

# How can we ground ourselves in care and dance



## our revolution?

Led by



# How can we ground ourselves in care and dance our revolution?

Led by



### **Beginning, threading, setting out on the path**

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### **Printing**

AF Impresores

**Colombia, 2023**





# We dedicate this publication to the memory of the late Tatiana Margarita Cordero Velásquez (R.I.P.), Executive Director of the Urgent Action Fund Latin America and the Caribbean (UAF LAC) from May 2013 to April 2021.

She was the seed, inspiration, starting point and leading guide for this research project.

Tatiana came to UAF LAC seduced by the *call of the conch shell*<sup>1</sup> towards Sustainable Activism, and during the years she was with us, she was the ember that kept the fire alight and nourished the roots of the Fund.

In every space she occupied, she made care a daily action, a way of understanding and being in the world and a political stance, both for protecting the dignity of life, nature and territories, and for the UAF LAC team and the Urgent Action Funds.

She invited us to maintain a spirit of calm in the face of urgency, to look one another in the eye, to take the time to say the right words, to transform by transforming ourselves, to recognize our own vulnerability and to actively listen in order to embrace one another with compassion. She urged us to light our own inner fire and to join our powers.

We offer this **in Tati's honor and as a gift to her**, what we are after her departure.

Tati, you remain an inspiration for the activists, organizations, people and communities with whom you shared your life, your emotions and your words. We thank you! We are sure that you illuminate this collective utopia for a **society of care** from your place among the stars.

---

<sup>1</sup> **The sound of the conch shell** ("*Sonidos de Caracola*", in Spanish) is the name that UAF LAC has given since 2012 to its call to the hearts of human rights activists in Latin America and the Caribbean to contribute to more sustainable activism.

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**¡Hola!**

**Olá**

**Приве**

**Hi!**

**नमस्ते**

**Bula!**

**ابحرم**

**Bonjour**

**안녕하세요**

**你好**



**How are you?**



**How are you  
feeling today?**



**Are you here looking for the  
answer to the title question**

**How can we ground ourselves in  
care and dance our revolution?**

# Surprise!

There is not only one answer. There are many answers, and even more questions we would like to raise. Some of them are new, some of them have always been there, some of them you may have already asked yourself, others may have gone unnoticed and others have been waiting for the right time to be asked. And that —sparking more conversations— is precisely our intent with this book. This **“how?”** offers a constellation of stories, voices and a diversity of activists’ experiences regarding care and protection.

In 2017, we embarked on this collective process of research *from the Global South*, and along the way we went through a pandemic, which inspired us to delve more deeply into care as a political act for our lives and the lives of other people, beings and species.

**We are not the same, and this time has given us an opportunity to face uncertainty, the meaning of life and death, with amplified mindfulness.** At the same time, it has been an opportunity to learn from the immense capacity for creativity and transformation that lies within each of us, in our collectives, communities, organizations, families (whether chosen or not) and our **support networks**.

This experience of **collective research** has been woven by and between the teams of the four Urgent Action Funds, based in Latin America and the Caribbean (UAF LAC), Asia and the Pacific (UAF A&P), Africa (UAF-Africa), and North America (UAF WHR<sup>2</sup>); and a diverse team of researchers, coordinators, non-binary and trans activists, women human rights defenders and an Advisory Group.<sup>3</sup> It has been an arduous, but enriching and ultimately gratifying, process.

We hope this collection of stories and experiences serve as an inspiration to you and the processes you are involved in, to continue together building a care-centered world.

And for you, what does it mean to ground yourself in care?

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<sup>2</sup> *The geographic scope of this Urgent Action Fund includes Central Asia, the Middle East, Western and Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, Russia, Turkey, the United States and Canada.*

<sup>3</sup> *This group was made up of activists, practitioners, healers and people who, from various practices, bodies of knowledge and backgrounds, have accompanied women human rights defenders and trans and non-binary activists on their paths of care, protection and healing.*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are countless words and expressions used around the world to convey gratitude. Without attempting to gather them all here, we would like to use this space to express our sincere **thank you**, gracias, 谢谢 (xiè xiè), धन्यवाद (dhanyavaad), grazie, اركش (šukran), Спасибо (spasibo), obrigada, থ্যাংক্যু (thänk ju), danke, ありがとう (Arigatou), 고맙습니다 (Go-map-seum-ni-da), dankie, благодаря (blagodaria), ευχαριστώ (ef-hah)-rees-TO mahalo (ma-HA-lo), teşekkür ederim (teh shek uer eh der eem), kop khun, ngiyabonga,

---

*(insert here the word or expression in your language of origin).*

**Gratitude is a language of the heart**, and celebrates our shared path. In this spirit, we begin by honoring walking together, thanking all the people who, in so many ways, helped to make this publication a reality.

We are grateful to all the Directors and Co-Directors of the Urgent Action Funds, who supported Tatiana Cordero's proposal in 2016, exerting their political will to **focus on care and expand their reflection toward the necessary transformations** that we, as social movements and human beings, need. Thanks are due to Kate Kroeger (Executive Director UAF WHR), Shalini Eddens (Deputy Executive Director UAF WHR), Ndana Tawamba (CEO & Executive Director UAF-Africa), Virisila Buadromo (Co-Lead, Partnerships and Resource Mobilisation UAF A&P) and Mary Jane Real (former Co-Lead UAF A&P). We would also like to thank the people within each Fund's team who played a crucial role in coordinating the project: Jebli Shrestha (UAF A&P), Masa Amir (UAF WHR), Raisa Borshchigova (UAF WHR) and Jean Kemitare (UAF-Africa). In the development of communication processes, we would also like to extend our thanks to Keishla Gonzalez-Quiles (UAF WHR), Deepthy Menon (UAF A&P), Onyinyenchi Okechukwu (UAF-Africa). And as part of some of the meetings, coordination tasks, reporting and dialogue, thanks to Nancy Chitiza (UAF-Africa), Rosette Nanyonjo (UAF-Africa), Olivia Trabysh (UAF WHR) and Ava Danlog (Urgent Action Funds). This path has brought the teams of the Urgent Action Funds closer, has helped us support each other and walk alongside each other in the transformations we have experienced.

For three consecutive years, in 2017, 2018 and 2019, we shared encounters, thoughts and feelings that materialized over the course of this book. **The network of assistance and support** that was formed with the Advisory Group enabled us to reflect more deeply on care and protection, recognizing in this process **the various perspectives and many ways of inhabiting it and acting upon it as activists or practitioners (those who accompany other women and individuals)**. We are grateful to this group for helping to ask the questions and remember what our movements and our practices have been through, and for keeping the fire of this research project burning in every meeting. They shared their knowledge and experiences during interviews and meetings, and contributed as researchers: Rosa Posa (Paraguay), Mónica Enríquez (Colombia/USA), Ledys San Juan (Colombia), Cara Page (USA), Marusia López (México), Itzel Guzmán (México), Verónica Vidal (México), Ana María

Hernández (México), Awino Okech (Kenya), Rosa Chavez (Guatemala), Ruby Johnson (Australia), Jelena Dordevic (Serbia/Brazil), Rudo Chigudu (Zimbabwe), Sandra Ljubinkovic (Serbia), Shawna Wakefield (USA), Carmen Sánchez (Spain), Daniela Fonkatz (Argentina) and Flor de María Álvarez Medrano (Guatemala).

We feel accompanied in this dream of a world, in the possibility of a society that focuses on caring for life, activists, movements, relationships and processes; which women and disagreements have materialized in daily actions, at the front lines, and wherever and however they are. You are an example of this ♥.

To see the acknowledgments of the Advisory Team in the last in-person meeting for the research in 2019, visit [www.rootingcare.org](http://www.rootingcare.org).

These have been months where hearts, minds, feelings and actions have come together in a spiraling timeline, at different moments, to hold interviews, compile them, draft the first structures of the text and assist UAF LAC in this research. Thanks to the team of researchers and consultants who contributed their knowledge and immersed themselves in the stories: Lucia Nader (Brazil/UK), Tania Correa (Colombia), Eden Wondmeneh (USA), Maya El Elhou (Lebanon), Nancy Raoof (Egypt), Gistam Sakaeva (Chechnya), Adela Nieves (USA), Codou Bop (Senegal), Rudo Chigudu (Zimbabwe); and also to Paola Mosso (Chile), who developed recommendations and guidelines for sustaining digital care in this process, and everything having to do with the storage and virtual use of the information that had been compiled from various places.

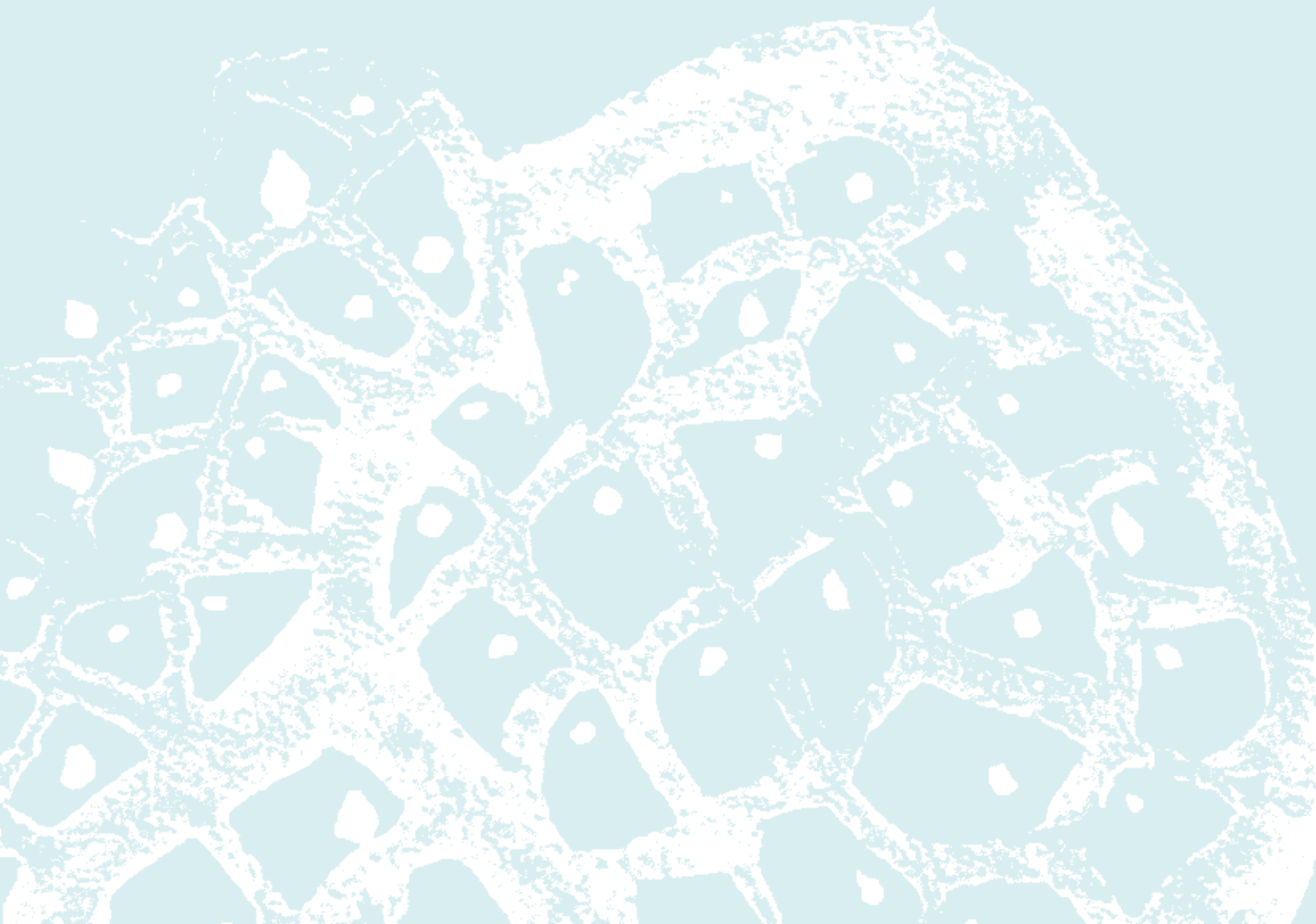
Additionally, our meetings would not have been so special without the guest facilitators. In 2017, with María del Rosario Mina (Colombia) in Palomino (Colombia); in 2018, with Jeannette del Carmen Tineo (Dominican Republic) in Islas del Rosario (Colombia), and in 2019, with Gioconda Herrera (Ecuador) in Tepoztlán (México); and the work of other consultants on preparing the memoirs, codifying and transcribing interviews and procedures for consulting the persons interviewed: María Isabel Casas (Colombia), Hanin El Mir (Lebanon), Sahana Mehta (USA), Laura Chaustre (Colombia), Alba Patricia Hernández (México) and Edna Mayorga (Colombia). The meetings had a heart united at the center of earth and heaven. We are deeply grateful for the unceasing support and assistance of Flor de María Álvarez Medrano (Guatemala), who from her Mayan spirituality and worldview guided and nourished our spirits during the process.

We are indebted to our translators, interpreters and transcribers: to Beatriz Canal (Colombia), Anette Shorr (Colombia), Diana Jacobson (Colombia), Maria Cristina Dangong (Colombia), Fabiola Garcés (Colombia), Rima El Khatib (Lebanon), Aina Idrisova (Russia) and Helen Zho (Canada). They applied language justice and the political nature of interpretation to various languages during the meetings and writing of this book. We also want to remember and thank the women who supported us in event logistics and production: Patricia Lucero (Colombia), Yanina Flores (México) and Karina Avendaño (Colombia), who always made sure we had spaces full of special details and care for all participants. And of course, we need to mention the collaborative eyes of Tatiana Maecha (Colombia) and Greta Rico (México), who captured our dances and our smiles with their beautiful photographic work.

To all of us, as the UAF LAC team, and especially, to members (current and former) who, from various roles were involved in the different phases of this process (in writing, logistical coordination, work coordination, communications and editing, among others): Tatiana Cordero (R.I.P., Colombia), Lau Mar Carvajal (Colombia), Luz Stella Ospina (Colombia), Sara Munárriz-Awad (Colombia), Luz Adriana Sanchez (Colombia), Paola Adarve (Colombia), Daniela Rosero (Ecuador), Alejandra Henríquez (Colombia), Anaiz Zamora (México), Laura Aristizabal (Colombia), Gina Rodriguez (Colombia), Fátima Valdivia (Perú) and Beatriz Puerta (Spain/Colombia).

We want to thank our ally organizations and people, and the confidence and commitment of the donors who have supported us and who have participated actively as interviewees. We are grateful for the affection, flexibility and openness of mónica enríquez-enríquez (Colombia/USA), part of the Foundation for a Just Society team, who since 2018 has not only helped make funding available, but also accompanied us and provided us with feedback during the process and conducted interviews of colleagues in other foundations. We are also grateful to Maitri Morarji of Foundation for a Just Society, who was committed to financially supporting the development of a communications strategy. Within the donor community, we would also like to especially mention Nevin Oztop, Radha Wickremasinghe, Katrin Wilde, Jesenia Santana, Lesley Carson, Joy Chia, Mónica Aleman and Jon McPherdan Waitzer, who all shared their perspectives and experiences regarding care.

Finally, to the activists, who are not only the center of our research, but also the center of our work as the Urgent Action Funds. We thank you all for your trust and your willingness **to share vital experiences in the defense of human rights and nature, your reflections, questions and emotions, your lessons and the many anecdotes you shared to give life to this book**, which helped us recognize what we have achieved and identify the changes that have and have not taken place in the last 11 years regarding protection and care of women's, feminist, trans and non-binary movements. To:



**Celeste Mayorga**, *RUDA Mujeres + Territorio Iximulew* (RUDA Women and Territory) | Guatemala

**Miluska Luzquiños**, Executive Director of the Organización *Feminista por los DDHH de las personas Trans* (Feminist Organization for the Human Rights of Trans People) | Perú

**María Teresa Blandón Gadea**, Nicaraguan feminist movement | Nicaragua-Central America

**Rosanna Marzan**, *Diversidad Dominicana* (Dominican Diversity) | Dominican Republic

**Lana Souza**, *Colectivo Papo Reto* (Papo Reto Collective) | Brazil

**Luna Irazábal**, *Colectivo Ovejas Negras* (Black Sheep Collective) | Uruguay

**Jelena Dordevic**, *Colectivo Feminista de Autocuidado e Cuidado entre Defensoras de Direitos Humanos* (Feminist Collective for Self-Care and Care among Human Rights Defenders) | Serbia/Brazil

**Pramada Menon**, queer feminist | India

**Carolín Lizardo**, *Colectiva Mujer y Salud* (Women and Health Collective) | Dominican Republic

**Rosa Posa Guinea**, *Akahata*, work team on sexuality and gender (international); and *Aireana*, lesbian rights group | Asunción, Paraguay

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**Yuli Rustinawati**, Arus Pelangi | Indonesia

**Dr. Njoki Ngumi**, The Nest Collective | Kenya

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**Senda Ben Jebara**, *Mawjoudin* (We Exist) | Tunisia

**Yara Sallam** | Egypt

**Fatoumata Sangare**, NGO AMSOPT | Mali

**Ayat Osman**, Ganoubia Hora | Egypt

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**Xiaopei He**, Pink Space | China

**Sarala Emmanuel**, Batticaloa | Sri Lanka

**Emma V. Ricaforte**, human rights advocates/defenders | Philippines

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**Elvira Meliksetian** | Armenia

**Lilit Martirosyan**, Right Side Human Rights Defender NGO | Armenia

**Salome Chagelishvili**, Women's Fund in Georgia | Georgia

**Zana Hoxha**, Artpolis-Art and Community Center | Republic of Kosovo

**Ruth Alipaz Cuqui**, CONTIOCAP | Bolivia

**Sandra Ljubinkovic** | Serbia/The Netherlands

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**Hope Chigudu** | Zimbabwe/ Uganda

**Amparo Peñaherrera Sandoval**, *Federación de Mujeres de Sucumbíos* (Federation of Sucumbíos Women) | Ecuador

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**Elsa Saade**, Urgent Action Fund | Lebanon

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**Jing Xiong**, Feminist Voices | China  
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**Devi Peacock**, Peacock Rebellion | USA

**Renu Adhikari**, activist founder of WOREC Nepal, founder chairperson of the National Alliance of Women Human Right Defenders | Nepal

**Dr. Aida Seif el Dawla**, co-founder of El Nadim Center against Violence and Torture | Egypt

**FC** | Tunisia

**Grace Kabera Amani**, *LUCHA* (FIGHT) | Democratic Republic of the Congo

**Farah Shash**

**Shawna Wakefield**, Root. Rise. Pollinate! | USA

**Grace Ruvimbo Chirenje** | Zimbabwe

**Erica Woodland**, National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network | USA

**Julienne Lusenge**

**Aizhan Kadrallieva**, LGBTIQ+ activist, previously worked with Labrys | Kyrgyzstan

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**Olga Karatch** | Belarus

**Credo Ahodi** | Benin

**Fernanda Shirakawa** | Brazil

**María Lucia da Silva** | Brazil

**Kunthea Chan** | Cambodia

**Pisey LY** | Cambodia

**Milana Bakhaeva** | Chechnya/Russia

**Millaray Carillo** | Chile

**Danelly Estupiñán Valencia** | Colombia

**Diana Pulido** | Colombia

**Ledys San Juan** | Colombia

**Marcela Bohórquez** | Colombia

**Antonia Fuentes** | Colombia

**Gegê Katana** | Democratic Republic of the Congo

**Jelene Postic** | Croatia

**Gloria Uchiva** | Ecuador

**Shamima Ali** | Fiji

**Jasmine Kaur** | Fiji

**Jessica Horn** | Uganda/England

**Meena Seshu** | India

**Pedan Marthe Coulibaly** | Ivory Coast

**Peninah Wanchikomongi** | Kenya

**Ikal Ang'elei** | Kenya

**Ukei Muratalieva** | Kyrgyzstan

**Naomi Tulay-Solanke** | Liberia

**Yah Parwon** | Liberia

**Lucía Lagunes Huertas** | México

**Ariana MacGuire** | Nicaragua

**Angelique Abboud** | Palestine

**Alibel Pizarro** | Panama

**Lilly Be' Soer** | Papua New Guinea

**Selene Yan** | Paraguay

**María Témpora** | Perú

**Geri Cerillo** | Philippines

**Khwezilomso Mbandazayo** | South Africa

**Rosanna Flamer-Caldera** | Sri Lanka

**Matcha Phorn-in** | Thailand

**Nadia Benzertini** | Tunisia

**Samar Tilili** | Tunisia

**Yana Tsiferblat** | Ukraine

**Sonali Sadequee** | USA

**Cara Page** | USA

**Yelis Vegonza** | Venezuela





**In closing, we are grateful for the path that each body and spirit has taken to read these pages. This is an excuse to raise awareness of our interdependence in all that surrounds us and to honor that network of life to which we belong.**

Palomino, July 2021

CHAPTER I

# Honoring the Path



**Let's dance and see  
where it takes us.**

These are the final words of the book:  
*What's the point of the revolution if we can't dance?*

**And dancing took us here.**



# THE SEED

**(...) We are a dream of the earth, our mother's dream. Everything that exists and is part of our lives also comes from a dream: plants, animals, rocks, rivers, mountains, all of nature, all people, You and I, we were dreamed by our mother, and today we're here, we're real...**

(Adaptation of the story *We come from an ancient dream* by Guillermo Ojeda Jayariyuu, painter and researcher of the Wayuu people of Guajira, Colombia)

Urgent Action Fund Latin America and the Caribbean (UAF LAC) was founded in 2009, as the third of four Urgent Action Funds around the world: Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF WHR, 1997), UAF-Africa (2001) and UAF Asia & Pacific (UAF A&P, 2017). Together, we are a global consortium of feminist funds that support women, trans and non-binary activists and their organizations and movements, to promote their rights and their transformative power and to contribute to their full protection and sustainability. We are autonomous and interdependent organizations that share a unique rapid response funding model adapted to the needs and contexts of each region where we work.

Care is our heart and the foundation of our identity as UAF LAC. For us, care is a way of seeing the world, of living in it and transforming it. It is an action and a perspective that articulates sustainability, *better-being*, empathy, shared responsibility and enjoyment, all of which guide our work both within and outside the institution, not as a *must be*, but as a daily venture that is permanently under construction. That is why we say that care is our ethical and political bet. Moreover, care is the thread that weaves our principles of philanthropy and gives meaning to our practices within the Urgent Action Funds.

The book *What's the point of the revolution if we can't dance?*, written by Jane Berry and Jelena Brodervic and published by UAF-WHR in 2007, was a milestone for feminist and women's movements throughout the world. It gave us an in-depth perspective on the situation of women human rights defenders, on how they felt, how they were affected and how they faced the risks to which they were exposed in their work. In 2017, Tatiana Cordero (R.I.P.), Executive Director of UAF LAC, proposed a new research project, this time with a global focus and *from the Global South*, guided by the question:



**What has happened with the care and protection of women, trans and non-binary activists in the world in the years since "What's the point of the revolution if we can't dance" was published?**

This global investigation was led by UAF LAC as a collaborative process of the Urgent Action Funds and the contribution of the Advisory Group. It has been an in-depth conversation involving various viewpoints, contexts, identities and life stories. In this sense, we do not intend to provide a review of the first book or a comparative study, nor to evaluate existing practices and approaches.

The multiple systems of oppression that affect activists'<sup>4</sup> lives and work have become more pervasive. Around the world, the types of violence they face

have assumed new forms. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the physical, emotional, psychological and socio-economic impacts on their bodies and lives has intensified. The rising tides of political and religious fundamentalism, authoritarianism, misogyny, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia and the impact of the capitalist-extractivist model, among others, are some of the many challenges that activists face daily, depending on their context. At the same time, the feminist, women's and trans and non-binary people's fights and the resistance movements seeking other possible worlds have flourished and expanded through the many forms and beings that promote them.



- 
- 4 *In this book, we will use gender-neutral language to include the diversity of identities and ways of self-identifying of those who participated in this process: women, trans and non-binary activists.*

# INTENTION

## We want this story to nurture the heart

—Recollection from the Conference at Palomino. Colombia, 2017

Alongside these political, social and economic shifts, the landscapes of care and protection have changed as well. Existing practices and reflections have been recovered, transformed or questioned. With this in mind, this book explores what is new and what persists, the common and the diverse, based on the experiences of activists and those that accompany them.

Collective construction of knowledge helps us honor and remember, find new meanings and mobilize change in our present and future, as people, activists, feminist funds and donors. For that reason, the objectives of this project are:



*Supporting activists, organizations, movements and donors to incorporate practices and reflections regarding holistic care and protection.*

*Strengthening networks of solidarity among activists through the collectivization and display of their experiences, so that their movements can become increasingly sustainable.*

This process has also been an invitation extended *from the Global South*, understood as the political place from which we are located. It is a perspective for the action and analysis that challenges the colonialist scope, shifts the experiences and stories to the periphery, promotes leadership *from the Global South* and language justice. It moves at different rhythms and timeframes, and it incorporates ancestrality and spirituality as an integral part of its being and doing.

# APPROACHES AND PERSPECTIVES

During these years, as UAF LAC, we have cultivated an understanding of **care as the root that sustains life**. This concept arises from a conversation between our personal and collective stories, our worldviews and our accumulated reflections and experiences, together with activists and women defenders of human rights, territory and nature in Latin America and the Caribbean.

**Grounding ourselves in care** is, for us, connecting our being with what sustains life in all its dimensions. It is precisely being aware that our roots are woven into a *network of life*, between interdependent people and beings. It is a decision and a conscious intention to make care the center of our action. And to the beat of that drum, to continue dancing our revolutions.

For this project, we began on the following bases:

- ✦ The existence of **multiple conceptions** about care and protection, which are configured according to the particular conditions of **each context** and personal experience.
- ✦ A **holistic approach** that takes into account the physical, emotional, spiritual, psychic and digital dimensions of care and protection. Concurrently, it addresses this in both the **personal and collective** spheres, recognizing the risks that stem not only from external factors, but also those that are generated by **internal factors** linked to the forming of relations and the dynamics within organizations and movements.
- ✦ An **intersectional** approach that allows us to understand the complexity of each experience shaped by various forms of injustice, discrimination and inequality, based on gender, sexual orientation, social class, ethnicity, race, age, geographic origins, (dis)abilities and other aspects of identity and experience.
- ✦ An **intercultural approach** that requires a respectful dialogue and interaction among various cultures, celebrating the wisdom and memory of all the towns that inhabit and that have shaped history and social struggles around the world.

- ✦ **Feminism** as a specific way of understanding and positioning ourselves with respect to social realities and as a creative, mobilizing force both personally and collectively. From this stance, we create links with activists in ways that recognize their autonomy and their status as political subjects. This helps us to be self-critical and in a perpetual process of re-learning.

## THE COMING-TOGETHER THAT BROUGHT THIS DREAM TO LIFE

The questions, goals and methodology of this research project were agreed upon in three meetings<sup>5</sup> between the Urgent Action Funds and the Advisory Group, made up of organizations and people close to their cause who have dedicated themselves to reflections and assistance in processes of care and protection in various regions of the world.

### First meeting: 2017

The municipality of Palomino (La Guajira, Colombia,) welcomed us for this first meeting, where we got to know each other and shared individual and collective trajectories, to thus build a timeline of the landmarks in this path of care and protection. This was where we identified the core concepts of our search:

- ✦ Self-care and collective care
- ✦ Spirit
- ✦ Power
- ✦ Politics of care

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<sup>5</sup> The full proceedings of each meeting can be viewed at: <https://fondoaccionurgente.org.co/es/recursos/>

Around these core concepts, we defined some key questions that would then become the basis for the interviews we conducted. Some of these were:



**What is the implication of thinking about self-care in our current context, in light of our multiple identities?**

**How do we practice self-care and collective care within our organizations?**

**What are the practices and forms of self-care of young activists (on- and offline?)**

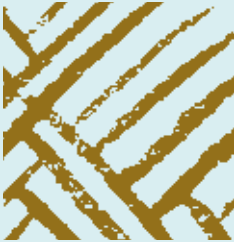
**How is the political meaning of care understood?**

During this meeting, we strengthened ties between the Urgent Action Funds and reaffirmed our commitment to sharing, documenting and furthering work and experiences around collective care, to learn together about the practices developed within each Fund. Additionally, each of the organizations and independent participants provided documentation and specific support for the continuity of the process.



## Second meeting: 2018

This time we met in Colombia's Rosario Islands, where we returned to the questions and delved into the thematic core concepts defined in the first meeting. New questions arose from these conversations, such as:



**How do donors understand care, and what is their responsibility regarding the sustainability of movements?**

**How do we keep the fire lit without being burned by activism?**

**How can we decolonize the memories of well-being?**

At this point, we proposed that the research would emphasize the collective dimension of care and power; we verified objectives and built the ethical and methodological criteria, as well as the first draft of our assumptions.

## Third meeting: 2019

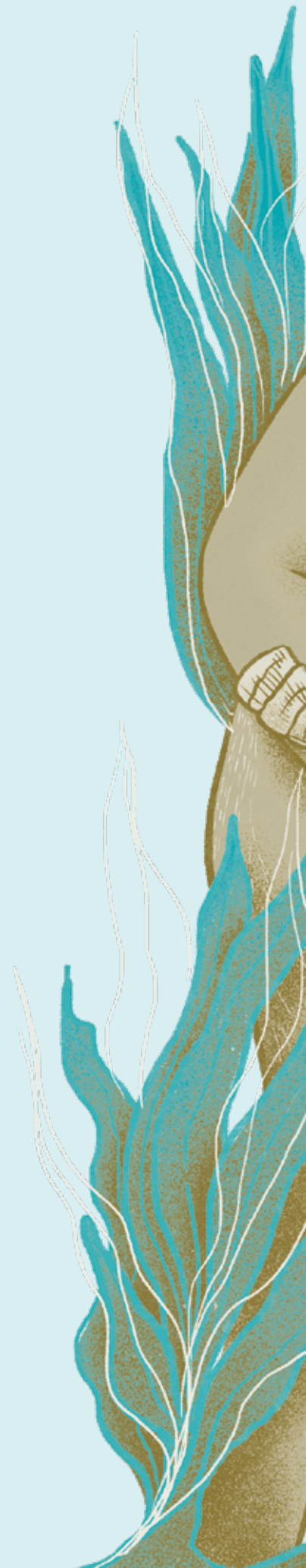
*Stoking the Fire and Nourishing the Roots* was the invitation to meet in Tepoztlán (México). In addition to the Urgent Action Funds and the Advisory Group, the researchers participated in this meeting. After conducting the interviews and a preliminary analysis by region, we came together to share, analyze and provide feedback on the preliminary findings of our process, including donors' perspectives regarding their role in this field. We also discussed the methodological, conceptual and practical challenges of the global, multilingual process. Finally, we imagined the possible products and strategies for publishing our results.

This meeting was an opportunity to celebrate our own stories and to honor those who paved the way and those who have guided us in our path of care and protection.

# THE CORE QUESTION

In response to our primary purpose,  
the core question of our research was:

**How do women, trans and non-binary activists in the world experiment and visualize care and protection today, at the individual and organizational level, taking into account the context, identity(ies), particularity(ies), trajectory and stories of each one of them?**







# TOPICS AND HYPOTHESES

Based on the outcome of the meetings, we defined six topics, each of them with its own initial assumptions, which guided the methodology and the questions we asked to the people we interviewed.

- ✦ **Topic 1. Personal history, specificities and feelings of each activist:** every woman, trans or non-binary activist has a story, a trajectory, specific identity(ies) and conditions that influence their experiences, perspectives and care and protection practices.
- ✦ **Topic 2. Challenges, threats and risks of activism:** the challenges and risks that each activist faces depend on their contexts and particularities: gender, race, age, sexual orientation, abilities, bodily diversity and socio-economic conditions, among others, all of which influence their activism and the risks to which they are exposed.
- ✦ **Topic 3. Personal practices of care and protection:** activists have developed (or wish to develop) personal practices that sustain and strengthen their daily and long-term activism, giving them power, autonomy, pleasure and a sense of protection.
- ✦ **Topic 4. Care and protection collective practices:** organizations have (or could have) care and protection practices, and there are motivations and challenges to strengthen them.
- ✦ **Topic 5. The donors' role:** donors play a role in the promotion and existence of care and protection practices among women, trans and non-binary activists.
- ✦ **Topic 6. Care and protection as concepts, diversity and political aspects:** under certain conditions, care and protection may challenge the current structures of power or existing oppression and discrimination in our societies and among ourselves. Furthermore, there are widely varied conceptions of care and protection.

# ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF CARE AND PROTECTION

For UAF LAC and the Urgent Action Funds, placing *care at the center* is the ethical principle that guides each one of our actions, including the collective construction of knowledge. Accordingly, researching care in the world of activism is something that influences, transforms us and affects us in various ways. With this awareness, we created a set of ethical principles to guide the research process:

Guaranteeing a feminist approach based on trust and a subject-subject relationship, avoiding an extractive logic. This meant sharing objectives, methodologies, details and findings of the process with all the people involved. In the interviews themselves, we strove for a two-way communication, rejecting a mere “data collection” approach and ensuring:

- ✦ The interviews centered around the perspective of the interviewee.
- ✦ The creation of a horizontal space for dialogue, being aware of the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee.
- ✦ Flexibility in adapting the pace, format and content of the questions depending on the context, characteristics, requests or circumstances of the interviewee.
- ✦ A reflexive practice that considers researchers’ subjectivity, contexts, conditions and experiences.
- ✦ A welcoming and safe environment, attentive listening, avoiding interruptions and building empathy.

Applying informed consent and guaranteeing the confidentiality of the information and identity of each participant. To this end, each interviewee signed a consent form prior to the interview, and another one afterward, and each of them were asked to sign off on the portions of the interview that were included in the final publication.

Supporting the emotional needs of both the interviewees and the researchers, providing them with resources and alliances with organizations or people who could support them when necessary. In addition, the materials each researcher received included useful suggestions and considerations to

support them during and after the interviews, in order to deal with their concerns and emotions<sup>6</sup>.

Having digital care and data protection, taking the necessary measures to ensure safe communication among researchers, the Urgent Action Funds, participants and interviewees and safe sharing and storing of the information. For this purpose, we had a consultant who helped us identify the tools needed to mitigate the risks.



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<sup>6</sup> Some of these practices and considerations included: paying attention to the number of interviews per day and the time that was most comfortable for each researcher; preparing for the interview in order to avoid feeling overly stressed; the interviewee not being “neither hero nor victim;” the researcher not being responsible for the quality of the responses or the search for truth; taking a deep breath and grounding oneself before, during and after the interview; taking breaks and expressing feelings during the interview to avoid an overload and encouraging a closer relationship; keeping a research log in which their feelings could be recognized and honored; and having the research team act as a support network from whom they could ask for and provide assistance.

# INTERVIEWS AND ANALYSIS

We developed a qualitative methodology with a narrative approach, meaning the activists' personal stories, in their own words, were the core of the process and the guiding thread of this publication. To this end, it was crucial that we created an intimate space of trust, containment and safety for the interviews.

We all agreed on the choosing criteria for the people we would invite to share their stories in order to guarantee a diversity of contexts, experiences and perspectives, without attempting to be all encompassing:

- ✦ **Geographic diversity:** following our focus on research *from the Global South*, we wanted to make sure we involved activists from all regions where the Urgent Action Funds work.
- ✦ **Diversity of causes and issues:** we strove to involve activists working on many causes, with diverse trajectories and organizational forms in their fights.
- ✦ **Diversity of identities:** we called upon activists who identified in various ways regarding gender, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, age, race, ethnicity, social class and bodily diversity, among others.
- ✦ **Diversity of profiles, roles and backgrounds:** in addition to the activists themselves, each Urgent Action Fund interviewed between 5 and 10 people dedicated to accompanying activists. Some of them self-identify as activists, healers and therapists, among other roles. We refer to these individuals as "practitioners." Additionally, to incorporate the specific perspective of donors, we decided to include 9 people linked to philanthropic organizations that were close to the Urgent Action Funds.

All told, **we conducted 141 interviews in 63 countries**, broken down as follows:

- ✦ 97 interviews with women, trans and non-binary activists
- ✦ 21 interviews with "practitioners"
- ✦ 9 interviews with donors

- ✦ 8 interviews with members of the UAF LAC team
- ✦ 4 interviews with regional researchers
- ✦ 2 interviews with the authors of the book *What's the point of the revolution if we can't dance?*

The interviews were conducted by **10 different researchers** based in 9 countries, in more than 7 different languages (Arabic, English, French, Nepali, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and local dialects in some cases).

Having transcribed the interviews and translated them into Spanish, English, Portuguese and French, we created a **codifying** system and we organized an analytical matrix in a *safe* software for arranging the narratives by themes and categories. Then, based on a common guide, 9 researchers conducted an initial analysis to determine the findings for each region. Finally, we conducted an overall codification and analysis.

In addition to the interviews, we organized 5 exercises —both face to face and virtual— in which activists were asked to **write letters**, either to themselves or to anyone else they chose, to share their experiences involving care. These letters are a resource digitally available to inspire more conversations and further personal and collective reflection.

The narrative of this publication brings together the contributions from the Advisory Group during the three meetings, the researchers' analysis of the narratives and stories of participating activists, and various moments of reflection and writing by the Urgent Action Funds.

CHAPTER 2

# Situating the Risks

**Have you ever imagined your activism  
in another context?**

**If you had been born in another time and  
place, what would your occupation be?**





We live in a specific time and space, in conditions that make our actions possible. These conditions are stable, but, at the same time, they change. Locating ourselves in the world means also locating ourselves in movement, in a changing context in which activism persists as a perpetual and continuous impulse towards more just societies.

*There is suffering, but there have been many joyful moments too. I've seen changes from where I started to where I am now, the people I've worked with, the people that were born after me, the people that I have taken care of. I see them changing, I see them embracing women's rights. But I also see the world changing a lot, getting worse in some areas, but there has been a lot of change. There are more women's organizations. There are women's funds on the continent, gender studies in many universities. That wasn't the case when we started, or when I joined.*

— **Hope Chigudu** | Zimbabwe/Uganda

### **In this here and now, there are risks.**

Thinking about the risks means being aware of the likelihood that something or someone might hurt us, even our own actions and practices. The risk depends on each situation, country, activist, moment, experience, etc. The risk level, in turn, depends on many factors, for example, on the conditions that create vulnerability and on the abilities we have to respond to threats. Despite these specificities, however, we share a historic moment and a global context where there are commonalities that go beyond borders.

**The risks are situated in specificity:** it is not the same to be a lesbian woman in a country where this is criminalized, as it is to be a lesbian in a country where same-sex parents can legally adopt. Nevertheless, there are shared elements and trends in the context. The globalization expressed in the markets, in extractivism, climate change, crises generated by the COVID-19 pandemic... remind us that we are interconnected. **Although we each face our own risks, we live in societies that rank people by class, race and gender, and that are also exclusionary and discriminatory regarding age, (dis)ability, sexual orientation and migratory condition, among other variables.**

*There are contextual challenges like this one I'm telling you about in Nicaragua, but there are other global challenges that bring us back to what we were facing thirty years ago. For example, the challenge of this rise in machismo and gender-based violence: sexual abuse, rape, abuse, feminicide... in fact, in terms of feminicide, the murder of women is even worse now than it was thirty years ago.*

— **María Teresa Blandón Gadea**, Nicaraguan feminist movement | Nicaragua

In order to situate these risks, we will concentrate on global risks, those that were observed across many of the countries where the Urgent Action Funds work.

## LIFE AND SAFETY AT RISK

Activists all around the world face challenges, risks and threats related to their work. The stories they tell us often include accounts of violence, threats against their lives and families and obstacles to defending their rights.

Violence can be expressed through **intimidation, surveillance, persecution or stalking**, directly or through the intimidation of family members:

*Women activists in particular, as well as feminist activists, find themselves in physical danger. There are things like being followed on the street, being followed home, not being safe yourself or your children not being safe, your family systems being under attack, people going to your family for them to tell you “let that shit go”. I mean, there is all of that for different people, so there is that level of safety.*

— **Dr. Njoki Ngumi**, The Nest Collective | Kenya

It can also take the form of **physical aggression**:

*During the last two months, I was walking down the street and someone I don't know pulled up and started hitting me in an extraordinarily aggressive way, saying “I work for security.” This person was beating me for at least 5 minutes without stopping —hitting me in my face and my whole body. I was able to write down the license plate number as they left and my lawyer reported the car to the police. The police said that they couldn't get any*

*information on that car. It's unusual for police to say that, as they usually can get that kind of information.*

— **F.C.** | Tunisia

### Or **attempts on their life:**

*They've tried to kill me a lot of times. It's been awful when I'm being followed by paramilitary forces, and with weapons [...] I know that when they threaten you, they're going to act on it.*

— Anonymous | Latin America

*And now they want to kill me too, because I am a human rights activist, because I want to talk about transgender problems. Every time I speak about this topic openly, they want to kill me, they want to kill my parents, but I don't want to become a refugee in Europe. I want to stay in Armenia and continue working, because I feel that I'm an activist, I'm going to help other people, I don't want to take my suitcases and go to live in Europe.*

— Lilit Martirosyan, trans activist, Right Side Human Rights Defender NGO | Armenia



Violent reactions towards activism by women, trans and non-binary people tries to limit their actions, silence their voices, prevent them from spreading the message and paralyze them. The threat of inflicting violence against them or their families is an expression of power by those whose interests are threatened.

*The threat implies both emotional and physical control, it's not just a simple threat. Besides being a preventive risk, it is a manipulative one, one that psychologically controls you, because you start going "okay, I won't go out, I won't talk, I won't say anything." The message behind this, ultimately, is "shut up!". Or rather, I won't shut you up by whipping you, but I'll shut you up by threatening your life, threatening to kill your daughter or whatever it takes, and "I control your life, I control it psychologically because I can".*

— **Danelly Estupiñán Valencia** | Colombia

# WHERE DO THE RISKS COME FROM, AND HOW ARE THEY FORMED?

When we delve deeper into situations that originate risks, we find that there are societies marked by structural violence, oppressive governments or authoritarian regimes where there is a prevailing and widespread sensation of danger. Then there are people, entities and groups that attack activists, individually or collectively. Depending on context, identity, political trajectory, support networks and the ability for individual or organizational response, the risk can increase or diminish. The challenge is understanding how these elements manifest themselves for each activist in their context.

Activists may face greater risk in certain historical periods or cycles of violence that revive moments of repression from other times. For example, in 2013, during the presidency of Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi, massive protests broke out against his attempt to pass an Islamist-oriented Constitution and issue a temporary presidential decree that would give him the power to legislate without judicial oversight. Morsi was overthrown in a coup headed by the Defense secretary, general Abdel Fattah El-Sisi (who later on, in 2014, became the president of Egypt).

After the coup, Egyptian security forces and the Army, under the command of El-Sisi, carried out raids in two places in El Cairo on demonstrators who were supporting president Morsi: the first at Al-Nahda square, and the second and largest, at Rabaa al-Adawiya square. Human Rights Watch describes these raids as crimes against humanity and one of the largest massacres of protestors in recent history. An Egyptian activist remembers it as one of the worst moments of her life:

*2013 was a terrifying and alarming time, not just because the Army was in control, we were living in a dictatorship, and corruption and injustice and everything you can imagine was rampant, but also because of the way that system was capable of bringing out the worst in people. The revolution of 2011 brought out the beauty and hopes of people [crying], but Sisi brought out the worst in them [...] From 2013 to 2015 the situation was at its worst. Especially in 2014, the Rabaa massacre was horrible, then the incident at the Fatah mosque, and before that, the incident with the republican guard... Massacres were things you read about in history books, you believed they were a thing of the past, but you could never fully imagine them. Yes, that*

*was the worst moment, that and people's reaction to those incidents, their irrationality when faced with hate and violence. I was furious and depressed.*

— **Dr. Aida Seif el Dawla**, Co-Founder of the El Nadim Center  
Against Torture and Violence | Egypt

For many, these forms of violence against activists come from the **State and its many faces**. They come from concrete actors: the military, police, political figures, governors, people who create laws. It is the State that represses, criminalizes, stigmatizes and censors, through legal and illegal means.

The first barrier to the exercise of activism is the **law**: laws **that discriminate, criminalize historically marginalized populations** and help reproduce inequality. In countries where sexual orientation and gender diversity are criminalized, the threat comes from the State, which restricts rights and freedoms. The legality of the rule, in turn, inspires other instances of violence in society, like discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people, which puts activists at risk for questioning the established order.

*We also co-host almost all of the groups in our country. As in this country sex work is criminalized, even though they do not explicitly criminalize LGBT relationships, they tend to expand the Criminal Code to further criminalize LGBT people... criminalize same-sex relationships in terms of sodomy, that's how it is described in the Constitution. So my work does carry that risk a lot of the time.*

— **Anonymous** | Africa

In Togo, we find a clear example of how this specific risk takes shape for lesbian women in contexts where it is not even possible for them to react. Since homosexuality is against the law, activism is silenced, and it makes the person whose right to express their sexual orientation is being violated a “criminal.”

*I'm not personally stressed, but there are places where, when you get there, there are verbal aggressions you're not allowed to respond to, because if you do, you run the risk of physical aggression. They say “look at the lesbians, there they are, there they are...” You hear that and you'd better get out of there without reacting, because you know the Criminal Code and Article 393, which criminalizes same-sex relationships, which are considered acts against nature.*

— **Nika** | Africa

The laws are also used to close off spaces in civil society. The regulation of organizations that results in arbitrary closures or excessively strict requirements on how they function prevents them from existing legally, which can clearly limit their access to funding and hamper activists' work.

*They [lawmakers] will use the shrinking civic space. For example, Uganda introduced many laws that are curtailing the operations law [for] civil society organizations, human rights activists, including women human rights defenders. So, in that way, the external environment will affect our work.*

— **Brenda Kugonza**, Women Human Rights Defenders Network | Uganda

*The other important element is the funding. Since two years ago, China has had an NGO regulation law. Foreign donors who want to operate in China have to register to the Ministry of Public Security and, if they don't, their contribution or any activity they do in China will be illegal. And this is not just for foreign NGOs, it's also for us, [the] local and grassroots NGOs. We cannot work with those foreign NGOs who do not have local registration in China. This has made it very difficult for feminist organizations who are also doing advocacy. It is completely impossible for us to get funding from the Government. According to the Government, feminism is too sensitive of an issue. It is not something the Government funds. These are the reasons why we work with foreign donors.*

— **Jing Xiong**, Feminist Voices | China

Another threat comes from the discourses of people in power within formal politics. The State, embodied in the figure of government representatives, spreads discriminatory discourses, which delivered from that position of power, results in a social legitimization of symbolic violence, which is the foundation that allows other types of violence. Language, beyond words, has a performative power on that stage, one that has consequences for the lives of women, trans and non-binary people, particularly those with a non-hegemonic sexual orientation.

*I think, generally, that our political leader is homophobic. So that's one of the biggest challenges. When your Prime Minister makes publicly anti-gay remarks, then you are bound to have a problem. And then the whole community rallies behind him and locks down. That becomes very challenging.*

— **Jasmine Kaur** | Fiji

*If you really want to get to know a politician, just ask them about women's rights. They say horrible things, it's unbelievable how they react. Best case scenario, they say they are not feminists. Worst case scenario, they say that women cannot be active, cannot be journalists because of the Bible or something like that. It's unbelievable. I even remember the discussion in 2015, when people in social networks discussed very actively if a woman could be the president of Belarus, since women have "female days" and are "too emotional during those days." "How could the president of Belarus take part in the daily decision-making process like that? Can you imagine such a thing?"*

— **Olga Karatch** | Belarus

**The stigmatization from the government** pretends to discredit activism, to turn public opinion against the defense of human rights, especially the rights of women, LGBTIQ+ people and those defending the land, territory and nature. The discourse of political figures is mutually reinforced by the stereotypes and imaginaries promoted by the media, and these become recurrent ideas repeated in the day to day, which discourages new movements from gathering strength.

*Governments, people in power, try to discredit and say that you're the problem, that you as a defender are the problem, that you as a woman human rights defender are the problem that is preventing development, you're an obstacle to development, and they start to stigmatize you in that way, and then everyone starts to see you that way.*

— **Ruth Alipaz Cuqui**, Indigenous *Uchupiamona* woman from Bolivia; defender of Indigenous rights, human rights and the rights of nature; member of the Commonwealth of Indigenous Communities of the Beni, Tuichi and Quiquibey Rivers and General Coordinator of CONTIOCAP | Bolivia

And after the stigmatization, or as a form of it, comes **criminalization**. In all the regions we found stories of judicialization, arbitrary detentions or threats of criminal charges as a way to limit activists' involvement.

*And given the climate of freedom of expression in the Gulf and the criminalization, the brutal criminalization of people who are speaking out or expressing a different opinion, I have to be more cautious of my work not to put myself, my family or relatives at risk because of what I'm doing.*

— **Anonymous**

*As a social activist and human rights defenders it's easy [for them to intimidate you]. You can be categorized as a terrorist, an attacker or a culture destroyer [...] We don't have accessible legal aid and we don't have accessible lawyers. We don't have purely independent judges and prosecutors. If you face a problem or accusation, where can you go?*

— **Pisey LY** | Cambodia

Another face of State repression is the **abuse and violence exercised by public law enforcement and State security agencies**.

*I had a very difficult situation this year, due to security problems starting on March 8. I was attacked because of participation in the World March. The threats and attacks lasted more than two months. All the girls from our organization who took part in the march had the same problems, including me. The police and unknown men were harassing us.*

— **Ukei Muratalieva** | Kyrgyzstan

*In October 2018, a strike by SUMIFRU worker women was brutally dispersed by the military. Two organizers were arrested. I negotiated the release of both of them. It is fulfilling if you are able to save lives and free people.*

— **Anonymous** | Philippines

*They seized our identity as women during the period of forced disappearance. At the beginning, I was kidnapped by the State for seven months and nobody knew for that entire time where we were, until we showed up in jail.*

— **Fatna Elbouih**, human rights defender, Association Relais Prison/Société (Moroccan Association for Bridging Prison-Society) | Morocco

Attacks by the State put activists in a position of extreme vulnerability, because they limit the spaces in which they can demand justice, in turn favoring **impunity** and heightening the risk to their lives and their integrity.

*The threat from the State is paralyzing because it comes from a structure that should be protecting us and guaranteeing our rights. If it's a mob, you can call the police. But who do you call if the government is after you?*

— **Anonymous** | Sri Lanka

And, in other cases, **State violence is mixed with State-sponsored violence, creating various types of relations, even collusion, expressed in alliances and agreements between legal armed forces and armed groups that operate on the fringes of the law.** In countries going through armed conflict and in those where participants are armed, the threat may come from paramilitary groups, groups linked with illegal economies, or shadow powers that have a very specific weight in the territory.

*In fact, the contexts are totally adverse to our struggle. People think we have a death wish, but we women are fighting for life, or rather, I'm fighting for life, I love life. But people get this idea that I'm looking for death, because those who attack us are expressions of death. I'm talking about military structures, paramilitary forces, drug dealers, gangs. So people, my family, they're almost always afraid, afraid that someday they're going to murder me.*

— **Anonymous** | Latin America

*I'd say that one of the biggest concerns is the persecution of women human rights defenders in Colombia. Regardless of the place of enunciation, there's a targeting, a targeting by... well, by the power establishment, right? By the government. And you know that here in Colombia there's paramilitary activity. (...) We've experienced persecution, we've felt that activism is much more controlled. It's clear that there is violence aimed at those of us who want other possible worlds, those of us who want other ways of living in society.*

— **Tef Piñeros**, Colectiva Yerbateras (Yerbateras Collective) | Colombia

The violence activists encounter when they seek and struggle to build **other possible worlds** occurs when their activism threatens economic interests, or questions the *status quo* or dominant ideology. Other worlds mean other economic models, other ways for human beings to live and relate to nature, all of which clash with those who are in power. For those who defend territory, the environment and nature, challenging corporate power entails a clear potential risk.

*So you have the people working on environmental issues and, again, it's not about [the] environment, it's about business. It's about business that is being questioned when people are doing environmental defense. It's corporate power that is putting them in danger.*

— **Jessica Horn** | Uganda/England

A number of activists were threatened for their **opposition to mining and hydrocarbon projects, infrastructure works** like dams and ports, monocultures and lumber companies. In Latin America, 9 out of the 25 people interviewed said they had been attacked for their activism in favor of territory. For example, an activist in Perú tells us that the persecution began after she led an action that affected the interests of a lumber company.

*When I took a stand against all that logging, because they were killing our nature, and of course I was alone, I had my children. (...) I stepped in, I brought the Police and we blocked everything. You can't imagine the amount of coal there was in those trucks. We stopped them, we stopped everything. But what was this company's response? They tried to kill me and my children.*

— **María Témpora Pintado** | Perú

These risks existed across all of the regions, although there are some differences between the risks that activists saw as most prevalent in their region. The regions where activists expressed greater concern about State repression or threats by the government or security agencies were North Africa, Southeast Asia and Western Asia. The region where online harassment and censorship were reported most often was Western Asia. The regions with the most frequent accounts of physical violence or threats of violence were East Africa, Central Africa, North Africa and South America.

Regardless of the context, the **widespread precariousness** of conditions in which many activists in the world live and work is a common reality, and one that exacerbates the risks they face. This is linked to structural inequalities, including funding that tends to value work solely on a narrow, results-based approach and fails to prioritize the wellness and care of activists or the sustainability of their movements. Activists are often working on a volunteer basis and have to find paid work to support themselves. This not only reduces their ability to respond to emergency situations, but affects their collective and individual well-being.

*If you look at the many human rights defenders that are out there in the world, including Kenya, the majority of them don't have a livelihood project or program where they can get their daily living. So we also need to factor in how we help women human rights defenders to sustain themselves so that they don't get distracted by other things. For example, if I am working on sexual violence, and I'm unable to meet my day-to-day expenses, then it means I'm actually going to look for a well-paying job, because activism is not actually bringing food to the table.*

— **Wangu Kanja**, Wangu Kanja Foundation-The Survivors of Sexual Violence in Kenya Network | Kenya

*As a human being, sometimes I felt bad, especially when financial resources are low and the attacks on human rights are high.*

— **Anonymous** | Philippines

The risks we find in all the regions have also occurred in other times: cycles of violence repeat themselves. Social mobilization has encountered repression by the State and from other agents for many years. So how is today different from the situation ten years ago?

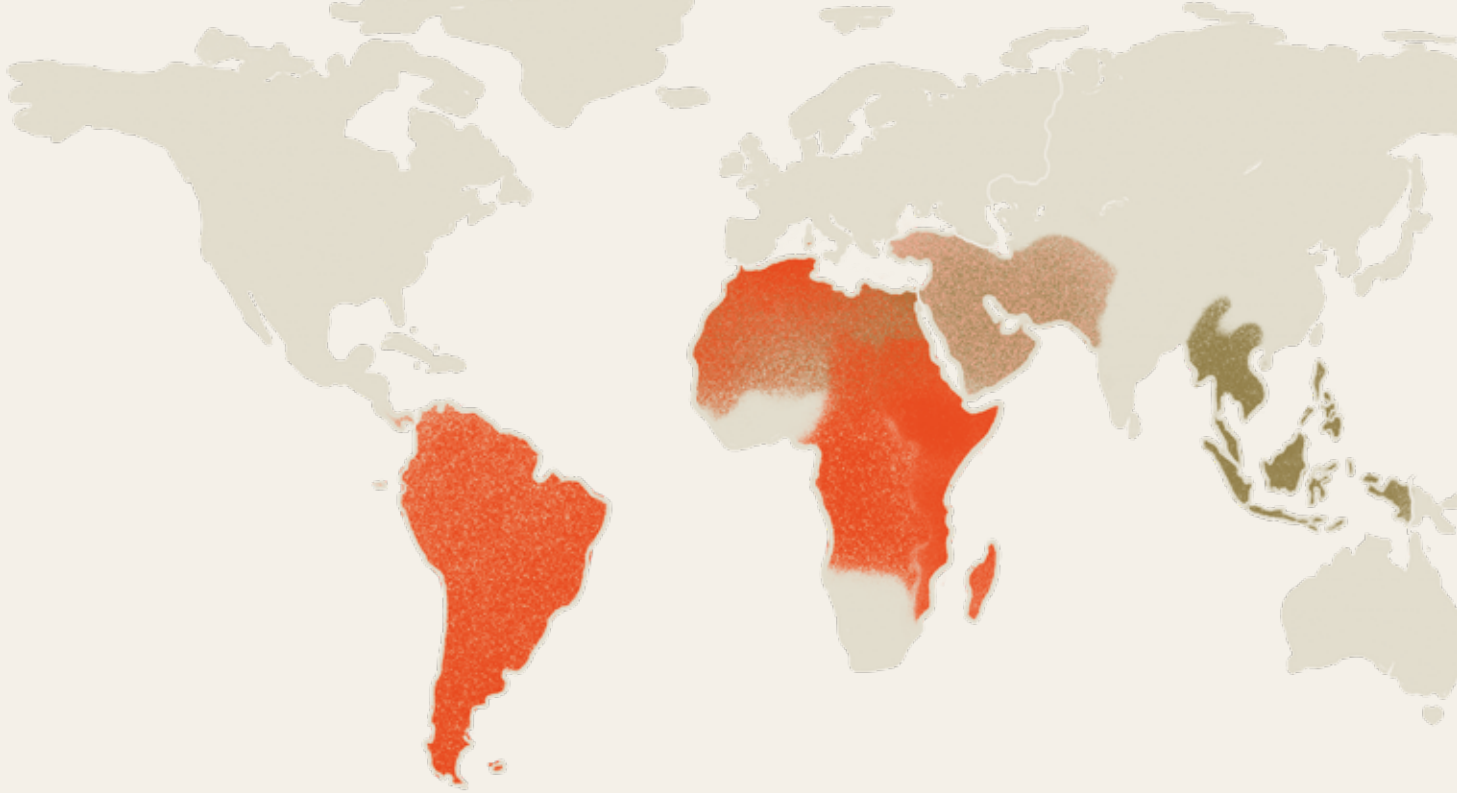
## OLD RISKS ASSUME NEW FORMS

Activists are perceiving a **resurgence of fundamentalisms that attempt to impose their worldview and exclude visions that are different from theirs**. Current risks sound familiar to us because they allude to conservative values and past traditions, and because they show an attempt to return to the former state of things, marked, among other aspects, by the absence of separation between Church and State, the predominance of the institution of marriage over other forms of association, gender stereotypes and the family-oriented focus<sup>7</sup> of public policies.

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<sup>7</sup> This focus is used by state institutions to make the interests of the family preeminent, using a traditional concept of family, which outweighs the rights of its individual members, especially the rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people.

- ✦ **Online harassment and censorship**
- ✦ **Physical violence or threats of violence**
- ✦ **State repression or threats by the government or security agencies**



*I think we are definitely at odds with a huge re-emergence of global fascism [...] Religious fundamentalism that is shutting down [groups who enforce the existence of] gender and [creating] fear [of] a gender spectrum that, of course, understands gender is fluid and powerful in its own right. And that is being dismissed, erased and threatened.*

— **Cara Page** | USA

Our **global context is shifting to the right**, and towards increasingly conservative stances, regardless of the ideological leanings of the government that espouses them. Recent elections have shown that people with openly discriminatory discourses can come to power by democratic means. This has strengthened fundamentalist groups, who deploy increasingly complex and far-reaching policies to spread their discourse in the media and revive discussions around, for example, gender and sexual orientation. Briefly

put, activists are facing fundamentalist ideas that already existed but are expanding and manifesting in new ways.

*Yes, I believe that the ultraconservative, fundamentalist right, which is anti-rights, evangelical, Catholic, etc. has gained a lot more ground than they had twelve years ago. They're much more deeply entrenched, they've made up so many things, they've also reacted virulently to our progress, they've become emboldened. (...) It's like they've invented a new order of rights, they've invented the idea that freedom of speech can include lesbophobia, homophobia, misogyny; that rights aren't universal, that children's rights are subordinated to the ideas of their parents. That is, they're like changing... trying to change the order of things.*

— **Rosa Posa Guinea** | Paraguay




## VIRTUAL SPACE AND ONLINE COMMUNICATION

We live in an age of connectivity and virtuality. Today we conduct our personal, community, professional and commercial relations through the Internet and social media. The COVID-19 pandemic turned many formerly face-to-face social activities into virtual interactions, exacerbating existing inequalities in

times of crisis. Virtuality has become a stage on which violence and inequality is perpetuated and accentuated. For instance, only a small percentage of the population was able to access remote medical services during the pandemic, because this requires an infrastructure for connection and digital education at home, among other things. Furthermore, a lot of women had to arrange their homes —with no extra recompense for the effort— to simultaneously perform their professional duties and the caretaking assigned to them by traditional gender roles.

In this context, one of the new risks that has emerged, which didn't exist in the previous decade, is violence through technology<sup>8</sup>, which has grown as the Internet provides access to an increasing body of information and spaces for expression, denunciation and social mobilization. Anonymity in these circumstances does not pose a risk in and of itself, and in fact, in some cases, it has become a protective strategy for activists that do not have the liberty of being able to express themselves openly and safely, particularly in repressive contexts. But for the same reason, **anonymity** is deeply stigmatized when it is adopted by activists or people reporting instances of violence. Anonymity becomes a risk factor when actors who feel their interests threatened use it to attack activists, shielded by the impunity that usually accompanies this type of violence.

One of the elements that activists associate with risk in the virtual space is the exposure of or trafficking in private or personal information, used by countries, companies and other parties to criminalize, harass, “out” or silence their voices or impede their action, both on the web and in actual physical contexts.



*I was helping a friend doing a visa application and one of the questions, which I'm guessing was not a question 20 years ago, was 'do you have an online profile?' Now these States are also trying to monitor us —they know that the digital platform is also where people are doing activist work, which makes it riskier. Employers who go onto your online spaces and check out what your opinions are, check out what your life is like, to see if you are 'a threat', so it definitely increases the risk, it increases visibility.*

— **Khwezilomso Mbandazayo** | South Africa

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<sup>8</sup> By this we mean aggressions carried out through any technological device or tool, in order to thwart the work of human rights defense. These violences may include attacks on social media, theft of data and equipment, use of surveillance technology, content censorship or website or profile hacking, among others.

For some activists, the profile they create in public spaces is a significant part of how they project their identity. Their representation of themselves, their interactions with others and the space for communicating their thoughts is an important part of their day, when they express feelings and emotions.

*[There was] a moment when someone became obsessed with the fan page [owned by the collective to which they belong] and began to file complaints against it, like systematically, until they shut it down. And with the shutdown of the fan page, my profile was also closed. And that was super painful to me, because my first reaction was: 'I feel like they killed me, I feel like they virtually killed me. Like I disappeared.'*

— **Diana Pulido** | Colombia



In understanding the specific impacts and risks present on this virtual stage, we must broaden our definition of care to incorporate the **digital body**<sup>9</sup> as one of the territories we care for and protect, because what happens online has implications in the real world.

*You realize that [the Internet] is an anxiety-inducing device. Not only that, it's social media itself and how they are being used. That you encounter hate speech that's highly amplified because people can hide behind their screens. So there's violence and there's a very strong resumption of hostilities from [both] sides. And that's something that happens because of these very strong identity issues. It's not just a question of a policy I see from the outside, it also has to do with who I am, my gender identity, sexual preference, racial issues, where I am in the world.*

— **Fernanda Shirakawa** | Brazil

One activist also mentioned the risk of sharing personal information with companies, accepting the terms and conditions of “free” apps where our information, our habits, tastes and histories, are “legally” trafficked. Another element that activists identify as a new risk is the anxiety caused by hyperconnectivity, which has grown as we incorporate our mobile phones into more aspects of our daily lives.

*I've been thinking and talking a lot about this. About how it was an expression in our body, because the cell phone is right there in our hands, receiving notifications all the time, and it's an object that means a lot, right? It's not just a device. There are our friends, my family, my entertainment, where I go to disconnect from the world, and where I go for information. So you realize that it's a device that induces anxiety, and then you have social media itself and how that's being used.*

— **Fernanda Shirakawa** | Brazil

One of the risks associated with virtual space is harassment. This includes aggressive or threatening messages, attacks, posting false information with the intent to slander and other practices that hamper the work of activists and their organizations. Socially, this type of threat is often dismissed, and procedures for reporting it or investigating it are precarious or completely

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<sup>9</sup> **Digital body** is a category developed in dialogue with activists from the Latin American and Caribbean regions. This category is understood as the combination of memories and information about ourselves or about the collectivities to which we belong, which we create digitally to have a presence in the virtual space, closely connected with our physical body, and deeply interrelated to the notion of territory-body-earth, present in numerous Latin American cultures. The **digital body** is interconnected with the various bodies and territories we inhabit, and which are at once vulnerable to risk, and spaces for protection, care and resistance.

lacking in many countries. Activists remind us that the fact that it is virtual does not mean it is not real, and in fact, it could worsen the situation.

*It's been a whole new agenda with the virtual aggressions. (...) When you report them, for example, the authorities say "that's not a threat," because... well, it's virtual. It's also been a process for women defenders to realize that these attacks are violence, and I believe we're at a point [where] a lot of work has already been done on recognizing that this affects us as well. It doesn't matter that they haven't delivered an actual letter. It's as if they've delivered a threatening letter right to your house, only you see it on the computer.*

— **Verónica Vidal Degiorgis** | Uruguay/México

*I have seen sisters and comrades completely having to be hospitalized because of what people have said on Facebook about them.*

— **Phumi Mtetwa**, Just Associates (JASS) | South Africa

**Repression and criminalization are also expressed virtually** through surveillance, control and censorship. Technologies give governments a new tool for controlling and monitoring activists who challenge or resist their decisions or denounce their collusion with private companies that threaten their territories and common goods.

*My five close friends and working partners got arrested and detained for 37 days. After that, several organizations were shut down and had to go underground. (...) Yeah, after 2015 a lot of offline activities were canceled or [kept] really low-profile. We worked online a lot: online activism, online mobilization. But then last year our accounts were shut down. Out of the online threats, the most crucial one is basically censorship... not just to us, but to any citizen in China. When you say something [that's considered] correct or not, you know, it gets really tricky when you don't know what you can say and get arrested by the police. It's kind of ridiculous. The government wants to control everything online. Our organizational accounts were shut down and that has made everything more difficult for us. Censorship has become complicated.*

— **Jing Xiong**, Feminist Voices | China

Connectivity also brings new opportunities. **The virtual space can be a scenario for solidarity, mobilization, friendship, assistance, networking and care.** Sometimes it is the only way to communicate what is

happening in rural or remote areas or in countries where telecommunications are closely controlled. Or it is simply a tool to connect with others, exchange knowledge and support each other mutually, no matter the distance or physical borders.

*I think in terms of folks that are supporting this work, and supporting activism and movements, and the pace of violence and the interconnectedness compared to twenty years ago. We're all much more aware of what's happening in different places than we were probably twenty years ago. At the same time [we're still] really navel gazing in our own context too. I think we've gone through a period of being more aware of what's happening in other contexts, and now, because of so much oppression happening in many different countries, that people are going back to local in a way that is necessary for building solidarity and trust, and also because of the urgency.*

— **Shawna Wakefield**, Root. Rise. Pollinate! | USA

*But the flipside of [online threats] is online solidarity, especially with other activists from outside Cameroon because remember, we have a crisis. I told you we have a crisis that has been going on for three years and there are times when we don't even have Internet, it's been cut off sometimes for more than 30 days and when this happens and you have stories and you need help getting the word out and things like that, it's the solidarity of our sisters outside of Cameroon that keeps us going.*

— **Comfort Mussa**, Sisterspeak237 | Cameroon

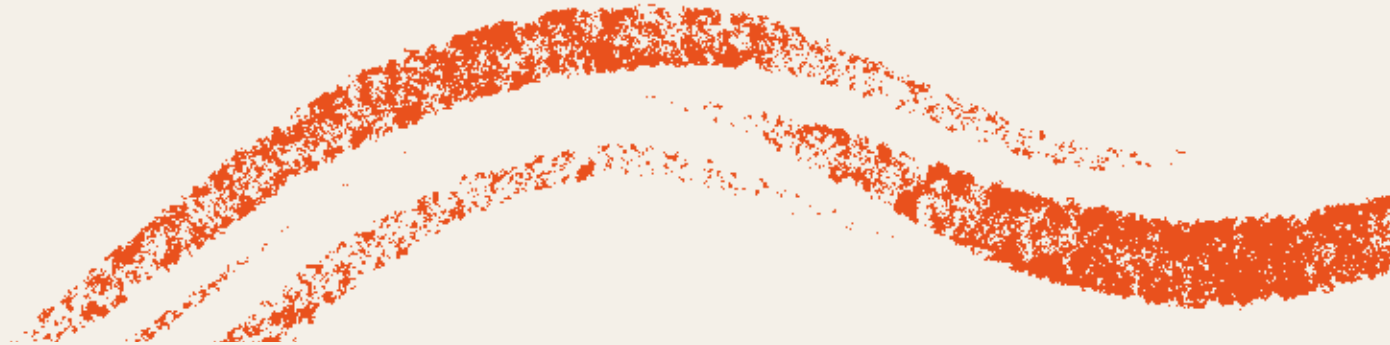
### **The Internet has also changed the way people come to be feminists.**

The younger generation, who grew up with the Internet, finds in it a space for socialization with a diversity of people, a space permeated by an affinity of ideas that they might otherwise not have heard about. A Panamanian activist who became involved with feminism in the 1990s tells us how she initially joined the student movement, where she met feminist women. Then, working in an NGO, she began to specialize in gender issues, in contrast with young feminists who take other paths:

*It's not like before, when young women came from our NGOs, from our organizations. (...) There's a whole lot of young women who have become feminists because of the Internet. And then they approach the movement they find in Panama. But I believe a lot of them are Internet feminists, and I say this as a good thing. I mean, they know what's going on in other places, they're listening to things from other places. This is a generation that's between sixteen and twenty-five years old. There's others who are twenty-*

*six, thirty, thirty-five, those are a little more our legacy. But the younger women are not the legacy of my generation. I'm forty-eight. And for me, I mean, I get such a smile on my face when I see that there's so many of them. Some of them are in theater, they're [performing] in open mic nights, [they] have an art store, set up a book fair or discussion in the context of the book fair or are feminist poets. That just makes me so happy.*

— **Alibel Pizarro** | Panama



## SITUATED RISKS AND EXPERIENCES

**The same risk can be experienced differently depending on our identities and the specific conditions in which we live.** Situating risks and threats means recognizing that the same condition can represent a risk factor (increasing the possibility that I may be harmed) or a protection (reducing that possibility), depending on the context.

Being an activist always involves risk. **Being a woman, trans or non-binary activist means transgressing the gender roles established by patriarchal society, and for that reason, attacks against them have a sexist and misogynist backstory.**

*I think being a woman is the reason why, first of all, I experienced these threats, because I have other male colleagues who, when they write about certain things people dislike, people don't go back to them and say "aah, you are not a good leader because you are not married," for example. What does being married [have] to do with a professional opinion, right?*

— **Comfort Mussa**, Sisterspeak237 | Cameroon

One risk that is materially greater for women activists is **sexual violence**. The threats against them, whether virtual or physical, often include a sexualization of their bodies or the threat of sexual aggression.

*We understood that when we get arrested, when female human rights defenders are arrested, it is not just physical or emotional torture, but sexual violence is also used as a form of torture. So we are definitely aware of those kinds of threats. Even our legal counsels are receiving online threats like: "Be careful when you walk on the street because we will rape you!" Things like that, comments that are sexual in nature... So we feel more at risk specifically as women in this political climate.*

— **Geri Cerillo** | Philippines

*Sexually, I am at risk anytime, no matter [how] resilient I am, you know, but what can we do? This is the reality. Corrective rape is used against me to harass me, intimidate me and to stop my activism. As an activist, I still have the utmost fear of that environment.*

— **Pisey LY** | Cambodia

Another characteristic of threats against women and feminist activists is that they **extend to their families**. References to their reproductive role, threats against their children or other family members, or even threatening messages transmitted through their relatives, reinforce the idea that they will be punished for transgressing the gender role traditionally imposed on women.

*In general, male human rights defenders face problems, but they're the target. They might go after their families, but it's different for women because they want to show them that they're women, that they're just women, like, "why do they meddle in questions like this?"*

— **Djingarey Ibrahim Maiga**, *Femmes et Droits Humains* (Women and Human Rights) | Mali

*If you speak about repression against men (...) it's almost never personal attacks, not personal attacks on their family, not personal attacks on their children, not trying to destroy the social life or personality of the man. If you speak about women, if you speak about women human rights defenders, it's very important to keep all this in mind, all these personal attacks, this is all something for destroying the personality of the women and this is something against your private life and against your sexuality, against your*

*children, against your family, against yourself, against your social [life], your reputation, etc. This is quite a big difference.*

— **Olga Karatch** | Belarus

Threats affect an activist's family relationships, and the situation can reach the point where their own partners, mothers or fathers pressure them and question their work. A number of activists told us that they had found a lack of understanding of their commitment to a specific issue or criticism of their activism, because it is perceived as a decision with potentially dangerous consequences.



*[Speaking of tensions between organizations because of their complaints of land hoarding in Indigenous territory] But they did report me to the authorities, they waged a terrible slander campaign (...) even my parents cried, like why was I fighting for things that weren't mine and why was I reporting, and why didn't I look for a normal job. (...) Because they went to frighten them, they made them go to a meeting, an assembly, and they told them "you should tell your daughter, your daughter is such a good person, and because your daughter this and that, because you don't know what she's getting into, she might even drag you guys down with her" (...) and then they started to work on my mom and my dad so they could control me.*

— **Opasta** | Honduras

*I used to get calls in the middle of the night threatening me to withdraw cases [I was working on] or they would kidnap my daughter. These things used to stress me [out] a lot. On top of that, my husband used to say, "Who calls you at night? Why do they call you? Why are you doing this kind of work?" It would create a very difficult environment. I say I have invested a lot in my daughter. If she is a little bit late returning from school, my stress level increases. My husband stresses me out, the traffickers threaten me... for a long time, I've struggled with this situation.*

— **Renu Adhikari**, activist, National Alliance of Women Human Rights Defenders | Nepal

**Particular risks exist for people with different sexual orientations, gender identities or expressions.** The legal barriers they face in accessing their rights limit their freedom of movement, and when a trans woman, lesbian, bisexual or other queer or gender-fluid person becomes more visible through their activism, there is a greater chance they will be attacked for that identity.

*I have never had any problems but I'm still a queer woman from North Africa. Honestly, when I moved here specifically, [it was] one of the things I kept thinking about, because I am married now [to a woman]. For me, I think, one of the things that scare[s] me most, is what would happen if I came back and they knew that I am married. I can easily be jailed.*

— **Anonymous**

The right to the city and to freely occupy public spaces is no longer guaranteed, especially for trans women and others who have a non-hegemonic gender expression.

*(...) You could say that those of us who are transvestites in broad daylight are more at risk in the outer parts of town. There are places that are a lot safer, like downtown. For example, downtown Santiago is safe because there's a diversity of people, and somehow that diversity protects you.*

— **Claudia Rodríguez**, Fondo Alquimia (Alquimia Fund) | Chile

*I think the number of times I'm physically harmed depends on my gender presentation at the time. (...) Shootings are just so common in my neighborhood... [I think] "Oh, it's just a matter of time" and I kind of try to do it in this way, "I'm going to be rational about it. I'm just gonna live my life. I'm going to keep on alert." Whenever I tell people when I'm going*

*places and they're like "no." (...) I'm actually just, like, legit scared [of what could happen]. And I can feel it. I can feel it in these places in my body, I can feel it.*

— **Anonymous**

Stereotypes can be expressed through aggressions, police abuse or blaming by public-sector officials, when activists try to report an aggression.

*[Imitating the police] "But she did something, for sure."*

*"Sir, we work in human rights, all of us [women] have our private lives, I don't know if they're sex workers or not, but we're reporting what happened to our co-worker in her workspace."*

*[Imitating the police] "Yes, but she must have done something."*

*When they murdered C., [they assumed it was because] she did something. When they beat J. and hit her until they drew blood, [they assumed it was because] she did something. When I went to report the theft, the investigator came in: "But what happened? Who were you with?"*

*"Sir, they robbed my house, please..."*

*So there's always that blaming, and I know it's because of being trans.*

— **Miluska Luzquiños**, *Trans Organización Feminista por los DD. HH. de las personas Trans* (Trans Feminist Organization for the Human Rights of Trans People) | Perú



The risks that activists face, and the challenges that these risks imply, are bound up in the contexts in which they live and in the specificities of each of them: gender, sexual orientation, race, social class, age, geographic origins and (dis)abilities, among others. So it is not about thinking of identity as a filter we add to a person, but rather about understanding their complexity and situating ourselves in that particular, intersectional place, to approach their realities and understand them in their context.

It is important to think about how **stereotypes around (dis)ability and gender** influence the way people tend to understand the risks activists with disabilities face. In the research, activists with disabilities refer to widespread perceptions about their disability which place that condition above all the

others, and eclipse situations of risk, whether tied to their activism, their other identities, those associated with their sexual orientation or the fact they are mothers.

*A lot of programs are being developed for women leaders with disabilities who work in Kyrgyzstan. These programs are related to the job you have to do, but there is no such understanding that you need protection programs too.*

— **Ukei Muratalieva** | Kyrgyzstan

*For example, someone comes along and pushes my wheelchair, without my permission, which is something that's happened to all of us, but I see that it happens more with women, because they identify you as someone who needs help and that you're weaker. (...) After that, regarding, for example, sexual orientation (...) they assume that people are straight. With disabilities, even more so. Like you have to be straight, and, to the extent possible, you shouldn't have sex. Like that's the idea, right?*

— **Luna Irazábal**, Colectivo Ovejas Negras (Black Sheep Collective) | Uruguay

Activists also pointed out the implications of fighting to ensure that all human rights are effectively guaranteed to **people with disabilities**.

*I grew up as a young woman with a disability. Now that I'm grown, I advocate for all sectors: women, the youth, children, with or without disability because everything that they need [is also] what we need. (...) Because for instance, disability has various categories, so if you talk about education, which is a fundamental human right, to ensure that they have education, you need to train teachers in sign language... When it comes to infrastructure, building roads and other things, you just need to make it accessible, so that I'll go along. When it comes to agriculture, we need to be trained in order to do agricultural activities. [In the] justice system, we need our lawyers, our judges to understand sign language... So our advocacy is completely in general, but you have to ensure that all of these are in place so that no one is left behind. That's the whole part about it.*

— **Amb. Daintowon Domah Pay-Bayee**, Coordinator of the Young Women Leadership and Knowledge Institute Liberia (YOWLI) and Secretary General for the Political Affairs Department of the Coalition of Political Parties Women in Liberia (COPPWIL) | Liberia

Another challenge is understanding what it means to **have an ethnic identity**, and how this intersects with other identities constructed from collectivity and from individuality. Some of the interviewees claim membership in an ethnic group as a collective identity, stressing a characteristic “way of being”, while narrating specific experiences, even personal conflicts with other dimensions of their identity, according to the space or other groups they belong to that are not related to ethnicity. For example, an activist from Thailand noted that there are no spaces for reflecting on the specific conditions of Indigenous lesbian women, and how the collective experience of colonization created a different reality for them.

*First, being an ethnic minority is already a risk because we have been oppressed socially, economically and culturally. The majority have the power and never recognize how cultures and social structures do not protect us. (...) This is how it is being Indigenous or an ethnic minority every day. There is also internal colonization, (...) [because] we are surrounded by feminists who are not lesbians, we are also sometimes not allowed the narrative of being lesbian and fighting for gender equality and orientation and climate justice as well. And we don't have spaces to talk deeply about sexual orientation. Oppressed lesbians like me, our issues are not addressed equally with other issues. There are some barriers that we still need to talk about. (...) If you don't have space to talk, how can you solve the issue?*

— **Matcha Phorn-in** | Thailand

## INTERNAL RISKS AND PENDING CONVERSATIONS

Thus far, we have referred to threats from the outside, but we also need to address some elements or situations that take place within organizations and movements and could constitute a risk. Conflicts or difficulties that are not promptly dealt with can trigger impacts for individual and collective safety and weaken movements. That is why it is just as important to face the situations within organizations as it is to deal with outside threats.

*The targeting of CSOs [civil society organizations] is affecting people. Therefore, our daily interaction with one another starts to be unpleasant. There is this atmosphere of one not only dealing with the government or the targeting, but we are also dealing with arguments/conflicts and*

*the dynamics with the people within the organization or with other organizations, and this becomes dismaying. You start to think: "why am I doing this? If we are unable to resolve our issues, how do they expect us to do any kind of change?" The feeling of hopelessness kicks in.*

— **Anonymous**

First, there is the question of **power relationships and hierarchies**. How much is this talked about within organizations? Are we questioning the way we approach power and leadership? What specific challenges do feminist organizations face with regard to leadership and power?

*I think one of the most damning things I ever heard came from a young feminist. We were talking about leadership, power, etc. in organizations and she said that many women's organizations are run like families, the very family structure that we often question because of the inherent violence that lies within it. (...) I think that there are many things which actually lead to dissatisfaction, which lead to disparity. We are not able to talk it through and we do not discuss power, and power can very often be totally corrupt. And we don't open those spaces for conversations because we're terrified of what happens.*

— **Pramada Menon** | India

*The movement pretends that it's open and horizontal, that it has no structure, but it has a structure that is unspoken and normalized.*

— **Anonymous**

Conversation is important, because it appeals to the internal transformation that feminism has always encouraged. It is an **opportunity for a profound transformation** of daily practices —not just *outward*, but also *inward*— in feminist spaces.

*Even in feminist movements you are going to have to face the same unequal power, dynamics and hierarchies that you face in general society, and there is no utopia in that. It is just really vital that we all work together to try to create that utopia, because, actually, we have to actively do it.*

— **Jessica Horn** | Uganda/England

Luckily, the movement is not static, and an increasing number of organizations are adopting other ways of relating and organizing their work. Some opt for

collective decision-making, others have a horizontally structured division of labor. They also mention remote and virtual work as a strategy for being more flexible, and reconsidering labor dynamics, including, for example, shorter work hours.

*The structure of our organization is very horizontal, there is absolutely nothing vertical whatsoever, so that the leader behaves like a boss and we all obey them in everything. We have this kind of advice committee where we discuss our problems together and look for strategies to solve them.*

— **Milana Bakhaeva** | Chechnya/Russia

Another point that came out during the process was how activists stand on the **various ways of experiencing and understanding activism**. We heard repeated mention of issues like **being addicted to their work, experiencing activism as a sacrifice, feelings of guilt, internal expectations** on how to be a “good activist or feminist.”

*We are movements and we are trying to transgress certain conservative, traditional, hegemonic stances, but we're still working in the same ways. We're still working on the basis of guilt, and not on the basis of responsibility or shared responsibility, for example. We're still working (...) around always being martyrs to the cause.*

— **Selene Yang** | Paraguay

In our conversations with activists, these practices were identified from a critical or self-critical organizational and personal perspective. Many of them spoke of moments of disillusionment because of the constant comparison or internal disputes that ended up creating tensions; some described a breakup of collectivities and personal searches for other forms of participating in activism, because most of them find that a real commitment to collective solutions is rare.

*We are actually constantly saying, you know, "you're not liberal enough, you're not queer enough, you're not whatever enough, you're not woman enough." So if we could just end that and be able to talk to each other...*

— **Pramada Menon** | India

Finally, activists' accounts were marked by mentions of the effect on their overall health, their well-being and their lives: **traumas, illness, moments of emotional instability, stress and fatigue**. Activists shared that these

are repercussions from traumatic episodes, related to the risks and threats they face, and in turn to some of their practices: lack of down time, anxiety, high stress levels, long work days, long commutes, physical demands, irregular meal times, etc. All of these effects, which are not limited to internal risks, were mentioned explicitly by activists.

*Activists [find it] really difficult to keep a positive mindset when they're harassed or when they're getting pressured. They experience a lot of mental issues; it becomes so difficult [that] they become depressed.*

— **Jing Xiong**, Feminist Voices | China

*So last week it hit me really hard, like really bad, I felt like I needed to process everything, and that takes time. And I was scared that these traumas — I don't think this thing about my knee is a coincidence. "Oh, well, I hurt my knee, what bad luck." I think it's a consequence of all these things, these unresolved knots inside me, in my life, there are things I'm not accepting, and that may be why I have the problem with my knee. I think there's a reason.*

— **Anonymous** | Nicaragua

While there are specificities when we speak of risks (both external and internal) depending on context, we find certain internal problems that are common to each region. For example, activists from North Africa and South America made more frequent mention of conflicts between different perspectives on feminisms. In South America, they were more likely to mention discrimination within the movements; and, in Western Asia, more inclined to speak of power relationships and hierarchies.

The act of situating risks leads us to think about ourselves personally and collectively, on a local, regional and global level. By remembering that risks depend on the context and the specific experience of each activist, we can avoid lumping together all their experiences or all their challenges, their practices of self-care and resistance. At the same time, realizing this connection we have as part of movements and our interconnectedness with the world around us reminds us that we are not alone: it activates our empathy, our solidarity. It also drives our strength in continuing to build other possible worlds. We need to deepen these connections and continue weaving together our experiences to go on transforming, both within and outside of our movements.

# INVITATION

## Cross-border inspiration

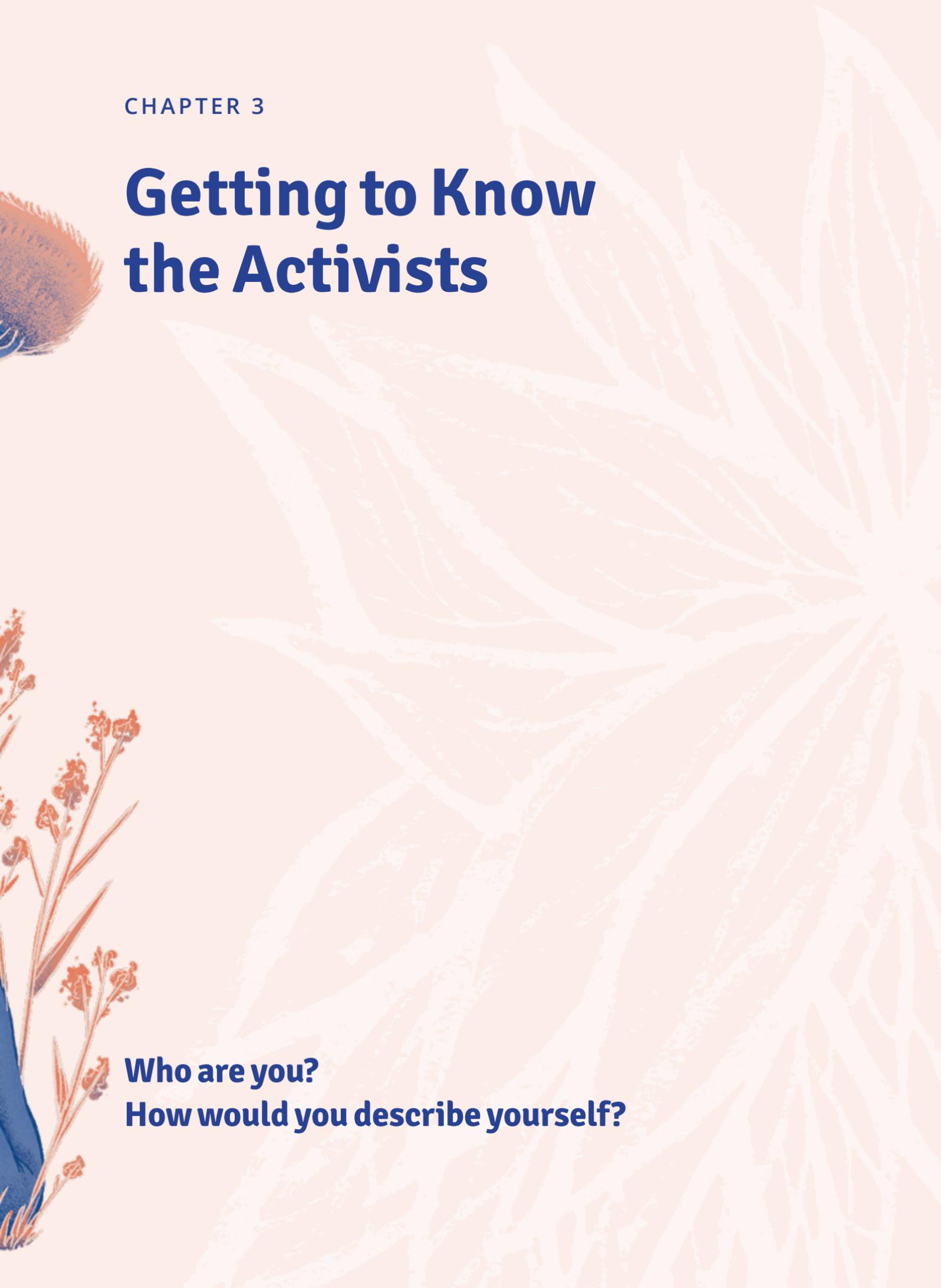
Choose a quote included in this chapter from a country you are not familiar with, a country you could not clearly locate on a map or one whose history you know almost nothing about. Do a little research into that place and into feminist, women's, trans and non-binary people's movements there.

### **What did reading about their experience inspire in you?**

We invite you to write a message to the feminist activists of that country sharing with them your experience in facing similar risks.







CHAPTER 3

# Getting to Know the Activists

**Who are you?**  
**How would you describe yourself?**

To situate activists on a map, it is not enough to color in countries or categorize them according to the rights they defend. Experience and subjectivity are fundamental. Activists are much more than their demographic data. Activists are their experiences, their memories and their subjectivities, told in their own voices.

## WHO ARE THE PEOPLE SPEAKING?

- ✦ They are **118 activists and practitioners**.
- ✦ Our interviewees included **7 people who were victims of forced displacement** or exile, and **3 women with disabilities**.
- ✦ **83.1%** of the people interviewed are activists and **16.9%** are “caregiving activists” or “practitioners.”

### Age

**19%** of the people interviewed were between **20 and 29**

**36%** between **30 and 39**

**16.1%** between **40 and 49**

**14.4%** between **50 and 59**

**5.1%** between **60 and 69**

and **1.7%** between **70 and 79**

The last **6.8%** did not share this information.

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<sup>10</sup> This was asked as an open-ended question, without a preset classification. The information we are sharing reflects the answers we received. Many of the people we interviewed did not respond to this question, because they did not self-identify in any particular way. In this section, we present some of their reflections about arbitrary classifications and how they interpret them in their context.

<sup>11</sup> As with the ethnicity/race category, many of the interviewees preferred not to be identified in any way with regard to their sexual orientation.

## Self-identification with regard to ethnicity<sup>10</sup>

**27.1%** did not answer      **26.3%** said Afro/Black      **10.2%** white  
**9.3%** Indigenous      **8.5%** mixed      **7.5%** Asian  
**4.2%** Arab      **5.9%** answered "other"      and **0.8%** identified as North African

## Gender

**89.8%** identified as cisgender women      **4.2%** as non-binary people      **2.5%** as trans women  
**2.5%** as trans men or trans people who prefer to be referred to in the masculine      and **0.8%** responded none of the above.

## Sexual orientation<sup>11</sup>

**45.8%** did not respond      **22%** identified as heterosexual      **13.6%** as lesbian  
**9.8%** as queer      **5.1%** as bisexual      and **3.4%** gave other responses.

# Identity in activism

- ✦ **16.1%** are activists for LGBTIQ+ rights
- ✦ **14.4%** are activists against violence toward women and gender-based violence (GBV)
- ✦ **11%** are activists for women's rights in general
- ✦ **7.6%** defend territory, the environment, and the rights of nature
- ✦ **7.6%** are caregiving activists or practitioners
- ✦ **5.1%** are activists for sexual and reproductive rights
- ✦ **1.7%** are "artists"
- ✦ **1.7%** are digital activists and defend digital rights
- ✦ **1.7%** are journalists
- ✦ **32.2%** indicated "other" specializations.

## Grouped by the Urgent Action Fund that conducted the interview, these are the general figures:

- ✦ **31%** UAF-Africa
- ✦ **31%** UAF LAC
- ✦ **23%** UAF WHR
- ✦ **15%** UAF A&P

**62.7%**

live in **urban areas**

**12.7%**

live in **rural areas**

**2.5%**

**move between urban and rural areas**

**22%**

did not provide this information

**37.3%**

**have a partner**

**2.5%**

**have more than one partner**

**44.1%**

**are single**

**16.1%**

did not answer

**38.1%**

**have children**

**51.7%**

**do not have children**

**one**

interviewee **was pregnant** at the time of the interview

**9.3%**

did not answer

## Regions

**19.1%** of those interviewed were from South America

**10.2%** from Central America

**1.2%** from the Caribbean

**5.1%** from North America

**9.3%** from North Africa

**4.1%** from Central Africa

**6.8%** from East Africa

**9.3%** from West Africa

**1.7%** from Southern Africa

**10.2%** from West Asia

**5.9%** from Southeast Asia

**4.2%** from South Asia

**2.5%** from Central Asia

**1.7%** from East Asia

**2.5%** from Melanesia

**2.5%** from Southern Europe

**2.5%** from Eastern Europe

The activists who participated in this investigation are **women, trans and non-binary people** who defend the human rights of women, LGBTIQ+ people and territory. Some of them mentioned their profession, trade or area of work: journalism, art, social work, psychology, anthropology, sociology, astrology, *reiki*, psychotherapy. Most of them stressed their activism, either generally (“I am a human rights defender”) or specifically (“I am a defender of sex workers’ rights”, “I am a defender of territory,” “I am an activist primarily for the rights of lesbian, bisexual and trans people”). Most of them spoke from the perspective of their organization and acknowledged acting collectively in their work. From their experience, some reflected on what it meant to define oneself as an activist.

*I don't really like the term "activist." I think each of us has the capacity and a specific space for advancing in their field of interest, whatever that may be. I could be a researcher, a psychology specialist, a social specialist, a lawyer, I can be whatever and do my best, but there's no job called "activist." I'm doing my job and my job is part of a larger circle of many things that can change, and I'm trying to be part of that circle.*

— **Anonymous**

*It's been a whole process. From where I've been for the last ten years, which is a global, international, feminist organization, a lot of times, I felt like... I'm not the defender, the one on the front lines, right? I'm not in the community, I don't work with the base every day, I'm just doing advocacy in global, regional spaces. (...) So of course we understand the right to defend rights, and we have our personal practice as well. (...) We're supporting various causes in our personal militancy. (...) Now I think that based on that reflection. (...) I consider myself a defender, too, not one of the women on the front lines, but one of the facilitators. But it's been a long road to seeing myself that way: an activist, a defender.*

— **Verónica Vidal Degiorgis** | Uruguay/México

# WHO ARE THESE ACTIVISTS?

**How do activists define themselves?** The answer depends on the political trajectory and, in some cases, their personal moment. **Their identities are multiple, and for some of them they are not fixed**—they change throughout their lives and are influenced by the individual process.

*Q: How do you define yourself in terms of race and gender?*

*A: Gender, I'm just now thinking that I might be trans, that's why I don't use the name on my official ID. Um... and I'm white.*

— **María Pierna Sabei – Pipi** | Argentina

*In terms of identity, identity is a very fluid thing. This is how I define myself. It's a fluid, flexible thing. And nowadays I strongly identify myself as an Arab woman who lives every day through challenges. And bear in mind that there is a lot of racism happening now. And of course, I'm very white-passing. But then when it comes to people speaking to me, they know that I'm not from here. So they basically need the race thing, how I identify myself. Okay, I'm an Arab woman and I'd like to say queer. It's a very strong identification for myself and a feminist.*

— **Anonymous**

The words to **define oneself in terms of gender** are limited in all languages: *femme, woman, gens non binaire, sexe féminin, cis woman, female, trans, travesti, mujer, persona trans, mulher cis, persona no binaria*, trans and queer, transgender woman, nonconforming, gender queer, trans non-binary—these were all answers to this open-ended question. When asked about gender, almost no one hesitated to answer; this is a definition that marks their identity on a daily basis.

Some activists who identify as women emphasize the fact that they are not traditionally, so that they are women who defy stereotypes. They are people who have reflected on and are aware of sexual and racial power dynamics and socially imposed gender roles.

*My gender identity is feminine, and from there I am a militant too, right? Being able to speak from those diverse places, respecting transitions, respecting the non-binary, respecting all ways of expressing gender. But I do place myself on the feminine side —non-hegemonic, obviously.*

— **Tef Piñeros**, *Colectivo Yerbateras* (Yerbateras Collective) | Colombia

*A: I think I am a mother and a father and all other roles. At home we have divided our chores. We respect each other, we have division of work (laughs). My husband also respects my choices, but we argue sometimes.*

*Q: Is there any other identity you associate with?*

*A: I am a woman for the workers. My work is for the male and female workers. I am a woman who can carry bananas, I am a woman who can pack bananas.*

— **Anonymous** | Philippines



Expressions of gender influence the words and language we use. Language becomes a place from which to affirm femininity, masculinity or existence outside of these categories.

The words we use to name ourselves and share our experiences are grounded in each context and have a universe of meaning depending on the language in which they are expressed. In this investigation, we conversed in Russian, English, Spanish, Portuguese, French and Arabic, but the mother tongues of those we interviewed ranged from Chinese, Nepali, Sápara, Quechua, Tacana, Quiché, Croatian, Serbian, Thai, among others. We understand that it is inevitable that some of the meaning of our words in each language is lost in translation. For example, the use of pronouns is common to many of these languages, but in field work the question “what are your pronouns?” was often more familiar to English-speaking activists than to those who live in countries with other languages, where the question is apparently not asked as often.

*I am a gender non-binary person and that's why I use they/them pronouns.*

— **Aizhan Kadralieva** | Kyrgyzstan

In other languages, responses varied, either because pronouns do not exist grammatically or because this use of language has not been claimed. In Spanish this reflection was not made explicit, but two of the people

interviewed changed the masculine and feminine grammatical endings “a(s)” and “o(s)” for “e(s)” when speaking, to include all genders, or to speak from a gender-neutral perspective.

The question of **sexual orientation** is something that came up spontaneously in more than half the interviews in responding to the open-ended question about identities. Those who wished to share this information were primarily people who do not identify as heterosexual. Calling themselves lesbian, bisexual or queer is more important to them because they are aware of being different in a society that inculcates heteronormativity. And in this area—at pace with the movements themselves—the terms and interpretations have changed and will continue to be transformed.

*Well, I identify as a respectable lesbian lady, that's my identity; respectable lesbian lady. I always say that if I were twenty years old, I might suddenly be a non-binary person, pansexual, but I came late to this. I'm a lady, that's it. (...) If I were young, I'd think about it differently but no, I don't have the urge to change this late in the game.*

— **Rosa Posa Guinea** | Paraguay

The question about **racial identity was much harder to answer**. In this case, making a statement about this is different from one region to another, and various activists described how they had not thought about it until they left their country, or when the question came up in some “global” categories—for example, those used in administrative records, by migratory institutions or in international policy classifications—which, instead of being agreed upon and based on the identities of people and communities, are defined based on colonial legacies.

*When it comes to race, I realized that in different parts of the world, race is categorized very, very differently. I did not have a situation in Croatia where I would need to categorize myself in racial terms. We do have this ethnicity issue, and we had our war around that in the nineties, which I was affected by. But when I came to the United States, I checked the Caucasian box.*

— **Jelene Postic** | Croatia

*I'm Indian, which I suppose in global language would be South Asian.*

— **Pramada Menon** | India

Q: So, you think the race question sounds “North American”?

A: Yeah, I mean the thing is, I find that many times we’re categorized in a set of statistical categories when we shouldn’t be. Sometimes the categories that are out there and that are identifiable in the system are not really representative of the actual reality of our identities or our experiences. For instance, in the USA, Lebanese people are considered white in the census (for many historical reasons), but do I look white to you?

— **Elsa Saade** | Lebanon



Racial identity is often expressed as a call for recognition of inequality, and as a political stance. But pigeonholing people in terms of race can be simplistic, racializing what we want to construe as “different” in order to justify the domination of some groups over others.

When asked about their identity, interviewees claimed their ethnic identity (which encompasses cultural characteristics rather than physical features) and talked about their various family origins and their stories of migration. To fully recognize the weight of their words, we present them verbatim below. Bear in mind that this is not a complete listing of the racial and ethnic groups of the regions, merely those mentioned by the interviewees who participated in this investigation.

**Africa:** Black African woman, Black woman/*femme noire*, African, Black female, Kenyan woman, Liberian, a woman of African descent, Black, from the Bantu tribe, *Ivoirienne* and *partie du groupe ethnique Senofo*.

**Asia and Pacific:** Mixed race, Indian, Indian-Fijian, racial minority in Fiji, Filipino, Indigenous people, ethnic minority, Chinese, minority Chinese ethnic group (which is called *Straits Chinese*) and Cambodian.

**Latin America:** *Mujer étnicamente negra, blanca/branca, indígena uchupiamona, mapuche, latina, mestiza, maya quiché, de origen miskita, afroindia, negra, mestiça asiática, mestiza, preta and descendência árabe.*

**Eastern Europe:** Kurdish woman, an Albanian from Kosovo, white, white person from Eastern Europe and “I don’t identify with ethnicity.”

**Middle East:** Arab, Palestinian, Arab-Palestinian and Middle Eastern Arab.

**North America:** Vietnamese, African living in the United States, Asian American and South Asian.

These words of **self-identification refer, in some cases, to physical traits, but also to representations and stereotypes about them.** When an emphasis is placed on migration, the interviewees speak about the shocks they feel when being exposed or targeted as different, or being lumped in together with others. A Brazilian woman defender referred specifically to the difference in categories when she wanted to describe the color of her skin, and when she wanted to refer to historic marginalization.

*My color is preto. If the IBGE [the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics] comes here and asks, “what color are you?” I’m going to say “I’m preta [Black].” (...) If the police come to kill me, I’m going to say “I’m negra [Black].” Now, becoming negra means considering myself part of a group. A group with history, with traditions, and a group that is permeated by this history and by historically produced racism, and the place I’m in today can be explained by that.*

— **María Lucia da Silva** | Brazil



Activism claims these identities in the public space. While identities speak to a personal construction, they recall a collective historical experience. Activists situate themselves with regard to race and gender in a political context that varies from region to region, but which remains racist, sexist, classist, heteronormative, etc.

Many of the activists express themselves publicly from their personal and collective identities. The celebration of their identity is seen in the names of their organizations, the way they publicize their events, their communications and the reflections of academic theory. It is also claimed in their organizational forms, in their daily practices, in their artistic languages and expression, in their struggle for the right to non-discrimination and in their struggle to be recognized in legal terms.

*I do politics as a Black woman.*

— **Phumi Mtetwa**, Just Associates (JASS) | South Africa

In other interviews, in narrating their life stories, **activists with disabilities** identified the moments of change that led them to involve themselves dynamically in activism, moments related to meeting other people with disabilities and participating in collectivities and spaces for political reflection on various issues, which shaped the way they define themselves today.

*I have a disability. I am a woman who uses a wheelchair, and that's a big part of my identity. (...) I've had mine since I was little, since I was three or four, it's something I've lived with and gone through my whole life, and I think it makes a big difference.*

— **Luna Irazábal**, *Colectivo Ovejas Negras* (Black Sheep Collective) | Uruguay



## SPECIFIC TRAJECTORIES, INTERWOVEN TRAJECTORIES

**Every activist has their own story, trajectory and specific conditions** in their work as rights defenders, which influence their political stance in the present. This stance is configured out of multiple identities.

**School or university, family and feminist groups** were some of the spaces that marked activists' trajectories. In narrating their life experiences, they speak of **various moments of change**, from subtle turning points in which they "gained awareness" of gender, class, race and other variables of inequality, to dramatic changes in their lives due to violence, illness or crisis.

The **role of family** is basic. This space for socialization beginning in childhood was an inspiration for some.

*I was born to a quite a politicized family, so resistance is one of the things that I didn't choose, but that chose me by virtue of where I was located, the ways in which I was raised.*

— **Anonymous**

The **role of mothers and grandmothers** was mentioned repeatedly as an influence; being close to other ways of being a woman —women who allowed them to transgress the feminine “ought to be”— influenced their awareness of what it means to be a woman in this world, and how they might reinvent this meaning.

*So for me, at a very young age, my mother, who is a social worker, was the source of all that inspiration, I never get tired of saying it. My mother encouraged me to volunteer a lot when I was much younger, so every vacation I would be placed in some social work institution to volunteer my time.*

— **Yah Parwon** | Liberia

*Well, I think that “my mother was a feminist and she didn’t know” applies to me. (...) My grandmother was practically one of the first couples to divorce [sic] in Ibarra, where I was born, and that was quite a lot. (...) I think my grandmother was a pretty disruptive woman for her time, with due regard to time and context, because she was able to maintain herself, keep going, administer her own land, at a time when most of the people doing that were men.*

— **Amparo Peñaherrera Sandoval**, *Federación de Mujeres de Sucumbíos* (Federation of Sucumbíos Women) | Ecuador

*My mom is my greatest support, and she has been in the thick of all my activism. The other day we were having a conversation about how she used to come to all of our events, she does not come now because she is old and can’t walk properly. She said to me “you have been such an inspiration to everybody, the work that you do and how you do it. I am so proud of you.” That’s all it took. It was really good to hear.*

— **Rosanna Flamer-Caldera** | Sri Lanka

In other cases, it was **fathers, or grandfathers or entire families**, who influenced their activism, not just by example, but also as a space for reflecting on the collective and individual meaning given to activism.

*I was raised with my grandfather. He was an idealist who was involved in the Mexican revolution. He taught me the meaning of justice, of the search for better worlds, and that, even as a young girl, had an impact on me. I remember that I would lie down on the floor, on a rug beside his bed. He was old then and spent a lot of time lying down. I always wanted him to*

*tell me stories about the revolution, his adventures and his thoughts. So I remember that was important for me.*

— **Ana María Hernández Cárdenas**, *Consortio Oaxaca* (Oaxaca Consortium) | México

In other cases, activists learned first-hand the risks of this work, through their family stories.

*I was born into a family of militant activists. During the war in the nineties, I went with my family to protests and the women would run together, hiding from the police, who wanted to beat us, to crush any dissidence. At that time, I must have been twelve or thirteen, or even younger.*

— **Jelena Dordevic**, *Colectivo Feminista de Autocuidado e Cuidado entre Defensoras de Direitos Humanos* (Feminist Collective for Self-Care and Care Among Activists) | Serbia/Brazil

Not everyone had that kind of support. **In other cases, the family was a space of violence**, a place where inequality and injustice were revealed. A number of activists told us how rage became the motivation which drove the transformation of their experience, since it inspired them to act.

*I know that anger is what drives change. I never was able to abstain from that source of anger. It started within the family. Yeah. Witnessing the whole imbalance of power between my mother and my father and the whole abusive relationship they have. So from an early age, I think this made me rage, not only rage against this injustice, but like rage against the whole machine.*

— **Anonymous** | Lebanon

*I think I've been an activist since the day my dad tried to hit my mom and I pushed him away. This is the day I became a feminist. I think our mothers and our grandmothers are feminists without defining it. They're feminists because they have lots of stories to tell.*

— **Anonymous** | Jordan

The experience of violence —whether in the context of war, conflicts between communities caused by armed groups, tribal conflicts or structural inequalities that fuel injustice— does not always cause people to replicate it; it can inspire the wish to eradicate it, to put an end to it. In these stories,

experiences of violence (whether their own or those of people close to them) reveal the widespread hostility that many activists grew up with. It is this personal and outside experience that inspires them to defend rights, to fight so that other people do not have to go through the same thing.

*I became an activist from an experience I had gone through. My husband's village was in conflict for more than eight years and we lost everything in the tribal conflict. In our context, you get married and you belong to the husband, and his land and his people belong to you. The tribal conflict lasted for more than seven years and we lost everything. So now I am internally displaced, but I am settled in a new home. (...) Then, about thirteen years ago, my husband walked out on me for a younger woman. And from there I started my activism work. (...) My father and mother never saw violence in their homes, but I saw a lot of violence within my own family. All this has helped me in setting up the organization. I started to help these people, especially women who are affected by violence and conflict. It is all the issues that have personally affected me that have helped me become an activist here.*

— **Lilly Be' Soer** | Papua New Guinea

*What does activism mean to me? It means liberation, it means justice, it means freedom. I chose activism because of one personal reason. I told you I have four children, so at the age of fourteen I became a teenage mother and being in Liberia, being a child, I was blamed and shamed. No one felt that I was being abused, that I needed help. I went through hell alone, and so it was with the support of my mother [that] I was able to get an education and I was able to give back. So as my contribution, and standing in resilience of what happened to me, I dedicated myself to the rights of girls who are voiceless, to those who have agency, but don't have platforms, in order to start amplifying the issues, so that they too can be served justice; and to also help to put mechanisms in place so the things that happened to me or are happening to this generation will not happen to the next generation.*

— **Naomi Tulay-Solanke** | Liberia

**When do we become aware of inequality, of injustice? At what point do systems of oppression begin to be felt?** For some of the people we interviewed, it was in their childhood when they first asked themselves, **why are things this way?**

*This is a very long story for me. In this part of Turkey, we faced many difficulties and these difficulties start when you are born in this area, in this part of Turkey. The same thing happened to me when I was seven years old. I knew there was [a] difference between girls and boys, but I didn't understand why. So, for two years, I acted like a boy, so I had the same rights. But then I realized that even if I acted like a boy, I didn't have any rights.*

— **Anonymous**

Gradually, the question becomes: **“can things be different?”** And this becomes a motivation for activism. Every activist travels their own path according to their own starting point and identifies privileges or forms of oppression.

*I came from a position of privilege, money, caste, religion, so that was not the difficult part. It was precisely this privilege that reacted to inequality between the sexes. Male privilege was the first barrier and that became the reason to fight back.*

— **Meena Seshu** | India

Another socialization space where activism first took shape was school, where segregation by sex reveals cultural gender roles. For many, school was where they began to ask questions at an early age.

*I was always at the top of my class. (...) In class, there were girls and boys. Teachers always told the boys that they were no good, lazy, that they let themselves be distracted by the girls, etc. Then I started to ask questions: “is being a girl bad?” “Why do we think girls can't do things?” (...) Questions I would ask mostly to my father, because I lived with him, and he always answered me that a girl can come in first, and can even become a leader.*

— **Djingarey Ibrahim Maiga**, *Femmes et Droits Humains* (Women and Human Rights) | Mali

*Since I was a child, I've always asked myself and questioned certain things, like why my brother got a bicycle and not me, why girls weren't allowed to play with boys, and why there was [a] difference in how we were treated, and many things like that.*

— **Ayat Osman**, *Ganoubia hora* | Egypt

For some activists, going to school was in itself a transgression. For instance, seeking out education and knowledge gave them autonomy. Wanting to study meant migrating to a city far from their communities, or working since childhood to find the money to live by. Two life stories, one from Bolivia and one from Kuwait, illustrate this. An *Uchupiamona* Indigenous woman from the Bolivian Amazon region, a defender of nature and territory, told us her experience:

*I didn't want to give up, and I looked for ways to leave my community (...) to find a way to stay in school. (...) I did part of my high school education in San Buenaventura, which is a bigger town (...) and from there I went to La Paz to finish high school, working. I worked as a domestic employee in La Paz to finish high school till I got my degree. I became the first female bachiller in my village —that's how you call it in Bolivia when you complete high school. Then a lot of things happened —my mother died, I was left with my younger siblings, and I had to help them. I also began studying a business administration degree, which I did very slowly, because I had a daughter, I got married, I went to live in Santa Cruz, where I completed my undergraduate education at 35.*

— **Ruth Alipaz Cuqui**, Indigenous *Uchupiamona* woman from Bolivia; defender of Indigenous rights, human rights and the rights of nature; member of the Commonwealth of Indigenous Communities of the Beni, Tuichi and Quiquibey Rivers and General Coordinator of CONTIOCAP | Bolivia

A Palestinian photojournalist and documentary-maker who grew up in Kuwait and currently lives in Senegal defends women's rights through her photography:

*The only thing that affected me was when I finished high school and my father did not allow me to go to Lebanon to continue my studies. He didn't even have the money to send me. At the time, there were no private universities in Kuwait. (...) I worked as a receptionist in an American school in Kuwait for two years and, at the same time, a friend of mine in Lebanon helped me enroll in the Lebanese University to study social sciences. Attendance [at the lectures] wasn't mandatory back then. I used to work at the school and my friend would send me notes from the lectures, and at the end of the year I would travel to Lebanon for final exams. And I would pass my exams. At the same time, I started studying photography too by correspondence. There weren't any online universities back then, in 1996 or 1997. I interned with a studio photographer in Kuwait, but I felt like I was suffocating because I used to leave the house to go to the studio to*

*take photos of veiled women who would come because they wanted their photographs taken by a woman. I felt like I didn't want to do that. During the third year, I was 21 or 22, and I saved some money to finish my studies and leave Kuwait. I told my parents attendance in university had become mandatory. I lied to them.*

— **Anonymous**

For activists that went to **university**, the scenario became an opportunity for collective and organizational work, for social mobilization.

*I was doing student activism. They [my classmates] would want to go out, you know, just for leisure, enjoy themselves, to do the stuff that young people do. They thought this idea of pushing for a response from Zimbabwe, whatever you call it, was boring. It was too tough for their age. So I ended up not having a lot of friends, not a lot of female friends. Most of my friends were male. They were just the boys who were in the student union. (...) And I think after university that's when I started having female friends, but they were also activists and people in the same field. People with the same passion, who understand the same work that I do.*

— **Maureen Kademaunga** | Zimbabwe

*In 2006 I started university. The university was known for its union meetings, assemblies and demonstrations at the College of Humanities and Social Sciences in Tunis. Back then it frightened me, I didn't understand the purpose of these protests, I didn't understand what their demands were —it was difficult to digest the concept. But after joining the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women, I started to understand the meaning of activism, and what it meant to be part of [a] movement where you feel comfortable fighting shoulder to shoulder. When I was fighting alone, I was scared.*

— **Nadia Benzertini** | Tunisia

For others, activism occurs alongside other identity construction processes—going to the city to study, coming from a rural community where women occupy themselves only with housework; being a feminist in an Indigenous community in which feminism is frowned upon; identifying as a trans person and beginning a gender transition; coming out as lesbian, bisexual or queer.

*When I was twenty years old, I left home and worked as a sex worker. I learned about an organization that was working on LGBT issues and I helped this organization in organizing seminars and trainings. Later on, I founded my own organization to help transgender people.*

— **Lilit Martirosyan**, trans activist, Right Side Human Rights Defenders | Armenia

In conducting the interviews that went into this project, we experienced particularly powerful passages when activists speak of the satisfaction they get from their work. Their struggles become concrete moments, told with emotion, because activism is also about achievements and joy that are felt in the body.

JH, in Ghana, mentions the importance of a movement-building “boot camp” for queer activists in East Africa. MS, in India, remembers a two-day national conference attended by more than 200 sex workers who spoke on sexuality, the media, unions and the women’s movement. On the other side of the Atlantic, in Perú, ML recalls the achievement of bringing debate over the first policy on gender identity for trans people to the floor of the nation’s Congress. Further north, AH, in México, tells us about assisting women defenders who are in difficult circumstances and come for a ten-day program for healing, rest and reflection. She shares the satisfaction she feels when activists are transformed by this space.

L, in Kuwait, talks about the messages she received from girls who found inspiration in her talk about an education project for Arab women called “I read, I write.” To the south, in Kenya, WK highlights her foundation’s success in having justice served for 760 survivors of sexual violence and gender-based violence. Traveling to the Pacific, JK, in Fiji, tells us she felt very happy during the International Women’s Day march in which they reclaimed safe public spaces for women. Meanwhile, in Ukraine, YT recalls how excited she was at a mass demonstrations against sexual violence. And on the other side of the world, in the United States, DP tells us how they succeeded in raising US \$90,000 from 600 people in six weeks, which funded their purchase of facilities for community organizations.

# WHAT DOES FEMINIST MEAN TO ACTIVISTS?

Although not everyone we interviewed considers themselves feminists, many do, and they recall the moment when they encountered **feminism as a turning point in their lives**, which has made new freedoms and new perspectives possible.

The word ***feminism*** still frightens a lot of people. There are resistances, “a bad name” and little understanding of what it refers to. This is largely because of the stigmatization that opponents have brought upon the feminist movement. In the interviews we listened to, resistance to the term may originate from within the family or even within the activist themselves, depending on what *being feminist* means in their environment. In some contexts of the Global South, feminism may be associated with “whiteness” by society at large, even by some activists. This is why some activists have opted to create other alternatives, including interpretations or resignifications within feminist thought.



*I started working as a radio journalist, (...) that was about ten or twelve years ago. (...) The first time I did a program about negotiating for safe sex, the backlash was something I wasn't prepared for, and for the first time I heard someone call me "feminist". That's not a word I was familiar with, that's not a word I used to describe myself. (...) There are these labels of "You're whitewashed, you are bringing the realities of the white man into our African context. Feminism is European." And I would say "No, I don't know if I am a feminist I just know..." You know, I found it hard to define myself, but the names came from different people. (...) It helped me to read about other African feminists because I just took my time and went online and read about other activists and other advocates in Africa, how they were doing it, and then it dawned on me that this was just patriarchy trying to shut me up when they say "This is not African," because, I mean, what is "Not African" about telling our stories? Even my grandmother constantly told me stories about her experiences every night. I was just bringing the stories to the radio, and so I owned it and said, "Okay, I am a feminist, no ifs, no buts." (...) This is what feminism means. Just equality for men and women and just having a space for women to live their best lives.*

— **Comfort Mussa**, Sisterspeak237 | Cameroon

*I'm a feminist too. One of the identities I have is that I'm a community feminist, a non-imposed feminism, a non-Eurocentric feminism, non-European; a feminism that emerges from the territorial, from the struggle against multiple oppressions, and all that. That's how I express my identity.*

— **Anonymous**

Feminism **arrived in their lives through theory, or through relationships with other women, trans and non-binary people.** It happened in **workshops, feminist spaces and conversations with friends.** This arrival was the gateway to many other reflections and paths, other forms of seeing and being in the world.

*When I was 20, I got to know about feminism on paper in college, because in one lecture I just got to know feminism. It made me think I can see a different world. I realized if I can analyze using a feminist lens, it explained a lot of [the] problems that I encountered... when I was young.*

— **Jing Xiong**, Feminist Voices | China

*I like to say that feminism saved me... It saved me from a lot of things. So in this process —let's call it a revolution— I met feminists, because I believe that feminism is something that's embodied. I didn't start with books or theory, I started with other women.*

— **María Teresa Blandón Gadea**, Nicaraguan feminist movement | Nicaragua

Feminism plays a part in the **process of building awareness about our own life experience.**

*Feminism has given me life. I feel like I was reborn when I encountered feminism. It's made me more human, more aware.*

— **Tef Piñeros**, *Colectivo Yerbateras* (Yerbateras Collective) | Colombia

It gives **meaning, strength, and a reason to continue** their activism.

*I also call myself a feminist and I'm proud of it. It allows me to apply all identities that are marginalized by society, but it's my strength to fight and find the common ground of what I am fighting for. Fighting for ethnic groups, Indigenous groups, women's rights, fighting to stop oppression and also fighting for the rainbow family, as I'm also a mother.*

— **Matcha Phorn-in** | Thailand

It situates and politicizes **our personal stories.**

*Feminism enabled me to begin valuing biography. (...) Also, I was also more reconciled with my own class, with my family history, with my mother's illiteracy and my own. Meaning, more connected with the perspective that activism must also deal with class [and] connect with the class struggle.*

— **Claudia Rodríguez**, *Fondo Alquimia* (Alquimia Fund) | Chile



*So my big question is about micropolitics, intimacy, but knowing that this doesn't happen in isolation, it's something we've learned as well. (...) It's the idea and the radical conviction that we begin dismantling and deconstructing the patriarchy from our intimacy. When we begin to give a place to our emotions, for example, to name our sadnesses, our emotional conflicts, to think and feel our different ways of connecting with each other, emotionally, in family terms, ultimately, we're also toppling that principle of patriarchy that says reason is more important than anything, which is also a legacy of modernity.*

— **Marcela Bohórquez**, Puenteras | Colombia

It enables us to imagine **new worlds**.

*I know that the freedom we allow ourselves as feminists to imagine ourselves differently even though we can't fully perform it, but that fullness of all being, is completely liberating. (...) Because then it seems to me that we're not crazy. It affirms me that when women sit together and share their experiences, they kind of... reach a place where they see what similarities there are in experiences and make the connection to the structures of oppression etc., and get bit by the bug that this is wrong, this is not ordained by the goddesses and therefore can change.*

— **Khwezilomso Mbandazayo** | South Africa



It reminds us that **we are not alone in this resistance...**

*I lived for a year in India and it was a different experience. Here is where I began my life as a feminist. You stay in a society where there's democracy, it's a strong feminist movement, there are spaces you can't find in your country to express yourself, to learn to understand more and see what's in your interest and what not. (...) I felt like I wasn't alone, and for the first time I learned to build a family outside of the biological family I know, and I learned to have an alternative family and work with other women who had common ideas, people who give you love, respect and appreciation every day.*

— **Fahima Hashim**, Salmamah Women's Centre | Sudan

...and **every day there are more of us**, and our collectiveness grows.

*I think [one of the memorable moments] would be International Women's Day. It was a public march. So we took [to] the streets and marched and claimed safe spaces for women in public spaces. And it made me feel more empowered. And it sort of gave me more purpose in the sense that a lot of other people are joining the movement and sort of taking the torch onwards and that I have a good set of members within my organization who are willing to take the movement forward as well. So it feels good to see that more and more women are doing this work and becoming feminists.*

— **Jasmine Kaur** | Fiji

It's a **space for continuous transformation.**

# INVITATION

Draw a time spiral of your life to the present moment, and find the moments that were important for affirming the identities you have or have had. You can include drawings or symbols to recall the turning points. You can do this exercise on your own, or with other people. If you like, ask yourself these questions as starting points:

- ✦ How have you defined yourself throughout your life?
- ✦ What elements have influenced you in defining yourself this way?
- ✦ How do your identities cross over each other, change or become redefined?
- ✦ How do you situate yourself today and how does that make you feel?



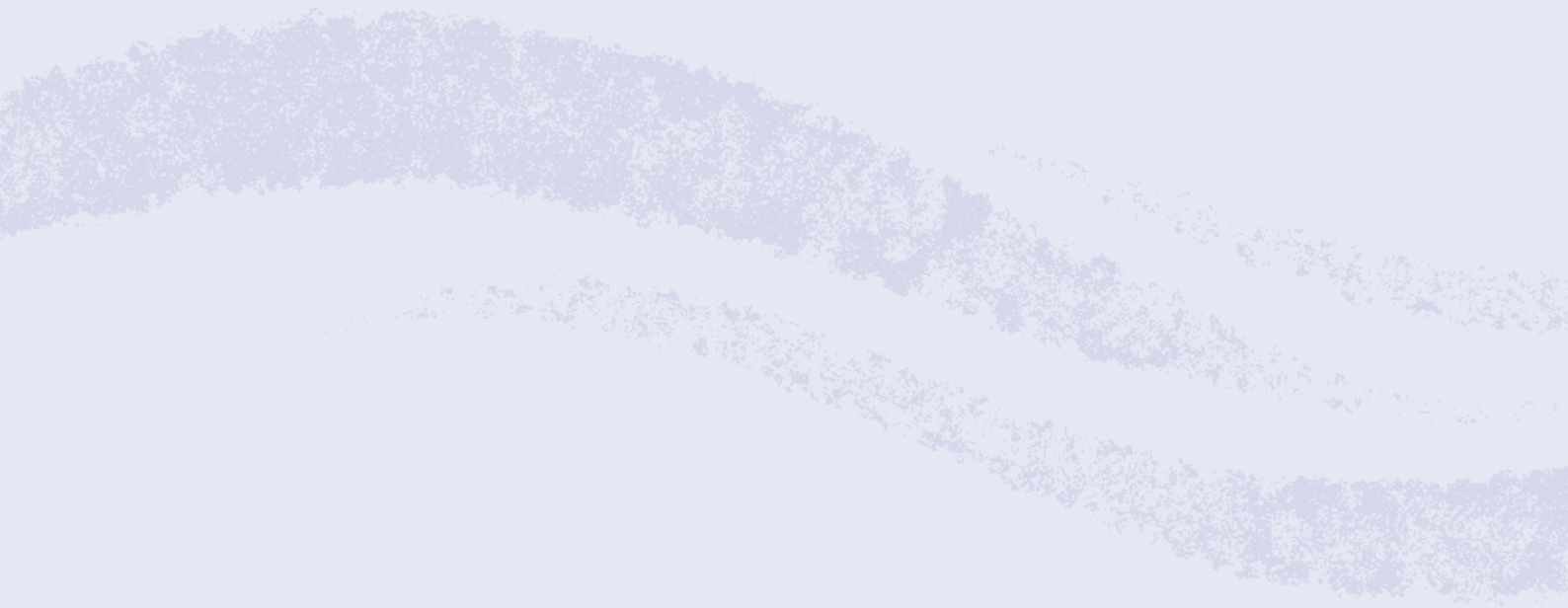


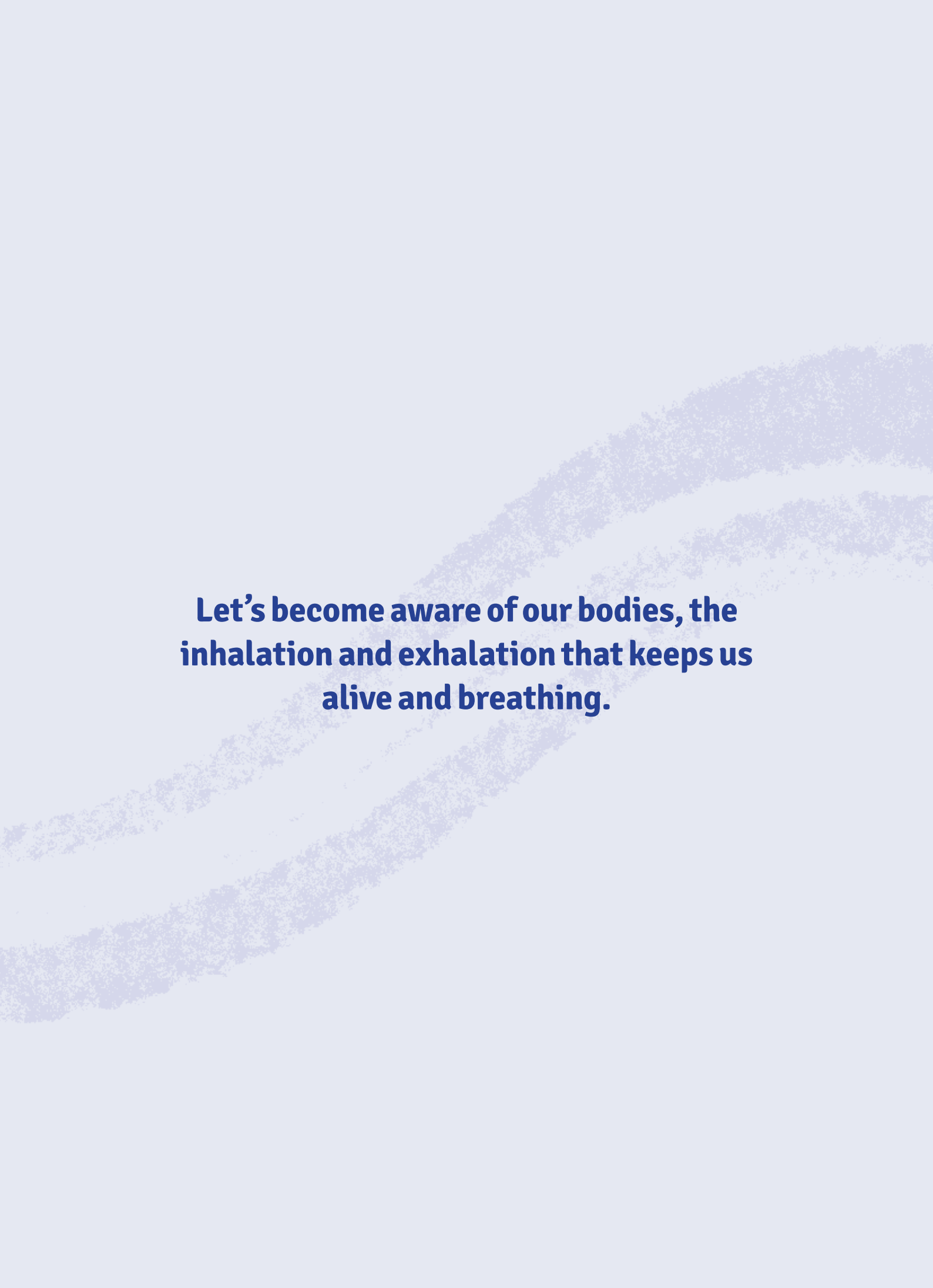
# Conversing

Alarms, e-mails, WhatsApps, songs, work, online work, the news, coffee with a friend, the phone, Facebook, the press release, another video call, the group meeting, the radio ad, dinner, the market, your daughter's school, the article they sent, the TV series, the latest news, the urgent call, the message, the newspaper, the meme... words surround us every day, all the time, coming at us so fast that we can't read them all, hear them all, or pause before we speak.

**Let's stop for a minute.**

**Let's take a breath.**





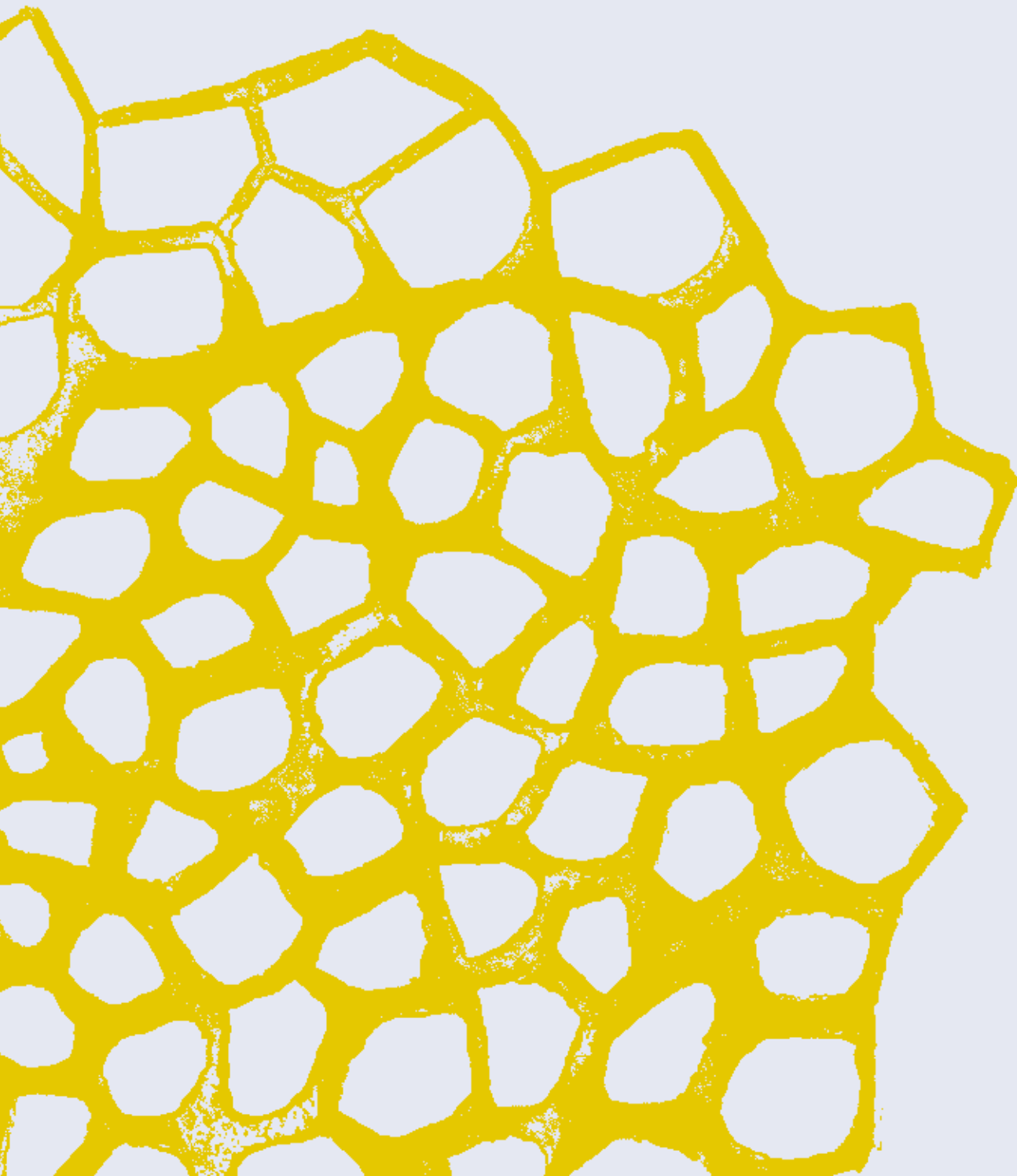
**Let's become aware of our bodies, the  
inhalation and exhalation that keeps us  
alive and breathing.**

**NOW, LET'S CONVERSE!**

**How are you?**

**How are you feeling today?**

**What does care mean to you?**



Throughout this process of research, we reaffirmed how important it is to *converse*. We need time to speak, to listen to each other, to learn together and to make sense of what we've lived and experienced. Words help, and sometimes heal, and conversing requires willingness, time and calm.

In the process of putting together the book *What's the point of revolution if we can't dance?* we asked a hundred activists, "How are you?" In this research, we returned to the same question, and we explored it in depth in every conversation we held.

**When we talk about the importance of conversing, we are referring to honest, deeply felt conversations that try to answer by *feeling the questions*: "How are you? How do you feel right now with regard to your daily activism when it is about your body, mind, emotions, voice and spirit?"** Everyone we interviewed answered, and we listened closely. Then we went over the conversations carefully, looking for the implications, how things were named, what they mean in the day-to-day, what activism means. There was laughter and tears, sustained by gestures and gazes. Valuable moments of conversation happened, with listening and smiles of recognition between two people, sometimes strangers before then.

**Care adapts to change.** Everyone has their own perspective on how it should be, and we do not have to all agree. The conversation can become a space for the birth of new ideas, for rediscovering and reaffirming our own opinions; a space that lets us situate ourselves in relation to what we think and what we want to transform.

The intent for this book is to bring together all the people who participated in the process into one conversation, **so that all of you (the readers) can converse with them, among yourselves, with us and with yourselves, and for this conversation to become many conversations that enrich each other and flourish.**

*It's not like a "guidebook": it's a book that's an excuse for us to have these chats that we sometimes don't have the courage to have.*

— **Georgia Nicolau** | Brazil

# FEELING-THINKING ABOUT CARE AND PROTECTION

As we mentioned at the opening of this book, the COVID-19 pandemic and the many transformations it triggered, different in every context, have prompted reflection and conversations about care, perhaps more than ever before. Care, in its various conceptions, intentions and scopes, began to gain increasing prominence in daily life at the personal, family, professional and community level, related to how we think and feel as human beings and in connection with nature. Today we hear the word “care” many times a day:



*Take care of yourself, says the granddaughter to her grandmother by video chat.*

*It is time to care for ourselves, says the president in a speech to the entire country.*

*By staying home, you take care of yourself and you take care of others, says the radio public service announcement.*

COVID-19 and its mandatory pause and lockdown of the body against a common risk put care at the center of many reflections. Although the conversations we share in this chapter occurred before the pandemic, they give us perspectives on what we are living through now. Let us look at how *care* and *protection* bring us together, and how perspectives on them vary, as central conditions for life and activism.

The interviews were conducted in a spirit of open listening, particularly regarding what activists understand as care and protection. An activist in Kenya told us that the conversation invited her to delve more deeply into her thoughts and experiences. When asked about a possible title for the interview, she responded:

*I would say you are really tearing and digging deep into your soul, 'cause this conversation has made me really dig deep into myself. I would call it a real 'deep diving,' but I would be borrowing from other people's words. Because you are laying our soul bare and inviting us to share, inviting us. (...) I feel a responsibility to be frank, to be open, to lay myself bare and to give my perspective.*

— **Peninah Wanchikomongi** | Kenya

Activists expressed **different understandings of the concepts of care and protection, and the relationship between them.**

*Care in activism has different levels and types. I think there is care within the movement, within the organization, with yourself, but also externally, from your family.*

— **Senda Ben Jebara** | Tunisia

Let's start with the **individual level**. Most activists associate care with caring for themselves, and many times they called this "self-care." This can be connected with various dimensions.

**Self-care can be knowing yourself** and being mindful of how you live.

*Things that you do to get to know yourself, to get into yourself... Your body mapping, your body scan, even meditation. (...) Doing things consciously. (...) Mindful living, you know, self-care. So, once you already know that, what does it mean to have good food? And when you go out and have food, then you're mindful about what you're eating. So, it's really a daily life.*

— **Lin Chew** | Jakarta, Indonesia

The idea of paying attention to the effects of daily practices came up frequently, including identifying negative impacts and incorporating preventive actions into daily routines. So for many activists, self-care has to do with a **process of mental reflection by which we make decisions.**

*My thoughts. A type of self-care is being mindful of my thoughts and transforming them into something positive, into a hope, a possibility.*

— **Claudia Rodriguez**, Fondo Alquimia (Alquimia Fund) | Chile

Care, from the perspective of prevention, is connected with awareness before taking political action, and is related to the possibilities of acting in this context. Some of the risks can clearly be mitigated, but others are very difficult to control. So care is wrapped up in how we place ourselves with respect to external circumstances that we cannot change, and what decisions we make, individually and collectively, to improve our way of being in this situation.

Making decisions on a daily basis and being in the world mindfully —that is care. Not everything depends on things outside of us; we have agency and creative capacity. In this sense, **care is deeply political.**

*In the end, what kind of life are you seeking to have? Do we seek a miserable, sick, and sad life? Why do we do this kind of work? I mean, if happiness drives you, this is what you seek and it's political in that sense, because they are trying to strip you out of your agency and to strip you of your energy. One way of resistance is to be happy and healthy.*

— **Yara Sallam** | Egypt


It is a path that can lead us to question and confront our own ideas, and to mobilize sweeping change.

*For me, self-care also means healing yourself. Taking charge, taking charge of yourself, resolving your own problems, and it's a decision. For me, thinking about care in my own life is a decision, so it means assuming responsibility. It's not an easy task, it's a task that requires a lot of energy. And it's no bed of roses, it's not all fun and games, it's also confrontational. It's painful, very painful, when you admit to yourself that you're not taking care of yourself.*

— **Diana Pulido** | Colombia

Activism requires certain material conditions; and it requires physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health to sustain our movements and our lives.

*We do a lot of activism work as women human rights defenders and then sometimes we forget about ourselves. We forget about our mental well-being, our physical well-being, because we carry on the work of others. And so when we talk about self-care and protection we are talking of the following things: we are talking of mental well-being; we are talking of if you are attacked for the activism work, there is some kind of protection; (...) if you are imprisoned, you can access legal support. For example, the women who were protesting in Uganda at some point were beaten and some people had medical issues. There should be some funds to provide that kind of support whereby defenders might need some medical support. When I talked of self-care and well-being, [I meant] that sometimes we are burnt out as women human rights defenders, we face psychosocial challenges that call for psychosocial care. (...) Self-care and well-being will help us cultivate, to sustain our activism work. What is lacking now in terms of self-care is that we*



*do not recognize it really. As women activists, I must say, like me, sometimes we forget about self-care and so I think self-care as a protection mechanism will help us sustain movements, but also sustain our lives.*

— **Brenda Kugonza**, Women Human Rights Defenders Network | Uganda

Care goes beyond the personal. It is **relational; it transcends the organizational, the community, the social**. It even goes beyond the dimension of what is human, and **relates to life in all its manifestations**. In this regard, **the practice of care can destabilize power structures**, question and transform various types of oppression that activists face in their daily life and work.

*Self-care is a radical act... It is not something that we should treat as an afterthought. (...) I think earlier on I said that as a woman, I need to be aligned in my body, mind and soul so that I show up in a healthy way and [do] not become toxic to my kids, to my husband, to my friends, to my family, to the job that I go to everyday. So for me, it is something that should be prioritized. (...) It should become warfare, a do-or-die. Otherwise, we are going to lose ourselves and in the end we are going to fragment our movement, we are going to fragment our organizing process, we are not going to move in any way. We would have lost ourselves in trying to work, work and work, and not take care of the bodies, the minds, the souls and the communities that do the work.*

— **Grace Ruvimbo Chirenje** | Zimbabwe

Many of the people we interviewed recognized the collective dimension of care in which ties are strengthened to transform movements, which also reveals differences between the Global North and South with regard to this dimension.

*We are complex beings and also our movements are complex, and have multiple forms of containers and connectors and beings. So I think that this is the complexity of it: are we still having a conversation about the concept? Like self-care is super selfish, so what about the collective? So actually it's deeply contextualized, right? In the context or in societies that are difficult, [the] collective is a form of care. You know for them [women human rights defenders] this is not a theoretical conversation. It's actually living. Yeah. And in deeply individualized societies such as the ones in the Global North, and [for] organizations and activists based in the Global*

*North, it's highly individualized. How do we move there? How do we see the spectrum? It is not either/or. We all move on that spectrum. How do we create these relationships, that are transformative, that are there for transforming our movements?*

— **Sandra Ljubinkovic**, consultant in somatic transformation | Serbia/Holland

Many times, collective care takes the form of limits and agreements at work, managing tensions, with priority given to the common good; but it also has to do with constantly thinking about our co-workers, our peers, lending a hand and reminding each other mutually that no one should be overloaded with work.

*I think it's important for people to be caring for each other, to understand each other, to be able to go beyond certain disagreements, I think it's a very important part of care within the movement. To be able to unite on the things that we agree on, to be able to discuss without animosity when we disagree on something. Care within the organization is to be able to implement self-care activities and good practices and to be able to reach out to a person that you worked with and say: "Listen, you are very overwhelmed, I can take over from now, just go rest a bit, do something fun, just do something that you enjoy and I am here for you."*

— **Senda Ben Jebara** | Tunisia

**Care has effects on our immediate environment**, including work. That is why it becomes so important to set limits and reach agreements. In these conversations, collective care became tangible in the way we build our group work, in listening to the feelings and needs of people in our working environment, aspects that go beyond organization of tasks. But we continue to see how many times this remains at the level of individual responsibilities and does not transcend to organizational and collective agreements.

*Care is how we make sure the team and the people we are working with are receiving attention from each of us.*

— **Activist** | Cambodia

In this sense, some activists mentioned a change in their understanding of care and protection.

*Initially, care and protection in my case meant basically taking time off: you know we are breaking down, we take time off to take care of yourself, take care of your family and all that. That is still valid to me. But now I also believe that care and protection is something that is more strategic, that has to do with your personal environment, your professional environment, everything you do. You write down your goals, for example you have your goal for your week, your goal for your organization. For me care and protection means thinking we should be aware of the way we work, the people we work for, how... we ensure that they are protected and cared for.*

— **Yah Parwon** | Liberia

The activists we interviewed referred repeatedly to the **importance of being well in order to help others.**

*In terms of care, I use the example of the flights. When the air hostess says, 'In case of any emergency, you put the mask on yourself before you take care of the child.' So I use that as my sort of idea in terms of care, in terms of what do I need to do for myself, for me to be able to continuously do the work with the constituencies that I work with, but also with the colleagues [that] I work with. Both at the organizational level, but also at the partners and movement level.*

— **Ikal Ang'elei** | Kenya

**The collectivization of caregiving work** appears as an alternative to collective care, which challenges the way this work is usually imposed on women in the private sphere with no choice in the matter. We were told of experiences that referenced other ways of assuming care as a community task, work that activists must address on a daily basis within their own homes.

*And just as much as we challenge patriarchy, just as much as we challenge marriage, just as much as we challenge culture, ethnic identity in our own homes, we also need to do it along with supporting each other in these roles that women play in their everyday lives as they become feminist activists. So it has to be about loving, about those roles also. (...) It is an important realization for me but also an important, conscious, feminist political way of working —that we also support each other in our everyday relationship and care responsibilities that all of us have. I think very few of us have the luxury of having enough money to pay [someone else] for that kind of work*

*—even that, one needs to challenge because it is another woman who is doing that work. The rest of us have to do it ourselves. And to support each other in those care roles as a part of our feminist activism is important.*

— **Sarala Emmanuel** | Sri Lanka

Care relates to the **emotional, the spiritual, the physical, the mental and also the digital**, and these dimensions are understood and interconnected by situating them in the specific contexts and experiences of activists and their communities.

*Well, it's something we talked about in the Web of Safety and Care. It's not just physical. It's also the person's emotional and mental state. At the end of the day, at least in my organization, we tend to focus on the physical aspect, ensuring a buddy system, even digital security so that you won't be tracked, we have protocols to ensure that you are physically safe from being arrested or harmed, etc.*

— **Activist** | Philippines

When we talk about “watching out” for colleagues and the collective dynamic, activists placed special emphasis on being careful about workloads to avoid affecting physical and emotional health and addressing crises when they seem to be affecting mental health.

*We don't want to lose activists because of their health and mental health. (...) All these years, I feel so many people left not only because of health and mental health, but other things too. I think it's also important that we feel like a community and that we are supported by other members of the community. Otherwise it feels like you are doing things alone. I feel my struggle, my work, is my own pleasure. I feel it's important to feel part of the movement. So you feel your health is not just part of you, but a treasure for the movement. So it's important to unite the people, unite the struggle to see we are all connected. To see that the value of your body and mind is part of the movement.*

— **Xiaopei He**, Pink Space | China

Some feminist cyber-activists whom we interviewed drew a line between security, protection and care, explicitly referring to the **intrinsic relationship between the digital sphere and our bodies**, understood as our physical, spiritual, mental and emotional wellness. This takes the form of mindfulness toward our digital practices and a shared responsibility in the use of technologies as daily actions of care.

*For us, the demonstration of this is political. It's very political to say it the way we want to, regarding security. Digital safety is related to cyber-crime, it's associated with the military, with terrorism. Protection is associated more with practices. Care is associated more with not letting yourself go crazy from the technologies, like unplugging yourself digitally [questioning and limiting the tactics of certain apps that make users feel like they need to be always watching it]. All of this is a care practice.*

— **Selene Yang** | Paraguay

Various activists recognize **the importance of collective creative spaces** that can set the stage for us to recognize traumas and **mobilize healing processes**, at both the personal and collective level. They conceive healing as an internal process and as part of their care practices.

*Healing spaces are very important and co-creation in the spaces is also very important, and maybe this is a kind of liberation and freedom that I am looking for when going through everyday resistance and struggling with feminist issues. Because we were so natural, so alive, so real. And it wasn't... constructed, you know, it was not a process that was coming from outside, but it was something which was blooming from within.*

— **Elvira Meliksetian** | Armenia

**Care connects us with the community, the earth and nature.** Caring for water, earth and territory was mentioned in Latin America as a way to care for the community.

*For me, care means that, inside of me, the fabric that we're walking and the struggle we're waging daily, and the plans, the challenges, the projections, the horizon, our walking is interwoven with love, justice, freedom and dignity. That is interwoven in our being, and that care has to come from our body-territory, recognizing that care goes in our bodies, in our minds, as a collective, not as an individual. Like, if you're okay, but your friend, another defender, isn't, you're not going to be good, like you're good as long as the other one's good too. It's like in a community, a care in community, a*

*care where if you get better, I get better, and if the others get better, we all collectively get better and we have power, (...) but not just taking care of our bodies, it's also taking care of the earth. If we're cared for, and the earth is invaded by mining companies, power companies and all that, there's no collective care. Feminists have to understand that our struggle isn't just against the patriarchy, we have to fight neoliberalism and the invasion of territories, because care also means community and territoriality.*

— **Anonymous**

Many activists reminded us that **care is also associated with material and economic conditions**; therefore, sustaining activists' lives means responding to the demand for and enjoyment of rights that make it possible to live in dignified conditions.

*We don't have a retirement pension. Because my pension is going to be paid in social work. I am seventy years old, I don't have any inheritance. I have to live, so I must work. I can't say "I don't want to anymore, let's have a walk." **So care is also connected with a material condition of existence.***

— **María Lucia da Silva** | Brazil



Other activists invited us to reflect on care and protection **beyond privileges.**

*I think the protection and care right now feels like something very privileged and not very common to the people on the ground. I think the ability to protect and to care for ourselves should be the basic things that every person has.*

— **Aizhan Kadrallieva** | Kyrgyzstan

For some activists, the discussion about material conditions and the distribution of resources is also part of the **political dimension of care and protection.**

*For me, [applying the] word political about care and protection means two things: one, it means publicness, it means that we can't be silent about tiredness, we can't be silent about conflict and tension. The other thing is resources, whatever types of resources, whether it's personal skills, money, investment, whatever it may be... The politics of care and protection involve strategic publicness, and a better public relationship and conversation... as well as more deliberate, scaled up allocation of resources.*

— **Dr. Njoki Ngumi**, The Nest Collective | Kenya



Other ideas about the **politics of caregiving** remind us that this is a key element in the construction of **other possible worlds**.

*Well, for me care is political in the sense that if we do not perceive it as human beings —and this is body, mind, sensation, feeling— how are we going to build another world? How are we going to build another world if I can't even understand what my needs are? I discovered a Chilean economist who speaks of basic needs, [who argues that] one thing does not eliminate the other: the fact that you need to eat to survive does not mean that you don't also need mental health to survive. One thing does not compete with the other. It's not true that these are just "white people problems," there is plenty of research that has shown that poverty has a big impact on mental health.*

— **Anonymous**

Another aspect mentioned frequently in the discussion of care was the **age and point in the life** of each person we interviewed. We encountered **a variety of perspectives on what has changed** from generation to generation, which in turn reveals the specific challenges that different generations continue to face.

*I think younger generations now have access to more ways, just by the fact that we talk about self-care now versus what we used to say. Generally, women activists, older generations, I see here right in Liberia, we always say they didn't have a retirement plan for themselves and it's not like you can retire from activism, but [that's just the perception]. And I think sometimes that is why they are easily co-opted or something like this. I guess they need to get an opportunity to rest. So it's easy to sit down and suddenly say 'we don't have to talk about X, Y and Z issues because we've already crossed that road.' And also their health and well-being, no one was talking about personal safety. It was about getting on the streets and mobilizing. Those who founded their own organizations are still going around asking for source[s] of funds, for what to do, how to continue. They are still out there.*

— **Lakshmi N. Moore**, member of the Feminist Forum of Liberia,  
Country Director for ActionAid | Liberia

Some believe that **there is more awareness and openness today**, and, in turn, more options, information and tools available.

*Well, the thing is not very many people practice self-care yet. So I can't see the difference. I mean I can't make that kind of comparison because there are so few doing it, I think. But I think that the younger generation*

*is more open to it and realizes more that they need to do it and will also take the steps to do it, or they already do things, like going to yoga lessons, even meditation. I think there's more available also now, already popular. So there's already a beginning, at least doing something for yourself. We didn't have that before. So it's more the older feminists, [who] are harder to bring in, who say, "We didn't need all these things, why do the young ones need it?" Sometimes we hear that, "They are not strong enough." "We could manage without." It was not available then, it wasn't the culture. So the older ones have much more work to do to break through, this kind of socialization that we need to just care for others and not for ourselves.*

— **Lin Chew** | Jakarta, Indonesia

*I believe young women define care very differently. I mean, at least what I've seen here, [care] has always [been understood] as religion, spirituality, therapy, whatever... and I feel like young feminists see it as a lifestyle, not as an activity that I do, a hobby I have, or something I do to heal, or to be well, but also something I do because it's my practice.*

— **Ledys San Juan** | Colombia

Other activists **saw no dramatic change** in the way care is assumed in activism, and recognized **difficulties in exercising care** when one is young today.

*It can also be the other way round, because the younger generation can also be overworking. They can also be victims of capitalism, thinking that their value is measured by the amount of hours they're working, and overworking means that you are a good employee, and thus, more appreciated. That's a really dangerous tendency. So, I cannot say for sure that there is this difference between the younger generation and older generation, even though there are some risks that I see.*

— **Salome Chagelishvili**, Women's Fund in Georgia | Georgia

There were also ideas questioning **generational divisions from an anti-capitalist political position**.

*I think that the system is betting on a stupid division —excuse the word—that's being fed between the generations. The new ones are new, and they bring all the creative ideas, and the rest of us pass on to history. It's not true! That's an absolutely patriarchal, neoliberal, capitalist story of waste and consumption. So now I've got a new product and I'm buying it today,*

*because it's better than the old one, right? Well it turns out people aren't products, and history isn't something you consume, and... recognizing what we have, and if today the young people can do it and they're in a position to do it, that's great because together we'll find the way, and it's great that they can do it and move forward, while understanding each other together.*

— **Lucía Lagunes Huertas** | México

Finally, many pointed out the need for spaces of **intergenerational dialogue and construction** in which mutual lessons could be learned.

*I realize that the movement has somehow disconnected from its communication with the younger generations. They just didn't know how to approach them. They just didn't know how to get them involved. So that was the time when I left everything and I started working with young women, doing art performances and inviting them to come to the protest, to the marches, to meet with activists.*

— **Zana Hoxha**, Artpolis-Art and Community Center | Republic of Kosovo

## SPEAKING ABOUT PROTECTION

In our research, we wanted to hear how activists conceive of protection, and how they relate it (or not) with care. A number of the people we interviewed **associate it more with a response to external risks.**

*When you're a Cameroonian activist, protection is foremost, and for me that means avoiding situations that can put you in danger or put others in danger. We need to avoid exposing ourselves when we can't fully guarantee our safety, and above all, think about safety measures, avoid just going in headfirst by instinct.*

— **Renée Nwoes**, Women in Front | Cameroon

Although protection is generally associated with factors that are external to the context, it also means looking inward, reflecting on what might happen and **what we can do to prevent the risks.**

*If you look at yourself, recognize the situation you're in, recognize what the possible risks might be, protection is what comes after looking at yourself, being able to incorporate preventive actions. "If I go on like this, I'm going to have a negative effect, so I can incorporate some actions that help me transform this situation a little."*

— **Amparo Peñaherrera Sandoval**, *Federación de Mujeres de Sucumbíos* (Federation of Sucumbíos Women) | Ecuador

Protection tends to be **associated with physical safety**, and in this sense it is differentiated from and may be a complement to care.

*I **take care** of my house by keeping it clean, keeping it neat, creating conditions, making it pretty, having flowers around, a bunch of things. But I **protect** my house by putting up a security camera and a fence.*

— **Selene Yang** | Paraguay

Other activists believe that protection transcends safety, and relate it with care for life, proposing a more holistic protection.

*Protection is not only about saving lives and sharing safety, it's also about dignity —and care supports that.*

— **Shawna Wakefield**, *Root. Rise. Pollinate!* | USA

Many people we interviewed drew a **direct connection between care and protection** and mentioned aspects like **generational trauma** — contributions from activists of the African diaspora and the Latin American migration in the United States— which expanded the dimension of care to a collective strategy and need, and an anti-systemic alternative.

*I think care and protection are inseparable. And here's how: this idea that safety is not connected to a bodily autonomy or an understanding of how we collectively care for each other. I go back to interdependence. (...) What we need individually or for our families is distinctly our own, but it's in relationship to a cosmos or a cosmology of what we need of and with each other. (...) If we're not thinking about generational trauma, I think of care and protection as generation. That if there wasn't a world map, I'd prefer a constellation of care strategies and protection that sustains us, that protects our way of being, values our livelihood and allows us to be connected to our memories.*

— **Cara Page** | USA

Other activists shared a little of their past history and how the meaning of safety, protection and care has changed throughout their lives.

*It's vital and necessary to have measures for protection and to think about safety, to have that perspective, (...) because violence is omnipresent in this space, it's present in private spaces too, but much more evident in the public spaces where I'm active. So really my interest after the first book ["What's the Point of the Revolution if We Can't Dance," which she co-authored] was safety, not self-care. I think that, after that, I began to express myself more and more in this way, because [care] is pure life. Thinking about safety is thinking all the time about intersections, about defense, it's exhausting. Care brings a lot of life, a lot of beauty, a lot of healing... and safety always brings a lot of anxiety.*

— **Jelena Dordevic**, Coletivo Feminista de Autocuidado e Cuidado entre Defensoras de Direitos Humanos (Feminist Collective for Self-Care and Care Between Human Rights Defenders) | Serbia/Brazil

## THE DAY-TO-DAY CHALLENGES OF ACTIVISM

Conversing about care in activism also means **conversing about what activism means on a day-to-day basis.**

The activists we interviewed talked to us about activism and **how it transforms their relationships with their families.** For many, activism means economic instability and, sometimes, less support from their families in these life choices.

*One of the first things that came out from my family was support, but also a little bit of skepticism. My sister is working for an international agency getting a pretty decent and stable income. And, with activism, I was basically trying to make ends meet, not having a paycheck at the end of the month and carrying that burden.*

— **Ikal Ang'elei** | Kenya

Activism is a **life choice** that has **implications for emotional relationships and bonds**, for example, with one's partner. In this regard, a number of

activists described the challenges they have had to confront and the decisions they have had to make when this choice is not shared or supported.

*I broke up with my fiancé because of my political inclination and activism. He was not ready to marry someone who has tension/bad relations with the State, who may be stopped/summoned by the State or who receives a late work call from a female victim of violence and goes out to assist her. I don't see this a sacrifice, I see it as a duty, my duty.*

— **FC** | Tunisia

Others think about **consequences for the use of time and money**, for example, if they decide to have children or others who depend exclusively on them, because many of them work in activism that places heavy demands on their time and with limited financial resources.

*She asked me if I planned to have a family. And then I said yeah, that I planned to have probably two kids because that's just what my financial capacity will allow. And then she said, "How about your activism?" And then my partner also chimed in, "That's not going to be a problem. We're going to share." My partner said, "I am going to be the house husband and then she's going to work." And then we just laughed it off. And then I said "No, it is okay, our kids are going to be activists anyway."*

— **Anonymous** | Philippines

Activism in day-to-day life **can take the form of a demanding activity**, many trips and events, not having time for the family, **but it can take other forms if we incorporate care practices**. One of the activists, who has five daughters, told us how her daily life changed when she began to pay attention to care in activism.

*I learned about the proposal of the Urgent Action Fund, Sustainable Activism, basically self-care. (...) Honestly I'm grateful to life and to them, above all, because if not I wouldn't be telling you this story now. (...) Beginning a process of healing, of care, of protecting myself, of protecting my daughters, and above all protecting my colleagues in the organization, because this also gave us all food for thought; we were also worn out, because we're women, and also mothers, mothers of so many. (...) I spend a little more time with them, they're normally at school now, and they're like normal kids, that's what they say, because they go to school every day. It wasn't like that before, because I'd leave and I'd travel, because wherever I went I'd take them with me everywhere, because that was like a feminist*

*militancy. (...) You know what you really want is for the kids to grow up in a different type of life transformation, that they don't go through the things you went through, have tools you didn't have, you know, for life. So yes, it's very different because for example I go, I see them in the school plays, in dance class, I go with them to school, I go to things that before this, because I was always in meetings and busy, well, I couldn't.*

— **Yelis Vegonza** | Venezuela

Regarding the **use of information and communication technologies**, a Brazilian activist told us how hard it is for her to disconnect, because of her concerns over the safety of other people, and this causes her to be constantly in communication.

*There's something about the urgency of electronic communications, wherever I go, whatever I'm doing, even if I'm resting, I have this feeling all the time that I have to be connected, because if something happens, I'll know it and I'll be able to react. This sense of the new, this sense of urgency is in life, it's in the psyche. On the one hand, I feel reassured when I know that people are well protected physically; but, on the other, my head is going 24/7, thinking and on alert. I think it's this urgency thing, being braced all the time for something to happen, whether good or bad, being ready to act and help in some way. So my head is always thinking of millions of things.*

— **Lana Souza**, Colectivo Papo Reto (Papo Reto Collective) | Brazil

The stories we hear, the people and the communities we work with, being in **contact with violence and injustice, can lead to a moment of crisis and affect our health.**

*Last week I had an anxiety attack, but, like, for a week I couldn't shake it. I couldn't stop crying, I cried for six days straight, I didn't sleep, I didn't eat, I couldn't breathe. Well, it was awful, truly awful. And only now I'm starting to come back from it a little.*

— **Anonymous**

In this same vein, an independent reporter who works for women's rights and justice, and who coordinates a feminist organization, whose slogan is "If we don't tell our stories, who will?", aims to use communication to amplify the voices of women and minority groups in Cameroon. In her words:

*At some point, I remember I suffered a very severe burnout, constantly hearing about women who had been raped, (...) and around November 2016, I remember I was travelling and I just couldn't breathe, I couldn't breathe and I had to be rushed to the hospital. The doctor checked me, did everything and then told me that I was terribly exhausted and I was suffering from a burnout. And he advised me not to report on any traumatic incident for at least three months. (...) All of this was a lot and I took time off, I didn't report, I took the medications and then I discovered self-care, because I started reading about it and how to protect myself especially from the public, and how to stay healthy as an activist. When you are hearing all these things, and writing all these stories and pushing for justice, sometimes you don't realize that it all affects your health but, in 2016, that incident was a turning point for me.*

— **Comfort Mussa**, Sisterspeak237 | Cameroon

We also heard calls to recognize the importance of **emotional stability** amidst changing contexts.

*Politics is unstable, it is dynamic and alters a lot. My psychological state depends on the political context and the environment. That's why I want my psychological state to be linked to something more stable than politics.*

— **Samar Tilili** | Tunisia

Another challenge mentioned is that, even when there are reflections and practices of care, activists are not exempt from **feelings of guilt**, because of **the idea that they have to take charge of everything, which also increases their frustration.**

*There are things that affect us a lot, there are things that unsettle us, make us impatient, make us feel even guilty that we can't just solve things right away, you know?*

— **Miluska Luzquiños**, Organización Feminista por los DD. HH. de las Personas Trans (Feminist Organization for the Human Rights of Trans People) | Perú

They spoke to us of **fatigue, illness and other problems that come from forgetting about themselves.**

*Today I'm very tired. I feel tired. But when I think about everything we've done, all the changes I see in the lives of families and women, the tiredness goes away. But I have to say I'm tired, I'm always sick, sometimes even when I participate in certain activities. You can see that today I'm a little sick. There were times when I really forgot about myself. I forgot about myself because I didn't think about myself, and I told myself that I was the only one who could take care of my sisters, So I forgot about my health, my body and many other things. I stopped thinking about myself and only thought about this.*

— **Djingarey Ibrahim Maiga**, *Femmes et Droits Humains*  
(Women and Human Rights) | Mali



## Of **sadness, depression and exhaustion.**

*I've felt the moments where I was unwell, where I was demotivated to continue doing my work. And I remember moments when I was so burnt out that I was depressed about everything and the world around me and, and I reached a point where I was no longer able to do anything because I was so burnt out.*

— **Anonymous**

## Of **stress and the pain triggered by past experiences.**

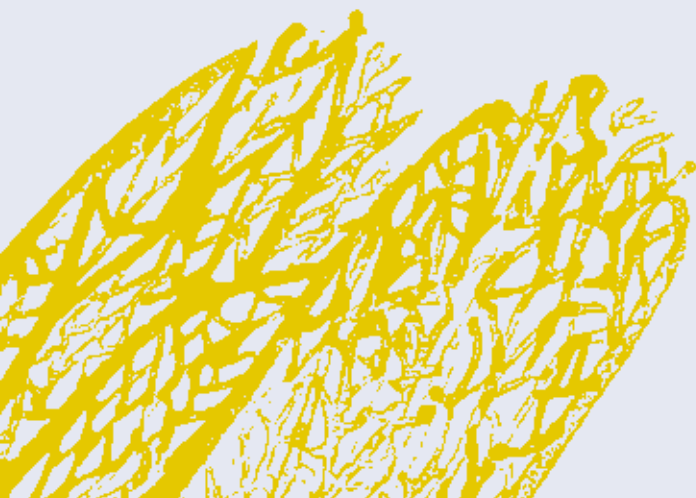
*The more time passes by, the more stressed I feel. Paranoid, especially with the current digital targeting present in Egypt from the government. Whenever I send an email, I would check the email address seven or nine times and would feel paranoid and worried while sending the email, fearing it would go to the wrong person. I would have nightmares of mistakenly sending an email to a wrong person, this includes nightmares of prisons, violence, incidents from the revolution time... my subconscious gets confused. It is not easy to process all these years.*

— **Amal Elmohandes** | Egypt

## Of **fear and distrust.**

*Oh, yes, we went through a lot of fear, (...) and also fear for the women you live with, for people in your house, your family, and so on. So that fear is always present at night, keeping you awake.*

— **Shamima Ali** | Fiji



***How do we embrace these sensations?***

***How do we allow ourselves to feel them and give them room?***

***How do you do it?***

# WHAT SUSTAINS ACTIVISM?

## “I CAN’T LET THIS FEAR TERRIFY ME.”

Many of our conversations were full of frustration, sadness and tears. But when we asked about the happy moments, activists’ eyes shone, laughter filled the space and after a moment of silence, the hope and inspiring stories came back. Let us converse now about the motivations and the joys, about what sustains activism despite it all.

It begins with **recognizing fear, but refusing to let it paralyze us.**

*Emotions are still human emotions. There are times when we feel weak, alone, but I like what I feel whenever I’m afraid. I say to myself, “yes, I’m scared, but if I give up, I’m going to be just as sad as I was before I started this struggle and then I wouldn’t have achieved anything. All my efforts, all these arrests, all this intimidation —everything would have been in vain.” There’s nothing to do but go on, and that strengthens me, consoles me. I tell myself that my love for my country, my love for my society, is stronger than this fear, so I can’t let this fear terrify me.*

— **Grace Kabera Amani**, LUCHA (FIGHT) | Democratic Republic of the Congo

**Remembering the satisfactions and reaffirming the fact that we are activists.**

*Being an activist is the most rewarding thing. It’s difficult especially in China now... extremely difficult now... But nothing compares to the excitement and fulfillment of being an activist. So I don’t regret it at all. I just need to survive and sustain my activism and continue to be an active activist.*

— **Jing Xiong**, Feminist Voices | China

**Finding ourselves in community.**

*I said that the good things that worked for me are the same happy moments that I have received. Now, the fact that we have many Ugandan feminists who are really active and that together we can denounce certain human*

*rights violations against human rights defenders... You feel like you have a sense of sisterhood. So, for me, interacting with the close feminists in Uganda have been my happiest moments.*

— **Brenda Kugonza**, Women Human Rights Defenders Network | Uganda

**Street mobilization**, when activists in countries around the world come together on dates marking feminist movements, where every time more people arrive to continue the resistance.

*Q: Can you tell us something about a recent event or an occasion or a conversation that made you happy and fulfilled as an activist?*

*A: I think that would be International Women's Day. It was a public march. So we took [to] the streets and marched and claimed safe spaces for women in public spaces. And it made me feel more empowered. And it sort of gave me more purpose in the sense that a lot of other people are joining the movement and sort of taking the torch onwards. I feel I have a good set of membership within my organization, [which] has members willing to take the movement forward as well. So it feels good to see that more and more women are doing this work and becoming feminists.*

— **Jasmine Kaur** | Fiji

The **joy we feel when our mobilizations achieve what we set out to do.**

*In November 2016 we held a 12-day vigil, and we blocked the Bala Gorge, where they were planning to build the mega hydro-power plants [of] Chepete-El Bala, and we blocked it, we put up barbed wire, (...) so no boat could go by from SERVICONs —outsourced by GEODATA— which was doing the studies. At the end of 12 days, they decided to withdraw, and that was a moment when we were very joyful at having stopped the process, at feeling that way at that moment, we did not agree with this mega project that would affect our lives. So seeing (...) the sacrifice of the people at the vigil, having that moment of joy, feeling like we won a small battle in defense of life.*

— **Ruth Alipaz Cuqui**, Indigenous Uchupiamona woman from Bolivia; defender of Indigenous rights, human rights and the rights of nature; member of the Commonwealth of Indigenous Communities of the Beni, Tuichi and Quiquibey Rivers and General Coordinator of CONTIOCAP | Bolivia

**The satisfaction that comes from progress** in the courts, or when a discriminatory law is stopped.

*From the beginning, since I came to [my workplace], it was the fight against the “gay propaganda” draft law in Kyrgyzstan that was copied from Russia and introduced in the [Kyrgyz] Parliament in 2014. I started my activism with this, the fight against the draft law, and I felt so satisfied and relieved when the draft law was stopped in the [Kyrgyz] Parliament in the second reading. And recently it has been frozen for a while and has not moved anywhere. I think it was a huge success, because we got the feeling of being able to stop something that is not for us and something that is against equality [and] discriminates.*

— **Aizhan Kadralieva** | Kyrgyzstan

*It’s really precious. You know? I cry, I’m emotional. When they [the activists she was defending as a lawyer] were released from prison, I was so happy, but also they were all men and I couldn’t hug them because of the conservative society. I don’t know how to deal with that, because I come from a very open-minded environment, and I look at them and I’m like, “Are we only gonna shake hands now, after all of this?” But it’s worth it. Just seeing their family happy, and them happy as well. It was really, really amazing. I can’t say that I worked on releasing any of them. I mean I worked, but it was not only my work that led to releasing them. It’s very rare that it happens, but when they are released, I’m the happiest person on Earth. Yeah, and actually I drag all my family with me. “My mom will be so excited about this guy who is going to be released today”, I think to myself.*

— **Anonymous**

**The reward you feel when you see the change in people’s lives and it is recognized.**

*Perceiving also that the work I’m doing is being well-received and (...) can help build things, that helps me too. When it’s recognized. When you see that your work is recognized, that gives you strength, too.*

— **Fernanda Shirakawa** | Brazil

And, very important, the **gratitude when you feel the recognition.**

*My happiest moment, I think, [is] when some people tell me “Thank you.”  
That is enough for me and it makes me happy.*

— **Anonymous**

Knowing that gratitude is so important and motivating, **how can we encourage it? How can we recognize others’ work? Thanking ourselves, hugging each other, celebrating our achievements, remembering the moments that restore our souls and making new moments possible that bring joy and pleasure.**



# CONVERSING WITH MYSELF

Sometimes it's hard to give ourselves the time and space to feel, to express our emotions, to listen to and express what the body and the heart are feeling.



***"Is it hard for you?"***

***"Do you think it is still hard for us as a movement?"***

***"How do you feel right now about your daily activism in terms of your body, mind, emotions, voice and spirit?"***

These were some of the first questions we asked in interviews.

There were many **different responses**. The air could be full of sadness, fatigue, many emotions all at once. We will share a few of these, just to remember our humanity, and because maybe you are feeling like this right now.

*I'm not okay. I mean, on so many levels. (...) There's so much sadness, there's too much failure, there's so much frustration. Nothing is changing and the system against which we have been fighting has won. And everyone is clapping for them.*

— **Anonymous**

But **persistence is there, despite the fatigue.**

*At this point, my heart is happy, my body is kind of tired, the environment is toxic, but my mind is focused so... yeah my mind, my mind is focused. It is persistent with what I want to do, the change I want. So my mind is like, "You are working for a change."*

— **Naomi Tulay-Solanke** | Liberia

**Balance and recognition of change** are there.

*Well, today, fortunately with this opportunity that I've given myself to take care of myself, I feel good, I feel calm. I've worked on being mindful of the risk I have, but regarding that risk, I'm making an effort for it not to become a limitation for living the life I defend so much, to enjoy the life I defend so much.*

— **Danelly Estupiñán Valencia** | Colombia

And of course, **there is a mix of emotions, because you never feel just one way, it depends on the context**, the moment when we answer the question. It is an opportunity to look within each of us, or to look at ourselves collectively, and gather our strength.

More than a decade after the publication of the book *What's the point of the revolution if we can't dance?*, activists' stories reveal to us that it is still difficult to talk about oneself, and to think, feel and externalize the question "How are we?" Many times we cannot find —or we have to make for ourselves— the time and space to talk about it. But this has been changing, and many activists are hopeful.

*Thank you for this question! Honestly, I always try to encourage women to talk about their experiences, but it turns out when it comes to sharing my own experience, I also have a lot of work to do, because it's always easier to talk about the work that I am doing compared to a simple personal question on "How am I?". I think, right now, I am feeling that there is a lot happening around. I feel both pessimistic and optimistic. On [an] optimistic note, I would say that the feminist movement is becoming stronger. I see a lot of new faces around, and I also have the privilege of being connected to activists around the world, so I feel empowered and I feel that I am not alone. I know that the work we are doing makes sense. It is something that is transforming society. This is really inspiring. It is something that makes me move forward.*

— **Salome Chagelishvili**, Women's Fund in Georgia | Georgia

# INVITATION

## A moment for yourself

The honest response to *How are you?* is sometimes difficult to share, so the invitation we are extending here is to ask yourself the question, converse with yourself, describe in words what you feel here and now, look within yourself and be honest.

There are many ways to do this —writing a letter to yourself, otherwise putting it in words, creating an artistic message like a collage, drawing, dancing or simply being mindful of your current state— all of which can be profoundly liberating acts of self-love.





CHAPTER 5

# Sharing Practices

**What do you do when you are tired?**

**Do you remember having done something today to care for yourself?**





We have already reviewed the contexts and risks that activists face, the transformative power of feminisms and the strength of activism. We also reviewed various perspectives on care and protection. Now we invite you to reflect on the following questions: **How is care manifested? How do activists in various parts of the world experience care on a daily basis? What care and protection practices are found among the diversity of feminist, women, trans and non-binary activists?**

Many activists talked of care precisely by mentioning specific daily practices or actions that make them feel well or protected. These actions emerge from their unique contexts and experiences, so they are not linear, nor do they replicate any formula.

Like protection, in care, activists identified some **practices that they decide on individually, and others collectively.**

*For me, care isn't any one thing (...) like a list of [concrete practices], it's gradually understanding that you need certain things, and that you can have tools to allow you, in some way, to meet these needs for yourself. So for me the first exercise is trying to listen to what I need, right? (...) I have a saying: "I hear myself and I obey myself."*

— **Diana Pulido** | Colombia

"Is there anything you found helpful at times when you felt unsafe or challenged, and faced a lack of care in your activism?" "How do you care for yourself and maintain your activism and resistance?" "Do you have any practices that involve spirituality?" These were some of the questions we asked activists in order to open a conversation around such practices.

The reflections we share here reveal how **practices are grounded not only in one's identity and one's context, but also in one's experience and in one's body.** They give us a glimpse into the many conceptions regarding care and protection that emanate from those practices, and how these elements are interwoven with what activists do every day, and with what they call it. This, in turn, reveals the inseparability of practices and conceptions, because naming care and protection is not a strictly intellectual or rational exercise, but rather **part of the embodied experience.**

Various interviewees described how they respond to the **risks they face, and the possibility of preventing situations that might harm them.** In this regard, they mentioned, as care and protection practices, specific measures they take every day.

*I have memorized the phone numbers of people whom I can directly contact to relay my situation. I know there are certain experiences in my work... when I ask a military officer or a police officer his or her name, they sort of get shocked like, "Why do you need my name?" Those kinds of things that can get you more information can deter the police from abusing you, because they know you are looking for a name to be held accountable.*

— **Anonymous** | Philippines

In all regions, different activists emphasized the importance of friendships and family. Activism can give rise to great friendships that become networks of affection and support.

*My friends give me positive vibes. I can't tolerate negativity in my life anymore. I have great friends. I can lean on them. Our ideologies align.*

— **Anonymous**

Some of them speak of a **support network that gives them the confidence** to speak when the hustle and bustle of daily life overwhelms them, networks that are vital for holding on. These networks can be made up of other activists, allies or family and friends.

*When I feel stressed out, emotionally exhausted, drained or when I feel like I'm going crazy —I know this is not necessarily the best habit— I have a support system of friends whom I live with. Or my husband, I can just talk to him.*

— **Anonymous** | Philippines

At times simply **socializing, engaging in group activities** with families, colleagues or friends is a practice that brightens their lives and helps them sustain their activism. Some of them spoke of these activities as a containment practice.

*In my personal case, the truth is that my family is my containment, my sisters are super important, because getting together with them, making a family meal, laughing, singing, dancing, is super therapeutic for me.*

— **Lucía Lagunes Huertas** | México

Others include **friends and companions of other species.**

*I hang out with... my cat.*

— **Loan Tran** | USA

*Well, my dog is also part of my self-care, a space... for enjoyment. I say there's no more unconditional love than what dogs give, the sentient beings at your side, because yeah, I also like that a lot.*

— **Amparo Peñaherrera Sandoval**, *Federación de Mujeres de Sucumbíos* (Federation of Sucumbíos Women) | Ecuador

Other **daily actions of care** are those that relate directly to **bodily wellness, which of course is connected with our emotional, mental and spiritual side.** For example, **sleeping well.**

*Another tactic I have learnt is just to sleep enough hours, because when I started, I used to sleep three or four hours maximum. (...) I thought I was getting much more done. I was online, I was writing more. But then I realized that, in the end, I was just not being as productive as I could be, so I sleep a little more than I used to... that's like my second tactic, because I feel the freshness of the morning when it's just me and the world, before people wake up, [and that] helps me.*

— **Ikal Ang'elei** | Kenya



## Taking **time to eat and hydrate.**

*I have a little difficulty with discipline, particularly in my life, but I can tell you things that make me feel good when I'm doing them: yoga, swimming, running, being close to nature. Sleeping well is essential for me, having time, waking up and having coffee; [having] space, drinking water and eating. When I'm feeling trashed, I notice I've been eating practically nothing but carbs, my skin changes, I change, my mood changes, my bowels change, that's what's going on.*

— **Anonymous**

## **Exercise.**

*Every day I need to find some time for myself to work out, to run.*

— **Matcha Phorn-in** | Tailandia

To be able to listen to and attend to what each person needs, to devote time to each one of them, and to have time for rest and self-care, is very important; and so is —activists told us— to know our own limits and set them when we are in demanding situations. This is key, especially in situations where expectations are high, both our own and of those around us, regarding our response capacity. These limits are necessary in order to avoid experiencing caregiving or serving others as a mandate or sacrifice.

*I've discovered that, for example, learning to say “no” is a big help.*

— **Millaray Garrido** | Chile

Stopping at the right time can be preventive, helping you to continue on and to stay well. **The ability to stop, rest, turn down tasks, set boundaries and be okay with it is a learning experience.** For example, finding a relaxing space when we are under pressure, or not working on our days off.

*I realize that if I don't stop now, if I don't listen to myself and understand my limitations, I am going to burn out. That is also a really interesting conversation I am having with myself. On the one hand, I understand that I don't want to burn myself out. On the other hand, my motivation not to burn out is fueled by being connected to other activists. If I am not burned out, it means I can stay around longer, I can do more work.*

— **Salome Chagelishvili**, Women's Fund in Georgia | Georgia

*For the first time, I'm trying to give more time and attention to my partner, and to divide my work and activism from my personal life. Before, I was fully in my activism and work and I couldn't see [anything else in my life], because for me it was not important, but now I try to give a part of my time to my partner, to myself, to yoga, to write about my feelings if I have some sort of feelings to write. Also, I... cook a lot, trying different recipes as well.*

— **Aizhan Kadralieva** | Kyrgyzstan

*Sometimes when I'm feeling really overwhelmed, I go someplace alone to listen to music and have a beer.*

— **Credo Ahodi** | Benin

**Doing things that enable us to momentarily distance ourselves from activism** is a recurring practice.

*Yes, precisely to maintain my activism, what I try to always do is something outside activism. Something I like. Or go to... I don't know, a writing workshop or a dancing class, sometimes even going to therapy... These are things that have also helped to sustain my activism.*

— **María Pierna Sabei, Pipi** | Argentina

Getting one's mind off it, **resting our thoughts from problems and difficult situations.**

*I will go out and hang out with friends. I'll go out and watch really crazy stupid Bollywood movies and laugh at the most delightful things. One of the things I actually now have stopped doing is watching films which are deeply depressing or talking about the work that I do. I really don't think I need to now depress myself further. So I think that's also one of the ways in which I take care of myself, that I really don't want to see horrible stories.*

— **Pramada Menon** | India

*There is something comforting about watching stupid series. Sometimes I feel like, "Okay, I need only two brain cells." And I don't need any more than that. I don't want to overthink; actually, I don't want to think at all.*

— **Anonymous**

In some conversations, the idea came up of **taking a break from the virtual** as well: turning off the cell phone or notifications, or changing our social media habits. Just as risks were identified in the virtual space, activists speak of the ways they care for themselves in this space.

*Part of self-care, I think, is understanding that this extension of our digital data is also a part of us. So it's also caring for ourselves when we protect our passwords, when we are careful and think about where to post something, or who we accept as friends in social media. (...) Sometimes it seems like digital things aren't a problem, they won't influence me, they can't physically harm me, so I'll do whatever. But no, we women see some very explicit impacts from this.*

— **Fernanda Shirakawa** | Brazil

Sometimes the importance of **stopping is learned only after a crisis** or a period of exhaustion.

*I had three collectives, I worked like a crazy woman at the Ministry [State agency], I had this relationship, so I didn't have time for shit, I mean for myself. I didn't know what hurt, what didn't hurt, if I was sad... it was really a very strong kind of escaping from myself, that I hadn't been very aware of. [I was talking to a friend] and they said "Wow! This is really extreme! It's not normal, you know?" What was going on with me that I would do this? So I hung up and right then I called the [reiki] specialist for an appointment. I had a first session in which I concluded that I had to drop a lot of things. The first session was just sitting down to talk to her and it was like, "I have to leave home." (...) So I said, "Yeah, I need to stop."*

— **Diana Pulido** | Colombia

*These past few months, I have been getting more rest compared to the last several years, [which were] really, really exhausting. This year, I have found myself taking more breaks. I left for home in February and also March and this June, so that's a lot. Before I used to go home just on Christmas. (...) But for this year, I don't know what aspect particularly changed that. Maybe it's me taking a break or, you know, being proactive in taking breaks. I think I am more at ease now, much more... I can breathe more easily now. I find that my disposition is better. I have more initiative. I'm happier.*

— **Anonymous** | Philippines

And at times like these we may find **other possibilities that help us.**

*I am still working, but I have several ailments in my body. It's all stress-related, I know. I am feeling particularly low in the last few days. Many things are going on. I have even thought about committing suicide. But I have been doing meditation and this practice has helped me.*

— **Renu Adhikari**, National Alliance of Women Human Right Defenders | Nepal

In many contexts, however, **maintaining these practices becomes a permanent challenge.**

*Self-care with the situation in our countries, especially in my country, which is a difficult country and we're going through inter-community conflicts caused by armed groups. (...) Protection is a little... well, I try to make an effort, it's the only way. For example, right now, the situation is getting worse in Congo. We have to go to a place where it's quiet, take a vacation. We don't have the means for that, to pay for a vacation, for example. And of course, we can't leave the area... all of that is a problem.*

— **Gegê Katana** | Democratic Republic of the Congo



And there are those for whom **being well is a challenge they take on every day**, and remind us that challenges are part of our life and mobilize us.

*We always think that our well-being [has to be] at 100%. I also believe that my life is [not] the absence of any challenge. This is something I had to learn, because every time you have a challenge, whether it's work or personal, it poses a risk or challenge to your well-being, but now [I have] the ability to be able to face these challenges without letting it break me down.*

— **Yah Parwon** | Liberia

Many recall the joy they feel in being capable of creating something out of nothing, having an idea and giving it life, creating with their hands, with their bodies, transforming materials, learning new techniques and technologies, or simply appreciating and **including creativity, ingenuity and art in their daily lives.**

## LET'S CELEBRATE ART IN OUR LIVES!

*For me, I love everything that has to do with the creative process and that's what heals me, nourishes me. So for me, my moments of self-care have to do with things that I'm creating, everything, I love it. I discovered that I love sewing, I love it!*

— **Amparo Peñaherrera Sandoval**, *Federación de Mujeres de Sucumbíos* (Federation of Sucumbíos Women) | Ecuador

### Discovering (ourselves) while creating

*For example, there are coloring or pottery workshops, which is... like active meditation, you don't need to... you get into this way of breathing... you just simply do something sometimes, art helps you to connect with yourself, return to being, coloring.*

— **Itzel Guzmán**, *Consortio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca* (Oaxaca Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equity) | México

## Discovering poetry

*For a while, I used to do what was called “a poetry night” to support a poetry meet-up. For me, I’m an extroverted introvert, so spending time with friends, doing things with friends can be where I get some kind of support.*

— **Lakshmi N. Moore**, Liberia Feminist Forum | Liberia

## Traveling through books

*And I read a lot, I listen to music. I think my best way of dealing with a lot of this stuff is reading romance, which has got nothing to do with my life, but it’s so delightful to know other people are falling in love and having good sex.*

— **Pramada Menon** | India

## Dance, body movement

*It’s a hobby and it’s also a way for me to be more in touch with my own body and skin. And belly dancing also helps you move your hips, your pelvis, that whole area that’s been oppressed over centuries. So it’s not the easiest thing to do and so I, I really enjoy it. It’s very liberating.*

— **Anonymous**

## The relief we find in music

*I used to play music and just listen to songs, and before I realized it, there was this peace of mind and I could move on. Music revives the soul regardless of the circumstances.*

— **Amb. Daintowon Domah Pay-Bayee**, Coordinator of the Young Women Leadership and Knowledge Institute Liberia (YOWLI), and Secretary General for the Political Affairs Department of the Coalition of Political Parties Women in Liberia (COPPWIL) | Liberia

To connect and reactivate, **nature plays a key role**, no matter where you are in the world. Activists seek out fresh air to breathe, they gravitate toward water—oceans, rivers—to fill themselves with its healing power.



*I try to spend my time with nature. I love green, I love rivers. Every time I have that chance to go, I feel so fresh and energetic and you know that you can maintain your energy and you can resonate with yourself again.*

— **Anonymous** | Cambodia

*I'm thinking of the times where things have been really hard and my first instinct was to just go to the beach. And so I go to the beach and it's nice to feel like very small, tiny, like a tiny irrelevant dot in the grand scheme of things; and that's very comforting.*

— **Loan Tran** | USA

It helps to go to a park or a garden, or if leaving the house isn't a possibility, just connecting with the elements that sustain us, looking up at the moon and the stars (with no screens), absorbing a little sunlight or a good bath, feeling the immensity of the universe. Others find connection through **mediation or yoga**. Many agree that these help them to sustain themselves.

*I do yoga. I try to be disciplined, even though sometimes I can't do it because I travel a lot.*

— **Anonymous** | Cambodia

*Before I go to sleep, I engage in processes of letting go for the day. And I wake up and I start my mornings, without fail, with meditation. And that grounds me. That gives me a sense of close connection with what I am feeling and what I am thinking. And it helps me in many ways to not just be okay, but to fully comprehend my full emotions, frustrations, anger, and also what I am going to do about it.*

— **Phumi Mtetwa**, Just Associates (JASS) | South Africa

Or something we learn from another culture which we incorporate regularly.

*Another thing I do is a little meditation, breathing, oxygenating my brain, and my body as well, with meditation. Those are practices I'm learning to do. The other thing [shamanism], is obviously part of my spirituality and my own culture. But meditation is something I've been practicing and I'm doing more regularly now, and it makes me feel good.*

— **Anonymous**

These exercises coincide with the idea of care as a way to build mindfulness and connect with our own being, to listen to the needs in every moment. For example, **connection and support are also found in activities with co-workers.**

*Every Tuesday morning, I do yoga with my co-workers. It helps a lot! It's amazing how much it changes. Our relationship changes greatly.*

— **Georgia Nicolau**, Instituto Procomum (Procomum Institute) | Brazil

These exercises remind us that, when it comes to taking it to a collective level, **there are no pre-set formulas that work for all organizations or for all people.**

*We had a meditation session with the staff and everybody was looking at me as if I had gone crazy. We are in a Buddhist country where everybody is supposed to meditate, but my staff thought it was kind of lame.*

— **Rosanna Flamer-Caldera** | Sri Lanka

*It doesn't have to be, you know, yoga. Why do people immediately think it has to be yoga that brings us to liberation? It works for some people, definitely not for many others. But [it's] something that can help them, especially people who are highly traumatized, that can help them to deal with trauma. And it can definitely be an [invitation] to different spaces. It's not like, "You're supposed to do this." Also an invitation to some people whose strategy is smoking, sex, drinking —these are all coping strategies and there's no judgment in that. My smoking, whatever it is, my self-care. And there's nobody who can say, "Well, you know that's wrong." Well, this is your way. And to me it's important for us to acknowledge different strategies, nervous systems, different coping mechanisms, different practices as well.*

— **Sandra Ljubinkovic**, somatic transformation consultant | Serbia/The Netherlands

Some activists spoke to us of **therapy** as something that helps: psychotherapy, alternative therapy or counseling for **healing the body and the spirit**, from various bodies of knowledge or traditions, that they turn to in times of crisis or as a regular practice of self-care.

*I also go to therapy. I entertain my therapist greatly.*

— **Anonymous**

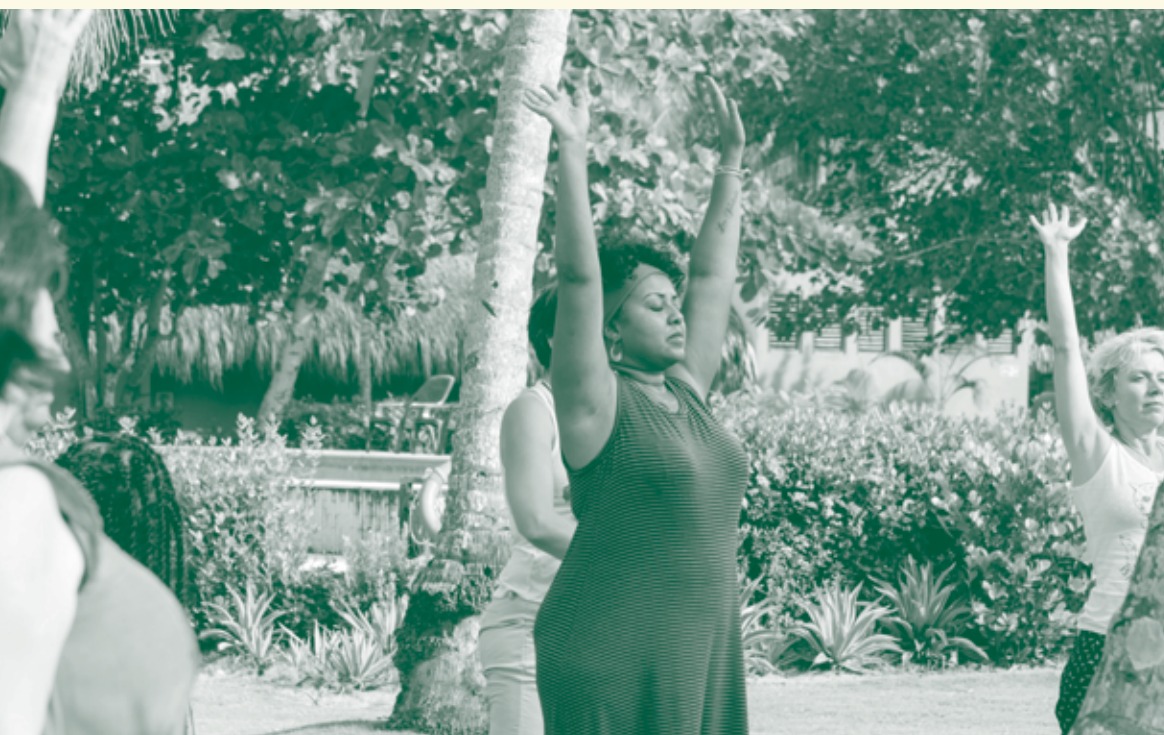
*I have my personal therapist, the one I've had all along. We've been doing this for many, many years. This person knows my history, and we discover the rhythms of the things that work for me as we go along, which I think is important.*

— **Celeste Mayorga**, *RUDA Mujeres + Territorio* (RUDA Women + Territory) | Guatemala

Many activists speak of spirituality as an important part of their self-care, their connection, their center.

*Spirituality enables me to sit, get myself together, and think about the meaning of what I am going to do. First of all, I must really be centered. Centered in my heart, my body, and my soul, my physical being. And in other areas I must be centered and for me that centering comes through that spirituality, in the sense that I know I am connected... the universe and whatever energy I send out is going to affect my work and affect everyone around me, because we are all connected.*

— **Hope Chigudu**, *HopeAfrica* | Zimbabwe/Uganda



In this personal relationship with the spiritual, we find that **some people connect with religion**. Religion holds a particularly important place in the lives of various activists in Africa.

*When I read the Koran or when I fast, I feel at ease and calm, I don't feel alone, God is by my side. But I can't force anyone to do these practices. They're very personal decisions.*

— **Fahima Hashim**, Salmamah Women's Centre | Sudan

For other activists, **spirituality is different from religion**.

*Yes, I am inspired by spirituality, but not religion. When I was a child, I could see how religion is very sexist —I grew up Buddhist and saw how oppressive it is. I needed to find [out] what is the common spirituality for women. Close our eyes, come back to ourselves, believe in what we feel and believe in our strength and power within. This is how we come back to the ground and the spiritual, how we are able to express our sexuality, our identity. We are very connected with nature, with Mother Earth, with the people who are caring and practice peace. All that for me is growing spiritually that makes us feel that we have something really strong inside, and it is our strength.*

— **Matcha Phorn-in** | Thailand

In Latin America, activists referred to **bodies of knowledge and practices that stem from ancestral and Indigenous worldviews**.

*I feel like what helps me is trusting in the duality of the universe. There's light and shadow, and the light is always stronger, and I cling to that. That's why I love the Mayan worldview, because there are energies that guide us and show us the negative and positive, and you decide where you want to be.*

— **Flor Alvarez Medrano** | Guatemala

*Yes, in fact, I come from a family of curanderos [healers], shamans, or whatever they're called elsewhere. My great-grandfather was one of the strongest curanderos, or spiritual guides, of my village, and we did rituals in my village twice a year. (...) I grew up with that, it's part of my belief system, my culture, my spirituality, and we practice it. I'm part of that, I think that's also something that gives me strength.*

— **Anonymous**

There is also the presence of traditions from the **African diaspora and Black spirituality**.

*Whenever I can, I get together with some women friends who have a lot more experience than I do in the area of Black spirituality. (...) We do some rituals to express gratitude to the earth, gratitude to natural resources, to our male and female ancestors, rituals that they know how to do, and they include me when I'm there.*

— **Carolín Lizardo**, *Colectiva Mujer y Salud* (Women and Health Collective) | Dominican Republic

*It's my faith. I'm a daughter of Oshun, I have a guide and many times I'll go to her, my Oshun guide. (...) Also, for the past five years I've been seeing a pai-de-santo [father of the saints], and he's very important in my life. Many times I think of him, I remember him, and it gives me strength. (...) I'd say I have a stronger connection with him than with Candomblé itself. (...) I don't consider myself a practitioner, but I do sympathize with Candomblé, and specifically the teachings he brings to me.*

— **Georgia Nicolau** | Brazil

Understanding and connecting with one's own cycles and life cycles through **astrology and tarot** are also spiritual paths chosen by some activists.

*My core spiritual practices... I've been a practitioner of astrology for probably twelve-plus years, formally. But as a young person I always gazed at the moon, always gazed at the stars. I thought that was slightly weird, but apparently it's not. It's a real core practice that I do religiously because it is a way to understand cycles. It's a way to be in connection with the cycles and also to know how to work with what's happening energetically versus working against it.*

— **Erica Woodland**, National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network | USA

Others see the **spiritual in every element of their daily lives**, like a thread connecting multiple dimensions of their being, with other beings and with the world around them.

*The practices of Capacitar (the network I belong to, which teaches wellness practices) all connect me, body-mind-emotions-spirit. Yoga too, going to the beach with my friends, walking with my girlfriend in the rain in a nature*

*park too. And a lot of other things. For me, spirituality is what connects who I am, what I feel, what I think, what gives me coherence, what makes me feel good and connects me with the planet, with earth, with all the elements and all those people that are doing thing around the world to heal themselves and heal the world. That's my spiritual practice.*

— **Alibel Pizarro** | Panamá

For others, **spirituality is not a part** of their activism or their lives.

*Do you think in your activism there is an influence of spirituality?*

**No.**

*You are not a spiritual person?*

**No.**

— **Jasmine Kaur** | Fiji

One of the activists shared with us a reflection about what she calls “systems of care on a personal level,” **which go beyond isolated actions of momentary relief** that we might take to care for ourselves. They involve an awareness of the habits, daily decisions and constant practices that together enable us to be well personally and collectively.

*I think that what people do in their contexts to create their own system of care —on the personal level and on the collective level— is what's really important, what do you do regularly as a practice and how that connects into your day. So it's not a separate thing. Like, “I took a bath! It's self-care!” That is not the point. It'll help you feel better for a second but what you do regularly gives you resilience. Care practices should help build resilience so that you can come back to the community, to relationships, to the work with a sense of dignity and well-being.*

— **Shawna Wakefield**, Root. Rise. Pollinate! | USA

# CARE IN THE COLLECTIVE SPHERE

Many activists **emphasized the need to strengthen and delve deeper into collective care**. Reflection on this issue is still emerging, but practices are increasingly more visible and more diverse; still, there remains much to do and converse about. Interestingly, one of the findings is that many activists speak exclusively of “self-care,” even when referring to collective practices.

*I'll be honest, in all the organizations in Honduras there isn't a practice of collective care, because in every project, the organizations have focused their activities on developing the project and that's it. We'd never heard it said—or understood—that women leaders, that the people who head the organizations, that the people who make up the organization, that women who comprise the organizations need care, self-care. We found out about that from a specialization course I took. I discovered self-care was a necessity for leaders and for everyone involved in this kind of work. That's when we began to mention self-care in the organization. This was just a short while ago, but I think it's beginning to sink into the organizations.*

— **Opasta** | Honduras

Care and protection in the organizations may be expressed in **daily spaces where participants share experiences and actively listen to each other**, especially when bearing in mind that a job is not something that should consume one's entire life. Frequently, these spaces are made possible during meetings.

*We are always checking in about ourselves when we have meetings. We are checking to make sure that we are safe, we are okay. Whenever we have meetings, we are not only talking about our work. Before that, we talk about our life, our love, our family. If we get sick, we always share. Because we are not working in a physical office together, it's mostly online. We use the online spaces to connect more and check with each other. When we meet [in person], we spend more time together and checking [in] personally [on] what is going on, what is happening in each of us.*

— **Anonymous** | Cambodia

## Listening and speaking circles are a common practice.

*What we really appreciate are these “sharing circles”, where we just give space to each other to share whatever is happening, and use these empathetic listening and nonviolent communication approaches. It helps us to really be with the story. And we will be with the person and feel the presence of one another.*

— **Elvira Meliksetian** | Armenia

## Strategies emerge for **resolving tensions**.

*I remember in a job when we started to have tension within the team, and what we decided to do is to open a safe space. We asked everyone from the team to come in, and we explained that each one of us would hear things that they don’t necessarily like to hear about themselves, about our work, but this is just a way to improve the work. We are not criticizing you as a person, we are just trying to have a conversation on how you can work on certain things.*

— **Senda Ben Jebara** | Tunisia

## It opens up space for **sharing emotions**.

### **For laughing!**

*It’s been very important to have time to talk and unload. To talk about what we think, we have moments—in the end, they’re not that frequent, but we have moments when we laugh... We tell each other things, funny things, we even laugh at ourselves. And in the hardest part of this crisis, we admit that we had some meetings, let’s say without planning them, that were pure laughter therapy sessions.*

— **María Teresa Blandón Gadea**, Nicaraguan Feminist Movement | Nicaragua

*And sometimes I feel like crying, I make myself strong, I joke, I fool around, and I change, right? And I’m good there, like really good, and my colleagues support me too.*

— **Gloria Ushigua**, Asociación de Mujeres Sápara (Sápara Women Association) | Ecuador

## Or crying!

*So we get together to cry [laughs]. We thought it was crazy, but one time we were all there with tears in our eyes and everybody holding it in and nobody crying, but everyone with their eyes just brimming with tears. And one day we said, "Well, why don't we get together and cry, cry as a group?" We said, "Yes, how beautiful, right?" "Yes, because I want to cry." "Me too!" "Me too!" [laughs] We met and it was very beautiful. Well, and it was a little crazy. We invited another friend and we really had an amazing time. We cried, each one of us spoke, we looked at each other, we hugged, and we went on. Since then we just say "Get together for a group cry."*

— **Danelly Estupiñán Valencia** | Colombia



The notion of collective self-care is also found in **joint activities outside of work or activism**: parties, meals, retreats to nature, watching movies.

*For collective care in a team, we do have a regular once-a-month dinner. All the team comes to a restaurant, we have dinner, chilling time, where we can sit, talk, see each other and all those things.*

— **Aizhan Kadralieva** | Kirguistán

*In my organization, at lunchtime some co-workers made a rule: “No work talk during lunchtime.”*

— **Lucía Lagunes Huertas** | México



A formal job generally means established, inflexible hours. However, some organizations have come up with new proposals: even before the pandemic, some organizations introduced work-from-home or remote work, or **flexible hours, rhythms and workspaces** according to each person's needs.

*You have to work from eight to five thirty every day, but you don't have to do that because that's not creative or innovative. You can work in coffee shops, in universities, under the shade of a tree. Just have that self-discipline and inform the team where you're going. You can work alone or you can work in a big team. You spend a dollar for a cup of coffee to be creative, why not? You don't have to be at the office. Sometimes we go off at four and we go to the pub and have a glass of beer. You have to read or write, then do it. We don't need any more traditional, conventional NGO staff. Maintaining your human resource is having a system that is not bureaucratic. Not a lot of NGOs do that, [they have] time sheets ... you're like a machine and you don't talk except to your laptop. I see my people so free and highly responsible. Invest in people. You don't change people by staying in the office eight to ten hours a day.*

— **Anonymous** | Cambodia

*They can take days off, work from home if they want to. We go out on retreats, and sometimes training, but also looking at what we are doing, giving women time off for child care, giving them more maternity leave, so it's about feeling that they are cared for.*

— **Shamima Ali** | Fiji



**And we are left with the questions, how are we challenging the logic of productivity in our organizations and collectives? What are we doing to reverse or reinforce the dynamics of capitalism in the age of virtual work?**

Some organizations have **wellness or self-care policies**, and they identify them as such.

*In the budget of the organization, last year we tried things, we got a project that covered access to a fitness center and swimming pool for the whole team. They were able to go to the gym and the swimming pool all year. (...) We tried to put in the budget of the organization the dinner that we have every month, and also psychological and medical support for team members. Sometimes the salary is not enough to cover medical treatment or psychological treatments for the team members, so we tried to budget for some of these in our projects.*

— **Aizhan Kadralieva** | Kyrgyzstan

*When I very simply allocate in my strategy and strategic plan (...) that the well-being of the people is one of my goals, I find the work produced is very different and efficient. Also, creating policies to ensure that people, for example, don't see more than three cases per day, that they should take their full vacation, that there is a system of supervision, flexible hours, maternity and paternity leaves. All of these things should be present in the policies because we are very informal so we tend not to stick to what exists legally in the country. There should be a policy and a strategy for well-being at work.*

— **Farah Shash** | Egypt

*In the last three years, the collective has been introducing self-care. And how do we introduce self-care? Seeing what we like to do and what gives us peace. (...) We sit down to think about what the group as a collective likes, what we could do, how and when, because there isn't always the space, the time, or the money. But we always found at least a moment for that.*

— **Carolín Lizardo**, *Colectiva Mujer y Salud* (Women and Health Collective) | Dominican Republic

Some choose **less hierarchical forms of organization**.

*I think the issue of power relations makes for an unjust system, and that exists everywhere, although we are trying to avoid that by using a participatory approach to our programs and management. Normally, [if we're not paying attention to this issue], the one who has the most power has the privilege to decide, for instance. However, when we try to address*

*this issue by having a proper consultation and decision-making, it [leads to] a very good discussion among the three of us. So that is how we try to address it in our foundation. We communicate among the three of us.*

— **Matcha Phorn-in** | Thailand

Others promote **therapeutic support, either individually or during group retreats.**

*[In] such a stressful situation, we always need the help of a psychologist. We have two psychologists in our initiative, ready to help at any time. For the organization they do team building, two or three times a year. We always prefer that our group is taken to another country to work with specialists in another country, because leaving the country to go to another free country seems to help people a little bit.*

— **Anonymous** | Uzbekistan

Some told us about having **protocols and measures for organizational protection and security**, as part of their practices of care, protection and safety, which enable them to prevent risks and respond to them.

*Our initiative group has a security and confidentiality policy that we update every year.*

— **Anonymous** | Uzbekistan

*We created a protection protocol, we created a prevention, attention and contingency protocol.*

— **Danelly Estupiñán Valencia** | Colombia

Regarding the use of telecommunications, activists mentioned **agreements on hours and media for talking about work**, as a way to protect the limits and personal space of the team members.

*Telling the person who's writing "I'll answer at ten, when I get to the office. It's eight, I'm not going to answer now" is a practice we also use to care for ourselves. We also avoid writing to other group members on the weekend. Unless, for example, we're sending a funny meme, that's all right, but writing to say something like "Who's already checked such and such?" Never, we don't do that.*

— **Selene Yang** | Paraguay

In times of personal crisis, we turn to our friends; on an organizational level, too. **Local and international networks save lives and maintain international solidarity.**

*All the friends from different countries always support me, either with words, or with money, I'm so grateful to them.*

— **Gloria Ushigua**, Asociación de Mujeres Sápara (Sápara Women Association) | Ecuador

*I still [believe in] the power of networks. I have had my fellow feminists, for me having such networks has been very protective. I consider that powerful. By just having networks, women's organizations, colleagues who are doing similar work that I do, [who are] facing the same challenges. We normally sit and discuss the risks, the threats, and for me that has been very protective.*

— **Brenda Kugonza**, Women Human Rights Defenders Network | Uganda

In Central America, some activists use the concept of **embodiment**, which comes from community feminism, to refer to collective actions by which they can sustain or support others with their bodily, virtual or energetic presence. It is a way of understanding assistance, solidarity and support among activists and mobilizing collective strengths.

*I believe that in adverse contexts —adverse to women human rights defenders— feminist territorial embodiment is very important. It has given me a lot of strength. Embodiment, an embodiment that arises from a need felt by others, not like they pet you and say "Oh, you poor little voiceless*

*Indian, you need the support of an NGO”, no. I’ve received embodiment from [my fellow feminists]. They say “Look, I believe you. Look, your struggle is my struggle. Look, let’s walk together as friends.” They give me advice... This helped me, a very profound feminist territorial embodiment, which arises from the collective, it’s not so much... a code of the State. It doesn’t have the codes of the government, it has the codes of life.*

— **Anonymous**

Another practice is to **collectively support activists in their role as caregivers.**

*I think very few of us have the luxury of having enough money to pay [someone else] for that kind of work—and even that needs to be challenged, because it is another woman who is doing that work. The rest of us have to do it ourselves. And supporting each other in those care roles as a part of our feminist activism is important.*

— Sarala Emmanuel | Sri Lanka

From the perspective of the people interviewed, there are **multiple challenges for implementing care practices.** Among them are the lack of an intentional focus on care at the collective or organizational level, the lack of time to do so, excess workload and initiatives that are not necessarily useful to them or do not adapt to the needs of everyone in the organization. There are also tensions derived from hierarchies and power relations. Several activists said that the absence of funding is a challenge, because without sufficient resources, many organizations tend to prioritize other activities and put their self-care last.

*[We] were struggling to secure funding for core programs that we couldn’t afford to end or to stop, because that would mean women will not be supported. So that was our main concern. Also, we couldn’t really think about securing resources for care, maybe because we thought it was a luxury compared to the other program that we led.*

— Anonymous

Some activists also point out that **not all practices and actions that make care possible require financial resources.**

*Flexible hours, flexible work location, more vacation days, understanding stress—all of these things could be done without the need for money. It’s*

*an administrative decision. Also, part of well-being is for people to feel they develop within the organization, constant evaluation on the work they do, to have more chances and opportunities to build their capacities and skills. It's possible the organization will be financially limited, but it can also provide other means of comfort for its staff.*

— **Anonymous**



**The diversity of practices and contexts we have shared motivates us to continue our reflections on what we want, need and can do to sustain ourselves as activists and as movements. They also invite us to ask ourselves: what do we need to strengthen and transform the care practices we already have and incorporate others?**

# INVITATION

## How do you practice collective care?

Among all the care practices described in this chapter, creatively describe the one that caught your attention the most and relates to the reality of your organization and collective.





# Transforming Funding Together

**How many conversations are there  
between donors and activists about care?**

**How do we feel about the power  
relationships that surround money?**



**Movements have emerged and been autonomous throughout human history.** They persist because of a combination of internal and external motivations and conditions. For example, the political, social and environmental context, the things that happen in activists' lives, the level of collective consciousness and the transformations and impacts that activists mobilize in their personal, collective and societal spheres. While the availability of funding helps movements to sustain and grow their impact, peoples' resistances exist in and of themselves; they do not depend on external financing. That is why our main goal for this section was to **better understand donors' current role<sup>12</sup> and explicitly define activists' needs and interests**, in order to spark conversations about care and protection from the perspective of **shared responsibility**.

Most conversations about care and protection will **inevitably touch on socioeconomic questions and how we sustain our activism**, movements and organizations, because we share globally in a context in which money and material resources play an important role in people's lives. From a perspective of care, it is vital that we bear in mind the interdependence of funding and movements for the protection and defense of human rights. In this regard, the close relationship and commitment between feminist funds and women's movements has encouraged more widespread reflection in other philanthropic sectors.

*I think the interest in care and protection is growing. It doesn't mean that it's perfect, but we have to recognize that especially feminist funders, not just women's funds, are really discussing and exploring better ways to support and care for feminists and women activists. I was quite encouraged by some of our feminist sisters who are working in donor agencies, who are thinking about [the] burnout of women activists, women leaders.*

— **Phumi Mtetwa**, Just Associates (JASS) | South Africa

As part of a worldwide ecosystem of feminist and women's resources, the **Urgent Action Funds** have encouraged these conversations, which we hope will serve as a **bridge between activists and donors in connecting, impacting and building awareness** about the need for more and better

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<sup>12</sup> We interviewed 9 donors and asked them how they personally relate to care and protection, and what they think their role is or should be. Some of the findings of these interviews were used to structure this chapter and are shared in a complementary digital document.

funding for feminist movements. In our daily work, we understand our role as an active participant in resistances in the various regions where we work, and we have proposed other ways of funding and directly supporting movements.

We recognize the way philanthropy has transformed itself recently, and the increased awareness that exists about this issue. We began by **assuming that there is space and willingness to think, to create and to maintain (more) pleasurable, sustainable and safe forms of activism and that donors play or could play a role in that.** What we heard validated this assumption and encouraged us to think that there are very concrete steps that donors can take to contribute.

**What can donors continue to do? What might they start doing? What could they stop doing?** These were the main **questions we asked** the donors we interviewed. Their answers sparked many conversations, some pointing to new findings and trends and others opening up new questions.



It is clear that donors have an important role to play in promoting practices of care and protection for feminist activists. The majority of activists we interviewed shared that current practices of donors, as discussed in this chapter, are falling short or affecting their care and protection in a negative way. They also believe that it is within their possibilities—and indeed their duty—to modify these practices. Many activists expressed there are certain nuances and diversity, so it is important to avoid generalizations about donors and assessments of them, even though all of the interviewees agreed that it is fundamental for movements to have them as real allies.

*In my opinion, donors can also play a kind of an ally role. Financial support is always very important, but if we have partnership, it is much better. This would allow for them to truly listen to our experience and expertise.*

— **Olga Karatch** | Belarus

# POWER AND MONEY: THE NEED FOR OPEN AND GENUINE CONVERSATION

Is it hard to talk about money and the role of funding? Might it even be painful to ask ourselves and others about power relationships with donors? What's the best way to foster these conversations?

When we defined the interview questions, we posed these questions to ourselves in the researcher group and the people responsible for research in each of the Urgent Action Funds. Some felt we had no legitimacy to ask about such “sensitive, intimate subjects,” as one researcher put it. Others suggested that this would be seen as a “taboo issue” in their countries or regions, and that activists would prefer not to answer such questions.

Allowing for this exchange among the researchers and supporting each other to find ways we would all feel comfortable in asking these questions, we moved forward. **We were pleasantly surprised by the openness and willingness of activists to share their experiences and their wishes on these subjects.**

Most activists clearly expressed that their individual and organizational socioeconomic conditions are very important for their care and protection, and that **more financial support** coming from donors is crucial. The call for bigger and more flexible grants, better salaries, workers' rights and health-related benefits was frequently heard. They also stressed that this should be accompanied by a broader conversation on power dynamics, and on changing grantmaking behaviors and processes. The *quality* of donors' support and their relationships with activists is as important as the *quantity* of grants or the amount of money given.

The activists interviewed belong to a variety of organizations that rely on different funding sources. For some, the word “donor” referred to community funds explicitly designed to support activists and/or for the protection of activists; for others, it is associated with international sources of funding, such as from governments, that they apply to with periodic projects. Some refer to funding organizations that in turn receive resources from larger donors and, in other contexts, it is private philanthropy that takes center

stage. In all of these cases, the conversation is associated with fundraising and the formats, requirements and reports on the use of that money.

There was a majority point of view that the **power relationships** that surround money and socioeconomic conditions are central in this debate, because they are at the forefront of activists' lives and undergird the oppression they experience.



*There is an aspect of power. With money comes power, and that power is often abused. Donors have objectives that they need to meet and they're not going to be apologetic about meeting those objectives at the expense of those that they're supposed to protect. They want us to do certain things that do not make sense in our context, but guess what? They have their own objectives and also the foreign policies of the countries they are from. They have deadlines, they have log frames to fill —we just have to fit into those uncomfortable boxes, and very rarely do we find ourselves as women's organizations telling them to go bugger off, because we also need the money. And I spoke about the Global South/Global North politics in terms of who has more money and who doesn't.*

— **Grace Ruvimbo Chirenje** | Zimbabwe

In the interdependence between movements and funding, activists' care and protection is linked, among other things, with **building confidence as a basis for transforming those power relations.**

*Here in the favela we depend on donations from people, based on trust, to buy construction materials and finish the house where our headquarters are located. There was trust, and we were careful to always find the cheapest material. And this is something we don't have the freedom to do with foundation funding, because everything has to fit on a line. Some foundations could improve their accountability requirements because they're so complex that they make development more difficult. Because this is what guarantees life —the day to day, the care and safety of the activist, the communicator, the militant. Those of us who have little money know well how to use it, how to save to use money in the best way possible. I believe donors need to learn more about that, to trust, to transform the day-to-day into activism, especially in the favelas.*

— **Lana Souza** | Brazil

Power dynamics can be an obstacle to open and genuine conversations. They can also play a negative role in how activists experience care and protection. Some of the activists went further and said that dealing with donors is **the most challenging and most frustrating part of their activism**. They believe that tense relationships and demands by donors are a big part of the problem and expose activists to insecurity and burnout. They backed up this assertion with examples related to high levels of stress, frustration, insomnia and even sickness.

*I'm not so stressed about helping women as I am about managing resources. That's what keeps me up at night! (...) Because you go crazy trying to keep up with that part. In my previous project I got sick, really, really sick. I felt like my health was visibly crumbling. My feet swelled because I couldn't even sit down, and at the end of the project I was so tense I couldn't sleep, my feet were swollen, the only time I ate was when I was on the job, because I had to use every minute of my time, because "That didn't add up and this adds up and this doesn't add up" —it's exhausting!*

— **Antonia Fuentes** | Colombia

**Acknowledging and being attentive to those power dynamics and imbalances is a necessary step if we truly want to take this debate to a new level and transform funding practices.** A good starting point is to ask, listen and make sure that the requirements do not affect the internal dynamics of organizations or collectives.

*I think donors could even ask and check if the organization or the group has a self-care policy and also how they work in terms of internal power dynamics. In order for this not to be too much internal interference in the organization, there should be more discussion with the grantee on self-care and protection collectively by having collective consultation with them.*

— **Anonymous** | Cambodia

A good conversation is one where there is a **genuine willingness to listen and, perhaps, to change our practices and opinions based on what we hear**. This is the invitation throughout this book, and, in this chapter, this invitation is extended to those who are in the position of being donors.

# THERE IS ROOM FOR HOPE, BUT ALSO AN URGENT NEED FOR TRANSFORMATION.

It was encouraging to hear from some activists that they perceive a growing movement among donors to play a more positive role in care and protection. The openness to listen, to understand activists and to learn more about the diverse experiences and realities they face were mentioned as important components of this effort. Funds with a feminist approach to grantmaking or feminist funds were very often quoted in the examples we heard.

*I found within private philanthropy [that] there's a big mix and, again, it just depends on where the money comes from and who's managing it and how it's done... There are some donors who are super activist on this issue and are leading the way, sometimes really interested in the questions and actively interested to support it... and will create resources and allow space. And some not so much. But I think the funding for that is limited in the context of women's funds. I don't like to generalize about donors, I think it's important to look at different communities within the donor community and what some of their pressures are and what shapes how they think and what they expect.*

— **Jessica Horn** | Uganda/England

Another activist highlighted the **awareness role some donors are already playing**.

*We have come to learn about the importance of care from one of our funders. They have come to tell us about the importance of self-care, that therapy is important, for example. There are some things we are trying to do, even if the workload is sometimes a challenge.*

— Lilly Be' Soer | Papua New Guinea

An activist from Nicaragua stressed donors' **flexibility** in light of the sociopolitical crisis in her country since April 2018, when social protest broke out and was brutally repressed, when multiple human rights violations that have forced many activists into exile were documented:

*In this time of national crisis, I think it's changed. I think there has been... like a greater awareness from the donors that support us and I believe there has been a great deal more flexibility, much more understanding. There has been a good reading of the crisis.*

— **María Teresa Blandón Gadea**, Nicaraguan feminist movement | Nicaragua

Those who finance social organizations have access to numerous contacts, media and spaces for engagement that provide a good opportunity to promote care and protection from various perspectives. Two positive actions that were mentioned were the **sharing of experiences and the dissemination of information** by donors.

*Donors can play a positive role in advocacy. Popularizing lessons learned around healing justice [which comes from activists, not donors] and making that available to others and encouraging other donors to support this vital work.*

— **Shawna Wakefield**, Root. Rise. Pollinate! | USA

Some funds **actively promote care practices**, and respect the organization's needs, while asking how care is incorporated into the project they are resourcing. This is greatly appreciated by activists.

*With [fund name] the experience has been amazing. (...) They're very respectful of our time, our spaces, what we want to do but, besides that, they have options for you to think about specific actions within the organization. So we applied for a project in which we proposed the issue of self-care.*

— **Diana Pulido** | Colombia

While recognizing these good practices, activists also identify obstacles, for example, **when the very structure and organizational systems of donors sometimes prevent them from giving support.**

*Donors are also fighting their own structures. They don't know where to put that budget, and what's sad is (...) wellness is the work, but is seen as 'by the way' [to the budgets allocated]. Few donors have a political consciousness and those who do are constrained by their systems and their structures.*

— **Hope Chigudu**, HopeAfrica | Zimbabwe/Uganda

Some activists added the widespread concern that donors **think more about activities and results than about the activists who work towards achieving them.**

*I believe that we have some very good donors, who understand the political, social and cultural process of those they're funding, and I think that's a very good thing. But sometimes they come in with this whole colonialist approach, very traditional, what they need is execution, nothing more. And they don't really understand why we're doing it.*

— **Selene Yang** | Paraguay

*Many times, donors think more about the results than about the people who carry out the activities that enable them to obtain these results, particularly in the area of women's rights. So this means they think less about us, the women that have enabled them to achieve the results they wanted.*

— **Fatoumata Sangare** | Mali

There were also criticisms alluding to a **logic of exploitation** in which we are involved as part of the capitalist system, and which **affects the dynamics of philanthropy.**

*National and international development cooperation organizations capitalize [on the resources they receive], and we're stuck with the work. They don't pay decent salaries and many women don't get money for the projects they have to do. That's because they know that us, the women, can do a lot with a little money. We always do this, even to support your house, your organization. Out of nothing, we make a lot. Women can do this. And national and international development cooperation exploits exactly that —the productive and reproductive capacity of women to do a lot with few resources, almost without exception.*

— **María Lucia da Silva** | Brazil

Many of the activists we listened to believe that **placing more importance on care and protection is fundamental** so as not to augment the risks to the organizations and people supported, and to contribute to their health and sustainability, understood holistically.

*It is [donors'] funding, but the organizations are doing the work: if [people in the organizations] are not cared for, the donors are also affected. I think it should be an issue of interest for donors.*

— **Yah Parwon** | Liberia

*I think donors could play a really important role in popularizing care and well-being in general. The demands that donors have are sometimes too much for the activists. Less money and more work does not necessarily mean that the project is successful. It is important not to burn out the activist and, therefore, [not] to put her in danger. So, I believe that donors are also really responsible for how we all feel cared for and protected.*

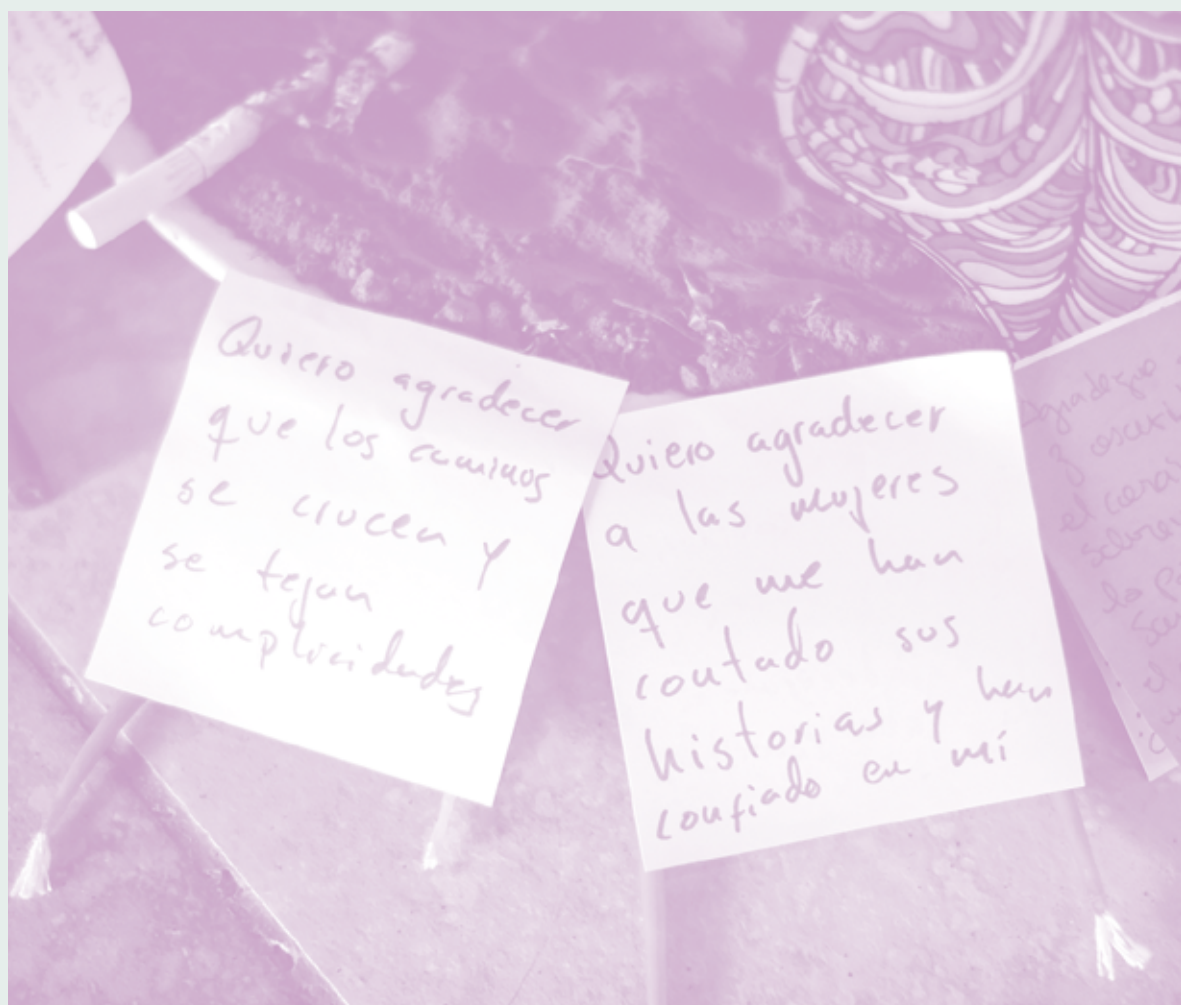
— **Anonymous**

*For the sustainability of human rights defenders, we need support from donors (such as money, knowledge etc.) to the organizations, not only talking about the project, running the activity. "I gave you money, you have to run this activity." But also to make sure the organization is healthy in terms of the people who are part of the organization. This would really help us. To make ourselves, myself, healthier. This also has an impact on the organization's sustainability and results.*

— **Yuli Rustinawati**, Arus Pelangi | Indonesia

Recognizing and transforming interaction between donors and movements implicates and involves us all. That is why our invitation is to share responsibility in this dynamic, be aware of the role each one plays, and the work that falls to them, and to understand the extent of how interdependent we are all in this common project.

How can we move forward together in this transformation?



## PATHS TO FOLLOW

Activists' perspectives chart possible paths to extend progress, transform practices that negatively affect movements and continue empowering donors' role as allies in the protection and care of activists around the world.

## ✦ Respect, trust and responsibility

We heard a widespread perception that relationships and practices between activists and donors should be based on trust and respect. They also require **empathy and solidarity** to understand how some harmful practices and approaches affect activists. Donors must take care, then, that their actions—from delivery of funding, including inquiries made to outside parties for funding endorsements, to invitations to events or the approaches they use in evaluating activities—do not heighten the risks faced by their partners and allies, and that they **prioritize their care**.

*When funds or donors that aren't headquartered here in Africa want to do their "due diligence," they ask other organizations for information. These are mechanisms they have to prevent fraud and embezzlement. That's good, on the surface, but it depends on who they ask for information. For example, if they ask someone or some organization that provides a biased report with information they can't prove, that report can hurt the entire organization on which they're collecting information. I've already had to work on untangling that kind of thing, because it happened to me.*

— **Massan d'Almeida**, XOESE, Le Fonds pour les Femmes Francophones (XOESE, the Funds for Francophone Women) | Togo

We also heard about the need to start **seeing activists as people and organizations as composed by humans, not machines**.

*For people to take care of themselves shouldn't be a goal. It's a need, it's like an obligation, a right. Before anything, before you ask me for results, think about the other person, from a position of care, right? —mutual care.*

— **Celeste Mayorga**, RUDA Mujeres + Territorio | Guatemala

Faced with these difficulties, activists propose **feminist, intersectional and intercultural approaches** to evaluate the transformations achieved, **beyond a mere productivist mindset**.

*I want funders to stay out of the middle. I just want them to fund the work. I don't want them to force healers to measure their impact. I want funders to believe and trust that generational trauma is ongoing and you can't measure it, you can't measure how much of a dent is being made in transforming generational trauma. Just trust that we're doing it. We have to get outside the traditional measuring tools that funders use that are*

*rooted in a white supremacist's frame. I don't want the funders to ask us to tell them our stories, our practice and then retell them out of context. That's dangerous. I want donors to show up in a way that is authentic and genuine and aware of their power and aware of their role to give money, resources and more time for healers, organizers, practitioners to be together across borders and imagine.*

— **Cara Page** | USA

## ✦ Accepting the diversity of approaches, particularities and needs

**Allowing and supporting this diversity of perspectives and approaches** is not only necessary, it is a key factor for the effectiveness of any initiative, **out of respect for the autonomy of activists and their organizations.**

*Being a woman and being an activist in a society where women have no status is pretty tough. If donors really want us to be heard more, for us to be more productive, they have to think about creating components that enable us to care for and protect ourselves. For that, they need to take into account the diversity of women's rights defenders, according to the country and the women.*

— **Fatoumata Sangare** | Mali

To this end, it is crucial to recognize our privileges and how systems of oppression operate in different contexts, in order to make this transformation a reality. We must begin by at least not replicating **historic discriminations, based on race, disabilities or any other condition.**

*I think donors could expand the programs [related to care and protection] so that people with disabilities could participate in these programs. Last year only two women participated in a similar program.*

— **Ukei Muratalieva** | Kyrgyzstan

Moreover, we need to change the idea that there are universal models, because they reinforce colonial, Western capitalist concepts of what constitutes care and protection today. **There is no single path, no one-size-fits-all formula.**

*The question is how [donors support care and protection]. Is it on their own terms or on the way we want it? What works in Palestine might not work in Tunisia. What works in Lebanon won't work in Morocco. Donors see us all as one entity, 100 %. It has some arrogance to it and is very generalized. I think they should trust the organizations in all regions about what and how care and protection can be.*

— **Angelique Abboud** | Palestine

*With donors it's a constant struggle to fully comprehend the context in which an organization operates versus what you have to achieve at the end of the project. And sometimes there is no openness to recognize how the shifting context can make us not stay in the logic of the project. We need donors to have a process-oriented approach that takes this into account.*

— **Phumi Mtetwa**, Just Associates (JASS) | South Africa

*I also would ask them to be able to connect personally with the groups, to understand their context better, to learn about the kind of work they are doing, to understand their challenges and to be able to support self-care and good practices and to create a closer relationship than just a grantee-donor relationship.*

— **Senda Ben Jebara** | Tunisia

## ✧ Advancing guarantees of labor rights

Many activists emphasized the important role that donors play in **advancing dignity and autonomy, including their labor rights and sustainability**. They pointed to a **false dichotomy** between funding **"external aspects"** of the work (activities, projects) and **"internal aspects"** that guarantee that the work can be done in dignified conditions and incorporate support for strengthening and sustaining activists and organizations themselves.

*Let's not regard caring for the team as a passing fad, as a superfluous expense, but as something very important for donors to understand—that it's crucial to work both from the inside out and from the outside in. I'm referring to outside of the organizations, the reason, the goal for which they were created. It might be defense of sexual and reproductive rights, land and territory, against violence, all the issues we work with. It's very necessary that funds are allocated for that. At the same time, it's very*

*important for them to allocate funding to people in the organizations and collectives, who make this work of defense and assistance possible. We need to have the right conditions regarding well-being, labor rights, rest, attention and healing from the impacts of violence.*

— **Ana María Hernández Cárdenas**, Consorcio Oaxaca (Oaxaca Consortium) | México

One key aspect of this more rounded approach to supporting activists concerned **allowing and supporting better salaries**.

*Let's work, yes! But we don't have social security, we don't earn good wages. It's not what we deserve for the work we do. Today, if I were to stop working, I'd be unable to pay a doctor, or pay for food till the end of my life. This is activists' greatest concern. We give everything for others, but nobody is concerned about us. Most donors only fund activities, only the work, only for a year, only for six months. Oh... if we could only be sure that when we grow old we can live happily someday, that my children won't be without medical care and that they'll have the little they need to live on.*

— **Julienne Lusenge** | Democratic Republic of the Congo

The fact that some organizations rely on **volunteer work** is also a challenge when it comes to advancing care and protection.

*I wish we could be granted a larger fund to give salaries, and for the staff to be full-time, instead of them working two jobs every day to pay their own personal expenses. I think if this happened, we would have our own office, we would have an office branch in Cairo. This would let me have a salary and I wouldn't be financially pressured. As for personal incentives, I think all of us have the excitement and the reasons to keep going on with our activism, but it gets hard when you need to work two jobs.*

— **Ayat Osman**, Ganoubia Hora | Egypt

Several activists mentioned that working to protect rights without **having their own social security, labor and health rights protected** was a contradiction and an obstacle to their own care and protection.

*Many donors don't give money for social security. How are you going to have a person working for human rights and not give them the right to dignified health? Without social security here, we poor people die sooner. Although we work for the love of our causes, for the pain we see when we*

*see these things happen, we're also women, we're also human beings, we have families that depend on us. And most donors pay precarious salaries.*

— **Carolín Lizardo**, *Colectiva Mujer y Salud* (Women and Health Collective) | Dominican Republic

*Another aspect of working in women's rights, particularly when you work for a nonprofit organization, is that social assistance, social security, doesn't exist, because we're not public servants. Medical insurance is too expensive, even to have access to medical attention when you get sick. We hesitate to seek treatment because if we go to the hospital, they ask us how we're going to pay for the tests, or worse, for other surgeries.*

— **Djingarey Ibrahim Maiga**, *Femmes et Droits Humains* (Women and Human Rights) | Mali

This also has to do with better conditions, not just for the **individual activists but for their families as well**, and the possibility of enjoying social security in the present and future.

*Today we've made a certain amount of progress on this front. So yes, it's a work of political advocacy that we do. And in that sense (...) much of what we're demanding with self-care and well-being agendas is that they recognize the rights we have as human rights defenders, because many times it has to do with your employment conditions, if you have access to social security, or access to retirement, right? A pension fund, right? Healthcare for your family, education, right? That's basic for the working conditions of defenders.*

— **Verónica Vidal Degiorgis** | Uruguay/México

Having resources for staffing and health benefits or rights guaranteed can be the **difference between life and death** —as was illustrated by very real cases and threats to activists' lives.

*When they attacked N, if we hadn't had the money to pay to send her to South Africa, if we hadn't had medical insurance, N would have died that day, because she'd been hit in the head, she was losing blood, she was unconscious, she was going to die. But because we had medical insurance, her airfare was paid for her to be accompanied by co-workers, who first took her to Kampala and then to South Africa, until she got better and came back. We took care of her husband and her son, who had been beaten, and we looked for a house in another neighborhood until they*

*found other means. If an organization doesn't have resources, it's death. So it's really important that donors, the movement on an international scale, think about how to protect us.*

— **Julienne Lusenge** | Democratic Republic of the Congo

We also heard from activists who say that donors must play an active role in **eliminating inequalities between international, national and local organizations.**

*I was saying that donors have to trust us, give us enough resources, means, funding, to be able to do our job well and use the money where it's needed. Because they go through international NGOs to give money. Because when they give us money through international NGOs, they put us in a situation of slavery, excuse the term. They give us crumbs to do work you'll never be paid for, where you never know how you're going to save for a decent retirement. You're going to work and work, and in the end you starve to death. There was a colleague who starved to death after working as an activist for more than thirty years. Because her organization didn't have enough money, only for activities. (...) In the end, when she got old, she was homeless, she had no food, she couldn't go to the doctor, she was a woman, alone, with no kids.*

— **Julienne Lusenge** | Democratic Republic of the Congo

*Look, I think the issue that few donors are concerned with care and protection says it all, no? The issue is that there are donors who pay no attention to who they're giving their money to, and give money to people who don't do the work (...) and those of us who do the work, they don't want to support us because they say we don't have a strong structure. But they give money to big corporations [big NGOs], I call them big human rights corporations, which ultimately sub-contract our services. So why don't they give the money to those of us who are really working? (...) I think that's one of the limitations, although every donor gives their money to whomever they want.*

— **Rosanna Marzan**, Executive Director of *Diversidad Dominicana* (Dominican Diversity) | Dominican Republic

This does not necessarily mean not donating to larger organizations and international ones, but simply making sure that they **also fund local organizations**, respecting their autonomy and territories.

*We are doing everything to protect this territorial space where there are so many things: genetic information, biological wealth, medicinal plants, animals and millions and millions of beings we don't even know about. If interested donors want to preserve that information, we have to explain that they are in our territories. If they want to carry out social programs and keep on working with big organizations, they should do that. But earmark part of that money also to work with us, from our view of what we want to do in our territory.*

— **Ruth Alipaz Cuqui**, Indigenous *Uchupiamona* woman from Bolivia; defender of Indigenous rights, human rights and the rights of nature; member of the Commonwealth of Indigenous Communities of the Beni, Tuichi and Quiquibey Rivers and General Coordinator of CONTIOCAP | Bolivia

## ✧ Improving quality and flexibility of funding by increasing autonomy and diminishing bureaucracy

During our research, we heard time and again concerns over the **quality of funding**. Because of its capacity to reduce structural precariousness and build more equal relations, **core funding and flexibility** are key components of care, protection and the sustainability of movements.

In this regard, we heard, for example, that activists and their organizations would benefit from creating a **separate budget for care and protection**.

*I think the donors should have a separate budget or a budget line for each project, which would include security and care components. This would be really important to establish the culture of care and would also motivate and inspire other donors, even though I believe that this process should happen on the grassroots level.*

— **Anonymous**

*It's important to make a budget for defenders to be able to care for themselves. Right now, it's up to the defender to define the attention she might receive. For example, if you give me a budget for care, it might include body massage and sports, which I would do a lot more of, because many times you have to pay to do that.*

— **Pedan Marthe Coulibaly** | Ivory Coast

While there are a variety of views regarding the need for specific budget allocation, or for greater core funding, the key to both is allowing greater **autonomy and flexibility in the use of funding**.

*Donor flexibility saves our organization a lot. There must be some sympathy, sorority, understanding. We are the ones who live in this situation, the ones who live in this country, in this mess. Sometimes we are completely out of project budget lines, but you need to change something. [One funder] understands, which is why I am very grateful for her.*

— **Ukei Murataliev** | Kyrgyzstan

Small changes can achieve a lot. **Less bureaucracy and less paperwork** are also key to the quality of funding, and therefore, can have a concrete impact on easing the daily burdens of activists' lives.

*We have been working on an application for a donor for four or five months. We have been chosen for this funding and they want three quotations from this, and somebody else's CV, and this and that. My staff has been working non-stop and we still haven't got the funds. They don't seem to realize the amount of effort it is taking us because we have all kinds of other stuff that we are doing as well. So, I don't think they care very much about our well-being. They are ticking off their boxes.*

— **Rosanna Flamer-Caldera** | Sri Lanka

*I would love less bureaucracy and paperwork. And in terms of self-care and also collective care, autonomy is very important because [it gives] an opportunity for the organizations to choose [for] themselves what are their urgent needs and the ways that they feel like they want to operate. I think that reducing the issues connected with bureaucracy, with paperwork, would make it easier to focus more on that and on the content. It would also give activists more time to take care of themselves.*

— **Elvira Meliksetian** | Armenia

Another familiar theme of our conversations was the limits imposed by **project cycles and short-term contracts**, and how they limit the ability to plan for the long term and achieve lasting change.

*Donors just want to fund specific projects that last one or two years, and after that we have to start over. It's that cycle that kills us. It means we can't think long-term, because we can't plan with such short-term contracts. This*

*is something common to the movement, and something that we need to think about when dealing with this issue of personal care. We are obligated to do things that way to be able to stay within our budget... and that's if we have a budget.*

— **Massan d'Almeida**, President of XOESE, *Le Fonds pour les Femmes Francophones* (XOESE, The Funds for Francophone Women) | Togo

## ✧ Supporting community-based and holistic practices and approaches

Many women expressed the need to further extend the progress that has been made in being **more open to local and community practices, including cultural traditions and diverse attitudes toward spirituality of activists and communities.**

*No fund had included that part before, I always said, "Why don't they ever take that into account? I want to go with a curandera, with a mamo [spiritual authority of the Coquí people] to do a healing ritual for me. Why can't somebody pay for that?" I think that everyday we're understanding more about the dimensions of this and putting into practice what a diverse approach means. In management terms, a diverse approach generally refers to "We support a hundred Black women." Yes, but we don't support their spiritual sides, their self-care, their way of doing it, so there's no approach. They are starting to understand that people have their own strategies, they're empowering communities, because they're not reinventing anything. What they're doing is empowering what people have historically been doing, without so many conditions. This should be multiplied, collectivized, because this is transformative.*

— **Danelly Estupiñán Valencia** | Colombia

Seeing "your body and your mind as part of the movement" was a powerful way one of the women described the **need for more support for mental health**, including funding for therapy and training and strengthening networks of therapists, psychologists and healers.

*There should definitely be more support and funding for therapy sessions. We are seriously injured in that respect, and we need real help.*

— **Anonymous**

*I think [donors] need to actually invest in mental health, like a lot of resources to go towards mental health because we are losing human rights defenders each and every single day, because people are unable to handle some of the issues that they are going through. Depending on the issue that you are handling, it will always go back to affecting the family, your family. You are constantly trying to juggle your family's responsibilities and you are trying to juggle the issue. One of the things they need to heavily invest in is mental health.*

— **Wangu Kanja**, Wangu Kanja Foundation-The Survivors of Sexual Violence in Kenya Network | Kenya

Besides specific ad hoc funding, activists repeatedly mentioned the need for more permanent structures like **“houses of care” and support for retreats organized by the activists.**

*I would love donor organizations and networks to support goddamn retreats, based on our own practices, on the wisdom that we have. Instead of the donor curating it, like who would be in and who'd be out, having organizers who are rooted in both healing justice and disability justice. We need the fucking retreats. We need them regularly. No outcomes, no expectations. It is just healing, just relationship building. And I will say that that retreat does more repair work than almost anything else I have seen in social movements.*

— **Devi Peacock**, Peacock Rebellion | USA

*I also think that what's really important is for us to create more permanent spaces for care, like the space they have in México, at Casa La Serena.*

— **Ledys San Juan** | Colombia

## ✧ Supporting exchanges, research, campaigns and legal support

When we talk about donors, we are not just talking about money. The work they do gives them access to other resources and actions that can promote care and protection. Some activists suggested that donors can play a role in **connecting them to peers in other countries and supporting more exchanges** around care and protection.

*[Besides] money, we can also get knowledge on self-care and well-being that can be used in group works or therapy sessions. It's not something we are familiar with. We need this kind of knowledge to conduct this kind of work ourselves. This could be done by donors connecting us with activists in other countries to exchange information and share experiences. This would help us find strength from each other and know what's happening in other places. It's rewarding. It gives me thoughts and insights on what I can do in China.*

— **Jing Xiong**, Feminist Voices | China

*It's about offering space and opportunities for local activists to grow, being introduced to new opportunities and new regions. For example, I learned from Cambodian activists and artists so much about resilience. Therefore, we need to create these spaces that would enable mobility of activists and create opportunities for exchange of activists between countries.*

— **Zana Hoxha**, Artpolis —Art and Community Center | Republic of Kosovo

**Support for research, campaigns and legal and administrative assistance** in the field of care and protection were also mentioned during the interviews.

*I believe donors can also contribute by funding research, studies into the impact that activism has on our lives. Supporting and facilitating resources for studies like those we're developing on how to promote the mental and psycho-emotional health of activists and women defenders, are important. I also think that [it's important] to promote campaigns to recognize the work, to validate the work that's being done.*

— **Ana María Hernández Cárdenas**, Consorcio Oaxaca (Oaxaca Consortium) | México

*Sometimes, when you need some kind of emergency evacuation, not only financial assistance, but also assistance in administrative matters —such as visa assistance, public campaigns— [it] should be provided. If donors have any possibility to intervene there [it would be positive], depending on what they can do and help purely in administrative terms to speed up this evacuation.*

— **Milana Bakhaeva** | Chechnya/Russia



# WHAT HAPPENS WITH SELF-CARE AND COLLECTIVE CARE WITHIN DONOR ORGANIZATIONS?

In this chapter, we have not touched on practices of care and protection within donor organizations, because we wanted to focus more specifically on activists' perspectives. But we wanted to note the importance of this reflection, where inroads are currently being made.

**How do you care for yourself as part of a fund, foundation or institution that supports feminist and human rights activists? Do you care for each other collectively? Do you have enough time to rest? To eat right? To think and do something about the way your work affects you emotionally and physically?**

If we want to help mobilize changes in protection and care, it is vital that we recognize the humanity that connects us based on what we are, what we do and the causes we defend together. It is essential that we see each other and begin the transformation from the inside, from our own experience; that we reflect on our own practices and conceptions. That we transform them.

We need to look closely at the guilt associated with the notion of privilege due to the role we play in defending human rights; pay attention to what might be encouraging to activists but which we might deny ourselves or our organization as a whole. It is crucial that we examine those practices which, perhaps because they are internally accepted (like excessive workloads and productivist logic), become naturalized and demanded externally on those who (paradoxically) we are supporting for the purpose of improving their well-being.



**How would you like to care for yourself, and what obstacles do you find to doing so? Do you have your own practices you would like to share? What conversations and interchanges between donors and activists are happening now? Which would you like to mobilize?**



# INVITATION

## What can help make these conversations flow more easily?

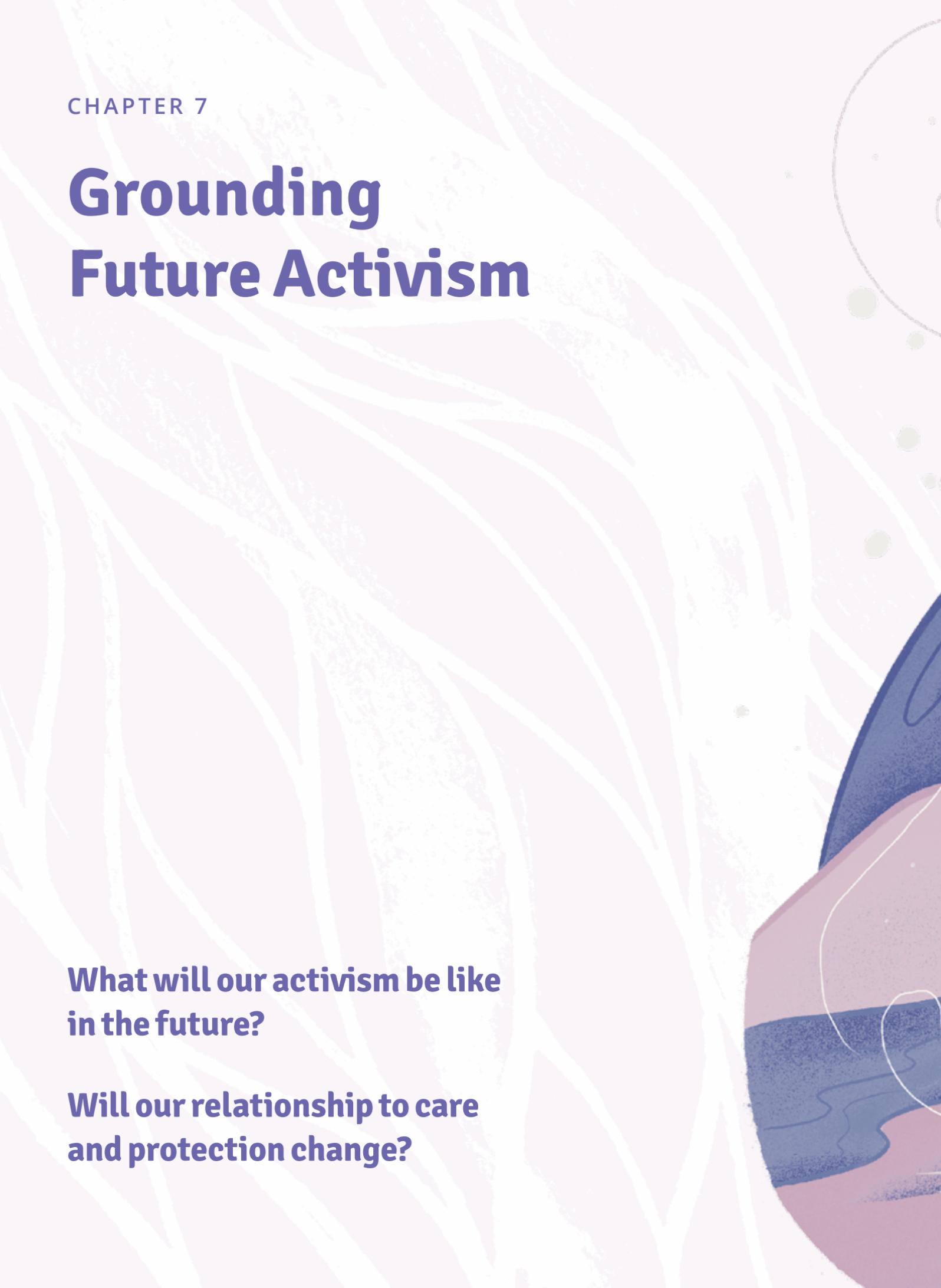
If you have a willing partner, try a role-playing exercise in which one of you plays an activist and the other one, a donor. Imagine the discussion about money and power. Picture yourself trying to achieve your goal in the conversation. Then, exchange roles and replay the exercise in order to experience both sides of the power dynamic.

\*If you do not have anyone to do this exercise with, try placing an empty chair in front of you and act out both roles.

- ✦ How did your heart feel?
- ✦ How did your body feel?
- ✦ Is there something that makes it harder for you to express yourself? Is there something that makes it easier?
- ✦ What lessons did you come away with for future conversations on money and power?





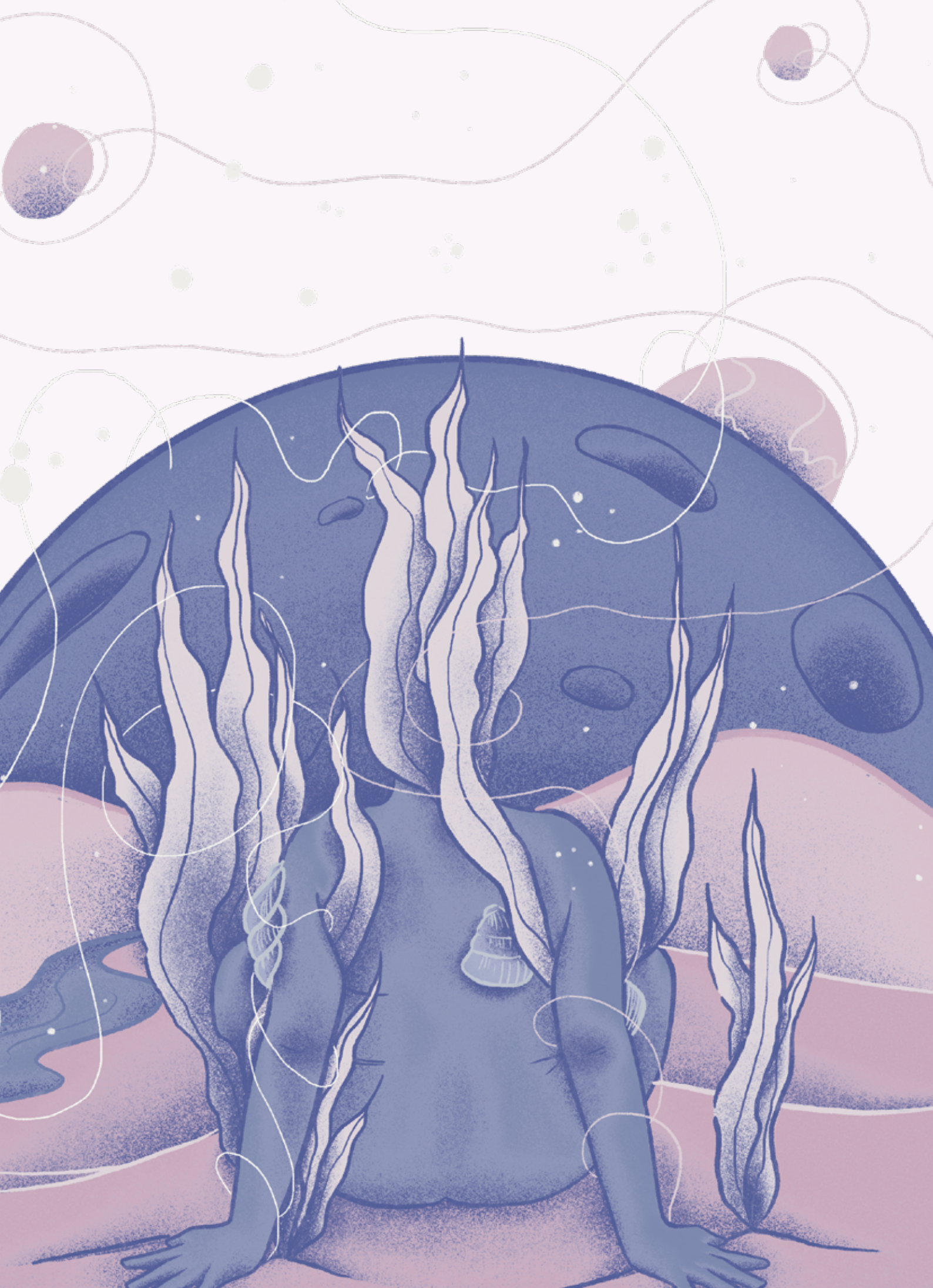


CHAPTER 7

# Grounding Future Activism

**What will our activism be like  
in the future?**

**Will our relationship to care  
and protection change?**



Our roots are constantly changing, always interacting with the environment, being nourished and fed, crossing with other roots. That is why for us, grounding means unceasing movement and change.

In all these years, after the book *What's the point of the revolution if we can't dance?* moved the ground beneath us, sometimes it seems the landscape has not changed. But underground, and even though we may not have noticed, our roots are walking. Activism has been transformed. We are more interconnected today than at any time in the past. Conversations about care and protection have progressed. There are still many challenges—we have questions to explore, conversations that are barely starting, and with all of this, it is vital that we celebrate and honor the progress we have made. As we are reminded by an activist from México, *vedette*, voguer, educator and hip hopper Nany Guerrerx, “One foot in the party and the other at the protest.”

We choose life, to keep on nourishing our roots to flourish and sprout new seeds. We believe in continuing to intertwine in order to weave together the activism we dream of, and for that to happen, we know that we need to remember, to turn back again to our hearts. We need to make offerings of gratitude to the earth, recognize the experiences of our foremothers and predecessors, who have guided us this far. We need to open dialogue and cultivate trust with those who have charted the path for us to understand this present and, in turn, welcome those who arrived recently, celebrating together that we are everyday more and more diverse.

So let's **celebrate the dialogue and the diversity of perspectives around care and protection!**

*Something that has also changed is the feminist perspective. 10 years ago this issue was completely absent—even in organizations working with protection—or it was present in a very limited way, and it's emerged recently thanks to the work of feminist organizations and networks, working for a more complex understanding of violence, creating a perspective of protection that addresses more than the structural cause and also incorporates spheres of protection that have to do with healing, with recovery, with facing burnout too. That is something that is been wonderful to see, how this vision has gradually grown stronger, although there's still a long way from an in-depth understanding, even if it's much more present now.*

— **Marusia López Cruz**, JASS/IM-Defensoras (Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Right Defenders) | México/Spain

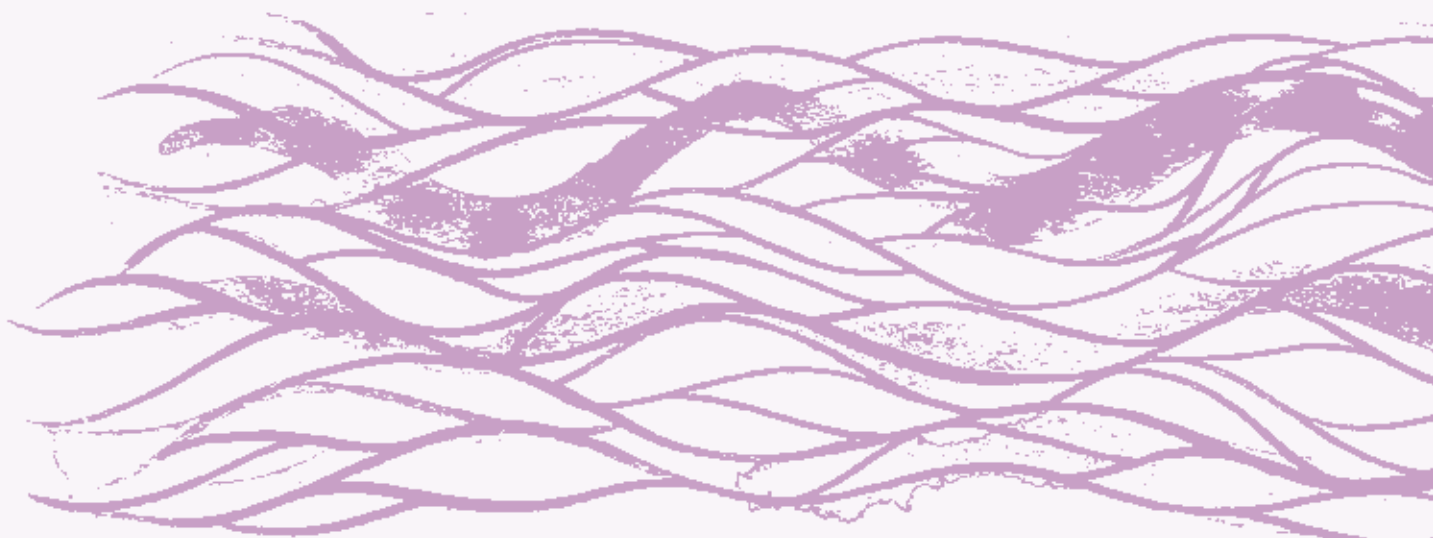
We are able to **recognize ourselves as grounded, with a history, a memory; and from that to deepen intergenerational dialogues and recover, build or learn from other practices.**

*I think there is another element: when I think about my generation, [about] Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous ways of doing care and protection, we kind of like, diss them and the whole ways in which, like, the Western approaches were so embraced. And, right now, one of the most important things is to go back and draw from ancestral knowledge. That's number 1. The second thing is not necessarily to completely diss the Western approaches, but to also recognize that some of them are not designed in a way in which they speak to speak to our Indigenousness, so to speak. I don't know if that is a word. We have to keep finding ways in which we are not quick to diss approaches because of where they have been cooked, but to actually explore if they can work, and if they don't work, we would have explored them, you know. And if they do work, we acknowledge and celebrate where they came from.*

— **Phumi Mtetwa**, Just Associates (JASS) | South Africa

And we can also celebrate that we have gradually found ways to **ground ourselves in care and connect to others** to share and improve care experiences and practices, and to collectively think more deeply about what this means.

*The politics of care are very new in the activist world in general. (...) I think it came as a consequence of not having appropriate care. And I believe that with time it will be different, because in comparison, like ten years ago, I would rarely hear anything connected with care in the area of activism. It*



*was always about giving, doing, reacting; and currently we started hearing more and more about practices of care, of politicizing care, of putting care into the organization's standard strategies, having a consultant or support in holistic security and well-being, and using care as a Sustainable Activism.*

— **Elvira Meliksetian** | Armenia

We have in this book a space for speaking, for sharing passion and ideas. Let us sit down and **share how to make activism sustainable.**

For example, **recognizing and addressing the challenges we still face.**

*So I think a lot of the challenges are at the level of constructing new narratives and practices of activism, on how to transform beliefs that are holding us back [and to] work on a personal and collective level to develop a much more pleasurable activism, less guilt-ridden and more satisfactory for everyone.*

— **Ana María Hernández Cárdenas**, *Consortio Oaxaca*  
(Oaxaca Consortium) | México

Transforming relationships and expanding **intergenerational trust.**

*What I'd love to see change is the way older women treat younger women involved in activism. Age is just a number, and all women should feel recognized for the work they do, regardless of their age. For me, that would be ideal, it would enable me to develop capacities and benefit from the help or assistance of mentors so I can later pass on their knowledge to future generations. Intergenerational work would have more impact and would motivate young women activists. That's what I'd love to see.*

— **Renée Nwoes**, *Women in Front* | Cameroon

Strengthening **bonds of solidarity and mutual trust, and continuing to be present for each other.**

*I'd like to send a global message in this context: we women are putting our bodies on the line, and not just our bodies, but our spirit and our entire selves, to deal with different conflicts, whether in defense of land or water, or defense of women who have experienced violence. Because how many women become the victims of retaliation by the men who attack other women? So I'm telling them: we won't be silenced, we're going ahead with all that work we have as women, because among all of us we have to*

*take care of each other and protect each other, and continue this activism together in the community, doing it all in such a way that it isn't just one, it's everyone hand in hand. That we can take up these burdens we all carry within ourselves and make them more bearable.*

— **María Témpora** | Perú

**Letting go** to make the path lighter, and to **create collectively**.

*If we overcome this idea, it would be easier, because I think we take too much responsibility and expectations on our shoulders, which are impossible to come through; and it creates even more frustration and anxiety in our lives. And I would really love to leave this away. We're a bunch of activists gathered together. Let's create something! It's amazing!*

— **Elvira Meliksetian** | Armenia

Taking a fresh look at practices based on the “ought to be,” expressed in **judgments and comparisons between activists**.

*What I would really love to see changing is the sense of criticism towards one another. Because sometimes the activist environment is not the safest environment, because there is the same criticism [about those who are] not activists [and who are the] “correct” activists.*

— **Anonymous**

Embracing the different emotions we feel, **recognizing ourselves in our full being** and from there breathing life into the power of what we do.

*Sometimes we're moved by pain, sometimes we're moved by joy, but usually when we're sitting with a single emotionality, then life is no longer so pleasant for us. So keeping these emotions (...) together and above all positive, is an option to be able to sustain our struggle, sustain our leaderships, sustain our movement and sustain our life force. It's the only way to do it.*

— **Danelly Estupiñán Valencia** | Colombia

And with this, maintaining a **lasting and day-to-day connection** with everything that exists as one of the many ways to live a **spiritual existence**, which also allows us to sustain personal and collective care.

*[The knowledge that] care and protection, safety, well-being, feelings, strategies that are not ableist, which do not presume one static way of being, can, will and have centered spirituality, have centered people to be able to understand their relationship to the planet, to ancestors, to traditions that have come before them, to gods and goddesses, what have you, whatever gets them out of bed in the morning, literally keeps us going. And I do think the practices of what connects us to our intention, what connects us to our lineage, our chant, our traditions, are very much about what will sustain our personal and collective well-being.*

— **Cara Page** | USA

Could it be that all of this can expand our **conception of what we do as political work?**

*I think [that] where there is also space for openly feeling and talking about love and romance, where there are spaces for celebrating our relationships, where we can live our interpersonal lives freely. That even in our own communities, in the spaces we create, everyone is safe. This also includes spaces like physical expression and physical care, creativity along with the other kinds of political work we have to do. That's how I would imagine it. And also [a future] connected or rooted within nature, because that is another connection which is not commonly there in our political work. It's there, but we are not conscious of focusing on it enough, whether it's gardening collectively, eating food we grow or cooking together. This is actually easy when you are working within communities, because that is the everyday life of women to whom we are connected. But we don't bring it in as part of our political work. I would like to see more of that.*

— **Sarala Emmanuel** | Sri Lanka



# AND YOU, WHAT FUTURE DO YOU WANT TO CREATE?

Out of a fabric of multiple voices and territories, we offer up a constellation of experiences, ideas, questions, challenges and alternatives around care and protection, where activists share experiences from their personal spheres and from their movements. We consider contexts, geographies, cultures, identities; grounding specific life conditions, environments and possibilities to make a dignified life possible.

This is how we analyze care and protection, as a political action which, although grounded in various ways, is invariably what sustains movements. We call for more dialogue that sheds light on transformative personal and collective action along with flexible funding and a redistribution of resources to more effectively respond to needs and promote practices that care for and protect life in all its forms.

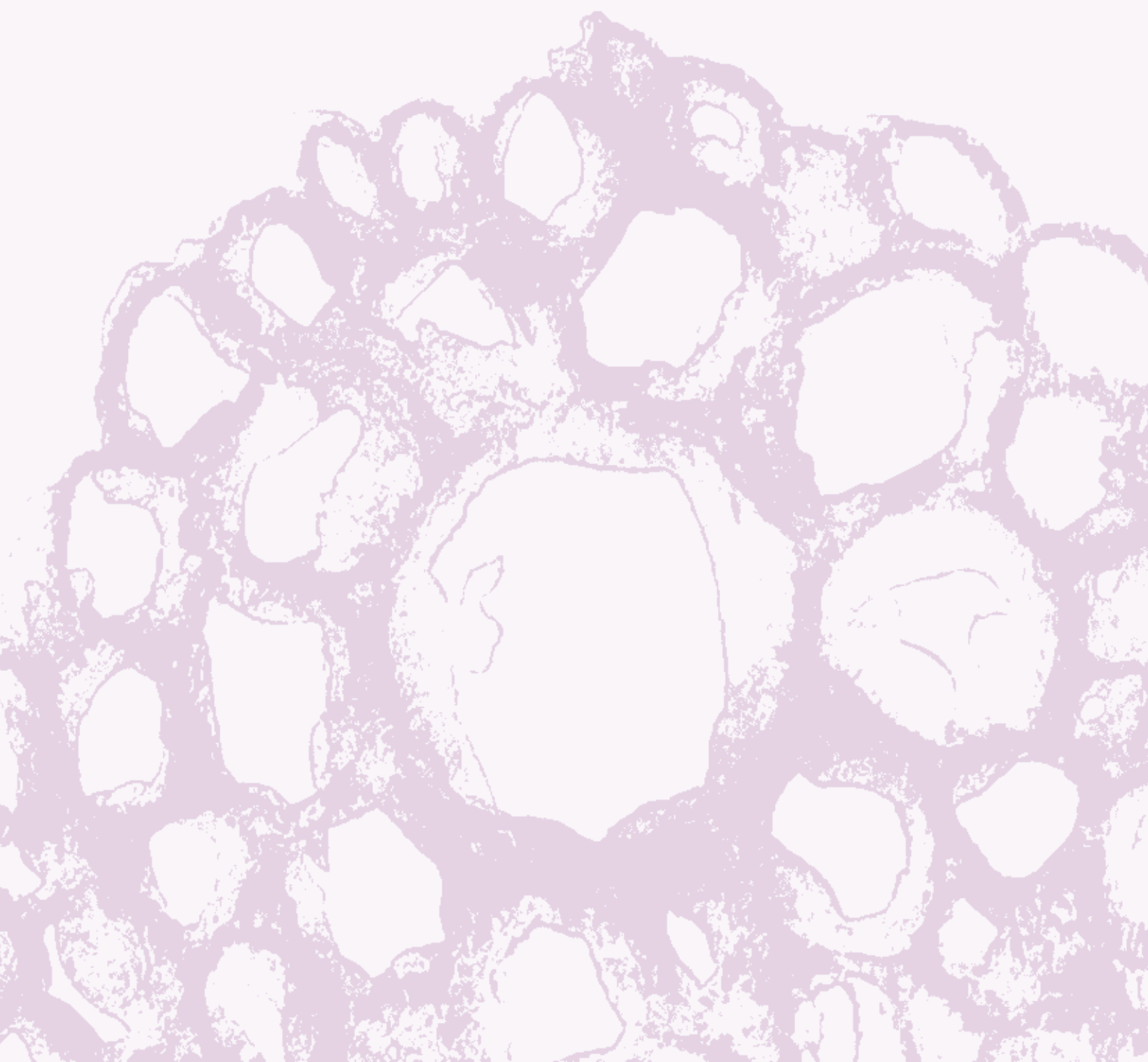
There are still many open conversations, and above all, an open call to create and celebrate existing actions, processes and reflections. To rekindle daily practices, to question our actions at the personal, collective and community level, to destabilize power and transform oppression. It is imperative that we recognize how violence against activists and their communities is intertwined with violence against our planet, because their activism exposes the unsustainable interests of the world order. For this reason, it is urgent we gain a shared responsibility and awareness about the interdependence of life itself with life around us.



# INVITATION

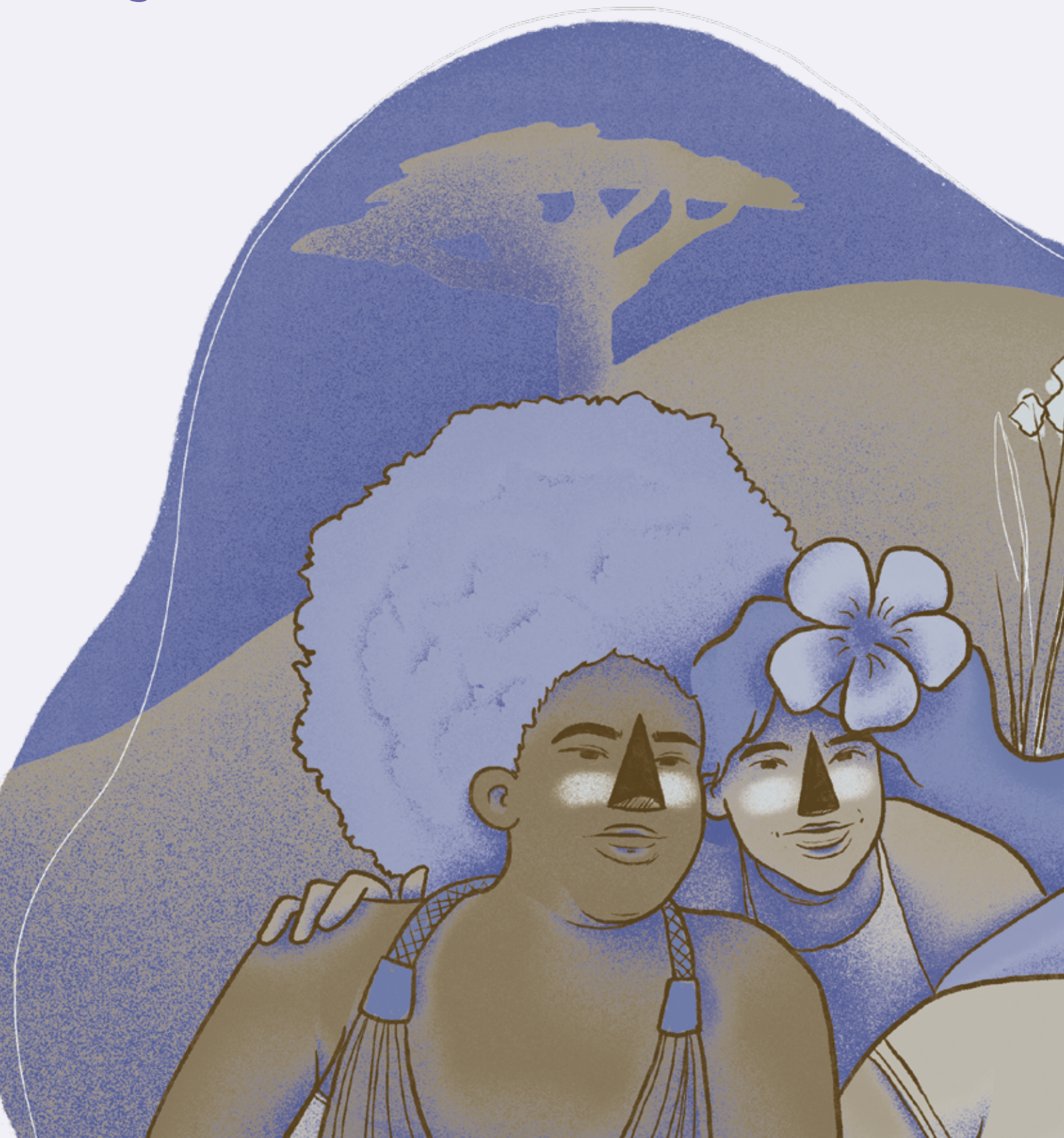
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## CHAPTER 8

# Prospects, Trajectories and Practices of Care in the Urgent Action Funds





Learning and transformation around care and protection is an ongoing, never-ending process. In this section we share some insight on the histories, reflections, approaches, programmatic strategies and internal actions of each of the Urgent Action Funds, updated in early 2021. To place prime importance on the viewpoints and actions of the activists we interviewed, we decided to present our own work and approaches in a separate chapter; and also to present each Urgent Action Fund separately, which serves to illustrate our diversity as a collective of Sister Funds.

# 1. Urgent Action Fund for Women's Rights (UAF WHR)

## History and trajectory

Since its founding in 1997, the Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF WHR) has provided more than two thousand Security Grants to sustain the work of women, trans and non-binary feminist activists. These Rapid Response Grants reveal the gravity of the threats activists face, as well as the diversity of their strategies, their courage, resistance, creativity and tenacity. The grants have funded urgent relocations that have saved lives, support for families to visit prisons where activists are being held, digital safety and skill-building audits, psycho-social support and much more.

In 2007, UAF WHR published a book entitled *What's the point of the revolution if we can't dance?*, an innovative compilation of testimonies by more than a hundred activists from around the world regarding the sustainability of their activism. Activists shared their experiences and reflections regarding their fears, hopes, fatigue, pain, exhaustion, funding challenges and also the importance of humor. They made suggestions about funding feminist and women's movements. The book played a fundamental role in developing the Urgent Action Funds' concept of *sustaining activism*, and helped call attention to this critical issue, both in donor circles and among activists. Today this book remains an effective guide for informing and deepening our understanding of activists' needs and advocating for them in philanthropy and policy making.

## Approach applied to organizational strategies

Care and protection are not isolated categories. They are deeply interconnected socially, economically and politically. They refer to practices, behaviors and beliefs (such as recognizing the inherent value of human beings); they have to do with access to resources (access to funding and other resources, or exposing structural inequalities that inhibit access); and they encompass the politicization of work (how they are linked to our labor policies, our livelihoods, our well-being as vulnerable human beings).

We believe that self-care and protection are necessary organizational values that should be recognized, discussed and supported as essential practices, adequately funded and practiced as a social rule. They should be included in all of our policies to protect activists who defend human rights.

Care and protection are deeply grounded in cultural and Indigenous practices, and should be an integral part of our learning and growth in order to better support activists. The lived experiences, learned lessons, practices and strategies of those who reside and work in various regions and countries—including under repressive regimes—should be integrated into the way we look at care and protection, and how we develop strategies around them. We must maintain safe spaces for collective and individual care and protection as a critical strategy for building movements.

UAF WHR ensures that the grantmaking process is as accessible and simple as possible, and has minimal bureaucracy. The goal is to increase access to essential funding for activists' safety and well-being, and minimize the burden, stress and anxiety that activists feel in dealing with donors.

To achieve this, UAF WHR provides personalized support to each applicant based on their needs, priorities and circumstances, both in the application process and during programmatic action and reporting. This is reflected in the language we use and in our flexible approach; we remove any barrier that might prevent or hinder activists from applying for or receiving the support they so dearly need. Because we are committed to supporting marginalized and under-represented communities, we understand the importance of an inclusive approach to grantmaking. This has also been reflected in our increased provision of urgent funds to LGBTIQ+ and disabled feminist activists. In our work with Rapid Response Grants, we remain faithful to our six core pillars, which are:

- ✧ **Justice.** We work towards a world in which all human rights, including the rights of women, trans and non-binary people, are upheld and regarded as equal. We apply a human rights and social justice viewpoint to all aspects of our work by focusing on particularly marginalized groups (for example, on trans activists), and by critically analyzing unequal power structures and how they operate.
- ✧ **Feminisms.** We recognize and respect a multiplicity of feminist traditions and affirm diverse approaches. We honor local wisdom and self-led activism. We commit to addressing the challenges faced by feminist movements and feminist activists, while making room for collective learning.
- ✧ **Courage.** We proudly support activists who raise critical issues and work on dismantling patriarchal, racist, capitalist and other oppressive agendas. We stand with activists and join our voices to theirs in philanthropic and advocacy spaces, and we respond immediately to their urgent needs.
- ✧ **Integrity.** We practice transparency, honesty, reliability and responsibility —especially in challenging moments. We think critically and actively listen to grantees, donors, advisors, partners and movement allies to build relationships based on mutual respect and trust.
- ✧ **Mindful engagement.** Conscious of the exploitive history and present reality of resource accumulation, we fund women, trans and non-binary activists and connect them with resources in ways that upend traditional power dynamics and empower marginalized voices. We trust the leadership of local activists and their resilience.
- ✧ **Well-being.** We promote holistic care within our institution and in activist spaces. We understand that self-care is an important political tool in our ability to fight for justice. For us, the practice of well-being, both individually and collectively, is a central tenet of feminist movements.

Most of the grants that UAF WHR approves —whether for Security or Advocacy— include elements of well-being and psychological support for activists, their families and organizations. We understand the importance of a collective, holistic, long-term approach that respects the care and protection of activists and movements. In our analysis and assessments, we

respect activists' experiences. We do not impose our vision of what security and protection strategies should be. We listen, we understand, we respond rapidly and we publicly express our solidarity with their resistance.

UAF WHR has amassed a substantial body of knowledge about protection mechanisms around the world. In our effort to seek out and improve collective practices about the security needs of organizations, networks and movements, we embarked on a pilot initiative in 2015 that would help address the long-term security needs of activists as a complement to our Rapid Response Grants. The flexibility of this initiative enables us to define, together with our allies, the meaning of collective approach, and the activities it entails, according to the context.

In philanthropy, we have found that donors are gradually becoming more willing to listen closely to the needs of the communities they serve, and to be more flexible with their funding models. But philanthropy needs to better integrate racial and gender justice lenses, build more awareness of disability justice and provide more and better resources for community-led grassroots organizations, communities of color and activists with disabilities. We definitely need to diversify foundation staff and board members; UAF WHR is a leader in this effort.

Philanthropy is not truly thinking about historical traumas, including colonization and the way that its systems, policies, justice and language impact communities; they continue to focus on the here and now. Our wish is for philanthropy to consider historic context and to transform funding behavior to better support communities impacted by colonization —and to do so more rapidly.

### **Organizational practices of care**

All of us practice care differently, and not always in visible ways. Collective care, or feeling cared for, is different for each person. We do not have a unified idea about this, and the concept varies from organization to organization. We want people to sincerely know that we honor personal care and time for ourselves. We feel it individually, and we follow it with intention at the organizational level. How do we institute this within the organization? We must honor the work and adopt an approach that enables us to slow down and care for one another. The specific UAF WHR benefits that create care are those that assist and protect children in the time of COVID-19, provide access to the Wellness Bank, medical insurance and FSA-HRA<sup>13</sup> benefits that go beyond the bare minimum. But these benefits are not a privilege: they are

a human right. The personal is political, and on this basis, our organization consider our staff members as whole people, not mere numbers. We want to make it clear that even asking about care demonstrates care.

## 2. Urgent Action Fund Africa (UAF–Africa)

### History and trajectory

The Urgent Action Fund Funds have always been aware of the problems of care and protection. Although UAF–Africa itself did not publish it, the book *What’s the point of the revolution if we can’t dance?* is part of the identity of any Urgent Action Fund. We are proud of this historic publication, and we often mention it in our internal discussions. There was never a specific moment when the issue of care and protection “became” important: it has always been.

An important lesson we continue to learn from feminist activists is that the issues of protection and care cannot be peripheral to activism, or an afterthought to the work: they are the work, because when care and protection are at the heart of our activism, they maintain and strengthen our movements.

We honor the work of Hope Chigudu as a feminist activist who has contributed greatly to our understanding and practice of collective care. Her work on organizational wellness is especially significant, because it stresses the importance of building feminist structures that are not toxic spaces, but rather spaces that represent feminist values and care for the well-being of their members.

UAF–Africa recognizes that protection and wellness are interconnected: protection improves not only when feminist activists can continue doing their jobs safely (physically, emotionally, culturally and digitally), but also when we think of the collective security and mutual care that is necessary among activists, families, organizations and communities, to sustain their lives and

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<sup>13</sup> *Health insurance plan benefits in the US.*

their work over the long term, to achieve change. Thus, protection is not just about feeling physically safe (although obviously this sensation is critical), but also about ensuring that groups are well (free of toxic cultures and internal tensions and divisions that are such a major source of vulnerability, and which make it easier for organizations and communities to be exploited by external actors). Therefore, concerning ourselves with well-being and care is fundamental when considering issues of protection and of groups' capacity to sustain their activism.

Networks are essential for protection. They are a response to the isolation of feminist activists, and the absence of support from their own families and organizations. In networks, responses are developed and directed by the activists themselves, and they can take advantage of their first-hand knowledge to meet the needs that arise from specific situations. With regard to the need for well-being, networks can provide a refuge for feminist activists that need it, and can activate professionals who can support activists with self-care and in collective care. They also counter the individualistic approach that characterizes most protection mechanisms.

A network approach strengthens the community, not just at-risk activists. Focusing on networks entails developing movement leadership (not individual leaderships) to strengthen activists' political skills and collective power, which contributes to the long-term sustainability and security of movements.

Finally, focusing on networks and collectivity helps to offset capitalist approaches to understanding and practicing care: it is not about following a diet or doing yoga. It is about questioning the ways that activism is practiced today, and imagining different forms of organization.

### **Approach applied to organizational strategies**

Today, we consider care an integral part of our protection grants. Although in the past we generally used these grants to support feminist activists and groups in formulating protection plans —such as improving the physical security of their offices, their digital safety resources or relocation strategies— we now believe that this support also includes support for the collective well-being of the groups as integral to strengthening feminist movements.

UAF–Africa has been reflecting on the context and challenges activists face for years, along with the opportunities at hand. One of the trends we have noticed is that activists are working more on creating new cultures of activism around collective care and well-being. We also noticed gaps in support for traditional protection. For example, because it is largely

individualist, it may not work for many activists who have children or other family members in their care, because these activists cannot use protection mechanisms that prevent them from being close to their families. Tactics that increase visibility provide short-term support, but over the long term they may actually heighten the vulnerability of activists and their families and communities, among other shortcomings. Based on these reflections, UAF–Africa launched the *Feminist Republik*, a platform for African feminist activists to reimagine other ways of supporting feminist movements and cultures of feminist activism. UAF–Africa wants to be remembered for its efforts to create this platform and travel this path alongside many allies.



We have learned that Rapid Response Grants are crucial to collective care initiatives, for sustaining feminist movements. In the future we would like to see protection support for feminist activists, provided by donors and facilitated by organizations working in this field, given using a collective feminist approach. In other words, as part of collective strengthening, and not as a means of isolating activists from their communities.



# UAF–Africa organizational care practices

UAF–Africa has various organizational care practices. One is holding monthly meetings with staff to share how we are all doing personally, professionally and politically. This is a space in which we listen to team members and learn about what they are dealing with. There are also our annual staff retreats: spaces where we can connect as a team, forge closer ties and relax.

We encourage our team to take their days off. It is vital to stop and do other things besides work. For staff members who need it (for example, those who are continually in touch with people dealing with traumatic experiences), UAF–Africa covers the cost of psychological counseling.

Currently, UAF–Africa is working on hiring an expert in psychosocial support who specializes in emotional containment to provide the necessary support to staff members. This idea was considered some time ago, and in the context of the COVID–19 crisis, it has become a pressing need.

## 3. Urgent Action Fund Latin America and the Caribbean (UAF LAC)

### History and trajectory

The political ethics of care are central to the work of UAF LAC, so the process of training and collective reflection on care within organizations is also a preventive strategy, complementary to urgent funding. Organically, we understand that Rapid Response Grants are the backbone of UAF LAC, and that care is our heart. This is how our political intention was expressed, and it has also led to institutional practices.

This change from traditional organizational culture and in the day-to-day, also involved reflecting on care and collective power. Thus, we are intentional about promoting meetings with activists as safe spaces, nourished by

feminist practices and other approaches to accompaniment, that would enable us to feel these reflections in our bodies (as one of our territories).

Walking this path we are celebrating today has meant building awareness about self-care and collective care. We are recognizing our feminist legacy and our Indigenous, Afro-descendant and *mestizo* roots of knowledge and worldviews regarding the Web of Life, our interactions and interdependence with everything that exists, and the importance of healing and spirituality, which help sustain the fabric of life and movements. UAF LAC has been working from this political stance on care and protection both within its own organization and in its relations and ties with others, both in Latin America and the Caribbean, and with donors and allies in different parts of the world.

### **Our approach, our outlook, and how they apply to our strategies at UAF LAC**

One of the key approaches of our work has been based on the feminist affirmation that *the personal is political*. This has helped us to understand the sustainability of activists and their organizations, and what this means in relation to care. Returning to this political dimension of the personal has meant resignifying it. We are forging a new understanding that political activity, which is written in the sphere of public life, has a private dimension, which is in turn also political. We recognize that political activity on the *outside* is as important as on the *inside*, in personal life. And that therefore, this is precisely why care is central.

For this reason, we understand that *care, even care for oneself* (self-care) is always relational. And it is understood in relation to people, nature and life in all of its manifestations. Although it is a personal decision and an act of mindfulness, it assumes conditions and possibilities of time, relationships, support networks and resources that involve other beings. Care is empowered in the relationship.

Insisting on the collective dimension of care has been one of the most important contributions of UAF LAC. We were the first to identify this dimension as fundamental when dealing with the care, protection and sustainability of activists and their movements. At a time when discourses on care followed a consumerist, individualist logic, focused exclusively on self-care, we were already saying: *care is collective*.

Our proposition is that there are three levels of care: self-care, collective care and *toward a society of care*<sup>14</sup>. This last concept is born of the memory of ancestral peoples, of their ways of caring for life, because this is precisely

what their legacy has given us: the fabric of care that has a name in the peoples of *Abya Yala* (*sumak kawsay* being the most well-known of these), which goes beyond the concept of individual wellness and refers to a life well lived, a good way of coexisting with all other manifestations of life. It is a society of care grounded in ethics<sup>15</sup>, which permeates human relationships, relationships with other living beings and with the environment. Also, in our approach it is vital to understand care in relation to the body as our first territory: territory as a place, as a culture, root and space that sustains life.

We have also insisted that effective care requires material conditions. In human rights organizations, labor rights should serve as the basic definition of minimal conditions by which care is possible. But we know that, beyond these necessary conditions, it is indispensable to build agreements, practices and collective strategies that make care something day-to-day and sustainable.

We have also made room for spirituality, not only as an enunciation of the elements or dimensions of care, but as a cultural practice deeply rooted in ancestral peoples that gives meaning to life and permits a constant connection between human beings and the protective energies that sustain them.

From this perspective, care is our ethical-political center of gravity. Care is a daily practice that permeates all of our institutional activities, internally and externally. It is the way we relate to the activists and organizations we support. Paying attention to how they feel and how they are is vital in every action and process we carry out, because we understand that their well-being is one of our responsibilities. Not only do the resources we provide support organizations' sustainability —why and how we present those resources is crucial to us. Our relationship with activists matters: listening

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<sup>14</sup> Carosio, A. (2007). "La ética feminista: Más allá de la justicia." In: *Revista Venezolana de Estudios de la Mujer* v.12 n.28. Caracas. Available at: [http://www.scielo.org.ve/scielo.php?pid=S1316-37012007000100009&script=sci\\_arttext](http://www.scielo.org.ve/scielo.php?pid=S1316-37012007000100009&script=sci_arttext)

<sup>15</sup> "Care is proposed as a social responsibility and not simply an individual choice. An ethics of care is proposed as a public value for building citizenship. The compass of ethical change should be building a 'society of care.' In it, members of the community should not only enjoy rights, but also assume obligations toward the collective welfare. Interest in the care of others, transformed into universal values, and thus expected and hoped for in the conduct of both genders, is an indispensable ethical premise for the generation of new and better models of society." (Carosio, 2007)

to them, following up on their requests and taking into account their needs when we invite them to participate in events and processes, whether in person or virtual.

By the same token, we affirm that care is at the heart of what we do, which means making it a fundamental part of our vision and our day-to-day work. It is, then, the basis on which we contribute sustainability to movements. This is reflected in the fact that every grant we make includes specific funding for organizations to strengthen their proposals on collective care, and also in the fact that, in addition to funding, we advance training and awareness-building processes regarding care and integral protection as a complementary preventive strategy. It is also evident in our assistance to organizations to make care an institutional practice, inseparable from protection and security. That is why we make it a priority to help activists maintain and strengthen practices that not only reduce the risks they face, but also heal and empower their political action and their lives.

We insist that cultural forms of protection and care must be respected. Our perspective incorporates intercultural understanding, because there are many ways in which cultures, peoples and communities understand and experience protection and care. In our context, this has meant advocating to validate collective protection practices of the peoples of our region and helping to show that individual protection is not the only or the best option; that relocation as individual protection needs to be understood in its entirety, taking into account the network of relationships that it requires to be effective; and in turn the collective impact it has on the relocated individual, their organization, family and community.

Placing care at the center has also meant including it in the digital dimension, from the *digital body*<sup>16</sup> of activists, without limiting our understanding of digital security to the use of safe platforms and tools. It has meant having the political will and disposition to make the changes necessary in organizational culture in order for care and sustainability to permeate our entire team. In this

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<sup>16</sup> *Digital body is a category developed in dialogue with activists from the Latin American and Caribbean regions. This category is understood as the combination of memories and information about ourselves or about the collectivities to which we belong, which we create digitally to have a presence in the virtual space, closely connected with our physical body, and deeply interrelated to the notion of territory-body-earth, present in numerous Latin American cultures. The digital body is interconnected with the various bodies and territories we inhabit, and which are at once vulnerable to risk, and spaces for protection, care and resistance.*

regard, Sustainable Activism has gone from being a collaborative initiative to a program. In addition to psychological support for members of the Rapid Response support team (to process the emotional and affective burden of listening to activists' realities and needs) we now also have a Collective Care Fund that guarantees well-being and care for everyone on the team. We remain vigilant not only about how the crisis in the region affects activists, but also the toll that responding to these demands takes on ourselves. Finally, every activity we carry out is accompanied by this perspective of care and includes attention to the body and emotions, so our work is not guided by reason alone.

### **Our internal care practices**

Along the way, we have found that working in a feminist space requires a willingness to examine our own practices, a willingness to heal and transform ourselves in order to be able to accompany others. We have also learned that care is a fabric of many tones and textures and that we weave it collectively; while doing so, we enrich our outlook and our work.

As we mentioned earlier, self-care and collective care are mutually dependent. With this conviction, we have together looked for the most effective paths for caring for ourselves as a team. We cannot claim to be a feminist fund that supports women, trans and non-binary feminist activists in the region if we are not present for each other internally.

Along the way, we have politicized our language on a daily basis, because of our conviction that Castilian Spanish is a colonial language. So we embrace discovering and replacing the word *acompañar* (to accompany or assist) with other words that have roots in our worldviews, or which have broader and deeper meanings. Words that translate as "connecting the soul with someone else," "connecting the heart with that of someone other than you," from a perspective of radical tenderness. Thus, we feel more comfortable using words like *apañar*, *acuerpar* and *apapachar* (to comfort, to enfold, to embody).

This radical use of language evokes our roots, because in the frenetic pace of capitalist production we have chosen to prioritize comforting ourselves, enfolding ourselves, embodying ourselves, caring for ourselves. We do not have (nor do we want) all of the answers, but we do have the ethical and political will to discover them gradually together. So by enfolding the team that constantly receives requests for support, we have discovered the need to fund therapeutic support. Embodying the individual processes of each member also means creating space in each day to find out *how we are*, for example, incorporating methodologies from other latitudes<sup>17</sup> into our team

meetings. It is, therefore, vital to have plans to keep track of teams during crises to know how each person is responding to their particular context and what they might need to adapt flexibly to the changing scenarios and the emotions and fears that this implies.

In the process of becoming a virtual team in the last few years, we realized that we had a responsibility to maintain the same spirit we had in the physical office. This led us to profound reflections on our “digital habits,” since we did not want to disconnect from life. We found similarities between our practices for emotional care and the dimensions of protection in the virtual sphere, which we have called “digital care.” Now we have groups on encrypted messaging platforms just to express our affection, share jokes, talk about what we have seen and done on each trip, tell others about experiences in airports (which for Latin American and the Caribbean people are never easy), memories and pleasures. All of this without neglecting in-person meetings and allocating time and funds to make these possible, without forgetting that looking into each other’s eyes and hugging each other enables us to maintain our energy as a team in the midst of virtuality.

How can we celebrate more than 10 years of existence in the region if we do not celebrate the existence of those who made it possible? This type of question has opened reflection and daily exercises to make room for celebration and gratitude as an internal practice. Revelry is necessary. Music relieves us, the pace and rhythms—in every sense of the word—of each member are respected. As regards to the pace of work, we encourage everyone to speak up when they need to stop. We also adopt the various rhythms of our own sounds and corporality, and we inspire each other to connect with the body, to trust our own voices, to share personal bodily exercises from various cultures in our break spaces. Honoring these paces and rhythms is also recognizing the importance of life’s rhythms and the time we need to eat, to rest, to care for ourselves and those around us, especially in times of crisis.

Caring for ourselves means recognizing and thanking each team member for their daily work, with the awareness that all work is valuable and necessary. Finally, one of our internal practices is that each team member has one or more *comadres* within the team. The *comadre* is a companion, confidante,

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<sup>17</sup> *The 3 P's that UAF-Africa applies: in meetings we ask how each person of the team feels, Personally, Politically (in relation to the context) and Professionally.*

someone you can talk to about what's going on, what you feel, someone you can rely on confidentially and informally. We learned this practice from our colleagues at *Red Mariposas de Alas Nuevas* (Butterfly Network of New Wings), an Afro-Colombian organization that has participated in the Sustainable Activism training process.



## 4. Urgent Action Fund for Asia and Pacific (UAF A&P)

### History and trajectory

UAF A&P was founded in 2017 and began making grants in the Asia and Pacific region in 2018. In our first year, we made 37 Rapid Response Grants to feminist activists in 11 countries of the region and, in our second year, the numbers increased to 53 grants in 18 countries.

As the youngest of the Sister Funds, we had the advantage of learning from the experiences of the other three. One of these lessons is that the concepts of “protection” and “safety” have different interpretations for activists. What “feeling secure” or “feeling safe” means can only be defined by each activist, based on their individual context. The safety of feminist activists is not only about the person themselves, but is also intrinsically linked to the security of their families and communities.

### Approach applied to organizational strategies

The UAF A&P grant program is designed on the basis of an empathetic relationship with the organizations we support. We are aware of the unequal power relationship between us, as the funding party, and our grantees. That awareness caused us to be intentional about defining our role as facilitators, to support them in strengthening their knowledge and skills so that they can be resilient communities of activists who are able to weather unexpected risks and threats.

We understand that the context of every activist is different, and we are aware that they are the ones who are best situated to decide on the appropriate measures for guaranteeing their own safety. Depending on the needs that activists express, we provide the appropriate grant and connect them with networks and advice from others on the ground who can offer them assistance and support.

The feminist approach understands the issue of safety and physical protection as integral to the sustainability of feminist activists’ movements. We believe embedding long-term structures of safety and care in communities strengthens activists’ capacity for resilience and the sustainability of their movements. We have also learned, alongside the activists, the importance

of individual and collective safety. Care and well-being are an intrinsic part of our movements and are inseparable from them. Through our Rapid Response Grant program and our Enabling Defenders Program, we prioritize this political awareness about holistic safety and care. Our hope is to bring about a fundamental change in the way activism is carried out and funded, in which care and safety are prioritized as strategies for building movements over the long term.

### **How we practice care and empathy in implementing our programs**

- ✦ We try to minimize processing times for funding, and to keep up good communications with applicants to ensure that they feel heard.
- ✦ We respect each applicant's situation of risk and we keep them up to date on the grant processes, especially when it is taking longer than expected.
- ✦ We involve them in program development from the start, to ensure equal participation in drafting agendas.
- ✦ We respect their experience and knowledge and recognize their expertise regarding their own context.

Our openness and flexibility enable us to adjust our hours and our programs to meet activists' changing needs and realities. We try to reduce the disparity between ourselves and our applicants and grant recipients, by, for example, guaranteeing equal policies on travel expenses during events.

### **UAF A&P initiatives and experiences in the region**

From the beginning, together with activists and our movement advisors, we have asked ourselves constantly what it means for movements and activists to be "resilient" and what "resources" mean. In this case, resources mean something more than funding and money, and resilience means having a strong movement ecosystem that places individual activists at the center. Our programs are guided by these lessons.

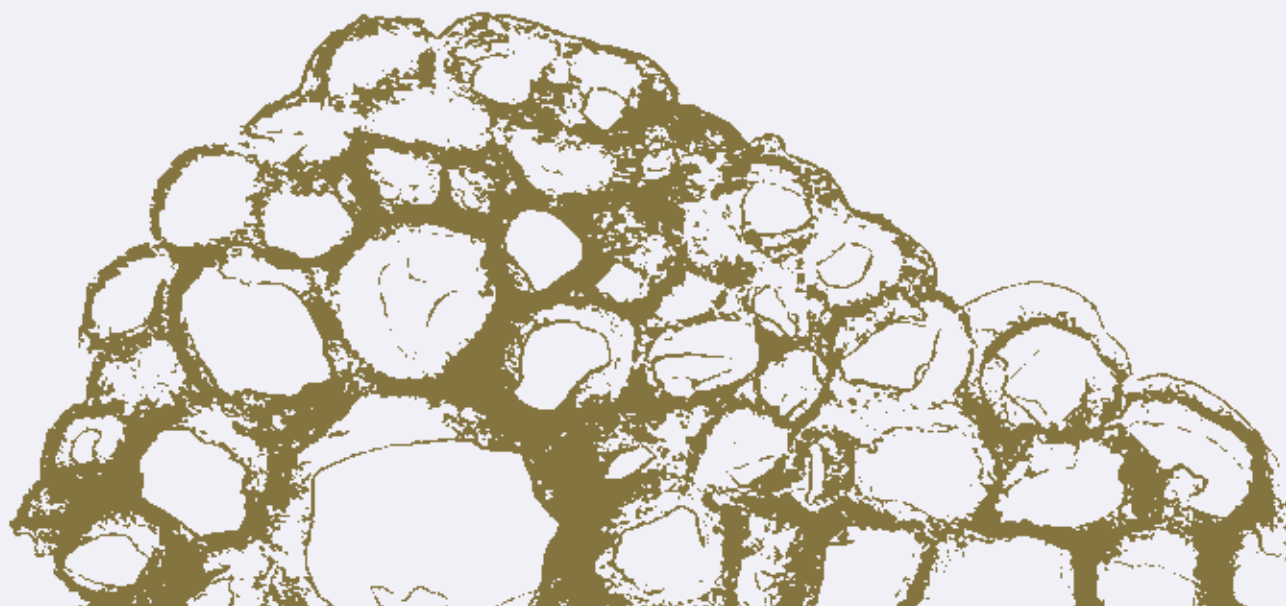
Our Rapid Response Grant program has two categories: Security and Wellness grants, which incorporate mental and emotional health as part of the care required by activists facing immediate risk; and Resourcing Resilience grants, which enable activists, their organizations and networks to be proactive in setting up systems of protection against anticipated risks, so they maintain their safety and well-being over the long term. For example, we have supported activists in creating a medical fund and extending support at

times of need, and in organizing convenings of women, trans and non-binary activists to create a support network they can rely on when facing risks.

Besides this urgent support through the Rapid Response Grants (RRGs), we also believe it is important to build long-term structures of safety and assistance. We are working together with activists and movements to create “networks of safety and care,” imagined as a system grounded in activists’ communities which comprehensively addresses their needs and those of the movement, recognizing the multiple roles activists play and the relationships they sustain (outside their activism) that might be relevant as part of their protective network.

In the Pacific region, we are exploring the possibility of strengthening movements through sustainable livelihood initiatives, and seeking other resources that might be mobilized to improve their protection, for example by connecting communities to social entrepreneurship and business networks.

In these years of work, we have learned that we need to respond to the community of activists, and not just to people and organizations. We need to continue our rapid response to emergencies and simultaneously empower activists so they can create sustainable systems for and together with their communities. In times of pandemic and crisis, we must find ways for our grantmaking programs to reinforce the commitment of being empathetic with allies and partners, with environmental concerns and with our own safety and well-being.



## **Organizational practices of UAF A&P for self-care and the collective care of their team**

We practice the feminist approach to empathy and care within our internal processes and operations. We have adopted a model of co-leadership “not based by default on traditional hierarchies, but one that practices shared responsibility.” We urge team members to focus on caring for themselves while caring for others, and we do the same in external interactions. Our adoption of the Emergent Learning Framework, instead of a traditional monitoring and evaluation tool, has helped us innovate, reflect and improve collective practices of care: “We wanted to define accountability beyond reporting to donors, to recognize our responsibility toward the groups we support and our allies, and strengthen our own practices of responsibility within the team. We wanted to know if by implementing reflective learning processes we could strengthen our relations and advance our individual and collective learning, helping us to become a more responsible, adaptable and receptive fund.”

This same empathy and care are practiced within the team through a sense of shared responsibility among all the staff members. For example, we are committed to guaranteeing a smooth flow of Rapid Response Grants while safeguarding the emotional and physical health and well-being of each member, allowing time for rest and committing resources for support when necessary. In the virtual environment, our vision is to create an organization that practices the feminist culture of sharing and caring. This has been reflected in the ways we have been able to continue our program while caring for our team in the unprecedented situation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some systematic practices that have contributed to our organizational culture have been weekly meetings with the team based in the Philippines, and monthly meetings with the entire staff, which begin with a moment for sharing personal concerns and political problems before discussing professional updates, a practice adopted from the Urgent Action Funds.

Similarly, we hold bi-yearly physical retreats with the entire team, in which we try to make room to connect with each other informally, outside of work issues. We always make an honest effort to create open and safe spaces so the team can be heard. To keep the constant interaction and exchange that occurs in a physical workplace going, we have created online spaces for social interchange, which are increasingly being used by team members to connect to each other beyond our professional capacities.

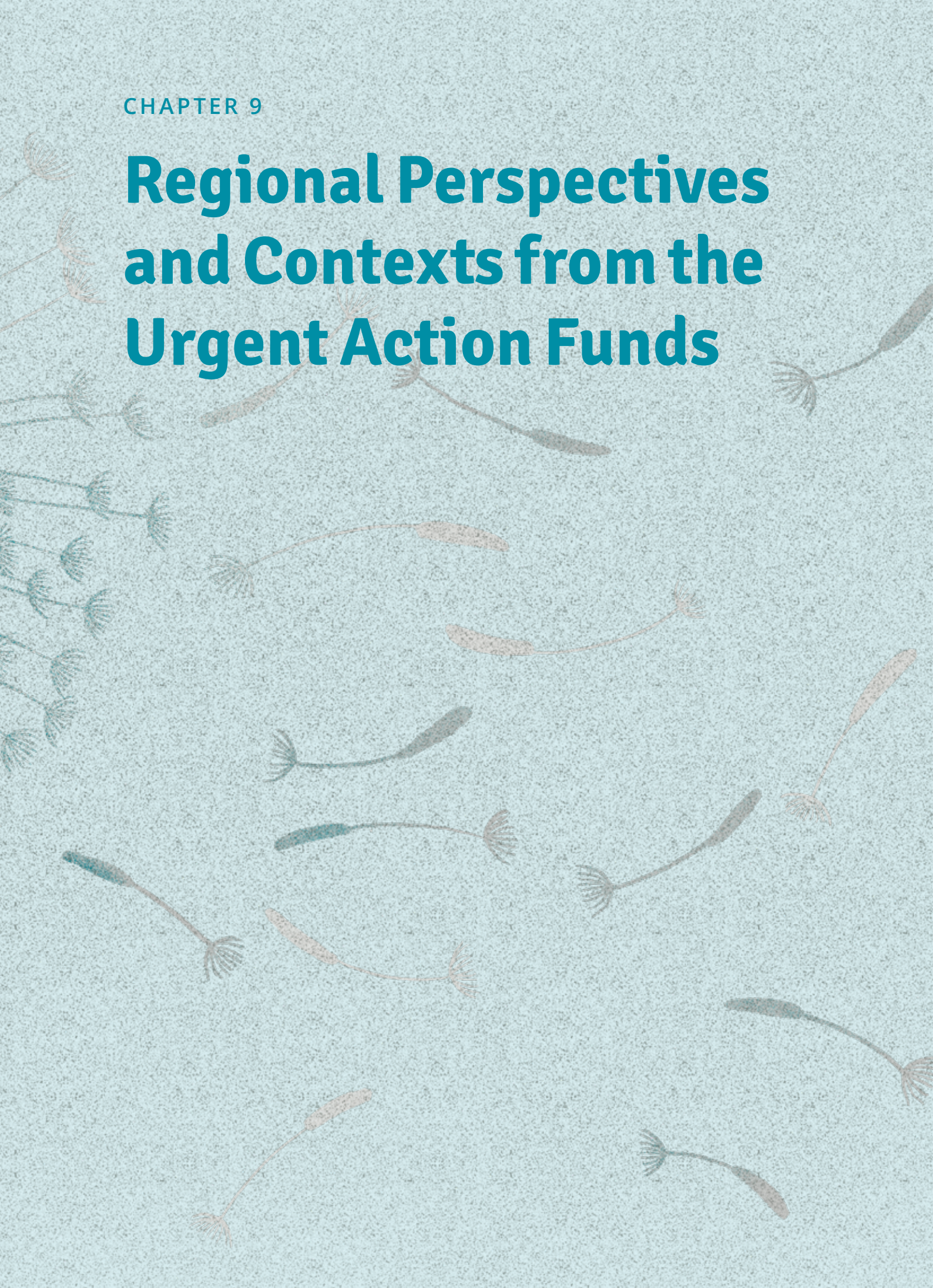
As an organization that is constantly learning, we create formal sessions to reflect on specific programmatic developments, and also to share personal reflections as individuals. We go beyond the emphasis on results: we urge people to value the process and the lessons learned as well.





CHAPTER 9

# Regional Perspectives and Contexts from the Urgent Action Funds



## Challenges and opportunities for strengthening care, protection and sustainability of women's and feminist movements

Although they respond to different social, cultural, economic and even environmental contexts, the Urgent Action Funds of various regions face very similar obstacles, which seriously affect feminist activists and movements. We are referring to the expansion of the far right, which has caused setbacks in terms of rights and laws; the dispossession and exploitation of territories, making use of the criminalization of Indigenous, Afro and peasant communities; excessive militarization as a form of repression and control; and violence in digital spaces, which has become an increasingly important issue today in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, including strategies of surveillance and censorship.

In the next section, each Urgent Action Fund details the contexts, challenges and opportunities for movements in the regions where they work, sustained by the common axis of well-being, sustainability and care for the defenders of human rights, particularly the rights of women, trans and non-binary people and all the struggles that stem from this work.



# 1. CONTEXT FROM THE URGENT ACTION FUND FOR WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS (UAF WHR)

## Challenges

In recent years, there has been a marked rise in hostility and violent response to gender equality and feminism, and against the violence-free, egalitarian and just world they seek to create. As can be seen around the world, this trend is closely related to a broad-based increase in populist right-wing and far-right forces, and is exacerbated by the catastrophic and lasting combination of patriarchy, racism and homophobia. Both misogyny and the defense of traditional, hierarchical models of gender—and no less important, the rejection of homosexuality and sexual diversity—have been, and continue to be, central elements in nationalistic thought.

In the United States, under the administration of former president Donald Trump, policies that affect basic human, civil and political rights became increasingly aggressive and widespread. This has had a double negative impact on the work and lives of women, trans and non-binary activists. Their work has become much more intense and necessary, and at the same time, attacks against them have grown, both by the State through aggressive government policies, militarism, excessive surveillance and overzealous law enforcement; and by non-State actors, including right-wing extremists, fascists, white supremacists, misogynists, religious fundamentalists and xenophobes. Further aggravating this situation is the increasing restriction of social protests and criminalization of any effort to hold the government, corporations and powers accountable for their actions.

Communities of color<sup>18</sup>, migrants, refugees and gender, sexual and religious minorities have for a long time experienced intergenerational traumas<sup>19</sup> that grew exponentially worse during the Trump administration. This has made activists in these communities even more vulnerable and exposed them to significant levels of threat. Corporations act in collusion with the government, especially in the extractive industries, to exploit and cause damage to communities of color and low-income populations<sup>20</sup>. Environmental activists

who work in these communities face gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against women (VaW), including sexual aggression and violence, kidnapping and murder, and digital and psycho-emotional threats from State and non-State perpetrators.

Similar to what has been happening in the United States, in western and central Europe there is a growing wave of anti-immigrant, anti-Black and anti-brown rhetoric<sup>21</sup>, which is deeply related to the wave of violent reactions against women's human rights. In France, Muslim feminist movements and coalitions are being openly attacked by local state officials. The reproductive rights of women in Poland are hanging by a thread with the rise in right-wing discourse and growing repression of the right to choose and have access to abortion. Ethnic nationalism in western and central Europe continues to prosper. Neo-Nazi movements, the far-right and extremist religious groups that had formerly been relegated to the shadows are re-emerging into the public sphere. Strange bedfellows —nationalists, conservative politicians and churches— are taking advantage of these turbulent times and joining forces to thwart progress made in human rights and social justice. Some politicians justify their hostility toward immigrant people —especially Muslims— by suggesting that these communities wish to replicate the oppression of women and LGBTIQ+ people that exists in their own countries. But they are using this rhetoric to fan the flames of anti-Muslim sentiment, which in turn exacerbates oppression of women and of LGBTIQ+ people.

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<sup>18</sup> We are referring broadly to communities of Black, mestizo, Indigenous, immigrant, refugee and undocumented persons.

<sup>19</sup> Traumas related to structural oppressions experienced across generations, like racism, colonialism, sexism, war, dictatorships, fascism, authoritarian regimes, anti-gender movements, gender violence (including inter-family violence), and civil, political and human rights violations, among others.

<sup>20</sup> One of the many examples of this collusion was seen last year in the United States, when Energy Transfer Partners (ETP) and the Dakota Access Pipeline project committed human rights abuses against the Water Protector group. ETP and its private security force was found to have been collaborating with local law enforcement agencies, including the Louisiana sheriff's department, who were deployed in North Dakota to support the county sheriff and private security forces in Standing Rock.

<sup>21</sup> Racist expressions against Black and other non-white people.



In Russia, Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, women's and LGBTIQ+ movements face violent reactions from fundamentalist groups. Throughout these regions, there is a widespread tendency to criminalize protests and activism that are against the rising tide of authoritarianism and oppose violence against activists (particularly against those who defend human and LGBTIQ+ rights). It is troubling to witness the growing number of key political positions being held by proponents of these conservative and far-right movements in countries that are also undergoing significant democratic reform.

In Turkey, the increasingly dictatorial government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has shown itself intolerant of anyone who challenges its plans or fails to toe the official line. There has been an escalation of hate speech against the LGBTIQ+ community in this country: politicians, right-wing media organizations and government institutions are increasingly aiming their sights at the LGBTIQ+ communities and threatening them openly. This has generated high levels of stress, anxiety, depression and trauma among activists.

In this context, activists face numerous barriers in accessing care and protection and in continuing their activism: they find themselves in increasingly dire circumstances. In the reflections and the lived experiences of those who defend women's rights and LGBTIQ+ rights, there are traumas transmitted from generation to generation (intergenerational traumas), as well as acute personal traumas, which inform, motivate and in turn affect their activism. But there are few spaces where they can explore these, much less begin any type of healing process. Some activists may be unaware of the meaning of the terms *care* and *protection* in their activism, since perhaps these have not been recognized, used or articulated as priorities in their movements. For this reason, time, resources and safe spaces are needed to work with these traumas and to heal collectively.

There is a need to raise awareness, to create spaces for expression, to share experiences, stories and strategies in all geographies and to build communities of care in order to support the resilience and sustainability of activists and movements. There is a persistently dangerous myth that activists must sacrifice themselves in their quest to change society, because they take on this work voluntarily. They are not conceived of as people with basic needs and desires that must also be satisfied and protected. Their time is valuable, and it should be compensated and recognized; their civil and political rights must be protected.



## Opportunities

One of the most notable political phenomena in recent times has been the #MeToo movement, which captured global attention and found echoes in many parts of the world. Millions of women, trans and non-binary people exposed issues that had been considered taboo in their communities. Thanks to the impact of this movement, in places like the country of Georgia, sexual harassment in the workplace is now legally classified as a form of discrimination. Before May 2019, sexual harassment in the workplace did not imply any punishment at all. There is hope that Georgia's example will have a positive influence on the countries of South Caucasus and Central Asia. UAF WHR is closely following this trajectory and supporting feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements in those regions.

We have seen a rise in the visibility of groups who defend the rights of persons with disabilities in all regions, and we have contributed to this struggle. For example, we supported a Russian group that worked with lesbians living with disabilities to create a website accessible to women with disabilities, which created an opportunity to increase the visibility of this community.

Human rights organizations in Poland have fought hard for years to defend women's rights to choose and access health services, challenging laws that restrict abortion. We have been able to support their work through Opportunity Grants for awareness-building strategies, using narratives and photographs to illustrate the ways women have resisted and made legitimate decisions for themselves. In the Middle East, our rapid-response assistance has been increasingly helpful in supporting the relocation of LGBTIQ+ activists in Yemen and Syria, where armed groups and conservative communities came together to threaten and slander them. We have also supported groups of feminists living and working in the highly patriarchal Muslim society of Russia's north Caucasus.

## 2. CONTEXT FROM THE URGENT ACTION FUND–AFRICA (UAF–AFRICA)

### Challenges

There are a number of challenges posed by the “closure of spaces for civil society.” These include a regional context marked by increasing militarization in some African countries like Nigeria, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Zimbabwe, Republic of Gambia, Algeria, Eritrea and Egypt. The experiences of feminist activists vary from the context of Liberia —where the militarized response to an outbreak of Ebola threatened the safety of women in affected communities and influenced citizens’ reaction, because the military presence evoked memories of civil wars and disturbances and raised questions about citizens’ trust in their government and its way of handling the propagation of the illness— to that of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a region where active rebel groups commit gender-based violence against women.

There are also different forms of fundamentalism, depending on the context. Religious fundamentalism is seen in the growing power of Pentecostal churches and their capacity for reproducing heteronormative, homophobic speech that has directly affected public policy. One example of their power is Uganda’s Anti-homosexuality Law of 2014, which was proposed locally but motivated by right-wing fundamentalist Christians from the United States. To criminalize homosexuality, States work in concert with non-State actors in control campaigns, under the pretext of culture and religion.

We have also witnessed a rise in cultural fundamentalism, evident in some contexts in efforts to moralize public spaces, in violation of personal rights and freedom. In Burundi, for example, a law signed by the late president Pierre Nkurunziza instructed all married couples to legalize their relationships by the end of 2017, in order to create “a more moral Burundian society.”

Another challenge we have identified is the criminalization of activists, which takes many forms. It can manifest in the passage of laws and administrative actions that hinder the work of activists, such as laws that restrict the receipt of foreign funding or vague laws aiming to protect “morals” and “traditional values” that have been used to crack down on the defense of rights such as sexual and reproductive health. Criminalization also takes place through

processes of delegitimation and stigmatization that aim to damage the public image of activists so that their targeting is socially acceptable. Feminist activists have consistently been labeled as “bad mothers” or “whores” who seek to destroy the morals of society in order to silence them and legitimate their persecution.

We have also seen a rise in online violence. Because the Internet has been an important tool for women, trans and non-binary activists to disseminate information, to defend, mobilize, organize and promote human rights, they have faced a constantly evolving tide of violence: from trolling and stalking, to revenge porn and deep fakes, to online threats and the constant use of new tools whose purpose is to surveil and censor. Governments may use various tactics to produce their own mass content in order to distort the digital narrative in their favor, without explicitly revealing their sponsorship of that content.

There are also non-State actors (such as corporations) that have started to involve themselves more in problems of women’s human rights through the use of technical frameworks for social impact and women’s entrepreneurship, for example. They thus address the symptoms rather than the structural problems, which dilutes feminist and social justice arguments. Related to that is the increased corporate capture happening across Africa, including land grabs for mining and agroindustry by multinational companies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed many challenges to civil society. For example, many governments used the pandemic as an excuse to implement severe restrictions on the right to assembly and free speech. Several governments, including Uganda, Cameroon, Malawi, Zambia, Egypt and Algeria, have used the pandemic to justify attacks against journalists, activists and healthcare workers who criticize the government’s response. There have also been vague laws passed that criminalize the spreading of “fake news.” Activists have widespread concern over the surveillance structures that have been introduced with the pandemic and how these will affect future practice of rights and issues such as internet freedom and online violence.

Like the rest of civil society, feminist activists have been affected by the pandemic. But the challenges they face are enhanced by the rising backlash and defamation they have experienced for highlighting the gendered impacts of the pandemic and the ways in which many governments did not account for these in policy planning.

Women activists have also faced contexts in several countries in which States deployed their armed forces to implement curfews, distribute food





and hygiene products and undertake other measures deemed necessary to implement protective measures. The effect that the militarization of health crises has on women is rarely analyzed. Women's safety is almost always compromised in such settings. The deployment of the military has been coupled with a discourse of "war against the virus" which highlighted the struggles to grapple with the pandemic given underfunded public health care systems and weak social protection and governance systems that left millions unsupported.

The pandemic has raised serious questions about economic justice. Feminist activists have long critiqued neoliberal policies and the narrow focus on development fundamentalism. As countries reel from the economic effects of the pandemic, it is likely that calls for economic rights will be met with repression or strong critiques at best. The pandemic continues to be a time of great stress —this in addition to the "normal" stresses of activism. Activists are dealing with burnout, exhaustion and other mental and physical health issues more than ever, resulting in chronic illnesses and even the collapse of their organizations. This necessitates thinking and strategizing about ways of supporting activists, especially in a context that could entail future funding challenges given the possibility of further global economic crisis. Civil society space is volatile and changing. The terminology of "closing spaces" can be limiting, as it falsely implies that the space was open before. In fact, space for activism has never been conducive for women, trans and non-binary activists. It can shift, open or close depending on many changing and interrelated factors.

## Opportunities

Apart from the challenges, the context also reveals to us experiences of resilience by activists who are finding ways of collaborating with new actors, forging alliances and denouncing and creatively navigating the gaps between various government agencies in order to find entry points to be able to influence. For example, a grantee partner in Egypt that conducts street theater was facing great difficulty doing this work in the country and resorted to forming collaborations with film directors to learn from their experiences around how to safely film in the streets. In another case, activists in Uganda were able to halt evictions of communities from their lands by going through the justice system, which they report still holds the possibility of redress for rights violations, as the judiciary retains a level of independence from the government.

We also found that supported interventions often result in the formation of new collaborations or alliances. An example is a group in Zimbabwe that

we supported to engage in activities around promoting and protecting the rights of women vendors with disabilities during a period of unrest in Harare and Bulawayo. The women were trained on how to protect themselves while vending and at the end of the training period formed a safety group in the two regions where tips are shared and they are able to alert each other about security threats.

Feminist activists are increasingly working on creating new cultures of activism based on practices of self- and collective care, mutual support and well-being. We support a group in Tunisia, for example, that is setting up a mechanism for collective support which includes group and individual psychosocial counseling for each group member, not just those who are on the front lines.

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the creativity and responsiveness of feminist activists and groups who filled gaps that many governments left vacant (including shifting their work from longer-term projects to emergency



relief, informing communities about the virus, fighting State efforts to extend draconian measures using the pandemic as pretext, etc.). Such efforts could help feminist activists grow their constituencies and strengthen their legitimacy in the public eye. It is important to think of steps that can be taken to support civil society in establishing the narrative that their work was critical during the pandemic, as that could affect the future of civil society and civic space. There is also a great opportunity to support the advocacy that feminist activists have been conducting for years to highlight the short-sightedness of neoliberal policies and a narrow focus on development fundamentalism, as the effects of such priorities became painfully clear during the COVID-19 pandemic. Supporting the documentation of these effects and highlighting feminist alternatives is of utmost importance.

The pandemic has also been a time in which feminist activists have found new ways of conducting their activism to adapt to the “new normal,” which has meant concentrating more on the importance of collective care and putting well-being at the center of the work. This is a valuable opportunity



to illustrate the importance of supporting collective approaches to care as critical to sustaining movements. We are gaining a growing understanding of the importance of networks to the well-being of feminist groups, which became very clear as activists grappled with the pandemic. In networks, responses are developed and led by the activists themselves, and they are able to draw on their first-hand knowledge to provide for the needs for specific situations. Focusing on networks must entail the development of movement leadership to strengthen the political skills and collective power of activists rather than of individual leaders, which contributes to the long-term sustainability and safety of movements. There is a great opportunity for groups to share their approaches to collective care that kept them going during these difficult times, which would be very informative at a moment when there is a widespread recognition of the importance of supporting the wellness needs of activists.

### **3. ECONOMIC AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT FROM THE URGENT ACTION FUND LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN (UAF LAC)**

#### **Challenges**

Latin America and the Caribbean remain the most dangerous regions for activists. According to the latest analysis by Frontline Defenders, Colombia had the highest number of murdered activists in the world in 2019, followed by Honduras, México and Brazil. In recent years, the regional context has been marked by numerous social uprisings in countries like Ecuador, Chile, Colombia and Bolivia, and ongoing political crises in countries like Nicaragua, Argentina, Honduras and Guatemala. Most of these uprisings—which have proven the power of young people and social movements' capacity to rally multiple social sectors—have emerged in response to specific government measures, like cutbacks to fuel subsidies in Ecuador or public transit fare increases in Chile. But beyond these specific motives, these uprisings have responded to social movements' historic demands for a long-term



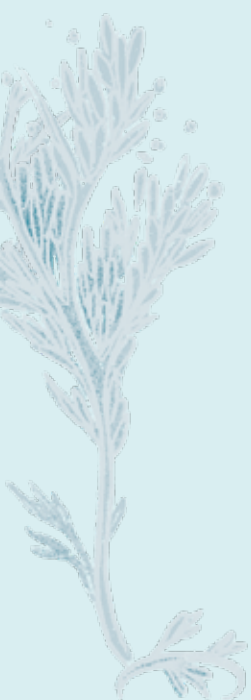
transformation of the democratic and socioeconomic model, environmental justice and construction of lasting, sustainable peace.

In response to mobilizations, governments have intensified militarization efforts and repression of social protests, with thousands of people injured, tortured or killed; the criminalization of civil society; digital surveillance and violations of the right to free speech. In all countries, these attacks evidence specific modes of violence against Indigenous people, Afro-descendant people and women, trans and non-binary people. In this context, activists continue to resist the structural violence created by multiple systems of oppression, which has worsened during the political crises faced by most of the countries in the region. In 2020, the violence and crises were heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most Latin American countries have seen a strengthening of right-wing, authoritarian and conservative regimes in recent years, accompanied by a reversal of rights hard won by social and feminist movements, and have put in place discriminatory policies against Indigenous, Afro-descendant and peasant communities, as well as women and LGBTIQ+ people. Activists are dealing with a rise in structural violence against women, trans and non-binary people, which takes the form of multiple attacks on their lives and integrity, including criminalization, stigmatization, harassment, sexual violence and murder.

Religious fundamentalists and right-wing groups in all these countries oppose social change, spread hate speech, exacerbate structural racism and xenophobia and shield corporations and elites. Many have even trampled the division between Church and State and imposed the Bible as law, such as in the case of Bolivia after an illegitimate new government seized power. These groups have intensified their hate speech and their strategies against women and LGBTIQ+ people. They have not only buttressed their alliances, but are also playing an increasingly direct role in formal power structures, both national and local. They are assuming messianic discourses that demonize ancestral spiritual practices and fan the flames of popular religiosity, which validates their intent to govern from a religious perspective.

Those who defend their territory and their communities continue to resist the extractivist model and its inherently misogynist and racist nature, which perpetuates colonialism and territorial dispossession, primarily against Indigenous, Black and peasant communities. Latin America and the Caribbean are the most dangerous regions in the world for defense of land, territory and nature: in 2021 they accounted for **70% of murders**<sup>22</sup> of activists who work for these causes. In this context, territorial defenders



face criminalization, stigmatization, harassment, attempts on their lives and various forms of violence by State and non-State actors acting in concert. At the same time, their leadership is continually questioned and subjected to violence from their peers in mixed and community organizations.

There is a widespread lack of State protection measures for activists, an absence of political will to recognize the structural causes of the violence against them and a lack of mechanisms that can guarantee their basic rights (especially *the right to defend their rights*). Neither is there access to justice, and almost all the crimes committed against them go unpunished. Justice systems reproduce discrimination and operate on the basis of racist, sexist and classist stereotypes.

One element that today has become much more significant with respect to the context in which the book *What's the point of revolution if we can't dance?* was published is the violence that activists experience in the digital space, because this is one of the spheres in which feminist activists have gained considerable strength. Activists face the risk of violence, stigmatization and defamatory campaigns (often sexist and racist in nature); they must deal with hacking and the shutdown of organizational websites, surveillance, data theft and other attacks on their digital security.

Because of structural social inequality, activists often live and work under precarious conditions. And with the gradual closure of spaces for civil society organizations, activists face increasing difficulties in organizing; in many cases the legal identity and bank accounts of feminist organizations have been canceled. We are seeing cutbacks in funding for movements in the region, which are not being prioritized comprehensively due to the concerted influence of some governments and donors. The situation is further complicated by the financial and socioeconomic crisis that has occurred during and due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>22</sup> Front Line Defenders (2021). Retrieved from: <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en>

## Challenges in the framework of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

The public health, social and economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges for feminist activists and movements. This new context has worsened the structural problems of the prevailing socio economic and political model and has heightened the risks for activists that were already dealing with political or democratic crises, which is why we can say that we are experiencing a set of simultaneous crises. Even more troubling is the lack of protection for basic human rights, the collapse of already fragile health systems and the lack of access to food, water and electricity.

Latin American governments such as Nicaragua, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras and Chile have become increasingly militarized and restrictive of basic freedoms: police and the military have been involved in multiple human rights abuses. Furthermore, they have used the pandemic response as a pretext to strengthen authoritarianism and criminalization, targeting activists, especially those belonging to Afro-descendent, Indigenous and marginalized urban communities and LGBTIQ+ people. Trans and non-binary people have faced criminalization and violence by police forces who limit their mobility via gender-based pandemic restrictions, as occurred in Colombia, Perú and Panama.

All forms of violence and sexual exploitation have grown during the pandemic, which has concretely affected women who are dealing with multiple types of discrimination. Existing mechanisms to prevent and address this violence, already precarious, have collapsed<sup>23</sup>. Attacks on activists have continued and murder rates remain high, along with the rates of physical and sexual violence and harassment. Online surveillance, stalking and defamation have increased, particularly against feminist activists that challenge government measures as exclusive and lacking in gender perspective.

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<sup>23</sup> In Colombia, the demand for GBV emergency response services has grown by 91%; in México, by 35% and in Argentina, by 25%. Furthermore, restrictive measures and the health systems crisis has erected barriers to the guarantee of sexual and reproductive health, especially access to safe abortion. Sources: <https://www.france24.com/es/20200406-repunte-violencia-machista-cuarentena-coronavirus-mujeres-victimas>; <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jew7rwBA09ub6dgROme4uFaOwYaF6hHv/edit>; <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/multimedia/2020/4/infographic-covid19-violence-against-women-and-girls>

Finally, we stress that extractive activities are ongoing. Some projects that had been paralyzed by community resistance have resumed legally, with the encouragement of governments, or illegally by the use of force. Additionally, some countries like Argentina<sup>24</sup>, Ecuador<sup>25</sup> and the Dominican Republic<sup>26</sup> are planning to increase mining and fracking activities as strategies for financial recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

Structural injustice, combined with these simultaneous crises, have a myriad of negative effects on the emotional, physical and spiritual well-being of people, individually and collectively. With the COVID-19 crisis, activists are under more pressure to support and guarantee the basic needs of their families, communities and organizations, in addition to their own. They must contend with heightened emotional and physical impacts: most of them are dealing with feelings of fear, rage, despair and anxiety, not to mention the loss of loved ones and the effects on their own health. They are also dealing with increased workloads in their organizations, homes and communities, and the sensation of being unable to take a break while responding to the context. Finally, they must face the challenges of finding alternatives for sustaining themselves, while remaining interconnected, overcoming digital and communication barriers.

## Internal challenges

There is a growing awareness of the importance of care in organizations, but we still need to strengthen practices of care and protection —mainly at the collective level— and to broaden spaces for reflecting on this issue. It is indispensable that movements continue to reflect more deeply on forms of organization, to give more latitude for shared, horizontal and



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<sup>24</sup> AIM (2020). "El gobierno profundiza su idea de modelo extractivista." Available at: <https://www.aimdigital.com.ar/parana/el-gobierno-profundiza-su-idea-de-modelo-extractivista.htm>

<sup>25</sup> El Mercurio (2020). "Minería, una opción más que disputada para reactivar la economía en Ecuador." Available at: <https://www2.elmercurio.com.ec/2020/05/08/mineria-una-mas-que-disputada-opcion-para-reactivar-la-economia-en-ecuador/>

<sup>26</sup> BNamericas (2020). "Mineras planean invertir US\$2.600mn en Dominican Republic." Available at: <https://www.bnamericas.com/es/noticias/mineras-planean-invertir-us2600mn-en-republica-dominicana>

diverse leaderships that strengthen community power. Similarly, it is vital to continue opening safe spaces and promoting careful processes to converse about tensions and conflicts, and to heal as people and as a group, which ultimately makes movements more sustainable and enhances their capacity to face external risks. Finally, recognition must be given to the valuable progress made toward building increasingly intersectional, self-critical and inclusive movements. We must continue to transform practices and broaden perspectives to ensure that no voice, no experience, is rendered invisible or discriminated against.

## Opportunities



The crisis caused by the pandemic has once again made clear that a model of society and a socioeconomic system that contradicts life, that prioritizes economic growth over human rights, personal wellness and a harmonious relationship with nature, is unsustainable. These times have shaken our very foundations and given us a chance to rethink ourselves and to broaden the ways we understand and experience the protection, care and sustainability of movements and of life itself. It has faced us with the possibility, the need, to build a “new normal,” knowing that the state of things before the COVID-19 pandemic was not the world where we want to or can live. This moment has revealed the power of collective and community bonds and practices that sustain life and permit group protection, regarding both health and the ongoing risks that have been reshaped or accentuated by the pandemic. At the same time, the pandemic has shown us the importance of support networks in enabling care rather than simply responding to basic needs. What has emerged, then, is the need for mutual care amid the emotional impacts this crisis has generated.

The pandemic has proven the tremendous capacity of activists and their organizations to adapt and create new ways of continuing to sustain themselves and to do their work, despite the difficulties and the physical distancing. It opens an opportunity to reinvent forms of organization, from the collective and from the community, placing group wellness at the center of priorities. In this regard, we believe there is an opportunity to empower the multiplicity of cultural practices of collective protection, which are grounded in diverse worldviews, spiritualities and the cultural legacies of many peoples, and are already being welcomed and revived by many activists.

There is a greater awareness and more room for reflection on the importance of care and protection, and tremendous creativity around caregiving practices, whether new or recovered, particularly on a personal level. There is also a

growing interest in strengthening practices on a collective level, based on the recognition that protection is not something external that comes totally from the State. As powerful reflection emerges from the region regarding the political nature of care, articulated and vital for feminist activism and not as something instrumental, activists are taking critical stances against the commercialization of care and the imposition of discourses from the position of privilege.

Recognizing the growing intention to learn, dialogue and share experiences of care and protection, and documenting these processes, gives way to collective learning. These dialogues are intergenerational and intercultural; they harbor the memory and honor the wisdom of those who have blazed trails, and those who are building them now from other realities and experiences.



## 4. CONTEXT FROM THE URGENT ACTION FUND—ASIA AND THE PACIFIC (UAF A&P)

### Challenges

Over the course of the past decade, we have experienced the global phenomenon of far-right policies in virtually every sphere. Activists, particularly women, trans and non-binary people, face intersectional attacks from conservative social structures and patriarchal values, authoritarian governments and growing fundamentalisms. These trends also reflect the realities of the Asia and Pacific regions. We have seen the rise of authoritarian

leaders, elected through democratic processes to occupy higher positions in their countries, and the resulting erosion of the values of human rights and democratic practices. This is at once the cause and the consequence of a climate of growing hostility toward human rights, women's rights, environmental justice, climate justice and other progressive values.

Populist ideas, fundamentalist rhetoric and anti-human rights discourse have found mainstream spaces and gained legitimacy as these leaders ride to electoral victories. For example, recent elections in Thailand and Cambodia preceded an aggressive rollback of democratic practices, which included the arrests of opposition leaders, a ban on opposition political parties and arrests of activists. We are witnessing increasingly brazen arrogation of power by the military in Myanmar, which has dismantled the democratically elected civilian government and is engaged in violence against its own citizens every day.

Among governments' tactics to suppress dissent are: criminalization of dissidence, including judicial persecution and arrest; imposition of administrative burdens and financial restrictions that hamper functioning of organizations; and the use of direct violence, to name but a few. To legitimize these attacks, governments created policies and laws that perpetuate narratives such as the "war on drugs," "war on terrorism" and "anti-trafficking campaigns." These narratives serve to further persecute the victims of structural inequalities.

The already limited space for civil society and activism in Asia has been further reduced by a series of strict national laws aimed at placing civil society under the control of the State and increasing attacks on activists, including lawyers, journalists and even ordinary citizens who criticize the government. Various countries in the regions have passed vaguely worded laws and regulations and enforced existing laws on an intentionally discretionary basis, with the aim of silencing dissent. For example, China, India, Cambodia and Thailand have all passed laws that directly affect the operations of civil society organizations. Also, countries that exercise systematic violence against activists have stripped them of mechanisms to demand justice and seek reparations for rights violations. Meanwhile, the laws and measures that regulate the internet and cyber security have been extended to limit freedom of expression and speech and media independence in various countries.

The concept of human rights as universal values is being questioned in Asia and the Pacific, with some arguing that they represent "Western values" and an imposition against Eastern cultures. These narratives are directly or indirectly perpetuated by State leaders for their own benefit. Human rights activists, specifically those who work for women's rights, sexual and reproductive

rights and against domestic violence, are targeted for “promoting Western ideals and values,” or of being “anti-national” and “disrespecting local culture and religion,” among other accusations, putting them at higher risk.

This situation is more pronounced in countries seeing an increase in religious fundamentalists who have gained more power through the dominant electoral policy. For example, elected leaders in Indonesia have made open threats against LGBTIQ+ communities, which resulted in physical attacks against them and the destruction of their properties and shops. In Bangladesh, activists are concerned about an increase in visible signs of a growing “Islamization” of the country (for example, in girls’ school uniforms, the inclusion of a scarf to cover the head). Similarly, in Malaysia, activists have forewarned of the impact on women and girls of the passage of Sharia-compliant laws and policies<sup>27</sup>.

Furthermore, the regions of Asia and the Pacific have also been heavily affected by climate change: from typhoons in the Philippines and the Pacific countries, to flooding in the countries of south Asia. Among others, these are the impact of increasing deforestation and development related infrastructures and have resulted in displacement of communities, growing food insecurity and diminishing access to water and land resources for Indigenous communities.

In addition, growing corporate influence has translated into the privatization of public utilities and goods, eroding social protection and forcing communities into even deeper marginalization. States in the regions continue to conspire with local and foreign private investors, intensifying the dispossession of community land and extraction of natural resources in order to create development projects. This has negative impacts on tribal and Indigenous lands, including the displacement of Indigenous people and destruction of their ways of life. Activists fighting for the right to land and environmental justice are disproportionately attacked both by States and by non-State actors, private companies, local interests, land mafia, etc., and may even be disappeared or murdered.

The risks for women, trans and non-binary activists are exacerbated by existing power inequalities and patriarchal sociocultural and political norms.

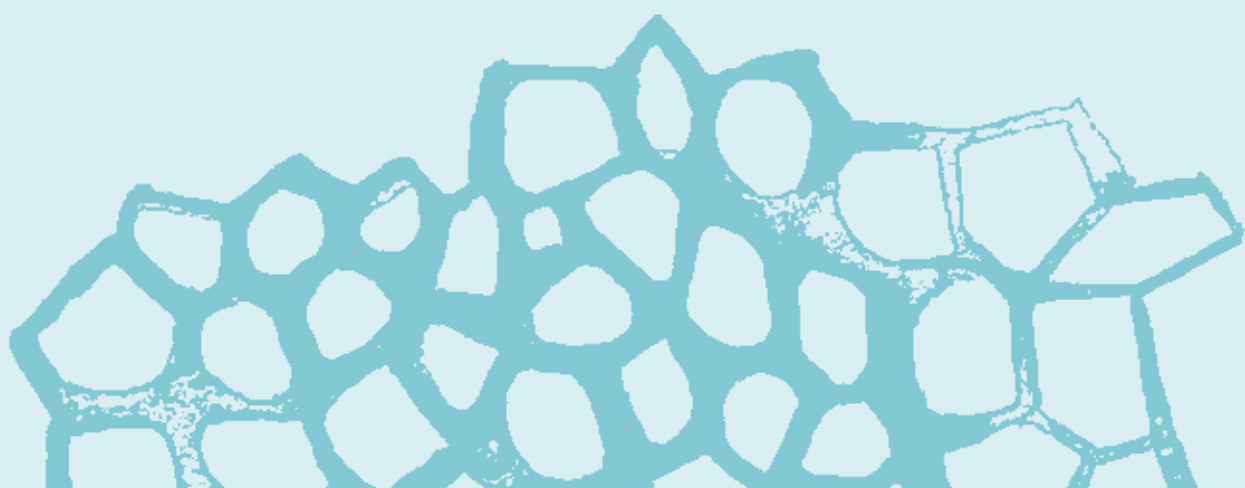
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<sup>27</sup> Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2018). “CEDAW discusses situation of women in Malaysia, Chile, Republic of Korea and Fiji with civil society representatives.” Retrieved from: <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22673&LangID=E>

Attacks on women, trans and non-binary activists are personalized: their intent is to discredit and devalue them as human beings by attacking their sexuality, their families and their communities. Conservative norms in most countries in the region often mean that when a person becomes an activist, they lose the support of their communities and families. They are accused of failing in their duties to their families, and of endangering them. The lack of family and community support makes them more vulnerable to risks and threats, including gender-based violence, and affects their ability to access available support systems.

Moreover, these oppressive norms are present within the human rights community itself, where physical and psychological violence is sometimes exercised against women, trans and non-binary activists. These violations are rarely documented systematically, because those responsible are not considered “the usual perpetrators.” Furthermore, commenting on violence within the community may be viewed as weakening social movements.

This increasingly hostile context for human rights activism and democratic practices is further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which was used as additional ammunition to curtail civil society spaces. Intimidation, harassment and arrests of activists in countries like the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh continue amid the lockdowns, along with the resulting economic and food insecurity faced by millions of marginalized people who have no access to government assistance. Governments have used the pandemic as an excuse to further consolidate their power by imposing emergency measures allegedly in response to the public health crisis. The public health necessity of suppressing the virus has been used as a pretext by governments to restrict basic liberties. Activists, who often subsist on precarious means, face additional challenges, both in terms of their personal survival and the sustainability of their activism.



## Opportunities

Civil society that works in support of human rights is relatively well-developed in the Asia and Pacific regions. There are many organizations that conform to feminist norms and values in their approach to promoting human rights. They have extensive experience working at the community level, nationally and internationally, to advance the feminist agenda. Similarly, there is a wealth of knowledge and resources among these groups for building and strengthening networks and alliances. A stronger alliance with existing networks and the creation of other new ones would generate opportunities to jointly explore systems of safety and care for women, trans and non-binary activists at the regional and national level.

In the digital environment, the use of the internet, especially social media, has grown exponentially in Asia and the Pacific due to the rising prevalence of mobile phones, which account for 45% of internet users<sup>28</sup>. Although anti-democratic and regressive forces have proven capable of manipulating digital tools and platforms, organizations have also been able to use the available resources as forms of resistance. One particularly telling example of this has been the use of social media platforms by young activists in Hong Kong, Thailand and Myanmar.

Although we consider the internet and social media platforms as an opportunity for advancing care and protection for women, trans and non-binary activists, we are also aware of the limits of access and the exclusion, particularly, of rural and community-based activists. This is even more consequential in the context of the pandemic, where in-person gatherings have been limited. Opportunities provided by the expansion of internet technology, including social media platforms, should take this exclusion into account and improve the community relations that are cultivated in spaces outside of the digital world, and with guarantees of digital security measures.

There is another opportunity to be found in the historic, cultural and social context of both regions that fosters community safety and caregiving networks: Indigenous cultures and practices in the regions which promote collective care and exchange, and which place an emphasis on community relations. Although the context of “religious rights,” “family values” and

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<sup>28</sup> Moore, M. (2020). “Number of internet users APAC 2020 by country or region.” Retrieved from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/265153/number-of-internet-users-in-the-asia-pacific-region/>



“preservation of traditional cultural practices” is being exploited by anti-rights groups, in these regions there are Indigenous practices that nourish the bonds and the resilience of women in their communities. There are opportunities to re-imagine the safety and care of women, trans and non-binary feminist activists, highlighting the concepts of these cultures: sharing and caring through the collective empowerment of women and minority communities to be able to reinterpret, choose and redesign these practices, and discard those that limit and violate their rights<sup>29</sup>.

Finally, there is an opportunity with the advent of emerging feminist sources of funding in the region, which are attempting to break the traditional relations between donors and recipients, and which support activities for building grassroots movements: for example, Women’s Fund Asia at the regional level and the Fiji Women’s Fund at the national level. The feminist lens adopted by these funders and the models that they are creating encourages organizations and networks to also focus on the well-being and care of human rights activists as central elements in their movements. The relationships we have cultivated as feminist sources of funding in the regions may be further developed to collaboratively strengthen networks of safety and care for women, trans and non-binary defenders and activists in the regions.

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<sup>29</sup> United Nations. (2012). “Report of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights.” Retrieved from: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N12/459/30/PDF/N1245930.pdf?OpenElement>



*This book was edited during 2022, after over two years of the COVID-19 pandemic.*

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