

awid

FEMINIST REALITIES



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Note on Feminist Realities



At AWID, we understand feminist realities as the **living, breathing examples of the worlds we know are possible.**

We understand these diverse feminist realities as reclamations and embodiments of hope and power. They are embedded in the multiple ways that show us that there is a different way of living, thinking and doing—from the daily expressions of how we live and relate to each other, to alternative systems of governance and justice. Feminist Realities resist dominant power systems such as patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy.

These are powerful propositions that orient us toward a vision of what is possible, and show how feminist organizing is blazing a path toward justice in movements and communities around the world.



Editor's Note

Yewande
Omotoso

Feminist
Realities
is a warm
and caring
invitation,
a kind of *en
masse-care*
(versus self-
care) act of
preservation,
an invitation
to archive,
to take stock
of all the
work lest it
disappear.

Earlier this year, we put out a call – for pieces, reflections, artwork, poetry – inviting submissions to this digital magazine. We were deeply warmed by the enthusiastic response, over 450 submissions from people in 150+ countries and territories around the world. As one can imagine, making the final selection was an incredibly challenging task but what we hope we've created is a diverse spread of concerns, contexts, knowledges and creativities; each piece intimate and insightful in its own unique way. The theme of the magazine was to be "Feminist Realities". I had not personally encountered this term until I engaged with AWID on this project. My first thought latched onto the word "reality". Indeed – looking at our world – the reality of the matter when it comes to the continuous violence that is inflicted on women and trans people's bodies is sobering. But then I quickly realised that 'Feminist Realities', as coined by AWID, is not about contemplating how much of the mountain there is still to climb but rather about acknowledging what has been accomplished, created, forged, negotiated, fought and won for, garnered, claimed and nurtured into existence.

Just like that, with a quick change in perspective, I began to grasp the concept of "Feminist Realities". Being a lover of words, as this project has progressed, I have come to love the use of the word "Realities" in this concept. So, not Feminist Futures, not Feminist Struggle but Feminist Realities. I have come to love the use of the word Realities not as a means of chastening us as to the harsh facts of our current condition but rather shoring ourselves up with the knowledge of what has been accomplished (brought into reality) even as we continue to challenge, fight, resist, organise, care for, love, nurture and protect. Feminist Realities feels like a radical culture change in a time when it can become rote to delineate atrocities, and of course we must. I am not suggesting in any way that being aware of all the horrors and all the work still to be done is bad or wrong or even counterproductive; but you will find in these pieces, in addition to bringing awareness, a deep intelligence, acts of defiance and a claiming of self – I am here.

Feminist Realities is a warm and caring invitation, a kind of *en masse-care* (versus self-care) act of preservation, an invitation to archive, to take stock of all the work lest it disappear.

And so this magazine edition is an opportunity for our Feminist Realities to appear in all its messiness, joy, power and brilliance. I see it as an instance of recognition, literally to know again. Thinking this recalled to mind the Zulu word "Sawubona" translated as "we see you" or I like to think of it as "we recognise you". We recognise your Feminist Realities, contributors, feminists, workers, activists, we recognise you in your plurality, multiplicities, complexities and courage. We recognise the power of being able to hold both the scale of the mountain ahead and the diverse valleys and footpaths already mapped.

There is a time for everything and this edition of the magazine comes about when the crisis of heteropatriarchy has been made even more visible. These authors have claimed these pages, this space and time to enrich ourselves in the knowledge of all the big and small acts of triumph that occur every day in the various corners of the world. We invite you to be inspired by the stories, the images; feel the soft intimacy of these accounts and depictions and allow yourself to be filled up and sustained by them.



The Triple Cripples: Let's talk about sex, baby!

NANDINI TANYA LALLMON

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Olajumoke ‘Jay’ Abdullahi and Kym Oliver are revolutionary feminists in more ways than one. The two friends call themselves the “Triple Cripples” because they are subjected to three layers of discrimination as Black disabled women. Jay, now 31, contracted polio as a baby and uses a leg brace and crutches for support, while Kym, aged 25, has multiple sclerosis and uses a wheelchair for mobility. The name of their duo stems from an endeavour to redefine the word “cripple”, which, according to them, “has been thrown at disabled people as a slur, a surefire way to remind us that we were ‘flawed’ and were always going to be ‘less than’.”

As Black women, Kym and Jay have been victims of the globalised racial stereotype which hypersexualizes dark skin. In their book entitled *Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe describe how Black women have been historically depicted as “high promiscuity risk” by doctors because of their libido and fertility. Jay explains that “people think I’m always ready to go all the time for anything and everything because I am a Black woman.” While both women have been subjected to intense fetishisation because of their skin colour, their disabilities have boggled the minds of many. Kym describes her experience as a curvy woman as: “I have the type of body that people want to manhandle and they feel like I should be able to take that, but at the same time there’s this idea that I shouldn’t have standards because of my disability.”

On online dating platforms, Jay has been asked if she can carry out certain sex positions as potential partners “have decided that they want to be with you in this way and want to know if your physicality can facilitate that.” During a check-up, Kym has even had a medical professional filling in an admission form apologise for asking her how many sexual partners she has had with an undertone implying “I know (these questions) don’t apply to you but we have to follow the standard questioning process.” The misconception that lack of physical autonomy equates to lack of sexual desire is pervasive. At school, Jay was excluded from sexual education classes based on her presumed inability to have sex. She explains that even well-meaning organisations advocating for access to sexual and reproductive health services often fail to factor in the specific needs of disabled women. For instance contraceptive pills are frequently hailed as an effective birth control method without any mention that they can

accentuate blood clot risks for women in wheelchairs.

Based in London, the Triple Cripples were looking forward to their participation alongside the Decolonising Contraception team at SexFest2020, a one-day festival created for people of colour, and dedicated to sexual health and well-being. Unfortunately, the event was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, undeterred, Jay and Kym turned to their online advocacy platforms to counter the ways sexuality is seen from a strictly heteronormative perspective and to challenge the idea that womanhood is defined by the ability to procreate. The duo launched a YouTube channel and a podcast, also called the Triple Cripples, to promote the representation of multiply-discriminated people as holistic human beings. Their future plans include a creative documentary and a photographic exhibition dedicated to fighting discrimination and elevating the voices of disabled people of colour.

The experience of discrimination based on race, gender, and disability is beyond additive. Although disabled women of color share experiences of ableism with other disabled people, experiences of sexism with other women, and experiences of racism with other people of color, these experiences interact and cannot be separated: disabled women of color experience discrimination uniquely as disabled women of color. While the Triple Cripples acknowledge that stale and superficial approaches to diversity will not magically transform into inclusive spaces overnight, they remain confident that their little strokes will ultimately fell the great oaks that discriminatory practices represent for them. ■



“Bloomed”

by Titash Sen @unzeroed
(Kolkata, India)

—

The joy of accepting yourself and
growing in that light.

**“Asignado
Nderentendei Al
Nacer” [Assigned
Nderentendei at Birth]**

by Bastión Moral @basti0nm0ral
(Asuncion, Paraguay)

—
Obligatory womanliness is a colonial cisheteropatriarchal imposition of violence against bodies assigned female at birth. Trans bodies continue resisting despite being made invisible and historically erased. I am not a woman; I was assigned a gender based on my genitals.



United against the violence

KARINA OCAMPO

@kariu2 | Buenos Aires, Mexico

In a hidden corner of Chiapas, Mexico, women and sexual dissidents have come to organize our actions. It's December and the Christmas holiday has just passed, but those of us traveling through Chiapas have another celebration in mind.

Women and dissidents of all creeds and colours are on our way to the seedbed *Huellas del caminar de la comandanta Ramona* [In the Footprints of Comandanta Ramona], in the Tzotz Choj *caracol* in the community of Morelia, municipality of Altamirano. There the women *compañeras* of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN, in Spanish) have organized the Second International Gathering of Women Who Struggle.

The *caracoles* [literally, conches or snails] are closed autonomous spaces which Zapatista men and women have won by marking their territories and defending them with their lives. Inside, the communities feel safer. They hold their own assemblies and gatherings of Good Government; they do not recognize the Western capitalist paradigm and consider that model of representation Bad Government.

Local women wear ski masks or bandanas over their faces, partly for protection but also so they all look alike. Those receiving us new arrivals stop each vehicle, and the men cannot go any further. After registering a long line of us there under the intense sun of the mountains, they take us in their vehicles to the place where we are to spend the next three days.

We spread out on the land, camping in tents or in enormous rooms on wooden planks. "No drugs or alcohol," as substance use is prohibited in all of the *caracoles*, so the first night we dance moved only by our emotions and the joyous cumbia rhythms which leave us worn out but happy in our new Sisterhood.

"We are the daughters of the witches they couldn't burn," reads a flag flying

over a window on a big platform which is somewhat like a shrine. The likeness of Marielle Franco, the Brazilian activist who was assassinated, casts her gaze at us from another poster as if to ask, "Where to from here?"

A lively ambiance lights up the faces and colourful clothing of the intrepid women who have gathered here. Feminist chants can be heard. "*Ni una menos, vivas nos queremos* [Not one (woman) less, we want all of us alive]," we yell, fists in the air. We are women and witches, rebels and diverse bodies, who have all come, following the animal instinct of gathering, to protect ourselves, and also to reflect, dance, and speak freely without fear. We are women who struggle, about 4,000 of us from 49 countries as different as Austria, Turkey or New Zealand.

During the opening, Zapatista activists perform a choreography to a traditional song called "The Blue Angels." In the middle of the enormous field, surrounded by cement and wooden buildings, dozens of them march in line, dressed in green and brown uniforms, pointing to the sky as if shooting arrows; then they form a human snail, symbol of all that is sacred, water and life, and their dialectic strategy of resistance. It is surprising and brings on applause.

Then comandanta Amada gives a welcome speech: "More than a year after our first gathering, we can take stock of what is happening. Throughout the world women continue to disappear and are raped; this year the number of women raped, disappeared and murdered has not stopped."

What is said is very different from what is actually happening, is the message of the

comandanta. Never before have we heard so much about the progress of feminism, but they are still killing us. According to the National Citizen Observatory on Femicide (Mexico), ten women are killed per day but only 25% of those cases are considered femicide. “We Zapatista women consider this very serious, which is why we are inviting the women to focus on one topic alone—violence against women.”

The proposal has been made. We will talk about the violence we have suffered and carried in our bodies throughout centuries of normalization of patriarchal dictatorship. But what would appear to take a few hours continues long into the night and carries over into the following day. The testimonies are so raw there is no escaping them. No matter where we were born, or whether we had access to a good education or a good family, all of us had suffered violence at the hands of men.

This is the opportunity we needed to stop hiding it: abuse and rape by strangers, and by acquaintances, family members, and friends. Women who were called crazy and left on the street trying to escape their abusers. Mothers who lost their daughters to boyfriends or trafficking networks and are still looking for them. Trans women who are discriminated against and persecuted. We are all the one with the microphone in hand. “You are not alone!” we scream. “I believe you, my sister!” And we cry from the open wound but know that one day those same tears will heal and make us stronger.

Still wracked with pain, I make my way to one of the cafeterias run by the Zapatista compañeras together with my new friends, a group of Mexican and Argentine women who had spent the day together.

The Zapatistas participate in all aspects of the event organization, not only in preparing the food which they sell at affordable prices; they take turns cleaning the bathrooms, providing security, and taking care of our needs. Others document and film or work on the sound and technical aspects. Several live there, others have come from another of the 18 caracoles in the region. Among themselves they speak in their original languages, mostly Tzotzil, Tzeltal or Tojolabal, and most also speak Spanish.

We smile at one another, we need one another and nothing more; our gazes understand when words do not. That night there would be more music, instruments and voices giving a beat to our feminist song. Artists like Audry Funk or Mon Laferte would be among others lesser known, but I will only hear it from afar since I need to sleep.

Dawn awakens us, energy renewed. The compañeras, leading with their example of autonomy, give us minimal instruction and leave the rest up to us. We are free to plan our own activities. In the hours that follow we will meet in rounds to organize ourselves by interest. I choose a yoga workshop and another on moving meditation. After breakfast I walk on the grass from tent to tent listening in on some of the talks.

As the testimonies on the bandstand continue, in another area a Mexican woman speaks about traditional weaving, a group discusses abolitionist arguments about prostitution, another talks about cannabis, and yet another group practices self-defence techniques. There are meetings by topic and by country, and

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though the debates get heated at times, sisterhood prevails. I stay to attend the talks by Argentines, travelers, and communications people.

It's impossible to be everywhere at once, so the only rule is to share and interact. I also enjoy the contact with the abundant earth here in Chiapas, as I sit down to feel the sun. Night finds us dancing around the fire, in a group embrace, voicing our desire out loud, "Patriarchy is going to fall!"

The last day is dedicated to artistic expression. On the stage are women expressing themselves through theatre, music, dance, and poetry. I interview my peers, asking them why they had come. Julia, who is from Berlin and belongs to an anarchist group, tells me, "one of the reasons why I am here is because the capitalist system is a global system, so it doesn't make sense to have isolated struggles. We have to find a way to create networks.

I take with me the idea of women's strength and the heavy experiences they shared. In Germany we have the same statistics of women dying at the hands of their ex-partners or husbands, or uncles who murder them and people don't talk about it. It is something we should talk about."

Behard is from Kurdistan and lives in Norway. "I learned about the Zapatistas and I am interested because they do not fight against the state, they go beyond that idea. I do not believe in the nation-state; I consider myself a Kurdish anarchist and I am interested in seeing how to apply this in real life. Here I can see and feel how it works. The movement is happening, it's not theory, and it's important for all of us women to see ourselves and feel ourselves because it gives us hope to go and build new societies. We have shared our solutions. I do not think we can copy them because we are from different lands and languages, but we can all be inspired by seeing how people live beyond capitalism. We are different and that is fine. We do not want to become Zapatistas, but we do have a lot in common and it is good to see other revolutions happening."

When the gathering ends the men will return to the caracol, but the feeling of empowerment endures. We, women who struggle, have been given the task of "carrying forward the little light we have been given." Thank you, sisters and compañeras, for that flame which still burns in this awakened conscience. ■



Photography project: “La muerte sale por el Oriente” [Death leaves by the East]

by Sonia Madrigal

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(Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, Mexico)

—
Images created in Mexico which are part of the photography project: “Death leaves by the East.” The women in the periphery exist because we resist.





Anatomy of a Survivor's Story

MARYUM SAIFEE

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When you do a search for “Female Genital Mutilation” or “FGM” online, an image of four line-drawings of the female anatomy pop up next to its Wikipedia entry. It illustrates four types of violence. The first being a partial cut to the clitoris. The second, a more invasive cut with the entire clitoris removed. The third is progressively worse with the removal of the clitoris, labia majora and minora. And the fourth box illustrates a series of hash marks to symbolize stitches over the vaginal opening to allow only for urination and menstruation.

As a survivor of FGM, most questions about my story fixate on the physical. The first question I usually get asked is what type of FGM I underwent. When I told a journalist once that I went through Type 1, she said, "Oh, that's not so bad. It's not like type three, which is far worse." She was technically right. I had the least invasive form. And for many years, I gaslighted myself into feeling a sense of relief that I was one of the lucky ones. I comforted myself, noting that I could have been less fortunate with all of my genitalia gouged out, not just the clitoral tip. Or worse, I could have been one of the ones who didn't survive at all. Like Nada Hassan Abdel-Maqsooud, a twelve-year-old who bled to death on a doctor's operating table earlier this year in Upper Egypt. Nada is a reminder to me that for every data point — 200 million women and girls who live with the consequences of FGM globally — there is a story. Nada will never be able to tell hers.

As much as I find the label "survivor" suffocating at times — I also realize there is privilege embedded in the word. By surviving, you are alive. You have the ability to tell your story, process the trauma, activate others in your community and gain insights and a new language and lens to see yourself through. The act of storytelling can be cathartic and liberating, but it can also shatter the storyteller in the process. Without integrating the psychosocial support of trained clinicians into storytelling and healing retreats, well-intentioned interventions can result in more trauma. This is all the more important as FGM survivors navigate the double pandemic of their own PTSD from childhood trauma, and the indefinite COVID-19 global shutdown. In many anti-FGM advocacy spaces, I have seen this insatiable hunger to unearth

stories — whatever the cost to the storyteller. The stories help activate funding and serve as a data point for measuring impact.

Survivor stories then become commodities fueling a storytelling industrial complex. Storytellers, if not provided proper mental health support in the process, can become collateral damage. My motivation in writing this piece is to flip the script on how we view FGM survivors, prioritizing the storyteller over the story itself. FGM survivors are more than the four boxes describing how the pieces of our anatomy were cut, pricked, carved, or gouged out. In this essay, I'll break down the anatomy of an FGM survivor's story into four parts: stories that break, stories that remake, stories that heal, and stories that reveal.

Type 1: Stories that break

I was sitting in the heart of Appalachia with a group of FGM survivors, meeting many for the first time. As they shared their traumas, I realized we all belonged in some way or another to the same unenviable club. A white Christian survivor from Kentucky — who I don't think I would have ever met if we didn't have FGM survivorship connecting us — told the contours of her story.

There were so many parallels. We were both cut at seven. She was bribed with cake after her cut. I was bribed with a jumbo-sized Toblerone chocolate bar when mine was over. Absorbing her trauma overwhelmed me. And I imagine when I shared my story, others in the circle may also have been silently unraveling. We didn't have a clinician or mental health professional in a facilitation role and that absence was felt. The first night, I was sharing a room with six other survivors and tried hard

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to keep the sounds of my own tears muffled. By the last day, I reached breaking point. Before leaving for the airport, my stomach contracted and I convulsively vomited. I felt like I was purging not only my pain, but the pain of the others I'd absorbed that week. We all dutifully produced our stories into 90 second social media friendly soundbites with narration and photos. But at what cost?

Type 2: **Stories that remake**

On February 6, 2016, the Guardian published my story as a survivor. The second it was released, I was remade. My identity transformed from nondescript, relatively invisible mid-level Foreign Service Officer to FGM survivor under a public microscope. That same day, then-U.S. Ambassador to

the United Nations, Samantha Power, tweeted my story with the introduction: "I was seven years old" before linking to the article. The tweet symbolized a moment for me where my personal and professional worlds collided. Since then, they have been forever intertwined.

Even though I spent ten years of my career as a diplomat focused on other issues — I lived in Cairo during the early days of the Arab Spring in 2011 and served in Baghdad and Erbil when the Syrian revolution turned from an uprising to civil war — all of those past experiences that began to make me erased. When I spoke on panels, my identity would be reduced to "survivor." Like other survivors, I have worked hard to rewrite the script on how others see me. I reinsert pieces of my other identities when speaking to underscore to the broader public that while yes, I am a survivor of childhood trauma and while my FGM story may have remade a part of my identity, it doesn't define me.

Type 3: **Stories that heal**

With the guidance of a mental health expert, I have spent the last few months doing a deep dive into my FGM survivor story. I have told and retold my story over dozens of times in public venues. My goal is to break the culture of silence and inspire action. At this point, the telling of my story has almost become mechanized, as though I am reciting a verse from the Quran I memorized as a kid. I would always start with: "I was sitting in an anthropology class when a fellow student described her research project on Female Genital Mutilation. And that's when I had the

In my years of telling and retelling this story, I would have moments I felt nothing, moments I would break down, and moments of relief. It was a mixed bag, often contradictory emotions happening all at once.

memory jolt. A memory I had suppressed since childhood came flooding to the foreground.” I go into the details of what happened in granular detail – the color of the floor, the feelings of confusion and betrayal in the hazy aftermath. And then I go on to talk about the afternoon I confronted my mother about the summer she and my father shipped my brother and I off to India to stay with my aunt. The summer it happened. I later found out my aunt cut me without my parents’ consent. In my years of telling and retelling this story, I would have moments I felt nothing, moments I would break down, and moments of relief. It was a mixed bag, often contradictory emotions happening all at once.

When I began to take apart the story, I discovered the core moment where I felt most gutted. It wasn’t the cut itself. It was the aftermath. I remember sitting in a corner alone, feeling confused and ashamed. When I looked at my aunt on the other side of the room, she was whispering to my cousin and they both pointed and laughed at me. Unearthing the moment of shame - the laughter – has haunted me since childhood. The piece that was carved out of me is called “haram ki boti” which translates into

sinful flesh. Over time, the physical scar healed. But for many FGM survivors, the psychological wounds remain.

Type 4: **Stories that reveal**

Last year, I decided to take a sabbatical from the Foreign Service. I was burning out on both ends – I had just completed a really tough assignment in Pakistan and was also doing anti-FGM advocacy in my personal capacity. When I came home, an acquaintance from graduate school approached me to capture my story on film. As part of the process, she would send a camera crew to shadow me. Sometimes while giving speeches, other times filming mundane interactions with friends and family. On a visit to my home in Texas, I’ll never forget the moment where my mom told me her story of survival. As part of the film, we went on a road trip to Austin to visit the university where I first had the memory jolt. My mom is patiently waiting for the cameraman to set up his tripod. My father is standing next to her.

In the end, we eventually had the conversation I never had the courage to have with either of my parents face to face. Looking them both in the eye, retelling my story with a camera as witness, we discussed how FGM ripped our family apart (specifically my dad's relationship with his sister). For the first time, I heard my mom talking about her own experience and the feeling of betrayal when she discovered my aunt cut me without her consent. When I later told her that FGM was actually indigenous to the U.S. and Europe and that it was a cure for hysteria (prescribed by doctors) up until the 19th century, my mother exclaimed "that's crazy to me, this was a cure for hysteria. I'm

going to educate other doctors to speak out." And in that moment, my mother, a survivor who had never shared her story before, became an activist.

My story, intertwined with her story, revealed a tightly woven fabric of resistance. With our voices, we were able to break the cycle of intergenerational structural violence. We were able to rewrite the stories of future generations of girls in our own family and hopefully one day, the world. ■

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“Dreams”

by Neesa Sunar @neesasunar
(Queens, USA)

—
This is a woman breaking free from her mundane reality, devoid of color. She dreams in a colorful, “nonsensical” way that people in her life would not understand. She could be considered insane, yet her dreams are more vivid and imaginative than actual life. This is frequently how schizophrenia occurs to me, more engaging and exciting than real life.

Freeing the Church, Decolonizing the Bible for West Papuan Women

RODE WANIMBO

@rodwan986 | Jayapura, Papua

Province of Indonesia

“Lord, we are unworthy. We are the ones who committed sin, for Eve ate the fruit in Eden. We are just women who grow sweet potatoes, look after pigs and give birth to children. We believe you died on the cross to set us free. Thank you, in Jesus’s name Amen.”

This is a typical prayer of women I have heard during my visits to ministries in several villages. Even I said the same prayer for many years.

I was born and grew up in Agamua, the Central Highlands of West Papua. My father belongs to the Lani tribe and my mother comes from Walak.

In the Lani and Walak languages — languages spoken in the Central Highlands — *tiru* means a pillar. There are four *tiru* (pillars) standing firmly in the middle of the Lani roundhouse (*honai*), around *wun'awe* or a furnace. *Tiru* is always made of the strongest type of wood called *a'pe* (ironwood tree). The longer the wood gets heated and smoked from the fire in the *honai*, the stronger it becomes. Without *tiru*, the *honai* cannot stand firm. West Papuan women are these *tiru*.

West Papua is located in the western part of New Guinea island, containing some of the world's highest mountains, densest jungle, and richest mineral resources. It is home to over 250 groups and has an incredible biodiversity. Due to its natural wealth, West Papua has, over the centuries, been targeted by foreign occupiers. Until 1963, we were colonized by the Dutch. However in 1969, after a manipulative political act, we were transferred from the Dutch to Indonesia.

The first German missionaries arrived in Mansinam Island, Manokwari, in 1855. Then, in the 1950s, Christianity was brought to the Central Highlands of West Papua by Protestant missionaries of European descent from America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

According to Scripture in Genesis 1:26-27, Man and Woman are created in the image of God. It means all humanity is made with the call and capacity to exercise dominion. *Radah*, the Hebrew word for dominion, means stewardship. *Radah* is not a call to exercise imperial power as declared by Pope Nicolas

V, granting Catholic nations the right to “discover” and claim dominion over non-Christian lands. To diminish the capacity of humans to exercise dominion, is to diminish the image of God on earth (Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel*).

The Evangelical Church of Indonesia (GIDI) was established as an institution in 1963. In the Sunday Service liturgy of GIDI, women are considered unworthy to take any responsibility except collecting offerings. In 2003, after 40 years, the Department of Women was introduced within the structure of the Synod leadership.

In November 2013, I was entrusted to be a chairperson of the Women's Department of the GIDI Synod. Together with several other women leaders, we started a cell group that is committed to “decolonizing the Bible.” We learn together how to reconstruct the interpretation of biblical texts to champion women. A feminist theologian named Elisabeth S. Florenza calls it a feminist hermeneutic theory (Josina Wospakrik, *Biblical Interpretation and Marginalization of Women in the Churches of West Papua*).

Besides the cell group, we interview our elderly women to collect our ancestors' wisdom and values. As Bernard Narakobi in his book *The Melanesian Way* said: “Our history did not begin with contact with the Western explorers. Our civilization did not start with the coming of the Christian missionaries. Because we have an ancient civilization. It is important for us to give proper dignity and place to our history”.

Yum is a handmade knotted net or woven bag from wood fiber or leaves. *Yum* is highly valued, for it symbolizes life and hope. When women of Lani and Walak get married, our

maternal aunts put *yum* on our heads. It means we bear the responsibility for giving life and for providing food. *Yum* is used to carry garden produce, as well as being used as a container to put a baby to sleep in, as it gives warmth and a sense of security.

“West Papuan Women are *Yum* and *Tiru*” became the prime references as we contextualized women in the eyes of Jesus Christ in seminar and focus group discussions. From 2013 to 2018, we focused on reconstructing the view of women in GIDI and

in gaining a healthy self-image. We are still in the process of understanding who we are to Jesus, rather than who we have been told we are by theologians and the fathers of the early Churches. Josina Wospakrik, a West Papuan Theologian said “The Gospel is incredibly rich but it was impoverished due to human ambitions and agendas.”

Since 2018, the GIDI Women Leadership team and I have formulated four priority programs: Decolonizing the Bible, Storytelling in a Circle, Training of

Together with several other women leaders, we started a cell group that is committed to “decolonizing the Bible.” We learn together how to reconstruct the interpretation of biblical texts to champion women.

Trainers for Literacy and Gender. The fourth supported simple bookkeeping and savings groups workshops facilitated by Yapelin and Yasumat, which are faith-based organizations established by GIDI leaders to reach the economic, social and health needs of women in the communities.

Storytelling in a Circle

In this programme we create a safe space for women to talk — each woman has a story. We all sit together and learn how to be good listeners.

"I became Christian and was taught that the government is God's representative. Why did the government do nothing when the army burnt down my village and killed my relatives?" asked one woman in the storytelling circle. "My aunt was raped." She stopped for a while. Could not talk. She cried. We all did.

The process of storytelling has driven us into deep conversation. We began to contextualize Biblical texts within our daily realities. We started asking questions amongst ourselves: Where is God in our toughest times? Does the state government truly represent God on earth? Why does the Creator allow privileged people to destroy His own image in the name of Christianity and Development? During the process, I realized that I have been reading the Bible using somebody else's glasses.

The church has to be a safe place to share stories and be a place of comfort to be still and rest. As we reflect on the testimonies, those who tell their stories begin the process of recovering from wounds and trauma.

Financial Literacy for Women

Culturally, West Papuans invest in relationships. The concept of saving is understood as an investment in relations, not in a bank account. And while the Indonesian central government has granted special autonomy to respond to West Papuans' demand for self-determination, many government policies harm the quality of family life and do not account for women's lives. High illiteracy rates amongst

women mean most women do not have access to a bank account. With no money saved, access to medical services becomes a struggle.

Through the priority programmes, Yapelin, with the active involvement and support of women, created saving groups in Bokondini and Jayapura. The saving groups are chaired by women who have access to a bank.

In coordination with Yayasan Bethany Indonesia (YBI) and Yayasan Suluh, a faith-based organization (FBO) based in Jayapura, we facilitated four literacy workshops. The literacy team facilitated the training of trainers in three different dioceses: Merauke, Sentani, and Benawa. We now have 30 facilitators in different congregations who run literacy programs.

Lack of financial support for our programs will not stop us. Being stigmatized as rebels will not stop us from standing up and speaking in church evaluation meetings and conferences. It is stressful, but I am committed, together with several women leaders, to calling on the power-holders within to free the church.

The Gospel known as the Good News should become news that liberates women from a patriarchal circle of power, liberates women from social stigma, and returns women to the original purpose of The Creator. The Gospel must be a mirror to reflect who we are collectively. As Lisa Sharon Harper, in her book *The Very Good Gospel* said: "The Gospel is not only about an individual's reconciliation with God, self and communities. But also speaks on systemic justice, peace between people groups and freedom for the oppressed." ■



My Queer Ramadan

AMAL AMER

@youcandoithabibi

California, USA

**I pray with my family
for the first time in six
years while wrapped in
a keffiyah I scavenged
from a dumpster.**

Since coming into myself, I have refused to pray in *jamaat* with my family. Joining in the ranks of hierarchy, “women” behind “men” irks me. It grates my skin and teeth to the degree where I can’t focus, and the standing, bowing, and kneeling feels like a battle against my true being. Each second listening, a betrayal of my nature. Instead, I pray by myself in my own way.

Yet this Ramadan, I feel different. Back in my childhood home after many years, I am choosing to fast. I choose *suhoor* with my family, and praying together feels like a natural extension of eating together. After eating, my mother, father, brother and I line up for *fajr*.

I pray behind Baba, but my prayer is my own. I close my eyes, staying with my breath and my body.

My eyes closed, I open my inner sight to a wide open window on a vista of mountains, bright sun spreading over a light mist of clouds. This was the view I had while praying in *jamaat* at a queer Muslim wedding I attended in the mountains of the South of France last September.

I lined up with the wedding guests, queer and trans folks of North and West African, Arab, and European descent. Folks of all faiths joined while some chose to stand in respect at the sides or behind. The groups did not fall along fault lines of “Muslim” or “non-Muslim,” “religious” or “non-religious.” The two lovers marrying each led us in prayer, and so did the Muslim woman officiating the *nikkah*. Each of the three led us in two rounds of prayers, two *raqat*.

I showed up as I was, my body uncovered. I had not washed. I only passed my camera to a friend who chose to stand at the side.

In the first *sujood*, I broke down crying. I wore a jean dress that loves my body, one found at a thrift store my ex-girlfriend pointed me to. The sobs come through my whole body during the prayer, and I put my head to the earth with my community like a homecoming. A return to the embrace of love both intensely personal and communal, and I am held. It feels like swimming in the sea with multiple people: joyful togetherness. But when you go beneath the water, it’s just you and the current.

Like a dozen people buried in the same graveyard. Separate, but sharing the same soil. Becoming one with the growing earth.

That was how it felt to pray in communion at a queer Muslim wedding. I welcomed the light of acceptance while showing up as myself that day, with a group of people who had also chosen to claim all the parts of themselves in love. That light made a home in me, and it illuminates my heart in the dark living room at *fajr* this Ramadan morning. Though I pray with my birth family who do not accept all of me, I see myself praying in *jamaat* at that glorious wedding with all of my queer Muslim ancestors, my queer angels, my lineage, my soul family, my queer Muslim family, all standing in prayer. Bowing as one.

My family’s home does not always feel like my own, though I am here now. I take the *bukhoor* from room to room, barefoot. Smolder from the censer, an incense

that says, "Here I am." *Baraka*, blessings from the source of all, Allah and the Goddess to each room in the house, bidding good and dispersing the unbidden.

As I write this, the sky turns the same royal blue I am familiar with from exiting the club and pulling all-nighters. It is the gradient of morning I step into as I go to sleep. ■

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Ramadan morning.
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Ramadan:

The Muslim holy month, traditionally observed with 29 days of fasting without food or water during daylight hours.

Keffiyah:

A patterned scarf common in the SWANA region. The black and white version referred to here is associated with the Palestinian liberation movement.

Pray in jamaat:

Islamic ritual prayer in a group. Participants follow one person, traditionally male, who calls the prayer aloud.

Suhoor:

The meal before the fast starts at dawn.

Fajr:

The dawn prayer.

Baba:

Father

Raqat:

One round of prayer consisting of standing, bowing, kneeling, and pressing the head to the ground.

Sujood:

The prayer position when one presses one's head to the earth.

Nikkah:

The religious marriage ceremony.

Bukhoor:

An Arabic incense, woodchips soaked in resin.

Baraka:

Blessing



**“Angels go out
at night too”**

by Chloé Luu @Electricchildren
(France)

—

Pictures of angels in my life, just some women and non-binary people of color hanging out, taking care of themselves and expressing love to each other. It's these simplest moments that are the most empowering.

Kunyit Asam: The Roots of Love and Resilience

PRINKA SARASWATI

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Bali, Indonesia

The menstrual cycle usually lasts between 27 and 30 days. During this time, the period itself would only go on for five to seven days. During the period, fatigue, mood swings, and cramps are the result of inflammation. In traditional Javanese culture, this is the moment for women to rest and take care of themselves. During this moment, a woman would take Kunyit Asam, a jamu or herbal drink to soothe the inflammation. This elixir consists of turmeric and tamarind boiled together in a pot.

I still remember my first period — it was one day before graduation day in elementary school. I remember pedaling my bike and feeling something warm running between my thighs. When I arrived home I did all I could to clean myself and then put on a menstrual pad. My mother came home from work about four hours later. I told her what had happened. She looked me in the eye and asked how I felt. I told her that it was painful, that my body was swollen in every place. Then she asked me to go with her to the backyard. I followed her to our little jungle, my mother sat down on the soil and smiled.

“See this slender leaf? This is the leaf of *Kunyit*, empon-empon* that leaves the yellow stain on your fingers. What’s most important is not the leaf, but the roots. You dig the soil and slowly grab the roots,” my mother showed me how to pick *Kunyit* or turmeric roots. Then we went to the kitchen where she boiled water along with some tamarind. While waiting for it to boil, she showed me how to wash and grate the orangey-yellow root. Then, we put the grated turmeric into the boiling tamarind water. “Tomorrow, you can make it for yourself. This will help you to feel better!”

I remember the first time I tasted it — a slightly bitter taste but also sour. My mother always served it warm. She would also put some in a big bottle which I would place on my stomach or lower back for further relief. For days after, my mother’s hands and mine were yellow. My friends could always tell every time I got period because my hands would be yellow.

A year after my first period, I found out that you could get the bottled version in convenience stores. Still, I made my own *Kunyit Asam* every time I had my period

because the one in the convenience stores was cold. It did not smell of wet soil and warm kitchen.

Fast forward, I am a 26-year-old woman who casually makes this drink for friends when they have their periods. I’ve made some for my housemates and I’ve delivered some to friends who live in different towns. I do not grow turmeric roots in my garden, but I have grown and shared the love from my mom. What was once from garden to cup is now from pasar* to cup.

A couple of days ago, I asked my mother who taught her how to make the jamu.

“Who else? Yang Ti*! Your grandmother was not just a teacher,” said my mom. I was never close to my grandmother. She passed away when I was eight. All I knew from my mom was that she was a math teacher who had to teach courses after work. I had this image of my grandmother as a hard worker who was kind of distant with her children. My mom did not disagree with that, but explained it came from her survival instinct as a mother. “She tried to make time. She tried. She taught me how to make jamu so I could take care of myself and my sisters.”

My mother is the second child out of seven, six of whom are girls. The reason my grandmother taught her is so that all of her children could take care of each other. While my mother was taught how to make the drink, my mother’s older sister was taught how to plant turmeric. Yang Ti knew which one loved the smell of soil more and which one loved the smell of the kitchen. My mother was the latter. She learned how to plant from my aunt, her older sister.

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My grandfather worked in a bank but he got laid off when he was in his 40s. So, my grandmother had to do a side-hustle to support their children. My mother was in high school at that time when Yang Ti woke her and her older sister up at dawn. "Would you help me to pick some roots?"

Of course nobody said no. Especially if it was your mother, especially if you were born in Javanese culture where saying "no" sounded like a bad word. Together, the three of them went to the backyard, and they harvested empon-empon, rhizome, that was buried inside the soil. She grew many kinds of rhizome: temu lawak, temu putih, ginger, galangal, kunci, kencur, and Kunyit. That was the day where my mother realized that her mother was never far away from her. That was the day where she could spend more time with her mother. There, in the garden. There, in the kitchen.

"We're sending these for Ibu Darti, the lady who lives across the river. Kunyit Asam for her and her daughters.", said my grandmother to my mother and my aunt that day. They poured the turmeric-tamarind warm drink into a tall thermos and later my grandmother would deliver it on the way to school.

Over time, my grandmother got more orders for jamu. Everybody in the family helped her to make and deliver her jamu. The small business lasted only a few years, but that was what paid for my mother and her siblings' education.

Today, my mother, who got laid off just a few days before I wrote this piece, harvested turmeric and other roots. She's making her turmeric-tamarind drink from her kitchen. My phone rang in the middle of this afternoon, a couple minutes after I boiled the rest of my grated turmeric. Today is one day after my period.

"Ingka, have you washed your pot after boiling those turmeric? It would forever be yellow if you don't wash it right away!" ■

Empon-empon:

Roots like ginger, turmeric, etc. coming from the Javanese word "Empu" which means, something or someone that has deep knowledge.

Jamu:

Indonesia's traditional elixir made of roots, barks, flowers, seeds, leaves, and fruits.

Yang Ti:

Javanese term for grandmother, taken from the term "Eyang Putri" the female you look up to.

Pasar:

the word for traditional market in Indonesian.



“Feminist Movement”

by Karina Tungari @_katung_
(Hamburg, Germany)

—
The more women support other
women, the quicker we'll see
progress. Together we are stronger
and make even more impact.

Our arepa: Resistance from the Kitchen

ALEJANDRA LAPREA
@alejalaprea | Caracas, Venezuela

**I live in a country of the impossible,
where there are no bombs yet we are
living in a war.**

**A war that exists only for those of us
living in this territory.**

**I live in a country no one understands,
which few can really see, where
various realities co-exist, and where
the truth is murdered time and again.**

I live in a country where one has to pay for the audacity of thinking for oneself, for taking on the challenge of seeing life another way. I live in a country of women who have had to invent and reinvent, time and again, how they live and how to get by.

I live in Venezuela, in a time of an unusual and extraordinary threat.

Since 2012, my country has been subjected to an unconventional war. There are no defined armies or firepower. Their objective is to dislocate and distort the economy, affecting all households, daily life, and the capacity of a people to dream and build a different kind of politics, an alternative to the patriarchal, bourgeois, capitalist democracy.

Venezuelan women are the primary victims of this economic war. Women who historically and culturally are responsible for providing care are the most affected and in demand. However, in these years of economic and financial embargo, Venezuelan women have gone from being victims to the protagonists on the front lines defending our territory. Battles are fought from the barrios, kitchens, and small gardens. We defend the right of girls and boys to go to school and to be given something so simple as some arepas for breakfast.

Arepas are a kind of corn cake that can be fried, roasted or baked and served sweet or savoury as a side or main dish. It is a staple in the diet of all Venezuelans.

In Venezuela, arepas mean culture, family, food sovereignty, childhood nostalgia, the expert hands of grandmothers molding little balls, the warmth that comforts you when recovering from illness.

Venezuelan women are the primary victims of this economic war. Women who historically and culturally are responsible for providing care, are the most affected and in demand.

Arepas connect us as a people with the pre-Colombian cultures of corn, a resistance that has endured for more than five centuries. They are the Caribbean expressed differently on firm ground. They are an act of resistance.

When my mother was a girl, they would start grinding the dry corn early in the morning to make arepas. The women would get up and put the kernels of corn in wooden mortars and pound it with heavy mallets to separate the shells. Then they would boil, soak, and grind the corn to make dough, and finally they would mold it into round arepas. The process would take hours and demand a lot of physical effort. In the mid-20th century a Venezuelan company industrialized the production of corn meal. For an entire generation that seemed like an act of liberation, since

there was now a flour that you could simply add water to and have hot arepas in 45 minutes time.

But that also meant that the same generation would lose the traditional knowledge of to make them from scratch. My grandmother was an expert arepa maker, my mother saw it as a girl, and for me the corn meal came pre-packaged.

In this war with no military, the pre-cooked corn meal came to be wielded as an instrument of war by the same company that invented it, which was not so Venezuelan anymore: today the Polar group of companies is transnational.

We women began to recuperate our knowledge by talking with the eldest among us. We searched in the back of the closets for our grandmothers' grinders, the ones we hadn't thrown away out of affection. Some families still prepared the corn in the

traditional way for important occasions. In some towns there were still communal grinding stations which had been preserved as part of local history or because small family businesses refused to die. All of these forms of cultural resistance were activated, and we even went so far as to invent new arepas.

Today, we know that in order to resist we cannot depend on one food staple. Although corn arepas continue to be everyone's favourite, we have invented recipes for arepas made of sweet potato, cassava, squash, and celery root.

We have learned that we can use almost any root vegetable to make arepas.

Cooperative businesses have developed semi-industrial processes to make pre-cooked corn meal. In other words, we have recuperated our arepas and their preparation as a cultural good that belongs to all. ■

**“Entretejidas”
[Interwoven women]**

by Surmercé @surmerce
(Santa Marta, Colombia)

—
My activism aims to decolonize our senses in everyday life. I like to create spaces that communicate how we weave together our different struggles, and render visible dissident (re) existences, other possible worlds, and living bodies here in the SOUTH.



Entretejidas

Surmercé

**“Let’s take care of
one another”**

by Marga RH @Marga.RH
(Chile, UK)

As we continue to fight in our
struggles, let us remember how
essential it is that we support each
other, believe each other, and love
ourselves and our sisters. When
this system fucks us over, we

must take time to look after our
(physical and mental) health, that
of our sisters, and to understand
that each one of us carries unique
stories, making us fighters in
resistance.



Cuidémonos entre nosotras

Esmeralda takes over the Internet: How social media has helped Romani women to reclaim visibility

ÉMILIE HERBERT-PONTONNIER

@romani.herstory | Belgium

Remember Esmeralda? The exotic “Gypsy” heroine born under the pen of the French literary giant Victor Hugo and popularized by Disney studios with their *Hunchback of Notre Dame*. In the beloved animated film, Esmeralda is a dark-skinned woman with thick black hair and eyebrows. Gold jewellery, a low-cut and off-the-shoulder bodice, long colorful skirts, and a tambourine complete her look and have contributed to shaping an image of Romani femininity that has remained popular since the release of the film in 1996.

As a French woman of Romani descent, who was born in 1986, I cannot pretend that my childhood was not marked by *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. I watched the cartoon when I was ten and at that time, Esmeralda was the only Romani female role model in popular culture that I could look up to. She did not reflect my experience but vaguely resembled my mother and, most importantly, was my only option in a world of white-skinned, blue-eyed Disney princesses.

The Romani roots of my maternal family were something my parents advised me not to discuss publicly — and especially not at school. In the popular imagination, Roma were (and still are) frequently associated with lawlessness and disorder. My identity was then defined by secrecy, shame and intergenerational trauma. I would later discover that such secrecy is quite common among Romani families: by prompting their children to hide their ethnicity, parents are protecting them from a world that has historically been hostile to their prescribed Otherness. It is a survival strategy.

The representation of Romani women in popular culture has not improved in twenty years. In many countries across Europe, the Roma still face social exclusion, lack of access to quality healthcare services or education, as well as challenges in finding employment and proper housing. Romani women are statistically more likely to experience sexual assault and abuse than non-Roma. The media has largely helped to shape an image of Romani femininity that either fetishizes Romani women (as fortune tellers, witches or exotic, mythical creatures) or discredits them (as dirty and illiterate beggars). The scarcity and

whitewashing of Romani female characters within popular culture has contributed to denying our most basic humanity.

Yet, Romani women are an essential part of European societies: as citizens, artists, scientists, writers, activists, Romani women have contributed to improving their environment in a myriad of ways. Many of them have made their mark in disciplines as varied as the arts, politics, STEM or fashion. We are not at all suffering from a lack of positive role models: we are suffering from a lack of visibility.

As a proud feminist, I have always been interested in the idea of reclaiming the history we were written out of as women, of writing our own HERstory, centered around our experiences. So when, on International Women's Day 2020, I opened up the photo-sharing platform Instagram to create a new account, I naturally named it @romani.herstory. I had little experience with social media — in fact, I don't even own a smartphone, something that I quickly realized would be problematic —but I hoped that @romani.herstory could somehow help to pluralize Romani women's representations. Two to three times a week, I would write and publish a short biography recounting the life journey of a woman of Romani descent, an unsung heroine or trailblazer who refuses to conform to stereotypes. On this account, you will find the story of Panna Cinka, the 18th-century Hungarian violinist who challenged the gender conventions of her time; Swedish politician and human rights activist Soraya Post; the two Serbian actresses and rappers Simonida and Sandra Selimović and the extraordinary 19th-century wild beast tamer Ellen Chapman, who was also known under her stage name, "Madame Pauline De Verre, the Lady of the Lions."

The scarcity and whitewashing of Romani female characters within popular culture has contributed to denying our most basic humanity.

I chose Instagram because it allowed me to offer short, accessible and compelling portraits, which could potentially reach a wide and diverse audience. Soon I had to make time to answer the daily messages of support that were sent from — primarily, though not exclusively — Romani women. I am regularly sent the names of women whose story my “followers” would like to see published on the account. Launching @romani.herstory made me realize that alternative and collaborative forms of knowledge production could be built online and, on a personal level, it has helped me to shape with more confidence my identity as a young woman of Romani descent living in a digital era.

The internet and social media have enabled Romani women to create new patterns of activism and to connect beyond geographical borders. Women coming from all walks of life can now interact more easily and share strategies of resistance while bonding over various elements of a shared ethnic and cultural heritage. Online social networks, in particular, offer the opportunity to create new definitions and new images of Romani culture, otherwise largely invisible in mainstream media. Romani women take an active part

in this change of paradigms and, through their conversations, embody what they otherwise seem so rarely allowed to be in the dominant media: funny, creative, smart, playful, curious, complex and supportive of each other. By claiming these virtual spaces, we are affirming that our existence is valuable, in a world that has largely been denying it for centuries.

However, I am aware that the celebration of things like the @romani.herstory Instagram account might appear as somewhat elitist to vulnerable Romani women, who may have more pressing issues than scrolling down the social network. Furthermore, many Roma may not have access to communication technologies or may lack the digital literacy required to effectively use social media. In other words, Romani girls that I wish my “herstories” could inspire may simply never be able to read them.

This is why, two months after launching @romani.herstory, I decided to push the project further and to create a Ko-Fi account. Ko-Fi is like a virtual tip jar: the platform allows anyone with a PayPal

account to donate a small amount of money for a piece of content they appreciate. I decided that each month, I would donate whatever amount had been collected on Ko-Fi to a different grassroots organisation helping vulnerable Romani groups, with a particular focus on those working towards Romani women and girls' empowerment. The first organisation I wanted to donate to was E-Romnja, a Romanian association for Romani women's rights, which was created in 2012. At that moment, E-Romnja was collecting money for their "COVID-19 Emergency Relief Fund," which aimed to provide supplies, groceries, non-perishables, diapers, soap, disinfectant and other basic necessities to Romani families in need. The response was enthusiastic: in less than four days, my initial target of 100 euros had been reached, with donations ranging from 1 to 30 euros, everyone participating within their means. Albeit virtual, the

fundraising campaign meant that the project could become more grounded in social reality and therefore more effective to build collective, feminist and inclusive solutions to improve Romani women's lives everywhere.

I don't want to fall into the trap of technological utopianism and pretend that new technologies will solve all the problems of anti-Gypsyism overnight – in fact, online hate speech towards Roma and Travellers continue to be a concern for most of us. But digital technologies and social media help us create social change and visibility beyond the stereotypical representations that the dominant media continue to use to describe our experiences. Our realities cannot be silenced anymore: Esmeralda has taken over the Internet and is reclaiming her seat at the table. ■

Digital technologies and
social media help us create
social change and visibility
beyond the stereotypical
representations that the
dominant media continue
to use to describe our
experiences. Our realities
cannot be silenced anymore.



“Si las marronas lo permiten”

by Nayare Soledad Otorongx Montes

Gavilan @paellaypaelle

(Madrid, España)

—
In a racist state whose name I do not want to remember, lived the color of the earth, the color of gold, the color of the sacred. We protect our bodies ourselves.







“Fabrics, Passion, and Rebellious Fashion”

by Salma Soliman @salamii360
(Los Angeles, USA)

—
My existence is both a form of rebellion and rejection. I am constantly creating my own blueprint on how to exist in this world - one that's on my terms. My wardrobe embodies creativity, vibrancy, and confidence that actively works to reject patriarchal and capitalist structures and norms.

Our neighbourhood, our network, our strength

MARTA PLAZA FERNÁNDEZ
@gacela1980 | Madrid, Spain

The feminist reality that I want to share is about weaving networks in which we uphold one another. Networks which come together in different ways, which emerge from our shared vulnerability, and which make all of us stronger.

The streets of Chamberí, my neighbourhood in Madrid, became much more of a home following the gatherings in the plazas organized by the citizens movement that originated in a rally on May 15, 2011. I think about how, during those years, we met each other and were able to associate faces, voices, smiles with so many neighbours who previously were only silhouettes without names or pasts, and who we passed by without seeing or hearing each other. I think about how we've become involved and dedicated; how we've woven a palpable, tangible community; how we've been advancing hand-in-hand towards building a new more habitable world, which we want and that we urgently need to create.

A group of activists and utopian neighbours (in the best sense of the word utopian) — that moves us to action to do something real — that group for me was practically the first that reacted differently when I shared a part of my history and identity with them. With these women I shared my psychiatric diagnosis, my multiple hospital stays, the number of daily pills that accompanied me, my disability certificate, my difficulty in preserving that vital link that periodically disintegrates in my hands.

These neighbours, friends, comrades, links, and loves — did not only not distance themselves from me once they got to know someone who many others had labelled as problematic, manipulative, and egotistical — but became my principal network of affection and mutual support. They decided to navigate with me when the sea became agitated with storms. These people have given a different meaning to my days.

Building our feminist reality also encompasses carrying the “I believe you, sister” that we use when a friend has suffered a macho attack to

With these
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the violence experienced by psychiatrized women at the hands of the very psychiatric systems and institutions that are supposed to help us (and instead are often the new abuser who traumatizes and hurts us all over again). And this reality must include respect for our decisions, without taking away our agency and capacity to direct our own steps to one space or another; to listen to our narratives, desires, and needs...without trying to impose others that are alien to us. It means not delegitimizing our discourse, nor alluding to the label of our diagnosis, or our madness.

With these transformations, each stay in the psychiatric institute erased the ties that we had been able to build, but instead this network stayed by my side. Its members took turns so that each day there would be no lull in calls, in visits, so that I could feel them as close as one can feel another person separated by locked doors (but unfortunately open for abuse) within the confines of the psychiatric ward. Through

We've also explored the limits
of self care and the strength
of collectivizing care and
redistributing it so it's not a
burden that paralyzes us; we
learnt—and we keep learning
today—about joy and enjoying
care that is chosen.

the warmth and kindness from my people
I could rebuild that vital link that had once
again been broken.

The even bigger leap happened when I was
already aware of the numerous violent acts
and abuse (where among other assaults,
I spent days strapped to a bed, relieving
myself where I lay), I decided that I would
not go back to being interned. This network
of care, these women neighbours-friends-
loves-comrades, they respected my refusal
to return to the hospital and supported
me through each crisis I've been through
since then. Without being interned, without
violence. They took turns accompanying me
when my link to life was so broken that I
felt such a huge risk which I couldn't handle
on my own. They organized WhatsApp
group check-ins. They coordinated care and
responsibilities so that no one would feel
overwhelmed — because when an individual
feels overloaded they make decisions based
on fear and the need for control instead of
prioritizing accompaniment and care.

That first crisis that we were able to
surmount together in this way — without
being admitted to the psychiatric institute,
represented a dramatic change in my life.
There were months when my life was at
risk, of intense suffering and of so much
fear for my people and for me. But we
overcame it together, and all that I thought
was that if we could get over that crisis,
then we could also find ways to face all the
difficulties and crises that may come.

These feminist realities that we're building
day-by-day keep expanding, growing, and
taking different forms. We're learning
together, we're growing together.
Distancing ourselves from a welfare
mentality, one of the first lessons was
that, in reality, there wouldn't be anyone
receiving care (because of a psychiatric
label) or anyone helping from the other
side of the sanity/insanity line. We learnt
— we're learning — to move to a different
key, that of mutual support, of providing
care and being cared for, of caring for each
other. We've also explored the limits of self
care and the strength of collectivizing care



“Healing Together”

by Upasana Agarwal @upasana_a
(Kolkata, India)

and redistributing it so it's not a burden that paralyzes us; we learnt — and we keep learning today — about joy and enjoying care that is chosen.

Another recent learning is about how difficult it was to start integrating money as another component of mutual support that we all give and receive. It was hard for us to

realize how internalized capitalism kept on reverberating in our relationship with money, and that even though no one expected any payment for the containers of lentils we cooked amongst us when eating and cooking were difficult tasks, our expectation regarding money was different. Phrases like: “how much you have is how much you're worth,” become stuck inside

of us without critically analyzing them. It's easy to keep thinking that the money each one has is related to the effort made to earn it, and not due to other social conditioning distant from personal merit. In fact, within this well-established mutual support network — redistributing money based on needs without questioning — was still a remote reality for our day-to-day. That's why this is something that we've recently started to work on and think through as a group. We want to get closer to that anti-capitalist world where mutual support is the way that we have chosen to be in the world, and that entails deconstructing our personal and collective relationship with money and internalized capitalism.

In these feminist realities we also know that learning never stops, and that the road continues to be shaped as we travel upon it. There is still much to do to keep caring for ourselves, to keep expanding perspectives and to make ourselves more aware of the persistent power imbalances, of privileges that we hold and continue to exercise without realizing the violence that they reproduce.

Though we've already travelled so far, we still have a long way to go to get closer to that new world that we hold in our hearts (and for some within our crazy little heads too). Racism, classism, adult-centrism, fat-phobia, and machismo persists among our partners.

Among the pending lessons, we've needed for a long time already to build a liveable future in which feminism is really intersectional and in which we all have space, in which the realities and oppressions of other sisters are just as important as our own. We also need to move forward horizontally when we build collectively

— getting rid of egos, of protagonisms, to live together and deal with the need for recognition in a different way. And to also keep making strides grounded in the awareness that the personal is always political. How we relate to and link with each other cannot be relegated to the private domain, nor kept silent: other loves are possible, other connections and other families are necessary, and we are also inventing them as we go.

This new world which we want to create — and that we need to believe in - is this kind of world in which we can love, and feel pride in ourselves — and in which all worlds will fit. We'll keep at it. ■



“Healing Together”

by Upasana Agarwal @upasana_a
(Kolkata, India)

Looking at activists and feminists as healers and nourishers of the world in the midst of battling growing right-wing presence, white supremacy, and climate change. This piece highlights

how our feminist reality puts kindness, solidarity, and empathy into action by showing up and challenging the status quo to liberate us all.

"Are You Really Strong?"

by GonzoDen @GonzoDen

(Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan)







“Ashawo Work na Work”: How Young Ghanaian Feminists Are Making Feminist Futures A Reality

FATIMA B. DERBY

@fatima_derby | Accra, Ghana

In 2017, the AWID #PracticeSolidarity campaign highlighted how young feminists could build feminist futures by showing up for one another, being in cross-regional conversations with one another, marching in solidarity with other activists, and collaborating between movements. Feminist solidarity and collective action in practice requires, first of all, for us to understand and acknowledge that our experiences, although similar in some ways, are also unique and distinct in other ways.

Our different identities such as our gender, race, class status, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability or disability influence the ways we are treated by oppressive systems. Acknowledging these different experiences helps us find common points for action within our movements. This understanding of solidarity is key in feminist activism and organizing.

Maame Akua Kyerewaa Marfo is one of the organizers of the Young Feminist Collective, an Accra-based feminist group that defines itself as committed to continuing in the badassery of their feminist ancestors. For Maame, practicing solidarity becomes a feminist reality when she makes a conscious choice to include and centre women from different backgrounds in her activism and organizing. “Feminist solidarity is standing with everyone who exists at the different margins of society, even if their experiences are different from mine,” she says.

bell hooks tells us that: “Solidarity is not the same as support. To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood. Support can be occasional. It can be given and just as easily withdrawn. Solidarity requires sustained ongoing commitment.”

In April 2019, Nigerian Twitter was thrown into a state of fury when news broke of the unlawful arrests of over 100 women on suspicion of sex work. The arrests, which have now come to be known as the Abuja Police Raid, were made by the Federal Capital Territory Administration (FCTA) Joint Task Force and the Nigeria Police Force. The women were picked up from streets, restaurants, clubs and lounges, accused of being sex workers, and extorted by the

police. Many of the women were asked to either pay a fine of \$8 (N3,000) or be sentenced to imprisonment for a month. \$8 might seem like a small amount to some people but in a country where the minimum wage is about \$3 a day, it is a significant amount for many people. Those who could not afford the fines were sexually assaulted by the police.

The Abuja Police Raid and the unlawful arrests of the women on suspicion of sex work show how deep the stigma of sex work runs within our societies and institutions. Women who choose to live freely, dress the way they want, go wherever they like and at any time they please are often regarded as “sexual deviants.” The stigma associated with sexual deviance exposes women to higher risks of violence. Unfortunately, the police who are supposed to protect women are themselves ambassadors of state violence. Following the raid, women’s rights organizations and African feminists living in Africa and the diaspora took to social media to express their anger and frustration about the institutionalized oppression of women. Out of these conversations, #SayHerNameNigeria — an adaptation from the Say Her Name movement — was coined by Nigerian feminist Angel Nduka-Nwosu. The Say Her Name movement, according to their Mission Statement, is a “movement that calls attention to police violence against Black women, girls and femmes, and demands that their stories be integrated into calls for justice, policy responses to police violence, and media representations of police brutality.”

When I first heard the news about the Abuja Police Raid, I was horrified and seething with rage. I knew I had to do something so I reached out to some Nigerian feminists

Feminist solidarity is standing with everyone who exists at the different margins of society, even if their experiences are different from mine.

and asked how I could help. I was added to a WhatsApp organizing group where Nigerian feminists were planning to protest in Lagos and in Abuja. I volunteered to organize a solidarity march in Accra and they readily agreed. I got in contact with other young feminists in Accra, including members of the Young Feminist Collective and we began organizing a solidarity march.

Like Maame, Jessica Armooh is a member of the Young Feminist Collective, Accra. Her countless experiences of sexual harassment from police officers at road checkpoints gave her reason to march in solidarity with The Say Her Name Nigeria Movement. She says, “the Abuja Police Raid brought to bear the fact that things are really bad for women, especially for single women whom these police officers interact with. But it was also great to know that as women, we are in solidarity with one another, standing up for ourselves and advocating for each other.”

Organising and marching was a very intense and frightening experience for me. Mobilizing people to protest police violence meant that I had to deal with Ghana Police. I wrote to Ghana Police notifying them of our proposed march and they invited me to the

Accra Regional Police Headquarters to answer some questions about the march, the organizers, and participants. After reassuring them that it was a peaceful march and we were not a “terrorist organization”, they informed me about the procedure to obtain a police escort for the march. And although I felt a little afraid and worried for my safety, my commitment to standing with other women to demand justice gave me the courage I needed.

While I was feeling a little trepidation about the march, it was an empowering experience for Nana Akosua Hanson, who is a young Ghanaian feminist and the director of Drama Queens, a political theatre organization that uses arts for human rights activism. Prior to that day, Nana Akosua had never been to a protest before. She says it was liberating. In that moment, she felt the power of the movement most strongly - being part of the bigger march of women in the UK and across different cities in Nigeria.

“The solidarity march showed me how feminist solidarity manifests. Bringing together feminists on different continents, in the virtual space and on the streets of

Accra, united in a liberation cause for sex workers who have been brutalized by the police and ignored by the leaders.”

For Nana Yaa Konadu Agyepong, a young Ghanaian feminist writer, it was cathartic to march the streets of Accra and loudly oppose state violence against women. She acknowledges that oppressive systems are similar regardless of what country they exist in. “There have been instances where the Ghana Police Force has been violent toward women. Our protest was about those women in Abuja, but also about the ways women aren’t allowed to be — whether it’s going to the club or working in Abuja or driving in Accra.”

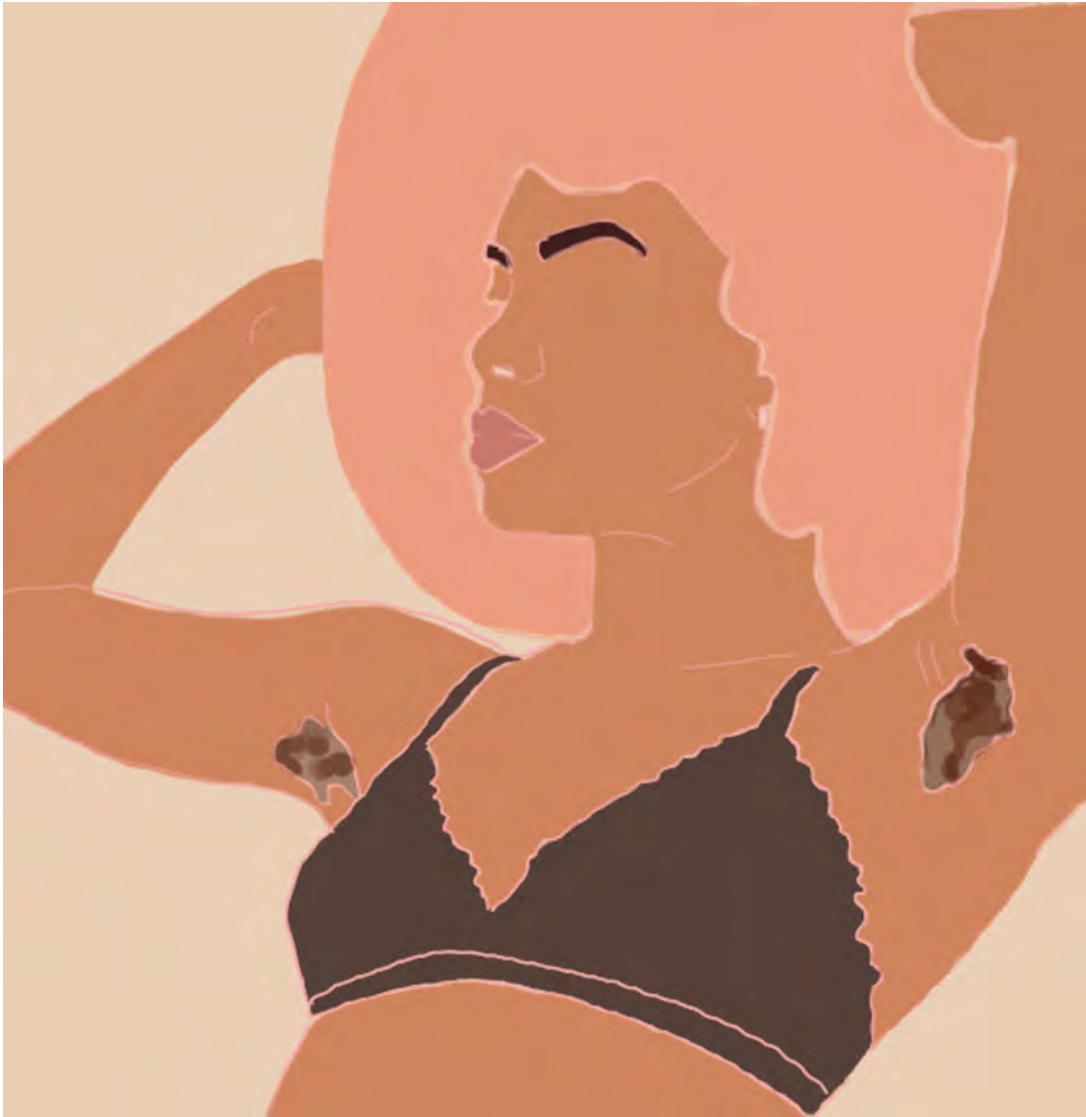
This cross-continental adaptation of resistance language and practice says a

lot about the similarities in Black women’s experiences the world over with regards to patriarchy, race, and other forms of structural violence. Our struggles are connected — the central principle of the #PracticeSolidarity campaign had become a feminist reality. And this feminist reality gives Nana Yaa hope.

“We have a very long way to go. There has been some progress. And I know it’s the collective force from individual efforts that will get us to freedom.”

Marching to the Nigerian High Commission in Accra, loudly chanting: “Ashawo work na work,” was freeing. It helped us assert our agency and gave us the power and confidence to stand up to the oppressive state. For me, that was a feminist future coming to life in our present moment. ■

We have a very long way to go. There has been some progress. And I know it’s the collective force from individual efforts that will get us to freedom.



“Let it Grow”

by Gucora Andu @gucora.andu
(Nairobi, Kenya)

A black woman with her arms raised, unbothered with her exposed bushy armpits. In many societies, armpit hair on women is taboo, while men don't face

such scrutiny. The idea that not shaving can be a choice is an important step towards reframing this issue.

Mainstreaming The Invisible Feminist Realities

DR. PRAGATI SINGH

@Dr.PragatiSingh | Delhi, India

In 2019, I was invited by the BBC to speak at the 100 women conference in Delhi, India, on the subject of “The future of love, relationships, and families.” The audience seated in the large hall consisted mostly of young Indians — college students, professionals, activists etc.

I believe that the only way to start considering a future is to first firmly ground ourselves in our current realities. And so, I started the talk with a “thought energiser”.

"I will speak out seven terms interspersed with pauses, and I'd like you to observe the mental image each conjures up in your mind's eye.

"You may close your eyes now. Ready?"
I started.

- A flying elephant
- Love
- An intimate relationship
- A romantic date
- Marriage
- An ideal family
- Sex

"Tell me, what did the flying elephant look like? Did anyone see one with giant floppy ears?"

I simultaneously showed them the first page that turns up on a Google search of the same term. There was a gasp of surprise when the screen was tiled with images of Dumbo, exactly how everyone had pictured.

"Did love look like a red heart for any of us?"
Again, a roar of agreement and surprise across the hall when I showed them the Google results.

"What came up with 'intimate relationship'? Was it a man and a woman in a romantic warm embrace?"

"Did your idea of a romantic date look as corny as this too?"

Google's idea of a romantic date: a handsome man sitting across a table from a beautiful woman, against a sunset. Some rose petals and some candles next to the wine glasses. The hall echoed with embarrassed laughter.

"And is this what the marriage looked like?"

"Was the ideal family possibly one with a husband and a wife with their two kids, one boy, one girl? Well, guess what?!"

"Anyone want to share what came up with the word sex? Genitalia? Penetration?"
The hall went quiet. In anticipation of the next slide there were muffled chuckles which broke into laughter, hooting, and claps when I clarified that I wasn't going to show the Google results for that one.

But what else is Google if not a mirror to our "groupthink?" That we all, Google included, seemed to imagine the same images isn't really that surprising. Most of us will realize quickly that our first instinctive images are stereotyped, cliché, and limited.

Some of us might have long moved on from heteronormative and traditional ideas of love and marriage. And yet something seems to have stopped us from mainstreaming the feminist realities that are further nuanced. Including, but not limited to, those acknowledging that:

- A committed monogamous intimate relationship doesn't have to be a romantic one.
- Or that a romantic date can include 3 people, all fully legal parents of the same child.
- Or that the happiest marriages can be those that were never consummated and involve no sexual intimacy ever.
- Or that sexual liberation can include celebrating lifelong "virginity."

These feminist realities have existed in parallel to traditional heteronormative realities throughout history, are amongst us today, and in a feminist future, are

Some of us might have long moved on from heteronormative and traditional ideas of love and marriage. And yet something seems to have stopped us from mainstreaming the feminist realities that are further nuanced.

going to command a larger seat at the table. These are models that challenge the romanticization of the singular “ideal” template and, without attempting to replace it, ask us to make space for plurality.

—

My friend David co-parents Octavia with two of his friends in California, one of the few places across the world where it is now sanctioned by the state. Each of the three are equal legal parents to the now two-year-old in every capacity. *Their biggest challenge? Three sets of American grandparents, and only two sets of American annual holidays.*

Such legalization forms part of a growing movement across many nations today. The ancient African proverb goes: It takes a village to raise a child. Multi-parent families challenge the notion that a couple, man and woman, is the most optimal parenting unit for a child.

In fact, is “a couple” even really the most optimal unit of relationships?

“In the long sweep of human history, the nuclear family will probably be seen as a

very brief aberration...” Ernest Callenbach contends.

Traditionally defined as a couple along with their children, “nuclear” families became the norm with industrialization, with the term first being coined only in the 20th century.

My 26-year-old Indian friend is in a healthy relationship with two men. She might not care for its legal recognition, but she wishes that the option was available.

Polyamory refers to the ability of loving more than one person at a time, with the consent of all involved partners. Multiple studies in the US, UK, and Canada make it abundantly clear that various forms of *ethical* non-monogamy are on the rise.

Polyamory counters the central idea of “The One”, the soulmate upon which the romanticization of the contemporary monogamous love is built. And while polyamory certainly isn’t everyone’s ideal, it raises a valid question for all of us: Is it fair to expect one partner to be able to fulfill all our needs, from those of security and stability, to those of adventure and mystery?

If you'd ask Dr. Paul Dolan, he'd say, "... if you're a man, you should probably get married; if you're a woman, don't bother."

He writes this based on a research study that found that the healthiest and happiest population subgroup globally were women who never married or had children. One might want to tread carefully with such sweeping conclusions at that one, but even so, it's worth pondering over if the institution of marriage benefits genders disproportionately.

One of my friends lives this feminist reality: An average Indian woman, who at about 30 years of age, actively decided to stay single. Twenty years later, she remains marriage, child, and regret-free.

Compared to 2001, the 2011 Indian census recorded a 68% increase in the ranks of the 'never-married woman' in the age group of 35-44 years. Note this against the 27% overall increase in that population sub-group over the same period.

Singlehood, when chosen by women such as my friend, challenges the narrative that urges women especially to seek fulfilment through marriage. In fact, it challenges the very notion that everyone has a need to be partnered.

Anyone who's ever used Tinder knows that sex and intimacy don't always belong in the same chat window, much less the same room or person.

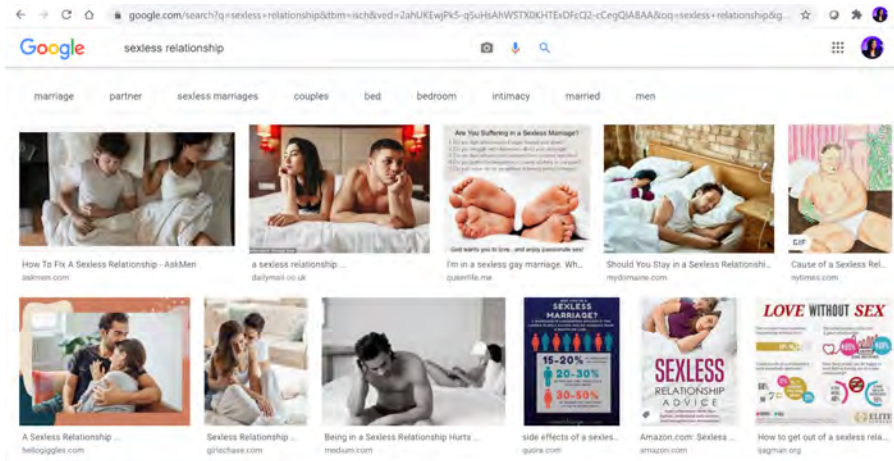
Marital relationships were initially designed to be a legal and social establishment, that allowed sex and child-rearing. Soon, they became highly entangled with the idea of love, romance, and intimacy, which is where they've largely stayed put.

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And so when I say that it is possible to have a committed, monogamous, loving relationship without romance or sex, it doesn't immediately make sense. And if I say that to some, this is desirable, it makes absolutely none.

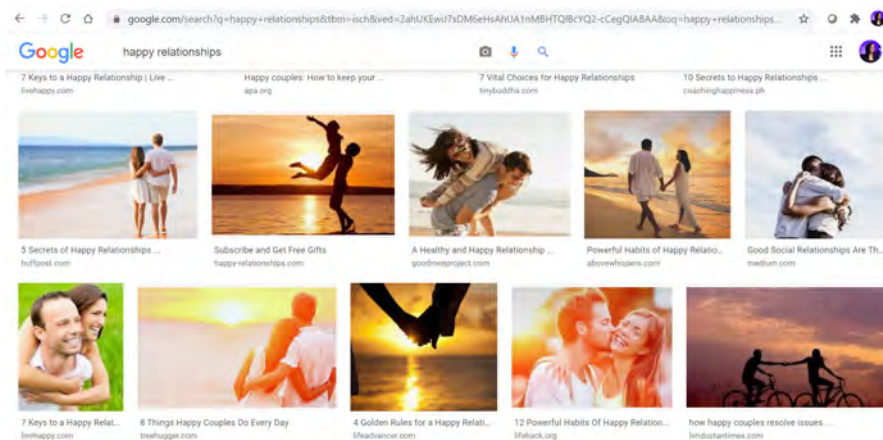
My friend Jay, a young Indian woman, tells me that her intimate relationships have always been romantic, deep, committed, loving, AND non-sexual.

But here's the thing: if you google "sexless relationships," you'll see something like this:



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I'm here to tell you that this too is the face of many non-sexual relationships.



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We seem to have grown up believing that there's only this one universally favourite cake recipe. It is assumed that for the "ideal" cake, we all have to:

- Take two units of people,
- and bake a base of platonic love.
- Add an even layer of romance, as frosting,
- and sprinkle it with a generous topping of sex.

I'm asking you to consider that this cake could vary in its structure for different

people. Maybe some don't like the frosting or the sprinkles at all. I'm here to propose that the platonic base can be the tastiest cake ever in itself, for some of us. That this cake isn't necessarily *lacking* anything, too, is a feminist reality.

Such non-sexual and non-romantic, albeit fulfilling, relationships challenge the assumed hierarchy between platonic, romantic, and sexual intimacies.

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Multiple studies show that millenials are having less sex than any preceding generations did. Remember the “Sex is cool but have you ever...” memes?

—

These “choices” are, however, not equally accessible to all of us.

For the last 6 years, I’ve been fostering a space for a largely forgotten minority within minorities: asexual and non-sexual people. Something that I started with a simple Facebook page, called Indian Aces, has today grown into a larger movement, involved in advocacy, research, awareness campaigns, workshops, and community-building.

In some cultures, the burden of the asexual and non-sexual “condition” might fall equally

across genders. But in contexts such as that of India, which is largely patriarchal, where sex education is minimal, where women live with such low bodily autonomy, where arranged marriages are the norm, where childbirth is an obvious expectation, and where marital rape is not recognized as rape, this burden is largely skewed.

What happens to these women, when we offer them only one “acceptable” template of adult relationships and family? What happens when they are caught between a culture that’s pushing them towards sexual assault and a feminism that is blind to their existence?

They desperately write to what was only a semi-active Facebook page in 2014, telling their stories, hoping to be saved. They share that they’re planning to run away from their homes, that they’re depressed and suicidal, that they’re terrified of being raped by the man their family is trying to marry them to, and they share the poems they wrote after the first time they were violated.

The feminist reality is one where having a relationship is not the only way for a woman to gain identity, where having a child is not the only way to feel fulfilled. The feminist reality is one where free sex is not the only way to feel sexually liberated and where we can acknowledge that virgin-shaming is as real, pervasive, and harmful as slut-shaming. And a feminist future is one where the stories those women shared, cease to occur. ■



“Angels go out at night too”

by Chloé Luu @Electricchildren

(France)



“Angels go out at night too”

by Chloé Luu @Electricchildren
(France)

Pictures of angels in my life, just some women and non-binary people of color hanging out, taking care of themselves and expressing love to each other. It's these simplest moments that are the most empowering.

Armenians, Feminism is our Past and Future

SOPHIA ARMEN

@SophiaArmen | Diaspora

Like it or not fierce *ungerhouis* have been part and parcel to our histories of resistance and are here to stay. The weapon of choice for Armenian womxn — the sword, the stage, the pen, the voice — is situated within the context in which they lived and are living, the struggle of the personal as political. Doing the intimate and everyday labor of honoring and archiving our histories is a feminist practice, and specifically centers the narratives discarded by patriarchy and other systems of domination.



Through persecution, progress and the perpetual pathos of nation-building, feminist resistance has been at the center of Armenian ideological, political, social, and economic development. Oftentimes, one hears the intentional misrepresentations of our community as inherently “patriarchal” and racist notions of the Armenian community stating that misogyny “is in our blood.” Yet such sentiments fail to recognize not only the long-standing contributions of *ungerhouis* past and present, but that such constructions of the Armenian community are monolithic, inaccurate, and are the work of powerful (often imperialist and/or assimilationist) forces seeking to unravel us from our own history and push a political agenda. This is not to say that patriarchy is not a governing structure within our community, rather the opposite. But to question from where these notions from outside our community spring

puts into focus the perpetuation of a narrative that renders non-western peoples in need of “saving” while fundamentally undermining true feminist movements on the ground. Thus, our analysis must include both anti-patriarchy and anti-imperialism/anti-racism and center our own voices. Our history is more accurately defined by the understanding that feminism has been essential to the Armenian struggle for all, including men and non-binary people, and is only valuable as defined as gender justice. For womxn in the community, our history is more accurately defined by the strength and resilience of Armenian womxn who have for centuries stood in the face of significant forces seeking to deter, disrupt and displace them. These womxn lead, playing instrumental roles in shaping the nation both in thought and action.

For the Armenian struggle, there is no possible disentangling from the ways in which anti-indigeneity, colonialism and hegemonic nationalism operate through and with patriarchy, transphobia, and queerphobia. Just as race and ethnicity served as the defining factor to deny Armenians fundamental rights and ultimately their existence in Turkey during the height of the Genocide, so too misogyny worked and utilized sexual violence as a tactic of violence against Armenian womxn, whose bodies were transformed into sites of “subhuman” race, gender, and nation¹. Utilizing such understanding reveals that in order to truly develop feminist theory and action, we need to recognize difference in and between communities and acknowledge the specificity of the historical context from which both power and resistance springs. And particularly, to name the ways in which women of the Global South have historically named their own feminist practices, regardless of if these practices have been registered in Western thought as “feminist.”

Meanwhile, Armenian womxn are asked to divide and displace portions of their identity, to draw and quarter their bodies, and their body politic. Especially in the face of mass murder and political enemies, Armenian womxn are told, to separate their gendered identity from their nation, to see these parts of self as mutually exclusive rather than part of a whole. The examples are ubiquitous, seen in scenarios ranging from Western feminists condemning womxn who choose to practice tradition and culture that is often gendered (while ignoring that Armenians themselves are challenging these roles), to Armenians speaking out in diaspora against

sexual violence where the perpetrators are Armenian and subsequently being labeled a “traitor” to the community. These mechanisms seek not only to divide us but fail to recognize the ultimate goal of all forms of social justice: liberation for all. A true commitment to Armenian identity requires an analysis that disrupts power, that recognizes not only both race/ethnicity and gender but also their multiple interconnections with sexual orientation, class, ability etc.

We need not look far for past inspiration for current work rooted in justice.



Author's family in Western Armenia before the genocide

¹*A Fate Worse than Dying: Sexual Violence in the Armenian Genocide* <http://www.palgrave.com/PDFs/9780230542532.pdf>



Armenian Womxn Liberation Fighters

A true commitment to Armenian identity requires an analysis that disrupts power, that recognizes not only both race/ethnicity and gender but also their multiple interconnections with sexual orientation, class, ability, etc.

Armenian womxn have fought for justice in many forms, whether by the pen or by the barrel of a gun. Beckoned by the vision of a free and united Armenia, womxn took to the frontlines on the battlefields of the intellectual and the physical. The tireless work and contributions of Armenian womxn during the national resistance is extensive, though often marginalized or overlooked in nationalist literature and rhetoric.

Examples of the active role of womxn are ubiquitous as womxn found the necessity to not only defend their communities, but envision alternative futures for the people and homeland they loved. To begin, revolutionary womxn were imperative in the founding and organizing of Armenian political parties, especially in the illegal distribution of nationalist literature and party communications/propaganda in the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, from carrying weapons between villages, enabling communication lines, and taking up arms themselves, Sona Zeitlan's work has revealed that womxn actively participated in the defense of Sassun, Zeitun, Van, Urfa, Mussa Ler, and Hajin, among others. Indeed, womxn also participated as armed fighters in the defense of the Armenian communities of Baku, Zangezur, and Karabagh against Azeri attacks, and were instrumental in the Occupation of the Ottoman Bank and the attempted assassination of Sultan Hamid.²

Images of womxn *fedayis* (guerrilla fighters) provide a rare look into our powerful past and the ability of trauma to break conventional gender roles, as the national resistance brought new opportunities to engage in aspects of Armenian life never before experienced. The

² Zeitlan, Sonia "Nationalism and the Development of the Armenian Women's Rights Movement." *Armenian Women in A Changing World*. pg 89

famous Sose Mayrig, of course, cannot be overlooked for her commitment to both family and nation, as a *fedayi* whose bravery won her immortal respect. Nationalist rhetoric, however, often relies on old tropes of the “nurturing” and “motherly” nature of these womxn. Contrastingly, they are more accurately described as dedicated organizers, characterized by their firm commitment to their communities, resisting the oppressive foreign forces attempting to dictate the terms of their Armenian struggle, and ultimately for their passionate vow to fight for their loved ones even in the face of great personal sacrifice. Their feminism is an indogenous one, and deeply connected to the fate of their entire communities. Armenian history is not devoid of progressive womxn activists and revolutionaries, is it in fact defined by them.

As a nation we must understand how we can utilize the lessons of history to determine what it means to be a *fedayi* today. From the Women's Resource Center of Armenia's work against gender violence to the political theater of plays like “Dear Armen” created by Kamee Abrahamian and lee williams boudakian, Armenians around the world are engaging in revolutionary actions that seek to dismantle systems of power and oppression and redefine what it means to be Armenian. As our past dictates, our future requires a firm commitment to raising consciousness, standing in solidarity against all forms of injustice to all people, and the preservation of our culture and history through active engagement in social justice. Indeed, when the legacies of our past *fedayis* knock on the door, will you answer? Our history demands it. ■

*Originally published in Haytoug Magazine, 2014.
Extended version to be available on thehyephenmag.com*

Their feminism is an indogenous one, and deeply connected to the fate of their entire communities. Armenian history is not devoid of progressive womxn activists and revolutionaries, is it in fact defined by them.

Feminist Resistance Series





Feminist Resistance Series

**“Dreams of a
Feminist Future”**

by Reem El Attar @reemillustrates
(Ottawa, Canada)



Feminist Resistance Series

“Her feminist reality is...”

by Chulumanco-Mihlali Nkasele

@chulunkasela

(Cape Town, South Africa)

The picture was taken during a protest at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, we had led a series of protests for over two weeks where we were challenging the universities policies surrounding gender-based violence and femicide, and the safety of students on campus, with particular attention to female and queer students.



Feminist Resistance Series

“Fury”

by Diana Manilla Arroyo

@diana_manilla

(Mexico)

On March 8, 2020, no generation, sexuality, gender, ethnicity or social class difference could divide us. The air of Mexico City's streets was filled with a sense of hope and fury in solidarity with victims and survivors of violence, patriarchy, indifference, and injustice. As the earth trembled, we shouted loud, together, stronger.



Feminist
Resistance
Series

**“Until
dignity
becomes a
habit”**

by Marga RH
@Marga.RH
(Chile, UK)

These portraits are inspired by the voices of resistance and protest movements in Latin America, especially by the key role that feminised bodies play in these struggles. It is a tribute to the grassroots feminist movements in resistance.



HASTA QUE LA DIGNIDAD SE HAGA COSTUMBRE



Feminist Resistance Series

“Un Violador en Tu Camino”

by Elli Mulder @ellimulder

(International Women's Day March,
Melbourne, 2020)

I took this photo just after the chant ‘Un Violador en tu Camino’. The air was thick with power and passion. For me, this image represents the collective and unapologetic demand of women everywhere to change the way things are.



Feminist Resistance Series

“Mawjoudat - women in revolution”

by Eleonora Gatto @nora_lagatta86
(Beirut, Italy)

Since Oct. 17, 2019, women in Lebanon have been on the frontlines of the revolution fighting a political system tightly entrenched with patriarchy. They have unapologetically occupied male-dominated spaces, guided the demonstrations, put their bodies between the protesters and the army, imposed roadblocks and called for women, refugees, lgbtq+, migrants and workers' rights through an intersectional lens.





WHAT I HAVE LEARNED FROM ANTI-PROHIBITIONIST WOMEN ALINE LEMOS

Brazil is the **3rd country** that most incarcerates in the world, in absolute numbers. Relatively to its population, it has the **26th highest** average among 222 territories.

This policy has proven itself to be **ineffective and unfair**, as attested by Camila Dias and Rosângela Gonçalves, researchers from the Center for the Study of Violence (Núcleo de Estudos da Violência) at USP:

"Prisons have never - and nowhere in the world - demonstrated efficiency in reducing crime or violence."

"The effects that are commonly associated with incarceration are racial selectivity and the expansion and reproduction of social inequality, poverty, vulnerability among the segments that are mostly targets of this type of punishment: **the poor and black youth.**"

Source: "Com 335 pessoas encarceradas a cada 100 mil, Brasil tem taxa de aprisionamento superior à maioria dos países do mundo". At g1.globo.com, 28/04/2019.

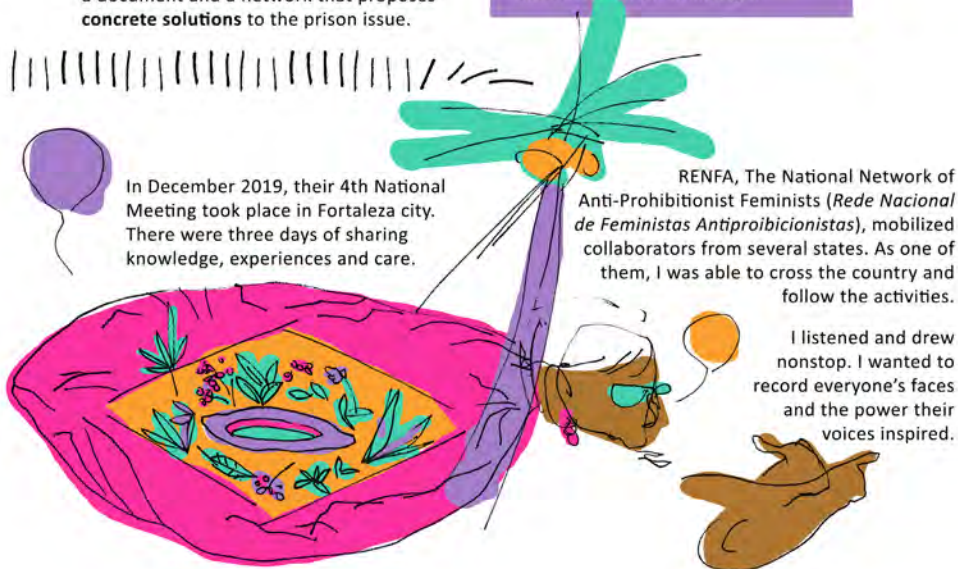
Faced with this scenario, activists created the



NATIONAL AGENDA FOR DECARCERATION
(*Agenda Nacional Pelo Desencarceramento*)
a document and a network that proposes **concrete solutions** to the prison issue.

"We are mothers and relatives of prison victims, we are former prisoners, we are members of social and human rights movements. We are from all regions of the country, connected by the fight against mass incarceration. We work to reduce the prison population and ensure that inmates and their families have a minimum of dignity and sociability, despite the prison"

Source: desencarceramento.org.br



In December 2019, their 4th National Meeting took place in Fortaleza city. There were three days of sharing knowledge, experiences and care.

RENFA, The National Network of Anti-Prohibitionist Feminists (*Rede Nacional de Feministas Antiproibicionistas*), mobilized collaborators from several states. As one of them, I was able to cross the country and follow the activities.

I listened and drew nonstop. I wanted to record everyone's faces and the power their voices inspired.

Feminist Resistance Series

"What I have learned from anti-prohibitionist women"

by Aline Lemos @a_linelemos
(Belo Horizonte, Brazil)

"It's impossible to fight racism without fighting incarceration. Incarceration is a direct inheritance of slavery. The **institutionalization of barbarism** against black bodies - that's what's happening! Democracy had never reached the poor. But now we have no legal mechanisms to defend ourselves."

"We have to **be alive**, impose contradictions and face them."
Regina Lúcia dos Santos,
Unified Black Movement (MNU/SP)
and Association of Friends and
Family of Prisoners AMPARAR)



As someone who is just beginning to understand my privileges and my contribution to this struggle, I'm grateful to RENFA for the opportunity to bring those faces and learnings with me.

I also brought their first publication, the Feminist and Anti-racist Manual for Decarceration


researches
legal impact
life stories
art



Being anti-prohibitionist means **opposing drug prohibition** policies, one of the main reasons for incarceration in Brazil, especially for women.

In recent decades, female imprisonment has **skyrocketed**.
In 2019, drug-related crimes accounted for **half** of the incidences.
Source: Levantamento Nacional de Informações Penitenciárias, Dec/2019

Like the Agenda, RENFA argues that drugs should be treated as a matter of **public health** and not prison.



Fortaleza was also an opportunity for RENFA to hold its own national meeting.

The Network exists since 2016 to fight for women's rights, especially those who are drug users, prisoners, homeless, sex workers and LBTQIA +.

RENFA

Its collaborators are women who operate in prisons, streets, social movements, homes, health systems, schools...

They're mothers, workers, researchers, lesbians, non-binary, students, survivors of the penal system, drug users...

With these fighting women, who occupy spaces with courage, intelligence and affection, I learned about what maintains our struggle:

the power of togetherness.

Let the invisible be visible: A Genderfluid Bodybuilder's Manifesto in Hong Kong

SIUFUNG LAW

@siufung_law | Hong Kong

“97..! 98.. where is 98? 98! Please come back to the lineup! ...99! 100!...” The backstage lady relentlessly asked each athlete to queue up in the humid, sweaty, overcrowded backstage area. Women’s Bodybuilding was the first category of the professional league day, and fifteen muscular, hulky women, muscle-to-muscle, squeezed into the scant backstage area, waiting impatiently for their turn to show off their aura on stage. Embellished with stylistic and idiosyncratic bikinis and makeup, these women made their final polish by pumping their seasoned muscles, rep after rep, hoping to give an ineffable impression to the board of judges.



*Siufung's professional
bodybuilding debut in
Romania 2019*

Siufung was number 99, and this was their professional debut in women's bodybuilding. As there were too many people in one lineup, the women were divided into two separate lines. Siufung was dressed no different than the other women: the tanned physique which showed the musculature of the body, the polished hair by a self-hired professional stylist, the shiny silver bracelets on both of their wrists, and the matching make-up with their lavender bikini

intended to exhibit femininity beneath the hardcore muscles. Now, as they waited in line, Siufung examined the other competitors, sensing a familiar intensity, tension and nervousness. Most of them looked restless, slightly agitated and grumpy. They furtively sized each other up. With their pumped muscles, Siufung looked relatively relaxed, as they stepped on the stage to flex their mandatory poses. Siufung's bright smile outshone the competitors, they

represented one of the few Asian women to compete on a professional international platform.

Women's Bodybuilding has been regarded by feminists as a sport that challenges the rigid assumptions of gender and body. Women bodybuilders are excellent examples of feminist realities, as they defy these conventional notions. By constructing their muscularity, these women redefine the meaning of muscles. "Muscles are genderless," Siufung said in a media interview. "Men and women have the same muscle anatomy. It resists the stereotypical presumptions of muscles equal to men, and men only."

Siufung was assigned female at birth. They identified as a lesbian when they were in high school. In Hong Kong, where there was a lack of sports culture and an obsession with academic excellence, their father, vice principal of their school, held the belief that pursuing athletic performance would negatively impact their academic achievement. He also believed that many female athletes in all-girl schools were tomboys, trying to gain female attention by playing sports. Siufung was forbidden to play sports until they went to college. They joined the school's cross-country and rowing team, and later became a member of the city's Women's Dragon Boat Team. Moving from one sport to another, Siufung finally found a home in the sport of bodybuilding.

Siufung became fascinated with this interesting but contradicting sport: a sport that both conforms and resists gender hierarchies. Similar to most sports, bodybuilding culture is largely male-dominated: most bodybuilding shows are promoted by male sponsors and judged by predominantly male officials to entertain male audiences. Women bodybuilders are hugely marginalized within and outside the sport. Often considered too muscular and monstrous

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to be featured in fitness magazines, women bodybuilders receive much less publicity and sponsoring. While Women's Bodybuilding was the first female category in bodybuilding, new categories such as Women's Physique, Women's Figure and Women's Bikini, which require more muscle toning and less muscularity, were created in recent years. Women bodybuilders were further alienated by the bodybuilding community when the Women's Bodybuilding category was cancelled in 2015 by the prestigious show The Olympia. It was only revived in 2020.

The category has been repackaged to highlight femininity alongside muscles. Heightened femininity codes are observed not only on the bodybuilding stage, but



Siufung is an ambassador of Athlete Ally to end homophobia and transphobia in sports.

offstage too. On social media, it is not difficult to find women bodybuilders putting on heavy make-up, wearing polished nails and feminine attire to highlight their femininity at the gym, as if to compensate for the muscularity that has deemed their bodies “masculine.” While these women are considered to be resisting the gendered notions of masculinity and femininity by having tons of muscles onto their bodies, their heightened nonetheless conform to the stereotypical ideals of femininity.

A year before Siufung found their passion in bodybuilding, they realized their desire to be socially identified as a man, and came out as a transgender man in 2013. In the first year of training as a bodybuilder, Siufung did not think of competing on stage. As Siufung was and is still legally female, the mere thought of wearing

a bikini on stage was horrifying to them, as they thought of bikinis as feminine clothing. Struggling between their gender identity and their passion for bodybuilding, Siufung began pursuing academic research in transgender studies in the hope of finding a solution to their question: “To what extent can a person embody both gender identities?”

Siufung competed in their first bodybuilding show and won the overall champion in Open Women’s Physique division in 2015. In 2018, Siufung became an International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness professional female bodybuilder. The victory led to Siufung’s new realization of their body: they did not only overcome the fear of wearing a bikini, but also enjoyed performing femininity on stage. Instead of confinement, bodybuilding has provided a

platform to constantly learn and unlearn the gendered codes. They love femininity as much as their masculinity; it is their wish to be identified both as a woman and a man, depending on the context. They no longer identify as a transgender man.

Siufung's unique experience defies the regulatory control over female bodybuilders in their heightened femininity codes. Their identification as genderfluid and non-binary has led to confusion within the bodybuilding communities, especially when Siufung appeared to be socially more masculine, although their experience has inspired female bodybuilders and transgender athletes to be brave. Meanwhile, Siufung's persistence in living their way has

motivated meaningful discussions about the participation of transgender people in bodybuilding. For instance, Siufung is the only genderfluid sports ambassador of Gay Games Hong Kong 2022, a 9-day international diversity festival with multi-sports, arts and culture event organised by the LGBT+ community, hoping to introduce a third gender category into bodybuilding as well as other sports. They are also a professional ambassador of Athlete Ally, aiming to end homophobia and transphobia in sports. ■

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the context.

VERY QUEER



“When They See Us: Very Queer Feminist”

by Lane Dilotsotlhe (Botswana)

This is the reality of a trans man in feminist spaces. His opinions are often muffled or tied down to the privileges his body carries. His presence is provocative. It foregrounds how feminist spaces can incorporate diversity and build solidarity.

@dilotsotlhe



**“When They See Us:
MamaCax”**

by Lane Dilotsotlhe (Botswana)

This piece celebrates the life of the late Mama Cax. She was more than just a model, disabled rights activist and feminist. She redefined our understanding of bodily autonomy, and for me that's what feminist power in action looks like. It's badass, it's womxn, it's a queen.



“Box No Boxes”

by Wu, I-Fei (Taiwan)

As a boxer and an instructor, I think teaching girls how to box is a feminist reality because it transforms gendered notions in sports and pushes back against hegemonic masculinity.

Looking at me Looking at Safe Spaces

JUDYANNET MUCHIRI

@judyannet1 | *Canada*

October last year I left for Kenya to begin what I have come to think of as my most important work yet. I have since been in Kenya exploring the influence of safe spaces on young women's civic participation. Although this research is for academic purposes, it is also very personal. As a feminist, my academic pursuits, my professional work, and my personal life are all in conversation with each other and are deeply guided by feminist values.

I am now sat here in Nairobi waiting out the #COVID19 Pandemic that has disrupted our lives. While I am very disoriented, this has afforded me time to reflect on this work that I have been doing for the last couple of months. I have been in conversation with diverse young women and women's rights organizations to co-imagine and co-create safe spaces for young women. I arrived at safe spaces the same way I arrive at any other work that I do; with an intent to expand spaces and freedoms for young women. However, I did not count on the emotional labour that would come with this kind of work and what it would take to accomplish my goals. I have intentionally adopted feminist and participatory approaches with the recognition that young women know best what safe spaces mean for them and therefore should be the ones to articulate those safe spaces. With this work, I intend to demonstrate that in the absence of safe spaces the extent to which young women can participate in civic activities is limited. Therefore, this work is a call to invest in structures and an ecosystem that enables women to exercise agency and live their best lives. It is important to point out here that I use the term women with the recognition that this is a blanket term that includes persons who self-identify as women.

As with any other research project I was prepared for surprises. However, it became clear to me very early on that this would not be like any other research. When I started meeting women and gathering them to talk about safe spaces, the first thing that I noticed was how women received me and my work with so much tenderness. And as I continued experiencing this kindness from women in Nairobi, Nyanza, and Rift Valley I began thinking about what it means to work from a position of kindness.

Acknowledging
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Equally important
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As I travelled around the country talking to women, it also became clear that safe spaces work is not easy work. This work asks for more. It asks for more time. It asks for more resources. It asks for more commitment. It asks for us to be very intentional. To be honest, this is not something I anticipated. I did not think about what this work would demand of me. The emotional labour required. I became overwhelmed.

Acknowledging when one is overwhelmed is important. Equally important is deciding what to do with that knowledge. This has been a learning point for me. Admitting that yes, this is sitting heavily on me; yes, I need to take a step back. This is where self-care comes in. And I use the term self-care here recognizing that the ability to take time off to take care of oneself is a matter of privilege and not everyone is able to do so. I feel strongly that we need to acknowledge our positionalities

and the privileges these positionalities afford us. That said, what I have learnt to do in these instances of overwhelm — and they have been many — is to sit in silence.

Sitting in silence has been difficult. It turns out that even taking a break needs some intentionality. What I am keen about here, and I think this is a lesson for other feminists as well, is what sitting in silence enables. Sitting in silence enables us to breathe. It enables us to thank ourselves for showing up. It enables us to look at lessons learnt. It enables us to think about what we can do better going forward. In other words, this is an opportunity to step back and look at our work from a distance. It is also a recognition that activating feminist realities is continuous work that will indeed take time.

While sitting in silence has helped, what has really inspired me to keep going is all the women that I have encountered. Doing work focused on systemic change seldom brings

quick results, making it difficult to stay motivated. But that should not deter. Every bit of action helps. The knowledge that there are women across the country — and the globe — organizing and putting in the work, despite insurmountable difficulties, to expand freedoms for other women gives me so much hope. This is what makes me know that, indeed, feminist realities and futures are possible.

Finally, it is only right that I acknowledge the women who have held me and my work with so much tenderness. I have already thanked each one of you personally, but I also want the world to know what absolute legends you are. I am lucky to know you. The world is lucky to have you. Thank you. ■

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“Healing Together”

by Upasana Agarwal @upasana_a
(Kolkata, India)

—

Looking at activists and feminists as healers and nourishers of the world, in the midst of battling growing right-wing presence, white supremacy and climate change. This piece highlights

how our feminist reality puts kindness, solidarity, and empathy into action by showing up and challenging the status quo to liberate us all.

The Story of An Unhappy Tale

GABRIELA ESTEFANÍA
RIERA ROBLES
@gabyestefaniarie | Mexico

I.

Juliana. How I would love to be called Juliana! The name is full of power and presence, full of force and vehemence. Truthfully, I think all of the qualities I give to Juliana are just in my mind and I invent them to survive and resist.

I am Estefanía, 28 spins around the sun, eight hours of sleep a day, four cups of coffee on average, and one hour of social media per day. My story is one of 23 years of resistance.

At five years old, the girl I used to be was in her grandparents' house playing with her cousins. In that circle of bubbly love, just like that, I was a victim of sexual violence by one of my cousins, El Babas [The Slime].

From that moment, the girl's life was transformed into a state of not feeling worthy. It took away her love, compassion, maternity, allowing herself to receive and give affection, trust, having dreams; it took away her body, her menstrual bleeding, her spirituality. She had become a slave to him.

Estefanía, 16 spins around the sun, 11 years of resistance, 12 hours of sleep a day, four hours of television allowed, and one hour of crying per day. The girl was crushing memories.

Estefanía, 22 spins around the sun, 17 years of resistance, nine hours of sleep a day, eight hours of university classes, and one hour of music per day. The señorita [young woman] decided to forget. The señorita promised to keep quiet. The señorita tries to fit in.

Estefanía, 28 spins around the sun, 23 years of resistance, seven hours of sleep a day, six hours of class a week, four ex-boyfriends, and one hour of therapy a week.

Have you ever thought about the importance of language, words, and ideas, the ways in which our mind expresses itself verbally? I tend to get hooked on thinking and finding a logical answer for things. It's so obvious! How could I not rely on that resource when that was the mechanism I chose at the tender age of five to process all the confusing information that had come to

my mind: "Whoever loves you, hurts you." So, to cope with the pain, my body and my mind became dissociated. I gave myself nicknames: the baby, the girl, the señorita. And so it was that birthdays, important occasions, unforgettable moments, loves, break ups, friendships came and went. And the baby, the girl, and the señorita were dissociated. Juliana! How I would love to be named Juliana! Unruly, uncompromising!

II

Sunday. A day like any other during this quarantine. As my mother, la Chatita, would say, "Because, daughter of mine, this quarantine caught us locked up." Yet for me, it meant that Sunday evening I could talk with my family.

Juliana, I know that I would love for us to be friends and that you will always be there to defend me. Because I find myself here again facing my greatest fear: El Babas has entered the family virtual meeting. By the great goddesses! Juliana, help me, please!

Juliana was that energy that would set me on fire and make me want to set everything else on fire, too. She was the very life force, womanly strength, the joy of feeling alive. Juliana, my white wolf, had been there from the very beginning of the resistance, protecting my essence when I was a baby, a girl, and a young woman. Juliana was my guardian and guide.

Juliana writes:

*"This message is not intended to greet you or to ask what is going on in your life. NO! This message comes straight from my gut, out of anger and a deep desire to seek justice with my own hands. And to tell you what you are:
A RAPIST!"*

"You are an adult who is clearly aware of his actions, deeds, choices, and the damage he has done to people all his life. But just in case you do not remember, I am a 28-year-old woman, your cousin, who you sexually abused when she was a girl. Now do you remember who I am? Oh no, wait a minute. You surely have done the same to others, but that is not mine to deal with in this story. Here I will do justice for me and my life.

"You are shameless and disgusting. I do not care about the reasons you have decided to be in my spaces, but once and for all I am telling you, YOU ARE A RAPIST and absolutely shameless. Get out of my life, get away from everyone in my life, get away from anything to do with me. Leave our family spaces, I do not want to see you, or I will say to your face, YOU ARE A RAPIST!

"Let me be clear: I am not the same innocent girl that you abused. Now, I am a woman who can say all of this to your face: YOU ARE A RAPIST!

"I will not give you the pleasure of making me feel less than or like my story does not matter. If you have had a miserable life or have faced suffering and sadness, that is not my problem. My concern is healing myself and living a life free of your trash and your hurt, a life in which I do justice for the girl inside me. Now, the woman I am repudiates you and sends you back to the space you have been living in and where you will remain for the rest of your life: the shadows.

"My pack is with me, as you will have noticed. I AM NOT ALONE! I AM NOT CRAZY! Your world is falling to pieces around you because I broke the silence about who you are, A RAPIST."

Can you feel that? Juliana sent that text to El Babas on April 28, 2020 at 3:58 PM. Trembling, frightened, emotions spilling over. Ay! Would you look at that brave life? I confronted him! I know that facing the abuser of my childhood was

**The pain will always
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and abuse.**

not something I was looking for, just like I was not looking to be abused. I had dreamed about saying to his face all that he was, all the damage he had done, all the hell he had put me through. And poof! There it was, I had done justice, I had denounced him.

Now we can be on our way together, Juliana and Estefanía. The pain will always be present. But I have learned that my life cannot be reduced to a single experience. My life cannot be reduced to one of victimhood, pain, and abuse. My life is a story of ongoing healing from a place of deep self-love. The girl, the young woman, and the grandmother together are abolishing time; they see each other, accept each other, and seek justice by way of consciousness, awakening, walking, accompanying, and loving.

The damage and control which that experience caused in my life are still here, but they are no longer dominant. Only a few days have gone by, but I feel like I can look myself in the eye, and smile from my soul. The fear has gone. I can live in and with myself. ■

By Borislava Madeit and Stalker Since
1993 @fineacts (Sofia, Bulgaria)

For creative nonprofit studio Fine Acts,
these works represent the power, courage,
and perseverance of women. The original

fighters, the born readies, the ones who
never gave up and who continue to
campaign – and to win – for all women.

BORN



FIGHTER

BORN



FIGHTER

BORN



FIGHTER

WE NEVER



GAVE UP



Between Two Worlds: The Double Consciousness of Women in The Gambia

HADDY JATOU GASSAMA
@haddyja2 | Washington DC, USA

The Mandinka tribe of The Gambia has a custom of measuring the first wrapa used to carry a newborn baby on its mother's back. Like other aspects of Mandinka cultural practices, this ceremony is steeped in gendered actions.

The measuring ceremony is one of the very first rites of passage for a Mandinka child. Women exclusively perform and facilitate this ceremony. It is customary for a small calabash ladle to be placed into the hands of a girl-child as her first wrapa is measured. The calabash signifies a future as a wife and homemaker. During my own measurement ceremony, to signify a learned future, my grandmother and mother placed a pen in my hand instead of a calabash. Both my mother and grandmother are staunch traditionalists in every sense of the word. However, casually, they wrote their own feminist manifestos with the simple sucking of the teeth and a choice to put education before “proper womanhood.” In our country, tradition is not always the antithesis of feminism. My mother and grandmother’s brand of feminism is one that wields the traditional powers and respect allotted to older women in most Gambian tribes to combat an otherwise patriarchal status quo. However this same provision of power and respect can be used to maintain and perpetuate patriarchal norms. As such, Gambian women have a double consciousness as to which side of the line of patriarchy they stand.

The concept of double consciousness is often used within the context of race. Within its general framework, the subject experiencing double consciousness has a sense of self as well as an innate awareness of how they are perceived and treated by others vis-à-vis their identity. In the context of race, double consciousness describes the sensation of never being able to truly be, but to instead constantly be confronted with the relation of who you are and whom others see you as. W.E.B. Dubois describes this state of being in his groundbreaking *The Souls of Black Folk*. He goes on to say: “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world

that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” This arduous state of twoness is also an experience synonymous with womanhood. In countries like The Gambia, where gender roles and patriarchal norms are deeply ingrained, this sense of twoness becomes more palpable.

In The Gambia, double consciousness in women has become a cultural hallmark. It rears its head during marriage ceremonies, when griots sing “aawo buuri kerram” which means the first wife is the queen of her house. At the very same ceremony, elder women will advise the new bride that “jigéen daafa waara mounge,” a woman must endure or have patience. At these ceremonies, the strength and grace of a woman is always celebrated and praised, but the tape with which this strength is measured is her ability to endure the potential harm her husband or in-laws may hurl at her. A bride on her wedding day often has the understanding that in her matrimonial home she can simultaneously be queen and servant. In the economic and educational realm women are generally encouraged to earn an education and aspire for well-paying careers. However, the measuring tape for many women’s academic and professional achievements is the ego of a potential spouse. As in many other parts of the world, it is not uncommon to hear phrases like: “how will you find a husband with all these degrees,” or “that woman is too wealthy, who will marry her now?”

The agency and egalitarian rights of women have always existed between two tectonic plates of customs: those that place women on pedestals of praise and respect, and those reflective of a patriarchal status quo. The tug of war between these matriarchal traditions of power

The agency and egalitarian rights of women have always existed between two tectonic plates of customs, those that place women on pedestals of praise and respect and those reflective of a patriarchal status quo.

and patriarchal norms (largely the remnants of colonialism), leaves Gambian women in limbo. In our tiny country, women live, work, and thrive between two divergent paradigms of existence. The first of these paradigms exists predominantly in informal spaces. In this realm, matriarchs are omnipotent. Their word is law and their wrath is dangerous. The ancestors, grandmothers, and mothers who make up this elite class of women serve as the foundation for the various iterations of Gambian feminism. This class of women are the bedrock of familial ties and the source of our quick wits and no-nonsense attitudes. They are the keepers of our histories and guides to our futures. The paradox of their own double consciousness allows these women to exemplify the strength and power of women in the Gambia, while simultaneously upholding patriarchal norms.

In The Gambia, women, particularly elders, act as the gatekeepers of cultural acceptability. Their

role ranges from the casual judgment of the length of a young woman's skirt, to confirming the virginity of a bride after her wedding night. They often see the actions of their daughters and granddaughters through the eyes of a man. The measuring tools with which they pass their judgments are usually tied to a patriarchal cause. A veil of double consciousness taints the societal advantage and discretion that is given to these women. Questions such as: what will a man think of a woman in a short skirt, what will a man do to a woman in a short skirt, what value will a man place on a bride who is not a virgin, drive the actions and judgments of the women who set and define our cultural practices. These women have the power to perpetuate or put an end to harmful practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child marriage. As the reigning arbiters of interfamilial affairs, they have the power to protect rather than reprimand women seeking refuge from abusive spouses. By lifting the veil of their own double consciousness, they can actively confront gender inequities within both paradigms of existence for Gambian women.

The second of the two paradigms is entrenched in formal settings. Unlike the first paradigm, which exists behind closed compound doors and within familial ties, the second paradigm is what Gambian society holds out to the public. This space is universal in its inequalities. It takes the form of wage gaps between men and women, disparities in access to education and literacy rates between boys and girls, and legal barriers to gender equity. While the features of the first paradigm are nuanced and often subject to the will of individual women, the facets of the second paradigm are systemic. The arbiters of the first paradigm are predominantly elder women, while institutions, often headed by men, facilitate the second paradigm. Women in The Gambia exist between these two distinct spaces, where their agency and rights become

dependent on the space in which they are. In many cases, the first of the two paradigms provides the space for progressive changes, while the second remains rigid. The practice of FGM and the ongoing fight to end it, is a prime example of the tension between the two paradigms in which Gambian women exist.

FGM as a customary rite of passage is rooted in the double consciousness of women in The Gambia. The recurrent justification for this cruel practice has always been Islamic religious obligation, which is a thinly veiled excuse for the larger and more dangerous belief at hand. Women who perpetuate this practice, by facilitating the process, volunteering their daughters to be cut, or chastising women who are not cut, all share the belief that a man will not value a woman who has not undergone FGM. Within the second paradigm, FGM is illegal and has been since 2015. Yet, thousands of women and young girls are cut every year in The Gambia with little to no legal recourse. There are countless local and international NGOs in the fight to end FGM in The Gambia. While many of them work within the systems of the second paradigm, demanding the government enforce the laws by punishing violators and speaking to students at schools, it is those who engage with the first paradigm that make the most headway. In recognizing the power of reaching the matriarchs of families, these organizations are shifting the future of women in the country towards progress.

I am one of only a handful of women in my family who did not experience FGM. On the day my female cousins and I were supposed to undergo FGM, my mother refused to send me along with the rest of the girls. Having undergone FGM herself, she refused to allow any of her daughters to experience its horrors.

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Systems of patriarchy exist in The Gambia, but the matriarchal traditions of our country hold a formidable authority. Tradition is not the antithesis of feminism. While Gambian women have a double consciousness as to which side of the line of patriarchy they stand, they also have the power of choice. Women like my mother and grandmother have long understood the power of their choices and have used their discretion to ensure that my sisters and I did not grow up measuring our strengths, our talents, and our very existence by the tape of a man's ego or gaze. The women in my life taught me to have a strength whose purpose is not for suffering at the hands of a man. Instead, the lessons we've been taught are that a woman is queen or king of her home and her life, and nothing less. As my generation of Gambian women move closer to joining the ranks of the matriarchs who possess this power in our social fabric, I am optimistic that there will be less speeches of a woman's duty to endure at weddings, and more moments like my wrapa measuring ceremony. ■



“Sacred Puta”

by Pia Love @pialovenow

(Puerto Rico)

Puta's body of work explores the dichotomy of the — Holy and not so Holy by re-imagining pivotal female figures from the Bible to pop culture as womxn who fiercely own their power of seduction while still remaining holy. Healing the split psyche of either having to exist in conformity or redeemed as too wild. Sacred Puta dares to imagine a world where The Virgin Mary (mother archetype) and the Erotic Priestess (Maiden archetype) co-exist in harmony, and womxn are afforded the complexity to be loved in their “freeness”. By doing so, Sacred Puta also questions our relationship between commodity and womxn, and how the two have shared a long history of exploitation especially within Capitalist structures, thus ultimately making the work about dismantling patriarchal and capitalist frameworks which are detrimental to not only womxn, but to our planet and every living soul in it.



Dieula and the Black Dolls

ANA MARÍA BELIQUE
@abelique | Dominican Republic

I.

The Naranjo Batey community is far from the city, but it's full of hard-working people brimming with enthusiasm. A girl named Dieula lived there. Even though her parents always told her she was beautiful, she never believed them.

Her parents thought she was the most beautiful creature that ever lived, but the child never saw herself as a pretty girl. Dieula thought that if she was really pretty, she should have long blond hair, blue eyes, and skin as light as a doll's.

"I want to be pretty like the doll I received for the Reyes holiday," she said as she played.

One day a young woman came to the community and gathered all the women together in the community centre. Dieula overheard her mother telling a neighbour that this young woman was going to make dolls. That really piqued her curiosity.

I want to learn how to make dolls too – she pleaded with her mother, pulling on her skirt. But she was too young to be part of the group, and that made her sad.

Nevertheless, every Saturday, Dieula stood in the doorway or spied through the window to see all the women inside, talking and learning how to make dolls.

These little balls they're making don't look like dolls. They're ugly and make me scared – Dieula told one of the boys that also looked on with her.

As the women's work advanced, Dieula thought that these dolls were very black, and they weren't nice like the ones she saw on television.

She wanted a big doll, with long hair and blue eyes, and hoped that they would soon start making those. But no. They kept on making little ugly black balls that didn't look like real dolls.

One afternoon, after the teacher gave her instructions, the women started to glue these little balls and little by little the dolls took shape. Then the women sewed colourful outfits for them. Dieula couldn't see what they were doing very well, but she did notice that the women were very happy and put a lot of effort into their work.

At the end of the class they placed several of the dolls they made on a table for all to see.

That day, Dieula saw something she had never seen before. One of the dolls looked so pretty, just like a princess, even more beautiful than a Barbie. She was surprised because the doll was neither white nor had blue eyes. Up to that day she never thought that a black doll could be so pretty.

I want to have one of those beautiful dolls, because they're so nice. I want a black doll like that – she cried out full of emotion. It's a pretty and black doll. It's BE-A-U-TIFUL.

Her mother, who was part of the women's group, got up out of her seat and called her aside. Dieula jumped in delight when her mother put one of those black dolls in her hands. She hugged it tight to her chest, beaming with happiness.

Since that day, Dieula started to understand that black dolls are also beautiful. For the first time she felt that her parents were right when they said that she also was. The girl understood that the colour of her skin and hair didn't make her ugly.

Dieula was as pretty as a black doll. She felt so proud of the colour of her skin that she told her little girlfriends:

If all these black dolls are so pretty, then all the Black girls are also pretty. We are black dolls.

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II.

Muñecas Negras RD is an initiative that aims to empower women and girls from the Bateys of the Dominican Republic. It runs doll-making workshops while engaging the women in discussions on themes related to Blackness, identity, Afro-descendancy, and gender issues, among others.

Muñecas Negras RD uses group work methodology that combines theory and practice to promote knowledge and strengthen capacity among Black women.

Racial discrimination is an important element that constantly affects the Afro-descendant population. In the Dominican Republic this is no exception and it's even more severe among Dominicans of Haitian roots. This is the main reason why we think it's so important to work holistically on empowerment to identity, self-esteem, and Afro-descendancy. This initiative is a way to encourage debate about how we are empowered actors of our own reality.

Another motivation for this initiative is income generation for its participants, since as women they suffer multiple exclusions (poor, Black, from the Bateys, and stateless) and they face limited possibilities of entering the labour market. Constant questionings about their Dominican nationality, documentation, and personal identity affects them as daughters of Haitian immigrants. In addition, the limited technical skills they've been able to develop make access to qualified workspaces even more difficult for women from the Bateys. This initiative thus seeks to provide opportunities for these women to build something way beyond the workplace social boundaries imposed on Black women, so that they can aspire to be more than domestic workers, and explore their creativity.

Muñecas Negras grew out of ten years of accompanying Dominicans of Haitian descent within the *reconoci.do* movement, a youth collective that works against racial discrimination, denationalization, and stateless policies in the Dominican Republic. ■



**“Tejedoras de sueños”
[Women weaving dreams]**

by Diana Mar @mar_indigo_
(Oaxaca, Mexico)

In the coastal region of Oaxaca weaving has been a legacy of resistance among women for generations. We women are weaving by waist loom the threads of our own histories, struggles, and dreams.



Ghosts Of Girlhood

AKUA ANTIWIWAA

@akua__antwiwaa

Accra, Ghana / Providence, USA

**Tight fist,
tight fists
a kiss into
an open mouth
open wide for
open wide for**

There is an old, hazy picture laying in front of me. In it I am dressed in all white, from the pearl beads fastened into my hair and tucked against my ears, to the ones that trail loosely around my tiny wrists. The ankle-length dress I am wearing sits comfortably over my white laced-up shoes and frilly socks. Clapsed obediently and steadily in anticipation for the photo, my little fingers barely wrap around the colorful floral arrangement I hold. It is my first time as a flower girl, a duty I love, and I look immaculate.

What do little girls dream of, and how do they inhabit their own worlds? As I sit with this photo, it feels as though I am looking at a stranger and a friend, vaguely familiar and yet unknown. I love her, but she does not know me. Yet I remember this day – the tautness of the dress around my waist, the way my socks itched, how my eyes searched for my mother, tall and beautiful, at the end of it all. Girlhood is such a tricky little thing. I feel her peering eyes lunge back at me.

*Out here there isn't enough
Space
for you to hear a breathing child
and call it your own*

The little girl reminds me that I used to think about my feminist life as linear; it had a starting point and an end goal. This sequence began as I slowly recognized all the things about my childhood that were unjust and binding, things that took me out of my body and turned me into stone. Then I read, I reflected, I felt, I thought I had reached enlightenment. I apologized to the little girl. I told her sorry, I sang many songs to her, I whispered to her just how much I wished I could have protected her. I hugged her deep into a soundless night. I wept for her, and with her. I said *kosε*. And then I let her go. I thought of her as a mirage

from my past, a bird singing so very early in the morning, right at the moment the night cascades into a mollifying dawn, high up in the rosewood trees of a place I would never know. In my mind, she would be safe there. I had finally arrived, arms full with knowledge, experience, stories, arguments, and lies – safe lies, good lies. These were grown arms, ones that were long and steady and strong enough to clasp anything that was deep and wide and rough.

In the time between putting my child away and emerging as the one who would save her, I left home. Finally away, I was free to become all the things I thought I could never be. I was also alone. I paused.

*open wide for
a soundless consideration*

How does one shape restorative childhood memories into a feminist practice? How does this become a reality? This time alone taught me many things, but more importantly, showed me that I did not have to let go of the girl inside of me to feel free. Rather, relating to her in this way, casting her to the realms of dreams and memories was hurting me. In only thinking of her as lost, broken and in need of saving, I was detaching myself from the parts of me that I felt deeply ashamed of. I needed to bring her along with me, to the present.

And so, in embracing the loneliness that often surrounds us, either by choice or fate, and the distances that engulf us via the land or sea or death, I turn to cultivating a memory of girlhood that is sustaining, one that is not only bruised by the violence of narrative. I cultivate this practice not only through my own memories, but through film, visual media, and the gift of stories from friends. Girl characters in films, especially, become a way for me to dream a million and more dreams, the way they dance across the

screens as the script unfolds ahead, a journey with as many endings.

—

*Sε wogya me hɔ kɔ a, medane mframa na
mayera wɔ awia mu, na mahwehwe wo*
If you leave me I will turn into the wind
and look for you everywhere.

This is a promise, and Esi fulfils it. The forerunner in Blitz Bazawule's stunning film, *Burial of Kojo*, Esi (Cynthia Dankwa) is a little girl who travels through the spirit realm to save her father after he goes missing. Armed with visions of the "crow who ruled the land in-between", Esi is brave and moves like a child who has not internalized the idea that bodily presence is everything. Following the messages and clues of the spirit world – revealed in exhaustive dreams that leave her weary – Esi follows the path to find her father, Kojo (Joseph Otsiman). In *Esi*, I am reminded of the fearlessness and fire of childhood, in the ways she recounts her dreams with calm conviction and curiosity. Although the task she is faced with is one that transcends both the physical and temporal realities of her world, Esi's trust in her own vision is what brings her father back. The relationship that Kojo and Esi share displaces ideas of the father as the protector and savior of the daughter. Because Esi's story is told in fantastical form, and that of her father, Kojo, is shown in the hyper-real – his struggles with money, his agony over going back to *galamsey* work – it is easy to imagine that Esi's world exists outside the material challenges of adulthood. In the end, however, we find out that Kojo himself is haunted by the ghosts of his past – a dead brother, who wants his soul. It is Esi who opens the door for these haunts to be attended to. It is Esi, whose care is abiding.

How does one shape restorative childhood memories into a feminist practice? How does this become a reality?

*of what might have happened
had it not fallen into silence*

As I watch Ada (played by Mame Bineta Sane) and Souleiman (Ibrahima Traoré) kiss against the rough walls of an unfinished building by the sea, I feel a familiar anxiousness rise up in my chest. When he unbuttons her shirt, I wish that he would stop. Almost immediately, and on the edge of my anxiety, an older man discovers them and tells them to get out. "This isn't a whorehouse!" he yells. It is a pity that their makeout session is cut short, because in ten days, Ada, already engaged, will be married to businessman Omar (Babacar Sylla). Hoping to see him later that night, Ada says goodbye to Souleiman. This is the last time she will see him. Frustrated by the wage theft they have endured for months, Souleiman and his fellow construction workers board a boat to leave Senegal for Europe. Ada is distraught. On the eve of her wedding a mysterious fire occurs, and strange things begin to happen. The lovers and sisters left behind by the men fall sick with a mysterious disease that turns out to be spiritual possession – the men have died at sea. Using the bodies of the women, these

I have looked at my young self
many times, tried to capture
her. Through mediums of
print and digital screens she
remains the same. She is
unknowable. But she is here.

men return to seek retribution from their boss, demanding payment. Souleiman is among them — but he returns, instead, for Ada.

Resonant in its title, *Atlantique*, Mati Diop's film is a somber reflection on labor exploitation and migrant death. It is also, however, a meditation on female sexuality and the labour extracted from teenage girls to appease a world in which their true desires come last, or never at all. Surrounded by the girls she hangs out with — “the sluts”, their short skirts, glitter and eye makeup dancing against the lights of the nightclub they frequent — Ada is tasked with deciding the kind of woman she wants to become. After being forced to take a virginity test, and sick with the loss of her love, Ada breaks off her marriage with Omar. Finally reunited — Souleiman in the body of another man — they make love under the blue lights of the club. The mirroring of Ada and Souleiman's opening scene with their final one, is for me a lesson in teenage freedom and sensuality — something that is often eclipsed by trauma, by shame. Indeed, Ada makes a mockery of respectability — she picks a lover of her choice while betrothed; she finds the courage to leave a man she does not love; she makes love with the one she chooses, even in death. At the end of the film, Ada, alone, turns to watch herself in

the mirror. Looking herself in the eye, she says to the viewer: “Last night will stay with me to remind me who I am and show me who I will become,” she says. “Ada, to whom the future belongs. I am Ada.”

—

a girl's word
a girl's breath

The fading picture in front of me is not the actual photo, which is in Accra, which is where I am not. My thumb sits on the edge of the photo print. It rests on the edge of the picture I now stare at through my phone screen. I have looked at my young self many times, tried to capture her. Through mediums of print and digital screens she remains the same. She is unknowable. But she is here. ■



**“Cultura Negra”
[Black Culture]**

by Astrid Milena González Quintero

@astridgonzalezq

(Santiago, Chile, 2016)

*Citing the artwork Pelucas Porteadores
[Portable Wigs] (1997-2000) by the artist
Liliana Angulo*

African traditions which are conserved in Colombia, especially along the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, contain mythical figures of wise women: carriers of oral tradition and memory who preserve the hidden discourses of rebellion. Women who escaped slavery and washer women politicize memories in a fight against being forgotten.



“My Home”

by Suhad Khatib @suhad.izm

(Palestine, Amman, San Francisco)

2018 *gh*



“Sisterhood Secrets”

by Suhad Khatib @suhad.izm

(Palestine, Amman, San Francisco)

Hi, I appreciate you allowing me the chance to interview for this position.

First, let me introduce myself: My name is Suhad, as in: Sue had coffee. You know, like the coffee your corporations stole from my people. I'm a single mom, because war economies killed all the men I know.

Fun facts? Well, I'm named after an aunt who survived a massacre at the age of four. Who wanted to overcome her family's forced diaspora by flying overseas to see me, her brother's first born, but died on the way with her four-year-old. So my fun fact is that I won't allow a single person in this room to pronounce our name incorrectly.

Strengths: I forgot how to be pragmatic. Experienced at burning bridges. Budding with theological knowledge. So, I now know that I am everyone who was before me and will continue to be in everyone who will live after me. I'm from a holy land that was fought for by ancestors, I'm sure you heard of, like, Mariam and Muhammad. I keep wanting to go back but entire armies and war systems stop me. So here I am, neither here nor there. Trying to find the courage to reclaim sovereignty over my social media posts.

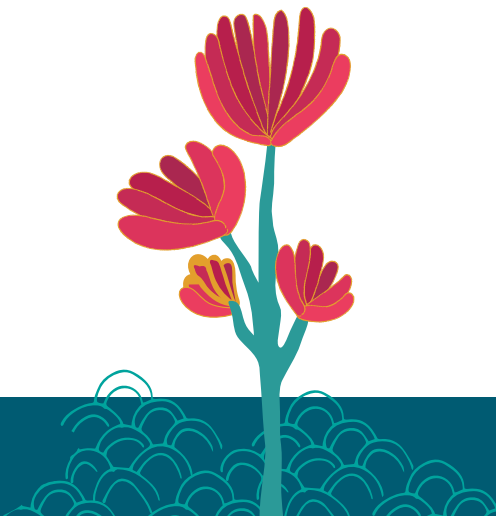
Education? Well, my father taught me how to be a Palestinian, which might be why I failed at it in the past. My mother taught me how to be a Palestinian-woman, which might be why I'll succeed at it in the future.

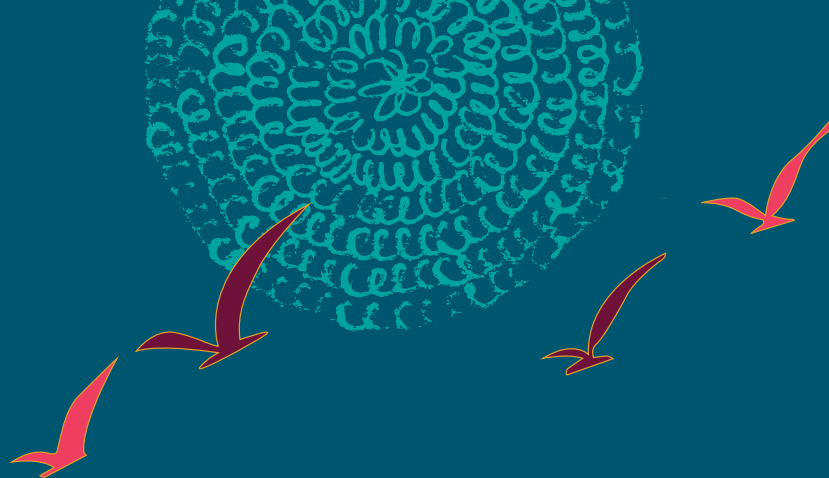
I speak three languages: Arabic, the language of the holy book, English, the language of the colonizer, and art, the language of the free.

Summary: I am no doubt a valuable addition to your diversity and inclusion brand. I'm still here despite all the obstacles capitalism put for me. Imagine how much I can achieve without obstacles. I have the emotional intelligence it takes to lead teams better than all of the foreigners you stacked against me in this skyscraper.

So I look forward to hearing back from you.

Share your thoughts about this magazine, then pass it along!





AWID is a global, feminist, membership, movement-support organization. We support feminist, women's rights and gender justice movements to thrive, to be a driving force in challenging systems of oppression, and to co-create feminist realities.

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