IN IT TOGETHER

FEMINIST RESILIENCE TOOLKIT

Introduction

Over the past decades, the Heinrich Böll Foundation (hbs) and its offices worldwide — including the Global Unit for Feminism and Gender Democracy — have worked to advance gender equality, democracy, and human rights. Through publications, campaigns, and collaborative projects, we have partnered with civil society organizations across the globe. Guided by feminist principles and a network of over 35 Gender Focal Points (GFPs), the idea to co-create this toolkit first emerged in 2024 as a response to recent geopolitical shifts and the rise of authoritarianism.

Feminists and human rights defenders — whether working for large organizations or fighting for social change within grassroots movements — often navigate complex roles as employees, funding recipients, and activists. In doing so, they frequently face limitations imposed by local governments and global political affairs. To address these challenges, this toolkit was designed as a collaborative project and a lasting, adaptive resource. Grounded in feminism and human rights, it is built upon practical, locally shaped experiences, partner feedback, and lessons learned from diverse contexts.

The goal of this toolkit is to equip feminist and human rights actors — both within and outside of institutions — with the knowledge and tools to apply feminist principles, foster understanding, advance decolonial approaches, and build systems of care. It aims to strengthen collective action for gender justice, inclusion, and LGBTIQ+ rights worldwide.

The resource includes nine regional case studies that map the diverse landscapes in which feminists operate. While regional contexts differ, the patterns of pressure, resistance, and resilience are universal. The toolkit is organized around three critical areas: mental and physical wellbeing, digital safety and security, and feminist leadership and funding.

How to Use This Toolkit

Each chapter includes practical exercises and tools for teams. Throughout these pages, you will find examples and quotes from colleagues and partners around the globe, some of whom have been anonymized. We acknowledge that these examples are subjective and context-specific; they are intended to inspire rather than serve as generalized roadmaps.

This toolkit is flexible; it can be read cover-to-cover or used to select specific exercises for team meetings, planning sessions, or collective care retreats. Please note that some exercises require time for preparation or debriefing, as they involve personal or team-sensitive reflections. We encourage team leaders and members alike to approach all sessions with empathy, active listening, and feminist solidarity.

Above all, the Feminist Resilience Toolkit serves not just as a guide but as a reminder that feminist work must remain rooted in care, solidarity, intersectionality, and justice — regardless of whether it takes place within an international organization, a grassroots NGO, or a local community movement.

Not Just Another Toolkit: Tools for Feminist Action, Care, and Resistance

For years, we spoke of fascism and authoritarianism as rising forces. Today, for many of us, they are no longer just intensifying threats but have become our daily reality. They are in our own backyards — established in our governments, parliaments, institutions, and everyday lives.

The institutional allies that once supported feminist work are in crisis. Shrinking civic spaces, institutional closures, de-funding initiatives, governmental bans, and rising financial demands — driven by climate disasters, wars, and ongoing genocide — have seriously weakened feminist infrastructures. Fundamental human rights are under direct attack: the right to live and speak freely; the right to land, water, and resources; and, alongside sexual and reproductive health and rights, the right to bodily autonomy and freedom from violence in all its forms. At the same time, the unequal distribution of wealth and the exploitation of human and natural resources continue to deepen social injustice and global power asymmetries.

Throughout the past decade, we have analyzed anti-rights actors: their narratives, tactics, alliances, and funding sources. Much of the feminist response has been reactive and defensive — and, consequently, exhausting. This moment demands a shift from constant counteracting toward strategic organization and proactive resistance. This is a marathon, not a sprint.

As a German political foundation engaged in feminist work across nearly 35 countries on five continents, we recognize our responsibility in these circumstances. We must do more than name these realities; we must call out injustice, offer concrete alternatives, and practice solidarity. As Loretta Ross reminds us, we must "call in" by joining and strengthening movements committed to justice and freedom for all. We are obliged to shape narratives and offer practical tools that future generations can challenge and adapt as needed.

Feminists working across all sectors — governmental and non-governmental, grassroots and institutional, policy and advocacy — are navigating pressures that have reached an unbearable peak. In this moment, we need tools that are practical, accessible, and experience-based: tools that help feminists resist, adapt, and sustain their work for an unpredictable future shaped by imperialism, supremacism, capitalism, and militarization. This toolkit responds to those needs, helping activists protect the wellbeing of themselves and their communities while finding new, alternative ways forward.

This publication has been co-created by nine Gender Focal Points working within the hbs and directly with partners in nine countries: **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, India, Kenya, South Africa, South Korea, Tunisia**, and **Turkey**. The concept and process were led by the Global Unit for Feminism and Gender Democracy, coordinated and conceptualized by Naida Kučukalić. Additional expertise was provided by three outstanding feminists: **Lejla Huremović** (Bosnia and Herzegovina) on mental and physical wellbeing; **Azza Nubi** (Sudan/USA) on feminist digital safety and security; and **Nino Ugrekhelidze** (Georgia) on feminist leadership and funding.

The history of feminist and social justice movements teaches us that transformative change does not happen overnight. We know that achieving social transformation may take generations before governments fully commit to gender justice and democratic governance. For this

reason, we intend for this toolkit to be a living document: a simple tool for ongoing reflection, evaluation, and strategic adaptation of feminist work, power structures, and structural/individual wellbeing in the years to come.

Acknowledgments

THE MIND MATTERS:
MENTAL WELLBEING
AT THE FINISH LINE.

Reclaiming "Resilience" Amidst Repression in SWANA

By Mahassen Segni, Heinrich Böll Foundation's Tunis Office

Across Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA), feminist and queer activists face intensified repression, violence, and structural neglect. A convergence of political authoritarianism, anti-gender rhetoric, economic collapse, and populism threatens both progressive movements and the physical and emotional survival of those leading them. International discourses often frame "resilience" as admirable persistence, yet many activists resist this romanticization of suffering.

In **Tunisia**, a country once celebrated for post-revolutionary progress in gender rights, civil society now faces a dramatic reversal. Feminist and queer activists have become targets of a conservative backlash, fueled by state institutions, media, and religious actors. LGBTIQ+ organizations such as Shams have been vilified in the press, harassed in courts, subjected to state surveillance, and ultimately criminalized.

In **Egypt**, authorities exploit broad "morality" and "public decency" laws to target LGBTIQ+ individuals. Officials use social media platforms and dating apps to entrap, arrest, and abuse individuals, often exposing them publicly. **Lebanon** illustrates a different but no less dire context; the country's economic collapse has decimated public services. In this vacuum, queer and feminist collectives like Helem have stepped in to provide essential but unsustainable aid in the form of food, medicine, and emotional support. In **Morocco**, vague public decency laws justify police crackdowns on queer gatherings, criminalizing that community despite sustained feminist advocacy.

In **Sudan**, the 2023 repressive turn forced many feminist and queer organizers underground. Yet rather than withdrawing, they have adapted. With the streets under military control and civil society brutally suppressed, collectives turned to encrypted digital platforms to continue political education. By running sessions on bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, and digital security, they have reached youth and community leaders across class and regional divides. These sessions became spaces of solidarity, healing, and continuity. Even as arrests and surveillance intensified, the intergenerational nature of this work has persisted.

Shrinking civic space across SWANA pushes feminist and queer movements underground, increasing risks to security and sustainability while also fueling burnout, trauma, and emotional fatigue. Under such conditions, "resilience" is no longer neutral – it becomes a burden and a demand for survival under relentless pressure. Activists are clear: the goal is not merely to endure injustice, but to dismantle the systems that perpetuate it.

The insistence on using the word "resilience" in international frameworks often reflects donor priorities rather than the lived realities of activists. For many, it is an alien term that disguises exhaustion as strength, making survival appear voluntary rather than imposed. "Resilience" must be redefined as a refusal to disappear, emerging not from stoic endurance, but from a strategic, collective resistance rooted in care.

Existing Strategies: What Works and What Doesn't in Feminist and Queer Resistance

Across SWANA, the strategies employed by feminist and queer movements reflect not only creativity but also a deep adaptation to risk. In contexts where visibility can endanger lives, organizing often requires a delicate balance between asserting presence and avoiding persecution. While some approaches have helped movements thrive or survive, others have revealed painful limitations, especially when external frameworks or international attention overlook local context or fail to provide real protection.

Yet for every successful strategy, there are approaches that have exposed activists to harm or inadvertently reinforced harmful dynamics. Chief among these is the pursuit of international visibility without sufficient protection. While global recognition can amplify local voices and secure temporary funding, it can also attract targeted repression. Many activists including prominent figures such as Badr Baabou, the founder of the Tunisian LGBTIQ+ organization Damj, have faced online harassment, defamation, physical violence, and other forms of intimidation following international recognition. In authoritarian states, external support is often weaponized as proof of "foreign agendas," fueling nationalist and anti-gender backlash.

Feminist movements in the region continue to innovate under pressure, but they are also increasingly clear-eyed about what does not work. "Resilience" when stripped of context, becomes a hollow celebration of suffering. What is needed instead are strategies rooted in the local and lived realities, and oriented toward transformation rather than mere endurance. As movements evolve, so too must the tactics: aiming not to adapt to oppression, but to outlast and dismantle it.

In Tunisia, for example, queer and feminist activists have embedded their advocacy within broader social movements, such as labor justice and anti-police violence campaigns. This integration has not only lowered their visibility in hostile media narratives, but also strengthened alliances and intersectional solidarity with other marginalized groups.

Safe house networks have also quietly flourished. In countries like Lebanon and Tunisia, where activists face eviction, family violence, or state persecution, networks of trusted homes serve as short-term sanctuaries. These spaces, often coordinated discreetly by feminist organizations or informal collectives, are not only shelters but sites of reorganization and healing. Trauma support and collective healing circles have emerged as another critical tool, especially among queer communities in Jordan, Palestine, and Tunisia. Many of these circles are adapted to local linguistic and cultural norms. For instance, rather than relying on Western psychological jargon, they use poetry, storytelling, and oral histories to process trauma in ways that resonate with regional traditions.

Media and storytelling such as feminist zines, WhatsApp audio bulletins, and dialect-based podcasts have emerged as grassroots responses to mainstream media erasure. These alternative media forms circulate practical information from protest safety tips to mental health strategies alongside political commentary and cultural critique. The power of these tools lies not only in their utility, but a shared refusal to disappear. They operate outside the spectacle of donor reports and government partnerships, often sustained by unpaid labor, love, and the urgency of survival. They remind us that "resilience" is not a corporate buzzword; it is a strategy of the marginalized, one that reclaims agency in a world designed to deny it.

Despite escalating repression, economic collapse, and structural violence, feminist and queer movements in SWANA have redefined what it means to survive. Survival here is never passive. It is a deeply political act, shaped by care, creativity, and collective resistance. "Resilience" carries political meaning only when defined and practiced by movements themselves; it is not a celebration of suffering, but a conscious, collective act of resistance insisting on dignity and transformation.

Rethinking "Resilience": Toward a Political Framework of Resistance and Liberation

Across SWANA, the feminist and queer movements, as well as societies as a whole, are collectively confronting a critical question: What does it mean to be "resilient" in contexts of relentless crisis, oppression, and erasure? While international discourse often praises women and marginalized communities for their "resilience," this framing is increasingly rejected by those on the front lines.

In the face of deepening authoritarianism, military occupation, economic collapse, and social violence, activists argue that the concept of "resilience" has been stripped of its political potency and repurposed to justify endurance, rather than demand change.

The problem lies in how "resilience" has been framed, especially by international donors, humanitarian agencies, and development frameworks, as the capacity to endure suffering. It becomes an individual trait, a badge of honor worn by women surviving domestic violence, queer people evading state persecution, or communities adapting to displacement and scarcity. However, in this framing, "resilience" becomes a synonym for abandonment. It celebrates coping while leaving the structures that cause harm intact. It romanticizes endurance instead of fueling outrage. As many feminists in the region now insist: "We are tired of being resilient, we want to be free."

In Tunisia, Lebanon, Egypt, and beyond, feminists have witnessed how "resilience" discourse has been weaponized. Authoritarian regimes applaud women, especially mothers "holding the family together" during crisis, all while dismantling public services and repressing dissent. Donor agencies offer microgrants for "resilient women entrepreneurs" in conflict zones, yet impose bureaucratic restrictions that stifle local organizing. International gender initiatives portray SWANA women as brave survivors who must be supported through self-care, without engaging the root causes of trauma: militarism, patriarchy, and neoliberal austerity. These frameworks depoliticize the struggle, reducing resistance to individual wellness and ignoring the need for systemic transformation.

"Resilience" must not be conflated with compliance. As activists from Sudan's women-led revolution and Morocco's Hirak Rif protest movement have demonstrated, true strength lies not in silently enduring but in collectively confronting injustice. Their work offers a different definition of "resilience," grounded in resistance, solidarity, and intersectional activism.

This critique is not new, but it has become increasingly urgent. Reclaiming "resilience" requires disentangling it from its colonial and neoliberal legacies, and anchoring it firmly in the context of political struggle. It is not about glorifying the capacity to endure violence, but about honoring the courage to resist it.

Emotional strength, in this light, is not measured by how much harm one can withstand, but by the determination to challenge and transform the systems that produce that harm. In the face of rising anti-gender movements, feminist and queer organizing must not be reduced to narratives of mere survival. These movements are not only resilient, they are visionary, strategic, and deeply committed to imagining and building a radically just and different future.

THE MIND MATTERS: WELLBEING AT THE FINISH LINE

In a world where social movements must constantly respond to overlapping crises – economic, political, environmental, and emotional – mental health has become a matter of survival. This is not merely an individual issue but a profoundly political one: it concerns how we live, work, support one another, and sustain our collective struggles.

The following chapter explores the intersections of feminist and human rights work, exhaustion, and collective care. It is grounded in the belief that there can be no social transformation without the wellbeing of those who make it possible. For those of us working in feminism, LGBTIQ+ rights, and human rights in general, the demands of public visibility and fieldwork can be both empowering and exhausting. While these spaces allow us to connect with one another, influence meaningful change, and build solidarity, they also expose us to chronic stress, burnout, and the pressures that come from public engagement and the weight of constant responsibility.

This chapter also outlines strategies for protecting our mental and emotional health alongside our physical safety. It begins by defining key concepts, such as the distinction between mental and physical wellbeing, and then moves into self-protection and the support networks we rely on, encouraging ongoing reflection about what each of us needs. To sustain our work – whether as employees of large international organizations, members of local civil society groups, or activists in grassroots movements – we must invest in resilience, care, and supportive networks that allow us to be proactive and transformative rather than merely reactive.

The Question We Forget to Ask: "How Are You, Really?"

Before discussing mental health as a concept, we must recognize it as a shared human condition – not just as a personal struggle, but also as a reflection of the world we inhabit. Emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and the feeling of being "on edge" are not individual failures; they are collective responses to the systemic instability, violence, and uncertainty that shape our lives. Across borders and experiences, people carry similar burdens of fear, hope, and the effort to make sense of it all. We often struggle in similar ways, yet we do not always get to hear how others cope. The following are reflections from people around us.

> *I've been feeling exhausted for quite some time, and I can't seem to find that spark of light. Thirty years after the genocide here, everything only seems to be getting worse. Each day carries the sense of standing on the edge of conflict again – it's draining and overwhelming.* – Alma, Bosnia and Herzegovina

I would describe it in terms of weather: a sunny day with some rain, but then a rainbow appears. With so much happening in the world, I try to hold on to optimism. I think hope is one of the most important things we can have right now – it helps us keep going. – Mase, South Africa

To navigate these challenges, it helps to distinguish between different types of safety and well-being:

Mental health refers to our internal capacity to manage everyday life. It includes how we handle stress, connect with others, and how we make decisions. Think of it as an umbrella encompassing our overall emotional and cognitive wellbeing.

Psychological safety is about feeling emotionally and existentially secure in a space – knowing we won't be attacked, ignored, or punished for being vulnerable, visible or just being ourselves. It is closely linked to **physical safety**, which refers to protection from physical harm or danger, secure surroundings, and access to resources that reduce the risk of injury or violence.

The Courage to Be Visible

Visibility is both power and exposure. To be seen – as an activist, feminist, journalist, or simply as someone who speaks up in public – is to stand in a space where care and danger coexist. Every act of visibility requires balancing courage with caution, and authenticity with protection. How does it feel? What does it cost? And what does safety mean in contexts where visibility can be both liberating and risky?

For example, speaking at a protest, appearing in the media on sensitive political issues, or being affiliated with a particular organization or movement can create feelings of vulnerability. Visibility can place us on the front line, yet we are ultimately responsible for our own safety. Awareness of these risks helps us prepare for and respond to potential consequences more effectively.

While the state has a duty to protect its citizens, we often operate in contexts where laws are not enforced or where state actors are the source of the threat. In these environments, we cannot rely entirely on external organizers or the police. While we must continue to demand that institutions fulfill their duty to protect, ultimately we must also weave our own safety nets – grounded in community, shared resources, and mutual care.

I have been involved in the Pride March in my country and have helped organize it for the past six years. Although we have had really good cooperation with the police, I still feel I can't trust them. As a result, I have to carefully consider the measures needed to protect my physical and mental wellbeing.

– Lejla, Bosnia and Herzegovina

EXERCISE 1

The Emotional Cost of Being Seen

Objective: To explore how public visibility, professional affiliation, and safety concerns affect your mental and emotional wellbeing in both your work and everyday life.

Instructions: Take a few minutes to reflect on the questions below. You may write your responses privately, discuss them in pairs, or share them within a small group.

1. Personal reflection

- How does your visibility in public spaces affect your sense of safety?
- How does this feeling of safety manifest in your daily life, at work, or during protests?

2. Contextual reflection

- Looking at your local or national context, how do social, political, or cultural factors influence your sense of safety and stress levels?
- If you work in media, grassroots movements, international NGOs, or any public-facing role, how does your professional visibility affect your wellbeing?

3. Action and strategy

- How do you currently manage feelings of stress, exposure, or vulnerability?
- What specific strategies could help you feel safer and more resilient in public or professional spaces?

TIP! Be honest with yourself. Acknowledging vulnerability is the first step toward building practical strategies for protection and resilience.

We work across South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, and experiences differ greatly. In South Africa, there is some guaranteed safety when doing public advocacy, with minimal risk of censorship or repression. In contrast, Zimbabwean partners operate under a highly authoritarian regime, facing threats like imprisonment or state abduction. This takes a heavy toll on mental health. Activists in restrictive contexts must be very careful and calculated about every action, which means they live under constant psychological pressure. – Mase, South Africa

When we are self-aware, we can make thoughtful decisions – such as choosing not to attend a protest if being there might inadvertently cause more harm than good. Recognizing our position allows us to protect ourselves while still contributing meaningfully to the cause.

Ideas for Self-Protection

We must be creative in finding ways to protect ourselves. When we are "on the streets," we need to carefully consider both the mental and physical aspects of safety.

- **During protests:** If you are concerned about physical harm or being identified, take proactive steps. Wear a mask[1] if necessary, avoid cameras, and change your direction if you notice you are being recorded. While we are responsible for our own safety, we must also accept that we cannot control every variable and should be prepared for potential consequences.
- **Online presence:** Define what visibility means for you. While it is sometimes important to use your real name, you may also want to maintain several profiles across different platforms for added safety and flexibility, depending on your goals.
- **Media engagement:** If you are active in the media (giving speeches, writing statements, or representing an organization), remember that visibility is exhausting. It is okay to step back to protect your energy. If possible, seek supervision or therapy to help navigate exposure, hate speech, or doxing.

Above all, simplicity is key. Practice intentional deep breathing, take walks, embrace silence, and switch off your phone – these small acts support your mental and physical health.

EXERCISE 2 — Emotional Exposure and Psychological Safety

Objective: To identify the specific moments, dynamics, and triggers that impact your psychological safety and to explore strategies for reclaiming balance.

Instructions: Take a few minutes to reflect on your experiences in your work, activism, and daily life. Consider the following questions:

1. Moments of psychological unsafety

- In what specific settings or moments do you feel unsafe in your work or activism?
- Are there situations where you hesitate to speak up or take action because of a perceived risk?

2. Emotional exposure

- Have you ever felt that you shared something too personal that others might misunderstand, criticize, or use against you?
- Has anyone ever spoken on your behalf without your consent?
- What does "carrying too heavy a load" look like for you (e.g., an overwhelming workload, emotional labor, or the weight of other responsibilities)?

3. Colleague and peer dynamics

- How would you describe your relationship with your colleagues or fellow activists?
- Do you feel understood and supported, and can you share your fears and challenges openly within your team or community?

Reflection task: Write down your thoughts and feelings. Identify any recurring patterns or triggers that make you feel unsafe or emotionally drained. Think of small steps or strategies that could help you feel more secure, balanced, and empowered in these spaces.

In some NGOs or movements, leaders sometimes speak publicly "on behalf of everyone." When this happens without consulting the group, it can feel emotionally exposing and even manipulative. Communication is crucial.
— Activist from Bosnia and Herzegovina

This is a common issue that directly impacts the safety and mental wellbeing of team members. The solution lies at the intersection of **leadership, communication, and inclusion**. Strong feminist leadership ensures that diverse voices are included and that people are not "spoken for" without their consent. Simple practices, such as checking in with the team before a public speech, can prevent unwanted exposure. This approach also helps reduce emotional burdens, build collective trust, and improve resilience.

Strategies for enhancing emotional safety within teams and groups:

- **Create spaces for connection:** Establish regular reflective meetings or informal check-ins that move beyond task-oriented agendas to focus on how team members are actually doing.
- **Provide professional support:** Access to therapy or coaching allows individuals and teams to process systemic stress and burnout in a healthy, structured environment.
- **Cultivate circles of support:** Building peer support networks fosters a sense of community and belonging, which strengthens mutual care and long-term understanding.

Good Practices from the Heinrich Böll Foundation

A **Gender Focal Point meeting** is a gathering of designated employees from different regions who are responsible for promoting and integrating feminist and gender-democratic principles within their specific teams, departments, or programs.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation has established this global network – spanning 35 offices across five continents – to **strengthen the organization's gender work**. During these meetings, which are usually held online, colleagues share updates and best practices, discuss challenges and solutions, and provide mutual guidance. Most importantly, these gatherings ensure a unified feminist perspective on diverse geopolitical issues.

These important gatherings can be impactful for several reasons:

- **Empowerment and ownership:** Thematic meetings remind members that they are active contributors to the organization's global feminist agenda. This sense of validation strengthens professional commitment and emotional wellbeing.
- **A truly safe space:** These meetings provide a confidential environment where members can raise concerns and exchange sensitive ideas or feelings without fear of judgment.

In our office, we have a strong support network and good relationships with each other and our partners. In times of crisis and war, this became very tangible – our partners reached out to us, and we had open dialogues to navigate the situation together. Collectively, we provided mutual support, building community, trust, and emotional safety. – Mase, South Africa

Given that we spend at least eight hours a day at work, the desire to share thoughts and feelings with colleagues is entirely natural. Beyond existing structures like team or thematic meetings, offices can further support their staff by:

- **Engaging external professionals:** Hiring a coach, therapist, or moderator to facilitate group sessions provides a neutral space to discuss not only work-related tasks but also broader political, social, and personal concerns.
- **Offering individual coaching:** Recognizing that not everyone feels comfortable sharing in a group setting, providing access to one-on-one coaching – where budgets and funding guidelines allow – ensures that every individual's wellbeing is prioritized.

Circles of Support

When institutional support is unavailable, we often rely on personal strategies and trusted networks to protect our wellbeing. Behind every public act of resistance is a web of trust that makes the work possible. When formal safety nets fail – or simply do not exist – these circles of solidarity become the core of our **resilience**.

If institutional structures are missing due to a lack of funding or resources, we must release our expectations of the organization and prioritize our own care. This raises a vital question: What steps can you take to **protect and support yourself**?

EXERCISE 3 — Mapping Your Circles of Support

Objective: To help you recognize your "support network" – the specific people you turn to when you feel overwhelmed or unsafe.

Step 1: The Wider Circle

On a sheet of paper, draw a large circle and divide it in half. On one side, write the names of your personal supporters; on the other, your professional ones.

- **Personal:** Friends, family, loved ones.
- **Professional:** Colleagues, mentors, therapists, lawyers, members of collectives.

There is always someone who can stand with us – we simply need to recognize and engage them. These people make up your **support network**.

Step 2: The Front Row

Identify your "front row" – the people in your wider circle who are closest to you. These are the individuals you can call in the middle of the night and with whom you feel safe sharing everything. Write their names in a smaller circle at the very center of your drawing.

Step 3: The Empty Zones

Think about who is missing. Is there someone you wish you could lean on but haven't reached out to yet? Do you ask for help as often as you give it? Consider colleagues, mentors, or directors who could become part of your support network. Write these names or roles in an outermost "empty zone" circle – these are the people you could potentially bring closer.

Step 4: Reflection

Look at your map. Where do you stand? Are there people you could invite into your inner circle? Are you leaning on those who are already there for you?

My support network is very small – just two people. There's no one in the outer circle. It's partly because I've closed myself off. The hard part is that asking for help feels like admitting I'm not okay – like I've failed to manage on my own.
– Activist from Bosnia and Herzegovina

Remember, having even two people you can truly rely on is a significant foundation. The challenge then becomes: How can I rebuild connections without feeling too vulnerable? There is no simple answer, but the first step is the willingness to open up. This exercise is simply your starting point.

Sometimes comrades become friends, and friends become comrades. Reflect on what "community" means to you: Does it require deep personal ties, or can it exist among like-minded people united by a common cause?

When I'm overwhelmed by political issues, I go to my "community." They aren't necessarily close personal friends, but they are people with whom I can be vulnerable and share my anxieties, knowing they will understand. Community also requires a commitment to care work. In moments of crisis, we often forget that caring for one another is part of what sustains us.
– Mase, South Africa

I call my best friend if I have personal problems. But when I had to testify against a politician after other queer activists and myself were attacked, I called my friends at the Feminist Anti-Militaristic Collective and said, "I need you there." We don't hang out every day, but I know they will always be there for me, as I am for them.
– Lejla, Bosnia and Herzegovina

BALANCING GUILT, EXHAUSTION, AND THE NEED TO RECHARGE

Human rights work, by its very nature, demands presence – emotional, physical, and intellectual. Yet, this constant engagement with injustice often clashes with our fundamental need to rest, laugh, or find joy. Many activists carry an underlying sense of guilt for experiencing happiness while the world suffers. This emotional tension – the pull between commitment and care, grief, and joy – is one of the central paradoxes of sustaining long-term change.

A friend of mine, a political activist, constantly posts on Instagram: slides of war and global injustice interspersed with slides of queer joy and happiness. People judged him for sharing funny reels alongside the horrors happening worldwide. His response was: "But that is life! In a single day, all these things happen – both the good and the bad." Even so, I sometimes feel that same guilt when I experience joy.
– Activist from Bosnia and Herzegovina

While the **feeling of guilt** is common, it is ultimately counterproductive. Being aware that others may not have the privilege of safety or happiness is a human response, but internalizing that as guilt only creates additional psychological pressure. Dealing with traumatic topics and navigating a life filled with systemic challenges takes a significant toll. If you do not allow yourself to recharge, you eventually become less effective for the communities and causes that need you most. To sustain the marathon of activism, you must find and defend a space for joy – no matter how small.

Icebreaker Exercise: Energy and Motivation Check-In

Objective: To foster connection, encourage vulnerability, and gauge the group's current levels of energy and motivation. This exercise is ideal for team meetings or large gatherings when you want to "read the room."

Instructions:

1. Take a quiet moment to check in with yourself.
2. On a scale of **1 to 10**, rate your **energy and motivation** — both for your **work/activism** and for your **life in general**:
   - 1 = Completely drained or unmotivated.
   - 10 = Fully energized and motivated.
3. Briefly share your number(s) with the group. If you feel comfortable, mention what influenced your current state – e.g., "Yesterday I was a 3, but after getting some rest, today I feel like a 7."
4. After each person shares, the facilitator may invite a brief reflection with questions like: "That's a significant shift – what helped you move up the scale?" or "What do you need today to maintain that energy?"

DEBRIEF: Notice the variety of responses and energy levels within the group. Acknowledge that fluctuations are a normal part of the human experience. Awareness of these shifts is the first step toward both individual self-care and collective resilience.

TOO TIRED TO KEEP GOING, TOO COMMITTED TO STOP-RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS OF BURNOUT

There comes a point when even the most passionate among us reach the limits of endurance. Burnout rarely appears overnight; it builds quietly in the moments when duty replaces desire and the urgency of change overshadows the fundamental need for rest. Recognizing these signs before they lead to collapse is an act of courage and a vital form of self-care.

> *I'm so exhausted sometimes. There are days when I simply cannot get out of bed, yet I push myself because I feel I have to. In those moments, it's hard to tell whether it's just temporary tiredness or the onset of burnout.*
>
> – Activist from Bosnia and Herzegovina

Recognizing **early warning signs is the foundation of burnout prevention**. It is essential to take action before reaching the "red zone." In the constant rush of work and life, burnout often goes unnoticed until it is too late. Once burnout has set it, we are forced to focus our energy on **recovery** and support strategies, **supporting others and ourselves.**

Sustainable activism means learning to notice the early signals of exhaustion and creating personal systems of care before a crisis hits. Prevention is not a luxury; it is a necessity for those working in emotionally demanding, high-pressure environments. This section invites you to pause and design a simple, personalized prevention plan to help you stay grounded, connected, and resilient.

EXERCISE 4 — Creating Your Personal Prevention Plan

Objective: To reflect on the habits and boundaries that help you stay well – because prevention begins with awareness.

Instructions: Using a notebook, laptop, or quiet reflection, answer the following questions to map out your current state and future needs.

1: Reflect on your current practices

- What are the things you currently do for yourself? Be honest – this is about your current reality, not an idealized version of it.

Examples: Do you take regular walks? Do you conduct "digital detoxes"? Do you eat lunch away from your screen? Do you attend regular therapy or meditation sessions?

2: Identify your rituals or routines

- Do you have daily or weekly rituals that protect your wellbeing? These small acts are not luxuries; they are essential prevention tools.

Examples: Do you avoid your phone for the first 30 minutes after waking? Do you use breathing techniques before sleep? Do you practice yoga, prayer, stretching, journaling, or reading?

3: Explore your boundaries

- Boundaries are the gatekeepers of your energy. What do your boundaries look like? Do you respect them?

Examples: Do you stop answering work-related messages after a certain hour (e.g., 6 p.m.)? Do you feel comfortable saying "no" to requests or social events when you are exhausted – without feeling the need to apologize? Remember, guilt is not a component of self-care, even if it is culturally embedded in our behavior.

4: Know your support network

Who can remind you to slow down when you are unable to do so yourself? Reflect on the people you trust and feel comfortable turning to – a friend, partner, colleague, therapist, or mentor. At times, we need others to help us recognize when we are pushing ourselves too hard. You may find that you are more receptive to certain people in specific situations – for example, hearing a difficult truth more easily from a friend than a partner, or from a colleague rather than a therapist. Those closest to us may not always notice the signs of burnout, especially when they share much of our daily environment. For this reason, it is important to intentionally broaden your support network.

Now, Summarize Your Plan!

Take your reflections and turn them into a concise summary:

- What am I already doing well?
- What do I need to add or change?
- What one small step can I take today?

> *It's so simple, and we all believe we know how to take care of ourselves, yet I see how easily I lose my work-life balance. Boundaries are the hardest part – we all define them differently. In feminist spaces, we try to build a culture of listening and care, but boundaries can be misused; there is always a risk in how they're interpreted.*
>
> – hbs employee

Creating Your Personal Recovery Map

Objective: To help you recognize the early warning signs of burnout and design a personalized response plan – your emotional "first-aid kit" for difficult times.

Instructions: Find a quiet space and answer the following questions honestly. This is a private reflection tool to help you prepare for moments when you need to pause and prioritize your own care.

1. How do I recognize that something is wrong?

List your personal warning signs across emotional, physical, and behavioral categories.

Examples: I can't focus; I get irritated easily; I withdraw from friends; I experience insomnia; I feel "empty" or cynical.

2. What helps me immediately? (My "first aid")

Identify quick, grounding actions that help you stabilize when you feel overwhelmed.

Examples: Going for walk; switching off my phone; drinking a glass of water; sitting in silence; taking deep, intentional breaths.

3. Who can I contact? (My support network)

Write down the specific names or roles of people you trust to listen without judgment.

Examples: A close friend; a specific team lead; a mentor; a therapist; or a trusted member of your activist collective.

4. What brings me back to myself? (Recovery activities)

List the activities that truly recharge you and reconnect you to your sense of calm and joy.

Examples: Cooking a favorite meal; yoga; tending to plants; reflective journaling; dancing; reading for pleasure; prayer; or spending time in nature.

5. My safe boundaries

Define the non-negotiable boundaries you need to maintain your energy and wellbeing.

Examples: No work emails after 6 p.m.; one full screen-free day per week; or committing to saying "no" to extra projects without feeling guilty.

TIP! Keep your recovery map somewhere visible – tucked in your journal, pinned above your desk, or saved as a note on your phone – so you can revisit it the moment you feel yourself becoming stretched too thin.

THE COMPLEXITY OF BOUNDARIES

Boundaries are among the most misunderstood aspects of feminist practice. They are often viewed as barriers that separate us, when in truth they are the very things that make trust and care possible. While we are experts at holding space for others, we often forget to hold space for ourselves. This section explores the delicate tension between personal responsibility and collective care.

It is easy to discuss boundaries but much harder to live them. In feminist circles, we strive to build workplaces based on empathy and listening. However, this can create a paradox: if one person needs rest, someone else may have to carry a heavier load. The challenge is to build a culture where "I need a break" is respected, yet collective accountability remains intact.

Boundaries in Feminist Teams and Groups

Objective: To reflect collectively on how we understand and practice boundaries within our team, and to find a balance between personal responsibility and collective care.

Step 1: Individual Reflection (10 minutes)

Ask everyone to find a quiet space to write down their thoughts on the following questions:

- What do boundaries mean to me in the context of collective or feminist work?
- Where is the line between personal responsibility and our collective care?
- How can my leaders or colleagues better recognize when I have reached my limits?

Be honest with yourselves – there are no right or wrong answers, only your lived experience.

Step 2: Group Sharing (15 minutes)

Divide into pairs or small groups of 3–4 people (or discuss as a full team if the group is small). Ensure every voice has space to be heard. Share key reflections, focusing on similarities and differences in how boundaries are understood:

- What surprised you in your own reflection? Where do you see potential tension or disagreement within the team? What examples come to mind from your everyday work?
- What do we specifically need from one another to ensure our boundaries are respected?
- What is one small change we could implement today to make our team culture more supportive and balanced?

Boundaries are not barriers—they are bridges. They connect the care we have for ourselves with the care we have for each other. In a feminist workspace, true leadership does not mean avoiding tension; it means staying present with it, listening deeply, and building enough trust so that care and responsibility can coexist.

TIP! When setting boundaries, focus on your own actions rather than telling others what not to do. For example, instead of saying, "Don't send me emails after 6 p.m.," try, "I do not check or respond to emails after 6 p.m." This keeps the boundary clear, respectful, and entirely within your control.

FROM BURNOUT TO BELONGING: THE POWER OF SOLIDARITY

No matter how strong we are, we cannot sustain this work alone. Solidarity is the collective dimension of resilience; it transforms burnout into belonging. It is the fundamental shift from "me" to "we," and it is what allows feminist and activist movements to survive constant pressure and recurring crises.

EXERCISE 7 — When a Team Member Needs to Step Away

Situation: In the midst of organizing a major event, a core team member with significant responsibilities approaches the group and says: "I know I'm responsible for an important part of this work, but I've reached my limit. I'm feeling overwhelmed, and I need to step back immediately." The rest of the team is also under immense pressure, and the timing could not be more critical.

Reflection Questions:

- How should a team respond when a member needs to step away at a pivotal moment?
- What does **feminist leadership** look like in this instance – how do we balance empathy for the individual with the need to maintain collective momentum?
- In non-hierarchical structures, where everyone is both a comrade and a co-organizer, how do we negotiate boundaries without creating resentment or burnout for those who remain?

Purpose and Learning Objective:

This scenario raises complex questions about care, accountability, and collective responsibility. There is no single "right" solution; however, when someone steps back at a critical moment, it is not a failure. Rather, it is an opportunity to rethink how the team balances individual wellbeing with collective goals. (Inspiration for coping strategies can be found in the Annex.)

In countries where politics deeply shape everyday life, it's hard to separate the personal from the professional. Even when you want to talk about something light, conversations inevitably return to political or social issues. It's exhausting, but what truly helps is the feeling of solidarity – being with others who understand and share similar experiences. That solidarity, those circles of support, mean a great deal.

– Yonca, Turkey

Sometimes I feel overwhelmed, as though I've reached my limit. At work, we have weekly meetings where we share and reflect. It feels safe because we are close as colleagues, but I still hesitate – I don't want to burden others.
– hbs employee

Sometimes we wonder: does it truly help to share the burden, or are we stuck in a vicious circle of repetitive venting? **Solidarity carries different meanings depending on the context.**

When someone carries part of your burden at work, the struggle becomes manageable. This is where solidarity meets comradeship – having someone who either understands your struggle or is there to help you navigate it. For others solidarity may mean simpler, more tangible things – for example, joining you at a demonstration, even if they aren't very political themselves.

Solidarity involves actively sharing burdens, offering support, and being present – whether through emotional understanding, practical help, or joint action. Simply empathizing or complaining without action is often not enough; concrete support helps people navigate challenges, reduces stress, and strengthens bonds of friendship and comradeship.

Solidarity also takes practical forms. When your institution, organization, or movement is targeted, a simple email from project partners saying they stand with you can be deeply supportive. If you are arrested at a demonstration, knowing that friends and colleagues are calling a lawyer, caring for your pets, or handling other practical matters makes a real difference. These concrete acts of support are powerful and meaningful.
– Activist from Bosnia and Herzegovina

THE ART OF MUTUAL CARE

Mutual care is the bridge between solidarity and sustainability. It asks us not only to care for others but to do so in ways that don't exhaust us or reproduce hierarchies of care. This section looks at what care means in practice, in everyday organizational and activist contexts: how we listen, how we check in, and how we respond when a peer reaches their limit.

I've realized that most of my conversations with partners are focused on administrative matters –contracts, budgets, and payments—rather than genuine check-ins. I rarely take the time to simply ask, "How are you?"
– hbs employee

EXERCISE 8 — The Need to Be Heard

Situation: During a routine online meeting within a large organization, a colleague – visibly exhausted by the humanitarian crisis in the region where she works – breaks into tears.

Reflection Questions:

- How might you recognize that a colleague is struggling at a meeting before a crisis point is reached?
- What immediate, empathetic actions could you take to support them in that moment?
- How should leadership be informed, and what follow-up steps are appropriate to ensure long-term care?
- Does your organization have existing mechanisms or structures to support staff experiencing acute stress or burnout?

Practical Support for Vulnerable Moments

When colleagues or comrades are emotionally exhausted, these small but significant actions can help:

- **Reach out:** Send a private message or make a brief call to show you are present.
- **Listen and validate:** Provide a space for them to share without judgment or the need to "fix" it; sometimes, just being heard is the fix.
- **Respect boundaries:** Offer help with specific small tasks or logistics, but let them choose what kind of support actually helps.
- **Create peer circles:** Establish safe, informal spaces for staff to connect outside of task-oriented meetings.
- **Celebrate small joys:** Deliberately notice and share moments that bring meaning or lightness to the day.

In the face of serious or urgent crises, organizations must have **clear procedures and protocols** in place. For example, what steps should be taken if a staff member or activist needs to leave the country or take an immediate leave of absence? Are such measures currently in place? If someone steps away, who assumes their responsibilities? How are such situations assessed and managed? While these protocols are more common in large international organizations, small NGOs and grassroots movements should also have simplified, written procedures that all members are aware of.

With so much happening in the world, we often ask ourselves: what does meaningful action look like? Even when we're not in immediate danger, constant exposure to suffering, conflict, and injustice affects us deeply. Many of us also carry intergenerational trauma – rooted in families, communities, or countries shaped by war and genocide. This history lives on in our bodies and continues to influence our present realities. The challenge is how to hold all of this – the trauma, the grief, and the sense of responsibility – without becoming completely overwhelmed.
– Mase, South Africa

Self-care and mutual support cannot be reduced to a simple checklist because everyone's needs and context are different. For instance, giving a person in burnout a month off might seem helpful, but if their work is their primary source of meaning and community, removing it could do more harm than good. Support must be tailored to the individual.

Many of our queer and feminist partners, like the trans and intersex communities we collaborate with, have developed excellent support systems. We have much to learn from their models of care.
– Naida, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Caring for our mental and emotional wellbeing is a form of resistance. In a world that thrives on the relentless consumption of time, people, and resources, the act of slowing down and resting and reflecting is radical. When we protect our wellbeing, we defend our collective struggle. Let us pause, breathe, and reconnect, ensuring that no one has to go through burnout alone.

REGIONAL CASE STUDIES

ALBANIA

We Were There: Feminists in the Making of the Albanian State

By **Edona Bylykbashi**, *Heinrich Böll Foundation's Tirana Office*

Albania gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, marking the beginning of its state-building process and the first wave of grassroots Albanian feminist action. These early groups were self-organized and democratic, though they often maintained a clear internal hierarchy. Funded through membership fees and international support, some organizations operated much like syndicates; they engaged directly with marginalized local communities while representing the Albanian feminist struggle at international conferences, thereby strengthening the movement and creating a tangible public impact.

Feminist magazines emerged during this period as platforms for critical exchange among both intellectuals, both female and male, who addressed women's issues and the necessity of equal integration into society. Initially, women's education and emancipation were justified almost exclusively through the "mother" figure, valued for her role in nurturing the future of the nation. Over time, however, the discourse expanded beyond this restrictive frame to address structural issues such as unpaid housework, economic autonomy, and the exploitation of sex workers. Through the formation of women's organizations, literacy campaigns, and advocacy networks before World War II, the feminist movement in Albania developed a strong institutional base. These structures shaped a generation of politically engaged women who went on to assume key roles in the anti-fascist struggle during the war.

The Communist Regime's Appropriation of the Movement

There is a common misconception that Albanian women first gained their rights under the communist regime. In reality, the regime appropriated the legacy of anti-fascist revolutionaries, portraying women's emancipation as a triumph of the state rather than an achievement of the movement. Feminist magazines, once platforms for critical thought, were instrumentalized as tools for state propaganda.

While the regime granted legal and constitutional rights ensuring formal equality – including the right to work, education, and political participation – and integrated women into all sectors of the workforce, it simultaneously preserved social and economic structures that reinforced unequal gender roles. In stark contrast to its public promotion of gender equality, the regime criminalized and condemned homosexuality and non-normative identities as moral deviations from the "socialist ideal," framing them as "Western, bourgeois decadence." The queer community consequently faced severe repression and invisibility during the communist era. The legal use of the term "pederast," which means "a man who engages in sexual activity with a boy significantly younger, typically under the age of puberty," was often intentionally used to blur the line between adult same-sex relationships and child abuse. While female homosexuality was not explicitly mentioned in the penal code, it was effectively repressed through rigid social and political control.

Post-Communist Shifts: New Struggles, Old Shadows

The collapse of communism in 1991 brought massive political, economic, and social turmoil. Civil society began to take shape, but public trust in collective movements remained low, as people associated activism with state propaganda. The first attempts to secure basic human rights for the queer community began in 1994 with the founding of the first underground LGBTIQ+ organization, "Gay Albania." With crucial support from the international community, the Albanian government officially decriminalized homosexuality in 1995.

Early post-socialist feminism was cautious, operating primarily through NGOs rather than mass movements. These groups focused on addressing domestic violence, political participation, and the trafficking of women and girls — a major issue following the 1997 civil unrest. Participation in international feminist networks encouraged local women activists, and gender mainstreaming eventually became a prerequisite for international aid and EU integration. This shift laid the groundwork for a new, vibrant wave of feminist and queer civic organizations that emerged in 2010.

The Demonization of Civil Society

Today, more than 80% of postgraduates in Albania are women, and they officially make up 60% of the active workforce (excluding unregistered employment). However, women hold only one out of every three managerial positions. Despite these numbers, feminism is often viewed with distrust by Albanian women. This skepticism resonates with Silvia Federici's critique of the woman under neoliberalism: the "successful career woman" who escapes her own oppression not through solidarity, but by adopting the power of the dominator to oppress other women.

While contemporary feminist and queer activists work tirelessly despite numerous challenges, and Albania's EU integration process serves as a catalyst for human rights legislation, progress for the LGBTIQ+ community remains largely superficial. Social stigma against LGBTIQ+ people persists, and discrimination is reported even within public institutions. Furthermore, the practices of international donors — which often disregard local contexts — frequently reduce activism to bureaucratic procedures. This lack of structural support undermines civil society, leading to the "projectization" of work, fragmentation among local actors, donor dependency, and burnout.

Moral panic over the feminist and queer communities was manufactured, portraying their work as foreign-imposed, morally corrupt, and harmful to national identity. In this modern-day "witch hunt," political actors have remained silent regarding a series of ongoing polycrises: unaffordable housing, failing education and healthcare systems, an alarming rise in femicide, and a spike in female suicides driven by digital violence. Amidst these growing anti-gender narratives, an urgent question emerges: How can Albania's feminist and queer communities stay grounded and continue their work under such immense pressure?

Structural and patriarchal propaganda during the communist regime erased the names and contributions of many Albanian feminists who played vital roles in the state-building process and beyond. Their work was not only ignored, but often co-opted to serve authoritarian state

narratives. Yet thanks to institutional traces and written exchanges, we can still revisit their practices and learn from them, highlighting the importance of knowledge production and archiving in preserving political and social memory. Unfortunately, queer histories in Albania are nearly absent. As Saidiya Hartman notes in her essay "Venus in Two Acts,"[2] the concept of "archival silence" illustrates how stories are sometimes purposefully destroyed or never uttered, leaving an irrevocable gap in collective history.

The past three decades have seen a significant shrinkage of public and community spaces in Tirana. Market-driven urban development has prioritized capitalism over collective needs, replacing informal gathering spots with privatized spaces. However, new forms of (queer) feminist work are emerging. Initiatives like Radical Sense in Tirana provide "alternative education and collective ways of being." These groups survive not through permanent physical locations, but by cultivating networks of care — sharing rooms, infrastructure, and financial resources. Feminist and queer collectives now collaborate closely on protests and direct action, designing banners together, sharing equipment, and coordinating safety strategies during demonstrations. Rather than depending solely on the state, they sustain themselves through mutual aid, small-scale member contributions, and strategic joint applications to European institutions and transnational feminist funds. In this environment, community becomes both the method and the political horizon: safety is produced through trust, and resilience is maintained through deep, ongoing collaboration.

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2 Hartman's work on the "violence of the archive" exposes how the lives of Black women, especially the enslaved, were systematically erased or distorted in historical records — a reality that mirrors the current lack of recorded queer experiences in Albania.

Patriarchy, Politics, and Resistance: The Anti-Gender Landscape of the Balkans

*By **Alma Sukić**, Heinrich Böll Foundation's Sarajevo Office (Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia)*

Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia are Western Balkan nations born from the dissolution of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia – a multi-ethnic state formed in 1945 during World War II as a unified front against fascism. That union lasted until 1991, when the region was engulfed by a series of wars that pitted former neighbors against one another. In the decades since, both countries have been shaped by persistent nationalism, the denial of war crimes, and precarious socio-economic conditions. Due to systemic resistance, only slow progress has been made in advancing women's rights, feminism, and LGBTIQ+ rights.

Following World War II, socialist Yugoslavia sought to build a politically and economically just society. This transformation fundamentally altered the status of women, as the government introduced formal legal changes to ensure gender equality. These reforms included the right to work, equal pay, social welfare, maternity leave, health, and education. Access to abortion was legalized in the 1950s and eventually enshrined as a constitutional right in 1974.[3] But when Yugoslavia collapsed, the situation for women changed noticeably: women became targets of ethnic and sexual violence, with rape used systematically as a weapon of war. They were also displaced and severely weakened economically by the loss of male family members. In addition, former Yugoslav countries saw a resurgence of religion, traditional values, and nationalism, which shifted gender norms back toward restrictive roles – positioning women primarily as mothers and "preservers of culture" – and gradually pushing them to the margins of public and political life.

Women's rights in **Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)** have improved in recent decades, driven largely by the government's pursuit of EU membership. However, significant gaps remain in the areas of justice, law enforcement, political participation, economic empowerment, and combating of gender-based violence. Although gender equality is constitutionally protected and BiH is a signatory to both CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention, legal implementation remains inconsistent across the country's administrative entities. The anti-gender movement has gained significant momentum in Europe, entering BiH primarily via neighboring Croatia and Serbia. Consequently, the LGBTIQ+ community continues to face multiple forms of discrimination, often within their own families. Since 2018, the Federation of BiH has been working toward a legal framework for same-sex partnerships – a concept that was considered unthinkable in the Balkans only a few years ago – though progress remains uneven across the region. Furthermore, gender-based violence is on the rise and frequently goes unpunished. This issue is exacerbated by a lack of media ethics; news outlets often fail to identify "femicide" for what it is, instead using sensationalist or romanticized language, such as describing a murder as the "tragic end of a love story."

3   The 1946 Constitution of Yugoslavia further solidified these rights, stating: "Women have equal rights with men in all areas of state, economic, and socio-political life. For equal work, women have the right to equal pay with men and have the right to special protection in their employment relationship. The state protects the interests of mothers and children in particular by establishing maternity clinics, children's homes, and daycare centers, and by granting women the right to paid leave before and after the birth of a child."

Overall, the independent countries of the Western Balkans face similar challenges. While they have established gender equality laws and guidelines on paper, enforcement remains inadequate. Another commonality is the deeply rooted patriarchal mindset that continues to restrict women's rights across all sectors of society. This structural neglect results in a severe lack of services for the most marginalized groups – specifically Roma women; women in rural areas; and lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women.

Anti-gender rhetoric in the region is often coordinated and supported by external actors. These include pro-Russian organizations promoting "traditional values" (often through Serbia) and far-right EU networks. Notable examples include the Polish organization Ordo Iuris, which recently expanded into Croatia, and the Spanish-based online platform CitizenGO. In this narrative, gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights are framed as "Western cultural imperialism." This movement manifests in public demonstrations; for instance, in the Croatian capital of Zagreb, groups of men gather every Saturday to pray for the return of men as "spiritual authorities" within the family and against reproductive rights. This brand of extreme Catholic activism is increasingly expected to spread to areas in Herzegovina with a predominantly Catholic population. Meanwhile, the anti-gender movement in Serbia has become very strong, led by the Serbian Orthodox Church, right-wing populist parties like Dveri, conservative NGOs, and online influencers. These actors utilize media platforms to spread misinformation regarding feminism, gender studies, and the LGBTIQ+ community.

Anti-gender activism has had a direct legislative impact within the Republika Srpska (RS) entity of BiH. Following a violent attack on **LGBTIQ+ activists** in Banja Luka in March 2023, conservative actors successfully pushed for amendments to gender identity laws, influencing criminal legislation and hate crime rulings. Furthermore, a coalition of 21 right-wing organizations successfully blocked a proposed draft law defining domestic violence and femicide, dismissing it in an open letter as "Western gender ideology."

Gender-based violence remains widespread in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although legal protections exist, such violence is frequently dismissed as a "family matter." There are few women's shelters, and those that do operate are chronically underfunded. Women's employment rates are relatively low – especially in rural areas of BiH – leaving many economically dependent on partners who may be abusive. Due to the country's multitiered political system, victim protection varies significantly by region. In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), domestic violence is classified as a criminal offense, yet perpetrators often receive only suspended sentences. In Republika Srpska (RS), domestic violence can be prosecuted as either a crime or a misdemeanor. Many cases with clear felonious elements are downgraded to misdemeanors by prosecutors, resulting in lighter penalties.

Activists are currently calling for the formal recognition of femicide as a specific form of gender-based violence and the abolition of legal loopholes that allow fines to replace prison sentences for human trafficking, sexual offenses, domestic violence, and similar crimes. The urgency of these reforms was highlighted by a recent, horrific case in which a man broadcast the murder of his wife and child live on social media before committing suicide. The incident revealed a disturbing cultural rift: while many were outraged, a significant number of young men used social media to cheer on the perpetrator. While authorities have since identified and punished those who incited violence online, the case underscores the critical need for a systemic overhaul of how gender-based violence is handled in the digital and judicial spheres.

The main actors in the anti-gender movement in BiH include religious institutions, nationalist parties, and conservative NGOs. Smear campaigns and digital threats against feminists and human rights defenders have become commonplace, as populist politicians frequently weaponize anti-gender rhetoric to secure votes. Consequently, gender equality initiatives are highly politicized; activists are often labeled as "foreign agents" or threats to traditional values. A landmark case in 2019 involved a former member of the Sarajevo Canton Assembly who had openly called on social media for LGBTIQ+ people to be "isolated in order protect society and children." This individual was later convicted of discrimination, marking the first final verdict regarding hate speech against the LGBTIQ+ community in BiH. Despite such legal precedents, younger politicians from major parties like the Bosniak Party for Democratic Action (SDA) continue to frame LGBTIQ+ identities as "deviant," often citing religious texts to appeal to the more than 90% of BiH citizens who identify as religious.

LGBTIQ+ individuals in BiH face systemic violence, stigmatization, and the pathologization of their identities within both schools and families. While "conversion therapy" exists, official data remains scarce. The issue has been discussed in North Macedonia, but only recently gained significant public visibility in BiH after being addressed at the Kvirhana Festival in 2022 and 2025. Public attacks on LGBTIQ+ people have increased, as has widespread hate speech on the internet. Transgender individuals, in particular, remain largely invisible in the media and face acute stigmatization, ridicule, and violence. They also encounter significant barriers to medical care – particularly hormone therapy – and are often subjected to humiliating treatment by officials due to discrepancies between their identification documents and their appearance.

The Center for Investigative Journalism (CIN) has published a monitoring report on the topic of hate speech, which shows that women who are politically or otherwise active in society are very often the target of hate speech. These attacks frequently bypass policy debate to focus on a woman's morals, appearance, or professional capabilities. This hostile environment serves a specific function: it actively discourages women from entering or remaining in the political sphere.

For years, anti-gender campaigns were not met with strategic counter-responses. But feminist and queer movements are now evolving, and proactive strategies are emerging through the forging of new alliances. In October of this year, for example, the Heinrich Böll Foundation will once again convene representatives from academia and civil society to work collectively toward solutions.

Despite entrenched patriarchy, persistent anti-gender activism, and inconsistent law enforcement, feminist and queer movements in BiH and North Macedonia are gradually building resilience. By investing in grassroots organizing and increasing public visibility – even in the face of significant international funding cuts – civil society is working to protect past gains while opening space for future progress. Although the pace of change is gradual, the movement toward a more inclusive and equitable society remains resolute.

THE DIGITAL SHIELD:
STAYING SAFE
AND SOUND ONLINE

THE DIGITAL SHIELD:
STAYING SAFE AND SOUND ONLINE

Introduction: Why Digital Safety Matters

The digital space has become both a site of immense opportunity and of profound vulnerability for those of us working to advance gender justice, feminism, LGBTIQ+ rights, and human rights. On one hand, it allows us to amplify marginalized voices, build solidarity across borders, and challenge dominant narratives. On the other, it exposes us to coordinated attacks, disinformation, and digital violence that mirror the very hierarchies we seek to dismantle.

These threats are not isolated; they intersect deeply with structural inequalities tied to race, class, sexuality, and geopolitical location. Historically marginalized communities often face the sharpest edge of digital harm, experiencing disproportionate levels of surveillance, hate speech, and exclusion from essential digital infrastructures.

For our work to be sustainable, we must build collective resilience. This requires investing in feminist digital security – ensuring our response to digital threats is not merely reactive, but transformative.

Reframing Digital Security – What Does This Mean?

To truly understand digital security and safety, we must think outside of the box and look beyond narrow, technical definitions of "digitalization" – all while taking a feminist, rights-based approach.

EXERCISE

1

What Is Digital Safety and Security?

Let's begin with a quick warm-up exercise. When you hear the phrase "digital safety and security," what is the first word or idea that comes to mind? Don't overthink it – just go with your immediate association.

Instructions:

- Write your word or phrase on a sticky note. (If meeting online, type it in the chat or add it to a shared digital board.)
- Then have someone gather these responses and create a collective word cloud representing the shared ideas.

This exercise allows us to identify recurring themes and see where our perspectives overlap or differ.

Common associations often include: the live-streamed life, information overload, fear of missing out (FOMO), hypervigilance, online surveillance, hate comments.

The first thing that comes to mind is that our lives are always "open." Even if I step away for a few days, there's a constant fear that something from my digital profiles could be misused, so I keep coming back to check. You can go on holiday, but you never really escape your digital presence. It's more than just peer pressure; it can make or break your personal and professional life. Over time, we start treating this hypervisibility as the norm.

— Mirza, India

Millions experience these same situations and feelings, but the burden is even heavier for human rights defenders, feminists, and activists. For these individuals, personal and professional social media use often overlap. While some create multiple accounts to separate their private lives from their work, managing these distinct identities adds a different kind of mental pressure.

I feel like I have to be online. Instagram keeps me updated on global events, but the constant news cycle is overwhelming. I once left the platform for two weeks just because I couldn't handle the influx of news anymore; I felt so relieved. Still, because feminist work is deeply political, we have to know what is going on in the world, right? I struggle between needing these platforms for my work and feeling exhausted and overwhelmed by them.

– Naida, Bosnia and Herzegovina

When discussing online safety, people usually focus on **social media** and online visibility. However, true digital security also includes **email communications** and the use of **smartphones**. The aim is not to force ourselves offline, but to create an awareness of the **digital rights**, strategies, and tools that help reduce risk and enhance overall safety.

Reframing digital security means moving beyond technical "fixes." It requires understanding safety in digital spaces as a collective, political effort – one that shapes security practices to align with feminist values, lived realities, and the specific constraints faced by activists, particularly in the Global South.

There is no way to protect ourselves 100%. But we can try. We can try to reach a place where we all feel that we're safe enough to continue doing our work and living our daily lives.

– Azza Nubi, queer feminist activist and digital rights advocate

Digital Security as an Animal

Instructions:

● Take a minute or two to reflect and imagine: If digital security were an animal, what would it be and why? What characteristics would this animal possess? Is it alert, agile, camouflaged, protective or perhaps something else entirely?

● Focus on one area of digital security that feels most important to you right now.

● Relate that specific concern to your chosen animal: How does this animal defend itself against threats? Which one of its special features or capabilities does it use to stay safe?

Use this visualization exercise to better understand your current "relationship" with digital safety. By identifying the strengths of your animal, you can pinpoint specific areas where you might want to strengthen your own digital practices.

Digital Rights - Feminist Principles of the Internet

@HumanRights?

When we talk about human rights, we often think of civil liberties, economic stability, housing, safety, or freedom from discrimination. Ask the group to name a few human rights that come to mind.

Now, consider the digital space. If the digital realm is where we spend our time, share information, and communicate, shouldn't it have rules as well? When you hear the term "digital rights," what comes to mind? Can you name at least one digital right?

For me, digital rights connect to traditional concepts like privacy, freedom of expression, and access to information. But freedom of expression can feel risky, as it often opens the door to digital threats.

– Luisa, Colombia

Digital rights also mean inclusion – equality in participation and access to digital platforms. Access is often taken for granted, because many people lack the devices or connectivity to participate, leaving them excluded. This exclusion is a significant barrier; it's almost like missing a limb. Inclusion is actually central to digital rights.

– Mirza, India

In short, digital rights are human rights in the digital world. They refer to the protection of human dignity and freedoms within the online space that increasingly shape our social, political, and personal lives.

Digital rights are continuously evolving to meet emerging needs, yet they remain part of universal human rights. They are embedded in many UN mechanisms – such as the work of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression – and are integrated into legal frameworks, international treaties, and national laws.

A key example is the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), a law designed to protect personal data and privacy. Its reach is global: it applies not only to EU organizations but to any entity in the world that collects or uses data from people living in the EU. The GDPR gives individuals greater control over their digital footprint, including the right to know how their data is used; the right to access or erase personal information; and the right to restrict or object to data processing. The law also prescribes significant penalties for organizations that fail to comply. Today, the GDPR serves as a global benchmark; many countries have adopted similar regulations, such as Brazil (LGPD), South Africa (POPIA), India (DPDPA), South Korea (PIPA), among many others.

Digital rights include:

● **Access to information and technology:** The right to access the internet regardless of geographical location, socio-economic status, or (dis)ability. This recognizes connectivity as a fundamental human right that enables participation in the digital world and guarantees the ability to find, receive, and share information.

● **Freedom of expression[4] and freedom from censorship:** The right to express opinions, ideas, and information online without fear of state-sponsored censorship, punitive measures, or arbitrary restrictions.

● **Data protection and privacy:** The right to maintain control over personal data. This includes protection from unauthorized data collection and the legal right to access, modify, or delete one's personal information.

● **Freedom from surveillance:** The right to be protected against intrusive monitoring and mass data collection by both government entities and private corporations.

● **Digital security and safety:** The right to a secure digital environment. This involves institutional protection from cyberbullying, online harassment, and exposure to harmful or predatory content.

● **Right to privacy:** The freedom from the misuse or unauthorized sharing of personal information. This includes the protection of personal data and the right to confidential, secure private communications.

● **Digital equity:** The right to equal access to technology, digital literacy, and information for all marginalized or underserved communities.

● **Right to anonymity:** The right to communicate anonymously and use encryption tools. These are essential for secure online transactions and the protection of whistleblowers and journalists, particularly in regions where encrypted communication is restricted or prohibited.

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4 Freedom of expression is protected by Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Feminist Principles of the Internet (FPI)

Human rights activists and feminist groups have been instrumental in linking digital rights to broader social justice issues, including bodily autonomy, safety, and inclusion. This advocacy reflects the ongoing evolution of the digital landscape and has led to the establishment of the Feminist Principles of the Internet (FPI).

Developed in 2014 through a collective process, the FPI framework integrates feminist values into digital rights. It was shaped by experts working across women's rights, sexual rights, online violence, queer issues, and internet freedoms.

The FPI consists of 17 principles organized into five key clusters:

- **Access:** Ensuring universal access to the internet, information, and technology.
- **Movements and public participation:** Influencing internet governance and political engagement.
- **Economy:** Promoting open-source platforms and alternative forms of economic power.
- **Expression:** Protecting freedom of expression while addressing harmful content.
- **Agency:** Focusing on consent, privacy, and the rights of children and youth.

Ultimately, the feminist influence on these principles is not just about technology — it is about shifting power. It serves as a vital reminder that everyone has the right to use and shape technology as a safe space for exchanging and learning, movement-building, democratic participation, and feminist resistance against patriarchy, surveillance, exploitation, and capitalism.

One major threat is the use of fear, which leads not only to censorship but also to self-censorship due to surveillance. This fear is amplified when a government targets even a single organization; it sends a chilling message to others and creates an atmosphere of control. — India.

Who Is Responsible for Protecting Our Digital Rights?

Unlike traditional human rights — which are anchored in established international frameworks like the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and binding treaties — digital rights do not yet have a single, centralized "keeper." Instead, responsibility is fragmented across several key layers:

- **States and national governments:** Governments are tasked with protecting citizens' digital rights — such as privacy, freedom of expression, and access — through constitutions, laws, and regulations. However, they can also be the primary violators of these rights through state-sponsored censorship, surveillance, or digital exclusion.
- **International bodies:** The UN Human Rights Council has affirmed that human rights apply online just as they do offline. While reports from the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression and resolutions by the UN General Assembly provide essential frameworks, these are often guiding rather than binding. A notable exception is the EU's GDPR, which established enforceable common standards across a major geopolitical region.

- **Private companies:** Large tech companies (such as Google, Meta, X, and TikTok) act as de facto gatekeepers. Their internal policies and algorithms control privacy settings, content moderation, and access rules for billions of users worldwide, often with little public oversight.
- **Civil society and advocacy networks:** Digital rights defenders are the front-line watchdogs of the internet. This includes vital advocacy groups and networks such as the African Digital Rights Network (ADRN), Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), Resilience Technologies, Digital Rights Watch, European Digital Rights (EDRi), LooM SWANA, among many others.

Threats in the Digital Space

While digital platforms are essential tools for activists, movements, and organizations to mobilize, reframe narratives, and connect with global audiences, their use carries significant risks. These vulnerabilities vary depending on the geographic region, the socio-political climate, and the specific issues being addressed.

In India, we work extensively in borderland regions. Because of constant geopolitical tensions, there is heightened surveillance. Much of our advocacy work is conducted under this intense pressure.

– Mirza, India

Digital threats often specifically target human rights defenders. While some malicious actors such as hackers are motivated by financial gain, others are politically motivated — specifically funded to disrupt and sabotage activist work as part of an anti-rights agenda. This creates a specialized layer of vulnerability that we must account for in our security protocols.

In Colombia, anti-rights groups and right-wing actors weaponize our data to criminalize and track social movement leaders. Using specialized software, they monitor us constantly. Because our information is often left exposed, we are incredibly vulnerable, yet we rarely know exactly who is watching.

– Luisa, Colombia

The ultimate goal of these digital attacks is to instill fear and paralyze the work of feminists and human rights defenders.

Online harassment is uniquely dangerous compared to physical-world interactions. In-person harassment requires a level of "courage" and carries immediate legal or social risks for the perpetrator. In contrast, digital spaces enable the rapid, effortless, and often consequence-free spread of threats and violence. Women, queer individuals, and human rights defenders are frequent targets, especially when operating under their real names.

While harassment is not a new phenomenon, the digital environment allows (specifically **sexual**) **harassment** to escalate quickly, exposing victims to additional risks. Through likes, comments, shares, and public affiliations, personal details – including workplace locations, home addresses, and travel patterns – can be easily traced. This reality necessitates a multi-layered approach to digital protection.

COMMON TYPES OF DIGITAL THREATS

High Frequency / Daily Risks

1. **Online harassment and cyberbullying:** Targeted abuse and threats on social media and other online platforms. These attacks are often gendered, racist, or transphobic and are a constant risk for feminists, LGBTQ+ activists, and human rights defenders.

Prevention and mitigation:
- Block and document harassing accounts (take screenshots; save URLs, timestamps, and any available metadata).
- Educate staff, teams, and partner organizations on safe communication practices and digital security basics.
- Consider using anonymous or pseudonymous profiles when necessary – particularly for activists operating in high-risk contexts; note that pseudonymity does not guarantee safety.

2. **Phishing and social engineering:** Fraudulent emails or messages designed to trick users into revealing sensitive personal data, credentials, or passwords. Common targets include queer, feminist, and human rights organizations, as well as reproductive health and rights clinics. Phishing remains one of the most frequent entry points for cyberattacks, affecting both individuals and organizations.

Prevention and mitigation:
- Always verify sender identities, email addresses, and links before clicking or responding.
- Use multi-factor authentication (MFA) wherever possible.
- Train staff and partners to recognize and report phishing attempts

3. **Weak passwords and hacking:** Unauthorized access to accounts, devices, or networks resulting from poor security practices, including reused, simple, or easily guessed passwords.

Prevention and mitigation:
- Use strong, unique passwords for every account (avoid reusing the same password).
- Enable multi-factor authentication (MFA) wherever possible.
- Monitor login history and unusual account activity.

4. **Platform manipulation, algorithmic bias and censorship (shadow banning):** Algorithms may suppress queer, feminist, or political content, effectively silencing marginalized voices. Accounts can be flagged, restricted, or hidden without clear explanation, resulting in forms of "silent" suppression that users may not immediately recognize.

Prevention and mitigation:
- Diversify platforms rather than relying solely on Meta or X; consider alternatives such as Mastodon, Matrix, or Bluesky.
- Monitor analytics, reach, and engagement for sudden or unexplained changes.
- Amplify content collectively and experiment with alternative hashtags or coded language where appropriate.
- Maintain direct communication channels (e.g., newsletters or Signal groups).
- Join coalitions advocating for greater platform transparency and algorithmic accountability.
- Archive critical content on independent websites or community-/feminist-owned servers.

MEDIUM FREQUENCY AND HIGH HARM

5. **Doxing and data breaches:** The unauthorized release of personal or sensitive data, resulting in the public exposure of private information (e.g., home addresses, medical records, or donor lists). These tactics are used to intimidate, harass, or target individuals and organizations, and frequently affect queer, feminist, human rights, and political activists.

Prevention and mitigation:
- Limit the amount of personal information and imagery shared online.
- Regularly review and adjust privacy settings on social media platforms.
- Remove unnecessary personal or sensitive data from websites, or seek professional assistance where needed.

6. **Masculinist online culture and coordinated harassment:** Organized harassment campaigns driven by misogynistic influencers or groups, often amplified by networks of trolls. These campaigns deliberately target individuals and organizations, provoking, encouraging, or inciting harmful – and sometimes unlawful – actions. Common targets include advocates for abortion rights, gender equality, and queer visibility.

Prevention and mitigation:
- Develop proactive social media strategies, including block lists and trained community moderators.
- Avoid direct engagement with trolls wherever possible.
- Establish peer-reporting networks to collectively flag and report abusive content to platforms.

7. **Image-based sexual abuse (non-consensual intimate imagery and deepfakes):** The non-consensual sharing of intimate images (sometimes referred to as "revenge porn") is a growing threat, disproportionately targeting women and LGBTIQ+ individuals. Such abuse can have severe psychological consequences and is often intended to damage reputations. AI-generated deepfake pornography further exacerbates these harms.

Prevention and mitigation:
- Apply watermarks before sharing images.
- Avoid storing sensitive images in cloud services without strong encryption.
- Document and report abusive content to platforms immediately.
- Use dedicated takedown and support services, such as StopNCII.org – pro tip!

8. **Disinformation and deep fakes:** AI-generated images, videos, or other content created to deceive audiences or damage reputations. Pornographic deepfakes are frequently used to humiliate or silence women, LGBTIQ+ activists, and human rights defenders. A significant proportion of deepfake content online is pornographic, and the vast majority depicts women. Disinformation involves the deliberate spread of false or misleading narratives to distort facts, discredit feminist movements, or target activists (e.g., smear campaigns portraying LGBTIQ+ advocates as "threats to family values").

Prevention and mitigation:
- Educate staff and partners about deepfakes and disinformation tactics.
- Verify the source and authenticity of content before sharing; cross-check with multiple reliable sources.
- Use digital literacy and verification tools to help detect manipulated or synthetic media – pro tip!

TARGETED AND HIGH RISK (LESS FREQUENT, BUT SEVERE CONSEQUENCES)

9. **Legal and policy-based threats:** Region-specific restrictive laws or policies that criminalize online speech, expression, or activism (e.g., so-called "anti-LGBTIQ+ propaganda" laws), often carrying severe penalties. In some contexts, digital evidence has been used to investigate or prosecute abortion seekers or providers.

Prevention and mitigation:
- Understand the legal and regulatory framework of the relevant region before publishing sensitive content.
- Anonymize accounts where necessary (e.g., use pseudonyms; separate activist and personal profiles).
- Use privacy-enhancing tools such as VPNs or Tor for sensitive browsing.
- Collaborate with trusted legal experts, including feminist lawyers and advocacy networks, especially when working internationally.

10. **Legal surveillance and criminalization:** Governments may monitor online activities and use digital evidence to investigate or prosecute activists. Search histories and app data can be weaponized (e.g., concerns around menstrual tracking apps and search data in post-Roe US contexts).

Prevention and mitigation:
- Avoid mainstream tracking apps that collect highly sensitive health information like menstrual cycles or hormonal levels; consider privacy-focused alternatives such as Euki or Drip.
- Clear search histories or use privacy-enhancing browsers/tools such as DuckDuckGo or Tor.
- Build cross-border solidarity and data protection strategies (e.g., partner with organizations in safer jurisdictions to host sensitive data).

11. **General surveillance:** Monitoring of communications or activities by states, companies, or other actors, which can include device monitoring, spyware, and organizational or corporate tracking. Such surveillance may enable intimidation, harassment, or the exposure of personal information (names, addresses, phone numbers). These tactics are often used to silence activists or discourage participation.

Prevention and mitigation:

- Use encrypted communication channels (email and messaging); review tools regularly as technologies evolve.
- Avoid storing sensitive data in cloud services without strong protection.
- Periodically check devices for unknown apps, tracking software, and spyware.

12. **Malware, spyware, and stalkerware:** Malicious or covert software designed to damage systems or secretly monitor user activity. Such tools are often deployed by abusive partners, hostile actors, or state-linked groups, particularly in authoritarian contexts.

Prevention and mitigation:

- Keep software and operating systems up to date; scan devices regularly (seek trusted technical support if needed).
- Install reputable antivirus/anti-malware protection.
- Avoid downloading attachments or files from unknown or unverified sources.
- Limit app permissions to what is strictly necessary (e.g., camera, microphone, location).
- Use secure, privacy-respecting browsers.

13. **Cyber-bombing and Zoom-bombing:** The deliberate disruption of online meetings through hate speech, explicit content, or threats. Such incidents frequently target webinars, trainings, and activist gatherings.

Prevention and mitigation:

- Use registration links and enable waiting rooms.
- Disable screen sharing for non-hosts.
- Share meeting links only in closed or trusted groups.
- Assign co-hosts or moderators to mute or remove intruders quickly.

14. **Data and identity theft:** The unauthorized acquisition of sensitive personal or organizational information (e.g., names, addresses, ID numbers, banking details, or login credentials), typically to commit fraud or other forms of exploitation.

Prevention and mitigation:

- Encrypt sensitive files and emails (seek trusted technical guidance if needed).
- Back up data securely and regularly.
- Share sensitive information only with verified contacts and trusted websites.

15. **Physical security threats linked to digital exposure:** Risks that arise when online information (such as location data or personal details) enables stalking, theft, or physical attacks.

Prevention and mitigation:

- Avoid sharing live location data publicly.
- Use GPS/location-sharing features selectively and only with trusted contacts.
- Separate professional and personal digital identities and devices where possible.

The rapid pace of technological change creates constant pressure to **stay informed**. Because the digital landscape is in a state of permanent evolution, there are always potential entry points for exploitation – risking the exposure of both professional and personal data. However, it is important to recognize that keeping up with every single development is impossible. Digital safety is not just about technical tools or sophisticated protective measures; it is rooted in the everyday choices we make online. A significant portion of our security depends on **individual awareness and behavior**: which cookies we accept, which untrusted pages we visit, and which suspicious documents we download.

The pressure of being constantly up to date – constantly being trained on digital safety and new potential threats – is its own form of labor. There are always loopholes that remain, and maintaining that level of vigilance is exhausting.
– Mirza, India

Online platforms frequently present users with "Privacy Policy" or "Terms of Service" checkboxes before allowing them to shop, subscribe, or download software. Because these documents are often dense and technical, most people simply click "I Agree" to proceed quickly. This is where individual agency plays a vital role. We are not always required to click "Agree" to every term; in many cases, access or subscriptions are still possible even if we opt out of non-essential data sharing. This highlights a critical dimension of digital safety: our own behavior is often our first line of defense.

Digital Safety: Essential Habits for Individual Protection

- **View photos as permanent records:** Treat every digital image as a permanent footprint. Once shared, it can be saved, forwarded, or screenshotted without your knowledge or consent.
- **Audit your privacy settings:** Keep your social media accounts private, remove unnecessary identifying information from your profiles, and proactively block unknown or suspicious contacts.
- **Manage your metadata:** Disable location and GPS metadata in your phone's camera settings before taking or sharing photos. This prevents others from extracting your exact coordinates from the image file.
- **Scrutinize the background:** Before posting, check for details that could reveal your location or identity, such as street signs, specific landmarks, tattoos, or reflective surfaces.
- **Exercise caution with "disappearing" content:** Even on apps designed for ephemeral messaging (like Signal, Snapchat, or Instagram), be aware that recipients can still capture content via screenshots or external recordings.
- **Document incidents:** If you experience threats or harassment, keep the evidence. Save messages and take screenshots; these are essential if you decide to report the abuse to platforms or authorities.
- **Build a support network:** Establish a "safety circle" of trusted family, friends, or professional support services. If you are facing blackmail or a digital attack, reach out immediately – you don't have to navigate these situations alone.

Online presence within social justice and feminist movements provides access to opportunities, increased visibility, and a transnational or regional reach that would be impossible to achieve offline.

Example: The Role of Social Media in the Arab Spring

The role of social media during the Arab Spring protests (2010–2012) was significant. While the revolution did not originate online, digital platforms were essential for mobilizing and organizing protesters. Throughout the SWANA region, then-popular platforms like Facebook played a central role in Tunisia and Egypt by facilitating the rapid spread of information.

Governments responded with varying tactics, ranging from blocking specific sites to cutting off entire internet networks. In Egypt, these shutdowns often backfired, fueling further protests rather than suppressing them. Facebook proved particularly effective among young, urban, and educated populations, helping to forge a sense of collective identity. Nevertheless, traditional tools – including cell phones, email, and physical gathering spaces – remained critical to the movement's success.

The primary tools enabling our internet use are our devices: smartphones, laptops, and tablets. We also rely on secondary hardware, such as USB drives, external hard drives, and cloud storage, to manage and protect our information.

EXERCISE 4: Protecting Our Devices

Take a few minutes to reflect individually or as a group:
- How do you currently protect your devices (phone, laptop, tablet)?
- What risks come to mind regarding how the information on your devices could be accessed or misused?
- How might online surveillance or harassment escalate into physical threats? Consider how individuals may be targeted due to their work, activism, or public visibility, particularly within your specific regional context.
- What risks might this pose for you personally, as well as for your colleagues, partners, or the communities you serve?

After reflecting, identify one concrete step you can take to strengthen your device safety or reduce your exposure to these risks. Remember, risks are not exclusively digital.

Significant risks also stem from official documents and email communications containing personal and sensitive information. Bureaucratic procedures and reporting often require high volumes of data – for example, when signing contracts, processing invoices, or registering external consultants with local tax offices. These processes sometimes require copies of passports or full names. While such documents should be stored securely, used strictly for legal purposes, and then destroyed, digital traces often remain in email history. This "data trail" poses a persistent security risk to the individuals involved.

Security Solutions

1. Secure communication and encryption: Use encrypted professional email services and secure devices whenever possible to maintain a baseline of safety. Encryption ensures that transferred data and documents remain unreadable to unauthorized users; think of it as a digital lock for which only you and your recipient hold the key.

2. Data retention and proper deletion: Be aware that downloaded files often persist on devices, and many smartphones or laptops do not have strong encryption enabled by default. Sensitive documents cannot be permanently removed by simply moving them to the "recycle bin," as data recovery software can often retrieve them. Instead, use secure deletion tools that permanently overwrite files.

3. Physical security and border crossings: Always consider the risk of device confiscation or unauthorized access, particularly when navigating checkpoints or international borders. Take proactive measures – such as hidden folders, temporary data offloading, or device lockdowns – to protect sensitive information during travel.

Solution: Use encrypted professional email services and secure devices whenever possible to maintain a baseline of safety. Encryption ensures that transferred data and documents remain unreadable to unauthorized users; think of it as a digital lock for which only you and your recipient hold the key.

A Word on Passwords

Many of us believe a password alone is enough, but it often isn't. Even the strongest passwords can be bypassed through phishing – a cybercrime where attackers pose as trusted entities (such as banks or known organizations). By sending deceptive emails, texts, or making fraudulent calls, they trick you into revealing sensitive data like login credentials or credit card numbers. They may also direct you to fake websites designed to steal your information for identity theft or financial gain.

To protect yourself and your organization, extra layers of security are essential:

- **Unique passwords:** Use a different password for every account, especially for email, social media, cloud storage, and administrative profiles.
- **Password managers:** Use a dedicated manager to store unique, complex passwords rather than reusing one simple password for everything.
- **Multi-factor authentication:** Always enable 2FA or MFA where available.
- **Vigilance:** Never click links or open attachments from unknown or untrusted sources.
- **Clear boundaries:** Never reuse work passwords for personal accounts.
- **Strict privacy:** Never share passwords via email, chat apps, or screenshots.
- **Public safety:** Always log out of accounts when using shared or public devices.

PRO TIP! For enhanced safety, many practitioners keep their **private and work emails** on separate devices. In professional settings, work laptops should be secured with robust encryption, and sensitive data should be stored on servers with strictly limited access

Two-factor authentication (2FA): This requires two different forms of verification to log in (e.g., your password plus a one-time code sent to your phone).
Multi-factor authentication (MFA): This utilizes two or more verification factors for even higher security (e.g., a password, a fingerprint, and a security token).

Making Conscious Digital Choices

Objective: To reflect on your digital priorities and critically evaluate the necessity and value of the tools you use.

Instructions:

- Imagine that for the rest of your life, you are permitted to have **only three applications** on your phone. Consider all the apps you currently use for communication, work, news, entertainment, and daily organization.
- Determine which three apps are most essential to you, and reflect on the logic behind your choices:
    - How do these apps serve your personal, professional, or social needs?
    - What trade-offs are you making by excluding other tools?
- Take two minutes to think before finalizing your list.
- Share your choices with a partner or group. Discuss how different roles and contexts (e.g., activism vs. personal life) shape people's priorities.

Purpose: This exercise is designed to help you:

- Identify your most significant **digital dependencies**.
- Prioritize the tools that are truly essential for your **life and work**.
- Foster **mindful digital habits** and encourage critical thinking about technology's role in your daily routine.

Tracking Devices and Apps

For many, especially those working in remote areas, tracking apps are essential safety tools. However, they are a double-edged sword. While these apps allow users to share their location with trusted contacts – such as family or members of the queer community – they can pose significant risks if the data is intercepted or accessed by unauthorized parties.

Many of us keep GPS tracking on our devices, and location services are often enabled without realizing it, which makes it easier for others to follow our movements. Several partners were victims of a robbery where their laptops and phones were stolen following a conference in a rural area. The most concerning part was that only conference participants supposedly knew the location, yet attackers were still able to find and target them.

– Activist from Colombia

To mitigate these risks, consider the following strategies:

- **Audit your circle:** Only share your location with individuals you fully trust and regularly review who has access to your data.
- **Use temporary sharing:** Enable location sharing temporarily rather than leaving it on permanently.
- **Leverage time-limited tools:** Use apps that allow for selective, time-limited sharing (e.g., "Share for 1 hour").
- **Conduct privacy checks:** Regularly scan your phone settings for unfamiliar or hidden tracking applications.
- **Prioritize manual check-ins:** If safety is a concern, consider a "check-in" system – sending manual updates at agreed-upon times – instead of relying on constant, live GPS tracking.

The "Locked Door" Analogy – Pro Tip (from Azza Nubi)!

Think of online safety and security as you would the physical protection of your home. One might argue: "Why bother locking my door if a determined person could break in anyway?" But imagine a house without a door at all simply because absolute security is impossible. That would be an open invitation for anyone to enter, steal, or cause harm. Instead, we install a door and we lock it. A single lock provides a baseline of safety. Adding a second, different lock makes entry even more difficult and increases your peace of mind. Installing a security camera provides extra awareness, even when you are away.

Addressing your "windows and backdoors": Each security measure is a layer of protection. However, security is only as strong as its weakest point. People often secure their front door but leave a window wide open. In the digital world, this is the equivalent of having a strong password but sharing too much personal information on social media or using that same password across every account.

Privacy as a collective responsibility: A common misconception is: "I have nothing to hide, so I don't need protection." But consider a reality check – do you really need to leave your door wide open? Digital security isn't just about safety; it's about privacy. Leaving your digital life "open" may not threaten you directly, but it can create significant risks for those connected to you – your colleagues, your partners, and your family.

Matching security to reality: Finally, always weigh the risk against the likelihood. Just as you wouldn't need a high-tech alarm system in an exceptionally safe neighborhood, you should match your digital security measures to the actual risks you face in your specific work and region.

Personal online presence can directly impact professional security. For instance, a personal social media profile expressing private opinions under a real name can easily be linked to an individual's organization. This connection creates potential risks not only for the individual but also for their team, their institution, and their broader community.

This is a two-way street: just as individuals must be mindful of their digital footprint, organizations bear a fundamental responsibility for the safety and security of their members. Visibility is often a prerequisite for impact, yet it also increases vulnerability to attack. Working in fields such as feminism, queer rights, and social justice inherently exposes us to risk, whether we belong to a small grassroots collective or a large international organization.

A common mistake is "siloing" knowledge – keeping digital safety practices restricted to a few individuals within an organization. Security is only as strong as the weakest link in the chain; if partners or peer networks do not follow similar protocols, such as using encryption or password managers, they may unintentionally jeopardize your safety. Sharing knowledge and resources is not just helpful – it is a collective defense that protects individuals, teams, and networks alike.

The ultimate goal is to find a sustainable balance: remaining visible and functional while staying secure. While some may choose to go completely offline to mitigate risk, for most activists and human rights defenders, a digital presence is essential to support others and advance their mission. The objective is not withdrawal, but rather learning how to remain safely and effectively engaged in the digital sphere.
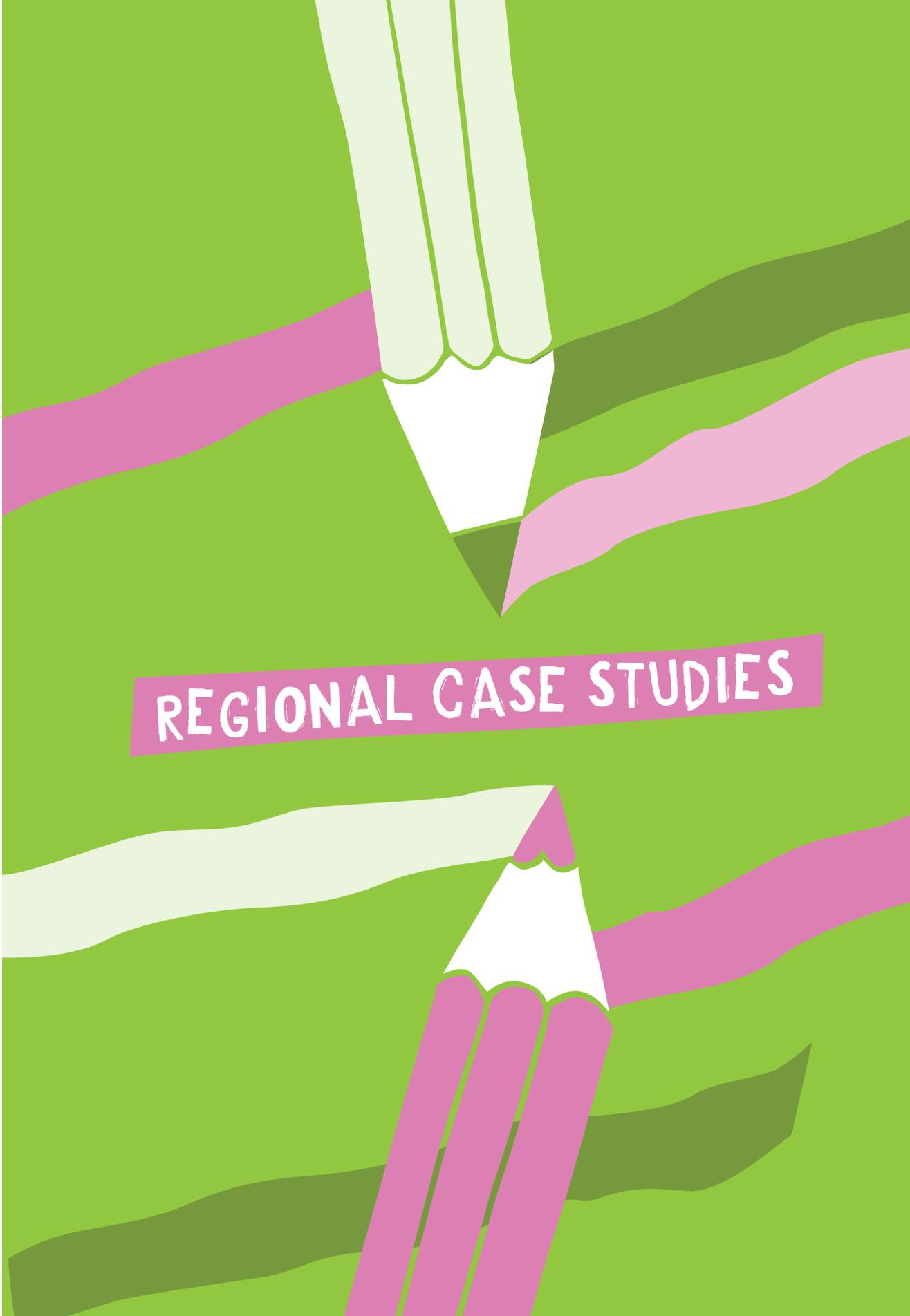
REGIONAL CASE STUDIES

TURKEY

Refusing Silence: The Many Faces of the Feminist Struggle In Turkey

By *Yonca Verdioğlu, Heinrich Böll Foundation's Istanbul Office*

Historically, the feminist movement in Turkey has demonstrated remarkable resistance and resilience against military coups, democratic crises, and the withdrawal from international conventions. It has consistently challenged bans targeting the LGBTIQ+ community, led legal battles against gender-based violence, and maintained a strong presence through street mobilization.

Emerging in the late Ottoman period, these movements developed primarily in response to the marginalization of women during the modernization process and the exclusionary nature of nation-state formation. While the feminist struggle during the late Ottoman and early Republican eras is often associated with public rights – such as citizenship and suffrage – historical records, including magazine articles and demands for divorce rights, reveal a simultaneous struggle within the private sphere. During the 1960s and 70s, women participated heavily in leftist movements; however, gender issues were largely subordinated to class struggle. This dynamic shifted after the 1980 coup, giving rise to autonomous feminism and visible queer activism.

In the Turkish context, "feminist resistance" is a multi-dimensional struggle led by women and LGBTIQ+ individuals against patriarchal structures, state policies, and everyday gendered practices. Operating at both individual and collective levels, the movement blends local dynamics with universal feminist principles. Activists sustain their struggle and assert their right to exist despite multi-layered oppression and violence. Today, women in Turkey develop daily strategies to confront economic inequality, societal pressure, and exclusion from the political sphere. These strategies manifest through the refusal to remain silent, the sharing of personal narratives, and the pursuit of justice through legal channels.

As Turkey's state structure becomes increasingly conservative and distant from gender equality goals, feminist resilience manifests through the reclamation of public spaces, such as the March 8 demonstrations. The movement utilizes civil society networks and digital tools – including social media campaigns and podcasts – to raise awareness and ensure security. During events like International Women's Day or Pride marches, activists use encrypted apps like Telegram or Signal to communicate and coordinate safely. This resilience also reflects a shift toward a more pluralistic and inclusive movement that extends to the distinct experiences of Kurdish women, migrant women, women with disabilities, and LGBTIQ+ individuals.

Feminist resistance in Turkey is not merely about enduring hardship; it is about finding new pathways and transforming hope into collective memory – a key concept for understanding the spirit of the struggle. This resistance encompasses several layers, most notably the opposition to patriarchal state practices, such as the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and the impunity often granted in femicide cases. By monitoring court hearings alongside feminist lawyers and issuing public statements, activists refuse to let these issues fade from public discourse, continuing their steadfast advocacy for the reinstatement of the Istanbul Convention.

Violence and femicide have remained at the heart of feminist struggle from the 1980s to the present day. However, these have never been the movement's only focus. Today, feminists continue to engage with Turkey's broader political landscape, addressing the aftermath of the February 6 earthquakes, the ongoing economic crisis and impoverishment, the rise of migration and racism, and the growing authoritarianism through participation in the March 19 protests. While defending the rights of women and LGBTIQ+ individuals in these challenging contexts, the movement simultaneously builds vital solidarity networks through collaboration with NGOs and local governments.

A key priority remains the defense of acquired legal rights, including those established under the Turkish Penal Code and protections regarding inheritance and alimony. While the issue of abortion rights may appear settled on paper, in practice, women face significant hurdles in finding public hospitals that perform the procedure after eight weeks. Furthermore, persistent obstacles remain in accessing basic birth control methods. The movement also staunchly opposes current family-oriented population and social policies that threaten to roll back individual freedoms.

Beyond policy, the movement maintains a front of cultural resistance. Women across Turkey fight for visibility in universities, workplaces, homes, and on social media. A powerful example of this is the Feminist Night March. Despite official bans on gathering along Istanbul's symbolic İstiklal Avenue, thousands of feminists continue to march every March 8 behind a single, defiant banner that simply reads: "Feminists."

Feminist movements also continue to challenge entrenched gender norms regarding "honor," the family unit, and traditional femininity. A significant shift in this discourse is the reframing of legal cases where women have killed abusive partners after years of systemic violence. By defending these actions as "self-defense," feminists reject the traditional narrative that equates womanhood with silent endurance. This stance represents a direct rebellion against patriarchal notions of honor and the perceived sanctity of the family over individual safety.

Intersectional Alliances and the Challenge of Shrinking Space

A vital dimension of this movement is the direct challenge to traditional norms posed by the queer and LGBTIQ+ community. Trans women, in particular, provide a powerful critique of biologically deterministic definitions of "womanhood." Organizations such as Hêvî LGBTI+ confront conventional family structures, illustrating how feminist resistance involves building alternative identities, life practices, and deep-seated cultures of solidarity.

These intersectional alliances – uniting the Kurdish women's movement, LGBTIQ+ activists, and migrant women – reflect a truly pluralistic struggle. By utilizing literature, art, and digital media to expose and validate women's experiences, the movement actively builds a collective memory. This process of documenting and narrating is, in itself, a form of resistance that challenges silence and institutional forgetfulness.

In Turkey today, a shrinking civic space and heightened censorship present significant barriers to feminist activism. Legal amendments to the Law on Associations (2020)[5] have granted the state increased control over NGOs, while the rights to assembly and protest have been de facto restricted. As feminist narratives are systematically pushed out of mainstream media, activists are increasingly forced to operate in a "gray zone." Freedom of expression in the public sphere is severely curtailed, and public demonstrations are often preemptively banned under the guise of "maintaining public order." Furthermore, activists face escalating risks, including the excessive use of force by law enforcement, arbitrary detentions, and persistent harassment.

Although feminist activism in Turkey draws upon a rich tradition of resistance, it has faced daunting structural and political challenges in recent years. These difficulties result from both external state pressures and internal movement dynamics, such as limited access to alternative platforms and legal support. While the movement remains rooted in a transformative tradition of solidarity that goes beyond mere opposition to oppression, these combined pressures have begun to hinder the engagement of new participants.

For the movement, resilience has never been about mere survival; it is about sustaining organizations, regenerating networks, fostering collective learning, and creating a culture of resistance. This historical legacy serves as a vital source of knowledge. While women's suffrage in Turkey is often framed as a "gift" of modernization resulting from the Atatürk reforms, feminists argue that this narrative erases women's agency and functions as a tool of discursive domination. Today, thanks to feminist historical scholarship, it is clear that a dedicated, grassroots struggle lies behind all achievements against sexism and patriarchy, both in Turkey and around the world.

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5 The 2020 amendment to Turkey's Law on Associations significantly tightened government oversight of NGOs. The legislation empowers the Ministry of Internal Affairs to suspend an associations activities, appoint government trustees to its board, and impose strict limitations on fundraising efforts.

India: Nationalism, Gender, and the Illusion of Empowerment

By Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman, Heinrich Böll Foundation's New Delhi Office

Contemporary India illustrates how masculinist nationalism can entrench itself within democratic institutions, demonstrating that gendered control can coexist with the very frameworks that ostensibly safeguard equality and representation. Political discourse and electoral strategies often mobilize symbols of cultural purity and national honor that rest on patriarchal ideals of womanhood, reinforcing the notion that women's bodies and roles are central to the nation's moral boundaries. At the same time, certain right-wing movements have learned to appropriate the language of gender equality, invoking women's safety, empowerment, or protection, in order to legitimize exclusionary policies or to stigmatize minority communities across India, particularly along religious or ethnic lines.

This paradoxical fusion of feminist rhetoric and patriarchal control is not unique to India; it resonates with a broader global pattern in which authoritarian or illiberal political projects selectively deploy the vocabulary of women's rights as a strategic tool. Such projects often champion a narrowly defined "respectable" femininity, celebrating women only insofar as they embody ideals of national culture or act as markers of communal identity. In doing so, they simultaneously undermine substantive feminist agendas, such as bodily autonomy, intersectional equality, and structural reform. This dynamic reveals how the very institutions of democracy can be harnessed to entrench gendered hierarchies even while claiming the mantle of progressive change – a reality currently exemplified in the Indian context.

Under the BJP government, Hindu nationalist ideologies have gained mainstream acceptance, transforming prevailing understandings of gender, nationhood, and citizenship. Hindu nationalist masculinity, operating through specific patterns of political discourse and cultural practice, is worth close examination. The iconic representation of the nation as *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) offers a powerful example: it creates a space for the symbolic celebration of women while simultaneously confining their agency to romanticized roles rooted in sacrifice, purity, and tradition. This paradox enables the movement to appropriate feminist rhetoric, invoking women's safety, empowerment, protection, while redirecting it towards consolidation of a patriarchal national identity and policing of minority communities, especially Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and Buddhists.

Narratives around "love jihad," the conspiratorial belief that Muslim men systematically seek to convert Hindu women through marriage, construct Hindu nationalist masculinity as inherently protective and perpetually under threat. This framing casts Hindu men as guardians of the community's moral and demographic boundaries, positioning women as vulnerable bearers of cultural purity whose sexuality must be defended. In doing so, such discourse legitimizes surveillance over women's intimate choices and renders patriarchal control not merely a social norm but a patriotic duty. The protective posture invoked here extends seamlessly into broader regimes of moral policing. This begins from the regulation of women's clothing and mobility to the stigmatization of interfaith friendships and public expressions of affection, and this is present in all geographical parts of India. These practices, often couched in the rhetoric of safeguarding tradition and national integrity, effectively recast women's autonomy as a site of communal anxiety, thereby naturalizing the idea that freedom, particularly women's freedom,

must be continuously monitored and contained in the name of cultural survival and homogenization in India.

A revealing tension lies at the heart of the BJP's appropriation of "women's empowerment" rhetoric. Genuine policy initiatives aimed at improving education, safety, and economic participation coexist with narratives that simultaneously reassert patriarchal norms and conventional hierarchies. Flagship programs such as *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* (Save Daughters, Educate Daughters) epitomize this paradox, celebrating girls as emblems of national pride and developmental progress, yet keeping their autonomy firmly tethered to the family and to a vision of cultural authenticity defined by Hindu nationalist ideals. This framing converts women's empowerment into a symbolic resource for the nation rather than a transformative political project, as women's value is measured less by their individual agency than by their role in safeguarding collective honor and demographic strength within India of the Hindu majority, actively reframing the nature of women's political participation.

Key Issues and Emerging Trends

The BJP's rhetoric of "women-led development" captures a central paradox in contemporary Indian politics: the celebration of women's achievements is often intertwined with their symbolic elevation as bearers of national pride. This tension between genuine progress and a subtle politics of control reveals how empowerment is often repackaged as a means of discipline. Similarly, the "love jihad" narrative exemplifies the discourse of masculine protection that constrains women's choices. Presented as a necessary defense of Hindu women from supposed Muslim conspiracies of conversion, it legitimizes surveillance over women's intimate lives and justifies moral policing of dress, movement, and relationships. Beyond its claim to "save" women, this narrative mobilizes anxieties about demographic change and consolidates majoritarian political power by portraying interfaith intimacy and marriage as a threat to the nation.

Amid these pressures, women navigate complex terrains of expectation and aspiration, balancing roles as daughters, mothers, workers, and citizens while pursuing their own ambitions. Their agency often manifests through "quiet" forms of resistance: negotiating family constraints to pursue education or employment, reshaping domestic roles, or subtly contesting moral policing. These everyday acts of negotiation demonstrate how women can both inhabit and subvert a nationalist gender order.

These dynamics resonate far beyond India. Across democracies experiencing a right-wing resurgence – from the United States to parts of Europe – gender has become a key battleground where nationalism is reinforced and democratic freedoms eroded. Whether through anti-immigrant rhetoric, restrictions on reproductive rights, or idealized invocations of motherhood, women are simultaneously celebrated and controlled. India's case thus reflects a global pattern, the strategic use of gender to naturalize hierarchy, consolidate political power, and chip away at democratic ideals – all while claiming to protect or uplift women.

Despite these challenges, stories of feminist resilience and youth activism persist, especially in southern India and parts of northeast India. However, these movements are increasingly overwhelmed by the recent rapid spread of Hindutva discourse into these geographies. This expansion threatens the very pillars of India's pluralistic traditions, making the work of local activists more critical than ever.

From Victories to Backlash: Feminist Movement and Anti-Gender Groups in Colombia

*By **Luisa Rodriguez Gaitán**, Heinrich Böll Foundation's Bogotá Office*

Over the past decades, the feminist movement in Latin America has achieved historic victories in advancing gender equality. These milestones include transformative legislative reforms and robust public policies addressing sexual and reproductive rights, as well as gender-based violence (GBV). However, these hard-won gains – such as abortion legalization in Argentina, the decriminalization of abortion in Colombia (up to the 24th week of pregnancy), and the implementation of new care systems and strengthened laws against GBV in Chile – are currently under serious threat. A surging anti-rights agenda, fueled by specific government administrations and conservative civic actors, seeks to dismantle this progress and roll back the protections that sustain gender justice across the region.

Mobilizing Fear and Traditions: Some Strategies Behind the Anti-Gender Narratives in Latin America

Anti-gender discourse in the region is often marked by an aggressive rhetoric that frames feminists and LGBTIQ+ communities as threats to the moral and social fabric of society. This narrative relies on stigma, stereotypes, and derogatory language. The rhetoric is rooted in conservative ideology, lacking factual or legal basis, and disseminated through social media by self-identified "good people" (typically aligned with white, middle-class, heteronormative values) who claim to be defending "traditional social norms." A common thread for right-wing, far-right, and religious conservative actors (Catholic, Evangelical, Christian) is the use of the "gender ideology" concept. Coined by the Catholic Church in the 1990s, this term is weaponized to portray gender and sexual diversity as an existential threat to the heterosexual nuclear family.

Colombian Context: Anti-Gender Movements and Their Impact

In Colombia, anti-gender discourse has grown since the 2000s, first with the formation of anti-abortion groups like Unidos por la Vida (2006) and later, in 2014, the attempt to introduce a constitutional abortion ban. In 2016, the term "gender ideology" was used as a central argument to oppose the peace accord referendum. Opponents portrayed the gender-related provisions in the accord as an attempt to impose a controversial new social doctrine that would "convert" children to homosexuality and disrupt traditional gender roles and family values. This framing contributed significantly to the narrow rejection of the peace accord in the referendum, as conservative groups used fear of "gender ideology" to mobilize voters against the peace process.

Anti-gender narratives and their political proponents in Colombia work across three key areas: utilizing the media for disinformation, attacking legal and policy efforts that have already been achieved, and influencing civil society through hate speech, smear campaigns, and the stigmatization and delegitimization of the work and demands of human rights, feminist, and LGBTIQ+ organizations.

Right-wing leaders and conservative groups have used misinformation campaigns on abortion rights and queer rights to gain supporters, claiming that feminist and LGBTIQ+ efforts aim to dismantle traditional families or "confuse" children through comprehensive sex education. As Colombia approaches new presidential elections in 2026, some candidates – men and women – from right-wing parties are actively using anti-gender discourse as a central theme of their platforms.

Conservative groups in Colombia have used referendums as a strategy to challenge the right to abortion, seeking to overturn the Constitutional Court's 2022 decision that decriminalized abortion up to the 24th week of pregnancy by mobilizing public support and collecting signatures to force a popular vote. At the same time, anti-rights groups have intensified their campaigns in universities and educational spaces following the decriminalization of abortion, using misinformation and the green color of pro-choice branding to attract young women who are considering abortion, to gather their data, and to persuade them not to get an abortion – telling them it is a crime. These tactics have been observed by organizations active in the feminist movement in Bogotá.

Efforts to roll back rights have primarily targeted abortion access and gender diversity protections. While the 2022 Causa Justa ruling decriminalized abortion up to 24 weeks, implementation is uneven, as conservative and religious actors have formed parliamentary alliances to block access to services and obstruct progressive bills, including a ban on conversion therapies for LGBTIQ+ people. Along the way, civil society actors and human rights defenders have faced increasing attacks, such as violence during marches or protests, fueled by disinformation campaigns that encourage threats against feminist and queer activists.

Strategies of Resistance by Feminist and Queer Actors

In Colombia, feminist and queer movements have advanced rights by implementing diverse strategies. Strategic litigation, led by the Causa Justa coalition of more than 100 organizations, challenged Colombia's abortion laws by framing this not only as a women's issue but as a matter of public health, equality, and human rights. The building of a multi-sectoral coalition (legal, health, feminist, youth groups) and use of constitutional arguments meant that the voices of marginalized women (e.g., Afro, rural, youth) could be heard, demanding full decriminalization of abortion – and thus achieving the historic 2022 ruling that decriminalized abortion up to the 24th week of pregnancy.

Feminist organizations such as the Bucaramanga-based Fundación Mujer y Futuro, which engages with youth, rural women, and survivors of violence, are working on securing political empowerment, sexual rights education, and rural women's local leadership. Such organizations have built strong networks with rural and urban activists via participatory education.

Alongside many gains, numerous challenges remain. Feminist movements and collective efforts continue to defend the gains achieved for women's rights and diversity, demonstrating that multi-level, networked action, grounded in an intersectional perspective, can effectively resist and even reverse the anti-gender backlash.

FEMINIST FUNDING IN A SHIFTING WORLD

FEMINIST FUNDING IN A SHIFTING WORLD

In this chapter, we reflect on the ongoing geopolitical and funding crisis while outlining a framework to help movements navigate the current landscape and identify emerging opportunities. Recent funding cuts – and the diversion of human rights resources toward other geopolitical priorities – have exposed the vulnerability of NGOs and movements when political winds shift. To sustain the essential social justice work we do every day, we must adopt more creative and flexible approaches.

Feminist funding models are intrinsically linked to feminist leadership, alternative resourcing, and strategic alliance-building. Central to this approach is a recognition of the assets we hold – both personally and institutionally. We must emphasize the power of social capital; in the current funding climate, the strength of our connections and the depth of our networks are not just social advantages, but vital lifelines for movement survival.

EXERCISE 1
Inherited Practices of Sharing

Before diving into the complexities of feminist funding and resourcing, take a moment for a short grounding exercise with your team. This practice helps us connect our personal experiences to our political work. How we perceive money and resources is often deeply rooted in our personal histories, extending far beyond our professional roles. By acknowledging these foundations, we can better understand the values that drive our approach to collective resourcing.

Step 1: Reflection (3 minutes)

Take a moment to think about your family history. What personal or intimate behaviors, habits, or beliefs regarding the sharing of resources – whether money, food, care, or moral support – have you inherited from your parents, grandparents, or guardians?

Step 2: Sharing (optional)

Does this question provoke or evoke anything in you? If you feel comfortable doing so, share one story, memory, or insight that surfaced. These reflections might center on various themes, such as generosity, saving, helping, or even conflicts or anxieties.

This exercise grounds us in our lived experiences, helping us recognize how our personal narratives shape the way we navigate resources, collaboration, and care in our professional lives today.

I come from a family shaped by intergenerational war trauma, which deeply influences the way we organize our family assets and our individual money. For example, I've developed habits like stockpiling everyday items such as toothbrushes, toothpaste, and rice. Even though I now live far from immediate danger, I still have a stock of things, because that's how my family used to be organized. I only became aware of this when friends pointed it out.

– Nino, Georgia

It reminded me of the pandemic period when people were in a panic, buying toilet tissue, and I was thinking about essentials like water, batteries, and flashlights. My behaviors around money are deeply influenced by how I saw my parents manage it. This mindset spilled into my professional life as well – while working as a resource mobilization officer, I was always focused on having contingency plans and endowment funds. We need a plan B should plan A fail.

– Akinyi, Kenya

What comes to mind first is that the responsibility for managing and sharing resources often falls disproportionately on women, especially in times of crisis. While men may be seen as providers, women are usually the ones overseeing the bigger picture – deciding what to keep, what to give away, what to prioritize for the children. This remains true regardless of the nature of the crisis, be it a pandemic, a flood, or a war.

– Naida, Bosnia and Herzegovina

This dynamic is equally present within the feminist arena. When we zoom out, we see similar patterns emerging: Do we have contingency plans? Where do our resources come from? Who is the provider, who distributes the resources, and how is this done? Sharing often occurs within specific social groups, guided by the principles of **solidarity and community care**. These habits of peer-to-peer resource sharing have historical roots and distinct regional dimensions, yet today we can still observe similar dynamics within feminist spaces.

In Tunisia, there's a beautiful ritual called al-ula – a traditional summer practice of preserving homemade food for the winter, born from the uncertainty of seasonal rains. It's actually a feminist act of care and resilience. Women from the same neighborhood gather together to prepare and preserve food, passing down intergenerational knowledge and ensuring community survival.
We've also had a lot of economic crises in Tunisia, where we didn't have sugar, flour, etc. This also reflects the invisible labor of women that sustains families and communities. In recent years, many feminist groups have begun reviving and promoting this practice as a model of resilience and mutual care.

– Mahassen, Tunisia

Centuries ago in South Korea, the tradition of labor exchange was rooted in farming. People supported one another during the demanding planting and harvesting seasons. This legacy has seamlessly transitioned into today's civil society organizations, shaping how they collaborate and share resources.

Instead of outsourcing to expensive experts, organizations exchange their resources – whether in research, advocacy, or the creation of safe spaces. When one organization hosts a fundraising event, others attend and contribute, ensuring the reciprocal cycle continues. This community-based approach to resource-sharing reflects deep-rooted cultural values of cooperation, solidarity, and mutual support within South Korea's civil society.
– Philip, South Korea

This icebreaker exercise intentionally uses the term "resources" rather than limiting the conversation to money. In times of crisis, it is essential to expand our understanding of what resources truly are and how we can mobilize them beyond financial terms.

When looking at the culture of giving, statistics reveal a powerful trend: small individual donations of USD 10 to 15 often accumulate to provide more sustainable support for social justice organizing than traditional institutional philanthropy. This serves as a vital reminder that **collective generosity and everyday giving** are formidable forces for change. Throughout history, people have supported one another, not just through money but through labor, knowledge, relationships, and care. Most social justice movements have reached their current heights precisely because they began with mutual support and collective generosity long before top-down funding ever entered the picture.

In the Western Balkans, for example, feminist activists successfully distributed nearly **USD 2 million** in participatory grants to **73 grassroots organizations**. These funds directly supported critical work on gender-based violence, queer-inclusive services, feminist education, and coalition-building. This demonstrates the power of a movement-led funding model, where small and medium-sized grants act as a catalyst for local organizing and sustainable network growth.

Where Does the Money Go? The Funding Landscape

Recent research into the **funding of anti-gender movements in Europe** highlights a striking financial disparity. Between 2019 and 2023, anti-right actors in Europe received approximately **USD 1.2 billion** from **275 distinct sources**. Substantial contributions originated from within 28 European countries, followed by organizations based in the Russian Federation and the United States. These enormous annual budgets[6] grant **anti-gender actors** extensive operational, political, and ideological freedom. In contrast, feminist, queer, and human rights organizations are often forced to work with "breadcrumbs."

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6 The reported figures represent only the funding that could be formally tracked; actual amounts are likely significantly higher.

Additionally, anti-gender groups often operate **with informal structures** and loose funding guidelines. Conversely, feminist, queer, and human rights organizations must navigate strict funding regulations and rigorous accountability mechanisms required by state and institutional donors.

The 275 identified anti-rights supporters include lobbying groups, service providers (notably anti-abortion organizations), media outlets, political parties, and think tanks. These actors are exceptionally skilled at **media engagement**, investing heavily in political campaigns with messaging that is **simple, accessible, and emotionally resonant.** By building a highly coordinated and well-funded ecosystem, these movements have effectively shaped public narratives. While their goals stand in opposition to human rights, there is much to be learned from the sophistication of their coordination and their ability to amplify an agenda.

Tax (In)Justice in the United States

In the United States, some of the wealthiest billionaires – including the Koch brothers, the DeVos family, and Amazon's Jeff Bezos – are channeling immense sums into anti-gender organizing. Much of this support backs initiatives like Project 2025, a Heritage Foundation-led plan designed to dismantle federal civil rights and reproductive protections while opposing LGBTIQ+ rights and climate change mitigation.[7]

Billionaires navigate this through a sophisticated philanthropic infrastructure that feminists rarely access, utilizing private foundations, public charities, and donor-advised funds (DAFs). A DAF allows a donor to set aside money for charity where it can grow through investment, providing the donor with an immediate tax deduction while the actual contribution to an organization is delayed.[8]

Essentially, the ultra-wealthy rarely fund politics directly. Instead, they utilize foundations and DAFs to "move money" in ways that appear charitable but ultimately reshape public policy. Under the US 501(c)(3) legal status, these funds are classified as charities, offering strong legal protection, low transparency, and significant tax advantages.[9] Consequently, billions of dollars sit in these funds under the control of wealthy donors. Meanwhile, feminist and grassroots groups are often excluded from this capital because the system favors large, established institutions over small, radical activist organizations. This disparity underscores why advocating for tax justice and critically examining the philanthropic sector is essential feminist work.

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7 Project 2025 is a conservative, Heritage Foundation-led initiative designed to restructure the US federal government by centralizing executive power. The plan seeks to systematically roll back protections for civil rights, reproductive health, climate mitigation, and federal regulations under a Republican (especially Trump) administration.

8 DAFs also exist in Canada, the UK, parts of Europe, Australia, though they generally exert less political influence in those regions than in the US. In the American context, DAFs serve as a primary vehicle for funding advocacy, think tanks, and broader political ecosystems with minimal transparency.

9 501(c)(3) refers to a specific US legal status for nonprofit charitable organizations. This designation grants the organization tax-exempt status and allows donors to claim tax deductions on their contributions, effectively subsidizing private influence through the public tax system.

Crises are inherently contextual and situated, experienced differently across various communities and regions. They are frequently defined by those who hold power and resources, such as states, donors, or international institutions. In contrast, feminist funding focuses on the lived realities of women, queer, and trans individuals, and marginalized communities – particularly in the Global South – whose specific crises are often unacknowledged, underfunded, or treated as secondary. Consequently, what an institution labels an "emergency" may differ significantly from the urgent, ongoing struggles faced by front-line activists.

We are not facing an unprecedented moment; we have weathered crises before, and they will continue to emerge. By definition, a crisis is a situation of acute or ongoing disruption that threatens the safety, rights, well-being, or agency of a people, demanding an urgent response. From a feminist perspective, however, a crisis is not limited to sudden events like war, natural disasters, or political turmoil. It also encompasses persistent structural conditions that have simmered for years – such as gender-based violence, reproductive injustice, economic precarity, and the anti-gender backlash. These systemic issues are often normalized and overlooked by traditional power structures. Ultimately, what is deemed a crisis depends entirely on **who is affected, who has the power to define the narrative, and whose experiences are taken seriously.**

A Taxonomy of Crisis: Toward Better Preparedness

A "taxonomy of crisis" is a framework for categorizing the causes, types, and stages of a crisis, enabling more effective planning and response. By systematically sorting these elements, we can better understand the root drivers of a crisis, its specific characteristics, and its likely trajectory over time.

The **drivers** of a crisis can vary. While they can be classified as political, economic, environmental, humanitarian, or health-related, these categories frequently overlap.

According to the Dalan Fund, it can be helpful to differentiate between four key dimensions of crisis management:

- **Crisis prevention:** Local communities, grassroots organizations, and collectives are often the first to detect emerging crises, evaluate potential risks, and come up with strategies to prevent them from escalating. This is the stage where big donors or states need to be informed and alarmed.
- **Crisis preparedness:** The identified capacity by affected groups to respond to emerging crises in a timely and effective manner. This requires resources, strategic infrastructure, and coordinated support – from donors, the state, individuals, and community members.
- **Crisis response:** This means taking immediate action once a crisis occurs to prevent it from spreading further and to limit its impact on the organization/community.
- **Crisis recovery:** This involves resuming normal activities and operations as quicky as possible. It includes developing recovery plans, rebuilding/adapting systems of work, and providing essential resources to sustain ongoing activism.

These dimensions, along with crisis drivers, don't exist in isolation; rather, they overlap and intensify one another. Current global events reveal that we have long been embroiled in escalating instabilities that are now reaching a breaking point. Many systemic issues have been building for decades and are currently surfacing simultaneously, creating the illusion of a sudden, isolated crisis.

Feminist funding must navigate various manifestations of instability, including complex and persistent crises, neglected emergencies, and sudden disasters. Because crises are inherently structural and compounded, they span political, economic, social, environmental, and technological spheres, often manifesting as armed conflict, humanitarian disasters, or health emergencies. Ultimately, every crisis is political. Its impact is dictated by geographic location, social positioning, and the strength of the networks to which one belongs.

Feminist Response – Can You Fund Us Like You Want Us to Win?

Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it. – Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale

We are not entering in a new crisis; rather we are witnessing the intensification of a decades-old struggle that has simply become more visible. Research from AWID's Where is the Money for Feminist Organizing? and the Human Rights Funders Network's Trust Gap report highlights a harsh reality for the movement:

- **40%** of feminist groups currently operate with **zero budget**, relying entirely on voluntary work to sustain their missions (AWID).
- **11%** have annual budgets between **USD 5,000–USD 10,000** and **15%** between **USD 10,000–USD 30,000** (AWID).
- 99% of global human rights funding is controlled by foundations based in the Global North, primarily in North America and Western Europe (Trust Gap).
- The remaining 1% that reaches the Global South is often fragmented across siloed streams – such as gender justice, peacebuilding, climate change, LGBTIQ+ rights, and HIV response – with very little room for intersectional approaches (Trust Gap). Within that 1% of gender justice funding, only 1% actually reaches grassroots feminist organizations.
- 30% of feminist groups expect significant budget and staff reductions in 2026 (the Prospera network).
- 65% of feminist groups anticipate cuts to both programs and personnel (the Prospera network).
- 2 in 5 funds have yet to replace lost income or secure alternative resources (the Prospera network).

The direct effects of funding withdrawals are already visible, especially among our LGBTIQ+ partners. Following the anti-rights conference hosted by the African Christian Professionals Forum in May, numerous organizations faced drastic budget cuts. Funding levels dropped significantly last year, and this year the decline has accelerated. In Kenya, the Free To Be Me program – which supported about 15 LGBTIQ+ organizations – was forced to close during Pride Month, resulting in half of their Nairobi team losing their job.

– Akinyi, Kenya

According to data from the Alliance for Feminist Movements, philanthropic giving remains deeply fragmented and siloed. This creates a fundamental mismatch: while feminist movements organize intersectionally, funding is structured around isolated categories. This misalignment weakens the collective impact and long-term sustainability of feminist organizing.

The global feminist funding landscape has already seen an annual loss of around USD 2.8 billion. These losses are primarily due to significant budget cuts from major donors – including the Netherlands, the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, and the Sigrid Rausing Trust – alongside a reduction in official development assistance (ODA) from the United States, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Sweden. Evidence suggests that major donors are increasingly diverting development aid toward defense and security priorities, a shift in ODA allocation that has raised serious concerns across civil society.

Additionally, many civil society actors are trapped in project-based cycles due to donor dependency. They are often required to comply with exhaustive regulations, reporting mechanisms, and deadlines, even for minimal grants. While we must continue to advocate for flexible, trust-based, and multi-year core funding, we cannot wait for institutional change. We must act now to build alternative, feminist-led funding solutions that reflect our values of solidarity and resilience.

Recommendations for Donors

1. Adopt more flexible, trust-based funding practices
Example: Allow a grassroots feminist group to reallocate part of its grant to emerging needs – like digital security tools or emergency stipends – without requiring prior approval for every change. More autonomy enables those involved to adapt the resources to evolving situations: less bureaucracy, more impact!

2. Encourage collaboration through joint projects
Example: Two regional feminist organizations partner on an EU-funded advocacy campaign, sharing research, communications, and outreach efforts, instead of working in parallel silos.

3. Share infrastructure, spaces, and resources
Example: A foundation opens its co-working spaces, meeting rooms, or online training platforms to partner organizations, reducing costs and fostering a sense of community among grantees. This maximizes benefits for both funders and partners.

4. Focus on equitable resource distribution
Example: Allocate at least 50% of gender-justice funding directly to grassroots organizations in the Global South, instead of concentrating it in global NGOs or Northern-based intermediaries.

Recognizing the Boiling Point: A Strategy for Survival

Understanding the "boiling point" of authoritarianism requires recognizing the gradual signs of democratic backsliding before the window for action closes. The 2024 CIVICUS Monitor Report categorizes the state of civic space globally as either **open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed or closed**, based on how effectively citizens can exercise their fundamental rights. Currently, only 40 out of 198 countries and territories – primarily Canada, the Scandinavian nations, and parts of Western Europe – are classified as **open**. In contrast, 81 countries and territories are rated as **repressed or closed**, reflecting widespread and routine violations of fundamental freedoms. This means that approximately 72.4% of the global population now lives under repressive conditions.

This reality confirms a global rise in authoritarianism, creating increasingly restricted environments for feminist, queer, and social justice movements. As civic space shrinks, we must confront a critical strategic question: **Which elements of our movement and infrastructure are non-negotiable and must be protected at all costs?** Beyond simply preserving the essentials, we must proactively build alternative systems and infrastructure that ensure our survival, continuity, and the capacity for ongoing resistance.

EXERCISE 2

Mapping Our Feminist Work Infrastructure

Objective: To help participants identify which infrastructures are essential for their work, their organization, or the broader survival of their movement. By mapping these systems, teams can explore how different infrastructures interconnect, provide mutual protection, and sustain one another during times of crisis.

Format: This activity can be conducted in small breakout groups or as a collective exercise with the entire team.

Step 1: Reflect

Take a moment to reflect on your own organization, collective, or network:

- What keeps your work moving forward when external systems collapse?
- What do you rely on most when your funding, safety, or public visibility are under threat?

Write down or sketch the key components that form your **foundational infrastructure**. Consider essential elements such as financial resources, the people involved, your community relationships, data and information systems, and the services you provide.

Step 2: Map the Infrastructures

On a large sheet of paper or a whiteboard, draw circles or boxes for each type of infrastructure and label them as follows:

- **Physical and psychosocial security and wellbeing:** The safety and resilience of employees, activists and communities, with a focus on those working on the front lines.
- **Fiscal and administrative:** Financial systems, internal resource management, and the flow of funds.
- **Service provision:** Essential support systems, including health services, legal aid, safe spaces, and direct community assistance.
- **Documentation and monitoring:** The infrastructure for evidence collection, archiving, and secure server storage.
- **Technological infrastructure:** A critical domain of power in the age of AI. As data is increasingly weaponized through disinformation and regulation remains scarce, feminist tech initiatives like the Numun Fund are essential for digital sovereignty.
- **Media and communications:** Strategic platforms and channels used to build counter-narratives and maintain public visibility in a crowded media landscape.
- **Relational and social:** The underlying web of alliances, mentorship programs, networks, and individual relationships that sustain the movement.

Once labeled, draw lines between these infrastructures to illustrate their interdependencies. For example, you might draw a line showing how social connections provide the pathways to access alternative fiscal resources, or how technological infrastructure is required to safeguard documentation and monitoring.

Step 3: Identify Strengths and Gaps

Discuss in your group:
- Which of these infrastructures are **strong** and functioning well?
- Which are **weak** or lacking entirely?
- What new infrastructure do you need to build in the next 1–3 years?

Step 4: Strategize for Action

Together, brainstorm **concrete actions** to strengthen each type of infrastructure and prioritize them.

Examples: Create an emergency mutual aid fund; build relationships with feminist tech collectives; share spaces or administrative systems with allied organizations.

Step 5: Share and Sustain Insights

Share the final infrastructure map with your broader team and keep it visible in your workspace to guide ongoing decision-making.

Key Examples of Feminist Work Infrastructure

Fiscal and administrative infrastructure:
- As banking systems and financial regulations are increasingly weaponized through tax and anti-corruption laws, we must develop transparent financial mechanisms. These systems should protect resources and ensure the mobility of funds while advocating for Feminist Tax Justice frameworks.

Service provision:
- Community-based services for people living with HIV and for queer and other marginalized populations must remain operational when state support is withdrawn. These services are not complementary or optional, they are lifesaving.

Documentation and monitoring:
- Institutions that track and archive human rights violations provide the essential framework for accountability. Memory and documentation protect truth, counter disinformation, and resist historical erasure, which are common tools of authoritarian regimes.

Media and communications:
- A robust feminist media infrastructure is essential to debunk anti-rights narratives and reclaim public discourse. Communication systems are not secondary, they are strategic tools of resistance!

Relational and social infrastructure (social capital):
- Relationships, friendships, and networks of solidarity are themselves forms of infrastructure. They constitute the **social capital** that sustains trust, mobilization, and motivation in moments of crisis.

The Strategic Importance of Social Capital as Infrastructure

While philanthropists and donors typically focus on financial capital, they often overlook an equally critical factor: **social capital.** This refers to the vast networks, relationships, and connections held by individuals and institutions. Whether regional, national, or global, these relationships are strategic assets that can be leveraged to open doors and create new opportunities.

In the field of resource mobilization, one of the most powerful questions we can ask is: "Who do I know, or who do I know that knows someone?" The depth of the trust-based relationships we cultivate – whether with actors in the human rights field, multilateral institutions, community councils, or fellow social movements – matters immensely. This is especially true in moments of crisis, where social capital often becomes the primary bridge to survival and continued impact.

EXERCISE 3

Additional Mapping – The "What If?" Scenario

Imagine the worst-case scenario: your funding is frozen, your organization is forced to close, or your team can no longer operate openly. In such a crisis, how can the infrastructures you have identified continue to function?

Guiding Questions:
- What **must** survive for the movement to stay alive?
- How can we **protect that infrastructure and keep it staffed**, while we still have access to funds and networks?
- Who could **take over** or **carry on** if our institution were unable to operate?
- What alliances, community structures, or informal systems could **keep the work moving**?
- What do we need to document, teach, or share right now in order to make that possible?

Action:

Within your teams, choose one or two infrastructures from your map and develop a short **continuity plan:**
- What immediate steps can you take to make them sustainable?
- What resources or partnerships do you need to secure them?
- How will you ensure the work survives, even if formal structures collapse?

Values: What We Refuse to Lose

The realities we confront are far from abstract. The rise of authoritarianism and the expansion of anti-rights movements are tangible threats, compounded by a rapidly shifting funding landscape. The key question we must ask is **not whether we can continue our feminist and queer work, but rather: under what conditions will we do so?**

Are we prepared to **reframe our language** – perhaps by pivoting to broader "human rights" terminology rather than explicit "LGBTIQ+" or "feminist" framing – to maintain institutional funding? Or do we **reclaim and defend** our language and our mission, continuing in solidarity with like-minded allies even with reduced resources? Choosing the latter requires us to double down on shared infrastructure, collective advocacy, and community care as our primary means of survival.

One of the critical values we must navigate these days is the strategic use of language. I see our opponents co-opting the language of human rights to counter our progress. Maybe it's time we adopt their strategies – speaking in the language they understand and turning it back upon them – using their own tactics to reclaim the narrative and win.

– Philip, hbs South Korea

There is no single correct answer. Some will choose strategic reframing to survive; others will refuse to tone down their language and narratives, and consequently receive fewer resources. What matters is that those choices are conscious, collective, and rooted in **solidarity.**

The bigger umbrella for work under shared values could be gender-justice organizing. Across regions, from the Russian Federation to Ghana, Uganda, and Nigeria, there are coordinated efforts to fund and spread anti-gender agendas. This includes the push for regressive policies and "foreign agent" legislation, similar to those enacted in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia. We are facing a common adversary – one that operates under many names, but follows a global strategy.

– Nino, Dalan Fund

Keeping feminist and queer work alive will require a concerted effort: a **shared infrastructure, mutual support, movement-led funding,** and **a foundation of common values.** These elements serve as a guide for resisting an increasingly hostile political climate. Even under repression, legal restrictions, or war, civil rights movements endure because they remain responsive, interconnected, and sustained by collective power. This is why returning to our personal and institutional values is essential — they shape how we organize, decide, care, and lead in times of crisis.

However, values are not static. Their meanings evolve alongside changes in context, power relations, and lived experience. What "solidarity," "justice," or "empowerment" mean today may differ across regions and movements, requiring us to constantly engage with their shifting definitions.

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Recalling and Redefining Our Values

Objective: To collectively reflect on the values that guide us – personally, institutionally, and politically – as we navigate shrinking spaces, regressive politics, and funding challenges.

This exercise helps clarify what we stand for, identifies which concepts need to be redefined, and explores how shared values guide our work as we resist external pressures.

Step 1: Individual Reflection (5 minutes)

Think about the key values you personally want to preserve in the current political and funding climate. Write down three to five values that matter most to you (e.g., solidarity, truth, courage, care, justice, integrity).

Which values feel challenged now? How are these values presented in your daily work or institutional culture?

Step 2: Collective Mapping (15 minutes)

As a group, create a **collective values map** on a flipchart or digital board. Draw two circles to represent:

1. **Personal values:** The individual values identified by team members in Step 1.
2. **Institutional values:** The values your organization officially claims to uphold or practice.

Then, draw connections between the two. Discuss:

- Where do our personal values align or clash with institutional ones?
- What organizational changes are needed to more fully manifest our feminist and queer principles?

Step 3: From Values to Strategy (15 minutes)

- How can these values guide **how we influence existing systems** (e.g., philanthropy, policy, media)?
- Which values **must shape** our advocacy, resourcing, and collaborations over the next one to two years?
- How can we protect these values when faced with pressure to compromise?

Debrief: Share these insights with other teams you collaborate with. Get into a conversation about how your values aligns with their values.

Values as a Compass Toward Funding Strategies

Values tell us *why* and *how* we act; strategies apply those values into *what we do*, especially with regard to money and donor funding.

Values define what we refuse to compromise on and are the foundation of feminist funding strategies: who we accept money from, how we raise it, how it's shared, and how power is distributed. Without values, funding strategies shift toward survival at any cost. Moving from values to funding strategies means turning civil society commitments into concrete decisions about money, sustainability, and autonomy.

Across the region, feminist groups are increasingly facing ideological restrictions from donors, who are directing them to avoid the term "gender" and replace it with "women" exclusively. This is a deeply concerning development. For those of us who work on feminist issues, gender work would look very different from what we're practicing right now.

– Akinyi, Kenya

Funding from major donors can inadvertently pressure feminist, queer, and social justice movements toward compliance or self-censorship. For NGOs, the risks of non-compliance are high – most notably the threat of being de-funded. Yet, standing firm in their core principles and values remains the lifeblood of feminist organizing. Navigating this tension is a constant challenge that demands courage, deep commitment to collective care, and unwavering integrity.

Dare to hold the unpopular opinion. In the current climate of anti-rights movements and forced deradicalization, being "unpopular" is a necessary commitment. When was feminism ever about being compliant, or being a "good girl"?

– Nino, Georgia

While values define the scope of our work, funding strategies determine our long-term sustainability. This necessitates a careful re-assessment of potential collaborators beyond our traditional allies – reaching out to corporations, ultra-high-net-worth individuals, wealth managers, religious entities, and public media. The goal is to identify new funding opportunities **without compromising the integrity of our feminist mission.**

In the coming years, we may find ourselves forming unconventional alliances. While these can provide vital resources, we must remain vigilant; many of these actors are already aligned with far-right agendas. Expanding our funding strategies does not mean abandoning our values; rather, it requires a more sophisticated approach to vetting and engagement to ensure our work remains autonomous and radical.

As traditional funding pools shrink and political repression intensifies, feminist movements must look beyond familiar allies and established funding models. Exploring alternative partnerships and resourcing strategies offers a concrete path to aligning feminist values with long-term financial security.

This section explores how feminist movements can strategically diversify their resources, ensuring they remain resilient and committed to their shared values in a changing global landscape.

THE GREAT WEALTH TRANSFER

We have just entered what economists call the "great wealth transfer." Over the next decade, more than USD 78 trillion currently held by ultra-high-net-worth individuals (UHNWIs)[10] will pass to the next generation. Historically, men have accumulated the vast majority of global wealth; however, due to hard-won feminist gains in inheritance rights, **around 70% of that USD 78 trillion is expected to be transferred to women**.

This shift is significant because women tend to donate more generously and flexibly during their lifetimes than men – a trend exemplified by philanthropists like MacKenzie Scott. Despite this potential, challenges remain. Family wealth is typically managed by a male-dominated wealth management industry, meaning that even when women hold assets, their financial decisions are often mediated by men.

On the other hand, when these funds are successfully unlocked, the resulting support is frequently unrestricted, adaptable, and trust-based. This value-driven giving is often rooted in deep, personal relationships with institutions or individuals, presenting **a vital opportunity to activate alternative resourcing models**. Engaging with UHNWIs is delicate, long-term work that can take years or even decades of cultivation. However, because the process is relationship-driven and built on trust, securing a major "gift" represents a transformative win for movement sustainability.

Examples and Resources

Shake the Table: A feminist collective dedicated to transforming the philanthropic landscape. They bridge the gap between social justice movements and UHNWIs, advocating for the redistribution of wealth in ways that are truly accountable to feminist principles.

Bridgespan Group: A global philanthropic advisory organization that helps donors and NGOs scale their impact. Notably, they have been a primary advisor for MacKenzie Scott's trust-based giving model, providing insights into how large-scale, unrestricted funding can be effectively deployed.

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10 An ultra-high-net-worth individual (UHNWI) is defined as someone with at least USD 30 million in investable assets. They sit at the apex of the wealth pyramid, above high-net-worth individuals (HNWIs), who hold at least USD 1 million.

FEMINIST WEALTH STRATEGIES AND ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC MODELS

We are at a point when feminist movements need to strategically engage with wealth, capitalism, and investment – using capitalism consciously and critically, while working toward its transformation and dismantling. There are people with feminist values who are using capitalism to inform alternative feminist approaches to ownership, collaboration, and financial sustainability. Key strategies include:

1. Community-owned economic models

Feminists are creating collective ownership platforms (such as feminist co-owned intellectual property platforms) and experimenting with alternative currencies, gender lens investing, and property-based wealth redistribution.[11] These models are particularly well-suited for grassroots and midsize human rights organizations, enabling them to invest in women-led businesses and provide structural support for the care economy.

2. Strategic ecosystem consolidation: resource sharing

Recognizing when movements or funds are reaching a "boiling point" allows us to merge resources strategically before they collapse. Consolidating ecosystems fosters greater efficiency, strengthens solidarity, and creates vital safety nets. This approach is scalable and suitable for organizations of any size.

Example: Dalan Fund's Cooperative Model

Dalan Fund utilizes a cooperative model to share financial, administrative, and grantmaking resources with other grassroots funds. For instance, if a partner organization loses its funding or lacks a dedicated financial manager, Dalan Fund's financial team can step in to sustain their operations. Instead of duplicating expenditures, this model enables organizations to pool resources and distribute support across the entire ecosystem.

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11 Property-based wealth redistribution involves shifting ownership from private individuals to collective, feminist-controlled entities to ensure the long-term sustainability of the movement.

3. Wealth planning and feminist investment

Wealth planning means strategically managing inherited or donated money and assets to ensure long-term impact, sustainability, and alignment with values.

The Equality Fund is an example of a **feminist approach to managing large sums of money.** Instead of spending (inherited or donated) funds right away, the money is **invested** to grow over time. This creates a **long-term, sustainable fund** that can keep supporting feminist causes in the future. This is a cooperative model, meaning that investments are made collectively and **benefits are shared** (as are risks), rather than controlled by a single individual or organization. This is suitable for big organizations with big money.

Background: Before the establishment of the Equality Fund, the Match International Fund was on the verge of closing due to financial challenges. A turning point arrived when a long-term donor passed away, leaving the fund a substantial inheritance. Rather than spending the capital immediately, the leadership made the strategic decision to invest it. Though initially criticized by some as "not feminist," this decision allowed the fund to build an investment portfolio – now diversified across sectors like real estate and technology – that provides the consistent returns necessary to sustain its global crisis grantmaking. By shifting toward an endowment model, the fund has secured a permanent, long-term resource for feminist movements worldwide.

4. Cultivating long-term relationships with HNWIs

Feminist philanthropy groups like Resource Generation and Good Ancestor are nurturing wealth redistribution networks. Through these efforts, personal wealth and inheritance strategies are becoming central pillars of the feminist resource justice movement. This represents a dedicated, long-term strategy to shift economic power.

5. Gender-lens investment

Institutions like the United Bank for Africa (UBA) are actively promoting women's financial inclusion through various initiatives and products that form part of a broader gender-lens investing strategy. Under this model, profits are reinvested into communities of women, trans, and gender-diverse people – a framework inspired by AWID's principles of feminist financial ethics.

Feminists must reconsider alliances beyond traditional partners. While corporate fundraising was widely viewed as unacceptable within feminist circles only a few years ago, there is a growing recognition of the need to work strategically with actors inside the capitalist system. As we gain access to private and public foundations and high-net-worth individuals, the critical question becomes: **How do we leverage this power and these relationships to advance feminist goals?**

EXERCISE 5

Superpowers for Change[12]

Objective: To tap into creativity and humor as a way of reflecting on values and power. This exercise helps connect personal imagination with a collective vision for justice and transformation.

Step 1: Check-In Question

If you could have any superpower to make change easier, what would it be?

Be as creative as you wish. Take a few minutes to reflect individually or share your ideas with the group.

Some examples from others:

- *"I'd control the minds of the ultra-wealthy, compelling them to give back their money!"*
- *"I'd read people's minds – because what they say and what they think are rarely the same."*
- *"I'd instantly dismantle patriarchy and sexism, replacing them with ived feminist values."*
- *"I'd be a time traveler; I would go back to learn from past movements, fix critical mistakes, and return to the present with greater wisdom."*
- *"I'd redistribute resources equally, because there is enough of everything for everyone."*

Step 2: Reflection

Discuss the following with your team:

- What does your chosen superpower reveal about your current priorities or concerns?
- How could that "superpower" be translated into real-life action or advocacy?

I think if we all collaborated with all our superpowers, we feminists could be such beautiful "trouble."

– Nino, Georgia

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12 This exercise serves as an excellent icebreaker for workshops on values, power, or feminist organizing. It is designed to spark creativity and inject energy into deeper discussions regarding systemic transformation.

In times of crisis, sustaining feminist movements requires **strategic funding**, **unconventional alliances**, and **adaptive leadership**. Building these alliances and making critical funding decisions demands resilient and accountable **leadership**, especially in the face of uncertainty. Leadership is both a form of power and the force that sustains collective resistance.

Power is not merely an individual attribute; it is embedded in allyship, political engagement, collaboration, and the very structures of our organizations and movements. These power relations are interconnected, forming an infrastructure that must be actively maintained and strengthened.

To sustain this infrastructure, we need a collective transformation and a strategic approach that responds to our current circumstances. This requires us to examine **leadership** through the lenses of **power, hierarchy,** and **accountability**, while understanding the three layers of power:

- How we experience and navigate power
- How power influences and affects us
- How we, in turn, influence power

Forms of Power

Power is exercised in diverse and overlapping ways. Feminist theory often identifies three distinct layers of power, which help us answer critical questions: Who decides? Who controls the resources? And what are the ultimate consequences of those decisions?

1. Visible, direct power (decision-making power)

This is the direct power we experience and participate in daily through formal leadership and decision-making roles. It is held by authorities such as ministers, CEOs, and donors. When we advocate for policy changes or sit at the boardroom table, we are engaging with visible power.

2. Hidden, indirect power (agenda-setting power)

This layer is subtler, operating behind the scenes to determine which issues are prioritized and which are ignored. It is the power to set the agenda and shape the narratives that dominate public discourse. This power is often wielded by lobbyists, media owners, and senior institutional staff who control the "gatekeeping" process.

3. Invisible power (ideological power)

The most difficult layer to pinpoint, invisible power is embedded within systemic structures and cultural norms. It shapes our everyday realities by defining what is considered "normal" or "acceptable." This includes gender norms, cultural biases, and the systemic structures that influence our beliefs and behaviors without us even realizing it.

EXERCISE 6

Mapping Hidden, Indirect Power

Objective: To reflect on how your team or organization shapes agendas, influences narratives, and guides decision-making. This exercise serves as a powerful self-reflection tool for monitoring and evaluating the deeper impact of your work.

Step 1: Individual Reflection

Ask each team member to list hidden, indirect powers they hold:

"What influence do you have that isn't always visible but still impacts our outcomes?"

Examples: Producing or shaping narratives; setting priorities; influencing partners; managing or controlling resources.

Step 2: Team Mapping

As a group, map out how your organization or team collectively holds hidden, indirect power. Identify whom you influence within your reach, including partners, stakeholders, communities, and broader networks.

Step 3: Discussion

- How are these powers currently **being used? Are they being applied positively, responsibly, and strategically?**
- Identify opportunities to use hidden and indirect power to further shared goals and feminist principles.

Step 4: Action Planning (Optional)

- Decide concrete steps for using your hidden and indirect powers intentionally within your program or annual planning.
- Agree on how to measure or track the impact of these subtle influences.

The conversation about **power** is complex and often framed in negative terms – as a tool for domination or control. However, power can also be a transformative force that enables individuals, organizations, and communities to create meaningful change.

Understanding the various expressions of power – how decisions are made, how resources are distributed, and how communities function – is vital. By analyzing how power is projected and shared, we gain the tools to transform systems from within, ensuring we are agents of change rather than subjects of domination.

1. **Power over:** The most familiar and visible expression of power, characterized by control or dominance over people, institutions, or systems. People in leadership, for example, exercise this form of power. We all hold some degree of "power over," whether we acknowledge it or not (e.g., as parents, siblings, or professionals).

2. **Power to:** This refers to the agency and capacity to act or effect change. Unlike dominance, it is an enabling force. It is a cornerstone of feminist action because it emphasizes collective efforts that empower individuals to contribute to a larger cause.

3. **Power within:** This relates to personal and collective self-worth – recognizing our own strength and capacity to act. It is often fueled by intangible resources like knowledge, lived experience, and social connections. Every resilient movement is rooted in a strong sense of "power within."

4. **Power with:** This is the act of building collective strength through collaboration, solidarity, and shared goals. It is through "power with" that we build the communities necessary to dismantle the systems of domination that have historically and systemically oppressed us.

5. **Power for:** This involves using power specifically to uplift others and advance equity, justice, and a shared vision. It shifts the focus from individual gain to collective benefit, asking: How do we redistribute resources equitably together? How do we channel our superpowers for the good of all?

Now reflect on where your organization, community, or team fits within this power ecosystem. How does the "power line" function in your setting?

For example, international organizations often hold a specific position within the larger ecosystem, wielding positional power relative to partners, grantees, and other institutions. Partners are usually civil society organizations or other structured entities operating on the ground, engaging directly with communities. In this traditional structure, communities are often situated at the end of the line – representing the individuals and groups that partners serve in the field.

Power flows in multiple directions. Larger organizations may exercise "power over" grantees through the provision of funding and the requirement of compliance and reporting. Simultaneously, these large organizations are held accountable to their own donors, boards, or governments.

"Power within" is important. The current political agenda is pressuring us to shrink – but we must refuse. By tapping into our internal power, we can continue to expand, grow, and thrive. If the traditional funding dries up, we must be creative and find resources elsewhere. That energy is what will push us forward; ultimately, it is how we survive. And we will survive.

– Nino, Dalan Fund

Our office is trying to move beyond traditional donor-partner dynamics, where the relationship is limited to fund disbursement and reporting. We want to be deeply involved in projects, campaigns, and advocacy work from their inception, ensuring that our core principles and values are integrated from the start. Our goal is to shift away from "power over" and instead foster a "power with" approach.

– Philip, hbs South Korea

Ecosystem thinking helps us visualize the flow of power and the dependencies between international organizations, partners, and communities. It clarifies positional power – identifying who holds influence and exploring how it can be exercised responsibly. Power is complex and goes both ways. Everyone simultaneously exercises and is subject to power, both personally and institutionally; it's never a simple either/or. Ultimately, power also carries responsibility.

We were the first organization in Tunisia to support LGBTIQ+ groups in 2012–2013, at a time when working on this issue was extremely risky for international organizations. Because of this, they have deep gratitude toward hbs. Even during the backlash we have faced as a foundation, they protected us. In practice, I sometimes feel that partners hold the real power. I believe our office exists because our partners exist.

– Mahassen, hbs Tunisia

Strong partnerships are built when partners feel confident that they can provide honest feedback without fear of reprisal or domination. The presence of safe, transparent feedback loops is a key indicator of feminist principles in practice. Consequently, the quality of these relationships should be integrated into institutional monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

Mapping Your Social Capital and Power Sharing

Objective: To identify and strategically use the different forms of capital and distribute power in order to strengthen your impact and resource mobilization efforts.

Step 1: Identify Your Social Capital

Map out the types of **capital** you and your organization hold:

- **Social capital:** Networks, relationships, and connections you or your organization have (locally, regionally, globally).
- **Political capital:** Influence, affiliation, and credibility you have with policymakers, institutions, or systems of power.
- **Cultural capital:** The ways you communicate, present ideas, and connect across class and cultural differences – do you ''speak the language'' of others?

Step 2: Reflect and Apply Strategically

Discuss as a team:

- Which type of capital do we use the most?
- Which type do we underuse?
- Where do our strengths lie, and what are we missing?
- How do we share social capital – ''power with'' and ''power to'' – with our partners and allies?

Mapping your organization through the lens of the **five expressions of power** provides a clearer view of how influence operates within your institution. This process helps identify whom you hold power over, whom you share power with, and how you cultivate the power within to build the collective power to act. An organization's name and visibility also carry significant positional power, which can be deployed as a strategic asset. By recognizing these various expressions of power and their impact, feminist leaders can move more strategically – strengthening the collective capacity for action and building movements that are both resilient and transformative. Ultimately, feminist leadership is an intentional practice of redistributing power, shifting away from top-down control toward collective agency, accountability, and care.

Power and Leadership

Power shapes leadership, and leadership is one of the primary ways power is expressed within movements and organizations. Feminist leadership is not just about who leads, **but how power is structured.** Vertical and horizontal governance models directly shape power, accountability, and inclusion.

I know I don't enjoy managing people, and I'm honest about that. Also, by default, I don't believe in managing people – what exactly are we supervising? I'm happy to collaborate with people, identify shortcomings, and focus on strategy – that's where I want to be.

– Nino, Dalan Fund

1. Vertical governance (Board of Directors, Executive Director, CEO, etc.)

In vertical governance structures, power flows from the top down, with clearly defined roles, legal responsibilities, and decision-making authorities. This model is common in large organizations, NGOs, and formal institutions, and is often necessary to meet compliance requirements, handle legal obligations, and ensure external accountability to funders, regulators, and the public.

For example, a board of directors is a group of elected individuals who represent the interests of and oversee an organization by setting the strategies, guiding the management, and being ultimately responsible for key decisions. While these structures are sometimes met with hesitation in feminist organizations, they are often necessary – because they are required by governments, and because they can play a valuable role in ensuring accountability and safeguarding the organization's mission. Many major international feminist organizations and NGOs have a board of directors.

According to a survey in 2015, board members often have plenty of power but very little understanding of the actual realities on the ground. Their lived experiences and priorities are often worlds apart from those of the movements and communities they are meant to serve.

Through a feminist leadership lens, vertical structures can function effectively when they are transparent, accountable to the movement or community, and grounded in feminist values such as inclusion, intersectionality, (structural) care, justice, etc.

For example, if someone needs to raise a concern about a leader/director, they should be able to do so. If there is a clear system of accountability in place to ensure the concern is heard, addressed, and acted upon fairly, that is a great step forward. Ultimately, the key is ensuring that people have access to each other, and to knowledge and information.

2. Horizontal governance

In horizontal governance, the power is shared rather than concentrated on a single individual. Decisions are made collectively or collaboratively, emphasizing trust, mutual responsibility, inclusiveness and consensus. This model is often used in grassroots feminist organizations and movements. However, fully inclusive decision-making can sometimes be challenging to sustain. Involving everyone in every process may take a lot of time and energy, and it may be difficult to meet all expectations.

If we want to make everyone happy, we should sell ice cream. And even if we sold ice cream, we would not have enough flavors to accommodate everyone's needs.

– Nino, Dalan Fund

While I deeply value a feminist, democratic approach where everyone's input is considered, it is often more practical for small teams. In larger teams – especially where capacities and knowledge vary – this process can become incredibly time-consuming. At the end of the day, there must be a clear structure for who makes the final decision.

– Employee in a large feminist organization

There is no uniform definition of what feminist leadership is, so it is helpful for the teams or organizations to collectively define what feminist leadership means to them and how they want to practice it. There are frameworks and guidelines that can provide help along the way.

From a feminist leadership perspective, a horizontal governance model aligns with core feminist principles while challenging hierarchy and domination, reducing dependency on a single leader, and building the collective "power to" act. Feminist leadership seeks to integrate horizontal practices wherever possible, fostering shared responsibility, accountability, and active participation.

While leadership is generally defined as guiding others toward a common objective, feminist leadership specifically emphasizes collective power, inclusion, care, and equity. Feminist leadership can take many forms, and it needs both approaches. It does not necessarily reject structure or hierarchy; instead it re-shapes and adapts them. While vertical structures (often legally required) can provide stability and institutional protection, **horizontal governance** aims to distribute power and build resilience through a focus on values and care.

That's why feminist leadership looks critically at **decision-making processes** and tries to make them more transparent, effective, and inclusive, addressing such questions as: Why was this decision made? What was the underlying rationale? In what context did the decision take place?

In an era of rapid change and rising anti-rights pressures, we cannot rely on the strategies and resources that served us just a few years ago. If our "theory of change" remains static, we risk falling behind. Adapting to these shifts is a necessary, collective task.

Feminist funding and leadership practices are inseparable: the way we access, distribute, and mobilize resources directly shapes the power we hold and the impact we create. By practicing feminist leadership – sharing power, building trust, and centering care – we sustain our movements and maximize the social capital and collective strength of everyone involved. In times of crisis, these principles foster a sense of solidarity and community, making long-term resilience possible.

REGIONAL CASE STUDIES

SOUTH AFRICA

Against the Tide: Feminist and Queer Resistance in Southern Africa

*By **Kealeboga Mase Ramaru**, Heinrich Böll Foundation's Cape Town Office (South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe)*

Across Southern Africa, feminist, reproductive justice, and queer movements are facing an escalating and coordinated anti-gender backlash. Once dismissed as fringe cultural conservatism and religious rhetoric, today's anti-gender politics are global in design and local in implementation. They are supported by opaque funding streams that enable anti-rights discourse to spread rapidly across the region and the wider continent. Championed by well-resourced alliances between religious fundamentalists, right-wing influencers, and state actors, these counter-movements frame gender justice as a threat to tradition, religion, national sovereignty, and the family. This is particularly visible in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, where, despite varying legal protections and civic landscapes, the effects are strikingly similar: a shrinking space for dissent, the reversal of hard-won policies, and the weaponization of culture and religion to delegitimize human rights.

Understanding the Architecture of Anti-Gender Politics in the Southern African Region

In **South Africa**, robust constitutional protections for women and LGBTIQ+ individuals stand in sharp contrast to the country's violent gendered realities. The nation has made significant strides in protecting the rights of LGBTIQ+ people through formal constitutional recognition and legislative safeguards. For instance, while the Civil Union Act remains a focal point of discussion, its 2020 amendment marked a critical victory: it ensured that marriage officials can no longer refuse to oversee same-sex marriages based on their personal religious or cultural biases.

However, progressive legislation has not yet translated into the necessary societal shift. South Africa continues to grapple with endemic gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF), deepening gaps in sexual and reproductive health services, and escalating public hostility toward queer and trans communities. Hate crimes remain a devastating consequence of this slow transformation, with LGBTIQ+ people frequently the target of violent crimes specifically motivated by their gender identity and sexual orientation.

In addition, conservative faith-based groups and political populists have grown louder in recent years, opposing comprehensive sexuality education, transgender rights, and the decriminalization of sex work. These actors increasingly frame feminism and queer visibility as "anti-African," "elitist," or "divisive," labels specifically designed to undermine public support for essential justice reforms. In recent months, political actors of some of the larger parties in South Africa have made public statements that undermine trans rights. These utterances echo the dangerous rhetoric propagated by anti-gender proponents. To justify these stances, politicians often leverage Biblical and cultural references, despite being documented bene-

ficiaries of covertly operating anti-gender groups. The perpetuation of this discourse by key political figures signals a sobering reality: even where legal safeguards are in place, they are not enough. Without deep-seated societal transformation, anti-gender actors will continue to exploit cultural vulnerabilities and propagate messages that incite exclusion and violence.

In **Zimbabwe**, gender justice has long been co-opted into nationalist narratives, frequently buried under the weight of the country's dire political situation. Queer identities remain criminalized under colonial-era sodomy laws, and LGBTIQ+ people continue to face state-sponsored hostility. Historically and currently, anti-queer sentiments permeate the Zimbabwean government, shaping public attitudes and positioning LGBTIQ+ rights as "anti-African." This rhetoric frames queer identities as erosive to the fabric of Zimbabwean society, weaponizing tradition to justify the ongoing exclusion of marginalized communities.

Additionally, there has been coordinated de-politicization of feminist organizing throughout the years. Feminist movements are subjected to heavy surveillance, with activists often painted as agents of Western imperialism and as individuals working to undermine the government in pursuit of regime change. The rise of Christian nationalist discourses has deepened resistance to sexual rights, reinforcing policies that restrict access to abortion, contraception, and gender-affirming healthcare. Meanwhile, the broader political climate marked by repression and economic precarity means activists face multiple layers of vulnerability, including arbitrary arrest, online harassment, and donor restrictions.

In **Namibia**, a country with a relatively open civic space, anti-gender narratives are becoming increasingly prominent. In 2023, following a Supreme Court decision recognizing same-sex marriages performed abroad, the Namibian Parliament moved in direct opposition to the ruling, passing two bills to restrict marriage equality for LGBTIQ+ people. These bills do more than invalidate rights; they impose punitive measures, including prison time and heavy fines, designed to suppress any public support for LGBTIQ+ equality. Since the Supreme Court's landmark ruling, anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiment has intensified, resulting in the tragic murder of six members of the LGBTIQ+ community in Namibia.

The role of religious actors has been central to this shift. Some churches have openly condemned LGBTIQ+ rights and publicly supported the anti-queer bills passed by Parliament. In this climate, debates around sexuality, abortion, and gender identity have become ideological battlegrounds where religious and nationalist actors claim moral authority. Although abortion remains heavily restricted, public discourse on reform is increasingly silenced by accusations of "foreign interference" or "moral decay." Furthermore, community visibility – including public marches, Pride events, and the registration of advocacy organizations – is often met with bureaucratic obstacles, denial, or physical violence.

Organizing the Resistance: Feminist and Queer Interventions in Southern Africa

Despite an intensifying anti-gender backlash across Southern Africa, feminist and queer movements continue to resist through bold, strategic, and intersectional interventions. From high-level legislative advocacy to grassroots mobilization and creative cultural activism, these efforts have successfully shifted public discourse and demanded institutional accountability. These feminist and queer interventions across South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe have challenged patriarchal violence and anti-queer hostility, and continue to push back against conservative retrenchment.

Conclusion

The rise of anti-gender ideologies across Southern Africa is not simply a cultural backlash; it is a coordinated political project rooted in repression, nationalism, and global right-wing influence. Yet even in the face of criminalization, surveillance, and violence, feminist and queer movements across South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe continue to resist with courage and creativity. From mass mobilizations like #TotalShutdown and legal victories such as the Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill, to cultural interventions like Drag Night Namibia and sustained grassroots organizing by GALZ and Katswe Sistahood, the region is rich with resistance that challenges repressive powers and continues to actively build new, liberatory futures grounded in justice, autonomy, and collective care

Kenya at the Crossroads

*By **Akinyi Odera**, Heinrich Böll Foundation's Nairobi Office (Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania)*

Before the current anti-gender backlash, Kenya had made notable progress in securing women's and LGBTIQ+ rights, particularly through constitutional protections, landmark judicial rulings, and a burgeoning civil society. Women achieved legal recognition in areas such as property inheritance, political participation, and protection from gender-based violence, while LGBTIQ+ communities gained limited visibility and organizational space, especially in urban centers like Nairobi and Mombasa. These gains, however, were always fragile, constrained by conservative social norms, religious influence, and uneven enforcement of laws, making the current anti-gender wave a significant threat to hard-won rights and social progress.

Amid this growing conservative climate, Member of Parliament Peter Kaluma is urging the legislature to advance the so-called Family Protection Bill. This proposed law aims to outlaw same-sex relationships, LGBTIQ+ expression, and advocacy activities. Kaluma is also challenging a 2023 Supreme Court ruling that affirmed the right of LGBTIQ+ organizations to register in Kenya. These local events are part of a broader global backlash against gender-inclusive policies – a movement that gained further momentum following the return of Donald Trump to the American presidency.

The Family Protection Bill seeks to criminalize homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and what it calls "aggravated homosexuality." The bill's reach extends into property and financial rights, prohibiting landlords from renting to organizations that support LGBTIQ+ rights and cutting off funding for activities deemed in breach of the law. Under this legislation, LGBTIQ+ organizations would be barred from registration entirely. If enacted, the bill would violate Kenyans' constitutional rights to privacy and freedom of expression. It would effectively ban the discussion of LGBTIQ+ issues on digital platforms like TikTok, which has become vital for modern advocacy. Most alarmingly, the bill would deny emergency medical care to individuals suspected of engaging in prohibited sexual activities – a direct contradiction of fundamental human rights and medical ethics.

Despite strong opposition from civil society, Kenya's Parliament continues to advance the bill. Monitors of LGBTIQ+ movements report that the African Christian Professionals Forum (ACPF) has presented its case from a spiritual perspective, portraying LGBTIQ+ and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) advocacy as "un-Christian" and a form "spiritual brainwashing." This rhetoric is particularly potent in a country where approximately 85% of citizens identify as Christian.

While some traditional women's rights organizations have remained silent, intersectional feminist groups – especially those representing LBQ persons – have been vocal. The Community of Grassroot Human Rights Defenders, led by Rachel Mwikali, has proactively countered false narratives spread by ACPF. Simultaneously, the Zamara Foundation, a co-founder of the #EndFemicideKe movement, has launched grassroots activities and digital campaigns to challenge the narrow "traditional family values" promoted by anti-rights actors. Their work reframes the conversation by amplifying messages about the diversity and resilience of African families, pushing back against moralistic depictions of family structures, and celebrating multigenerational and inclusive family forms across Instagram and other digital platforms.

The debate surrounding the Family Protection Bill gained significant momentum when prominent Kenyan journalist Larry Madowo, who is currently working for CNN, criticized an early promotional poster from ACPF. Madowo noted that the imagery featured predominantly white, male individuals and lacked local representation. His critique sparked a wave of online debate, eventually prompting ACPF to release a statement refuting the claims. However, this high-profile exchange inadvertently increased the visibility of the conference, bringing it to the attention of audiences who were previously unaware of the event. In response, civil society groups across Kenya have formed a united front to oppose the Family Protection Bill. These organizations are launching comprehensive awareness campaigns, pursuing strategic legal advocacy to challenge the bill's constitutionality, and mobilizing international support to protect human rights in the region.

Regional Lessons and Feminist Responses

Drawing lessons from similar legislation in Ghana and Uganda, where repressive laws have had far-reaching social and economic impacts, activists warn that the bill's enactment would escalate violence against LGBTIQ+ people, restrict access to essential services – particularly healthcare – and undermine critical HIV prevention and treatment programs, threatening years of public health progress. Through coordinated legal action and grassroots mobilization, activists are working to prevent such outcomes. Feminist and queer actors in Kenya have employed a combination of visibility, advocacy, and community-building strategies to counter the growing anti-gender backlash. Members of Kenya's LGBTIQ+ community are increasingly using **social media to share personal stories, mobilize support, and build public awareness**, especially in response to anti-gay protests and backlash. Kenyan queer rights organizations like the **Initiative for Equality and Non-Discrimination (INEND)** run **advocacy and community outreach campaigns** as well as public sensitization programs to challenge discrimination and educate communities. INEND also works on **fact-checking LGBTIQ+ misinformation and shaping public narratives**, especially online, where anti-rights content spreads rapidly. Through these efforts, they demonstrate resilience by documenting abuses and reframing narratives to show that diverse family structures and LGBTIQ+ inclusion are rooted in African realities and are not a foreign imposition.

The weekend after the ACPF conference, at least three LGBTIQ+ rights advocates held events highlighting the diversity of African families. Organizations like INEND published an article in one of the mainstream newspapers to mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT) and hosted a private gathering for queer individuals and their families to foster acceptance and support. Media personalities, including openly bisexual journalist Abigael Arunga, also used Instagram to showcase different family structures, debunking the myth that these forms are a "Western ideology." These campaigns emphasized that single-parent households, matriarchal-led families, chosen families, and adoptive families are all deeply rooted in African social fabric.

Kenya currently stands at a critical crossroads, shaped by the proposed 2025 Finance Bill and the approaching 2027 presidential elections. Since 2022, the current government has faced a series of internal and external crises: public objections to the election results and the subsequent self-dismantling of the IEBC; mass protests in 2023 rejecting the new presidency; the historic impeachment of the Deputy President; and, most recently, the Gen Z protests, which shook the administration's foundation and were met with state-led abductions and killings.

Against this backdrop of instability, the Kaluma Bill (the Family Protection Bill) represents a significant risk. Given Kenya's large Christian majority, the government may weaponize this bill as a populist tool to consolidate support and distract from economic and political grievances.

According to a 2024 report by The Advocates for Human Rights, discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people costs East African economies up to USD 5 billion annually. In Uganda, the passage of the Anti-Homosexuality Act in March 2023 led to a stark increase in insecurity and discrimination. This has resulted in widespread job dismissals, forcing many affected individuals into sex work as a means of survival. While Kenya is often perceived as more welcoming, the passage of the proposed Kaluma Bill could carry severe macroeconomic consequences. According to global coalition Open for Business, potential impacts include the loss of its African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) status, a reduction in donor funding, and a decline in foreign direct investment. Furthermore, informal evidence suggests that LGBTIQ+ youth are less likely to complete their education due to the withdrawal of family support following the disclosure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

ACPF and its affiliates have escalated their digital tactics, recently publishing a YouTube video targeting LGBTIQ+ organizations in Nairobi and Mombasa. The video portrays these groups as "foreign-funded" and "un-African." Initially drawing little attention, the content amassed over 2,000 views within five days, sparking concerns that mainstream media may amplify this rhetoric following review by the Kenya National Human Rights Commission.

Most alarmingly, ACPF has launched a "name-and-shame" campaign across its networks. By exposing the identities of LGBTIQ+ leadership and the physical locations of their offices, they have created a direct physical safety risk for human rights defenders. Additionally, while ACPF distributed a "Declaration of Family Values" to its conference delegates, the document remains shielded from public scrutiny.

Kenya's feminist and queer actors are responding to the current and intensifying anti-gender backlash with creativity, solidarity, and resilience, using digital advocacy and coalition-building to shift narratives and safeguard fundamental rights. Their work highlights the power of locally led strategies and new digital channels to protect marginalized communities in the face of political and social pressure.

Rights on Hold: The Backlash against Gender, Sexuality, and Human Rights in South Korea

*By **Philip Kim**, Heinrich Böll Foundation's East Asia Office*

South Korea has seen notable progress in gender and human rights over the past two decades. Yet, in recent years, political polarization, the anti-gender backlash, and stalled legislative efforts have complicated the landscape, leading to a fragmented and contested approach to equality and inclusion.

Erosion of Gender Equality and Rise of Anti-Gender Movements

Legal reforms in the 1990s and 2000s advanced gender equality, including with regard to workplace discrimination and gender-based violence. However, many younger men – particularly those in their 20s and 30s – viewed these efforts as threats to their own standing within a highly competitive society.

By the late 2010s, alongside South Korea's #MeToo movement – ignited by a female prosecutor's public testimony of workplace sexual harassment – the country witnessed a sharp rise in online sexual abuse, such as the Telegram Nth Room case, where women's sexual abuse content was illegally shared through online platforms for profit. This galvanized widespread public support for feminist movements, but also triggered a strong backlash from right-wing media, which portrayed gender equality efforts as divisive and excessive.

During the 2022 presidential election, candidate Yoon Suk Yul denied structural gender inequality and promised to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, thus appealing to conservative voters and 58% of young men in their 20s, which contributed significantly to his victory. Since he took office, gender-focused programs have faced defunding, rebranding, or cancellation, with gender rights being framed as a cultural battleground rather than a fundamental human rights issue.

Stalled Anti-Discrimination Legislation

Since 2007, South Korea has failed to pass a comprehensive anti-discrimination act that would outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, sex characteristics, disability, race, age, religion, and more. Civil society advocacy efforts from the National Human Rights Commission of Korea and international human rights bodies have been persistent but have been met with entrenched political resistance from conservative religious groups and right-wing public figures, who frame efforts to pass such an act as promoting "LGBTIQ+ propaganda" and violating religious freedoms. Even liberal lawmakers have hesitated to support the bill, fearing electoral repercussions, which has left many marginalized groups without adequate legal protection.

Abortion: Legalized but Unregulated

The Constitutional Court's 2019 decision decriminalized abortion effective from January 1, 2021, marking a moment of victory in South Korea's reproductive rights history. But the absence of follow-up legislation has created a legal and procedural vacuum. Medical providers face ambiguity around service provision, and individuals seeking abortion services encounter inconsistent access, high costs, and limited support. Civil society groups are calling for comprehensive reproductive rights, including public health insurance coverage, legal protections for bodily autonomy, and the incorporation of reproductive self-determination into health policy.

Sex Education: Inadequate and Exclusionary

Sex education is part of the national school curriculum in South Korea, but the current programs are heavily criticized for being predominantly abstinence-based, lacking up-to-date information on contraception and STIs, excluding content related to sexual orientation and gender identity, and reinforcing binary gender norms. Attempts to modernize sex education face pushback from religious and parental groups, who label reforms as promoting LGBTIQ+ and pro-choice agendas. Meanwhile, civil society advocates for comprehensive sex education (CSE) that promotes a rights-based, inclusive, and evidence-based approach to sexual and reproductive health.

Marriage Equality: Legal Recognition Remains Elusive

While South Korea's Constitution does not explicitly ban same-sex marriage, such unions remain legally unrecognized, denying LGBTIQ+ couples spousal rights. The issue gained visibility in 2013 when filmmaker Kim-Jho Gwangsoo held a public same-sex wedding, drawing national attention to the lack of legal protections. This was followed by a 2023 Seoul High Court ruling that sided with a same-sex couple who had been denied spousal health insurance – marking a symbolic victory. Marriage for All Korea (MAK), a key advocacy coalition, continues to push for reform through litigation and public campaigns.

Public support is rising, especially among younger generations, with 61% of people aged between 18 and 34 favoring marriage equality, but political resistance remains strong, amid pressure from conservative and religious groups.

Like South Korea, Japan experiences persistent gender inequality despite progressive legal reforms. Women face structural barriers within family law, limited representation in the political sphere and corporate leadership, and widespread gender-based violence. Reproductive rights are restricted (abortion needs spousal consent), in contrast with South Korea's 2021 decriminalization.

LGBTIQ+ individuals experience some social acceptance but minimal legal recognition: same-sex partnerships provide symbolic rights only, and transgender people face invasive medical and bureaucratic obstacles to legal gender change.

Both countries share the challenges of out-of-date laws, cultural conservatism, and inadequate societal shifts, highlighting the need for continued advocacy to align legal protections with human rights standards.

Why Japan Matters: Shared Struggles Require Regional Solidarity

Japan and South Korea face remarkably similar challenges when it comes to gender, making cross-border analysis essential for advancing change in both nations. Both countries struggle with persistent gender inequality through structural barriers in family law, politics, and corporate leadership, plus widespread gender-based violence. While South Korea decriminalized abortion in 2021, Japan still requires spousal consent, illustrating varied progress trajectories.

LGBTIQ+ communities in both nations have limited legal recognition despite growing social acceptance. Same-sex partnerships offer only symbolic rights, and transgender individuals face invasive bureaucratic obstacles to legal gender change.

Both countries remain constrained by outdated laws and cultural conservatism. While local activists work tirelessly for transformation, these shared challenges demonstrate why regional solidarity is crucial. Analyzing Japan alongside South Korea helps identify common patterns and strengthen advocacy efforts that align legal protections with international human rights standards.

South Korea at a Crossroads

South Korea is at a crossroads in its human rights journey – while past reforms created momentum for gender and sexual equality, the current political climate has stalled or reversed progress. The rollback of gender equality policies, resistance to anti-discrimination legislation, and a lack of legal recognition for same-sex relationships all point to a need for renewed, sustained advocacy.

Civil society remains crucial in advancing rights-based frameworks and pushing for comprehensive legislation, inclusive education, and institutional protections. However, meaningful change requires not only advocacy but also political courage and a broader societal commitment to human rights and social justice for all.

Building Power through Resistance, Resilience, and Adaptation: South Korea's Multi-Layered Counter-Strategies

Despite facing systemic rollbacks and entrenched opposition, South Korea's gender and LGBTIQ+ rights movements demonstrate a remarkably sophisticated strategy incorporating **resistance** (directly challenging anti-gender campaigns), **resilience** (building safe spaces and networks), and **adaptation** (reframing gender equality as foundational to democracy and leveraging international mechanisms). This approach – supported by a dense network of feminist NGOs, queer organizations, youth activists, and legal professionals – combines grassroots politics, digital activism, and formal advocacy to create a movement ecosystem that can withstand political hostility. The shared struggles with Japan underscore why regional solidarity matters for advancing human rights across both nations. Despite the current setbacks, growing support among younger generations and the movement's proven adaptability suggest these strategies are building the foundation for meaningful and lasting change.

Checklist 1: Responding to Psychological Unsafety and Supporting Mental Wellbeing
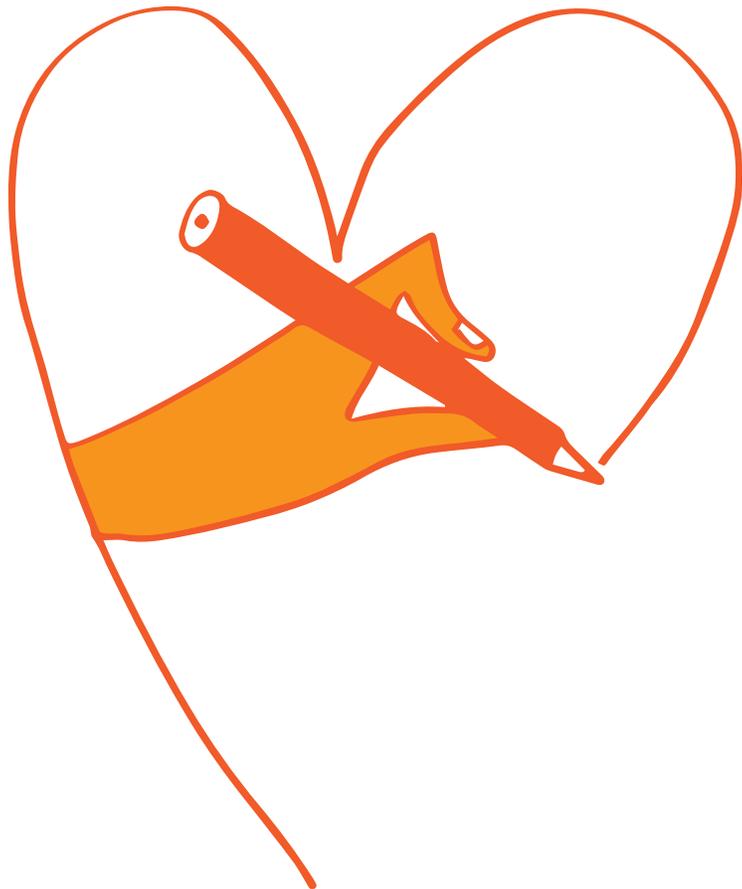
☐ Organize regular reflective gatherings or check-ins focused on emotional wellbeing rather than strictly work tasks. If the majority of the team feels comfortable with this, introduce this practice gradually using a variety of exercises.

☐ Encourage open conversations where team members can safely share how they feel, starting with yourself.

☐ Provide access to therapy, counseling, or coaching – either individually or collectively. If budget is a constraint, leverage internal resources from your broader network or partner organizations.

☐ Celebrate small wins and share gratitude, both individually and collectively, in a balanced way.

☐ Manage workloads sustainably and set realistic timelines to prevent burnout.

☐ Encourage flexible schedules during intense or emotionally heavy periods.

☐ Normalize the setting of boundaries, such as not responding to emails after work hours.

☐ Provide secure, anonymous channels for sharing wellbeing concerns or feedback in both directions (bottom-up and top-down).

Checklist 2: Warning Signs of Burnout – What is Burnout and How to Recognize It

Burnout doesn't happen overnight — it builds quietly. This section outlines the warning signs and practical steps for recognizing and addressing early symptoms, especially in high-pressure activist environments.

Burnout is more than just tiredness. It is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by prolonged stress and overwork. It often develops gradually – you continue to push yourself until one day you just can't keep going anymore. It is important to remember that burnout is not a sign of weakness; it is a clear signal that your system has been running on empty for too long.

Keep this list handy, and use it to check in on yourself regularly.

Mental and Emotional Signs

- Constant exhaustion or mental fog that remains even after rest.
- Feeling detached or numb about work or the causes you normally care about; a sense of being "paralyzed."
- Irritability, sadness, or anger triggered by small issues; increased anxiety or persistent feelings of guilt.
- Cynicism and loss of motivation, such as a growing sense of "what's the point?" or resentment toward the needs of others.
- Feeling overwhelmed and unable to focus, prioritize tasks, or make decisions.
- Constantly feeling like you're failing or not doing "enough"; pervasive self-doubt or guilt for wanting to rest.
- Feeling isolated, even when in collective or shared spaces.

Behavioral Signs

- Withdrawal from colleagues, friends, or community; feeling disconnected from your team or social circles.
- Avoidance of engagement, such as shunning meetings, deadlines, messages, collaborations, or group discussions.
- Using excessive work as a coping mechanism to manage stress or avoid underlying issues.
- Neglect of personal needs, such as skipping meals, sleep, or rest, while relying on caffeine, nicotine, or other stimulants to stay alert.
- Loss of interest in joyful activities, both in your private life and professional environment.

Physical Signs

- Persistent fatigue or insomnia.
- Frequent headaches, unexplained body aches, or chronic muscle tension.
- Digestive issues, such as a nervous stomach or significant changes in appetite.
- Heart palpitations or shortness of breath when under pressure.
- Getting sick more often (as a result of a weakened immune system).

Checklist 3: Emergency and Safety Protocols

In contexts where activism involves risks, clear safety protocols are essential for reducing panic and protecting lives. These procedures provide a starting point for organizations or collectives to adapt and customize to meet their specific needs.

1. Emergency Contact / Communication Protocol

- Ensure every team member can be reached or supported quickly in an emergency.
- Maintain an updated emergency contact list (partners, family members, relevant embassies, etc.), and keep it easily reachable.
- Store one digital, password-protected copy in a secure shared drive and keep one printed copy in a secure location within the office.
- Ensure everyone gets information quickly during a crisis, such as through an emergency messaging group.

2. Staff Safety and Evacuation Protocol

- Provide clear, actionable guidance for situations where staff are in immediate danger or must leave the country.
- Map out safe routes and identify secure locations or nearby partner organizations that can provide refuge.
- Clearly define who has the authority to order an evacuation and who must be informed; be sure to use encrypted communication apps in emergency situations.
- Ensure every staff member keeps a "go-bag" containing essentials and critical documents — both at the office and at home — particularly in zones affected by conflict, political instability, or climate-related disasters.

3. Work Continuity Protocol

- Ensure operations can continue if key personnel are displaced, relocated, or otherwise unable to work.
- Designate backup personnel for every position, including managers and leaders, to ensure decision-making remains functional during sick leave or emergencies.
- Centralize essential passwords and project files in a secure, shared digital space to prevent information loss.

4. Wellbeing and Leave Protocol

- Allow staff to prioritize their mental and physical health by taking breaks on their own terms during personal or collective crises.

- Provide "no-questions-asked" emergency leave (typically 3–5 days). Discuss the implementation of this policy with your teams to ensure it meets their needs.

- Designate a "peer-check" lead , tasked with checking in on the team's wellbeing. This role should rotate to prevent a single individual from bearing the emotional burden, or be shared by multiple people in larger collectives.

- Encourage and provide confidential access to counseling or peer support. Ideally have a therapist or professional counselor on call to provide immediate assistance during crises.

5. Office Security Procedure

- Protect both personnel and assets during local threats or civil unrest. While formal organizations should have these by default, informal collectives should also adopt these practices.

- Clearly define safe exits and establish meeting points outside the building.

- Keep a fully stocked first aid kit, flashlights, and emergency water supplies on-site.

- Store critical physical documents in a locked, fireproof, or otherwise secure location.

When necessary, the team should conduct a post-emergency debrief – ideally within one week of the crisis. During this session, team members can discuss what worked, what could be improved, and what needs to change for the future. Use these insights to update the emergency plan accordingly.

Exercise: When a Team Member Needs to Step Away – Possible Approaches

Normalize Care and Transparency

Encourage a team culture where members feel empowered to speak up early when they start feeling overwhelmed – before reaching a crisis point. Establish regular check-ins where wellbeing is an integrated part of the agenda (e.g., at team meetings). Ensure team members feel safe saying, "I need to slow down," without fear of judgment or professional repercussions.

Redistribute, Don't Blame

When a team member needs to step away, the focus should remain on support and redistribution rather than frustration or guilt. Collectively and transparently discuss how to reassign urgent tasks: identify which projects can be paused, which can be shared, and how to balance the remaining workload fairly.

Protocols, Protocols, Protocols

Use these situations as a learning opportunity to enhance future preparedness. Team members may unexpectedly go on sick leave, so the team or collective should have a "continuity plan" in place. This includes a simple checklist of who can step into key roles and ensures that critical information – such as passwords, contacts, project statuses – is accessible to the team rather than held by a single person.

Provide Space for Processing

After the situation has passed, create time and space for the team to reflect together. Discuss what worked and what didn't, and use these insights to redefine feminist leadership – both formal and informal – within your context. Feminist leadership is not about achieving perfection; it is about responding to one another with empathy, accountability, and clarity.

Checklist for Personal Use of Social Media, Emails, and Devices

1. How can I protect my social media?

- You may choose to use a professional alias or avoid using your full legal name.
- Use strong, unique passwords for each account.
- Enable two-factor authentication (2FA).
- Keep profiles private, limit post visibility, OR be mindful of the risks associated with public exposure.
- Think twice before posting personal details or location information.
- Periodically review connected apps and account permissions, as privacy settings and third-party access can change over time.

2. How can I secure my email account?

- Always use a unique, complex password combined with 2FA.
- Avoid opening suspicious links or downloading unexpected attachments.
- Use encrypted email services when sending sensitive or confidential information.
- Establish an internal protocol regarding which platforms to use for specific types of communication and create a step-by-step response plan in case an account is compromised.

3. How can I share sensitive files safely within my organization?

- Use secure messaging apps like Signal or encrypted email services such as Proton Mail, which is widely trusted by queer organizations.
- Share sensitive information only with verified, trusted contacts.
- Apply password protection to documents before sharing them.
- Send file passwords through a separate communication channel (e.g., if you send the file via email, send the password via Signal).
- Use file-sharing settings to limit permissions and set expiration dates so links automatically deactivate after a certain period.

4. How can I protect my devices physically?

- Set strong, unique passwords or PINs for your phones, laptops, and SIM cards.
- Encrypt your hard drive and any mobile storage (such as SD cards) to ensure data remains unreadable if the device is lost or stolen.
- Regularly update your operating system and applications to ensure you have the latest security patches.
- Avoid leaving devices unattended in public places or unsecured environments.

Immediate Response When Harm Occurs

1. **Stay calm:** Take a moment to understand the situation and what just happened.
2. **Ensure physical safety first:** If there is any immediate physical threat, move to a secure location before taking further action.
3. **Document everything:** Save messages, emails, and screenshots; securely store any evidence of harassment or digital attacks for future reporting.

Digital Response

4. **Secure accounts and devices:** Immediately change your passwords and ensure 2FA is enabled on all critical accounts.
5. **Report to platforms:** Use the reporting tools on social media or email providers to flag harassment, impersonation, or threats.
6. **Limit exposure:** Temporarily restrict your privacy settings to control who can contact you or view your content. In extreme cases, consider deactivating accounts until the threat subsides.

Organizational Response

7. **Inform trusted contacts or supervisors:** Alert colleagues or organizational leadership about the incident as soon as possible.
8. **Activate organizational protocols:** Implement existing safety and security plans, including crisis communication, evacuation procedures, and IT or legal support.
9. **Engage support networks:** Reach out to peer groups, feminist networks, or human rights organizations for guidance, solidarity, and to issue alerts if necessary.

Mental and Emotional Care

10. **Prioritize mental health:** Take breaks, seek professional counseling, or connect with supportive peers to process the experience.

11. **Rest and recover:** Allow your body time to recuperate; prioritize sleep and physical downtime.

12. **Reflect:** Consider what worked and what could be improved; use these insights to update personal or organizational safety practices for the future.

Cultivating a Preventive Mindset

12. **Learn and adapt:** Use past incidents to refine your habits, protocols, and overall security awareness. Practical steps include disabling automatic password saving in browsers, consistently using a VPN for secure connections, and maintaining anonymity or "staying faceless" in high-risk digital spaces.

13. **Empower others:** Share key lessons learned with your community to help others stay safe. Ensure you provide this guidance without exposing sensitive information or compromising the privacy of those involved in previous incidents.

SAFETY AND SECURITY SCENARIOS

Scenario 1: Online Harassment

- **Description:** Lina, a journalist from Latin America, reports on gender-based violence. After publishing a sensitive story involving high-profile individuals, she receives threatening messages via social media and email. Simultaneously, attackers try to hack her accounts.

- **Analysis:** Lina's exposure is compounded by her profession, her gender, and the sensitive nature of her reporting. These threats pose a risk to both her digital security and physical safety.

- **Mitigation:** Use strong, unique passwords and enable two-factor authentication (2FA) across all devices, email, and social media accounts; audit and limit the amount of personal information visible on public profiles; establish a verified list of emergency contacts within the organization including a trusted peer group; and systematically document all threats and hacking attempts to support formal reporting and legal action.

- **Reflection questions:** How would you respond if you or a colleague received similar threats? Does your organization currently have a protocol for staff or partners facing targeted harassment?

Scenario 2: Physical Threat While Reporting

- **Description:** Ivan, a human rights activist in Eastern Europe, travels across the region to document anti-government protests. While reporting on-site, he is physically assaulted and his equipment — including his camera and smartphone — is stolen.

- **Analysis:** Ivan's risk profile is elevated by the volatile nature of his locations, the visibility of his advocacy work, and a lack of protection from state authorities.

- **Mitigation:** Share detailed travel itineraries and real-time locations with trusted contacts; carry only essential devices; use encrypted messaging for all sensitive coordination; establish a peer safety network for immediate emergency response; and conduct continuous risk assessments as the situation on the ground evolves.

- **Reflection questions:** What specific safety measures would you implement when visiting high-risk or crowded locations? How can your organization better support and protect fieldworkers operating in unstable environments?

Scenario 3: Targeted Data Breach

- **Description:** Sameer, a queer feminist activist in the SWANA region, manages sensitive documentation regarding his community's advocacy work. Hackers target his files in an attempt to intimidate him and compromise his organization.

- **Analysis:** Risks are significantly amplified by Sameer's identity, his organizational role, and the high-stakes nature of the data he handles. A breach in this context threatens not only the organization's work but the physical safety of the individuals mentioned in the documentation.

- **Mitigation:** Encrypt all sensitive files and use secure, end-to-end encrypted cloud storage services; strictly limit file access to a "need-to-know" basis with trusted individuals; use coded language or pseudonyms in documents instead of real names and specific locations; and establish a pre-verified support network (including legal counsel and emergency relocation plans) in the event that data is compromised.

- **Reflection questions:** How secure are your organization's internal files and databases? Who is responsible for leading the response to a potential data breach? Who is included in your emergency support network if a leak occurs?

Scenario 4: Online Threats Against a Feminist Activist

- **Description:** Sita, an Indian transfeminist activist, campaigns online for women's rights in a marginalized border region. She becomes a target of coordinated harassment on social media, including threatening messages, sexual harassment, and the use of fake accounts to spread disinformation. Simultaneously, she faces multiple attempts to breach her email and social media accounts .

- **Analysis:** Sita's risk is compounded by her gender identity, her advocacy on stigmatized topics, and her location in a high-poverty border area with limited protections. This harassment is not only a digital threat but a direct assault on her mental health and physical safety.

- **Mitigation:** Strictly limit the amount of personal information shared online; consider working under a pseudonym or taking a strategic hiatus from social media; ensure immediate access to mental health professionals and a trusted peer support network; establish organizational protocols for escalating reports to international bodies or human rights defender networks capable of providing an emergency response.

- **Reflection questions:** How can activists protect themselves from coordinated online harassment? What systems can your organization implement to ensure a rapid and safe response to harassment? How can the mental and emotional burden of online violence be shared rather than carried alone? What measures are in place to ensure digital threats do not escalate into physical violence?

ANNEX: USEFUL RESOURCES

WELLBEING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

CREA
Self-Care and Self-Defense Manual for Feminist Activists
https://www.creaworld.org/media/pdf/resources/toolkits-and-manuals/Self-Care-and-Self-Defence-Manual.pdf

Hivos
Safeguarding & Holistic Protection: We Lead Safety, Security and Wellbeing Training Manual
https://hivos.org/document/we-lead-safety-and-security-training-manual/

We Lead Safety and Security Learning Brief
https://hivos.org/document/we-lead-safety-security-learning-brief/

We Lead with Power. A Feminist Transformative Leadership Guide
https://hivos.org/document/we-lead-with-power/

DIGITAL SAFETY AND SECURITY

Access Now
Digital Security Helpline
https://www.accessnow.org/help/?ignorelocale

Digital Security Guides
https://www.accessnow.org/guide-type/digital-security-guides/

Computer Incident Response Center for Civil Society (CiviCERT)
Digital First Aid Kit
(in collaboration with the Rapid Response Network)
https://digitalfirstaid.org/#

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
Digital Safety Kit
https://cpj.org/2019/07/digital-safety-kit-journalists/

Digital Defenders Partnership
Digital Safety Manuals and Guides
https://www.digitaldefenders.org/publications/

Digital Rights Watch
Digital Safety Tools and Guides
https://digitalrightswatch.org.au/featured/tools-and-guides/

Electronic Frontier Foundation
Surveillance Self-Defense: Tips, Tools, and How-tos for Safer Online Communications
https://ssd.eff.org/

European Digital Rights (EDRi)
Spyware Document Pool
https://edri.org/our-work/spyware-document-pool/

Front Line Defenders
Digital Protection Resources
https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/digital-protection-resources

Security-in-a-Box: Digital Security Tools and Tactics
https://securityinabox.org/en/

International IDEA
Directory of Organizations Working to Protect Journalists in Latin America
https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/directorio-de-organizaciones-idea-internacional.pdf

LooM SWANA
Safety and Security Scenarios and Recommendations for LGBTIQ+
Communities in the SWANA Region
https://loomswana.org/resources/

Open Briefing
Collective Protection Resources for Human Rights Defenders
https://openbriefing.gitbook.io/collective-protection/english/resources

Holistic Security Toolkit
https://toolkit.openbriefing.org/

Protection Ecosystem Map
https://ecosystem.openbriefing.org/

Resilience Technologies
Digital Safety Services and Training
https://rtafrica.org/services/

Safe Sisters
A Common Sense Guide to Digital Safety for Women and Girls in Sub-Saharan Africa
https://safesisters.org/resources/#2300

Tactical Tech
Digital Literacy Trainings and Workshops
https://tacticaltech.org/digital-media-literacy-training/

Safety and Security Services
https://www.openbriefing.org/services/security/

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Alliance for Feminist Movements
Reports, Analysis, and Toolkits on Resourcing the Feminist Movement
https://allianceforfeministmovements.org/resources/

Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)
Fierce Feminisms: Together We Rise | (Strategic Plan2023–2027)
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Toward a Feminist Funding Ecosystem: A Framework and Practical Guide
https://www.awid.org/publications/toward-feminist-funding-ecosystem-framework-and-practical-guide

Where is the Money? An Evidence-Driven Call to Resource Feminist Organizing
https://www.awid.org/witm

"Who Can Fund Me?" Database
https://www.awid.org/wcfm-feminist-funding-resources#wcfmdatabase

Better Preparedness
Taxonomy of Crisis: A Tool to Define, Assess, and Address Crisis
https://www.hrfn.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Better-Preparedness-Playbook-Taxonomy-of-Crisis.pdf

Black Feminist Fund
Black Feminist Movements and Crises
https://blackfeministfund.org/our-advocacy/black-feminist-movements-and-crisis/

Bridgespan Group
Fundamentals of Nonprofit Financial Sustainability
https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/nonprofit-financial-sustainability

Dalan Fund
Growing Against All Odds: Mapping Funding for Intersectional Organizing
in the CEECCNA Regions
https://dalan.fund/whats-new/where-is-the-money-for-movements-in-central-eastern-europe-caucasus-and-central-and-north-asia-ceeccna

Decolonising Economics
Resourcing Your Community: How To Sustain Social Movements Through Community Provision
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Unfolding the Tapestry: Weaving Themes and Strategies of Feminist Crisis Response
https://equalityfund.ca/en/posts/unfolding-the-tapestry

FRIDA – The Young Feminist Fund
Changing the Game by Resourcing Young Feminists
https://youngfeministfund.org/resourcing-and-changing-the-game/

Collective Care Collaborative Advocacy Tool
(in collaboration with Doria Feminist Fund, Mongolian Women's Fund, TEWA, Women's Fund Fiji)
https://youngfeministfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/DFF-Collective-Care-toolkit-1.pdf

Resourcing Connections: Reflections On Feminist Participatory Grantmaking Practice
https://youngfeministfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/PGM-Full-Report.pdf

Global Alliance for Tax Justice
Framing Feminist Taxation
https://globaltaxjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/2021-06-02-Framing-Feminist-Taxation-VF-two-page-EN-PDF.pdf

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The Trust Gap: The Troubling Lack of Direct, Flexible Funding for Human Rights in the Global South and East
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Numun Fund
Grants and Open Calls
https://numun.fund/grants/

Prospera International Network of Women's Funds
Seeds for Harvest: Funding for Gender, Climate, and Environmental Justice
https://prospera-inwf.org/resource/seeds-for-harvest/

Resource Generation
Social Justice Philanthropy Resources
https://resourcegeneration.org/resources/

Transformative Investment Principles (TIPS)
https://resourcegeneration.org/transformative-investment-principles/

Shake the Table
Illustrative List of Women's Funds and Feminist Funders
https://www.weshakethetable.org/resources

Lighting the Way: A Report for Philanthropy on the Power & Promise of Feminist Movements (in collaboration with the Bridgespan Group)
https://www.weshakethetable.org/report

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Impact Gender Lens Investing Training Program
https://www.unido.org/gender-lens-investing

Urgent Action Funds
How Can We Ground Ourselves in Care and Dance Our Revolution?
https://rootingcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/FAU_RootingCare_en.pdf

Walking the Talk
Financing for Feminist Futures (F4FF) Conference & Research Projects
https://f4ff.global/program/

Towards a "Common Ask" For Resourcing Feminist Movements
https://f4ff.global/resources/background-paper-caf/

Women's Funds Europe (WFE)
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