcare service in Nepal and it is provided free of cost in public healthcare facilities.”

### Abortion Services for All

Nine years after the Laxmi Dhikta decision, a comprehensive law called *Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Rights Act (SMRHR)* was passed. It recognised every woman’s right to obtain an abortion, even though revised gestational limits still apply. Abortion is legal up to 12 weeks with the consent of the pregnant woman and up to 28 weeks in case of rape or incest, or if the pregnant woman is living with HIV or some other incurable disease; if the pregnancy poses a danger to the woman’s life, physical health or mental health; or if there is a foetal anomaly. The law prohibits abortion performed by an entity other than approved health institutions or service providers. Beyond these conditions, abortion is still criminalised and punishment is laid out in the National Penal (Code) Act, 2017. The Penal (Code) Act, like its predecessor Muluki Ain 1963, permits the procedure only under certain circumstances as an exception to “abortion” as an offense. According to Sabin Shrestha, even today, in a single year around 100 cases are filed in Nepalese courts to penalise women who seek abortion after the prescribed gestational limit, or from unlisted service providers or health institutions (Neupane, 2022).

The SMRHR Act also demands abortions services to be adolescent and disability friendly. However, there are still various hurdles in providing abortion as a basic healthcare service to people of different age groups, gender and sexual orientation, persons with disabilities (PWD), etc. Durga Sapkota, a trained healthcare provider, learnt about the human rights based approach when she took a three-days training on safe abortion from Asia Safe Abortion Partnership. Now, she is imparting this knowledge to other young people through the

3 Voluntary group of mothers who raise awareness on social issues.

4 Public Health Service Act, 2075 (2018), chapter 2, sec. 3(4)(b) (Nepal).



organisation she co-founded, YoSHAN.<sup>5</sup> “In many cases, it seems that women rights advocates are not aware of the human rights based approach because of internalised patriarchy. But, when women’s health and rights are concerned, or abortion is concerned, it is not solely about service or only about rights. It is a combination of both.”

**“The SMRHR Act also demands abortions services to be adolescent and disability friendly. However, there are still various hurdles in providing abortion as a basic healthcare service to people of different age groups, gender and sexual orientation, persons with disabilities (PWD), etc.”**

In a society where abortion is still a taboo subject, it is even challenging when a person needs to depend on another person to access such service. “Even if we know the legal provisions, there is the issue of accessibility. Firstly, getting to the healthcare facility and secondly, service centre accessibility. Securing the right to privacy in such cases is challenging,” said Laxmi Nepal, disability activist who works with girls with disabilities on SRHR<sup>6</sup> issues. There is not much discourse and awareness of diversity within the disability community. In the experience of Ram Chandra Gaihre, co-founder of Blind Youth Association Nepal (BYAN), medical providers are quick to dismiss the sexual and reproductive needs of PWD instead of catering to them as per their demands.

Even though PWD require greater awareness about sexual and reproductive health due to existing barriers and their increased vulnerability to abuse, their needs are often overlooked within disability community and also by people working in the SRHR area (Shiwakoti et. al., 2021, p. 2). “It is usually believed that PWD do not marry so they do not have such issues. But now, with the human rights approach, people are slowly realising the SRH needs of PWD,” said Gaihre. Through BYAN, he is helping the government formulate guidelines to make abortion services disability friendly. Gaihre stressed the need of a tailor-made approach to accommodate needs of every person with disabilities as the needs vary depending on the type of disability. For example, the needs of people with intellectual disability are completely different than those of people with

physical disability. These experiences prove that access to abortion needs to be considered from different perspectives. As Upreti pointed out, there is a need to be mindful about specific barriers for specific groups, like adolescents who are not always at the table when such issues are discussed.

## **Reflections on the Abortion Movement and Challenges Ahead**

In 2016, after abortion services were made free, the CREHPA monitored public hospitals to check the implementation (Puri et. al., 2022, p. 3). Even then, one particular government hospital was charging NPR 500 for abortions. Anand Tamang shared that on their inquiry on why the hospital was charging women for abortion, the response was that the fee was supposed to be a deterrent for women seeking repeated abortions. Such mindset to punish women for abortion stems from the patriarchal pleasure in exerting power over a woman’s body (Tortorici, 2022).

The alternative to public health facilities are private institutions like clinics and pharmacies, many of which profit off the stigma attached to abortion. Yashoda Dhakal, abortion trainer and provider, shared that “private medicals sell medicines without any information and ask women to go to government facilities if any complication arises.” Many private medical institutions are notorious for selling unregistered brands of abortion medicines or fail to counsel properly about their use. However, for women, private facilities mean more privacy. “From a woman’s perspective it is not important whether the medicine is registered or the place is sterilised, but whether or not there is confidentiality. Whether or not what they share with the doctor is heard by others. For them privacy ensures quality. Usually health posts are nearby and everyone is already known to each other, so women may prefer clinics or pharmacies,” said Madhabi Shakya Bajracharya from Ipas Nepal, an organisation committed to strengthening the government’s health system.

There are also repeated funding issues. “Nepal is still heavily dependent on foreign aid for so much of reproductive healthcare. But women’s reproductive health should be the core priority of the government and it should have its own budget for. It is not something to be dependent on foreign aid,” Upreti said. This is evident from different abortion programmes and activities crippled worldwide from time to time under the Global Gag Rule<sup>7</sup> by the United States administration. Along with

<sup>5</sup> Youth Led SRHR Advocacy Nepal

<sup>6</sup> Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

<sup>7</sup> This policy restricted US funding of foreign NGOs that provide abortion counselling or referrals.



the FPAN, many other Nepalese organisations have been forced to shut offices, clinics, and even to stop spreading information on abortion when such rules were reinstated (Adhikari, 2019). In 1996, while working in The Asia Foundation Nepal, Upreti had to develop a legal curriculum for empowering women in the grassroots. It covered topics like property, marriage, rape, etc. However, Upreti was squarely told that she could not mention the blanket ban on abortion because the programme was based on U.S. aid.

**“Many private medical institutions are notorious for selling unregistered brands of abortion medicines or fail to counsel properly about their use. However, for women, private facilities mean more privacy.”**

After more than 20 years of advocacy, Sabin Shrestha has learned legal reform is never a single step process. From the Eleventh Amendment to the SMRHR Act, there have been changes in gestational limits but beyond certain legal conditions, abortion still falls under purview of criminal law. This is despite the Laxmi Dhikta case clearly stating that abortion should not be a criminal matter regulated under criminal law. Shrestha justified their continuous push towards the decriminalisation of abortion. “But if today’s provisions are better than yesterday’s provisions, then we should accept them and continue to work for more improvement. We have to continuously build up from that. A movement does not mean bringing the issue once and then leaving. We have to be clear about our destination. But we also have to be realistic and know that we cannot reach it instantly.”

The reward is seemingly near. In July 2020, the CRR along with its Nepal-based partners, including the FWLD, made joint submission for the Report of the Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) for Nepal. In 2021, at the regular session of the UN Human Rights Council, Nepal accepted findings of the Report and France’s recommendation that Nepal decriminalise abortion (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2021). In February 2022, the FWLD with the technical support of the CRR filed petition at the Supreme Court of Nepal demanding that the government fully decriminalise abortion (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2022).

There are also other learnings. Shrestha worked as a consultant while drafting the Safe Motherhood Act. During its drafting, they used terms like “pregnant women” but now with broader knowledge available, he has understood that the better terminology would be “person who conceives.” Upreti agrees there are diversities within the group: “If we were to do all of this today, then it would definitely require deeper engagement with women with disabilities and women from other disadvantaged groups.”

Over two decades of abortion legalisation, the movement has taken huge strides. Nevertheless, there is still a lot to do so that no punitive measure is taken against any person who accesses abortion and that no person is gagged from speaking about abortion. Abortion should not only be listed as a part of reproductive healthcare and a fundamental human right, but also be made fully available and accessible. It should be a personal decision that individuals can make for themselves. The question is whether we are willing to provide them that choice and capacity.

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The writing of the article would be impossible without the time and input of Aruna Upreti (Public health specialist), Anand Tamang (Founding Director of the CREHPA), Dhaneshwori Pant (Female Community Health Volunteer in Dadeldhura), Durga Sapkota (Co-founder of YoSHAN), Janaki Saud (Female Community Health Volunteer in Dadeldhura), Laxmi Nepal (Disability activist and Founding member of Access Planet), Madhabi Shakya Bajracharya (Policy and Governance Advisor at Ipas Nepal), Meera Dhungana (Senior legal advisor at FWLD), Melissa Upreti (Member of the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls), Ram Chandra Gaihre (Co-founder of Blind Youth Association Nepal), Sabin Shrestha (executive director at FWLD), and Yashoda Dhakal (Abortion trainer and provider in Dhangadhi).

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# Faultlines and Futures: Community and Care-Centered Approaches to Engaging Difference in Contemporary Caribbean Feminist Movements

Kristeena Monteith

In 2017, a wave of feminist action swept across the Caribbean. At the time, data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime indicated that The Bahamas, Jamaica and Barbados were in the world's top ten countries with the highest incidence of rape, and nearly a third of women in the region had suffered domestic abuse (Kebede, 2017). This persistent threat felt by women all over the Caribbean ignited activists of all identities and socio-economic backgrounds, and united them across countries around a shared cause - stopping gender-based violence in the region.

The same year, in response to a lack of action in protecting girls and women from sexual violence, a radical feminist collective, known as the Tambourine Army, became a focal point for the growing movement. They sought to amplify the voices of survivors of gender-based violence while providing virtual and physical safe spaces for those affected (Roper & Wint, p. 37). In the digital space, before the #MeToo movement shook the world, Caribbean women took to social media to name their abusers under the hashtag #SayTheirNames. This was only a few months after the emergence of the hashtag #LifeInLeggings, where women shared their experiences of harassment. The hashtag went viral in eleven Caribbean countries and sparked dialogue in the United Kingdom, USA, Canada, India, China, Japan, Denmark, and Belgium (King, as cited in Sanatan, p. 328).

Activists in seven Caribbean countries (Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, The Bahamas, and Guyana), held coordinated marches in memory of victims and in solidarity with survivors. They called for stronger action to protect women and girls from gender-based violence including street harassment and child sexual abuse. They catapulted gender-based violence into the mainstream Caribbean public discourse and onto national political agendas.

Naturally, this movement was not without controversy. In addition to the usual reactionary backlash from those who hold opposing views, some older Caribbean feminists disagreed with the tactics being employed by younger feminists of the Tambourine Army and labelled them "angry, emotional and confrontational" (Paul, 2017). In more extreme measures, Jamaican police arrested one of the key leaders in the movement for naming her abuser online. This led to an intensification of the backlash and eventually, the movement's decline (Roper & Wint, p. 51).

**"Challenges the current generation of feminist activists have inherited include navigating differences among racial, ethnic and national backgrounds, generational gaps, and various identities."**

Caribbean feminists are no strangers to organising across borders and reckoning with the challenges that diversity poses to movement strength, cohesion, and sustainability. In 2003, Caribbean feminist scholar Professor Violet Eudine Barribeau wrote in *Issues and Challenges of Caribbean Feminisms* of several such challenges that feminists in the region must grapple with as they continue to work towards improving the lives of Caribbean people. Challenges the current generation of feminist activists have inherited include navigating differences among racial, ethnic and national backgrounds, generational gaps, and various identities.

Looking at the current cadre of activists building and caring for their communities and fighting for change for people across the region, one can find examples of actions and approaches that are regionally integrated, intergenerational, and intersectional. These tactics also build on the legacies of more senior feminists

in the region and their ability to overcome historical divides, address the needs of different people, and unite Caribbean activists.

### **Integrated Community Building**

“Our [The Breadfruit Collective] support system has been the source of love. Our mission is to continue to build with those that care, to offer support, and to involve others, because we have seen the magic that happens when committed people work together” (Samwaroo, 2022).

Despite the close geographical, political, and cultural proximity of the Caribbean islands, efforts to collaborate have not always gone smoothly. For Caribbean feminists in particular, differences in lived realities amongst Caribbean women from various backgrounds have been a source of friction in the movement. For example, Indo-Caribbean women have historically highlighted feeling excluded from the movement because most of the visible activists for many decades were of Afro-Caribbean descent and most scholarship focused on their experiences, speaking little to the experiences of Indo-Caribbean and Indigenous women who face similar challenges, sometimes at even more alarming rates (Baksh-Soodeen, p. 80).

However, more recently, demonstrated interest amongst the current Caribbean feminists to learn from and lean on each other through challenges is a positive development. One such community-building tactic employed by feminists in the region is to forge interracial, multinational collaborative alliances and networks for collective action where activists from various countries share their experiences and support a common goal. The collective response to backlash against the Tambourine Army in Jamaica is a good example of this. Activists in other Caribbean islands were clear in their support and solidarity. A coalition of Guyanese activists and organisations declared that “the Tambourine Army does not stand alone. Touch one, touch all – not only all in Jamaica but all in the region and in the regional diaspora. Touch one, touch all!” (Kaiteur News, 2017). Technology has aided this process, making building communities with like-minded activists beyond national borders easier.

Activists have come to rely on the support of fellow activists from across the region. GirlsCARE for example, a Jamaican mentorship programme for young eco-feminists, relies on leaders and representatives from other feminist organisations such as Feminitt in Trinidad and Tobago, The Breadfruit Collective in Guyana, and Equality Bahamas, to serve as mentors and guides to the younger feminists participating in their programme. More importantly, feminist leaders from across the Caribbean willingly sign up to mentor

younger feminists who are also from other islands.

Founder and Coordinator Ayesha Constable said that “participants are linked to other existing regional and global networks and introduced to other opportunities to expand and continue their work” (The Jamaica Gleaner, 2022). Intersect Antigua takes a similar approach in “building feminist coalitions with women and queer-led activist organisations in the Caribbean”, which they describe as “a key organizing principle that guides [their] work” (Intersect Antigua).

Although still limited, this growing interest in collaboration and networking represents a possibility of realising a dream of more consistent collective action, which, multiple scholars have observed, strengthens movements. Caroline Sweetman, for example, called for such collaboration saying “what is needed is a formula for solidarity and shared action which sees difference not as a challenge, but as an integral part/and further, a strength - of women working as a movement” (p. 226).

### **Intergenerational Community Building**

Another tactic that supports the building of strong communities in the region is working across generational divides. In 2003, Professor Violet Eudine Barriteau wrote about the need for Caribbean feminist organising to be intergenerational. Describing the challenge as a lack of continuity between senior, current, and future feminists, she said “we, the ones who are established, who have paid some dues, cling to power in all its manifestations and often frustrate younger women” and of younger women, “anxious and eager to make their mark, [they] often arrive before they have reached” (p. 43).

Despite this, Caribbean feminists today are turning to feminist teachings from older feminists for wisdom, guidance, and support. Rebel Women Lit, a bibliography community, for example, has developed innovative ways to introduce the works of older Caribbean and African Diasporic authors, including feminists, to younger audiences whether through reading these works in their bookclub, discussing them via their podcast or even hosting events where readers can meet, listen to, and learn from older feminist authors (Taylor, 2020). Similarly, Black Women Radicals, a feminist organisation uniting the African Diaspora, developed the *Caribbean Feminisms Series* “paying homage to historical and contemporary Caribbean feminisms and feminists” (Black Women Radicals). It curates an extensive reading list of Caribbean scholars, activists and leaders “for engaging with contemporary Caribbean feminist scholars, activists, and artists across generations, borders, and languages” (Ibid).



In another example of intergenerational collaboration, WE-Change Jamaica, which is a volunteer led LBTQ and non-binary feminist organisation, regularly echo senior feminists in their work. “Every year the theme and concept for #HerLegacy changes but the event has always aimed to highlight the work being done by women in society who are contributing to social justice advocacy and the fight against gender-based violence. WE-Change used this event to recognise local and regional women who have made significant contributions to gender equality in the region and create conversations around the same. Other activists pull upon the work of older and ancestral feminist scholars and activists to ground and strengthen their work. The Tambourine Army itself did so, honouring those who had paved the path for feminists today (Roper & Wint, p. 46).

“...Caribbean feminists today are turning to feminist teachings from older feminists for wisdom, guidance, and support.”

Caribbean feminists are not only looking to older feminists and ancestors for guidance, but also attempting to break the cycle of division by also creating safe avenues for younger activists to develop their own knowledge, networks, and pathways to action. Making mentorship and education more accessible have become important parts of the feminist movement. As GirlsCARE mentors new generations of eco-feminists to tackle the threat the climate crisis poses to the region, organisations like GirlsWhoKnow, HerFlow, and Feminitt are addressing the gaps in traditional SRHR education to eradicate period poverty and provide knowledge and resources to young women, trans men, and non-binary folks. Similarly, organisations like Mary Seacole Hall’s I’m Glad I’m a Girl Foundation and EveforLife create safe spaces for young women and girls.

### Intersectional Community Care

Working intergenerationally and integrating actions across national borders is important to unite the movement, make it more accessible, and ensure it reflects a wide variety of voices and experiences. What is more important is ensuring greater inclusivity and intersectionality, which is perhaps the area that poses the greatest challenge to collective Caribbean feminist futures.

In September of 2022, feminists, women’s rights and LGBTIQ+ activists from multiple Caribbean islands came together in Barbados and Jamaica to build and share knowledge, technologies, and healing justice

practices. Over the course of five days the groups explored what it means to be a feminist in the Caribbean and Caribbean diasporas. They also looked at how activists across the region should strengthen their organisations, and thought about what the future of their respective communities could be. In sharing his perspective on what it means to be feminist, one activist explained that the word was complicated for him. He had spent years feeling kinship with women and working alongside women on achieving the same feminist goals, but as soon as he publicly affirmed and expressed his gender identity as a trans man, he became “the enemy” and felt relegated to an outsider position within the movement.

Experiences like his underscore the importance of the final community building and community care tactic employed by younger Caribbean feminists, which is attempting to make Caribbean feminism more inclusive and intersectional. Across the region, feminists are recognising the impact that class, gender, disability, and sexuality, among other identity markers, have on people and their ability to participate in the movement, and intentionally building movement spaces that centre and affirm especially marginalised and vulnerable people.

For example, not only are all the aforementioned organisations openly accepting of LGBTIQ+ Caribbean people and work alongside the ‘Queeribbean’ community (even in country contexts where it is sometimes unsafe to do so), most of them are headed by and/or include team members with various queer identities or have positioned themselves as allies. In this way, organisations do not only “make space” for queer Caribbean people, but rather ensure that they can participate fully, actively, and meaningfully, and have decision-making power to affect their communities positively. In so doing, they begin to heal a historical divide in the movement where gender diverse and non-heterosexual Caribbean people had little to no place within the movement (Haynes, 2020).

Similarly, more feminists are centring poor and working class people and realities in their work and attempting to reckon with a common critique of Caribbean feminism that persists to this day - that it is exclusive and elitist or as a member of CAFRA (Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action) put in Soares (p. 191): “Feminism, as a movement? It does not exist. Feminism and feminists are too insular. It benefits some, only certain individuals.”

Feminists across the region have been addressing this problem from two angles. Firstly, they are working within communities to support the most vulnerable and

marginalised people in holistic ways that centre their expressed needs. Tamukke Feminists with Mind Fund, for example, organised free mental health support for women and girls (Loop News, 2022). Organisations like WE-Change focus on training community members to respond to crises in their communities. Their psychosocial support programme equips Jamaican women with the skills to act as Gender-Based Violence First Responders (WE-Change, 2021), to care for and support women and girls who have experienced abuse. Red-RootSVG focuses on community aid to support women and girls displaced by the 2021 volcanic eruption in St. Vincent and the Grenadines (MohammedG, 2021).

Secondly, they are working nationally, regionally, and globally to dismantle the oppressive systems leading to poor life outcomes for Caribbean people and legislation including those that criminalise abortion and deny women, girls, and LGBTIQ+ dignity, respect, and protection. From participating in parliamentary processes to amend laws such as #LifeinLeggings did with the Barbadian Sexual Harassment Bill in 2016 (King in Sanatan, p. 332) and conducting important research such as WE-Change's look into *Intimate Partner Violence In LBTQ Relationships In Jamaica* (Andrew, 2020) - they are actively resisting systemic oppressions.

**"Across the region, feminists are recognising the impact that class, gender, disability, and sexuality, among other identity markers, have on people and their ability to participate in the movement, and intentionally building movement spaces that centre and affirm especially marginalised and vulnerable people."**

Perhaps the aspect of intersectional community care where the current feminist movement is most falling behind is that of disability justice. While organisations attempt to include people with disabilities and to ensure their voices are heard, there is not enough being done to truly engage with people living with disabilities (Davidson, p. 80).

The goal of community care as evidenced by these actions is not to smooth the difference over and homogenise the movement, but rather to make space for and accommodate different ideas and experiences within the movement. It demonstrates the need for Caribbean feminists to reckon with the ways the movement has centred some voices and left others behind. The

very first challenge Professor Violet Eudine Barriteau posed to Caribbean feminists is to reckon with their power dynamics. "I want us to recognise that we have a problematic relationship with power, that we experience contradictions around how we come to power, how we claim it, respect it and use it. I argue that this failure to grapple with our ambivalence over power constitutes the single major challenge confronting contemporary feminisms in the Caribbean" (p. 44). The second is to avoid replicating harmful power hierarchies within the movement (Ibid).

Because of the severity of the issues being faced by people in the region - from gender-based violence to abject poverty, organisations are sometimes more concerned with mobilising more activists or attracting new members to address these issues (Soares, p.195). Focusing on recruitment without addressing these challenges can lead to disengagement, burnout, and premature exodus from the movement. Addressing these challenges will allow movement leaders to slow down and spend more time understanding the dynamics of the structures and systems they are building. In so doing, they gain the insight that is needed to deliberately co-create movement spaces in which people feel welcome and where activists can thrive.

## Going Forward

There is no place on this planet where being a feminist is easy. There are many, sometimes divergent definitions, but to be a person who generally speaking, seeks to liberate people from gendered oppressions, is and has always been a dangerous and difficult endeavour, made even more challenging by confronting and engaging with difference. Caribbean feminists are not exempt from this challenge. Despite the legacy of collective action and resistance - against slavery, colonialism, imperialism etc., even today, countries in the region are contending with class, colour, language, sexuality, religion, and even country hierarchies, divisions, and segregations. These faultlines of marginalisation and exclusion create and foment distrust and other distractions that undermine and stymie otherwise thriving organisations that could lead to real change. As aptly observed by notable Caribbean feminist scholar Rhoda Reddock (p. 5), it is imperative that Caribbean feminists recognise this reality in their work.

The current generation of Caribbean feminists, here in the region and across the diaspora, are organising in powerful ways that are having impact on communities. Though this movement may not look like other feminist movements, in that it is spread out across various countries and more loosely organised than one would expect, these activists, organisations, and leaders are

responding to similar challenges, in similar ways, drawing from the same body of Caribbean feminist scholarship to structure their interventions and collaborating across borders to do so. These movement leaders have demonstrated a strong interest in community, inclusivity, collaboration, and solidarity that is refreshing and has the potential to strengthen Caribbean feminism to the benefit of all Caribbean people, the region, and the world.

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# An Examination of Romania's Response to Gender-Based Violence

Iulia Hau

A 2016 study that surveyed gender-based violence across EU member states revealed that 55% of Romanians, both men and women, consider non-consensual sexual contact justified in certain situations. For 30% of these respondents, rape was justified when the woman was in a group that had used drugs and alcohol, while for 25%, dressing “provocatively” could present a reasonable ground for sexual abuse (European Commission, 2016). Unsurprisingly, in 2021 the European Institute for Gender Equality ranked Romania in the third-last place on the European Gender Equality Index, just above Hungary and Greece (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021). Mentalities according to which “a slap is not beating,” “if he beats me it means that he loves me,” or “a woman must be punched from time to time or she will grow too big for her boots”<sup>1</sup> are deeply entrenched into Romanian culture and unfortunately still hold ground.

“Mentalities according to which ‘a slap is not beating,’ ‘if he beats me it means that he loves me,’ or ‘a woman must be punched from time to time or she will grow too big for her boots’ are deeply entrenched into Romanian culture and unfortunately still hold ground.”

Insightful and at times difficult conversations with feminist activists, researchers, and NGOs revealed that gender-based violence is one of the most pressing issues Romanian women face at the moment. Since 2000, which marked the first street protests against gender-based violence in Romania, the feminist movement achieved a lot: pushing the introduction of ade-

quate legislation, offering support to victims, and raising awareness of the public. This, however, is a broad field and its recent history alone could fill the pages of an entire book.

## The Playboy Protest

In April 2000, international media including the New York Times, CNN, and BBC, covered unprecedented protests in Bucharest led by women. It was in response to a bad joke on April Fools’ Day. Playboy Romania had published an article titled *How to Beat Your Wife... Without Leaving Traces on Her Body*, which described in detail ten proposed abuse methods, alongside a series of photos. The article suggested that a good beating might even lead to an elevated sexual experience, which a wife secretly craves. The article led to a fervent reaction from feminist activists who, for the first time in Romanian history, mobilised en masse against gender-based violence.

The protest in front of the Romanian Parliament included a letter-writing campaign to members of the Parliament and embassies. The event ended up on the front pages of international media and gained momentum as the first public impugment against antiquated national policies regarding the condition of Romanian women (Miroiu, 2015, p.108). Christie Hafner, the then chairwoman of Playboy Enterprise, publicly apologised, reprimanded the magazine’s Romanian editor-in-chief, and made a small donation to Romanian NGOs working of gender-based violence. In addition, the activists involved in the movement received an invitation to publish a series of articles in Playboy Romania. A temporary coalition of nine organisations dedicated to fighting gender-based violence was formed right in the aftermath of the protest, and the notions of “family violence” and “marital rape” were introduced

1 All these are popular sayings in Romania.

in the Penal Code later that year (Bragă et. al., 2017). The main obstacle to the protest was, disappointingly, the lack of interest from national media, which stood in stark contrast to the international interest. Only the Romanian version of Cosmopolitan magazine covered the events of the protest.

**“Gender-based violence is often exploited for entertainment in public spaces, on television, and in popular culture.”**

### **“A Crime of Passion”**

Gender-based violence is often exploited for entertainment in public spaces, on television, and in popular culture.

Feminists noticed such cases in 2012, in the same year Romania recorded 14.000 cases of gender-based violence incidents – the number of reported cases (ANES, 2018). As a result, three feminist groups organised a protest titled “Violența nu este divertisment!” (Violence is not Entertainment!), and used the space to stress the role of media in the sensationalisation of aggressive behaviour towards women, the mocking of victims, the hypersexualisation of women, and glossing over femicides through phrases such as “a crime of passion”, “murdered out of love” or “fatal attraction.” “The feminist activists demanded the adoption of an ethical code in journalism. Unfortunately, the event received almost no coverage in the media”, Tudorina Mihai, president of the FRONT association said<sup>2</sup>.

In 2013, statistics showed that almost 30% of Romanians agreed that women are sometimes “responsible for being beaten” and 42% considered that domestic violence was not an issue of public interest (INSCOP Research, 2013). The same year, the Romanian government intended to “deal” with rape cases in a new mediation law that would have forced the accused and the victim into an informal dispute resolution, in an attempt to prevent such cases in front of the Court (Iancu, 2013). This law not only risked the empowerment of the aggressor, but also threatened to re-traumatise and discredit the victim. Feminist organisations were quick to organise street protests to oppose the law, and the demonstrations ultimately helped block the implementation of the law.

Women’s rights activism in Romania boomed at that period. Numerous organisations joined forces and

formed, what would become, the most important network in the response to gender-based violence: VIF (The Romanian Network for Preventing and Combating Violence against Women). Romania was the only EU country that offered no legal protection to victims of gender-based violence (Sandu, 2019). FILIA Centre, one of the first Romanian feminist associations, launched the project “Femeile spun NU publicității ofensatoare” (Women Say no to Disrespectful Advertising!) in 2011, consisting of a catalogue<sup>3</sup> of various disrespectful commercials, as well as a book<sup>4</sup> on the same topic. The same year, FILIA organised a demonstration in front of the Parliament to demand an improvement of the laws on the prevention and control of gender-based violence, as well as the adoption of a protection order law. On the protest “STOP violenței asupra femeilor: Victimele nu mai pot aștepta!” (Stop Violence against Women: Victims can no Longer Wait!), feminist activists appeared with painted-on bruises, in bandages, and carried lighted candles in the memory of femicide victims. The activists stressed out that gender-based violence was not a private matter, and that it should be politicised.

**“Numerous investigations contributed to raising awareness and the mobilisation of the political apparatus.”**

In 2012, the Perla Case became one of the most noted gender-based crimes covered in Romanian media to date. A husband shot and killed his wife in the hair salon in which she worked, called Perla. Prior to the murder, the victim Felicia Vădan, repeatedly reported her husband to the authorities in vain. As a consequence of this case, legal protection measures were put into place in Romania. However, the law, police authorities, and the social systems were still far from able to provide the necessary protection in time. Victims needed to submit either a forensic examination report, witness declarations, or a record of previous complaint filed against the aggressor (Ciobanu et. al., 2016). A VIF research, carried out in 2013, showed that an average of 33 days were needed to obtain a protection order in Romania at that time (Asociația Transcena, 2013, p. 13).

### **Journalism for Women’s Safety**

As a result of the 2012 protests against the media’s depiction of gender-based violence, journalism in Ro-

<sup>2</sup> FRONT is made up of feminists who militate for equality between women and men, as well as for elimination of other types of discrimination through public demonstrations, lobbying and advocacy, education and research, sex education in schools, etc.

<sup>3</sup> <https://centrulfilia.ro/publicatii/Catalogul-reclamelor-ofensatoare.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://fdocumente.com/document/femeile-spun-nu-publicitatii-ofensatoare.html>

mania evolved. Numerous investigations contributed to raising awareness and the mobilisation of the political apparatus. In 2017, one investigation revealed that an overwhelming number of 500 proven and convicted paedophiles walked free due to suspensions of their sentences<sup>5</sup> (Tolontan et al., 2018). The same year, 400 of them were charged, not with rape, but with entertaining “sexual acts with minors” (Tolontan et al., 2019). Multiple judges considered that girls as young as ten were able to give their consent or that they were guilty of having aroused their subsequent aggressor with their *dishabille*<sup>6</sup> (Ibid, 2019). As a response to these disclosures, on 8 March 2019, the feminist group *Muțumesc Pentru Flori* (Thank You for the Flowers) organised the protest “Cum se scapă de-un viol, domnule judecător?” (How Does One Get Away With a Rape, Mr. Judge?) in front of the National Court of Law. The feminists asked authorities to stop the judgment of cases based on a victim’s outfit or level of alcohol consumption, to stop the investigation of abusers in a state of freedom, to continue to monitor abusers even after they served their sentence, and to simplify institutional procedures in order to avoid the re-traumatisation of victims.

In 2019, judicial and police courts – who more often than not treated victims’ complaints with indifference, ignorance, or even mockery – began to be held accountable. The *Caracal Case*—where two teenage girls were kidnapped, raped, and murdered by a 65-year-old man – shocked the public. One of the girls, 15, kidnapped, wire-tied, and raped, managed to call the police describing her location and ask for help (Hotnews, 2022). The dispatcher’s answer subsequently became viral: “Ok, ok stay there. Remain there. I am calling a crew but stop keeping the line busy.” Only one hour later did the same dispatcher ask a special telecommunications service how to localise a call. By the time the police were able to get a search warrant and finally intervene, it was too late (Digi24, 2019). The perpetrator was sentenced three years later, in September 2022 (Hotnews, 2022).

The Romanian independent theatre got involved in the feminist cause. Two theatre artists, playwright Alexandra Felseghi and director Adina Lazăr, created a play inspired from the *Caracal Case*, titled “Nu mai ține linia ocupată” (Stop Keeping the Line Busy) (Stoica, 2022). A few months later, in solidarity with the two victims, feminists groups organised a nation-wide protest in major Romanian cities, as well as in front

of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, titled “Cade una, cădem toate!” (If One Falls, We all Fall!). When the event was over, the phrases “Sexism Kills” and “Racism Kills” were written on the building of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which led to conflicts between protesters and guards.

### Civil Society’s Alliance with Journalism

Until 2021, sex abuses against minors could still be considered legal and consensual sex acts, even if the victims were children at the age of nine (Oncioiu & Stoicescu, 2021). Civil society activists, however, had had enough of suspended sentences for rape.<sup>7</sup> Thus, under the banner *Media X Files*<sup>8</sup>, a group of journalists wrote 20 articles in the span of one year, documenting cases of gender-based violence. Their efforts forced the authorities to issue a Judiciary Report, as the result of an investigation on the judiciary practices in cases of sexual misconduct involving underage victims. Some of the statements from the sentencing rulings were “the victim consented”, “the underage girl does it with her mother’s approval”, the 11-year-old girl consented “because she was not a virgin at the moment of incriminated sexual act”, “she already had a relationship with the defender, proof being they already had two children together” (Ibid). Such arguments used in a legal setting revealed a rape culture that blamed the victim, even in cases where the victim was child. Besides the absence of a law that clearly defined all sexual acts with minors as a felony, the next issue the report uncovered was related to depositions. The Judiciary Report revealed that there were no special rooms or safe spaces for victims. Instead, the depositions took place in the same room with the aggressor. Moreover, the involved authorities lacked special training and their handling of the cases often led to victims being re-traumatised (Ibid).

### Feminism among and for Roma Women

Gender-based violence within the Roma community is not addressed by governmental policies, and preconceptions about the Roma culture often determine the absence of juridical action. The E-Romnja, a feminist, non-profit Roma organisation, has been fighting for the rights of Roma women through advocacy campaigns and community development since 2012. One of their studies, *Phenja: Suroritatea dintre femei împotriva violenței de gen* (Phenja: the women sisterhood against gender violence) by Ioana Vrăbiescu, carried

5 According to the data, for each paedophile who was imprisoned, another three received a suspended sentence.

6 Dishabille - the state of being partly or carelessly dressed (Collins Dictionary)

7 CEDO had already found the Romanian State guilty in 2016. In a case implying two victims, Romanian judges decided to sentence the aggressors for sexual acts with a minor, rather than for rape.

8 Media X Files was an initiative aimed to investigate and publish 16 pieces about the topic of gender-based violence in 2020. See: [www.cji.ro/media-x-files-impreuna-pentru-relevant/](http://www.cji.ro/media-x-files-impreuna-pentru-relevant/)





Protest "Cade una, cădem toate" (If One Falls, We All Fall) Eli Driu / Ziarul Libertatea, All Rights Reserved

**"Gender-based violence within the Roma community is not addressed by governmental policies, and preconceptions about the Roma culture often determine the absence of juridical action."**

out among Roma and non-Roma women in the town of Giurgiu, revealed how women perceive gender-based violence. In conversations with victims of violence from their romantic partners, all participants emphasised that they are "less affected by physical abuse than by verbal abuse," which they do not define as domestic violence. Most of the women differentiated between abuse from biological kin and abuse suffered from spouses: "It is one thing to be hit by a parent, and another by a husband." Counterintuitively, their attitude towards victims of domestic violence was that of victim blaming, including cases where the interviewees themselves were the victim. In addition, marital rape was not perceived as a form of (sexual) violence (Vrăbiescu, 2021, pp. 18-19). Sexual harassment within the family, in the neighbourhood, or within the social circle was regulated through communitarian rules, not the law. There were no cases of rape filed to the police in Giurgiu, ever, and a sexual act in this particular community was considered rape only if there were more than one men involved in it and if the victim displayed visible traces of violence. None of the 24 women victims of gender-based violence interviewed ever reported their cases to the police (Ibid, pp. 21 - 23).

The Valea Seaca (Dry Valley) commune in Eastern Romania, located 90 kilometres from the nearest city, is made-up of a 50% Roma population. Since 2015, the feminist initiatives of E-Romnja here included week-

ly meetings aimed at informing on and eradicating gender-based violence, empowering women and encouraging civic participation, education on sexual and reproductive rights, and education of children about bullying (E-Romnja, 2021, p. 16). In our conversation, Anca Nica – one of the e-Romnja representatives – mentioned that at the beginning of their work in Valea Seaca, there were no cases of men prosecuted for gender-based violence. In 2020, as the result of a sexual abuse case involving an 8-year-old victim, where the perpetrator was her grandfather, the women of Valea Seaca organised a protest in front of the police station to raise the awareness of police passivity in cases of abuse and violence against Roma girls and women (Lincan, 2020). According to Nica, following the protest, the public defendant filed a demand for the revision of the procedures of intervention in cases of sexual abuse in the area, and the official inquiry revealed that, in fact, the police had no protocol for these cases. Things changed drastically once the feminist actions began. Women learned more about their reproductive health, realised that there is no justification for gender-based violence, and participated in the "Împreună pentru siguranța femeilor" (Together For Women Safety) march. Thanks to the initiatives of E-Romnja, women not only in Valea Seaca, but in other parts of Romania, had the chance to participate in educational activities on gender-based violence, underage and/or forced marriage, fighting school drop-out rates, and obtaining of identity papers for unattested citizens (E-Romnja, 2021, pp. 5-17).

### The Perception of Feminism in Romania

The past 20 years of Romanian feminism show that unrelenting feminist activism can bring positive changes at social, legal, and policy levels. Success stories revealed

**“it is essential to educate and empower women to voice their concerns around gender-based violence, and to demand the change they want to see in their lives.”**

that it is essential to educate and empower women to voice their concerns around gender-based violence, and to demand the change they want to see in their lives. Their feminist fight, however, continues and it will not stop until authorities take over the responsibilities in the protection of victims and prosecution of perpetrators, the public discourse around gender-based violence and feminism in general is changed, and gender-based violence is eradicated. Nevertheless, the struggle for an equitable society, in which women are treated equally, regardless of their ethnicity is, and will continue to be, one of the toughest. Protection and education of girls and women, especially those from vulnerable and marginalised communities, such as the Roma community, is a work in progress that has started only recently but has seen crucial improvement. On this path, numerous feminist associations and groups have taken over this responsibility, which in fact, should be the responsibility of the state. We have, indeed, a long way ahead, but the progress is visible day by day.



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Sincere acknowledgment to Laura Grunberg, Daniela Drăghici, Anca Nică, and Tudorina Mihai, who contributed with their time and knowledge to the writing of this article.

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# Advancing Queer Liberation in Nigeria: A Feminist Perspective

## Oluwatobiloba Yetunde Emitomo

Nigeria has been ranked as one of the least accommodating countries (Pew Research Center, 2020) to sexual and gender-diverse people<sup>1</sup>. Out of 69 countries around the world where homosexuality is illegal (Mendos et al., 2020), Nigeria is one of only 8 countries where homosexual activity between consenting adults is punishable by death (McCarthy, 2019). Queer people in this country face systemic prejudice, so their survival depends on the acceptance of their community, the general public, and government officials. Due to the intolerance of the 89% of the population who do not want “homosexuals” as neighbours (Epigone, 2020), LGBTIQ+ people are increasingly at risk of losing their lives, homes, possessions, means of subsistence, and dignity. Benevolence is reserved for this population by only 7% of the country who believe homosexuality should be accepted by society (Pew Research Center, 2020).

**“Queer people in this country face systemic prejudice, so their survival depends on the acceptance of their community, the general public, and government officials.”**

The institutionalisation of discrimination against people who do not conform to widely accepted norms regarding sexuality and gender expression in Nigeria dates back to January 2014 when the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) was passed. Under this law, one can be sentenced to up to 14 years in prison for same-sex marriage, public display of same-sex amorous relationships, and other related actions. Similar legislation, such as the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Law 2007 of Lagos State and Sharia Penal Code Laws, applicable in 12 Northern States, repress

Nigerians’ expressions of gender and sexual diversity, producing an intrusive and dehumanising mode of subjectivity.

In its 2021 Human Rights Violations Report, The Initiative for Human Rights (TIERS) recorded 521 cases of human rights violations against LGBTIQ+ people in Nigeria between December 2020 and November 2021, as a result of their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, sex characteristics — also known as SOGIESC (Makinde & Ogbeche, 2021). These offenses included physical assault, sexual assault, harassment, rape, conversion practices, kidnapping, blackmail, and discrimination committed by non-state actors, primarily individuals and mobs. The report also highlighted how state actors, especially law enforcement officials, intentionally misinterpret and take advantage of loopholes in the aforementioned laws to harm and extort queer people through invasions of privacy, arbitrary arrests and unlawful detentions, extrajudicial punishment, and forceful evictions.

Legal instruments that accommodate violence and discrimination against queer people in Nigeria are contradictory to international treaties the country is a signatory to, such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). These laws forbid discrimination against people based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identities, but the Nigerian government has not yet incorporated them into national law. Section 5 of the SSMPA Act limits queer Nigerians’ ability to freely associate. It states that anyone who “registers, operates, or participates in gay clubs, societies, or organizations, or directly or indirectly makes public show of same-sex amorous re-

<sup>1</sup> Herein alternatively referred to as “queer people”.

lationship in Nigeria commits an offense and is subject to a term of ten years imprisonment upon conviction.” As a result, there is little movement-building for queer rights issues in Nigeria. Civil society organisations are primarily responsible for promoting interventions and policies that protect the lives of the Nigerian queer community.

TIERS, a non-profit organisation that safeguards the rights of sexual and gender minorities in Nigeria, kick-started a process to repeal the aforementioned section of the SSMPA in 2020 at the Lagos State Federal High Court on behalf of 15 plaintiffs, comprised of 8 organisations and 7 individuals. They were seeking a ruling that the SSMPA is unconstitutional because sections of the law, which make it illegal to register or operate societies and organisations, are in conflict with the right to freedom of association that is guaranteed by the constitution. The plaintiffs’ legal representative showed up in court on 16 May 2022 to make their case for the SSMPA challenge.

According to Remi Makinde during the hearing, interim executive director of TIERS, attorneys for the plaintiff reaffirmed that the case is solely about the provisions of the SSMPA that limit freedom of association and expression for specific members of society and organisations that promote human rights. Their arguments were adopted in court by the plaintiffs, the defendant, and the amici. The judgment was adjourned to 29 June 2022. The verdict, however, was not prepared, and the court has since been on vacation.<sup>2</sup>

### **Leveraging Online Platforms to Advocate for Queer Rights in Nigeria**

Since 2019, there has been a 25% increase in the number of internet users in Nigeria, with 83.94 million of the country’s 216.7 million people currently using the internet (Sasu, 2022). Statista predicts that in 2025, this number will increase by an additional 24%. Queer rights advocates, feminist organisations, and groups have a more secure environment to organise, rally support for their causes, and demand fair and non-discriminatory policies as more people in Nigeria use digital platforms.

When a bill to criminalise cross-dressing in Nigeria was introduced to the House of Representatives for first reading in April 2022, young Nigerian feminists organised a digital campaign using the hashtag #Iamacrossdresser. The campaign’s goal was to highlight the danger of such a bill and the need for it to be withdrawn. “I just thought it was so harmful and ridiculous that a bill that would make it illegal to dress inappropriately for one’s gender would even be up for

consideration. At the end of the day, clothes are just clothes,” said campaign-participant Adaeze Feyisayo. “I got involved in the campaign to let people know that lawmakers think it is acceptable to sanction people based solely on their appearance.” Feyisayo is a young Nigerian feminist who actively took part in the digital campaign by using text and graphics to encourage participation online. “While this bill specifically targets queer and gender non-conforming people, its assent will affect everyone, including women, regardless of their sexual identity, because their expression and fashion have evolved. We don’t need a law that will make people more likely to be harassed.”

“Many people do not understand that homophobic or queerphobic laws do not only affect the demographic targeted, they have a ripple effect on everyone.”

The campaign’s hashtag, #Iamacrossdresser, alludes to the cross-cutting impact that this bill will have on women who dress in stereotypically masculine attire. Feyisayo’s participation in the campaign made her aware of how problematic it is that there is no diversity in Nigerian policymaking, which is reflected in the types of laws we have. “Many people do not understand that homophobic or queerphobic laws do not only affect the demographic targeted, they have a ripple effect on everyone.” Feyisayo explained that the campaign explored different intersecting identities of people, including queer and cisheterosexual people, taking into account that many young Nigerians are very fashionable in how they dress, defying gender norms surrounding clothing.

Feyisayo was impressed by the way other young feminists rallied their friends to support this cause and show solidarity. She emphasised that feminism in Nigeria is now waking up to the fact that misogyny, homophobia, queerphobia, and poverty are interconnected. “When you look at situations such as this, you will realise that people who get criminalised for these kinds of laws are poor people. The wealthy wear whatever they want, and they are unharmed, but poor and middle-class people are the ones who get harassed, extorted, and beaten up by the police. Equity starts with the system, and the system is made of laws. The laws we have do not promote equity or equality of people and minority groups.”

In September 2022, TIERS launched a digital campaign to urge the adoption and assent of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act across all of Nigeria’s states. The #ADOPTTHEVAPPACT and

<sup>2</sup> The article was prepared in September 2022.

#ASSENTTHEVAPPACT hashtags are being used in this campaign to encourage people to ask their legislators to adopt the law and to ask the governors of states that have not assented it to do so. The VAPP Act, which was signed into law by the federal government in May 2015, specifically addresses the various types of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) that Nigerians, particularly members of marginalised groups, experience. It does this by making these offenses illegal and by offering survivors of SGBV protection, counselling, and rehabilitation services and in some circumstances, financial compensation.

While the penal and criminal codes, Nigeria's long-standing federal laws, did not specifically mention some of the human rights violations queer people in Nigeria experience, the VAPP Act does. These crimes include rape — regardless of gender identity — female genital mutilation (FGM), forced isolation, forcible eviction from one's home, psychological abuse, harmful substance attacks, stalking, and violence by state actors. "The VAPP Act is one of Nigeria's progressive pieces of legislation, but some states have not yet ratified it. For this reason, we are calling attention to it and urging the public to use it as applicable," said Makinde. The VAPP Act has been adopted in 31 of Nigeria's 36 states, but it only applies in those 27 states and the Federal Capital Territory where it has been signed into law. Makinde went on to say that this campaign is crucial to TIERS at this particular time because the organisation is working on a project to stop conversion practices in Nigeria, which include a variety of interventions queer people undergo, frequently against their will, in an effort to change their sexual orientation to heterosexuality.

"Survivors-victims of conversion practices are separated from their family and friends, instructed to pray on mountains, and forced to starve under the guise of fasting. It is good that the VAPP Act makes forced isolation a crime, because it negatively impacts the psychosocial wellbeing of those who experience it." To educate the public about the significance of the VAPP Act and to encourage them to exercise their legal rights under this law, TIERS is working with organisations and queer rights activists in Nigeria. The activists championing this campaign are mostly minority women, including lesbians, bisexual women, transwomen, and women living with disabilities.

### Nigerian Feminists Championing Queer Rights

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent measures put in place to contain its spread confirmed Benedicta Oyedayo's suspicions that inequalities interact to shape people's experiences. Oyedayo,

a disabled queer woman living in Nigeria, said her approach to social justice and feminism was already intersectional but she did not have a name for it. Oyedayo has lived experience of how different modes of oppression operate independently and collectively to make having and wearing one's identities burdensome. She explained that the pandemic opened her eyes to how particular identities meld into issues that cannot be viewed in isolation but concurrently, in order to understand their depth and relationship. By doing so, she believes we can gain a better understanding of how homophobia, misogyny, and ableism are woven into inequalities. "Inequality is not a 'them' or an 'unfortunate others' problem; it is our problem." Sadly, most people do not realise this.

**"Inequality is not a 'them' or an 'unfortunate others' problem; it is our problem."**

"During the #EndSars protest in 2020, queer people were discriminated against due to their SOGIESC," she said. The #EndSars protests were calling to end police brutality, but queer Nigerians marching in solidarity with other protesters were often subjected to harassment. Feminists and emerging feminist organisations such as the Feminist Coalition spoke up against the mob action. They expressed their support for the LGBTIQ+ population in Nigeria and were met with backlash. "I dedicated 2020 to community building and engagement around my discovery of intersectionality," said Oyedayo, whose discovery of the concept of intersectionality was a pivotal point in her life. "In my search for individuals with similar ideologies, I discovered those who share my compounding identities and are subject to prejudice. Such as disabled queer women, disabled sex workers, and disabled trans women who were sex workers. This inspired me to write a personal essay titled *Disabled and Not Asexual*, in which I examined how women with disabilities' sexual behaviour, orientation, and sex characteristics are streamlined, watered down, and hardly recognised."

Oyedayo shared a story that exemplified the relationship between ableism and queerphobia, particularly the genital mutilation of intersex people and conversion therapy. "Strangers believe it is acceptable to approach me and inform me about someone who can straighten bones because Nigerians do not view people with disabilities as fully human. They almost coerced me into going with them when I politely declined. Because of their discomfort with how I appeared as a disabled woman, they felt the need to fix me."



Oyedayo uses storytelling on her social media pages to discuss intersectional issues, draw attention to the struggles that disabled people in Nigeria face on a daily basis, and call for better treatment from society at large, institutional structures, and the government. She also contributes to knowledge resources, such as handbooks and manuals that support the inclusion of people with disabilities in both education and employment. As a diversity and inclusion programme officer for an NGO in Nigeria, she fights for the rights of women and queer people with disabilities, as well as those who are socially and culturally marginalised.

### Feminist Organisations for Queer Liberation

Homelessness is a significant issue for queer people in Nigeria (Stewart, 2020), particularly for those who come out or are outed to their families. In order to provide refuge for sexual minority women who are in danger because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, Safe House was established in 2016 by Akudo Oguaghamba. According to her, it has offered safety to more than 30 people over the past few years. Oguaghamba was also the founder of the Women's Health and Equal Rights (WHER) initiative.

WHER uses a multifaceted approach to advance the rights of and provide support for lesbian, bisexual, queer, and other sexual minority women (LBSMW) in Nigeria by investing in community leaders as mobilisers, and in grassroots engagement. In addition, the organisation has paralegals, volunteers, peer counsellors, and programme graduates who use digital platforms to increase knowledge of sexuality, lessen internalised sexism and homophobia, and boost LBSMW's confidence and self-esteem. "WHER is guided by feminist principles of equality, equity, diversity, accountability, and sharing power. We recognise the role that patriarchy plays in stifling the voices of women and keeping them poor and small. As the sustainability of our work depends on how empowered our youth are, we also respect and embrace youth participation," Oguaghamba explained.

**"Due to their distinctive identities and lack of recognition by Nigerian laws and authorities, intersex people experience difficulties. Among them are bullying, the loss of bodily integrity and autonomy, low self-esteem, social isolation, and unemployment."**

In 2019, Obioma Chukwuike, an intersex and non-binary Nigerian, founded Intersex-Nigeria in response to a gap in LGBTIQ+ programming that, in their opinion, did not include intersex people as much as it should. Intersex-Nigeria is a feminist organisation that offers assistance to the Nigerian intersex community, including psychosocial, medical, informational, referral, community-building, and emergency support. "We also provide our community members with life and competency skills so that they are self-aware, confident, and have healthy self-esteem," Chukwuike said. Due to their distinctive identities and lack of recognition by Nigerian laws and authorities, intersex people experience difficulties. Among them are bullying, the loss of bodily integrity and autonomy, low self-esteem, social isolation, and unemployment. "I have a friend who was fired from her job due to her obvious physical differences. Because we are not recognised, intersex people are not protected from workplace discrimination under Nigerian law. You cannot protect people without recognition."

**"...Africans are using digital media, fashion, and creative arts to fight oppression, create safe spaces, and thrive in queerphobic societies."**

### Documenting Queer Joy as a Form of Resistance

Whenever a teenage Nelson C.J. typed a search term on Google relating to queer Nigerians, the outcomes were negative press. He decided to change the story. "I wanted to make sure that if a queer teenager checks Google and is unaware of how people like them are surviving in Nigeria, they can find something helpful and encouraging."

In order to support queer people's activism and creative endeavours, C.J. began documenting queer stories through journalism in 2018. In the subsequent years, he has published articles in local and international publications about how young queer Africans are using digital media, fashion, and creative arts to fight oppression, create safe spaces, and thrive in queerphobic societies.

"The choice of stories I write is more for a queer audience to envision other ways of being, than it is for the oppressors to see beautiful moments of queer people living (and enjoying life)."

"In general, queer people are not very welcome in Nigerian entertainment venues." According to Nelson, there are not many non-judgmental places where poor queer people can relax, go on dates, and openly show

their partners affection. Their social class can make a difference, however, and wealth can buy some Nigerians privacy. “It is ironic because the entire premise of the SSMPA violates people’s fundamental right to privacy, but in Nigeria, privacy can be bought,” he concluded.

### **Resilient Activism**

The existence of queer Nigerians transcends the limitations society has placed on them and the potential hostility they face. During PRIDE month every year, many of them join the rest of the world to celebrate their unique identities. 137 Nigerians from all over the nation, who are members of the LGBTIQ+ community, came together in July of 2022 to celebrate PRIDE in a grand way, thanks to a collaboration between WHER and nine other organisations. “2022 African Pride Accelerated was an outlet to celebrate our work, survival, and resilience in the face of oppression and violence. Additionally, it was an opportunity to honour our lovely and diverse community while fusing our queer identity with our Afrikaness,” said Oguaghamba. Through knowledge sessions, panel discussions, town halls, and art classes, the event offered a safe space for queer Nigerians to learn about collective care, movement building, intersectionality, and practice self-expression. The final day’s evening featured a gala night with dance performances, rap battles, and other forms of entertainment presented by the participants. Events like these prove that, although from the cultural and legislative perspectives, there is a lot to do in order to recognise and decriminalise members of the LGBTIQ+ community, feminist organisations and activists are not discouraged and they are not giving up on their fight. On the contrary, the feminist movement in Nigeria, although not as loud and as dominant as in other countries, demonstrates resistance and resilience, and the fight for the recognition of human rights of all marginalised groups will prevail.

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I would like to thank Adaeze Feyisayo, Akudo Oguaghamba, Nelson C.J., Obioma Chukwuike, Remi Makinde, and Benedicta Oyedayo for their time and input.

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# Feminist Mobilisation in Authoritarian Times: 2022 Elections in Brazil

Clarice Schreiner

In 2022, Brazil experienced the most polarised elections since democratisation in 1988. Luís Inácio Lula da Silva (better known as Lula)<sup>1</sup> received the highest number of votes in Brazilian history, which confirmed that he would begin his third term as president of Brazil in January 2023<sup>2</sup>. The election had the tightest results ever, in which a little over 2 million votes ensured the victory of Lula against his opponent, Jair Bolsonaro (TSE, 2022). Bolsonaro is the first Brazilian president not to be re-elected<sup>3</sup>, although he received more votes than in 2018. As the incumbent president during the last four years, Bolsonaro governed the country with far-right policies that co-opted and dismantled rights and institutions<sup>4</sup> (Farias, 2022; Machado, 2022).

**“Although some compromises were made, some agendas were avoided, and the speech was lightened from the feminist side, the election was the first step in a continuous feminist fight for a safe and rightful environment.”**

Elections in Brazil occur in two rounds. In the first round on 2 October 2022, Brazilians voted for four other positions: state and federal congress deputies,

governors, and senators. Hereby, a very conservative congress was formed. From 2023, the largest parties in parliament will be the Liberal Party (PL) of Bolsonaro with 185 seats, and the Workers Party (PT) of Lula with 125 seats (TSE, 2022). While the Chamber of Deputies in 2018 elected 15% of women parliamentarians, in 2022 this number increased to 17.7% (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2022). Nevertheless, this is a negative outcome as there was a growth of only 18%, compared to the 51% of the 2014 to 2018 period (Gênero e Número, 2022)<sup>5</sup>. In the Senate, the number of women stayed the same; out of the 81 seats, 14 went to women.<sup>6</sup>

The 2022 election in Brazil came at a time of enormous social tension. However, it was also a time when social movements flourished. This article aims to show the immense impact feminists had in the defeat of the far-right at the polls in the 2022 election in Brazil. Although some compromises were made, some agendas were avoided, and the speech was lightened from the feminist side, the election was the first step in a continuous feminist fight for a safe and rightful environment. To analyse feminist mobilisation in the 2022 elections, this report integrated conversations with four community leaders from Brazil<sup>7</sup> as they described the circumstances in an authoritarian regime.

1 Lula received more than 60 million votes, and Brazil has a population of approximately 215 million people, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (TSE, 2022; IBGE, 2022).

2 Lula is the leader and founder of the Workers Party (PT) and former Brazilian president from 2003 to 2010.

3 Re-election was approved in a constitutional amendment in 1997.

4 To understand better his popularity, some groups that supported his figure and antidemocratic agenda are part of evangelicals, business people, investors, motivational coaches, gamblers, ruralists, sertanejo singers, agribusiness people, and fashion influencers. It is not yet certain, however, how democratic the transition will be since more than a week after the election Bolsonaro barely recognised his defeat and mentioned possible coup attempts to prevent Lula from taking power (Farias, 2022; Machado, 2022).

5 The results also show Brazil is still far away from the world average of women in legislative positions, which is 26.4% (Inter Parliamentary Union 2022).

6 Damares Alves and Tereza Cristina were the only two women ministers at the beginning of the Bolsonaro government and were elected. The latter is known as “Poison Muse”, due to her support for agricultural policies and products with pesticides. Damares already said she wants to become president of the Senate, which will pose an immense obstacle to reproductive rights. She represents a very conservative branch of the Evangelical Church (Gênero e Número, 2022).

7 From the states of Rio Grande do Sul, São Paulo, Paraíba, and Minas Gerais.

## The Far-Right Advanced, So Did Feminists

In order to illustrate the significance of the 2022 elections, it is crucial to mention Marielle Franco, who was a Black lesbian woman from the *Favela da Maré*<sup>8</sup> of Rio de Janeiro. She occupied a seat in the Rio de Janeiro local parliament, the only Black woman to do so in 2016. Marielle denounced police violence in *favelas*, as well as the lack of rights guaranteed to Black women and people from these communities. She represented numerous people and engaged in diverse grassroots actions. Marielle was killed, together with her driver, coming back from a debate between Black women in March 2018, during the military intervention in Rio. More than four and a half years after the murder of Marielle Franco, the perpetrator has not been found. The list of suspects includes militiamen, former police officers, and politicians from Rio de Janeiro. Some of them have close ties to Bolsonaro.

From the moment of her death, Marielle influenced numerous candidacies of Black women in politics, who were called the “seeds of Marielle” and were elected for legislative positions<sup>9</sup>. They have been crucial in combating far-right politicians at the institutional level, blocking and denouncing racism, inequality, or policies that mistreat vulnerable groups. Many of these women have been part of social movements, and thus raised agendas claimed by feminist movements in the Chamber of Deputies. In the streets, the mobilisation of feminists also proved to be a key factor in opposing the authoritarian turn in Brazilian politics and society (Verissimo, 2022).

In October 2015, Brazilian feminist mobilisation on the streets became known as the Feminist Spring. The reason for the protests was the attempt of Eduardo Cunha, a parliamentarian president of the Chamber of Deputies, to restrict the right to abortion. Until then, this was the strongest popular feminist confrontation faced by a parliamentarian (Catarinas, 2018). Brazil is still one of the most unequal and conservative countries in the world<sup>10</sup>. The only woman to occupy the presidential chair in Brazil was Dilma Rousseff, from the Workers Party (PT) of Lula. Two years through her second term, in 2016, she suffered a parliamentary coup, led by her Vice-President, Michel Temer. Pinheiro-Machado (2019) interprets the authoritarian turn endured by Brazilian society since this episode from another perspective: “The emerging reactionism can also be understood, among many other factors, as

a reaction to the explosion of feminism, anti-racism, and the struggle of LGBTQI+ groups, which have always been organised in Brazil, but which, in recent years, have reached an unprecedented growth – disturbing, for many” (Ibid, p. 189).

Another important feminist mobilisation occurred in 2018, the *Ele Não* movement (Not Him), as Bolsonaro became a presidential candidate. It began with a hashtag with which feminists stated their disagreement with agendas endorsed by Bolsonaro. Soon it turned into a Facebook group called *Women United against Bolsonaro*, which in a few weeks gathered more than 4.5 million women. Numerous women in Brazil became politicised with the *#EleNão*, and millions of women went to the streets to reject the authoritarian project promoted by Bolsonaro. In September 2018, women marched in 114 cities in what became the biggest protest of women in the country (Pinheiro-Machado, 2019).

“Feminists in Brazil had many reasons to ask for the deposition of Bolsonaro from office and did so through the largest popular mobilisation of women in the country, which was only possible due to the proliferation of actions, calls, debates, assemblies, and meetings that involved continuously more women in activism.”

Gago (2022) evidences the massification of feminist movements in Latin America during the last five years and how this granted a new impulse for feminism. This boost is due to a long and large political work, together with rage from far-right backlashing policies and dismantling of institutions. Feminists in Brazil had many reasons to ask for the deposition of Bolsonaro from office and did so through the largest popular mobilisation of women in the country, which was only possible due to the proliferation of actions, calls, debates, assemblies, and meetings that involved continuously more women in activism (Ibid). Feminism is not a homogenous struggle. Different fights are connected, and to understand their relations and connections, one has to understand different stories and ways of life (Flores, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Favelas are peripheral communities usually next to big cities in Brazil.

<sup>9</sup> In 2018, Taliria Petrone, her friend, was elected (and re-elected in 2022) as Federal Deputy. Renata Souza, Mônica Francisco, and Dani Monteiro, all of Marielle’s advisors, were elected State Deputies in Rio de Janeiro (Serra, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Brazil was one of the last countries to ban slavery (it did so only in 1888, 66 years after the independence). The democracy is only 33 years old, and justice for those targeted and/or tortured during the military dictatorships remained limited.



Black Women's July Agenda 2022			
Exhibition "Black Women Write the World" Edvaldo Brandão Correia State School	Poetry Slam of Black Women Poetry Marginal/Sergipe	Meeting and Seminar of Black Jurists Network of Black Women of Piauí	Black Women: Perspectives and Challenges under the prism of the current conjuncture Institute of Black Women of Mato Grosso
Conversation circle: Black Women in Power Odara Institute	Afro Dance Workshop Institute of Black Women Mato Grosso	Right to the City - Conversation Circle World March of Women, Porto Alegre	Blacks in Power Campaign Odara - Institute of Black Women
Eyebrow Design Workshop Entrepreneurs Mothers of the Favela	Black women in technology Self-Organization of Black Women of Rejane Maria Sergipe	Workshop Black Women and Afro-entrepreneurship Subúrbio Ginga Women's Movement	Photographic Exhibition Uternally Griot Aya Group
How are Black Girls at School? Ayomide Odara Project - Instituto Odara	Popular culture and the maintenance of the legacy of samba de coco and capoeira Periferia Amulante	Black Leaders as agents of transformation in Business, Culture, Politics and Ancestry Restaurant/Quilombo Aláide do Feijão	Black Women in Power, Building Bem Viver Odara Institute
Conversation Circle: Bullying Against Black Girls at School Ayomide Odara Project - Odara Institute	Live "Nothing for Us, Without Us" - Black LBT Women in defense civic space Candaces Paraíba	A Conversation about the daily struggle of black women with music and dance Brazilian Women's Union	Webseries - This is Black Women's Art Reading Black Women
Experience Circle - Sacred Plants Calafate Women's Collective	Afro Children's Literature Workshop Institute of Black Women Mato Grosso	Circle of Black Lesbians in Activism from the Terreiro Lesbian and Bisexual Black feminists Network	Meeting of Black Northeast Women - Amazon: What is our nation's project? Black Women's Institute
After all, what is Bem Viver that Black Women defend? Network of Black Women of Ceará	"Until All Are Free: Black Women and the Criminal Justice System" World March of Women, Porto Alegre	Batucada Reflect to Decide: Political Incidence in Julho das Pretas Curumim Group	Building Affections: Mosaic Dynamics, Intervention Theater on Black Resistance Network of Black Women of Ceará
Identity and Hair: Afro Braiding Workshop Institute of Black Women Mato Grosso	Black Women Creating Sustainable Fashion World March of Women, Porto Alegre	Capoeira Roda Angola Mourão Capoeira Group	Ancestral Memories Fair and Cultural Presentation World March of Women Maranhão
Dialogue circle: Black women and strategies in sexual and reproductive health Network of Black Women of Pernambuco	Conversation with the Yorubás about the power of the Yabás Candaces	Dialogue Circle: Black Women in Politics and Affectivity Koxerê Women's Association	Special Programming - July das Pretas: 24-hour broadcast Frei Caneca FM Rádio
War on Drugs and the consequences for the lives of black women Black Women of Rejane Maria Sergipe	Building paths and remaining in Power! Black Women Resist	Conversation circle, breakfast and distribution of basic food baskets in the community Union of Blacks for Equality Vale do Pindaré	Conversation Circle on Creative Economy Black Women Fair

Source: Elaborated by the author based on Instituto Odara (2022). The picture in the background was taken by Isadora Mendes from the World March of Women Brazil, 2019. All Rights Reserved.

## The Black Feminist Movement

Black women in Brazil form 28% of the electorate and starting 2023 will have less than 7% of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 1% in the Senate<sup>11</sup> (Gênero e Número, 2022; Senado Federal, 2022). In the Chamber of Deputies, there was an increase higher than 100% compared to the 2018 elections (Gênero e Número, 2022). The two most voted Black women are from left-wing parties, Erika Hilton and Marina Silva, although more than a half of elected Black women come from the right spectrum of politics (Ibid). Only 8 out of 513 parliamentarians are Black women from left-wing parties, who will incorporate agendas from the Black feminist movement and disagree with the conservative opposition on issues such as agribusiness policies, workers' rights (especially rights of domestic workers<sup>12</sup>), basic education and public health, policies that mitigate violence against women, racism, and environmental protection (Abreu & Mori, 2022). The articulation of Black feminists in public spaces is fundamental as a mechanism against structural racism and overcoming enforced invisibility (Paixão, 2022; Folego, 2022).

"The articulation of Black feminists in public spaces is fundamental as a mechanism against structural racism and overcoming enforced invisibility."

Every 25 July is the national day of Tereza de Benguela<sup>13</sup> and Latin American and Caribbean Black Women's Day<sup>14</sup>. Before 2013, it was a date of empty celebrations, but with the establishment of the Month of Black Women<sup>15</sup> by the Northeast Black Women's Network, it turned into a month of Black feminist resistance in Brazil. In 2013, feminist mobilisation occurred only in the state of Bahia and highlighted that, for conquering power and space in society, Black women have to strengthen institutional organisations of their own. From then on, it became a collective organisation of different groups and movements of Black women, with a different theme each year, and mobilisations all over the country<sup>16</sup>. The theme is chosen through dialogue and analysis of the timeframe, and in 2022, the 10th edition had the topic "Black Women in

11 Eliziane Gama was elected as Senator of Maranhão in 2018 (Senado Federal, 2022). Around 54% of the Brazilian population are Black people and they will compose only 26% of the Chamber, with a timid increase of 8% compared to 2018.

12 Even after a law approved in 2013 equalled the rights of domestic workers with those of other workers, such as the right to minimal salary and yearly vacation leave, it is estimated that 75% of them remain in the informal sector (CFEMEA, 2021).

13 Tereza, also known as Queen Tereza, was a leader of Quilombo of Quariterê, in what is today Mato Grosso. After her companion died, she ruled this quilombo with more than 100 people, 79 Black people and 30 Indigenous. She was killed by Portuguese soldiers in 1770. During her leadership, she organised a type of parliament and defense system. They produced cotton, corn, beans, mandioca, bananas etc. (Gelêdes, 2014).

14 The first meeting of women from Latin America and the Caribbean to denounce racism occurred on 25 July 1992 in the Dominican Republic (Paixão, 2022).

15 Called Julho das Pretas, in Portuguese.

16 Although it has a more extensive impact in Northeastern Brazil.

Power, Building Bem Viver<sup>17</sup>". In accordance with the electoral year, discussing power was proposed in order to deepen the comprehension of spaces and agendas involving Black women in power (Leite, 2022).

In addition, since 2015, the March of Black Women occurs on 31 July, when Black women and allies occupy the streets. In 2022, the 7th March of Black Women was organised in numerous cities around Brazil, with the call "For life, rights, dignity and for a fair and anti-racist society" (Geledés, 2022). In Rio de Janeiro, around 10 thousand women marched and raised awareness of the position of Black women in Brazil, who are the main victims of femicide, domestic violence, maternal mortality, and unemployment (Ibid).

### The Movement of Indigenous Women

There are approximately 305 ethnicities and more than 274 languages in Brazil (Apolinário, 2020).<sup>18</sup> Indigenous women do not form a single movement, and many do not identify with the word "feminism" as for them, the term generalises and does not represent their diverse cultural practices and gender relations<sup>19</sup>. Jacy is an indigenous leader that lives in the Municipality of Conde. She explained how feminism was always a practice for Indigenous women, although not with this particular name. The main struggle of Indigenous people is their right to territory and the demarcation of their land. When territories are invaded, women are the first to suffer through rape, natural devastation, soil contamination, lack of natural and food resources, and physical violence<sup>20</sup>. The demarcation of land is central, because for Indigenous people, life is directly tied to their land<sup>21</sup> (Guajajara, 2019; APIB, 2022). Indigenous women groups proliferated in the 1980s<sup>22</sup>, inside and outside *aldeias*<sup>23</sup>, as women leaders centred on the collective struggle<sup>24</sup> (Castilho & Guimarães, 2021). Today, the Indigenous people of Brazil unite in their struggle through APIB (The Articulation of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil) and gather in a yearly

resistance camp called *Acampamento Terra Livre* (Free Land Camp) since 2004. APIB itself is presided by an Indigenous woman, Sônia Guajajara, who in 2022 was elected for the Deputy Chamber and in 2018 ran for president (Ibid). In 2019, during the 15th *Acampamento Terra Livre*, the March of Indigenous Women was organised for the first time in Brasília. Indigenous women marched under songs, dances, and rituals, shouting "Territory, our bodies, our spirit". Around 3 thousand women from 100 populations and 22 states participated (Castilho & Guimarães, 2021). After the march, the protestors joined with the March of Margaridas in Brasília into the largest action by working women in Latin America. In 2019, the March of the Margaridas took the streets of Brasília and gathered 100 thousand rural women<sup>25</sup>.

"The main struggle of Indigenous people is their right to territory and the demarcation of their land. When territories are invaded, women are the first to suffer through rape, natural devastation, soil contamination, lack of natural and food resources, and physical violence."

The 2nd March of Indigenous Women occurred in 2021 due to the pandemic in 2020. According to APIB (2021), there were 5 thousand people camped in Brasília, from 172 populations<sup>26</sup>. Then, the urgency to mobilise was even greater due to the voting on the Law Project 490 (backed by ruralists and Bolsonaro supporters) preceding in Congress, which aimed at demarcating Indigenous lands as they were occupied in 1988<sup>27</sup> (APIB, 2019). In 2022, Indigenous women were part of the *Acampamento Terra Livre*, which was the biggest one in history, with 7 thousand participants, which addressed the fight for demarcation.

17 Bem Viver can be translated to Good Life. It is a philosophy that "encompasses many dimensions and meanings. It can be said that it expresses, at the same time, memory and horizon – on the one hand, pre-colonial and traditional memory of the Andean world – and, on the other hand, protest and struggle against the excesses of globalised agro-industrial capitalism (Bonin, 2015)."

18 According to the last census from 2010, there are almost 900 thousand Indigenous people in Brazil (FUNAI, 2010).

19 Inside some communities, feminism is not needed, but outside them, it can be a mechanism to unite their resistance (Guajajara, 2019).

20 For them, the territory is their spirit and soul. They believe natural disasters happen globally because native people are being denied their way of living and nature is being devastated (Guajajara, 2019).

21 Today, around 12.5% of the Brazilian territory is indigenous land (Guajajara, 2019).

22 Although the first publicly registered Indigenous women organisation was created in 1884, the Association of Indigenous Women of the Upper Negro River (APIB, 2022).

23 Indigenous villages.

24 In 1990 the municipality Baía da Traição in Paraíba elected the first indigenous woman as mayor of a municipality, Iracy Cassiano (APIB, 2022). Today, it is estimated that there are 85 organisations of Indigenous women in Brazil (Instituto Socioambiental, 2020).

25 The name in tribute to Margarida Maria Alves, the first women union president, and a symbol of the struggle for equal rights for rural women and the fight against landowners who contribute to the concentration of land, exploitation of workers, and to deforestation of the Amazon Forest (Paixão, 2019). The main agenda of the Margaridas are sovereignty, democracy free of violence, justice, and equality (World March of Women, 2019).

26 The theme of 2021 was "Native Women: Reforesting Minds for Healing the Earth" (APIB, 2022).

27 It was an outrage for Indigenous people because, as they said: "Our history does not start in 1988". In 1988, when the constitution was written, they had less Indigenous regularisation than today, so it is a throwback of their rights (APIB, 2019). During these years of the march, Bolsonaro supporters threatened and tensioned, but did not stop the resistance (CFEMEA, 2021).





Source: World March of Women Brazil, 2022. All Rights Reserved.

35% of the land regulation processes still await legalisation and were frozen since Bolsonaro came to power (APIB, 2022). Nevertheless, progress is in sight. In 2022, Indigenous women Sônia Guajajara and Célia Xakriabá were elected, and Lula mentioned in debates that a Ministry of Native Peoples will be created (João, 2022; Guajajara, 2019).

### Transfeminism in Brazil

For thirteen years, Brazil has been the deadliest country for trans people in the world.<sup>28</sup>

The life expectancy of trans people in Brazil is only 35 years, while for the rest of Brazilians it is higher than 70 years (Carbajal, 2022). Although transphobia is a crime in Brazil since 2019, the number of transfeminicides was the highest in 2021 (Transrespect Versus Transphobia Worldwide, 2021). Furthermore, a report shows that 96% of trans people killed in the world are trans women, and 33% of those killed in 2021 were in Brazil (Ibid). Also, from 2019 to 2020 there was an increase of 41% in transfeminicides in the country (Sudré, 2021). The law was not enough due to the dismantlement of the few existing policies protecting trans people by the government in power (Holanda, 2022; Carbajal, 2022). However, the statistics are also limited, since the lack of police reports turns transphobia into an invisible crime, and the lack of data makes it difficult to map public policies. When crimes are committed, trans people trust neither public security forces nor the judicial system, since they are often exposed to more violence when trying to report

a crime<sup>29</sup>. Transfeminism is about granting reproductive health rights to everyone, including trans men who are usually excluded from debates, agency to decide for themselves, deconstructing binary identities and the stigmatisation of bodies. Transfeminism imagines feminism from the experiences of transvestites women, transvestites, transsexual and transgender women.

**"For thirteen years, Brazil has been the deadliest country for trans people in the world."**

In the 2022 elections, Erika Hilton<sup>30</sup> and Duda Salabert were the first trans women to be elected to the Chamber of Deputies. This was a huge achievement of the LGBTQI+ movement. They will support agendas of the transfeminist movement and contribute to the strengthening of actions in the streets. Furthermore, it will be the first time there is an LGBTQI+ parliamentary front in the Federal Congress (Da Silva, 2022). In June 2022, the 5th March of Trans Pride in Brazil took place, which discussed the increased violence, as well as the employability of trans people. Due to the elections ahead, the movement was political as well, as marchers screamed "Out with Bolsonaro", "Vote with pride against fascism", and songs of support to Lula (Zylberkan, 2022). With the minor shift of power, there is hope that policies will recognise and protect trans people so that Brazil can become a safe and inclusive space for them.

<sup>28</sup> A research done by the University of the State of São Paulo in 2021 revealed that 2% of the adult population in Brazil are transgender or non-binary people. This adds up to 3 million people (IBDFAM, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Also, most trans people in Brazil live very precarious lives, with difficulty in accessing both public and private sectors, and an immense amount is prostituted (Pinheiro-Machado, 2022).

<sup>30</sup> Erika Hilton was elected parliamentary of the city of São Paulo in 2018 and in July 2022 sued Bolsonaro in the Supreme Federal Court for transphobia and homophobia after he imposed heteronormativity in a speech, claiming that family is made up of men, women, and children and nothing beyond this (UOL, 2022). Bolsonaro supported a project called "School Without Party", which gave space to punish teachers that protected or supported LGBTQI+ rights in classes (Louise, 2022).



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### From Identity Struggles to Community Activism

Today, 33 million Brazilians face hunger (Pomar, 2022). It is estimated that out of every 10 trans people in Brazil, 7 do not have access to food in sufficient amounts (Gomes, 2021). This was further exacerbated by the right-wing government. Claudete of the Jardim d'Abril community, affirmed that there are thousands of entire families living on the streets without means to afford proper meals. In order to combat hunger and other social vulnerabilities heightened since 2018, actions were carried out by the feminist movement. Claudete spoke about community kitchens, in which she gets together with a group of women to cook lunchboxes to take to homeless people around her neighbourhood. Through these kitchens, she is able to feed her community and bring women together interested in getting involved.

Any from Morro da Cruz, a peripheral community in an urban area, manages an urban garden for the community to plant and harvest crops, which strengthens the collective of women through dialogue and sharing knowledge. Children are involved as well, and learn how to deal with the soil.

In Lúcia's community in Cabana do Pai Tomas, there is a library with 15 refrigerators turned into bookshelves. They cover them in graffiti and leave them around the

community, often covered in messages for the youth of the neighbourhood, and bulletined with community activities like hip-hop and *capoeira* groups. Another action is what the World March of Women calls "Operation Lambe-Lambe" when groups stick posters with feminist phrases around the city.

These actions and marches indicate how the feminist movement has to be transversal. Black, Indigenous, and trans communities are even more marginalised in society. In order to face the neoliberal system reinforced by Bolsonaro, an expansion of political alliances and of particular dynamics of feminist struggles inside other struggles are needed (Gago, 2022). This should happen in the formulation of agendas and organisation of actions, as more seeds of Marielles and Margaridas spread around the Brazilian territory.

"It is through feminist movements that politics in Brazil were and will be formulated. Although the institutionalisation of feminist agendas is not enough, together with mass movements in the streets, on social media, and in rural areas, women can build political agendas by and for women and marginalised groups."

### What Comes After Lula

Since 2018, feminists have used numerous occasions to organise and show their opposition to Bolsonaro, such as on the International Women's Day in 2022 with the theme "For the lives of women, Bolsonaro never again! For a Brazil without sexism, without racism, and without hunger!" (Barros, 2022). Street protests strengthened the feminist movements, and it was due to these popular mobilisations that Lula won the 2022 elections (CMP, 2022). The mobilisation during the far-right government of Bolsonaro was enormous and existent in every corner of Brazil. Still, the advancement of women in the polls was timid, as seen in the pages above. The Black, Indigenous, trans, and other feminist movements projected a larger occupation of seats, perhaps due to the hope created in 2018. In addition, given that more than a half of the women elected are from right-wing parties, it cannot be expected that there will be extensive advancements in the rights of women<sup>31</sup>. Undoubtedly, Lula was the best option in the 2022 election, which is the reason the feminist

<sup>31</sup> Agendas that conservative women support are, for example, a limitation of the understanding of reproductive and sexual health, and the favouring of home schooling, thus weakening the public education system (Araújo, 2022).

movement supported him since the beginning of his presidential campaign. This is due to his previous government<sup>32</sup>, as well as because Lula was the only other candidate that could defeat Bolsonaro. Another four years of Bolsonaro as the president of Brazil would have torn down the rights of women and marginalised groups, as well as destroyed the environment to a point of collapse (Araújo, 2022). Bolsonaro did not win even though there were suspicions of vote buying and an overall proliferation of fake news (Sakamoto, 2022). It is through feminist movements that politics in Brazil were and will be formulated. Although the institutionalisation of feminist agendas is not enough, together with mass movements in the streets, on social media, and in rural areas, women can build political agendas by and for women and marginalised groups (Moreno 2016), which have the chance to reinvent the present.

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32 In which there was the advancement of rights, as well as to his Government Plan, pointing out the (re)creation of a Ministry of politics toward women's rights (Barros, 2022).



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### Interviews

I want to thank Any, Claudete, Jacy, Lúcia, and other community leaders I spoke to for taking the time to exchange their stories and experiences with me. These women daily reinvent the present, full of compassion to protect those around them. I wish them boundless feminist interchanges that flourish ideas of a more caring society.

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# Feminists Strike Back: De-Colonial Anti-War Resistance in Belarus and Russia

Tony Lashden

I am writing this text<sup>1</sup> on feminist anti-war movements from Tbilisi, Georgia, a country that hosted me after relocation from Kyiv at the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion on Ukraine in February 2022. While I put together this article in September 2022, another conflict was escalating right near me, between Azerbaijan and Armenia (BBC News, 2022). Local feminist groups have already started mobilising to support individuals affected by the armed confrontation.

**“Feminists have been on the forefront of meeting the needs of those who suffer the most from the social and political crises: women and children, LGBTQI+ people, people with disabilities, BIPOC communities, and marginalised ethnic groups have been the focus of feminist care.”**

Feminists have been on the forefront of meeting the needs of those who suffer the most from the social and political crises: women and children, LGBTQI+ people, people with disabilities, BIPOC communities, and marginalised ethnic groups have been the focus of feminist care.

The Russian war in Ukraine emphasised the importance of feminist mobilisation. Since February 2022, Ukrainian feminists have organised numerous initiatives with the goal of providing immediate relief for the current crisis. Women’s March established a rapid national programme to support women; Martynka pulled

together resources to ensure the right to safe abortion for survivors of sexualised war violence; Feminist Workshop built shelters and assisted in the evacuation of elderly women. There are groups engaged in evacuation, provision of food, medication, shelter, and direct financial assistance.<sup>2</sup> In Ukraine, feminists organised to bridge the structural gap in humanitarian assistance and advocated for further support. They joined armed forces to defend the country. Other activists in the region have heard the call for action.

In writing this piece, I set out to understand the feminist anti-war actions in Belarus and Russia, and the important work of feminist activists in the region. By speaking with activists and listening to their painful stories about the war, their personal tragedies, and the ground-breaking discoveries about themselves and their heritage, I have learned of the importance of de-colonisation. It is not merely an intellectual imperative – it is a lived-through experience of resistance and rebellion against the Empire and its shadow. This article became an exploration of vulnerability, strength, willpower – and, above all – the feminist demand for justice and peace.

## Belarusian and Russian Feminists

Since summer 2020, Belarusian activists have been fleeing the country from political prosecution. The authoritarian regime has been cracking down on anyone engaging in protests or activism (OHCHR, 2022). Ukraine became a second home for many dissidents fighting the regime. During Kyiv Pride 2021, queer and feminist activists, stateless individuals, and political refugees joined the anarchist column condemning state

<sup>1</sup> This article contains aliases used to protect identities of activists at risk.

<sup>2</sup> Women’s March: <https://www.instagram.com/marshzhinok/>  
 Martynka, help!: [https://www.instagram.com/martynka\\_help/](https://www.instagram.com/martynka_help/)  
 Feminist Workshop: <https://www.instagram.com/femworkshop/>



and police violence.<sup>3</sup> At the same Pride, Belarusian activists organised a column highlighting specific issues queer migrants have in Ukraine (Lashden, 2021).

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, migration in the region sped up. By October 2022, more than 19,000 people were arrested for taking part in anti-war rallies (OVD Info, 2022). Some of these demonstrations were small, local forms of resistance and street performances. An illustrative case was that of Lolja Nordic, participant of feminist Eight Initiative Group and Feminist Anti-War Resistance, who became a suspect in a falsified criminal case on "telephone terrorism" and was subjected to several unlawful arrests, apartment searches, and surveillance (OVD News, 2022).<sup>4</sup> Lolja left Russia and continued her service to forcefully displaced individuals from Mariupol to Russia on their way to safer spaces in Europe. Setting aside the migration status of activists and their territorial belonging, there is also a complexity related to the ethnic background of activists.

**"Setting aside the migration status of activists and their territorial belonging, there is also a complexity related to the ethnic background of activists."**

Polina, coordinator of the de-colonial work at Feminist Anti-War Resistance, one of the largest collectives in Eastern Europe, has multi-ethnic heritage. She shared that "people perceive Russia as a homogenous country inhabited by one ethnic group." This is a distorted image: Russia has 85 regions populated by more than 160 nationalities. The "white" Russia people think of is an imperialist fantasy that Russia tries to portray".<sup>5</sup> This multi-ethnic lived experience is also shared by Sliva, a Belarusian-Turkmen activist, journalist, and poet. Sliva is engaged in several independent media initiatives where she focuses on examining processes of colonisation and xenophobia. For Sliva, her intercultural identity has always been a source of personal reflection. "I grew up in Belarus and then, after the crackdown on civil society in 2020, I moved to Russia. Soon, I will need to move again to a third country. I constantly reflect upon my identity, its roots and implications onto my activism. I am a woman who spent her life living in a country with an imperialist neighbour. I do not think that I had a choice whether I could think about colonialism or not – it is a self-evident part of my reality."

**"By revisiting the collective history of oppression and revising narratives on the meaning of "being Belarusian" or "being Russian," the movements can find points of unity and joint actions against coloniality."**

As Polina and Sliva see it, the stories of ethnic communities and "natzmen:ki" (national minorities, self-identification) are an important part of the de-colonial and feminist struggle. By revisiting the collective history of oppression and revising narratives on the meaning of "being Belarusian" or "being Russian," the movements can find points of unity and joint actions against coloniality.

### **Belarus: In the Shadow of Russia**

"I remember the hunger for national identity we had in the 2010s. We dedicated time and resources to produce articles on feminism and LGBTQI+ rights in Belarusian language, our team initially had visual identity that included Belarusian folklore symbols, we participated in numerous events where we tried to position LGBTQI+ people among other Belarusians," said Milana, feminist and LGBTQ+ activist, and part of the currently closed MAKEOUT project. For her, the reconstruction of national identity was initially connected to the respect of human rights and leftist values. Yet quite soon, the national discourse became full with right-wing political mobilisation.

The conservative project of restoring Belarus' borders prior to the USSR and its patriarchal values did not find much support from feminist and queer movements. The vocal activist critique of right-wing parties and leaders appropriating the national agenda led feminists to separate from the idea of national revival. Being economically and politically dependent on Russia, Belarus had to actively promote Russian culture as a part of the myth of "Slavic brothers" (bratiya slavyane) to hush local struggles for independence. Dating back to 1997, when Belarus and Russia signed a treaty on "Creating of the Union State" – a supranational political structure that was supposed to unify societal systems in two countries – the Belarusian regime has been actively suppressing attempts at restoration of the local language and culture (Informational-analytical portal of Union State, 2022). Since 2020, these efforts grew. The Belarusian state imprisoned dozens of cultural activists, feminists, musicians, painters,

<sup>3</sup> The picture of the column can be found here: <https://www.inform.zp.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/pride-kyiv-2021-12-1024x684-1.jpeg>

<sup>4</sup> Details on Lolja's case here: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcQ2LiNM74I/>

<sup>5</sup> Feminist Anti-War Resistance: [https://www.instagram.com/fem\\_antiwar\\_resistance/](https://www.instagram.com/fem_antiwar_resistance/)

and even tour guides who engaged in the promotion of Belarusian culture (PEN Belarus, 2022).

With the escalation of the war in 2022, and right after new loans from Russia, Belarus became a platform for the Russian armed invasion of Ukraine. The Russian army occupied several southern regions of Belarus, and local women started to report cases of violence (including sexualised violence) and abuse (Zaborona, 2022). Despite a new wave of protests on Belarusian participation in the war in Ukraine, and penalties from the state in the form of repressions and arrests, the regime continued its support of Russia. The question of de-colonial resistance and national independence was posed again. “It is not enough to account for the role Belarus plays in the war. We all agree that Belarusian and Russian states are a community of war criminals, but then we need to push for a continuation of that discussion. What happens after the basics are covered?” This was asked by Marni, feminist cultural activist and Belarusian member of Feminist Anti-War Resistance.

The instant reaction to this was mobilisation for action. Activists joined initiatives that provided evacuation and financial assistance, organised demonstrations to support Ukraine in major locations of Belarusian emigration (such as Warsaw, Vilnius, and Tbilisi). They created Napryamor.org, a portal that collected information on services offered to Ukrainian population in Ukraine and in the bordering states, and focused on support to survivors of sexualised war violence, eg. in the form of abortion medications.<sup>6</sup> Marni, who organised a series of solidarity events for Ukraine, shared her concern: “When the invasion started, I was constantly thinking how Belarus could easily be targeted by Russia in a similar way that Ukraine was and how little we would be able to do if it happened. What does it mean for us as a country to have so limited capacity to defend ourselves and to have so little attention from Europe on what is happening in Belarus?”

Reflecting on the specific role of Belarus in the war, activists started to engage in further discussions around the dependence on Russia, the influence Russia has on Belarusian self-identification, and how culture and society are produced in relation to colonialism. A special focus in these discussions was put on women and how women are affected by colonial dependency, and especially how they can mobilise during the war. Feminists warned about the potential conservation of these dialogues and the repetition of history. Milana, who encountered several collisions with conservative movements in Belarus, was sceptical about the growing ache for the nation: “I am very anxious when it comes to the national revival and supposedly de-colonial

practices. I see a lot of narratives that demand strict opposition: if you are fighting against colonisation, you are supposed to advocate for the nation. Yet, as a queer migrant woman, I find it impossible solidarising with this duality”.

The same concern is shared by Sliva. “When I hear the call to restore culture with the framework of the ‘nation’, I feel confused. These calls have no connection to reality: that nation no longer exists. When we try to recreate some ‘traditional’ values, we are doomed to replicate what has already been done by Russia and be glued even tighter to it. We either need to gather our culture piece by piece from the ruins, wasting significant time and resources trying to cement together what has already been lost – or to invent something else. And I personally feel that it is more prolific to channel energy in life-giving projects.”

The fuel to de-colonisation in Belarus is collective learning and discussions. By vocalising the specific relation between Belarus and Russia, and by identifying same patterns in other countries and regions affected by the Russian violent expansion, Belarusian feminists hope to form more sensitivity to other contexts and stand in unity with Ukrainian colleagues.

### **Russia: Shattering the Colonial Fantasy**

De-colonial resistance in Russia has a long history, though its connection to wide feminist movements and outreach to larger audiences are quite new. In the last two decades de-colonial activism has been marginalised and penalised. Connected with efforts of non-Russian ethnic groups to strive for autonomy and independence, climate and ecological justice, as well as accountability of local authorities, the de-colonial work in Russia has been met by severe state prosecutions. For example, efforts of Shors activist Yana Tan-nagasheva to defend sacred territories of the Shors community from coal mining have been sabotaged by local authorities in Kemerovo, Siberia region. Yana’s house was burned down, and for months, her family was terrorised with threats and surveillance up to the point of Yana’s relocation from Russia (Anti-Discrimination Centre, 2018).

Crimea Tatars faced even harsher repressions. While ethnic cleansing in Crimea dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and accounts for thousands of displacements, the recent persecutions of the Tatar community include politically motivated arrests and imprisonments, forced disappearances of community leaders, as well as erasure of local history and culture (Council of

<sup>6</sup> Girl’s Power BY campaign on rapid aid for survivors of war sexualised violence: [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cd\\_UR4booTm/](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cd_UR4booTm/)

Europe, 2021).<sup>7</sup> The state pressure on Indigenous people is also manifested in forced enrolments to the army. Buryat people, who were actively recruited and pressured into army service, are among the most affected groups. While activists from the Free Buryatia Foundation have tirelessly worked since 2014 to support Buryat people to leave the army, the invasion of 2022 negatively marked the community. Russian media has presented Buryat soldiers as marauders, putting the blame for war crimes committed in Bucha on the Indigenous people (Free Buryatia Foundation, 2022).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine sparked the interest in de-colonial practices. Polina, who is coordinating de-colonial work at Feminist Anti-War Resistance, said this of the war: “The war in Ukraine is not the only imperial war Russia has started. Taking Chechnya as a primary example, there were activists who have been talking about Russia’s purely colonial ambitions for ages. But the community of people who were interested in discussing these topics was small and marginalised. Chechnya itself has been shoved into a dark corner, and many have forgotten about the atrocities that happened there.” However, Russia invested enormous resources into forming a narrative of peace and national unity. Alternative accounts of social and cultural tensions were cornered by the state, and banished from mainstream media channels. The state-funded narrative upheld through mass national celebrations, such as the National Day of People’s Unity, assumed vast satisfaction within different ethnic communities (Kolesnikova, 2022).

**“Feminist Anti-War Resistance composed the Anti-War Manifesto, which was translated into numerous languages to promote anti-war efforts in Russia and beyond.”**

To oppose this metropolitan fantasy, various groups mobilised. The International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia reacted among the first by publicly condemning the invasion of Russia and expressing their solidarity with Ukraine (Indigenous Russia, 2022). Media Resistance Group published a call to disarm and de-colonise Russia by providing independence and autonomy to the Indigenous people of Russia and other communities suffering from Russian exploitation (Media Resistance Group, 2022). Feminist Anti-War Resistance composed the Anti-War Manifesto, which was translated into numerous languages to promote anti-war efforts in Russia and beyond (Feminist An-

ti-War Resistance, 2022). In addition, several media initiatives formed to spread alternative views on Russia, its wars, and exploitation from within the country.

Beda.media, a feminist media on de-colonisation and anti-imperialism in Russia, was formed with the ambition to provide an accessible space for people to learn about experiences of imperialism and colonialism. Sasha, Taba, Anya, Katia, and several other members of the collective came together to build a platform that would accumulate materials on de-colonisation. “The war has exposed a gap in knowledge and language – in my networks and in the media. I see that many people are looking for ways to discuss Russia as an empire. We want to support these efforts by unleashing stories and histories lived by real people,” explained Sasha. “Colonisation is not an abstract concept – it is a very real process people had to survive in.”

Polina does similar work at Feminist Anti-War Resistance: “Since February, we have been working non-stop on publishing stories of Ukrainian women who suffered from the Russian invasion. There is a lot of pain, anger, and sorrow in these narratives, and I feel it is important to consciously continue to give space to these stories, as they very vividly show how actions of the Russian state destroy the lives of thousands of people. And – as a matter of fact – have been destroying these lives for many years now in Russia: in Chechnya, Dagestan, Buryatia, Yakutia, Tatarstan, and many other locations.”

The migration and emergency relocation to countries such as Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, became a point of no-return in the de-colonisation journey of numerous activists. Katia from Beda suggested that thinking about whiteness, colonial habits, and structures of oppression comes hand in hand with un-learning history imposed by Russia and such un-learning is only possible by reconnecting with those who experienced Russian oppression.

Emilia, one of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance coordinators, shares this standpoint. Growing up and living in Russia for her whole life, with an Armenian heritage, she had to relocate to Armenia due to her activist engagement. She reflected upon her experience with humbleness: “When I lived in Russia, I really tried to fit in, though I constantly felt not fully belonging. This is how propaganda works: you want to be a part of the dominant culture, but it always reminds you that you are an outsider. Right now, in Armenia, I re-discover myself, my heritage, my community. I feel that this process is happening for many people right now

<sup>7</sup> Qirimname, a Crimean-led project, documents the violations: <https://www.instagram.com/p/ChaPykYM7kk/?igshid=YzA2ZDJiZGQ>

and so many more will tend to it soon.” Embracing the ethnic diversity, activists are striving to enrich their movements.

### **Building a Solidarity worth Practising**

Reflecting upon the past is needed, yet, it is not sufficient. According to Emilia from Feminist Anti-War Resistance, the support to Ukraine should be the aim of all actions done by the activists’ groups: “As I see it, a de-colonial approach should start with recognition that all resources we have: financial, symbolic, media attention – should be redirected to Ukraine. If Ukrainian groups need support – we need to prioritise this need and try to cover it from our end, we need to actively search for information on how we could best use our resources to amplify their efforts. By the end of the day, what we do should benefit people in Ukraine.”

**“The de-colonisation begins by shifting the oppressor from the centre and putting the focus on the oppressed. By highlighting the needs, calls, and demands of Ukrainian feminists, the feminist movements in the region hope to support the most important fight – the fight for liberation.”**

The respect and awareness to the actual needs of feminist groups in Ukraine come from immersive learning of activists working on the ground. The support to the ArmUkraineNow campaign, assistance to organisations managed by feminists, providing media space and attention to the groups are essential to the process. Sliva feels that the needs have been expressed numerous times: “So much has already been said and written by our colleagues. We need to listen more and build our activist practice in close connection to their demands.” The de-colonisation begins by shifting the oppressor from the centre and putting the focus on the oppressed. By highlighting the needs, calls, and demands of Ukrainian feminists, the feminist movements in the region hope to support the most important fight – the fight for liberation.

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I would like to thank Marni, Milana, Sliva, Emilia, Polina, Sasha, Taba, Anya, Katia, as well as groups of Belarusian and Russian activists who participated on joint calls and the discussions related to preparation of this material, for their time and efforts.

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# Femicide in Venezuela: Feminist Movements Break the Silence

Gabriela Mesones Rojo

"In Venezuela, it is not easy to talk about femicide." This is what activist Ketsy Medina told me in April 2022. She is the founder of a movement called #JusticiaParaTodasLasMujeres. "Finding someone to accompany you on the path of seeking justice is like getting another mother, another sister, another daughter." Medina has been seeking justice for the murder of her mother, Maigualida Sifontes, killed in December 2017. Two pieces of evidence were crucial — a video of the act and the fingerprint of the killer. However, in the midst of the court case around her mother's death, Medina learned that the evidence and her mother's case file had been lost. Medina is right; talking about femicides in Venezuela is not easy. Venezuela's politics is polarised between the country's ruling party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, and its opposition. They do have one thing in common. They have all made it clear that the issue of gender-based violence is not their concern. On top of that, the country is going through a humanitarian crisis, as a result of President Nicolas Maduro's<sup>1</sup> authoritarian public policies, marked by food shortages, hyperinflation, political persecution, and a sharp rise in violence and organised crime. Women and gender-diverse individuals have been the most affected.

Activist Luisa Kislinger reported that Maduro's administration has been worse than negligent towards women: "Venezuelan women live as our grandmothers and great-grandmothers did in the 19th century: no contraceptive pills to control their fertility, no access to safe abortions, no sanitary pads to allow a life during their periods, no official institutions to turn to when beaten, raped or verbally and emotionally abused by men, no policies to combat gender-based violence, no

fully functioning health facilities looking out for pregnant women and their newborns."

**"Organisations, collectives, and movements like CEPAZ, Utopix, Tinta Violeta, and #JusticiaParaTodasLasMujeres are specialising in different areas in order to prevent femicides across the country and each of these collectives have helped shape feminist movements in Venezuela."**

Consequently, femicide has been on the rise according to feminist groups tracking the information, such as Monitor Utopix<sup>2</sup>. These groups have tried to highlight the gaps in the system, but without official government data, a lack of laws that protect women, an absence of educational campaigns, and a deeply rooted sexist culture that fuels misogyny, the situation is further complicated. Nevertheless, Venezuelan women are fighting back. Organisations, collectives, and movements like CEPAZ, Utopix, Tinta Violeta, and #JusticiaParaTodasLasMujeres are specialising in different areas in order to prevent femicides across the country and each of these collectives have helped shape feminist movements in Venezuela.

## The Law Is Not Enough

In 2004, a group of five men allegedly hired by Iván Sosa Rivero, a Lieutenant in the Venezuelan army,

1 Nicolás Maduro was elected in 2013, after Hugo Chávez's death. His administration is considered as a military regime and has been characterised by a rise in authoritarian practices, an economic crisis, and persecution of political actors, dissident voices, and human rights activists.

2 Monitor Utopix is a data visualisation project made by the team of Utopix, a communications platform that raises awareness of social problems in Venezuela. More at: <https://utopix.cc/>

raped his ex-wife Alexandra Hidalgo<sup>3</sup>. The rape was allegedly an act of revenge for his wife's decision to file for divorce, marking the end of a 14-year-long abusive marriage. Hidalgo reported the rape to the police and the District Attorney's office, but Sosa Rivero disappeared. Eight years later he was found and arrested on Margarita Island, Venezuela. Because of his position as an army officer in Maduro's military regime, Hidalgo and her defense suspected that the judicial process was subject to numerous irregularities and procedural delays. In September 2021, Hidalgo's case finally closed. Sosa Rivero had been found innocent, and he sued Hidalgo for defamation. She said: "For years he has threatened to kill me, even in front of court officials. He even told my daughter he was going to murder me when he got out of jail, which she also denounced. Now, the worst has happened: he is free, and I am afraid he will return to hurt me. The state does not care, even though I had more than enough evidence for my case."

**"... the biggest problem behind the law is that although it establishes a special judicial system to deal with issues of violence against women, in reality no women's protection courts have been established."**

In 2007, the Organic<sup>4</sup> Law on the Right of Women to a Life Free of Violence aimed at protecting Venezuelan women was finally passed. Although there have been several modifications in the meantime, the law still has its flaws. According to Sara Fernandez, a lawyer who specialises in gender-based violence with the non-profit organisation CEPAZ, "the law does not contemplate institutional violence by the State, although it does cover a wide range of crimes that can be considered violence against women: psychological violence, physical violence, patrimonial violence. But the real problem is that the law does not have a regulation that would allow standardising the criteria and interpretations that are made of its norms." She said the biggest problem behind the law is that although it establishes a special judicial system to deal with issues of violence against women, in reality no women's protection courts have been established. On top of that, several states do not have special jurisdiction for cases of gender-based vio-

lence and often, the legal teams involved in these cases have little education on the subject.

Before a case even makes it to court, the process of filing an actual complaint to police is also filled with obstacles. Magaly Vásquez<sup>5</sup>, an expert lawyer on women's rights who helped draft the Law on Violence against Women and Family, said that women often face resistance from law enforcement when trying to report a crime. "Many women do not have the support of state institutions when making a report, and this is not a legal problem, it is a social issue. Unfortunately, most women suffer a double victimisation process: they are victims of the crime and victims of the system." Today, Hidalgo feels unsafe. "When I heard my ex-husband was found innocent my heart broke, but when I heard he was suing me for defamation I felt he had taken everything away from me. I cannot talk to the press anymore and my finances are dire after a 17-year-long litigation process. CEPAZ has been my only support throughout this process. Without them, I would have no means to afford legal representation."

CEPAZ, the Center for Justice and Peace, was created after the election of Nicolás Maduro. Their programme for women's empowerment includes the Digital Femicide Observatory<sup>6</sup>, empowerment workshops for women in vulnerable situations, and a programme for legal assistance for victims of gender-based violence. Their legal assistance programme, apart from helping over 200 women, contributed regular reports about the problems within Venezuela's legal system in terms of the protection of women. "Although we do not have official data, when we study the irregularities we see that they do not respond to isolated cases, but are rather part of much more systematic patterns of obstacles to access to justice," Fernandez explained. "First, there are no prevention policies that go beyond the judicial point of view, most victims do not even know where to go, where to call, or which entities and authorities can help them. Second, when a complaint is filed, the authorities do not receive it or seek excuses to refer the victim to another instance instead of taking charge immediately, as is their obligation. There are also no protection measures for those who report, especially victims of domestic violence, who if they have nowhere to turn, are extremely vulnerable."

Another consequence of the system, Fernandez highlights, is the re-traumatisation through this process. Sometimes this involves asking for evidence that is

<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Hidalgo's testimony was originally gathered in May 2021, shortly before the beginning of the fourth trial against her husband. You can read more about her experience at: <https://www.cinco8.com/periodismo/lo-que-vino-despues-fue-peor/>. In September 2021, there was a follow-up investigation after he was found innocent <https://www.caracaschronicles.com/2021/09/03/alexandra-hidalgo-from-revictimized-plaintiff-to-state-persecuted-survivor/>.

<sup>4</sup> In Venezuela, organic laws derive directly from the constitution.

<sup>5</sup> This interview took place in May 2022.

<sup>6</sup> The Digital Femicide Observatory was established in 2017 and published monthly reports of femicides across the country. The information provided have been essential in understanding femicides and violence in Venezuela.

irrelevant to the case, such as an individual's sexual history, or requesting proof of a lack of consent. This came to light during Linda Loaiza's case. She was a victim of torture, rape, kidnapping and attempted homicide in 2001 by Luis Carrera Almoina, who kept her in isolation for four months. Loaiza's was the first case of gender-based violence against the Venezuelan State before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (CDCH). Loaiza managed to prove that the Venezuelan State was responsible for her re-traumatisation during the legal proceedings. However, to this date, the Venezuelan government has not responded to the CDCH request for the reparation. Also, to this date, Luis Carrera Almoina remains a free man.

### No Official Data for Venezuelan Women

According to unofficial data, femicides in Venezuela have been on the rise since 2019, with 773 cases until June 2022. However, CEPAZ and Utopix emphasise the lack of official government statistics on gender-based violence and femicides in Venezuela. The National Institute of Statistics must collect gender-sensitive data and statistics but "one of the biggest inconsistencies on the part of the Venezuelan State in the search to eradicate violence against women, is that by considering the problem as a human rights issue, it has been silenced in official sources of information, as has happened with various areas of human rights in the country" (CEPAZ, 2020, p.18).

**"Because Venezuela's government is reluctant to receive international aid, they have less reason to provide accurate information about those most vulnerable. Putting out official data means also admitting policy failures."**

Historically, countries in the midst of a humanitarian crisis track and report these kinds of statistics in the hopes of getting international aid. Because Venezuela's government is reluctant to receive international aid, they have less reason to provide accurate information about those most vulnerable. Putting out official data means also admitting policy failures. There has been no official updated government data on economy, health, violence or education since 2014. Official data tracking femicides, sexual violence or maternity deaths has not been published since 2016, despite the fact that the Law on the Right of Women to a Life Free of Violence urges the State to publish transparent gender-sensitive data in order to respect the population's access to information. The same law states that every 10 days a woman dies from gender-based violence in

Caracas (Asamblea Nacional, 2014), a figure that does not correspond to any official government data, but is based on a report made by AVESA, a human rights feminist organisation specialising in gender-based and sexual violence.

**"If figures are not presented, we do not know how the survey of public policies is carried out, and there is no transparency in the evaluation to know the efficiency of these policies."**

CEPAZ's 2022 report highlights that this information simultaneously reveals two realities. The first is that it is necessary to provide official data in order to establish effective public policies. The second is that Venezuela's Legislative Power did not resort to its own official sources, but information from civil society organisations. "What makes this matter worse is that these organisations were later denied any control or intervention role in the definition of the public policies that should be generated in the application of the law," the CEPAZ report highlighted. "These quotes give the impression that there is a positive relationship between the State and organised civil society, which are in contradiction with the current reality in which non-governmental organisations are the object of criminalisation and persecution, both by de facto means and by regulatory mechanisms, as they have highlighted by various international bodies" (Ibid, p. 20).

Anthropologist and activist from Utopix, Aimeé Zambrano, emphasises the importance of official data to improve policies that affect women. The organisation's data collection and monitoring of femicides across the country has become a fundamental tool for understanding femicides across the country. "If figures are not presented, we do not know how the survey of public policies is carried out, and there is no transparency in the evaluation to know the efficiency of these policies," she said. "There is no emergency plan, which leads to the vulnerability of women, especially those at risk of extreme violence."

### Cyberactivism for Justice

When Maigualida Sifontes was murdered, Medina felt hopeful that her mother's murderer would be caught. After months of waiting, she realised that the legal process was going to take longer: "I felt alone and confused. I wanted to use my experience to help others". She participated in a workshop on cyberfeminism and had the idea to use a hashtag to visualise the irregularities in

legal procedures in Venezuela. Two hashtags were used, #JusticiaParaTodasLasMujeres<sup>7</sup>, and a hashtag for a specific victim, in Medina's case, #JusticiaParaMai-gualidaSifontes. The idea behind these hashtags was to make a public archive of the voices of family members and collateral victims of femicide. "Our main goal was always to achieve efficiency in making this information public. Our second goal was to get people talking about their stories and their loved ones," Medina explained. However, soon the hashtag spread and stopped being a hashtag that only catalogued femicide cases in Venezuela. People started using it to denounce sexual violence, gender-based abuse, harassment, and other types of violence.

After her first attempt with this social media campaign in 2018, Medina heard of a protest in front of the District Attorney's Office that called for justice for the murder of Mayell Hernández, a 24-year-old dancer murdered by her partner. Medina recalled this as a painful experience that sparked her need to help. A year later, Medina met activist and deputy Manuela Bolívar and they both started connecting with family members of femicide victims. Today, their collective is made up of 25 families. "This is our biggest achievement: building a strong community willing to make femicide cases visible." The movement has sparked the conversation about femicides and the government's negligence on social media, and has generated more than 10,000 tweets.

The collective is experience-based and most members are not trained in victim support, but they have experience in dealing with legal proceedings for femicides in Venezuela. "Experience is very valuable for us, but it makes our activism very hard. Every new femicide in Venezuela deeply affects me, and even though I love helping out, it takes a huge emotional toll on me," Medina explained. "However, it is important for us to promote inclusive activism in our collective. Some organisations treat survivors as passive individuals that cannot take care of their own cases. And we also see this in our collective: some family members are so deeply hurt and traumatised that it is hard for them to be completely hands-on with their cases. However, we see the advance of our legal process as a means toward healing." #JusticiaParaTodasLasMujeres's main service is companionship focused on legal and psychological perspectives, but Medina highlights the power of social media to fight against legal irregularities in Venezuela.

## Building Safe Spaces for Women at Risk

"The state does not protect me, only my friends take care of me" has become a common slogan in feminist protests in Venezuela, where the general feeling of insecurity, due to violence and impunity, is more present in women and gender-diverse individuals. In a context of humanitarian emergency, economic, social, and political crisis, the state's negligence and the lack of representation of women's rights in the political agenda (from the government, the ruling party, and the opposition) have left women at a bigger risk. As a result, feminist organisations, activists, and individuals have mobilised to provide information and support for those affected.

**"The government's negligence has encountered important resistance at the hands of individuals and organisational structures, which have sparked movements focused on one thing: building safe spaces for Venezuelan women at risk."**

Tinta Violeta<sup>8</sup> is one the most successful feminist collectives, providing shelters and safehouses to survivors of gender-based violence. Active as a collective since 2014, Tinta Violeta started their Mayell Hernández<sup>9</sup> volunteer programme<sup>10</sup> in 2019 as a training on accompanying strategies to support victims and survivors of gender-based violence. So far, they have organised four workshops that have trained more than 30 volunteers to accompany victims of domestic violence, who work in their 24-hour free support line. These volunteers were found in community conversations that encouraged women from impoverished communities to learn more about gender-based violence: "We talk about these issues in sports centres, bakeries, basketball courts, hair salons. We usually find people who claim that talking about these issues is not important, but more often than not, we also find women who talk to us about their stories of violence. This is the key for prevention: information is a compelling tool for empowerment and building strong communities," said Yoseglis Cabrera, one of the trained volunteers at the programme. Currently, Tinta Violeta only manages one transit home in Caracas, with a capacity of six women. "We are completely aware that one single space

7 Track the hashtags social media movement at: [https://twitter.com/search?q=%23JusticiaParaTodasLasMujeres&src=typed\\_query](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23JusticiaParaTodasLasMujeres&src=typed_query)

8 Read more at: <https://entintavioleta.com.ve/>

9 Named after a femicide victim in 2018.

10 More at: <https://entintavioleta.com.ve/voluntariado-acompanamiento-amoroso/>

does not meet the needs of a 30 million population. This is why the state must take over this role. However, our territorial network has grown so much that we are now capable of offering legal and psychological support for women in every state of the country,” Cabrera explained.

In an attempt to provide services that the government has refused to, the work of feminist organisations and activist has been fundamental.

The government’s negligence has encountered important resistance at the hands of individuals and organisational structures, which have sparked movements focused on one thing: building safe spaces for Venezuelan women at risk. Four organisations have had a huge impact through the monitoring, and documentation of femicides, and the creation of support networks: Utopix, CEPAZ, #JusticiaParaTodasLasMujeres, and Tinta Violeta. So far, these organisations are alone in addressing the bleak realities of women in Venezuela.



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Thank you to Ketsy Medina, Alexandra Hidalgo, Sara Fernandez, Yoseglis Cabrera, Magaly Vasquez, and Aimee Zambrano for sharing their time and knowledge for the production of this article.

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## Imprint

PUBLISHED BY: Ured Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e. V.  
u Bosni i Hercegovini, Global Unit for Feminism and  
Gender Democracy  
Gajev trg 2, 71000 Sarajevo

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EDITOR: Merima Šišić

DESIGN: Aleksandra Nina Knežević

PLACE OF PUBLICATION: [www.boell.de/en](http://www.boell.de/en)

RELEASE DATE: December 2022

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