

UNYIELDING

PERSONAL ESSAYS FROM WOMEN
HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS



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Unyielding: Personal essays from women human rights defenders

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EDITORIAL

Nadine Moawad is a feminist facilitator, organiser and techie from Beirut, Lebanon.

Welcome, dear reader, to our Unyielding Anthology. I am deeply honoured to have worked with this inspiring group of feminist writers from across the world to curate this collection of personal narratives.

Over five months, between April and August 2025, the contributors to this anthology carefully crafted their stories, despite great challenges to their own well-being and safety. Some struggled with where to begin, others with where to land, and everyone grappled with the mental toll of recounting the harrowing violence. I do not take lightly the fact that everyone who undertook this journey with us is still alive today and still adamant in their conviction to keep fighting.

Across contexts and geographies, worsening inequalities have fuelled terrible violence, both online and offline, leaving women human rights defenders exposed to unprecedented abuse that is intimate, targeted, and deeply harmful to their personal and professional lives. From state and non-state brutality in the streets to orchestrated smear campaigns on media and digital platforms, this violence has evolved in ways that laws have failed (or refused) to address. In this context, it was essential to publish these first-hand accounts of resilience, strength and steadfastness, directly from those on the frontlines of defending queer and women's rights, freedoms and dignity.

"I do not take lightly the fact that everyone who undertook this journey with us is still alive today and still adamant in their conviction to keep fighting."

As an editor, I did very little besides check in on the authors and prompt them on how, exactly, they found the strength to carry on defending their rights and their communities in such overwhelming circumstances. Honestly, I was asking mostly for myself. I don't know where to find strength anymore, amidst the unspeakable violence of the ongoing genocide in Gaza, as well as the ongoing Israeli war crimes against my home country. We are all living through a moment of great reckoning, especially with the digital tools we built to empower our movements now algorithmically assaulting us every day. Undoubtedly, our shared feminist dream to remake the world (and the

internet) into a safer, freer place for us all now feels more defeated, more heavily burdened with what we have witnessed in our homes, in our collectives, and in our newsfeeds.

You will probably feel, like me, a consensus among the different lived realities of these narratives that the backlash against feminist activism – online and offline – has gotten terribly worse. And that both new and exacerbated challenges will not relent in the foreseeable future. We are, indeed, living through a historical time of the empire’s consolidation: rogue technological experiments, relentless war machines, and climate collapse. And yet we, in the resistance, have so much in common across geographies and cultures: the similarities are striking, as are the connections. Against all the odds, we reaffirm the special power of feminist storytelling in the face of silencing, co-optation and complicity. And though much has changed in our movement over the years, this mantra remains true: that when we tell our stories, we build bridges of connection, care and solidarity. In times of hopelessness, we reaffirm our faith in each other.

You will also notice a defiance in the authors’ linguistic choices, writing in what can be described as Postcolonial English, animated with the grammar and vocabulary of their mother tongues. I made a conscious effort not to tame any of these forms of expressions, neither with capitalisation nor punctuation nor fragmentation. If the sentence wants to run, then run it will. And if a local word appears without a footnote, I left it without footnote, trusting that you, our readers, are also like us, and that you will allow the unfamiliar to reveal itself to you in any way it chooses.

We have organised the contributions into five chapters: Brave Beginnings, The Digital Frontier, Identities and Intersections, Colonialism, States and Exile, and Imaginaries – though most of the stories weave across these headings. I would like to thank the team at APC for their kindness and support throughout this project and all the authors for their patience and generosity. I invite you to read all of their stories and, perhaps, like me, you will find in these incredible testimonies a renewed faith in our collective power to overcome anything. And, like me, you’ll be really glad all these folks are on our team.



THE WEIGHT OF QUIET COURAGE

Brave beginnings: Narratives of resilience

Essay | Kenya

**Zipporah
Nyangara**



Mental health advocate, psychological counsellor, and founder of Haven of Dreams, where she curates safe, transformative spaces for healing and growth. Passionate about storytelling, creativity and faith, she weaves personal and professional insights to empower individuals and communities to heal, dream and thrive.

**Some of us are
born with a fire.
Others are lit by
the match of
lived pain. But
no matter how we
arrive at this path,
one truth stands:
activists are not
just born or made.**

**We are
transformed.**

As I grow older, I often find myself wondering: are human rights activists born or made? Perhaps it doesn't really matter. Because what I've learned is that whether born from conviction or moulded by pain, we are all shaped. People often assume activism is loud. They think it starts with picket signs, chants, and bold declarations. But for many of us, it begins in silence – in the aching gap between what happened to us and what should never happen to anyone else. Some of us are born with a fire. Others are lit by the match of lived pain. But no matter how we arrive at this path, one truth stands: activists are not just born or made. We are transformed.

Some of us are born with a fire. Others are lit by the match of lived pain. But no matter how we arrive at this path, one truth stands: activists are not just born or made. We are transformed.

Not all women human rights defenders (WHRDs) are on TV or marching on the streets in cities. Some are in rural villages, raising their voices at local chiefs' barazas, boldly stating their opinions in spaces where they were once only asked to pray or tidy up. Others are negotiating for a girl to receive bursary funds, just so she can stay in school. Some are organising kitchen table meetings, tending to the community's wounds in the silence of the everyday. We don't all wear capes. Many of us wear aprons, lesos, worn-out hope, and a knowing smile that hides exhaustion.

My name is Zippora Nyangara. I am a psychological therapist by profession, a facilitator of learning and action by practice and passion, and a mentor by calling. I am also a human rights defender. This is not a title or career. It is an identity. A quiet badge I carry every day.

Being a woman in a patriarchal society is already hard. Being a woman human rights defender makes it harder. You are branded: loud, rebellious, difficult, angry. In some spaces, you are unwelcome. In others, you are invisible. The assumptions made about your private life – that it must be perfect, balanced, a model – suffocate you. The assumptions made that you go around chasing sexually transmitted opportunities (STO) and defined as a bad example because of using your voice. It baffles me how people easily forget the gains and hold the branding close to heart.

Can we talk about how there is no level playing field even among human rights defenders because women still have to fight for their rights within spaces branded as equal and safe? The hardest bit of being a woman human rights defender is that sometimes you will face the evils you are fighting, but that would be a private pain. I remember one time during a learning activity with women on their rights and helping unpack the economic violence women face simply because they are women. I was there standing tall, confident; younger then and skinny, but I was confident enough to facilitate the training. I wore this mask to be able to deliver, but I was going through the same violations. It got me wondering how I empower others, yet my voice was still silent and I needed the money to raise my children.

I have learned that some people will use your vulnerability to dis-empower you while expecting you to empower people. And I realised that the community around you think you have life all figured out and much as it seems, it is not always a safe space to air out one's issues.

Men still dominate the narrative in human rights defenders' spaces. In meetings, our voices as women are often interrupted. In protest planning, our safety is an afterthought. We are told we are too emotional, too soft, too distracted by our children, our hormones, our families. But we show up. Every time. With a baby strapped on our back or worry etched on our foreheads. Sometimes, even in progressive spaces, I've felt erased. I've had male colleagues who subtly implied women were invited to "tick the gender box."

Often, it starts with trauma. Something that breaks us open. A violence witnessed or experienced. A freedom denied. An injustice swallowed.

As a therapist and a community mobiliser, I have observed that many women human rights defenders don't begin their work in conference rooms or NGOs. Often, it starts with trauma. Something that breaks us open. A violence witnessed or experienced. A freedom denied. An injustice swallowed. Activism becomes the language through which we try to reclaim our power and dignity. It becomes a balm and sometimes a disguise for the unhealed parts of ourselves. The body keeps the score and the nervous system registers that it is always in fight mode, so much so that it never gets to rest. The cortisol hormone is released and the norepinephrine is high every time. But what

happens when activism becomes our only identity? When the very thing meant to liberate us cages us in expectations of strength and sacrifice?

You do not step into activism – it pulls you in. Sometimes gently, most times violently. The fire that burns in your chest is not theory. It is memory. It is grief. It is the echo of what was done to you or those you love. You don't fight because it's a cause. You fight because you bled.

But when trauma is your compass, everything feels urgent. Every injustice feels personal. The line between your story and the stories you carry becomes blurred. You are constantly pouring from a place that has not yet healed. You build movements from the fragments of yourself – your heartbreak becomes strategy; your rage becomes your voice. At first, it feels powerful. Like redemption. Like reclaiming your narrative. But soon, the cost begins to show. Your body tires. Your nervous system forgets what rest feels like. You speak of boundaries but rarely hold your own. You cry at night not just from what is happening in the world, but from the weight of expectation – to always be strong, always be loud, always be fighting. You see yourself in every survivor, every protest, every plea. You become hyper-vigilant, easily triggered. It's not just what happened – it's that it keeps happening. And so, you keep going, even when your soul begs you to pause. You confuse martyrdom with meaning. And when the people you fight for don't fight back, it wounds you deeper than you admit. Because you weren't just trying to fix the world – you were trying to fix the wound inside you.

But the truth is, pain alone cannot sustain a revolution. Trauma makes you sharp, but healing makes you wise. When you don't make space for your own repair, you begin to re-enact your pain in your organising, your relationships, your leadership. You may silence others because you were once silenced. You may control because you once had none. You may serve everyone but yourself.

I think of Jane, a fierce human rights defender at her community level. Jane is a survivor of gender-based violence, who has undergone capacity building to understand different legal frameworks, present herself in a particular way. She swore that she would never leave anyone, especially a woman, behind. She swore to fight for women and their voices. She is in every seminar fighting and learning new ways to fight. She is ever on calls and linking women to safe spaces. In the evenings when she is supposed to reset and bond with her children, she is still on calls, trying to rescue one community after another, and to add salt to injury, the home that should be a safe sanctuary for her and the children is suddenly a court annex for the community.



The weight of quiet courage

**Pain alone cannot sustain a revolution.
Trauma makes you sharp, but healing
makes you wise.**

I remember not having gone through therapy to heal myself and how I would take everything in and I thought I would become the “Second Saviour”. But my, oh my, didn't I get tired? Didn't I burn out? Didn't I feel I needed to be omnipresent, yet I was just a human being? This is not just the story of Jane and I; most women human rights defenders operate from a point of trauma, and without healing it becomes a challenge. And in a world where social media has become the standard for measuring success, we keep chasing recognition and visibility and clicks because we believe we are not doing enough, and this triggers our trauma.

In the digital age, our activism never pauses – it follows us. The phone becomes both a lifeline and a leash. Notifications carry not just information, but demands, crises, and calls for help. Social media bombards us with stories of injustice in real time, keeping our nervous systems in a constant state of alarm. Even rest becomes performative – we ask ourselves, “Did I post about it? Did I speak up?” We've become addicted to dopamine, constantly checking our phones for the next notification. Screens have replaced presence. Many of us would rather skip a meal than let our phone battery die. Power bank companies are thriving – because we don't leave home without backup. Even on dates or during rest, we can't help but keep peeking at our phones. The very devices meant to connect and empower us have become sources of burnout, anxiety and antisocial behaviour.

Social media bombards us with stories of injustice in real time, keeping our nervous systems in a constant state of alarm. Even rest becomes performative.

Digital spaces that are supposed to amplify our voices are now used to attack us. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence is on the rise. Online trolls dig through our past posts and weaponise them. In some cases, AI-generated videos are used to smear and shame human rights defenders – uploaded onto platforms like OnlyFans without consent. And if you're in Africa, you know how shame around sexuality can become a tool for silencing. Families of human rights defenders are targeted. A simple shift in opinion becomes a public sin. The digital reach is broader, but so is the exposure – to harm, to judgment, to mental distress. It's painful that the very platforms designed to protect and elevate us often leave us feeling unsafe, unwell and unheard.

Real activism, the kind that endures, must be rooted in restoration. You must learn to mother yourself, to hold your inner child, to speak to your own wounds with as much compassion as you give the world. Otherwise, you become another casualty of the cause. You burn out. Or burn others out. Or both. But when healing walks beside you, your activism becomes softer, braver, more sustainable. You learn that rage is valid, but so is joy. That rest is resistance. That gentleness is not weakness. You stop screaming only at systems, and start speaking to the soul. You remember you are not the trauma – you are the survivor. You are not the fight – you are the firekeeper. And from that place – whole, aware, compassionate – you rise again. Not just to fight but to transform. The challenge of operating from a place of trauma is that the body keeps the score and burnout becomes part of you.

Burnout among women human rights defenders is silent and slow. It does not arrive with fanfare. It creeps in like a shadow. You smile, you post online, you show up. But you are exhausted. You don't remember the last time someone asked, "How are you feeling?" The question and demands are, "How will you help us? You human rights defenders have neglected us." The community expects us to have the answers. To be the resourceful ones. To solve their problems. But where do we take ours?

After the last protest against the finance bill in Kenya, I got compassion fatigue, and I did not have the energy or willpower to help people. That was one of the light bulb moments that I had to rest. I still fear gunshots, I remember my children asking me if and when I was going back and being asked by people the next step. While I have had many light bulb moments that I carry the world and pushed by my saviour's mentality, this time it hit so hard. I took rest without feeling any ounce of guilt and I also had boundaries

I've heard stories from women human rights defenders in private circles. Stories of being beaten by their partner yet advocating for equality in the community. Of returning home from a community session to a partner who questions their worth. Of being doubted, dismissed, even ridiculed.

Here comes the delicate part of our activism: many people think we are paid by someone to do this work. A case in point is the number of times we were asked who paid us during the protests. I was not! Passion and a commitment to justice lead us. Pain anchors us. But there is emotional turmoil. People imagine activism is glamorous, the hashtags and panels. But we cry in matatus. We skip meals. We stretch stipends whenever they find us. We attend funerals of girls we couldn't save. We carry the weight of a community's pain without permission to collapse. We carry communal grief. We carry the world on our shoulders and break down in the silent night. We carry the guilt of not showing up.

One woman said to me, "I fight for girls' education every day, yet I have to beg my husband to allow our daughter to attend school." Another said, "I advocate for safety, but I sleep with a knife under my pillow." We do not speak of these contradictions often. But they live within us. And they are real.

I think women should be allowed to sit at the right-hand side of Heaven, enjoy some spa moments and enjoy some RnB music because we will get there tired. Human rights work has been made to be too complicated and overwhelming, leading to mental breakdown. Therapy is expensive. Free services are stretched thin. There is stigma around it. There is negative public opinion. There is shame. You hear things like, "You are the strong one." I distaste this word, "strong", because it dismisses and invalidates people's feelings and experiences. And so, you break silently. We whisper about breakdowns like they are sins, when they are just signals and calls for help. I have had to provide psychological first aid and pro bono services for activists and there is a dire need.

Honestly, sometimes, we just want to rest. To pause. To breathe. But guilt comes flooding in. Who will carry the work? Who will protect the girls? Who will answer the calls? We crave balance between raising our children and raising our voices. But often, something has to give. And it is usually us.

**Do we have the right to rest?
Who heals the healer? Can we
be both broken and brave?
What would support look like if
it was truly responsive? What
does sustainability look like in
the work women human rights
defenders do?**

There were days I would look in the mirror and wouldn't recognise the woman staring back. She had given so much. But I'm learning to speak to her gently. To remind her that she matters even when she is not fixing something. That her softness is not a flaw.

I dream of a world where women human rights defenders have robust support, because at the end of the day, they are still human beings, have their lives to live, but passion drives them. I dream of a world where there is robust support because some are not employable because of the stigma associated with activism, and a world where everyone will be a human rights defender. Where therapy is affordable. Where healing is a line item in every donor budget. Where our children grow up seeing us whole. Where support is proactive, not reactive. I dream of a world where we don't have to be burnt out to be believed. Where our joy is not an afterthought. Where we can say "I need help" without shame.

Somewhere, a girl is watching. And she needs to see that courage can look like her.

At Haven of Dreams, we aim to continue providing safe spaces and circles of healing. One circle, one session, one safe story at a time. It's not perfect. But it is sacred. My desire is that women human rights defenders stir up revolution from a point of healing. My desire is that they do not find their identity in activism, and they can learn to take a pause and have boundaries. They can go for that vacation and enjoy it. They can be activists and present beings. They can still chase their dreams and keep becoming.

Despite it all, we continue. Not because we do not feel fear, or pain, or exhaustion. But because we know the cost of silence. Because somewhere, a girl is watching. And she needs to see that courage can look like her.

So no, not all human rights defenders are born. And not all are made. But all are shaped – by love, by loss, by fire. We are not perfect. We are not always okay. But we show up. In the village baraza. At the protest. On the blog. In the therapy room. At home. Because that is what quiet courage looks like. And it matters.



NAVIGATING LEERS AND GEAR IN A PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY: WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A FEMALE BIKER IN PAKISTAN

Brave beginnings:
Narratives of resilience

Essay | Pakistan

**Ayesha
Aslam**



Pakistani writer, who writes about social affairs, gender issues and more. When she's not writing she's out there on road biking. She grams @thatcrazycyclist.

**Cycling,
when done in a
community,
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than just
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It's an act of
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Clad in masculine attire, I ensured my scarf wasn't too visible. I cast a look at myself in the mirror, secretly wishing no one would notice my nail paint, and left home. As I get on my bike, I tend to ignore the judgmental eyeballs scanning me from head to toe. "It's fine, you got this!" I tell myself and kick the pedal to start my daily ride, hoping this camouflage of a man's clothing will be my saviour on the roads.

That's not the only screwed measure for protection. Riding on roads with traffic flowing in the opposite direction is another absurd trick that works. Competence isn't only what it takes; as a female biker, you have to know creative ways to protect yourself.

In a notoriously male-dominated society, women on bikes are culturally unaccepted and read as "asking for it". To be chased, violated, harassed - these are the behaviours men deem suitable. Women on bikes isn't a radical idea, but were our parameters to judge women ever radical?

The weight of expectations from women in South Asian societies is heavy. She's an outcast if she's opinionated and doesn't comply with expectations. Lo and behold, that's not the only downside of being a woman. The economic cost of being a woman is also high.

Take commuting as an example: all the feasible, least-cost options are despised by society and labelled as inappropriate. There's no legal restriction on female biking in Pakistan, but society still struggles to deem it normal.

More women need to experience the joy of feeling the wind on their face, the calmness it brings, and the soothing effect it has on one's well-being.

Weighing my options to commute on a bike as female, I had to make the most difficult call. It was zero-cost, no hassle of getting stuck in traffic, with a high propensity of harassment, against a relatively safe but soul-tiring commute. Four years back, when I started cycling to fix my mental and physical health, little did I know how unwelcoming the streets were for women. Eight months on the road, I realised more women need to experience the joy of feeling the wind on their face, the calmness it brings, and the soothing effect it has on one's well-being.

How often do you pick up a sport and think it would turn into a movement?

This movement might not be groundbreaking, but it was a breakthrough for women. How could it not be in a society where bikes are gender-biased, roads are gender-biased and meant only for men? Quite ironic, but the realisation came when one day my 12-years-younger brother wouldn't join me for riding. I could buy a bike, I could ride one, but I couldn't go out without the supervision of a 15-year-old boy. This was paralysing.

Do I have to seek a MALE companion every time I go out? Can't I just be out and about without much contemplation, arranging for my security? The triggers tacked on and pushed me to do it alone. Initially, it was terrifying and brought tears rolling down my cheeks. This shouldn't be anything out of the ordinary, just a girl on a bike minding her own business, but we didn't grow up seeing this so we couldn't see it as "respectable".

Cycling is therapeutic, but what if this therapy also makes you prone to harassment, violence? While cycling made me feel liberated, navigating the roads wasn't easy in a patriarchal society where the safety protocol for women said, "Stay home, stay safe." But system change doesn't just happen; one has to work for it. So in order to take up space, I began to constantly show up in spaces.

Every ride became a reminder of how privileged yet vulnerable I am. Privileged because I could ride my bike whenever I wanted, but vulnerable because I wasn't shielded from deliberate harm.

Over time, cycling made me calm, confident and helped me discover the strength within. Conquering the streets, it occurred to me that the way forward isn't in going solo but in a group that blows up patriarchal notions and normalises women biking.

It started with a Facebook post looking for like-minded girls. More than 50 girls signed up within a few hours! The only obstacle? No one had a bike. Ironically, in a city where so many women were willing to cycle, no one owned a bike. So feasibility and logistics became a necessary step in the journey and an additional role for me. The task changed from looking for girls up for cycling to looking for bikes for girls. The constant posting on the internet drew attention and a DM landed in my Messenger with an unexpected offer: “If you get the bikes, would you be interested in running a girls’ cycling group?” Happy, unsure and stunned, I floated the message in our private chat group to gauge responses. A single affirmation in five minutes led to the formation of the first-ever girls cycling club in Karachi. The group “Ride, Roll, Lead” was born, and what started with two cycles turned into 10 cycles within a month.

Being on the road opened my eyes to why no woman dared to cycle alone in the city. Fast forward to leading a dozen women’s rides made me realise that cycling, when done in a community, becomes more than just movement. It’s an act of resistance, existence, visibility, and a source of joy amidst all life’s problems.

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“I join these rides because cycling helps me sleep better. My friends ask me to do my cycling therapy before talking to them as it makes me less cranky,” shared Areeba, one of the riders.

“No matter what mood I come in, I always leave feeling relieved,” commented Wardah, another regular rider.

“A single therapy session costs 5,000 PKR. Cycling isn’t even two dollars. I call it my cheap therapy,” says Hafsa, who’s content with the after-effects of cycling.

This is not just a group, it's a sanctuary where women feel seen, uplifted and empowered. We laugh, tease, and crack inside jokes on our rides. Girls bring their friends, sisters, even workmates to feel the joy of riding together. The by-product? Iconic pictures, memories, and the motivation to keep going. As a woman biker, I can corroborate how empowering it is to find a clan that's shattering the invisible barriers, breaking the norms, and bringing more women onto roads to promote inclusivity and collectively, to claim our access to safe public spaces. Together, we can reshape the narrative and inspire more women to overcome the obstacles, to get out on the streets, and claim their equal share of roads and opportunities.



THE DAY I KNEW FEAR

Brave beginnings:
Narratives of resilience

Essay | Myanmar

Ma Bee Founder and editor of Myit Ye See Than Magazine. She is a women's rights activist and feminist researcher devoted to the improvement of women's lives in Myanmar.



**Fearlessness
can be
radical
when the
fear, itself,
can spread
its power all
over the
community
living
under it.**

What does fear look like?

We all have our own fear. Fear comes in different forms. Sometimes it is very visible to us, but sometimes it is masked in confusions and manipulations. For some people, fear is saying goodbye forever to loved ones. For some, it is losing stable jobs and incomes. For others, it can be rejection or the crawly earthworms in the wet soil after a rainy day. I always recount the times when I was asked what I am afraid of most as a child and teenager in class or in conversation. It always took me a while because I could not think of my fear immediately. In adolescence, I remember my friends and teachers called me “fearless”, “bold”, “disobedient”. Yes, I can barely think of anything that I am actually afraid of. I used to be proud that I was fearless and of the idea that nothing could frighten me.

Little did I know my fearlessness came from negligence of my own privileges. I was born and raised in a middle-class, educated Christian family in Yangon. I achieved the best education anyone could have at the time and had a job with a competitive salary. It is not surprising that I was ignorant of the state, the government, the working class, and ethnic affairs. But now, I know what fear looks like, feels like and what it does to me and to those around me. We only know fear as a negative and intense emotion. We describe those who are in fear as vulnerable. However, we tend to forget how fearlessness can be radical when the fear, itself, can spread its power all over the community living under it.

1 February morning

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military executed a coup d'état and seized power all over the nation in spite of the people's voting results in the 2020 electoral campaign. I clearly remember that morning. On 31 January, I had released my official music single on streaming platforms. I fell asleep early that night with the joy and soundness that everything was going to be better: my passion, my future, my career, my music journey, etc.

I was the only member of my family who woke up at 7 a.m. every day and went to work. As per my typical morning routine, I was getting ready for work, but when I checked my phone, it did not show any signal. I could not call or text anyone. I thought my old phone simply wasn't working anymore. Around 8 a.m., I left home for work and, passing by the street, I noticed my neighbourhood was quieter than it should be. There were a few aunties and uncles, here and there, in small groups, chatting in tiny voices. The tea shops, always crowded with breakfast eaters, were closed. However, there was a long queue in front of the rice shop. I wondered why people were so eager to buy rice so early in the morning. When I reached the top of the street, I hopped on a trishaw to head to the bus station. On the way, I asked the trishaw uncle what was wrong.

"There's a lot of news these days that the military is hinting at a coup. Don't you read the news?" he belittled me and assumed I was not interested in politics simply because I was such a young lady. And yet, I still did not get my answer. On the bus, I saw the roads were very empty, unusual for rush hour. Things like trash cans and national flags were scattered on the road. I could sense the smell of chaos around every corner of the city.

The route to the office passed by the NLD (National League for Democracy) headquarters. I looked through the glass window of the bus and saw a big crowd gathering in front of it. Then, I knew for sure something must have happened last night. I wondered if the military had seized power, doubting and hoping that wasn't the case. I still needed to confirm from reliable news sources, but my phone was not working. I was sure I would hear something from my colleagues when I got to the office. I waited there for almost three hours, but no one came. I left and got in a taxi and tried to confirm with the driver uncle if the coup had actually taken place.

He said “yes”. I could not believe my ears. Was it officially announced in the news? The driver said, “It was announced in VOA and media outlets around 4 a.m. in the morning. Oo Lay (Uncle) watched it and the signal broke down half way.” I was speechless for about 10 minutes. I could not utter a word nor hear what he was saying afterward. I was in my own thoughts and emotions; it was like I was robed with a dark cloak for a while. I noticed one or two tear drops fall down. I could not describe how I felt at that time. It was a mix of sadness, uncertainty, anger, emptiness, hopelessness and outrage at the same time. Everything we had built was gone. Too many questions popped up in my mind.

“Will our lives be turning back to the dark ages?”

“Will there be bloodshed like the 88 uprising?”

“What about the nation’s future?”

The taxi stopped in front of my boyfriend’s house. I wanted to make sure he was okay. That was the first day that I understood what uncertainty feels like. I felt that something very vital like a lifeline was taken away from me before I even realised I had it. In fact, my freedom, my rights, my voice – all the basic needs to be a free human – were taken away on that day.

My freedom, my rights, my voice

– all the basic needs to be a free human –

were taken away on that day.

Now I know what fear looks like!!!

The first mass protest started in Yangon on 6 February. On 19 February, the military junta shot Mya Thwe Thwe Khine, a young protestor, only 20; she was the first casualty. Since that day onward, the military continued its inhumane crimes by shooting protestors, bombing protest areas and snatching citizens participating in the anti-junta resistance movement. Day after day, we read news of violence the military had committed against peaceful protestors. We wept at night after the protests but, in the morning, we rose again, gathered ourselves in the streets, at the junctions of major roads, and at public spaces in the city.

On one of the days of continuous protests in a suburban area of Yangon – I could not remember the exact date as we were protesting all week long – I was the one holding the microphone at the front line of the protest. Two military trucks entered recklessly while I was singing the protest song and leading the chants. I stopped immediately and shouted “RUNNNNNNN” with the microphone that I was holding. The protestors scattered in various directions. I and a few friends ran into a small alley. A group of soldiers followed just a few metres behind us. We knew running towards the end of the street could be death for us. Hence, we entered a house in the middle of the alley. The owners, aunty and uncle, were waving silently at us, expressing a welcome gesture without making a sound.

As soon as we entered their compound, they led us to the back of the house where they had set up many small rooms divided only by thin wooden planks. We realised it was a boarding house, similar to the living quarters of many working-class people in Yangon. The prices of rent are higher than what an individual could earn per month. So, owners of big houses would set up the space into tiny bedrooms, which only allow a person to lie down and sleep. Many of the labourers could not afford proper accommodations. They went out to downtown in the daytime to do their work and only came back at night

to their tiny bedrooms to sleep. The uncle at the house told us to get into those tiny rooms and pretend to be one of the residents of the house. I got into a room immediately and got onto the bed of that tiny space. It was not only small, but also dusty and smelly with old clothes. I switched off the small light bulb, pulled down the mosquito net, and tried to pretend like I was asleep.

**From the narrow holes, I saw dark
green military boots, rifles, guns
and my comrades, their hands
tied behind their backs.**

In my panic, I had not realised that not all members of our team had made it. We tried to communicate with each other via mobile apps and I realised some of them did not reply. Only five out of 12 people were inside the house. We were silent for a while and prayed the soldiers would not suspect our hiding place, this boarding house. A few minutes later, we heard the sound of heavy footsteps approaching the house. Were these military boots? I tried to peek through the narrow gaps between the wooden planks, located just behind the bed pillow. From the narrow holes, I saw dark green military boots, rifles, guns and my comrades, their hands tied behind their backs. My heart was pounding so hard I could hear my own heartbeats. "Dote... dote... dote..." I thought that moment was endless, although it only took a few seconds. That was the moment I noticed fear crawling into my body. My palms and feet were cold, my forehead sweating, my knees trembling and my body weak.

"Why am I hiding when I have done nothing wrong?"

"Why couldn't I stand against this unfairness like I had always stood for women rights?"

"Was it the gun?"

"Was it the screams of my comrades as the soldiers' bats fell upon their heads and bodies?"



Suddenly, a thought struck my mind. I had never gotten hit by this kind of fear before. I asked myself, "What am I afraid of?" I was scared of getting caught by the soldiers for sure. At the same time, I felt anger. I was angry, questioning myself.

They were beating them; I saw it. Some of them were soaked in blood. I heard them screaming, but I could not save them. Survivor's guilt has swallowed me slowly and deeply since then.

The truth is, I was very angry and bitter because I could not be as brave as I used to be. I used to have a voice. I was never scared to speak the truth. I had never missed my chance to stand up for myself or other people when I saw injustice happening around me. I have always been fearless. But now, look what their guns made me feel and what their violence made me suffer. Tears could not stop from flowing when I realised my freedom was taken away. I felt the absence of security and alienation from myself. I was forced into silence.

bell hooks said:

Fear is the primary force upholding structures of domination. It promotes the desire for separation, the desire not to be known. When we choose to love we choose to move against fear – against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect – to find ourselves in the other.

Today, I realise that fear is tied to oppression, discrimination and violence. Governments and politicians use fear as a tool for domination, separation and control. Though it is negative and intense, we must reflect on how our fears reflect the systems that control or silence us. We must recognise fear as the mirror of the systems we live under.

No matter what kind of fear we are facing, we must realise that we still have the power to manage it and overcome it.

When someone asks me now what my biggest fear is, I answer “losing freedom” as an individual and as a collective group of people. Fear comes in forms, shapes, textures, and sometimes in distorted images. It is both physical and emotional. I believe the first stage of freedom from fear is to notice and accept its existence. From there, we can find ways to overcome and be healed from its wounds.

Like bell hooks taught us, the common fears of a community or a group of people need collective care and solutions. From my own experiences, I am fully aware that fear is not only a tool of control by the authorities, but also a motivator or driver to be reflective of ourselves, to highlight the problems in our own community, to encourage collective problem solving and to provoke individuals' ability to overcome challenges. No matter what kind of fear we are facing, we must realise that we still have the power to manage it and overcome it.

After the day I knew fear, I was even more determined to continue the fight for freedom of my own rights and my nation's. I am sure I will not back down, I will not give up, I will always remember this moment as my vulnerability guided me towards the journey of fighting for absolute and radical freedom from fear.



THROUGH FEAR: ON RISKS AND HOPES OF INHABITING SOCIAL MEDIA

The digital frontier

Essay | Mexico

**Aida
Naxhielly**



Writer and facilitator working on communicative and audiovisual processes from a community-based, antiracist and antipatriarchal approach. She's currently part of La Sandía Digital, Colectivo Juvenil Intercultural Nuestras Voces and Lundu Colectiva.

**It's possible,
and necessary,
to insist on our
right to occupy
digital spaces
without hurting
our lives, our
minds and
our hearts.**

As I write these words, I mourn the murder - announced today - of Sandra Domínguez, an Ayuuk (or Mixe) lawyer who defended women's rights for a life free of any form of violence. She openly and directly confronted the sexual and digital violence perpetrated by men in (or aspiring to) public positions in government institutions against other Indigenous women and colleagues. Men who took part in a chat where the privacy and intimacy of those women was violated. Men who are also part of Indigenous peoples, whom we should think of as comrades or partners in our struggle.

My hands are shaking, my arms are tense, and the sadness and fear overwhelm me as I write something on my social media in response to this news that hurts and upsets many of my colleagues; something that contributes a little to the demand for justice and to the visibility of her courage, because I know they are arguing that her husband - also disappeared and murdered alongside her - had links with the narcos and that this was the motivation behind this crime. Because I know that the narrative they're pushing is trying to minimise the fact that Sandra was persecuted for her work and reporting, to criminalise and re-victimise her in some way so that her case remains there, and we have to take a stand against this.

I notice how my body is in a state of alert because it acknowledges that in this context, in this country where, according to Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA), there have been 1,428 acts of aggression against land defenders reported in the last five years, the exercise of a political voice can be a risk.

Instinctively, I go back to X and make sure to not have too much information that could potentially allow others to locate me directly and quickly, although I know that going backwards, there are clear traces of who I am. I remove a pinned tweet of something that makes me happy and that I have had for many months now, because I know it makes me easily recognisable. I verify - forgetting for a moment that I set it up this way quite some time ago - that my account doesn't display my full name at first sight, that I have not activated anything related to my physical location. I check, every so often, how the number of retweets goes up, hoping on one hand that it does (to amplify the message), and on the other hand, maybe not so much...

Will I also be brave enough?

When in January 2015 I started my current X account, Twitter back then, I don't remember exactly what I was thinking. Maybe something related to wanting to share funny things and laughable circumstances that cross my mind. I probably just wanted to have a "normal" social network. But perhaps it is my upbringing in a family of social causes, my growing interests, my gradual politicisation, that made me begin to share opinions related to Indigenous people, women, violence and justice.

I also remember that at first this network allowed me to meet, or at least connect with, other persons who belonged to first nations. The practice of following each other made it possible, little by little, to cultivate links with people who thought like me and who worked for what they believed in. That actually made me feel confident in some way, made me feel actually part of a network.

I started to gain more followers and, by extension, to feel greater emotional and mental weight.

Now, it's been 10 years on that platform, and the details of how I've used it have become blurry. For example, I don't have a clear idea of what my first "political" tweet was, nor which post was the first "viral" one. But I do recognise that there came a time when I had to make more careful decisions surrounding my own impact in this virtual world. It was when I started to gain more followers and, by extension, to feel greater emotional and mental weight. Although I know I'm not necessarily someone with more influence, I do see how the continuously growing exposure had - and still has - severe effects on my life.

A key moment, I think, was during the pandemic of 2020. In general, as we know, the world turned to virtual spaces with increasing urgency. The use of platforms and devices for communication went up; not that this wasn't happening before, but it certainly felt like a burst and a point of no return. And this event also deepened and made more visible the gaps that exist in access to technology in general.

It was in this context that the death of George Floyd occurred and generated a wave of indignation against police brutality and racism, resulting in many digital protests in various parts of the world. In Mexico, as a neighbouring country of the United States, this also had its own impact.

At that time, I remember, I was already part of a “circle” of people who were fairly well known in the tweeting world for speaking out on certain issues, such as the racism experienced by Indigenous peoples in the country, and for taking a stand against patriarchal violence. Amidst the strong collective and widespread desire to do something against racist violence, I received more invitations to participate in spaces, to speak, to dialogue. It was some kind of “validation process” of who I was, what I was saying, and what I believed in. However, I was also beginning to question my own position as someone occupying these spaces, and whose voice seemed to carry a certain weight – more than that of others.



I was also beginning to question
my own position as someone
occupying these [virtual] spaces.

Also, around that time, the fear and anxiety were also inhabiting me. I remember with clarity when that started: in the path of my growing presence online, when my account was navigating between sharing stuff related to my work, or to my personal life, or to struggles I was in solidarity with. It was in that moment when a friendly acquaintance who followed me gave me advice: a warning related to my own safety. After I published something about my health, he wrote me a private message to let me know that I was probably, without my full knowledge or desire, sharing personal information in the tweet. There it was: my full name, not at first glance, but it was possible to zoom into in the picture. At that time, I thanked him a lot (I still do) for alerting me to this, because I know he did it so I could decide if I wanted to take it down or edit it maybe. His approach was far from scolding, but rather informing me to make a conscious decision.

It was there, in that instant, that I really reflected profoundly for the first time: What were the things that I was sharing? What did I want to say about my life? About what I believed in? Why? For who? What was the limit – my limit – and to what extent do I need to be careful of what I publish? Someone could question, with fair reason, why we should care about information that appears very tiny in a blurry picture... but the contexts in which we mobilise have taught us that we can never be too safe.

Even when I already had some clarity about not wanting to share all my data online, the truth is that in the inertia of “virality” and the hook that comes from seeing your numbers grow, the sort of “addictive dynamic” that comes from having “an audience”; in the face of that, the clarity of your surroundings can become even more blurred. Sometimes, having someone else remind you to care for yourself first can save your life, mind, or heart.

Less than a month ago, I was talking with other women defenders about Sandra and the very violent context against activists and organisers in my state, Oaxaca. The conversation took place, actually, in the context of a workshop about digital security for Indigenous women communicators and land defenders. At that moment, due to all the months that had passed since her forced disappearance, months of demands for justice by her family, friends and colleagues, amid the government's inaction, we knew – even if we didn't say it out loud – that the chances of her being alive were minimal. And we knew it because we work on this. It was noticeable in our way of naming her, in the tone of our voices and our looks; the collective sadness was right there with us.

But that didn't mean that the news was less impactful once it came to light. Because this reality we live in, where the violence confronted and experienced by women defenders continues to be downplayed, hits us directly again, in our faces and our whole selves. Grief, pain and sorrow settled in many, in all. And I remember, now, the words of two journalists, who are also part of Indigenous communities, Diana Manzo and Paulina Ríos, in a piece they recently wrote about the disappearances and murders of women defenders in Mexico:

And at the other extreme, there's the collective effect, the fear that's placed for defending human rights. The psycho-social impact of generating fear for raising your voice, for denouncing, for confronting patriarchy and the ruling powers. Thus, the action of protest, the action of denunciation is inhibited, and with disappearances, the impact is much more prolonged and more painful.

These past three years, I have had the chance to meet several other Indigenous women defenders, to hear their own approaches to digital platforms and technology, to dialogue with them about their doubts and fears but also their dreams of inhabiting the digital space. All that has allowed me to reflect on the uncertainty born out of knowing that what you do, say and write is going to circulate without control or decision about what will come next, once that thing is shared also by many other people.

Currently, I'm part of a collective organisation called La Sandía Digital. There, we work for the right to communication: we believe that all people should have the same opportunity to tell their stories through their own voices and narratives, without the need for intermediaries, fighting extractivism in all its dimensions. We have built different processes in this sense, particularly on strategic communication and audiovisual production for narrative change, with a special focus on the defence of territories, gender justice and, in general, human rights.

One of the first projects I coordinated was a participatory investigation about the obstacles, dreams and actions of 71 women defenders, mostly from native communities in Mexico. These are colleagues who are dedicated to the defence of territories and who face specific risks in their work; risks that, as we confirmed, are rooted in inequalities that continue to persist outside, but also within, organisations and grassroots movements, and even – sadly – within many of our own communities.

Hyperconnectivity and the saturation of information has consequences in the psycho-emotional drain on women defenders.

One of the concerns that clearly emerged among practically all the defenders and communicators who belong to different collectives from very diverse territories is digital security. Despite different approaches to security, one common worry rose from your name and face circulating through these networks, in photographs, videos or other forms of communication. We acknowledged the tension between wanting to be visible and wanting to protect ourselves from possible attacks from companies, governments, criminal groups, but also from people in our own communities. While we do recognise that these platforms allow us to connect with people in physically distant places, thus increasing the construction of solidarity, we also see how hyperconnectivity and the saturation of information has consequences in the psycho-emotional drain on women defenders and communicators.

Among my various tweets, there's an accumulation of tens of thousands of views. Some of those with the greatest reach speak against gentrification, dispossession and high-class tourism; against racism towards communities; against the stereotypes imposed on Indigenous women; and against the government of my state and country. Several of them have been republished, on different occasions, in other social networks such as Facebook and Instagram; a couple of them have even been included in news articles.

In the midst of that viralisation of what I write, of my user name, and my profile picture, is where I have learned, by mere instinct and intuition, to make decisions about my digital care. Things like changing – long ago, as part of that online growth – my username to a word in Mixtec; not sharing my full last name in my texts or other participations; modifying my public name to just initials or emojis at times; having a profile picture that just barely shows my face; keeping my Instagram account private; blocking without a hint of doubt any trolls who come to my publications and more; all those are things I have exercised for practically the last 10 years of my life... And when a screenshot of one of my tweets arrives to other networks or I share something that I perceive as riskier, almost as a ritual, I activate one of my risk mitigation strategies.

Talking about the consequences of viralisation might seem, for some people, irrelevant. For those who seek this as a sort of aspiration, my worries could seem unnecessary. Maybe for others it might even be self-centred or “over the top”. However, from what I've experienced and felt, as well as exchanged with other colleagues, the truth is that being in a position in which people beyond your closest circle begin to know of your existence can be very triggering, depending on your own emotional and mental state. It's no one's place to assume that everyone enjoys or wants to be in that position, no matter how much we use it strategically for our causes.

**It's possible, and necessary, to
insist on our right to occupy
digital spaces without hurting our
lives, our minds and our hearts.**

Inhabiting the digital world is a very intricate matter and I have understood its complexity, first hand, throughout all this time. I fully recognise that it has given me many advantages, that it has opened many doors and alliances for me and the work I do. But I also recognise, without a doubt, that it has changed the way I relate and feel about my personal life. While I stay hopeful in the possibility of finding other people to accompany us, support us, or join the causes we defend by knowing us through the platforms, I do it without forgetting the emotional and mental exhaustion that can come from constantly trying to take a stance in all the struggles we care for, and silencing the anxiety and sadness that this sometimes generates.

While I wipe my tears for Sandra and light a candle to honour her path; while I take a deep breath to release the fear that invades me; while I go for a walk and disconnect for a while from everything that overwhelms me; I take refuge in the certainty that it's possible, and necessary, to insist on our right to occupy digital spaces without hurting our lives, our minds and our hearts. And that's what we work for.



**THEY DID NOT
NEED TO BREAK
DOWN MY DOOR.
THEY ONLY HAD
TO BREAK INTO
MY PHONE.**

The digital frontier

Essay | Thailand

**Panusaya
“Rung”
Sithijirawattanakul**



Thai human rights activist. She was one of a leading figures in the 2020 pro-democracy movement and is best known for reading the -10point manifesto that openly challenged long-standing taboos around the monarchy, sparking nationwide debate.

**My room is
empty, there's
no one here
but me and my
cat. Yet, it feels
crowded, like
it's filled with
people staring
at me in anger.**

I am Panusaya, a former student activist from Thailand. I was only 21 when I learned the military government could be watching me even in my bedroom, not through a person but through my phone. It was the same device I use for talking to my friends, talking to my family, talking to my loved one, checking the news, watching some series, and playing games. That phone had been infected – multiple times – by Pegasus spyware, an advanced and sophisticated spyware developed by the Israeli company NSO Group. It did not need me to click anything. It just quietly entered, extracted, recorded and disappeared. I had no way of knowing. No chance to fight back. Nothing I can do to keep me safe from it. This is just because I was simply questioning and speaking the truth about the root problems in Thailand when my friends and I led the mass student movement in Thailand in 2020.

It began on February 21, 2020, when my fellow students and I protested the Constitutional Court's decision to dissolve the Future Forward Party – a newly established party representing the younger generation with progressive ideals. This event sparked political awakening among many young people in Thailand, including myself. The people had harboured political dissatisfaction since 2014, when the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) – the military-led group – staged a coup, claiming to end political conflict and restore peace. This was a lie. Political conflict is natural in a democracy where people have differing opinions. It's not something to be eradicated, but a means for people to debate and find common ground for the country's progress. No citizen is a villain in this equation. This coup, like the previous 12 in Thailand's history – yes, my homeland, known for its tourism, delicious food, beautiful beaches and kind people, has experienced 13 coups and constitutional dissolutions – got endorsed by the king of Thailand.

The student uprising in 2020 evolved into a nationwide pro-democracy movement. Protests occurred in universities across every province. New student activists like myself rose to express opinions and eventually became leaders in demonstrations lasting over two years. We gathered on streets, campuses, and online platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, striving to oppose the military government and call for monarchy reform, which we saw as the roots of Thailand's societal issues. Our sincere speech threatened their stability, but how could it not, when they interfered in politics to achieve desired outcomes without respecting the people's voice? They orchestrated coups, seized power from elected governments, and crafted bizarre laws to justify their arbitrary rule, disregarding the nation's regression. Students like us became the people's hope, while the state and monarchy saw us as villains to be eradicated.

Female activists like me endured mockery of our appearance, sexually explicit photo edits, rape threats and death threats, all knowing these threats could materialise.

For me, being a female student leader in the pro-democracy movement was far from easy in our patriarchal culture. Female activists like me endured mockery of our appearance, sexually explicit photo edits, rape threats and death threats, all knowing these threats could materialise.

Yes, I was genuinely afraid. These threats never occurred in front of me; I never knew who sent them because they often came online. My social media inboxes were filled with disgusting messages, beyond what a 21-year-old second-year student should see. It's nauseating to realise that those who sent these messages exist in the same society, possibly someone I passed by, knew, or shared social circles with. It became even more terrifying when I realised that someone might be watching and listening to me all the time, even when I was alone in my bedroom.

During my political activism and leadership in protests, I was arrested and detained four times. Each time my lawyers requested bail multiple times before the judges finally agreed to grant it. Every time they denied bail, I felt like I was being subjected to mental torture by the court system, it was never easy and traumatised me. In the prison they would keep monitoring me, CCTV was everywhere, there was no privacy in prison, not even when we had a shower, and there were no walls for toilets. The prison guards constantly kept a close watch on me and even used inmates under their command to monitor my actions, observing what I did and who I talked to, often trying to isolate me from the other prisoners. They tried to claim it was for my safety, but I knew that was not the truth. It was not about protecting me. It was about isolating me, making sure I did not speak too much and could not connect and inspire anyone else. They watched me through others, listened to my words, and slowly built a wall around me, all while pretending it was for my own good.

On my fourth time in prison and after multiple bail requests, the judges finally agreed to grant my bail. On December 1, 2021 I was released from prison under bail conditions:

1. Refrain from activities that tarnish the monarchy.
2. Avoid participating in protests causing unrest.
3. Remain at home 24 hours a day, except for exams, medical visits or court appointments.
4. Do not leave the country without permission.
5. Wear an electronic monitoring bracelet at all times.

That day, I felt they had stripped away my freedom, civil rights and freedom of expression for me being myself and having a good intention for our beloved country. It was also the day I realised they were invading my life through my smartphone.

Upon leaving prison, my parents were waiting in the car to take me to my condominium. I asked about my phone, and they said my sister had it. I found it odd since my mom usually brought it. I was using my mom's phone to call my sister to bring my phone to me. When we arrived, friends came to visit and update me on the outside world situation as they always do. Later that night my sister arrived, her face looked nervous; she handed me my phone and then showed me an email from Apple stating that my device had been hacked by state-sponsored spyware.

November 23, 2021

ALERT: State-sponsored attackers may be targeting your iPhone

Apple believes you are being targeted by state-sponsored attackers who are trying to remotely compromise the iPhone associated with your Apple ID. These attackers are likely targeting you individually because of who you are or what you do. If your device is compromised by a state-sponsored attacker, they may be able to remotely access your sensitive data, communications, or even the camera and microphone. While it's possible this is a false alarm, please take this warning seriously. I was stunned, feeling like my ears were ringing. I was surrounded by my family and my friends. I asked everyone if this was real or just spam and why no one told me about this email before. My sister said she and my parents did not want me to stress out during the time in prison; being in prison was already hard for me to cope with and there was nothing I could do while I was in there. My friends also agreed with my family, so they had said nothing. They assured me they would find someone to examine my phone. I was scared. I never thought of this and did not know what to do in this situation. My room was filled with people but that time I felt so alone.

Later, I learned I wasn't alone; over 30 activists, scholars and politicians received similar emails from Apple. Many Android users couldn't even verify their devices.

**The military government has
invested heavily in foreign
surveillance tools, not to protect
its people but to monitor, control
and suppress us.**

For weeks after we found someone who specialises in digital security, we received confirmation that it was Pegasus spyware. We received help from the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, who flew in from Canada to examine our phones and explain the severity of this spyware. At the time, I did not know what it was or how dangerous it could be. They explained to me that this spyware is designed to infiltrate smartphones without the user ever needing to click on anything. Once inside, it can extract everything, such as emails, photos, chats, videos, and even activate the phone's camera or microphone, all without the owner ever knowing.

It was both infuriating and shocking; I never imagined the state would go this far. I never had any idea that this spyware attack would happen in real life and especially would happen in Thailand. Our country does not have that level of technological expertise, but the military government has invested heavily in foreign surveillance tools, not to protect its people but to monitor, control and suppress us.

It felt surreal, yet it was happening. My phone was infiltrated four times on these dates: June 15, 2021; June 20, 2021; June 23, 2021; and September 24, 2021. They asked if these dates held any significance. Initially, I was not sure, but upon reflection, I realised these dates coincided with our protest planning meetings. They were days before and after protests. Then I recalled warnings to keep phones away during sensitive discussions, especially about the monarchy, as someone might be eavesdropping. At the time, I thought it was possible but unlikely, considering we were just students without power. Our protests were public, with press releases and interviews. We were transparent about our activities and ideals. I believed they had nothing to fear from us. That belief led us to let our guard down.

I wish I was not so naive and I had listened.

The did not need to break down my door. They only had to break into my phone.

After discovering the attacks, I took measures to protect myself and those around me. First, I limited communication to only those within the movement, avoiding involving unrelated individuals who might be at risk. I reduced contact with close friends, even cutting off communication with some, fearing they might be endangered by being my friends. I also minimised contact with my family, leading to periods where we did not speak at all. My parents learned about me through public media, just like everyone else. It was heartbreaking that I had to go to such lengths, and my family had to endure this, all to ensure their safety. It's painful and tormenting, but I believed it was necessary to bear the risk alone, not them. Because I could never know when they might be listening or reading my messages.

Within our movement, my organisation, the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration, we had some security measures such as code names, secure communication apps like Signal and Telegram, auto-deleting messages, and monitoring member activities. Our group had over 100 members, and we always looked out and removed inactive ones. Still, I felt it was not enough. We intensified our security, especially since we relied heavily on these apps. After the spyware incident, we decided to hold face-to-face meetings. During protest-planning sessions, we removed phones from the meeting area, turned them off, placed them in thick boxes, sometimes adding loud music to mask conversations, hoping to thwart any eavesdropping. However, nothing guaranteed our safety, as our group was heavily monitored by the military government. We were followed by police, and I believe the military was involved too.

My friends and I felt paranoid. I became so haunted by the spyware that, when alone, I'd talk to my phone, telling them over and over to stop doing this to me and other activists, as if someone was always listening. Sometimes, I would say:

Hey, if someone's listening, know that we're not trying to overthrow the monarchy. Do you think it is that easy? We have nothing but ourselves. What could we possibly use to overthrow the monarchy?

If anyone listening wants us to win, join us. Seriously, we can win, and it would benefit everyone. That one family can't do anything if no one supports them. Let's unite as citizens.

The did not need to break down my door. They only had to break into my phone.

Sometimes, I would try to deceive them by mentioning fake protest plans, just to see if there was any reaction, because I desperately wished to know whether someone was truly listening.

In fact, I might never know when they were eavesdropping. This led me to try to live without a routine, changing my daily habits. So they could not predict what I was going to do next. Normally, I carried my phone everywhere, even into the bathroom. Since then, I stopped bringing it into the bathroom or near me when changing clothes, I often placed a pillow over it, as I no longer trusted its camera.

My room is empty, there's no one here but me and my cat. Yet, it feels crowded, like it's filled with people staring at me in anger.

Countless unseen eyes, harassing me

In reality my room is empty, there's no one here but me and my cat. Yet, it feels crowded, like it's filled with people staring at me in anger. Maybe they're military officials, government agents, or police sent to watch me.

I cannot see them, but I feel them. They are always there, always watching. It was like being hunted in silence. The threat never leaves.

Eventually, I isolated myself in my room for an extended period. I cannot recall how long, but I remember that my youth vanished. It disappeared when I joined the pro-democracy movement (which I will never regret), more so when I became a state target, and completely when the state chose to use the world's most sophisticated cyber weapon to destroy the democratic movement and me.

If I remember correctly, I lived this way for about a year until I ceased almost all activism publicly, both on the streets and in the media. I continued to live a life bound to court appearances throughout the year due to 25 political cases from my protest leadership. I tried to figure out how I could keep living in a situation that was so difficult and suffocating. Everything felt heavy. Every step, every word, every glance watched and measured. I kept asking myself: How do I survive this? How do I stay human in a place designed to take that away?

I was scared, tired, and often felt like I was slipping away from myself but at the same time, I refused to give in. Somewhere beneath the fear, a small voice kept whispering that I had to hold on, that even in this place, I could still choose who I wanted to be. Some days, that voice was the only thing that kept me going.

And I held on by turning that pain into purpose.

I began working with human rights organisations in Thailand, taking an internship with an international human rights organisation, and eventually enrolling in a Master's programme in Human Rights and Democratisation. Each step was a way of reclaiming my voice, of proving to myself and to them that they had not won.

Nevertheless, the situation began to get worse. Under an elected government that chose to side with those responsible for the coup and the far-right, the students' demands and the flood of hope we once carried in 2020 were swept away in an instant, crushed under the weight of broken promises and political betrayal. More and more activists and ordinary people were convicted in political cases and sent to the prison. Courts became increasingly reluctant to grant bail, and the number of political prisoners has continued to rise. In many ways, it is even worse than under the military regime because now, repression hides behind the mask of democracy. Many activists, faced with relentless persecution, were forced into exile.

Eventually, I had to make the heartbreaking decision to leave my home - to leave Thailand, the country I love so deeply. The country I once stood up for on the streets, that I believed could be better. It seems Thailand does not love me back.

For a brief moment, I felt calm, safe and free from harm in a country that promised protection, but the peace didn't last.

I thought the digital surveillance had ended in 2021, but in March this year (2025), during a no-confidence debate in the Thailand parliament, the opposition revealed that there had been attempts from Internal Security Operations Command to dox me by guessing my account passwords up to 1,000 times using personal information like my birthdate, school ID, and significant numbers in my life. Even though I had not been politically active for some time, some individuals' accounts were successfully breached. Fortunately, I never used personal information in my passwords. However, it made me anxious again; I realised they were still monitoring me.



I had to make the heartbreaking decision to leave my home – to leave Thailand, the country I love so deeply.

Although we no longer live under a military government, I left with many questions. Why does a civilian administration – led by a party once known for its fight for democracy – allow such grave violations to continue under its watch?

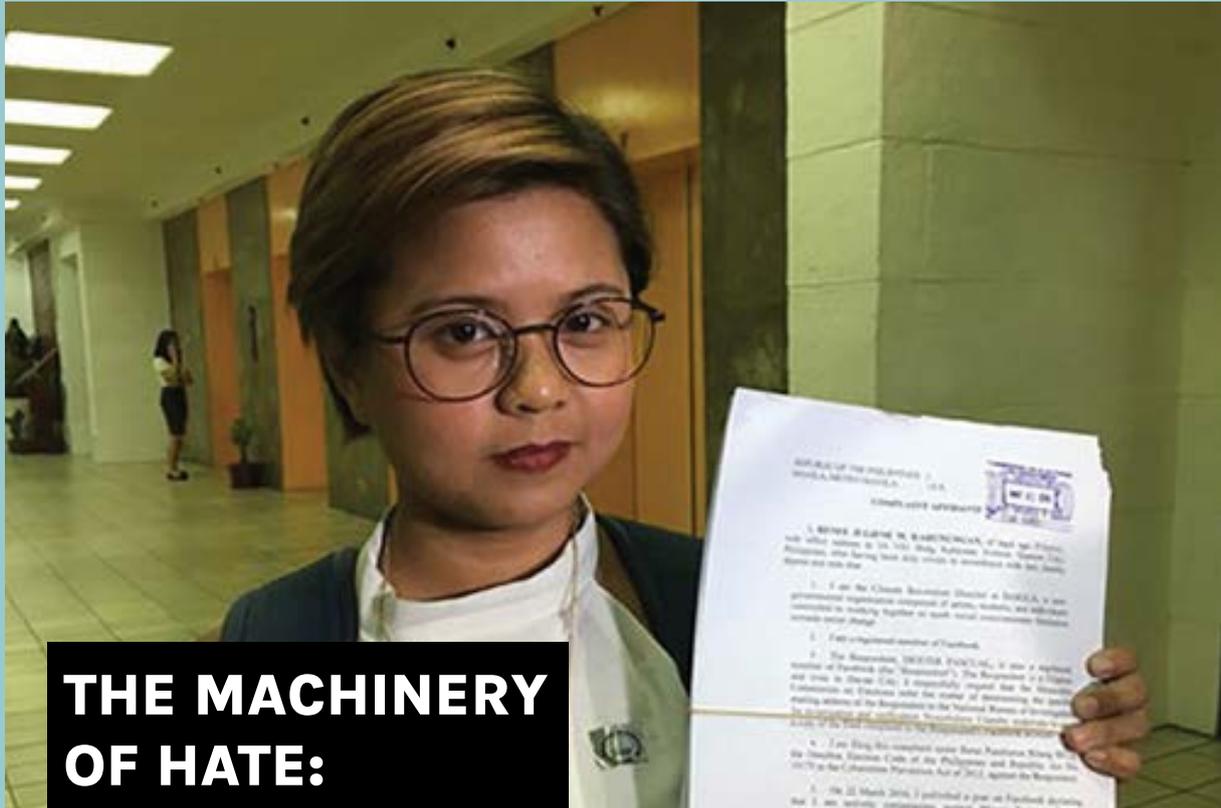
Thailand's second female prime minister, the daughter of a former leader who himself was forced into exile for 15 years, now presides over a government that still permits human rights abuses. It's shameful. It's disgraceful. It should deeply concern anyone who still calls Thailand home.

Digital surveillance still continues. Even in exile, I cannot shake the feeling that someone is watching, listening. The fear lingers in every device, every login, every message left unsent. It's a quiet kind of violence, one that crosses borders and pierces silence.

They never came in person. They did not have to. My phone became a prison, and I was already sentenced.

But I refuse to disappear. I've learned to live with fear, with the weight of being watched, but I won't let it silence me. I still speak because I must. I still fight, not because I feel safe, but because I know what's at stake if we stop.

Writing this is my way of refusing to be erased. I want the world to see what has been done to us and how far the Thai state and monarchy are willing to go to silence young people who dare to demand justice, truth and change. I want them to know: you did not win. I am still here. I have not stopped fighting. And I will continue for those who can't.



THE MACHINERY OF HATE: HOW MACHISMO FUELS DIGITAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The digital frontier

Essay | Philippines

Renee Karunungan



Renee Karunungan finished her PhD in Political Communication from Loughborough University in 2023, and continues to work in the climate change and human rights space. She currently resides in the United Kingdom, working with charities and non-profit organisations.

**Recovery meant
finding new
ways to continue
the work.**

**But it also meant
confronting
wounds I hadn't
let myself feel.**

Never have we lived in a time where freedom of expression is as easy as clicking a button, but at the same time, we have also never lived in a time where threatening one's life is also as easy as clicking a button. The internet is a double-edged sword, and this is a fact we have known for some time. With the rise of strongmen and populist politics also came the rise of digital hate campaigns, sowing division so deep we still don't know how to mend it. And with this rise of digital hate, women human rights defenders have become easy targets. From personal attacks calling us fat and ugly to the violent threats of rape and murder, the internet has become a violent place.

In recent years, especially with the rise of authoritarian leaders and populist politics across the globe, digital spaces have transformed into battlegrounds. Rhetoric once considered fringe has become mainstream. Online hate campaigns - once isolated incidents - are now deliberate strategies of political warfare.

Women human rights defenders are among the most targeted. The attacks we face are not just professional - they are personal, intimate and often sexualised. We are not only discredited for our ideas, but dehumanised for who we are. It's being told, daily, that we deserve violence for daring to speak. I know this not as theory, but as experience.

**Online hate campaigns -
once isolated incidents -
are now deliberate strategies
of political warfare.**

From Facebook posts to criminal cases

I first became a target in 2016, during what would become one of the most polarising elections in Philippine history. Rodrigo Duterte's campaign was brutal, blunt and unapologetically macho. He would curse, openly harass women during his campaign trail, and he would proclaim to "kill, kill kill," - which was met with cheering by his supporters. Such is the irony of a country deeply seated in religion but also steeped in machismo and patriarchy.

His team mastered digital media and used it not to educate or engage, but to silence and suppress. When I publicly criticised his war on drugs platform and rhetoric, I quickly became a target of an online hate campaign. At first it was dismissive comments: "You're just an ugly woman" or "You're fat and you pretend to be smart." But then the messages escalated: graphic rape threats, violent death threats, photos of guns sent to my inbox with captions like, "You're next" and "Be careful, I know where you live."

While I knew there were troll farms and fake profiles sending me these messages, what was more disturbing was that there were real people who just genuinely supported him, inspired by all the hatred, and thought it was okay to threaten someone's life. And I knew it was because they didn't understand the gravity of sending these threats while they were hiding behind a screen. I thought, would they do the same if they had met me in person? Would they come up to me and say the same things to my face?

At first I didn't know what to do. I received thousands of messages, read them, and wondered how seriously I would take these threats. Advice from colleagues said I should report it to the police. So I went to the women's desk of the Philippine National Police, but the most I got was logging the incident down. I was met with comments like, "Maybe don't post political things if you don't want the attention." Clearly, even the police didn't take online threats seriously.

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online threats seriously.

As a precaution, I posted the threats publicly. That act of speaking out – making my harassment visible – led human rights organisations and legal advocates to reach out. The Disini Law Office, known for championing digital rights, offered to take my case. Atty. JJ Disini, a leading cyber law expert who also represents Nobel laureate Maria Ressa, and the Medical Action Group, a longstanding human rights organisation, supported me in filing legal action. Together, we filed 12 criminal cases and 12 additional complaints under three laws: the Revised Penal Code, the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012, and the Omnibus Election Code. These were serious charges – threats of rape and murder, incitement to violence, and online harassment, all legally actionable under Philippine law. We identified the individuals behind the accounts. These were not anonymous shadows but real people who believed that hiding behind a screen shielded them from responsibility.

During a press conference, Atty. Disini explained: “Under the Revised Penal Code, it is considered a grave threat when you threaten somebody with physical harm. In this case, there’s threat of rape, threat of physical injury. And because it’s done online, it’s also cybercrime under section 6 of the law.” Our aim was to prove that digital threats are real threats. That the internet is not a lawless frontier.

It’s now been nearly a decade. Subpoenas have been issued, hearings scheduled, motions filed. The case is ongoing. But that legal milestone was only the beginning of my fight. In the years that followed, I moved to the UK, pursued a PhD, and turned my experience into a pursuit of understanding.

Turning trauma into academic inquiry

This legal battle, and the trauma that preceded it, became the foundation for my academic inquiry. I transformed my personal experience into my PhD research, determined to understand how social media, particularly Facebook, had evolved into a central arena of political violence and ideological warfare in the Philippines. My doctoral thesis, *The Role of Facebook Influencers in Shaping the Narrative of the Duterte Era*, is the culmination of this journey – a study born from pain, but powered by purpose.

Using quantitative content analysis, I examined how political discourse on Facebook during Duterte’s presidency reflected and reinforced incivility, intolerance and hate. I analysed thousands of posts from 10 Facebook influencers – both pro- and anti-Duterte – between 2019 and 2020. What I found echoed my own experience.

One of the most notable patterns was the prevalence of character attacks. These were not just political disagreements – they were deeply personal assaults, echoing the kinds of vitriol I received in 2016. More disturbingly, my research confirmed that pro-Duterte influencers were significantly more likely to post extreme forms of intolerance, including incitements to violence and hate speech. These weren’t outliers; they were common, systemic and, crucially, they were rewarded. Posts that contained the most hateful rhetoric consistently received the highest levels of engagement – likes, shares and comments.

The platform algorithms, I found, were complicit. They didn’t just allow hate – they amplified it. Facebook’s design rewarded outrage, pushing the most inflammatory content to the top of feeds. It was a system that enabled the very people who had threatened me to thrive, grow their influence, and radicalise others.

I also explored the blurred line between incivility and intolerance – two very different phenomena that often get lumped together. Incivility, while uncomfortable, can still leave room for debate. Intolerance, on the other hand, shuts it down completely. What I discovered was that pro-Duterte influencers regularly crossed that line, turning incivility into outright hate speech. And those posts were the most viral.

I saw myself in the data. The character attacks. The dehumanising language. The threats. It was all there, not just as a personal experience but as measurable patterns. This wasn't just my story – it was systemic. The data shows it, and my study proved it.

**The platform algorithms, I found,
were complicit. They didn't just
allow hate – they amplified it.**

Machismo, misogyny and the making of a strongman

To understand the full weight of digital violence against women in the Philippines, we need to talk about machismo and the deeply rooted patriarchal structures that enable it. Misogyny in the Philippines is embedded in our systems, our social norms, and even our humour. We are the only country in the world without divorce (which we seem to be proud of) and we joke about women's bodies constantly. While women enjoy freedoms, we are still bound to deeply held cultural values where women must obey, and have no right to speak out or make our own decisions.

Rodrigo Duterte was a mirror of this culture. His rise to power revealed what many of us already knew but didn't want to say out loud: that misogyny in the Philippines is rife and rewarded. His crude remarks about women, his infamous "joke" about a missionary being raped, his unapologetic attacks on female journalists and critics – these didn't disqualify him from office. They cemented his image as a "tough-talking man of the people". What should have been a political scandal became political branding. And the worst thing? People loved it. They laughed with him, cheered for him, and copied his antics. Their excuse? Oh, he was just joking. When did it become funny to joke about rape?

Online, this translated into an especially vicious form of hatred. Women who challenged Duterte were not just debated; we were dehumanised. We weren't wrong; we were sluts. We weren't brave; we were hysterical. We weren't critics; we were traitors to Philippine sovereignty. The attacks on our credibility were always wrapped in attacks on our womanhood.

Patriarchy in the Philippines operates with an almost religious reverence. And yet, it coexists with a culture that delights in the public shaming of women. This contradiction fuels a cycle of violence. On one hand, women are held to impossible standards of modesty, obedience and emotional labour. On the other hand, we are torn down the moment we claim space, raise our voices, or demand accountability.

**The attacks on our credibility
were always wrapped in attacks
on our womanhood.**

Online platforms amplify this violence. They provide a stage for performative machismo, where men (and even some women) can assert power through humiliation. And the targets are nearly always the same: women who speak, especially women who speak against power.

In my case, the abuse wasn't just about my politics - it was about my gender. The threats weren't just ideological; they were sexualised and gendered. The people behind them weren't debating policy - they were punishing disobedience. And that's what patriarchy does. It punishes women for disobedience. It frames silence as virtue and resistance as arrogance.

This culture - so deeply embedded in our language, our media and our politics - makes it extraordinarily difficult for women to survive in public life, much less thrive. And until we confront it, until we name it for what it is, we will keep losing voices that the world desperately needs to hear.

Recovery is also resistance

But beyond protest and research, there is also recovery. What happens after you've been forced to move out of your country to protect yourself? What happens after you've been burnt out, tired of all the hate you've received?

For me, recovery meant finding new ways to continue the work. But it also meant confronting wounds I hadn't let myself feel. When I was offered counselling during the peak of the attacks, I was told how strong I was, and how it seemed I was taking things quite well. Looking back, I knew I was always constantly looking over my shoulder to see if someone had been following me on the street. I was careful to look right and left every time I left our house, wondering if someone would identify and harm me. I was wondering if my neighbours knew who I was and if they were part of the hate mob.

Recovery meant finding new ways to continue the work. But it also meant confronting wounds I hadn't let myself feel.

I left the Philippines to find peace and safety elsewhere, but I've soon learned that choosing yourself comes with judgment too. In the years since I left, I've encountered a quiet but painful kind of shaming from within the very circles I once worked with. Some fellow human rights defenders have implied that by leaving the Philippines, I abandoned the fight. This kind of narrative - one that measures commitment by proximity - fails to recognise the complexity of trauma, safety and healing. It upholds a dangerous binary: that to resist, you must suffer visibly and continuously. That if you step away to breathe, you've abandoned everyone else who is still in the fight. But we need to dismantle



this thinking. Resistance takes many forms, and so does resilience. Choosing to protect yourself does not mean you've stopped protecting others. And if we cannot extend compassion to our own, what kind of justice are we really fighting for?

Finally, after years of being more silent on political issues, I recently started posting political opinions publicly again. But I still flinch when I receive messages from strangers and open my inbox. And quite frankly, I still hesitate before I post an opinion. These days, I ask myself, is it worth the hate I will get from this? Something I would have never thought of before the incident.

Where do we go from here?

First, we need better regulations – ones that understand the nuances of digital violence. My own case is a test. If seen through, it could set precedent. But if it falters, it sends a signal: that digital spaces are open hunting grounds and that while some argue the internet should be self-regulating, the evolving and increasing online hate and violence means that we need to rethink internet regulations. The nature of online violence is specific, evolving and deeply gendered. It's no longer just about "mean comments" or "debates getting heated" – it's about targeted harassment campaigns, doxxing, deepfakes and rape threats. Our laws were not built for this. Many legal systems still treat online violence as less "real" than physical violence, even though we now know the psychological toll is just as severe, and that there have been cases around the world where online violence translated to the real world. The law needs to catch up to the technology. It needs to name digital violence for what it is – and offer concrete protections and remedies to those targeted.

The law needs to catch up to the technology. It needs to name digital violence for what it is – and offer concrete protections and remedies to those targeted.

Second, we need platform accountability. Facebook, X, YouTube: these are not neutral platforms. Their algorithms are not passive. They decide what gets seen, what gets buried, and what gets rewarded. Their algorithms elevate the worst content, rewarding hate with visibility. As my research shows, posts that incite hate, dehumanise others or threaten violence receive significantly more engagement than those that promote dialogue, nuance or empathy. The more toxic the post, the more likes, shares and comments it generates. These

companies make money from outrage. They profit from polarisation. And they have spent years evading real accountability by hiding behind vague community guidelines and underfunded moderation systems. When women – especially women of colour, LGBTQ+ women, and women human rights defenders – report harassment, the response is too often slow, dismissive or non-existent.

Third, we need education. Not just media literacy, but civic education. How to disagree without dehumanising. How to argue without annihilating each other's humanity. How to build a public square that is fierce, but also fair. We have to re-learn how to inhabit public spaces, including digital ones, with respect.

And finally, we need care. For ourselves. For each other. We need spaces that allow us to process, grieve and recover. We need structures of support for people who are doing the difficult work of defending human rights – especially women. Legal support is crucial, yes, but so is emotional and psychological care. The trauma of being targeted online does not end when the threats stop. It lingers. It shows up in anxiety, burnout and self-censorship. It shows up in silence.

We need safe spaces where women can tell the truth of what they've lived through without fear of judgment or shame. We need trauma-informed practices in activist communities. We need collective healing that recognises that resilience is not about being invincible – it's about being held.

Because when we care for those who speak up, we strengthen the very foundation of democracy.

This essay is my story, but it is not mine alone. It belongs to everyone who has ever dared to speak truth in the face of tyranny and paid the price. To everyone who has fought back – not with fists, but with facts. Not with hate, but with hope.

This is what resistance looks like. It is not always loud. It is not always on the front lines. Sometimes, resistance is quiet. Sometimes, it is survival.

This is what resilience sounds like. It's the voice that cracks but still speaks. The hand that shakes but still writes. The heart that's been broken by threats and by fear – but still dares to love the people and the country it fights for.

We tell these stories not for pity, but for power. Because in telling them, we break the silence. In naming the violence, we make it undeniable. In standing together, even across oceans and time zones, we remind those who seek to isolate us: we are never alone.

This essay is my story, but it is not mine alone. It belongs to everyone who has ever dared to speak truth in the face of tyranny and paid the price.



THE CALL TO JUSTICE BEGINS WITH US

The digital frontier

Essay | Sri Lanka

**Fawzul
Himaya
Hareed**



Fawzul Himaya Hareed is a writer and Communications Specialist based in Sri Lanka. She is the Head of Communications at Sisterhood Initiative where she oversees all online outreach efforts to advance rights for minority women. Himaya also facilitates conversations surrounding women rights and gender, especially around Muslim women affected by systematic and social discrimination in Sri Lanka.

Recovery meant finding new ways to continue the work. But it also meant confronting wounds I hadn't let myself feel.

For over 30 years, Muslim women in Sri Lanka have demanded justice. The Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA), passed in 1951, is a law that covers most aspects of our personal lives from marriage to divorce. Calls for reformation began just three years after and, since then, Muslim women have been at the forefront of demands to sign their own marriage certificates, raise the minimum age of marriage, and call for equality in divorce procedures. Over the years, several reform committees have been put in place as some form of placation, but there has been little recourse.

I was 19 and fresh out of school when I first learned about the MMDA. The bus ride back home was tinged with a solemnity I hadn't felt the day before. I had gone my entire life not knowing about a law that would decree every aspect of my life and that had already done so for every woman that I loved. There would be no space on a marriage certificate for me to ever sign. Muslim children as young as 12 could be married with special permission. We were not allowed to be Quazi judges simply on the basis that we were women. And there were no conditions for polygamy. Thousands and thousands of Muslim women across our island were trapped by the Act's extraordinary and discriminatory provisions. I knew then that this was work I would put my heart into and have been here since.

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I work as an organiser for a group called Sisterhood Initiative, and we use the internet as a space to advocate for the rights of Muslim women. We were formed in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019, when Muslim women came under heavy Islamophobia and xenophobia and found it increasingly difficult to advocate for their own rights. Over the last five years, we have used digital strategies to talk about how the MMDA impacts our lives as Muslim women, reiterating the need for solidarity and empowering women across all faiths to come together. Our latest venture is a hotline that provides legal and psycho-social support for Muslim women impacted by the MMDA – the first of its kind. Our work is necessary, importantly so, especially in spaces that have become increasingly smaller and smaller to hold us all.

My role as head of communications has allowed me a deeper insight into the many ways the digital world impacts us differently. While the internet has become a tool of reckoning, it has also become a dangerous medium for our work to be treated callously. I have always believed in the idea of a free internet, one that works as the perfect ground to share our work and platform voices that would not otherwise be heard. But it has become increasingly clear over the last five years that the internet is no longer a space that protects anyone, especially women.

A few months into my role, I got a text message from our team with a link to a Facebook video. I was to record the video into an online drive as some form of evidence. I pressed play and watched. Over the course of the hour-long video, a man went into a deep dive into all the different organisations who called for reformations about the MMDA. He spoke carefully about how we were “agents of the West”, funded to share radical beliefs that threatened the sanctity of our communities and what we held dear. For an hour, he pulled up photos of women activists with their full names and questioned our ideals, our motives, and the way we dressed and held ourselves. We would work to take down the videos and, every time, they were re-uploaded. We turned to legal mechanisms for some kind of recourse. We filed a report at the police station. The videos were taken down but re-uploaded again. We worked to get them down too. Still, that fear lingered. It was my first glimpse into the utter seriousness of our work and the threats facing the future of any form of activism.

Groups from in and out of the country would question our ideals, share and attack our posts from social media, and question our intentions in livestreams to thousands of followers.

Continuously, our work would be dissected in similar online campaigns. As our work grew, so did the attacks around us. We were accused of giving up on our community for social capital and funds. Groups from in and out of the country would question our ideals, share and attack our posts from social media, and question our intentions in livestreams to thousands of followers. Our work was always spoken of as something that endangered the lives of those we advocated for. And because it was the internet, the question of accountability was much more difficult to answer. We did not want to be on the defensive; our work would speak for us, but it was still incredibly frustrating.

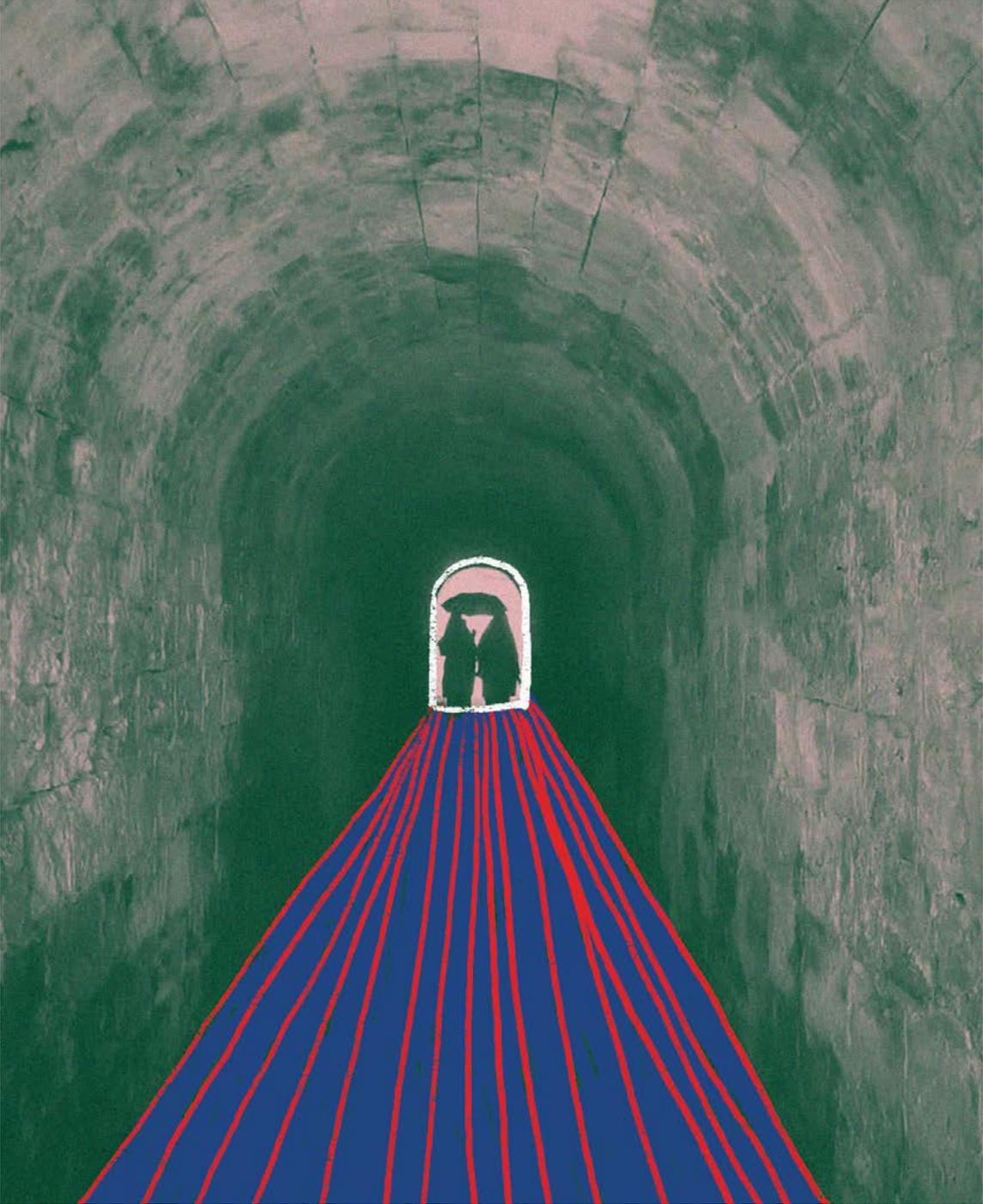
And while these attacks have not translated offline, we could still not escape the digital assault. While I tried to guard my own privacy, it was during these campaigns that my extended family came to know of my work. I was warned against doing what I wanted to do. It was unnecessary, they said, humiliating and beneath me. I was betraying my community. I was challenging God. An uncle pulled me aside and said, “Whatever you’re doing, I hope you know what you’re getting into. You’ll have to answer for your actions in hell one day.”

It was then that I began to grow conscious of how I presented myself online. I thought twice before sending a tweet and, eventually, stopped using the platform altogether. I could not write. My face hadn’t been splayed across someone’s profile – yet – but what if they came across it? How could I speak for myself as a Muslim woman when I was far from what we were imagined to be? I had seen my fellow Muslim women activists ridiculed and demonised. I had seen them pulled from their homes. How was their bravery being rewarded? Why did we have to be brave?

Social media platforms reward aggression and offer no accountability. Instead, calls for accountability have been weaponised to hack down free speech and expression. There is little recourse for any actions, especially in a world that punishes women for speaking about their lived realities. Our faces and our bodies have been weaponised and taken from us even through our screens. In January 2024, Sri Lanka passed its Online Safety Act under the guise of protecting women and children. Civil society and human right groups have called for its appeal, as it uses our struggles and fears as a way to descend on free speech. Our calls to take down posts are routinely ignored by Big Tech. We turn to trusted partners to hasten reports so they don’t cause further harm. In January, Meta announced it would no longer continue with its fact checking mechanisms and instead rely on a community note model. Meta’s algorithms feed on inflammatory posts, making hate speech much more difficult to take down. There is no space for accountability in platforms that reward ridicule through monetary gains. So how do we persist?

**I had seen my fellow Muslim women
activists ridiculed and demonised. I had
seen them pulled from their homes.
How was their bravery being rewarded?
Why did we have to be brave?**

The call to justice begins with us



Our efforts must encompass one another. Our work has never existed on our own and as we continue our advocacy efforts, our work continues to take new forms, spanning across personal law reformation to our digital spaces where we have necessary dialogues. There are calls for joint efforts to hold Big Tech platforms accountable, especially in the Global South, and efforts to cultivate safer spaces online for vulnerable communities.

A few years ago, a bus full of Muslim women stopped in front of the Ministry of Justice. They had come from all over the island just to share stories from their lives. Over the next two hours, each woman would stand up and share how the MMDA had affected her life. One mother spoke of how she would hide behind a tree to see the child she was separated from. Another spoke of how her husband had abandoned her. Another asked the minister how she could take care of a child with only a few hundred rupees. They were all women whose lives had changed forever and who were abandoned by the state, the law and those who were supposed to protect them. I remember holding the Holy Quran in my hands and reading a verse to our minister from Surah Nisa, one that stressed the sanctity of marriage, of love, and of equality.

It is a moment I think of every time I feel something close to doubt or fear. There is more work to do. And far braver women. Muslim women have been at the forefront of our call for justice. We are far from victims. Our work will persist as long as we exist as we are. There is still much that we can do together.



MY LIFE IN THE SERVICE OF THE CAMPESINO AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES OF THE INDEPENDENCIA BASIN

Of identities and intersections

Essay | Mexico

Graciela Martínez Delgado



Graciela is a campesina woman deeply rooted to the land and with a great love for Mother Earth. The life she has chosen to live has been to serve the people of rural communities, to raise awareness and promote social organisation to transform the living conditions of families, communities and the region. She has grown and developed in the “University of Life”, where classrooms rural communities, workmates are local organisations, and the subjects are their needs, problems and dreams.

**Our struggle
was in
defence
of life.**

**We needed
to join
together
in defence
of water.**

Historical context

The emergence of our organisation is best understood against the backdrop of Mexico's Cristero War and the Synarchist movement.

The Cristero War was a conflict that began in 1926 and continued until 1929, leaving a lasting impact on the people of Guanajuato. Elías Calles, who was president of Mexico at the time, had passed the so-called "Calles Law", which imposed restrictions on religious observance. The Hierarchical Church and the country's large landholders, along with the peasants who worked on their estates, fought together against the government. They were known as "Cristeros".

Years later, the Synarchist movement was born with the aim of preventing conditions from changing. Here in Mexico it was an anti-communist movement.

Father Memo, who spearheaded the process where I began my social work, came from a liberating line that strove to bring necessary change to situations of injustice.

Where I come from: My origins

I am Graciela de la Luz Martínez Delgado. I was born in the peasant community of La Grulla de Abajo, in the municipality of Dolores Hidalgo, state of Guanajuato, Mexico. I am the daughter of peasants and I grew up working the soil alongside my parents. That made me fall in love with the land. The land is always calling me. I like wielding a spade and a shovel. That is where my love for Mother Earth was born. It all began in the family home and it continued growing at CEDESA, or Centro de Desarrollo Agropecuario, A.C., an agricultural development civil association, where I have worked for over five decades.

**The land is always calling me.
I like wielding a spade and a
shovel. That is where my love
for Mother Earth was born.**

I can vividly recall when I first signed up for social work. It was in the 1970s. There was this priest in the community, Father José, who was socially aware and sought to improve the lives of peasant families. Later, Father Guillermo Dávalos de León came from Guanajuato, and he boosted those efforts in the communities of the Dolores Hidalgo municipality.

Only a handful of peasants owned plots. Most of the land was hoarded by the region's large landholders, who even then were beginning to drill deep wells for irrigation crops, employing young and older farm men. These men were exploited, as they were paid very low wages. All of this was discussed with young people at the time.

I began engaging in social efforts at the age of 12. There were no rural schools in the community at that time. I started out teaching Sunday school for boys and girls and later I joined the literacy campaigns. Fathers Memo and José led spiritual and social processes, working in particular with young people, who went out into other communities to organise their peers.

We participated in workshops, where we met other young peasants from different communities and regions. In those activities, we gained awareness and we had to go back to our communities and share what we had learned. I became very involved with CEDESA and in 1972 I joined its advocacy team.

I remember my outrage when I saw how the community norias, or waterwheels, were drying up as more irrigation agriculture came to the region, which is semi-arid. The communities were gradually being left without water and were forced to ask large landholders for water from the wells the landholders used for their crops. I did not think that was fair.

From its inception, CEDESA went from house to house encouraging communities to organise and transform situations of injustice. The road has not been smooth. We have experienced repression and harassment from the Hierarchical Church, from large landholders and from the government, who for decades accused our struggle of communism. I think that what bothered them was seeing the awakening of the people in the communities and the peasant struggle.

CEDESA grew gradually with the communities. We were never afraid to walk side by side and fight. Every nixtamal mill, vegetable garden, land grant file, community water well or tank was a means for organising, a way for both individuals and the people to rise up, led by the Gospel.

**What bothered them was seeing
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peasant struggle.**

The Hierarchical Church and the People's Church

Father Memo together with a team of priests committed to integral community development began supporting groups, especially of young people, connected with the Christian Agricultural Youth Movement, the JAC and the Mexican Social Secretariat. The JAC was a breeding ground, a committed and deeply spiritual revolutionary movement. It addressed root problems, discussed ways of solving different situations, including by forming agricultural unions prompted by a range of concerns, such as low wages and the lack of work, and it highlighted the importance of organising to improve living conditions.

This upset large landholders, who reported the movement to the government and appealed to the bishop to put an end to these efforts. The repercussions were harsh. The bishop used mass services to question young people, telling the congregation that it was communism.

Repression was real. Father Memo was expelled from the diocese, along with other committed clergymen. They broke up the labour movement in León and attacked the peasant movement here, but they could not destroy it. Father Memo had done a great job with young people.

When Father Memo left, and despite everything, Tere, Lucha and others took over the work in CEDESA, which at that time had an office in the Socorrito temple, in Dolores Hidalgo, where it was constantly under attack from the Hierarchical Church.

But they were not intimidated. On the contrary. They convened a large assembly there, gathering boys and girls 14 years and older. I was part of that group of young people from the communities who decided to move forward, encouraged by the parable of the sower. We were seeds scattered on fertile soil. Around that time, MISEREOR (the German Catholic Bishops' Organisation for Development Cooperation) had approved a project to begin construction of the space where CEDESA is housed to this day. This increased our commitment.

I was part of that group of young people from the communities who decided to move forward, encouraged by the parable of the sower. We were seeds scattered on fertile soil.

We held many meetings to see how we wanted to move forward. As we were having these discussions, a new municipal president came to Dolores Hidalgo. He and his wife were both very concerned with the problems affecting the communities. They invited us to implement the literacy programme, and that effort brought us back to the communities.

The literacy programme was thus an instrument for working with the communities. At the same time, we planted vegetable gardens and promoted beekeeping activities connected with health and natural medicine. This brought us together and gave us strength to overcome the crisis and the resentments over the repression we had suffered.

As lay persons, we realised that we could continue the process, guided by the Gospel, which helped us reflect on what we were doing and what we needed to do. In those analyses related with health issues and apiculture, we began to see the communities' clean water needs, as they were drinking from tanks or stagnant waters that were making them sick.

Beekeepers, who were then organised in the Association of Northern Guanajuato Beekeepers (ASANG), worked with health promoters and CEDESA to carry out a participatory assessment in 20 communities. This effort took a year and involved going from house to house.

The leading problems found were lack of clean drinking water, poor organisation and shortage of resources, with misappropriation of funds by delegates or commissioners who did not report their expenses. These findings were presented to the communities at an event held in 1973, which was also an opportunity to celebrate the 25 years of priesthood of Father Memo, who had returned to the region and was working with the recently established Celaya diocese.

We analysed the diagnosis and the obstacles that hindered well applications and agriculture-related proceedings. We then decided to join forces in a common cause.

Community committees and assemblies

The strategy we adopted to address these needs and issues was to establish assemblies in each community and form committees to deal with water, land and other matters, depending on the communities' problems, with the aim of monitoring and reporting on progress. These committees would manage their own funds, based on contributions for mobilisation.

On 15 May 1983, when we staged the first takeover of the government palace in Guanajuato, we discussed how we would organise. We asked ourselves: "What will we do if they refuse to see us?" And the response was: "Well, we will just have to force our way in." As women were respected then, we saw how important it was for them to join the struggle. They started participating with their children strapped to their bodies. Women would lead the group, opening the way for men to follow in after them.

The strategy we adopted to address these needs and issues was to establish assemblies in each community and form committees to deal with water, land and other matters, depending on the communities' problems.

The mobilisation was repressed several times, but we were gradually moving forward with our aims to advance agricultural and water well applications, and later community nixtamal mills.

Once we struck a dialogue with the government, a joint working plan was drafted, with all the communities united. This helped move things along with the government, with progress and pending issues monitored.

In this way, the Union of Peasant Communities of Northern Guanajuato (UCCANG) was formed. At the same time, through the struggle at La Colorada against the landholder Casimiro Peña, we were introduced to Michoacán's

Emiliano Zapata Peasant Union (UCEZ), where Efrén Capiz began advising more groups of ejidatarios, or cooperative farmers. A simple man of the people, Capiz, together with his wife Evita, spent decades supporting the struggles in this region and surrounding areas.

Other problems and needs emerged, such as roads, electricity and schools, and were gradually addressed. CEDESA was always there, supporting these actions.

All of these struggles combined were key mobilising forces. There were constant risks and repression. Many men and women were jailed. I too was arrested on one occasion, along with fellow activists. Another time, in 1991, three men and one woman from La Granja community were jailed. On the night of their arrest, we gathered to discuss what we were going to do. The decision we came to was that we would storm the jailhouse. As we were driving back, with Lucha at the wheel, we suddenly saw a tractor blocking the road and very bright lights behind it that blinded us. We hit the tractor and our car turned over. We were lucky to come out of it with just bruises, but the car was badly damaged. We learned later that the tractor belonged to the large landholder.

That, and many other ways, was how synarchism operated. Large landholders made their presence felt in the parishes, continuing their defamation and abuse from there.

Even with that against us, we were gradually achieving our aims, so we were not afraid. We fought together and celebrated every gain together.

As we entered the 1990s, we saw fatigue in the communities. Moreover, plans were under way for an agrarian counter-reform, which would facilitate the sale of socially owned land and the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The government was taking up every social project and the municipalities were also starting to bring water to the communities with their municipal networks.

At the same time, the Zapatista movement was a beacon of hope.

Even with that against us, we were gradually achieving our aims, so we were not afraid. We fought together and celebrated every gain together.

Strengthening the peasant economy

In that decade of the 1990s, we set out to find ways to strengthen organisation efforts. An important aspect of this was boosting what we call the Family Production Unit, or UPF, and the peasant economy.

We promoted the UPF together with the UCCANG and the ASANG. This involved working in rural homes and yards with eco-techniques, rainwater harvesting for food production, dry ecological latrines, greywater filters, ovens, and vegetable garden and fruit tree production. It also involved essential grain production on their plots and apiculture production in the forest, which later with the Africanization of bees became their home. Meanwhile, community assemblies were growing stronger and committees were receiving training. We are still supporting the UPF, which is currently a key organising element.

At the same time, CEDESA began discovering community-trade experiences, which would later become solidarity-based trade, with peasant production, processing and marketing. We held information-sharing meetings and forged bonds with RELACC (the Latin American Community Trade Network), which we joined when we established REMECC (the Mexican Community Trade Network), in 1999. It was a process that took almost 10 years. We then sponsored solidarity-based economy fairs, which are still being held today, with extensive organisation, and we opened two local markets in Dolores Hidalgo.

The struggle for water in the territory of the Independencia Basin

In the late 1990s, some communities were experiencing problems with their water wells. The pumps were breaking down because the water level kept dropping and the pumps overheated.

At the start of the following decade, we learned that the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) was conducting a study jointly with several municipalities. The study's findings were presented at a forum we attended. That was when we found out that the groundwater was contaminated with minerals, mainly fluorine and arsenic, due to over-extraction of the aquifer by growing agribusiness activity.

We took on the task of informing the communities of this situation and discussing it with them. Water-harvesting cisterns became a means for guaranteeing clean water for family consumption. We began convening meetings to talk about this issue and in 2008 we launched a diploma programme taught by Dr. Marcos Adrián, of UNAM, with the participation of Ramón Aguilar, a CENGUA engineer. The programme was offered to more than 100 people from the communities.

We learned that seven municipalities, including Dolores Hidalgo, form the Independencia Basin territory, and that the groundwater under it is all part of the same Independencia Aquifer. We saw the limitations that affected rainwater infiltration and how long it takes, given that the region does not receive much rainfall. There were increasingly more agribusiness wells and water infiltration was negligible.

Our struggle was in defence of life.

**We needed to join together in
defence of water.**

We understood that, even if water extraction from the aquifer were to be suspended, it would take 100 years to regenerate the Basin and the Aquifer. Our struggle was in defence of life. We needed to join together in defence of water. That is how the Coalition in Defence of the Independencia Basin (CODECIN) was born.

We gained something very valuable from the diploma programme: the knowledge that we belong to a territory that gives us life and provides us with a shared identity.

From that front, over the following years we joined together with other organisations to stop plans for the opening of a cyanide factory in San Luis de la Paz; to provide scientific evidence of erionite contamination in the Tierra Blanca community of San Miguel de Allende, where people fall ill and die from exposure to that mineral; to stop the construction of a highway through an area with erionite deposits; and to halt open-pit mining at Cerro del Gallo.

Spiritual strength: My life force

I think my spiritual strength comes from my rural origins and my family's deep connection with the land and its values and the responsibility toward it. In my childhood, I also drew strength from Father José's guidance.

Every visit to a community, every assembly strengthens you. You come back tired but motivated to continue walking beside the people of the community and encouraged by the love they give you, which intensifies your commitment. I chose this path at several moments of my life.

Every visit to a community, every assembly strengthens you. You come back tired but motivated to continue walking beside the people of the community and encouraged by the love they give you

And while there were times when I was exhausted, when I was tired of scolding people at meetings because I wanted everything to be perfect, I eventually realised that I had to love people as they were, because they loved me as I was and they did not need to be burdened with my crises.

I had many conversations with God. I told him how things had gone with my boyfriend, how the relationship did not work out and how I was not meant for marriage. I said to him then, "Lord, I agree to stay and serve the region and CEDESA. I only have one condition: that you will not let me become a frustrated and bitter woman, because I want to be happy."



When Lucha died, I suffered. Her death clipped my wings. But they grew back again. When Tere, my sister and colleague at CEDESA, died, I suffered greatly. My soul left my body. I felt I could not go on.

I had to go into the office and put things in order, with Maguito's help. And I needed to deal with my sadness and anger, and later with my body and my health, which was starting to show signs of diabetes-related complications. During those moments, I drew strength from having lived through the fourth and fifth step. That freed me completely and restored my strength. Little by little, I came to understand what so many people were telling me: that there was a reason God had spared me. It was time to take CEDESA back into my hands. I went back to not feeling afraid and I said: "Thank you, Lord, for helping me understand. Here I am. Guide me." That is why I am still here.

I want to continue helping in whatever way I can and wherever I am needed, offering my life experience and advice. That was and has been my life, and that is how it will be until my dying day.

I dream of having some years still ahead of me, lucid and independent.

I dream of working with young people at CEDESA, taking the time to listen to them, meeting them halfway.

I dream of CODECIN rising up again and of CEDESA continuing to support the defence of the territory. If God is merciful, I hope He allows me to live long enough to see irrigation wells closed to export agribusinesses. That does not mean there should be no agricultural wells, but that they should be used for watering the food crops we eat here. And hopefully the grandsons and granddaughters of those fighting today will be able to witness the regeneration of the territory, so that it may once again have life and give life.

I dream of CODECIN forging that path alongside other organisations, with the knowledge and wisdom that time and experience give us. With the organisation dying and being born again as many times as necessary, as part of life.

I will say one thing: At CEDESA we have accomplished everything we have undertaken in defence of life. Even with all the attacks and all the efforts to stop us, we have achieved what we set out to do. I have a lot of faith that we are going to succeed. And I say we because otherwise, where is it that I am going?

I want to continue helping in whatever way I can and wherever I am needed, offering my life experience and advice. That was and has been my life, and that is how it will be until my dying day.

And I believe that when I am no longer here, I will still be connected with what remains. Maybe I will be reincarnated as a tree, a nopal or water. There is Chela for many years to come!



BETWEEN ME AND US

A personal history of
the feminist internet
in Pakistan

Of identities and intersections

Essay | Pakistan

**Zoya
Rehman**



Zoya Rehman is a feminist organiser and writer based in Islamabad. For nearly a decade, she has worked at the intersections of digital life and feminist politics, contributing to movements and conversations on gender and leftism in Pakistan. Her work brings together political organising and creative experimentation, with a focus on building spaces that sustain feminist practice.

**The community
has been forced
to grieve its
dead, deaths
that rarely make
the news, while
simultaneously
having to defend
its right to exist.**

As a woman (barely), a feminist and an organiser, my relationship with being seen has never been straightforward. I did not grow up with any proximity to protest camps or party offices. What I did find proximity to, eventually, was the internet. After years of nerding out in more private corners, we found ourselves on social media platforms and blogging sites – teaching/ learning through statuses, tweets, vlogs, personal blogs that were all formative spaces of exposure for me.

I never thought of myself becoming a political organiser in the 2000s, nor did I have a clue about what being one entailed. I only understood, a little, why the world around me felt so heavy and unwieldy; why so much stayed unsaid in my family’s stories; my parochial school textbooks; my doubling, tripling emotional baggage.

Over the past decade and a half, that online life has expanded and collapsed more than once, later carried by the currents of organising. As I came to realise later, movement building in Pakistan, like anywhere else I suppose, never stays stagnant. It has moved from hashtags to threads to petitions to sizable street marches to strategy, from shouting for ourselves to being shouted down by the naysayers, the right wing, and sometimes even the same “comrades” who once claimed they stood beside us.

Visibility makes, and then nearly unmakes, feminists who hold even a fraction of online space.

More than that, visibility makes, and then nearly unmakes, feminists who hold even a fraction of online space. We learn to carry it differently each time: not only for ourselves, but for the movements that must always outlive us.

My political life online began in fragments. Facebook brain farts, stray forum posts, rabbit holes that made the world feel a little better than the life I lived at the time. I was in my late teens: lonely, disoriented, dealing with a lot of family turmoil, and completely out of place among the comfortable, elite, politically indifferent circles I came across via my schooling. What I needed was clarity; more precisely, a politics that could hold the myriad contradictions I was grappling with.

When Facebook was [blocked in Pakistan](#), I moved to Twitter to vent. There I eventually made my way, through liberal progressives first, to feminists, leftists, dissenters. I began to find words for what I had only sensed. Friendships formed. My politics grew. A life that had felt directionless found something larger to attach itself to.

But the same visibility that first made that possible slowly revealed its teeth. What began as an attempt to find others has become, over time, a constant negotiation between being seen and staying afloat.

My parents were never particularly political. Pakistan's upheavals before and post the 1990s were barely discussed at home, reduced to one-liners about the [Musharraf coup](#) or the death of Princess Diana or Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (before WhatsApp forwards began doing the same). I grew up with silence where history should have been, and that silence only widened my sense of dislocation.

I first began tweeting under my own name. That changed after a few encounters made the irritations, and vulnerabilities, of that exposure obvious. I wiped everything, started over behind a new anonymous handle, and rebuilt a (what I thought was an opaque) persona from scratch. This shift, never only about privacy, marked the start of a more deliberate reckoning with what it means to be visible at all, and what that costs you when your words live in public.

In the early 2010s, I stumbled into traces of Pakistan's feminist history, or at least its more known edges. For the first time I found myself among people and spaces that called themselves feminist outright. I already used that word for myself, but vaguely; a loose, liberal label grounded somewhat weakly in personal experience and a handful of read ideas. Now I was reading about

movements that had never made it to my textbooks, looking at images of resistance that no one had seen before at home. Visibility, in this case, was revelation. What was “seen” (like a sepia-toned protest photo, a poster, a naara/slogan) became a door to what had simultaneously been shelved away.

When I briefly joined [Shirkat Gah](#) in 2014, I sat for hours in the [Women’s Action Forum \(WAF\) archives](#). The organisation’s library opened up a world of political life that had been unknown to me. This was also a time of massive personal shifts. I was the angriest I had ever been in life, at my literal tether, and on the cusp of decisions that would sever me from the familiar. They brought me to Islamabad, where I began working as a law clerk at the Supreme Court of Pakistan. This move placed me in direct proximity to the political upheavals unfolding in Pakistan’s capital city, and of course the court, starting from the [PTI- and PAT-led protests that began in mid-August, with PAT workers camped across the length of Constitution Avenue](#).

Before I moved, I signed an anti-war petition against Operation Zarb-e-Azb, shared by leftists online. I began noticing how older feminists, leftists and liberals could hold contradictory lines on war, some critical, others disturbingly comfortable repeating the state’s script. I leaned further left. I learnt about the [Pak Tea House](#), a site of leftist exchange never mentioned in my history classes. I began meeting more leftists, queers, feminists in Lahore. Someone mentioned Gramsci in a space once, and I remember thinking: oh wow, someone who has actually read him. That felt like my cue to move beyond cursory Google searches and begin engaging more seriously with theory (beyond the bit of Marx and Engels I had read for Sociology classes in school).

Living in Islamabad made it easier for me to follow the pulse of protest and public action, as I began to pay closer attention. By the time the [Lal Masjid vigils](#) took place, I was a tad more attuned to how the street and state collide. By 2016, I began engaging more formally with the work of leftist formations beyond my surface-level knowledge courtesy of the internet, now colliding with what I was seeing before my eyes.

But alignment came with friction. I had joined several feminist Facebook groups (some centred on organising, others functioning as venting spaces for women and queer folks navigating patriarchy and gendered repression) including one for [the Feminist Collective](#). Through it, I met many of the folks involved, some of whom were also part of the organising left. It was through these conversations that I began to see how the same hierarchies we were

The same hierarchies we were trying to undo elsewhere were showing up in political spaces too.

trying to undo elsewhere were showing up in political spaces too. The Feminist Collective itself had emerged from those tensions, shaped by leftist feminists who already understood how gendered exclusions could hollow out political work. It became a space where old questions around visibility took on sharper edges: who gets to speak, who is spoken over, what is risked when we put ourselves forward: not just to the state, but to one another.

That reckoning pulled me more deeply into the left's orbit; to be honest, I was brought in by dedicated organisers always willing to increase their ranks. Members of the [Awami Workers Party](#) (AWP), some of whom are now close friends and/or comrades, began inviting me to join study circles, and at times, even lead them. A colleague, also an AWP member, had already made me sign the membership form without much ceremony. I also was taken along to a feminist political school in Faisalabad. All these efforts signalled that the party was going through a bit of a feminist overhaul, and I also ended up working with other feminist comrades on the drafting of a sexual harassment policy. Slowly, I became more involved in leftist organising. I already had a surface-level understanding of AWP's formation in 2012, their campaigns against [forced evictions in Islamabad's informal settlements](#), the political work surrounding comrade [Baba Jan's incarceration](#), and their Women's Jalsa on International Working Women's Day in 2015. But it was through being pulled into the work (the circles, the arguments) that I began to actually locate myself within the political life of the left. AWP's ongoing work around housing, in particular, was something many people had followed and hailed online: how it grounded the right to shelter within a wider socialist vision, and how it continues to hold that line with consistency.

I could go on about my early encounters with online spaces and how they jolted my political consciousness. But what matters here is that this was just one of the many ways a middle-class feminist in Pakistan came into awareness in the late 2000s to the 2010s.

Some people, I came to realise, had the privilege of being raised by leftist parents; women who had marched with WAF, or families shaped by student movements and union politics. Some grew up in households steeped in political or intellectual life, where ideas were a part of everyday conversation. I did not grow up like that. What I had was a mother who made sure I was always reading, who handed me books instead of pocket money, who, in her own way, might have found clarity and strength in a political feminist awakening, especially as a single parent. Many of the feminists I met in the early 2010s in Lahore had some personal or political connection to WAF and its legacy. I once heard someone describe themselves as having been raised in the belly of feminists. That was never the case for me.

So when I first found feminist spaces, outside of work or the development sector I had begun moving through, it was at first through the spaces I could access online. For those who had inherited the memory of WAF, [the 1983 protest outside the Lahore High Court](#) meant something immediate. For me, it did not. My mother was not part of it. No woman in my family was. They unfortunately did not even know the protest happened!

This moment also coincided with what I now think of as a specific chapter in the feminist history of the Pakistani internet. I am sure there were conversations happening in forums, Facebook groups, Reddit threads that I was never part of. But by the late 2000s, I had begun stumbling across political blogs; many written by those who would later become well-known thought leaders. Through these, the presence of an “online” leftist strain in Pakistan began to appear.

So what I encountered of feminist history online was not the definitive history of feminism in Pakistan, nor a linear post-WAF archive, but it was the history I could see from where I stood, as someone previously untethered to it. As someone who never knew she was even a part of a feminist history to begin with.



After a few years of being anonymous, I gave up. I had entered the digital rights space via work in the mid-2010s and was now being tagged in posts, not just in relation to the organisation/s I was working in, but also because of how fraught that space had turned out to be, shaped as much by its internal politicking as by the work itself. My bluff was called; the visibility I had managed to sidestep was now naming me directly. I am still not sure how I felt about it. But I guess who does not enjoy the fleeting thrill of an audience, however teensy, even if just for the dopamine hit...

At the time, I was barely using Instagram (Snapchat never made much sense to me), so the idea of becoming visible in a more embodied way also felt deeply awkward sometimes. But I had become used to ranting on Twitter, and I liked the idea that something I wrote might catch someone's attention and get a like or two. I like to joke that I became a writer on Twitter, because truthfully, tweeting for 15 or so years did make my writing better. At the core of it, I just loved those aha moments sparked by other people's thoughts, and was pleasantly surprised when I'd hear that my own words occasionally offered the same: many feminists my age were coming to terms with ideas we had not found the language for before.

For a while, it felt like I could say whatever I wanted, even be as obnoxious as I wanted to be. I was online and "free": yelling into a well, sometimes hearing an echo! I was angrier than I had ever been, and I am sure I took full advantage of

that, often coming off as particularly shouty. Some people had already begun lamenting in my DMs that I was “too angry” and needed to chill. I watched, unsurprised, as men were praised for the same ranty energy. OK.

Several paths were beginning to converge. One was the strange, self-congratulatory form of visibility that came with working in the development sector. Another was my entry into the feminist left, and into [Girls at Dhabas](#): a feminist undertaking that gained traction after one photo of a woman having chai at a dhaba (roadside tea stall) went viral. I never thought the concept was especially revolutionary, but somehow it gave a lot of women and queers online the push to speak about their own navigation of public space in Pakistan.

With [Shilpa Phadke's work](#) as its grounding, Girls at Dhabas soon expanded to other cities. I was its first member based in Islamabad. We were writing statements, debating thorny feminist issues as they emerged around us, parsing politics in our own messy ways. It was a bubble of about 20 or so feminists who leaned left/liberal-left, shared similar sensibilities, but had limited on-ground reach. Then the collective blew up, receiving acclaim across borders and also internationally. Brands began reaching out (I will refrain from naming them), wanting to use our work to polish their image. We, of course, declined.

We organised meetups, bike rallies, book clubs, baithaks across Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore. But G@D, as we called it, was not without its limits. Our reach was mostly confined to South Asian women in online spaces, and shaped, sometimes narrowly, by our own class locations. We were not organising in any deep, sustained way on the ground, and the class character of the collective was pointed out repeatedly by its critics. People wrote theses praising us, or critiquing us. But what mattered then was that we were working toward a shared visibility, not individual recognition. For a long time, the space felt generous, safe, close. Many of us found one another through it; some of us had never met the founders before. There was something steadying about collectively thinking through what everyone wanted to say, pushing back against one another in our WhatsApp group, and then seeing what resonated or annoyed people online. Even reading the subtweets about G@D was fun; for me at least!

**What mattered then was that we
were working toward a shared visibility,
not individual recognition.**

By then, the persona of “me” was already running up against the collective feminist work I was immersed in. That friction taught me not to hold visibility too seriously. I was opinionated enough to know what I could get away with saying on my own, and what needed a slower, more thoughtful unfolding in a group. My voice was beginning to shape itself around an emerging “us”.

During this time, conversations around sexual harassment – in universities, creative industries, media institutions, you name it – began to emerge more urgently through online testimonies. Harrowing accounts circulated across platforms, sometimes anonymously, revealing how deeply institutional impunity ran. In several cases, cybercrime laws were [weaponised](#) to file defamation suits or initiate investigations, functioning as gag orders rather than mechanisms of justice. While some framed this as [Pakistan’s #MeToo moment](#), many simultaneously recognised its limits: the discourse rarely accounted for working-class, peripheral or queer experiences. Still, this juncture helped fine-tune a political awareness of how digital spaces could surface structural violence, even when they could not redress it.

I still hold a deep affection for what G@D gave some of us: a space to try and name harm, joy, liberation, anger. A space where catharsis reached beyond the self. A space that, at its best, held us with care, and allowed us to hold one another in return.

But G@D eventually became defunct, and its politics remained largely affective: well-meaning, but the limits of the space became clearer with time. Many of us were thinking out loud, but not necessarily organising with or alongside those we claimed solidarity with. I knew by 2019 I wanted to commit differently. Later that year, I was invited by a senior comrade to join the [Women Democratic Front \(WDF\)](#), a formation shaped by years of organising, debate, and insistence by feminists within the AWP, though purposefully formed outside of it. WDF’s politics were rooted explicitly in socialist feminism; the organisation was publicly announced at the [2018 Aurat Azadi March](#). I joined right after returning to Pakistan from my master’s.

WDF’s online presence was shaped by its political activities on the ground, its units across the country (particularly in [Sindh](#)), and its commitment to political education. The organisation’s work was deliberate: political education, movement building across nations in Pakistan, the formation of local chapters, and a continuous effort to bridge the gap between theory and praxis. Its commitments – rooted in anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism, and

struggle against patriarchal capitalism – remained steadfast. It consistently worked to centre the realities of working-class women in its organising. Joining WDF allowed me to apply the bits I had learned and experienced, alongside comrades who had been organising long before me.

We often hear about how inaccessible the left is, but that has not been my experience, at least to the extent of how I was introduced to it. Despite knowing little and having read only a bit of feminist theory till the mid-2010s, I was asked to facilitate study circles and invited into conversations about shaping the left in a more feminist direction. Now, after more years of study (having read more theory, completed a Gender Studies degree, and gained a little bit of experience in organising), I could finally put what I had learned into practice with WDF. I found myself contributing to charters of demands, communiques, manifestos, statements and campaigns with my feminist comrades. The 2020 and 2021 [Aurat Azadi Marches](#), for which I was primarily responsible for information and education work, helped us refine a collective vision of what socialist feminist politics in Pakistan should look like, and that of course is evidenced by the intellectual labour all of us put into whatever would go up online.

However, after 2021, WDF's online presence became quieter. That year, the organisers of the Aurat Azadi March (myself included), as well as Aurat March chapters across the country, were subjected to [a barrage of disinformation](#). I personally experienced targeted harassment; videos, news and photos of me were circulated online, demanding that I and fellow organisers be killed. Fake accounts using my name and image were made. It was a coordinated campaign, and it worked in silencing us momentarily.

[What followed afterwards was a different kind of organising](#). One that prioritised even more grounding over acclaim. The backlash against Aurat Marches in any case had been years in the making, and by this time, the consequences became personal, material, relentless. It pushed us, who were a part of the Islamabad/Rawalpindi unit of WDF, to reassess how we showed up online, especially since we were organising in the country's capital. We had been producing posts round the clock, trying to respond to everything, all this time, only to realise we were mostly speaking into a closed loop, preaching to the choir, while exposing ourselves to very real harm. So we pulled back, not from political work, but from the compulsions of visibility. Our attention turned more deliberately to the space we were rooted in: towards collective reflection, smaller activities, interpersonal dynamics. We were still there. Just not always where an online audience expected feminist politics in Pakistan to be.

We pulled back, not from political work, but from the compulsions of visibility. Our attention turned more deliberately to the space we were rooted in: towards collective reflection, smaller activities, interpersonal dynamics.

The internet once held a certain promise, the kind Jia Tolentino captures in her essay [The I in Internet](#), which I have returned to more times than I can count. That promise extended, briefly, to leftist political work too. Whether the left has been able to organise online as effectively as the right remains a difficult question. The right, unburdened by the same political or ethical concerns, has often been quicker to capture the space. But the pitfalls for those of us with progressive commitments have been apparent for a long time. Trolling and harassment have become routine, even expected, and digital rights organisations in Pakistan and elsewhere have been [documenting and advocating against this](#) for years: through [trainings, support services, visions for what a feminist internet might look like](#). Visibility becomes inevitable for those practising feminist politics, even when that visibility is neither sought nor safe. This moment also made me reflect on how visibility is often treated as a form of [impact](#) in digital rights spaces, even as it exposes individuals to heightened risk, with few systems of support when that exposure turns hostile.

This is not limited to feminist organising. Bigger movements adjacent to or intersecting with it, like [the Baloch resistance against enforced disappearances](#), have seen [women at the forefront](#), many of whom have been arrested and detained of late. The [Baloch Yakjehti Committee](#) and the [Pashtun Tahafuz Movement](#), and critics of the state in Gilgit-Baltistan, in particular, have been targeted not only for their mass mobilisation in their respective nations, but [also for their presence online](#). In [a research project led by Dr. Nida Kirmani](#), women in the Baloch movement repeatedly said that turning to social media was their “last hope” in the face of relentless repression on the ground.

Censorship of online expression is often paired with [arrests](#) of the [leaders](#) of nationalist movements. What emerges is a pattern. State crackdowns on digital spaces often attempt to fracture the collective by isolating and punishing visible individuals. It is a strategy designed to dismantle the “we” by targeting the faces that make the political work more discernible.

And then, of course, there are queer and trans movements, particularly those led by [khwaja siras](#), that have faced [immense backlash](#). The [Sindh Moorat March](#) has emerged as the most prominent annual demonstration in this regard, a powerful public articulation of trans and khwaja sira politics. But that very visibility has made transgender communities a target. Especially after the passage of the [Transgender Persons \(Protection of Rights\) Act](#) in 2018, what should have been a landmark moment for transgender rights in Pakistan became the focus of reactionary campaigns led by religious political parties, who accused the law of promoting “Western immorality” and began demanding [rollbacks](#).

[Prominent transgender activists](#) have faced threats, disinformation and relentless personal attacks online. Some have had their names dragged into entirely fabricated scandals. The community has been forced to grieve its dead, deaths that rarely make the news, while simultaneously having to defend its right to exist. Meanwhile, Aurat March/es increasingly become a flashpoint for backlash and [coordinated attacks](#) also, because some queer participants carried pride flags into public space. Much of the outrage, particularly online, has fixated on these symbols, treating the presence of a rainbow flag as more threatening than the violence it protests.

Because these movements are so visible, particularly on social media, the targeting has been specific and sustained. What we saw was not just a generalised backlash against progressive politics, but a calculated effort to reverse the gains of the 2010s, and to isolate and punish those who dared to be visible.

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The internet once offered genuine curiosity, nerdiness, even joy. But increasingly, many of us feel fatigued; trapped in a space of constant visibility and judgement. Far too often, those with an online presence become the “faces” of movements, an injustice to the comrades who organise steadily on the ground, mostly unseen.

This is not just a matter of individual ergonomics. It reflects structural constraints on visibility. Working-class organisers rarely appear online. And in regions like Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu & Kashmir, where internet access is dictated by the state, digital erasure is a form of political silencing. Digital access shapes who gets seen and who remains invisible.

The same distortion applies to historical memory. We encounter countless records of WAF’s campaigns, but much less on [Sindhiani Tehreek](#), [Anjuman-e-Mazar’een Punjab](#), or even [women students organising in Ayub Khan’s Pakistan](#). The absence is even starker when it comes to trans and queer [histories](#) in Pakistan – rarely documented, often deliberately erased, and largely [sustained](#) through oral accounts, private archives and community memory.

So visibility, I have learned, is not always something to be embraced uncritically. It must be chosen, calibrated, sometimes declined altogether. I end this essay now knowing that the real risk is harder to name: what happens when you are no longer sure who is watching, or why you are still speaking. I do not have a definitive conclusion. I only know many of us are moving differently now.

What we name as online visibility is never neutral. It is shaped by who is watching, who is targeted, who is deemed expendable. I have witnessed all this unfold. Lately, many of us find ourselves turning away from the light. Not to hide, but to see better, beyond the discursive promise of genocide-complicit Big Tech platforms.



MESNGON

Of identities and intersections

Essay | Guåhan

Essay from an Indigenous women's human rights defender from Guåhan



Ha'ani Lucia Falo San Nicolas is a CHamoru and Samoan daughter, poet-scholar, activist and educator from the island of Guåhan. She is a doctoral candidate in Indigenous Politics at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and was awarded an inaugural 2023 Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Fellowship to support her research. Ha'ani also serves as the Indigenous Relations and Communications Director of Famalao'an Rights, Guåhan's sole reproductive justice initiative.

**To experience
colonisation
as an
Indigenous
woman is to
reckon with
subjugation
on multiple
fronts.**

We have a story in my culture that tells us that i trongkon niyok, the coconut tree, came to us from the body of a young woman.

Many years ago in Guåhan, the largest island of Låguas yan Gåni, there lived a happy and healthy family of three: a mother who was a talented weaver, a father who was a respected latte' (stone pillar) mason, and a beautiful daughter who loved her village and people.

One day, the daughter fell very ill. She was dying of thirst and kept asking for the juice of a fruit that did not exist. The parents tried everything to help her and even enlisted yo'amte' (healers), but nothing seemed to break her sickness. Eventually, the daughter died.

The parents placed their daughter's grave on top of a hill near their village. It rained for an entire week after she was buried. When the skies cleared, people quickly noticed a strange plant growing from the site.

Everyone in the village went to investigate. They found a tall tree with an umbrella of green leaves. When the parents approached it, something fell from above and landed right in front of them. It had a dark brown shell with what looked like hair. The parents noticed that it had cracked on the ground, and they pulled the cover apart to see a white interior under fragrant water. This was the fruit their daughter had asked for!

The people tasted the refreshing juice and used the fruit's meat as food. They burnt the husk as mosquito repellent, and the oil was used for cooking or adorning hair or the body. They thatched the roof of their homes with woven branches. How beautiful, the parents thought, that this ever-giving plant that nourishes our people emerged from our daughter.

**My ancestors have stewarded our
homelands, Låguas yan Gåni, for
thousands upon thousands of years.**

My ancestors have stewarded our homelands, Låguas yan Gåni, for thousands upon thousands of years. We tell stories such as the one above to remind us about our responsibility to one another, to our lands, to our waters. We tell these stories to return to CHamoru values and lifeways.

I share this story with you now because it illustrates the sacredness of famalao'an (women) in CHamoru culture. To this day, CHamorus, the Indigenous people of Låguas yan Gåni, consider this plant the tree of life. Our famalao'an are viewed in a similar way to the trongkon niyok: abundant, resilient and unyielding.

We are a traditionally matrilineal society. Our ancestors developed a complex civilisation where power and inheritance was traced through the woman's line. Famalao'an were no mere bystanders to the prosperity of the community - they were decision makers, knowledge holders, mediators, poets and life bringers. While famalao'an like myself still hold considerable influence within our families and communities, we remain at the face of a determined and ruthless colonial blade.

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In the 16th century, Spanish conquistadors stumbled upon Låguas yan Gåni and encountered peaceful and hospitable people. Yet, their quest for glory and god led to the subjugation of manCHamoru. Spain seized control of the islands and established the first Christian settlements in the Pacific in Guåhan. They violently forced patriarchy, monotheistic religion, heteronormativity upon the Indigenous population, uprooting and destroying their knowledge systems and relationships with the world. Famalao'an were explicitly targeted because their place in society went against the European patrilineal system that afforded white men power. Makåna siha (shamans) and yo'åmte', many of whom were famalao'an CHamoru, were cast as heathens to demonise and dismantle CHamoru spirituality. The Spanish took to uprooting social and cultural norms that empowered and privileged women, such as sexual exploration in guma ulitao (bachelor houses), divorce customs, and pregnancy out of wedlock.

Spain ceded Guåhan to the United States after the Spanish-American War in 1898, ushering CHamorus into a new colonial regime. While Spain used the CHamoru culture and language as an entry point to exact their control of Guåhan, the United States quickly turned to assimilation tactics to

eradicate Indigeneity. CHamorus were beaten for speaking their mother tongue in schools and public spaces. The practice of pattered, CHamoru midwives, ended after the institution of a Western healthcare system in Guåhan. Indigenous lands used for farms and ranches were stolen to create United States military installations, disrupting CHamoru subsistence.

Guåhan became a formal United States organised, unincorporated territory in 1950, a euphemism for a “forever colony”. This status means that Guåhan and its people are owned under their proclaimed sovereignty, never to be integrated into the union as a state. CHamorus never weighed in on the type of relationship they wanted with the United States.

This denial of choice in matters concerning CHamorus is a blatant violation of human rights. The United Nations recognises that colonised peoples have a sacrosanct authority to self-determination: complete agency to decide their political destiny. Guåhan remains one of 17 remaining non-self-governing territories (NSGTs) around the world. Despite naming our island as a NSGT, the United States continues to challenge Indigenous efforts to educate and mobilise toward a status change.

While we face an abhorrent elision to our sovereignty as a people, I cannot write about the human rights of CHamorus without speaking about the human rights of women. We understand the lexicon of violence because it has been forced upon our lands, waters, language, culture and bodies. To experience colonisation as an Indigenous woman is to reckon with subjugation on multiple fronts, a compounding pressure that is unfortunately neglected or disregarded when addressing decolonisation and social justice. Under its sweeping weight, stories celebrating the agency, power and knowledge of CHamoru and famalao'an CHamoru drown.

**To experience colonisation
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As a young girl, I grew up in this context where being a possession – of larger nations, of men, of those more powerful than me – was normal. When your ancestors were forced into silence and submission, it leaves scars within their descendants.

So many CHamorus are unhoused and face incredibly high rates of poverty, linking back to land takings and a capitalist system that privileges the wealthy. Poverty is linked to sexual harassment. Famalao'an CHamoru experience rape and sexual violence disproportionately, far too often at the hands of family members and friends. Exploitation is a symptom of colonialism that has left CHamorus and most especially famalao'an CHamoru to the wayside.

Today, one third of the island is controlled by the United States military. CHamoru families are commonly afflicted with chronic illnesses and non-communicable diseases, which many of our people attribute to "development" and the military's poisoning of the land and water. My father's mother and sisters all had varying degrees of breast cancer, the leading cause of death among CHamoru women. In Guåhan, famalao'an CHamoru are the most at risk of maternal and infant mortality. Although we do not know the numbers or have the data yet, we know in our bones that the health and well-being of our people and famalao'an are tethered to that of our homeland.

Nearly 90% of Guåhan's population are Catholic. The presence of the Church over the centuries has shaped CHamoru culture, blending elements of Indigenous language and customs with the faith. This lends itself to creating a hostile environment for reproductive justice advocates that is ripe for shaping social stigma around sex and the body. After attending an all-girls Catholic high school, I know very well of the intense pressures the Catholic community, which is largely made of CHamorus, places on women and girls. In fact, it is these strict values of chastity, devotion and the virtuous woman that were used by the Spanish to pacify famalao'an CHamoru years ago. The privileging of Catholic values and practices like matrimony, a Catholic sacrament that binds the union between man and women under god, has cultivated a culture of silence when it comes to issues such as domestic abuse, abortion, rape and sexual violence. This is not to say that all Catholic CHamorus and locals are complicit in harm, but to challenge Catholic teachings by supporting women's human rights to make decisions about their bodies is often interpreted as threatening CHamoru culture.

When home means safety, the arrival of thousands upon thousands of United States Marines - outsiders kicked out of Ryukyu (Okinawa) for their sexual crimes and heinous behaviour against the local people - in the coming months threatens everything. CHamorus had no say in what they call the "military build-up", and our community sits in fear of inheriting soldiers who have historically harmed the people and places they have settled.

Colonial narratives over 500 years in the making that speak about our homeland and people's smallness, vulnerability and insignificance have undoubtedly transformed how CHamorus view themselves and the worth and role of famalao'an. Despite this, famalao'an CHamoru have been at the front of the canoe, leading us toward a vision where rights are not only recognised but realised.

Famalao'an CHamoru such as Hope Alvarez Cristobal, Laura Torres Souder, Rosa Palomo and Jill Benavente were at the forefront of the CHamoru sovereignty and cultural renaissance movements at their inception and until this day. They and other famalao'an CHamoru brought attention to the intersection of class, gender and sexuality within our lived experiences. When the first whispers of the build-up went around in the early 2000s, CHamoru mothers, sisters and daughters like Ann Marie Arceo, Therese Terlaje, Victoria-Lola Leon Guerrero and the current Governor Lourdes Leon Guerrero came out in full force to protest increased military presence in Guåhan. Today, famalao'an CHamoru are visible in leadership positions within the government, academia and grassroots organisations.

This is where I come from: a lineage of protectors who firmly believe and act upon making a better future for Guåhan and its people.

This is where I come from: a lineage of protectors who firmly believe and act upon making a better future for Guåhan and its people. My advocacy in CHamoru self-determination and reproductive justice spaces builds upon the work of my forebears who recognised that CHamoru rights are inseparable from those of famalao'an CHamoru. In this work, I have realised that the insights and contributions of famalao'an CHamoru are often disregarded; that the struggles they are facing are separated from conversations about decolonisation and sovereignty. However, we all need to recognise that the rejection of our human rights to self-determination and to live free of violence and discrimination are intertwined. CHamoru rights are famalao'an CHamoru rights.



We must listen to the Indigenous women everywhere who are fighting for rights -

We know what the rejection of rights feels like all too well.

We know that the violence on the land parallels the violence on our bodies.

We know that they view our homelands as conquest.

We know that their desire to eradicate us has never disappeared.

Famalao'an CHamoru are no strangers to resisting a brutal thirst for our eradication and silencing. We know from our lived experience that the health, safety, and happiness of famalao'an CHamoru is staked in the prosperity of our people and land, which will be a sustained effort for years to come.

The trongon niyok live on in my ancestral islands and have done so for generation after generation after generation. Like famalao'an CHamoru, they endure - mesngon.¹

1. In fino' CHamoru, mesngon means "enduring, unyielding."



BETWEEN BARREL BOMBS AND FACEBOOK POSTS, MY BODY IS MY BATTLEFIELD

Colonialism, state and exile

Essay | Syria

Zaina Erhaim



Zaina Erhaim is an award-winning Syrian journalist and feminist. She works as a media consultant across the SWANA region.

**Suffering from
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“Why do you have to always be on the side of those losing?” my mother asked me with a tone of soft blame as I started writing in support of those who used to be pro-regime after the fall of Bashar Al Assad, the Syrian dictator, in December 2024.

She continues with a higher pitch this time: “They have been advocating for you to be killed, accusing you of being a terrorist and a Western agent for over a decade, and now you are defending them!”

I realised at that moment how this group of people had shifted in my head from a threat into weaker individuals facing revenge and unjust violations on the day Assad fell. Hence, I automatically shifted to their side, while my mother couldn't see them as anything but losers.

My aunt, on the other hand, lashed out at me when I started writing about the sectarian massacres in the coastal area of Syria: “We finally have a chance to go back to Syria after 14 years of exile. Don't burn our bridges again!”

Can I really stay silent and mind my own business? How?

Thirty years ago, in Khawla Bint Al-Zwar primary school in Edlib city in Northern Syria, the teacher was hitting those who didn't do their homework with a wooden stick (mastara) on their hands. A girl I didn't like much was waiting in queue when I heard her whispering to her friend, "My dad hit me on this hand yesterday, I hope the teacher will hit the other one."

I passed my notebook with the homework on to her and asked her to exchange places; that day I went back home with a swollen right hand and a full heart.

Suffering from violations of my own rights is the very reason I can't see others going through the same without taking a stand, especially knowing how much worse it feels when you are alone.

The price, though, is very high, especially if you are a woman.

Unlike my fellow male human rights defenders, I don't get held accountable for my actions; it's my family and sometimes even the men of my town who get attacked for not "raising me well".

Suffering from violations of my own rights is the very reason I can't see others going through the same without taking a stand.

I don't have a legacy of my own decisions and positions. No matter what I do, I will always be seen as a dependent. Unlike male journalists, I don't get challenged for my ideas or for the pieces I write, they go directly to my body, my private life, my extended family members, my looks and my lifestyle.

Unlike male journalists, I don't get challenged for my ideas or for the pieces I write, they go directly to my body, my private life, my extended family members, my looks and my lifestyle.

If I get kidnapped, my release won't be celebrated the same way. I will be asked whether I endured sexual harassment rather than any other method of torture, because my sexualised reproductive body is what matters to my patriarchal community. Some noble men might offer to marry me "to preserve my honour" as well. This happened with many women activists when they were released from the Assad regime prisons, like my friend Hanaa, who was 25 then with a Master's Degree in Education.

Worse is to get executed by family members in an "honour killing" crime, as happened to two women from the [Alwan family](#) in an Aleppo suburb in April this year.

Because I am a woman with a stand, every move I make is heavily monitored: where I go, who I hang out with, who I add on Facebook, what words I use to describe an event, etc.

Everything is fuel for another rumour, for a disinformation and trolling campaign, which in our region could turn into a real-life offence very easily.

The worst is the unsolicited misogyny, like what a secular comrade did to me in 2015, when I was still living in rebel-held Aleppo. He snapped a picture of me attending a women's choir event in Turkey with my mother and aunts. I was wearing a casual skirt and t-shirt. Then he offered, in a public post on Facebook, to share it with whoever wanted to know the "woman activist who only wears a headscarf inside Syria." This was despite him knowing that I had no option but to wear a headscarf in the rebel-held North to be able to stay and keep working.

Fear has turned into chronic stomach pain. I can feel the pain attack coming, even nine years later as I am writing about these incidents.

I threw up when a friend shared the post with my picture in it. Why? He didn't know me personally and we were both fighting for the same causes, including documenting the violations of ISIS, which had started kidnapping our friends at that point.

Sadly, this is not a unique incident. Despite living together under the regime's barrel bombs and saving my life by preventing its forces from advancing in our areas, rebels who were fighting ISIS issued a death penalty against me for speaking up against the killing of Charlie Hebdo journalists. And, because I am a woman, the ruling wasn't only against me, but also against my male guardian, my previous partner.

Fear has turned into chronic stomach pain. I can feel the pain attack coming, even nine years later as I am writing about these incidents. The heartbeats speed up, the cold sweat gathers, and my stomach crunches like a crumpled paper in the bin.

"You are putting yourself in this misogynist space. Mind your own business and you'll be fine," I have been told repeatedly by loving friends, especially when seeing me getting attacked online.

Since popularity in our culture is a thermometer for how good you are, I am being judged as a bad person for being "hated by many".

When binary narratives – good vs evil, thugs vs heroes – take over, applying a human rights approach and context to events and seeing reality through feminist lenses, make you a very easy target for all parties.

Against it all

I spent most of 2015 checking beneath my car for a grenade planted to kill me, and, even when in Turkey, I was looking behind me, suspecting a gun directed at my heart all the time.

The amount of thinking and planning needed just to go out to buy groceries or to complete any task is never taken into account in our workloads.

A couple of months after this, I received a call from the US consulate telling me that my US work visa was revoked because I live in rebel-held Syria. Then the worst happened when I was travelling to the UK in 2016 to attend an event about freedom of expression. I was told at the UK border that the Syrian regime had reported [my passport](#) as stolen and that border control had to seize it because this was the law, despite knowing that this was just cross-national oppression by Assad to silence me.

That led me to apply for asylum in the UK, but the Interpol case against me stayed, and until now, nine years later, I am still dealing with its consequences, one of which is a travel ban I must deal with whenever I go back to Syria. The regime fell, but its harassment goes on.

When everything goes against you, even the colonial lectures about dictatorship and freedom of the press, you reach a stage where you really doubt whether you are doing any good at all. That year, I felt trapped, lonely, and I questioned my values, activism, journalism, and everything I stood for. Despite leaving Syria, the online gaslighting campaigns against me continued on social media. And a report on national television called me a whore, jihadist, MI6, and spy all at once.

Online platforms, especially Facebook, weren't responding to this violence and hate; threatening public posts were not removed no matter how many times we reported them, because Syria was not a "market" for them.

For example, a man living in Germany once posted a whole 10-minute video spreading fake news and hatred against me and my family for a piece I had written, and despite reporting it with many of my friends, it wasn't removed from Facebook, though YouTube did remove it within 24 hours.



The regime fell, but its harassment goes on.

Four decades, not a single day of freedom

The campaigns to discredit me as a journalist and human rights defender, by those who would pick and choose which of my reporting suited them or didn't, have hit me so badly that I stopped writing in Arabic for five years. I also stepped out of anything related to Syria for nine years professionally and mentally.

For most of my Western colleagues, stepping out of Syrian activism meant losing my worth, despite being a journalist with decades of experience. In colonial eyes, I am only an expert in narrating my own story. My experience is not taken seriously unless it's related to my country and my personal life, unlike white human rights defenders who only need to read some books and do a visit to our region to be called "experts".

Nine years of disappointment and betrayal were only bearable by working with women and queers from the SWANA region. I felt seen, like I mattered and my self-confidence was restored.

At the age of 40, I think I have never been free, not even for a single day.

The American singer and civil rights activist Nina Simone once said, "Freedom is to me: no fear." And at the age of 40, I think I have never been free, not even for a single day. No matter how hard I try to give up on putting myself out there in public, I fail.

In trying to locate the organ in my body that takes such "illogical" decisions to go on despite all this: the threats, isolation, burnout, betrayal and unpopularity, I fail.

Some say it's conviction, love, or anger that keeps us going in defending human rights; I say it's a spell that you can't break no matter how much fear and horror you endure.

Giving up is a feature we delete when we walk the human rights-defending path. Here I am writing this piece from an old Damascene house, after finishing a training for women journalists. We spent most of it discussing our internal biases and how to produce impactful journalism that uplifts the most oppressed. We discussed the importance of holding power to account and building a feminist tribe we can belong to, to take refuge every time we get dispirited and attacked, to recharge and start all over again.

Until then, the most I hope for is to be free for one day and to experience the feeling of living without fear, before that angry armed man succeeds in proudly ending my life to "preserve his extreme values".

I love my life very much, and perhaps the superpower I developed during our awful war is the ability to still stand up for even that man and for his family if they were ever under attack.

WITNESSING ISRAEL'S COLONIAL VIOLENCE AGAINST THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE: A TESTIMONY THROUGH THE CRACKS



Colonialism, states and exile

Essay | Palestine

Anonymous



The author is a Palestinian lawyer and human rights defender who works with the international law unit at a Palestinian human rights organisation based in the West Bank. She holds a Master's degree in public international law, and focuses her efforts on centralising Palestinian experiences in international legal research, advocacy and mobilisation.

**Suffering from
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While this essay is meant to reflect a personal experience, I write with difficulty at expressing the “I”. In a neoliberal capitalist world order, where genocide has been allowed to take place in Palestine while states and regional and international actors stand idly by, the “I” has never felt so irrelevant. For decades, the Zionist settler-colonial regime has aimed at dissecting the Palestinian collectivity and breaking the links that make us a people. Rejecting this world order and the Zionist regime is to hold onto the collective, and to what makes us human, in the face of the ugliest manifestations of modern time: Israel’s genocide and Palestinians’ ongoing Nakba. That said, by using “I” in this piece, it is in no way a recognition of my personal experience in isolation from the “we”, as everything I am, everything I write, is the product of the collective and is owed to them. This piece is a reflection of a Palestinian woman human rights defender, in that order, on the recent Israeli colonial violence, the challenges, and what keeps us going.

I work with the international law unit at a Palestinian human rights organisation that focuses on seeking justice and accountability for Israel’s colonial violence against the Palestinian people. On a daily basis, I handle people’s testimonies and experiences under Israel’s apartheid regime, collected in written, oral and visual forms by colleagues in the field research team in Gaza and the West Bank including Jerusalem, in order to compile information for research, legal cases, accountability mechanisms, online publications and statements/press releases.

Under Israel’s oppressive regime, characterised by undeterred violence, imposition of [draconian laws](#), and use of [surveillance and hacking tactics](#) that aim to silence any voice of opposition and continuously shrink the humanitarian space in Palestine, advocating for Palestinian rights has become increasingly difficult. In relation to Palestinian human rights organisations, for example, Israel has utilised anti-terrorism laws to designate several organisations as “terrorist”, in an attempt to discredit, defund and shut down their activities, as part of Israel’s crackdown on any form of mobilisation against its repressive regime.

After years of working with documented material of Israeli crimes and people’s suffering, one learns to build defence mechanisms to be able to carry on with the work. However, with Israel’s 22-month-long genocide in Gaza and ongoing vicious military and settler attacks in the West Bank, there is no defence or coping mechanism that is able to numb the feeling one gets when exposed to people’s struggles on the ground. The amount of pain and suffering detailed in the testimonies we receive is telling of the level of

brutality and monstrosity embedded in the planning and execution of Israel's erasure campaign – rooted in racism and dehumanisation of the Palestinian people, which regards Palestinians as sub-human. [Statements made by Israeli officials](#) and the actions of the Israeli occupying forces (IOF) leave no question about the way [Israelis perceive Palestinians](#), and prove that any constraints on their use of force have been entirely lifted.

Israel also exercises a psychological warfare targeting and impacting Palestinians wherever they are, in Gaza and elsewhere. For those of us not present in Gaza, who are struggling with finding meaning in life or an impactful form of mobilisation, and are going about life out of necessity and stubbornness while we witness the destruction of our people, we feel the toll of Israel's psychological violence. Firstly, for the feeling of helplessness that the coloniser attempts to instill in our mindset as a power that can never be defeated, and secondly, as a showcase of might that aims to set an example for whoever tries to defy it. The “no-end-in-sight” military tactic has placed Palestinians in a spiral state of uncertainty, aimed at stripping them of their will to live, and crushing any hope for liberation or even survival. Within such a context, working in the field of human rights in Palestine comes at a cost. Despite being passionate and outspoken, I, like other human rights defenders, am faced with an ever-shrinking space for doing our work. From childhood, we learn that Palestinians live a different reality from other people. One becomes accustomed to going through Israeli military checkpoints, being subjected to searches, harassment, arrests, tear gas firings and sounds of gunfire. You inherit a level of trauma which, though normalised, grows with you and leaves a long-term impact. We also carry a particular anxiety as women, doing the best we can while thinking of our family and of others around us, who may, for example, face some form of surveillance or intimidation from the IOF or be subjected to visa or residence permit denial – evoking the works of George Orwell on government surveillance and tyrannies.

Israel's crackdown on civic space in Palestine and the environment of surveillance that I grew up in has deeply affected the way I conduct my work as a human rights defender. Since going abroad to engage in public advocacy efforts means risking intense questioning at the borders or worse, I have limited my engagements to closed spaces in order to avoid potential repercussions. Instead, I have chosen to focus on people's testimonials and place my energy into producing legal analysis and drafting pieces that best articulate and give meaning to the documented evidence and to people's experiences in the face of Israel's settler colonial violence.

In this age of speed, a five-minute scroll on social media provides you with countless news on Palestine wherever you are in the world. We learn about the updated number of killings in the Gaza genocide, the most recent torture tactics applied in Israeli prisons, the latest forcible displacement from Jerusalem, and demolition or confiscation order in the West Bank and '48 Palestine. We are seeing live images of the IOF destroying Palestinian lives, dreams, history, cities and refugee camps in Gaza and the West Bank and [re-engineering once familiar spaces](#). For myself, colleagues and friends, this has created a constant lingering fear of displacement over time, which has occupied our thoughts and become a regular subject of our nightmares. Even though we know this is a calculated tactic on the part of Israel, the level of trauma has an impact on the way we live out our lives – at work and at home – and how we plan our futures. It is this everyday colonial violence and domination that has created an overwhelming sense of anxiety that requires considerable efforts to control.

With the world continuing to fail Gaza and the Palestinians after over 22 months of genocide, I do not talk about pain amongst colleagues or friends, as there is no space to process or grieve collectively. We keep the rage, frustration and fears inside. In part, there is a sense of shame, that we do not have the right to talk about these feelings, perhaps out of a sense of a “privilege accompanied with responsibility” for being afar from Gaza, while our friends, relatives and colleagues are enduring a genocide. Despite the seemingly unparalleled Israeli violence, our collective experiences merit consideration, as Palestinians first and as human rights defenders, examining real, psychological toll on our own lives, sense of self, and hopes for the future.

Amidst the frustration and feeling of helplessness, we sometimes cope by overworking, by writing more reports, filing more cases, and engaging in more advocacy efforts. For some of my colleagues, this has led to burnout. For me, I found strength in amplifying the voices of those who are being silenced by the world's complicity in Israel's genocide. Focusing on the stories of those on the ground and on the realities reported by my colleagues from the field has allowed me to defy the constant feeling of helplessness. This does not emanate out of a naive belief that this will stop the bombs from dropping on my people in Gaza or deter settlers' attacks in the West Bank, but out of the need to be in a constant state of mobilisation in any shape or form. Amplifying people's testimonies, while deeply traumatising, is a way to honour their experiences and the effort exhausted by my colleagues in the field to capture and document people's stories, while they grapple with their

own struggle of displacement, bombings, forced starvation and dehydration and denial of basic needs.

After almost two years of unrelenting Israeli genocide, many shame the world for growing increasingly [numb to Palestinian misery](#). While that holds true ever since the world accepted the ongoing Nakba as the norm for the Palestinian people, what about those who are persistent in rejecting this reality? Personally, people's experiences have been the fuel for my work, and the reason I refuse to become numb to Israel's brutality and its infliction of a reality based on Palestinian subjugation.

From Ahmad Manasra, Nora Ghaith, Shireen Abu Akleh, Hind Rajab, Nizar Banat, Anas Al-Sharif, the destruction of Iqrit and Lifta, the ongoing erasure of Masafer Yatta, the first and second Intifada, the heartache of Palestinian farmers as they witness their crops uprooted and torched by settlers, the arrest of friends, of young people and the elderly, the systematic killing of leadership figures we've never met but have grown up with, a [father's shock](#) learning about the killing of his wife and newborn twins while out getting their birth certificates, the [bravery of our doctors](#), teachers, first responders, engineers, journalists, mothers, to Refaat Radwan's [final words](#) before he was killed by the IOF in Gaza: "Forgive me, Mother... This is the path I chose to help people," that will haunt us all for decades, just as the image of martyr Muhammad Al-Durra has and continues to linger on... It is in honour of my people and their struggles, and of all the told and untold stories, that we must keep on going.

There is power, grief, frustration, indignation and a sense of determined survival in these words and images from testimonies that we aim to convey and communicate in the reports we write and in every advocacy avenue we engage in. Being in control of our stories as people with all our dimensions is our exercise of agency and our way to refuse to be "[perfect victims](#)" in the eyes of the world. It is deeply painful witnessing peoples' most intimate moments of grief and overwhelming emotions broadcasted to the world while all possibilities for justice and accountability seem so elusive. As Palestinian translator, writer and researcher from Gaza [Alaa Alqaisi](#) put it as she grapples with starvation: "And yet I persist. I speak. I write. Because silence would be a deeper form of defeat. Testimony, even if cracked and uncertain, is the only offering I can still give. To keep it locked inside would be to let this hunger consume even the voice that names it."

At this moment, when Israel is eliminating everything that is beautiful, we are struggling to stay human. There is a part of our humanity we will never regain. What is happening today will haunt us forever and will have inter-generational effects – not just for Palestinians, but for everyone witnessing this monstrosity. I always wondered about why the older generation, my grandparents, having themselves experienced erasure and displacement during the Nakba and thereafter, were so serious, so stern. I never fully understood it until the current ongoing genocide, which defies the essence of humanity. What about the current and next generations, when what we are experiencing is more atrocious than the 1948 Nakba, as [described by one elderly Palestinian refugee](#) in Gaza?

In the face of the ongoing brutality of the IOF perpetrating the [first livestreamed genocide](#) in history, with millions of violations, stories and feelings captured primarily by their victims, who are at times equipped with internet service but denied the basic necessities for survival, how do we ensure the truth around this genocide does not end up twisted by those in power, buried in denial and complicity? The Palestine archives have been appropriated by Israel during the Nakba, and in the current genocide, Israel has been targeting Gaza's research and education centres, cultural and heritage sites and [Central Archives](#), containing thousands of historical documents dating more than 150 years. In the testimonies we gather, in the words we write and experiences we highlight, we aim to ensure that Palestinians are able to tell their own stories and document their reality. We all share the responsibility to uphold the Palestinian experience as told by the Palestinians. This is part of the ethics of witnessing Israel's settler-colonial genocide and violence against the Palestinian people.



What drove Refaat to document his last moments, his final wishes and du'a (prayers)?

What forces a mother to sit with our field researchers and recall every single painful second she experienced as she lost her newborn to the cold winter nights while displaced in Gaza?

What propels a man to thoroughly explain how IOF soldiers raped him and urinated on him while beating and cursing him?

What makes a Palestinian speak, engage and react with a world that has lost dignity and humanity, and continuously ask of him/her to prove their claims with solid facts and begin by humanising the coloniser first before speaking about their own story?

I ask myself these questions every time I read a testimony and write a report highlighting Palestinians' experiences. My only motivation in a world that has lost its way, and sole incentive to overcome feelings of anxiety and helplessness, is my people's words and experiences, those told and untold, and a hope that the next generation will grow less apathetic towards peoples' suffering and will honour their sacrifice and steadfastness.

Despite the heinousness of a genocidal machine, we should not belittle our struggles, we should strive to recognise them, contextualise them, and focus our work on the collective. Each Palestinian struggle takes part in the mosaic of our shared plight and collective pain, and blame must always be placed on the perpetrator - the Zionist settler-colonial regime. There is nothing in sight to indicate a shift away from this darkness. Yet, we still have to believe somehow there will be an end, and that all this bloodshed shall not go in vain. If history has taught us anything, it is that in the face of colonial violence, the Palestinian people remain rooted in their land.



TILL FREEDOM

Colonialism, states and exile

Essay | Iran

Ghazal Abdollahi



Ghazal Abdollahi is an Iranian visual artist and writer based in Berlin. Her work explores themes of political oppression, social justice, and human rights. She uses visual art and storytelling to raise awareness about pressing social and political issues.

**I watched
[my mother]
step out in a
video call, saw
her hugging
everyone,
singing,
shouting,
“Woman, Life,
Freedom” – all
through a screen.
She was free.**

“Are you happy with who you are?”

My mother asked me that more times than I can count, for years. Even in the worst situations, I would have said yes, the nightmare will pass and I love who I am. But now I’m shattered into a hundred selves.

I can see clearly the sacrifices my parents made. Growing up, my mother told me how, at 16, she was arrested by the new regime in Iran. I grew up with her stories of solitary confinement, her cellmates, and the people they became. Stories of friends getting executed. She was banned from finishing high school and started university later than she should have. You see - they kill your time, I said to myself from the beginning.

I grew up with her stories and struggles as an ex-political prisoner - a background that was a tag and red flag, even among people. Her struggles as a photographer, the protests she joined... As I aged, I distanced from it, only hearing her fights from behind walls: fired from newspapers, magazines banned, arrested again. Our friends arrested. Our house attacked by regime officers. Our belongings taken. My father blacklisted; his office shut down. Me, a teenager, always getting calls that either my mom or dad was arrested...

I stood back, watching it all happen to my parents, to us, to people like us. I thought I could close my eyes, go to university, join theatre classes, and pretend things were normal. Our theatre group got banned. They always know who you are, where you’re from, what you believe - they see it in everything you create.

The regime raided our house again, taking everything - hard drives, my parents’ life’s work, every memory we had. Then they took my mother. That was the moment for me: anger, helplessness, and a rush of power through my veins.

Then they took my mother. That was the moment for me: anger, helplessness, and a rush of power through my veins.

After my mom was sent to Evin Prison's women's ward, I visited on a Sunday, the visitation day. They checked me thoroughly and let me in. After waiting and walking through hallways and stairs, I finally saw myself in the cold, dark room with glass-separated cabins, cut off from the world and our loved ones.

We sat on a plastic chair in a cabin, choosing one where my mom could see the orange leaves through a small window behind me. I thought it might make her happy. As I held back my tears, I noticed my father greeting other families of the prisoners, people I didn't know at the time.

Then, the rush of sound and energy hit us from behind the glass. Our loved ones walked in, trying to find their families. My mom found us, we started talking. I kept watching the other prisoners, recognising their faces. Everything just became more real to me.

My mom began introducing us to the others, saying, "Look, this is my daughter, the one I've been talking about." In those moments, I felt like my world had grown. When I think about that spark, the moment that pushed me forward, the light, hope - it all traces back to that Sunday.

**Weeks went by; each Sunday, I
felt more connected to the other
prisoners. I started calling them
my mother's new family.**

I went home with an itch I couldn't scratch. Weeks went by; each Sunday, I felt more connected to the other prisoners. I started calling them my mother's new family. They spent more time with her than I did, and I realised they knew me better than I knew them - my mother had all day to talk about me, while I only saw their faces for brief moments each week.

Some had been in prison for years - five, three, 10 years... Each week, I'd go home, check their latest photo in the news, then return to prison, unable to count the wrinkles life had added. Each Sunday felt like another week stolen by the regime, and we ended every conversation with "Till freedom."

I became more active on social media, sharing about prison life, my mother, and other prisoners. Sometimes, it was just everyday moments - like the little flower my mother gave me, picked from the ward's garden. We couldn't give

them anything, but on visitation days, prisoners could send things to us. Weeks passed again...

At the time, I was working on a project, drawing self-portraits on coffee filters and sometimes writing letters to my mom. One Sunday, between all the noise and light I noticed the new white hairs in her hair and behind me the window with snow-covered trees. I looked at everyone else and thought, None of you look the same as your last photograph... These are our stolen moments.

We can't touch, we can't hold each other. None of us are free to go to a café or have a simple conversation over coffee - those small things, now a wish. I remember talking with my father and my mother each Sunday. How do I deal with this pain, this itch? How can I make sure these people I meet every Sunday leave a mark, not just pass by?

One thing that was mine, like a child I created, were these coffee filters. One Sunday, my mom and I had the same idea. She suggested, "Why don't you paint the women prisoners, my cellmates, on these filters?" By then, I had already painted portraits of her and sent them to prison. She had hung them by her bed. I said, "Yes, that's exactly what I had in mind." That's when I started painting their faces on the filters.

I thought it represented all the coffees we could have had, the talks, the time we could have spent. It symbolised a free world where we could have just walked around with coffee, getting to know each other.

With the portraits, I didn't just want to show their faces, their white hair, or the lines around their eyes. I aimed to share the stories behind these wrinkles - my personal connection to them in those brief moments of visitation. It's a side of these prisoners that people outside the walls can't see. A face different from the media narrative that calls them heroes or fighters, as if they aren't human.

I started painting their faces on the filters. I thought it represented all the coffees we could have had, the talks, the time we could have spent.

One Sunday, during a monthly in-person meeting, I saw what you don't see: a fighter is still human, breaking down, putting her head on her father's lap, crying for an hour. I feared touching her would make her break more. Her tears - I can't forget them. That's the real story. Even through all the pain, the fight continues.

Months passed until September 2022, when the regime killed Jina Mahsa Amini, sparking massive protests. I remember hearing that they were transferring her for burial to her hometown. The streets around the hospital were packed with people, and the regime already began arresting activists and journalists... At around 10 p.m., I heard the area around the hospital was crowded; I told my father I had to go. I drove there, unsure of what I could do. Streets were blocked by officers, preventing cars from stopping or people from getting out, beating those on the street.

I don't even remember my parents telling me not to join protests, just saying, "Be careful." My friends from a different world kept telling me, "Your family did their part, you don't have to go out." As the protests grew, my mom, worried in prison, couldn't say anything, and I was slightly relieved she wasn't on the streets. But for them in prison, not knowing what was happening outside and unable to join the protests must have been unbearable. A week into the protests, half of our friends were arrested. One night, as I walked home, my phone rang, and my friend yelled, "Do you know Evin Prison is on fire?" I replied, "Don't you think I know better? My mother is in that prison. There is no such thing happening." He replied, "It's all over the news!" I told my friends and started walking faster home, finding my dad distraught. I asked what we should do. We had to go there, see what was happening. My phone kept ringing, people asking, "What's happening?" The regime had set Evin Prison on fire. My dad said it wasn't safe for me to go near the prison, so he left with other prisoners' families. I was left alone, numb.

None of us knew how the morning came, how we left the house. It was Sunday, visitation day. My father went to one door of the prison to get answers, and I went to the visitation door, each door filled with family members desperate to know if their loved ones were alive. Inside, it was full of officers and guards. I said, "It's visitation day for the women's ward." He replied, "There's no visitation today." I asked, "Then how am I supposed to find out what happened and if my mom is okay?" He said, "Everyone in the women's ward is fine." I yelled, "Am I supposed to believe you?" He answered, "They will call."

It had been days since prison officials banned my mother from calling. And now we hadn't heard from her or anyone else, nothing was clear. On my way to find my father and join other families, I got a call from my mother. She simply said, "Tell everyone we are okay and everything is stable now," then hung up. I think I was the first to tweet that, sharing exactly what she said. Those were the darkest days...

People around us chanted,

"Woman, Life, Freedom."

Suddenly, a laser hit my eyes

The last protest I joined - that night I met my friends, and we walked down the same street where I had once imagined myself holding a coffee, walking freely with the faces I had painted on coffee filters. I was leading. People around us chanted, "Woman, Life, Freedom." Suddenly, a laser hit my eyes. I looked at my friend - his face was frozen in shock - I shouted, "Run, run, they are coming!" We all turned back and started running. They were coming with motorcycles and guns. I was running between cars, I felt someone shove me. I fell, got up, and kept running, not looking back. I got shot in the neck. Didn't know if it was a real bullet or not. Touched it, thinking, if there's blood, you'll die any second. I kept going. A man in a car yelled, "Get in, get in!" I knew if I didn't, I'd be arrested. I jumped in. His car was surrounded by officers yelling, "Give her to us!" and shooting at his car. I thought he'd hand me over. I was only thinking what would happen to my mom. But he didn't. He locked the doors and drove away.

That night, my friends were arrested. One of them was tortured and interrogated until morning. The others made it home, wounded. On my way back, I finally felt the pain - my stomach bruised from the fall, my neck burned where the bullet had hit. I hid in friends' houses for a week or two. Me and my father knew our home wasn't safe for me anymore. The threatening calls kept coming.

That night, I knew it was the last time. The last time I walked that street. The last time I drove my car. The last time my father held me so tightly, as if holding me close could stop time. The last time we visited my mother in prison. The last time the three of us touched, kissed, shared a moment together. The last photo with my father. The last call from my mother, as I was walking toward my seat on the plane. The last goodbyes.

I arrived in Germany at the peak of the protests in Iran, leaving more than half of myself behind. I had always learned to adapt quickly - life had taught me that skill well.

After countless interviews, visits and conversations, I realised I was still carrying the habit of censoring myself - a habit I no longer needed here. Slowly, step by step, I let it go and buried it.

Now, three years have passed. Looking back, I see that in my first year in exile, I did more than I had in 20 years in Iran. I didn't understand it then - was I really capable of all this, or just trying to stay busy to avoid facing what was happening to me? Still, even a simple hello from someone could bring me to tears.

**I kept writing, connecting, creating.
I added a new layer to my coffee
filter portraits - this time for those
killed by the government during
the protests.**

I kept writing, connecting, creating. I added a new layer to my coffee filter portraits - this time for those killed by the government during the protests. Faces with no names, no pictures. Something that could never have happened in Iran became real: I exhibited them. A big white wall held their memories. They stared at me... through me. Their eyes followed me around the room. I stood there, meeting my mother's gaze in one portrait. For a moment, it felt like I was back in those prison cabins where she once sat with her cellmates.

I was torn between worlds - my art, the pain for prisoners, the endless work on execution cases. I hadn't stopped to face my own traumas. I was lost. I didn't know where - or who - I was anymore. Since that September, it felt like I'd been swept into a river, carried with no control. I wasn't even surviving - I was just trying to save others, and failing, again and again.

My art - the one thing that always pulled me back from the nightmares - started slipping away. My paintings, photography, writing - my world - slowly disappeared, the colours dimming one by one. I had thought I was stronger than most. I wasn't. I stumbled forward with no way back. The hope and anger that once burned bright settled into something quiet and heavy. I sat alone,

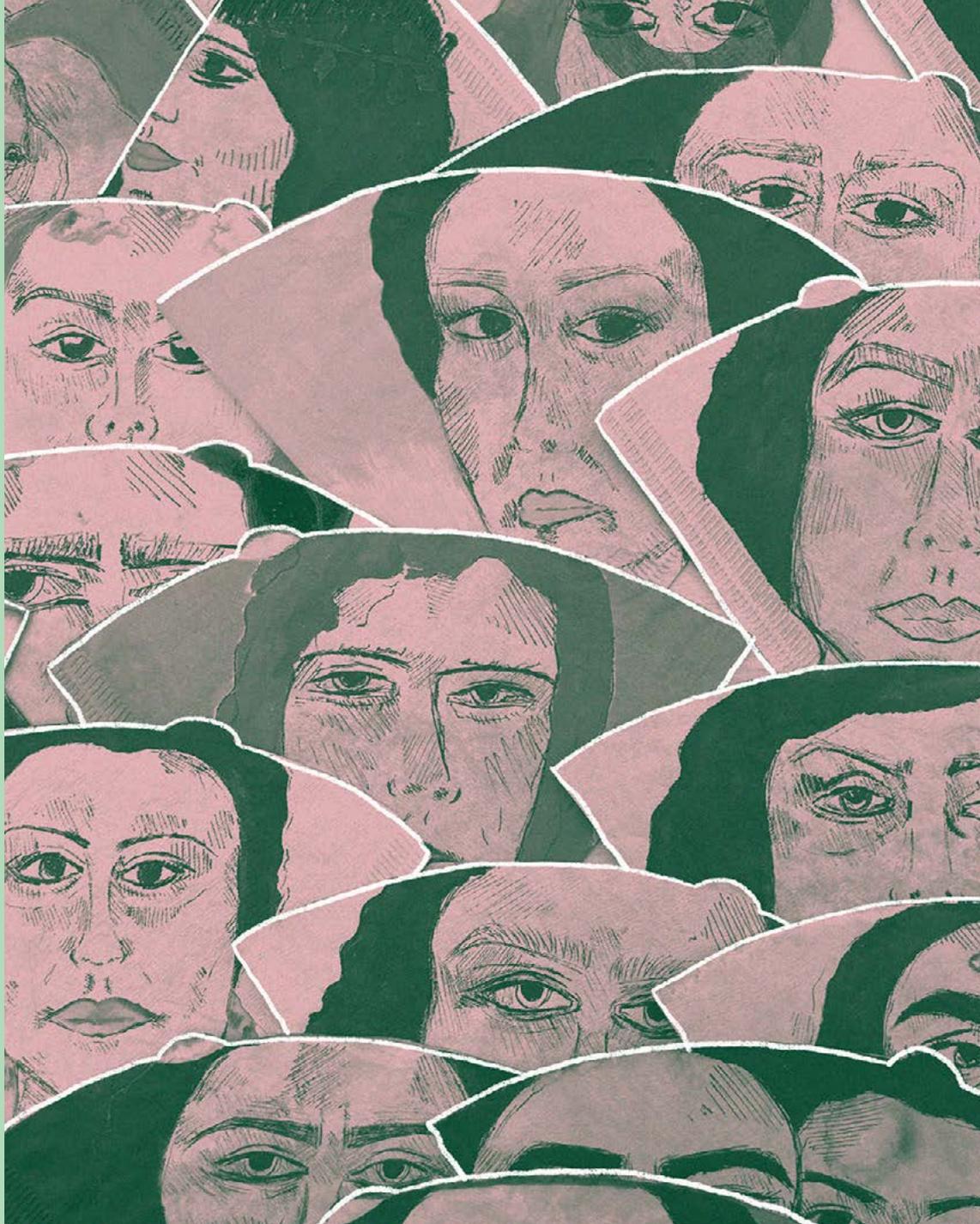
thinking about having nothing. People here would never understand me – we didn't share a past or a language of trauma. And those I left behind in Iran wouldn't understand either. Even sympathy here felt like a weight pressing down on me.

For a long time, I felt guilty for leaving my father alone to handle everything in Iran. When I was there, he could count on me. Now I kept thinking, what if he gets arrested again? With my mom in prison too, there would be no one close to them like me. I tried to believe I could still be useful from afar, that they could count on me in a different way. But the pain of not being with them during hard times was killing me. You never want that to happen, but your understanding of life shifts day by day. The distance becomes more than just physical. I had to focus my energy on making sure that fear wouldn't come true.

I tried to believe I could still be useful from afar, that they could count on me in a different way. But the pain of not being with them during hard times was killing me.

Right after my first painting exhibition, my father printed photos of the paintings and brought them to the prison. They allowed my mom to receive them. Later, my father told me the prisoners gathered around in the ward, placed the paintings on a table, and tried to find themselves in them. "Narges" immediately pointed and said, "Oh, look, this is me, her hair looks exactly like mine!" My mom, "Alieh", felt the one in the picture looked very different from herself...

I was on a train returning from the exhibition in Hamburg when I got a voice message from my father – recorded during a call with my mother in prison. Prisoners and my mom wanted to thank me and send a message of hope. They all gathered around the phone, speaking to me, started singing Bella Ciao. I sat there, earbuds in, listening to their voices – recognising my mother's, "Narges", "Sepideh", "Niloufar" and others... in the middle of all the talking and singing someone said, "We will bring you all back!" Oh I missed them so much. I even



missed the Sundays we went for visitations. Tears filled my eyes. Looking around the train, felt like I was living in a different time, different world - detached from everything around me. Their voices broke me and glued me back together all at once. I had the paintings with me on the train, laid them out on the table, looked them in the eye, and took a picture. I kept thinking: should I share the voice? The next morning at home, I did. I published the audio with the photo of their paintings. Their voices, during such a dark time for all of us, were a sound of hope.

I watched [my mother] step out
in a video call, saw her hugging
everyone, singing, shouting,
“Woman, Life, Freedom” – all
through a screen. She was free.

It was close to my mother’s birthday – her third one in prison – when my father told me she might be released. I think it was that same night that she and two of her cellmates walked out of the prison gates. My father, her friends, and mine – instead of me – were there waiting with flowers and open arms. I watched her step out in a video call, saw her hugging everyone, singing, shouting, “Woman, Life, Freedom” – all through a screen. She was free. I wrote the news: “She was freed from the small prison into the larger prison.”

Three years have passed since that night. It feels heavy when I remember I haven’t hugged my mother in six years – three while she was in prison, and three since her release, because I can’t return to Iran.

It still feels like this exile was forced on me – not being able to live normally, just think, dream, or have simple conversations. Don’t know if the nightmares will ever pass. We’ve lost more than we gained. But still, I say I’m happy – with all the disasters, all the scattered pieces of me.

Sometimes I feel unanchored, like there’s no place left to return to, no place to call home, it can seem like a kind of loss. But maybe it isn’t. Maybe that rootlessness is a form of freedom – not being tied to one place, one story, one life.

When I feel that way I remember a saying that felt like it was written for me:

“We were once trees, but now we are birds.”



WITHOUT A COUNTRY BUT WITH A VOICE: CRIMINALISATION AND EXILE OF NICARAGUAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Colonialism, states and exile

Video essay | Nicaragua

Alexa Zamora



Alexa Zamora is a Nicaraguan human rights defender and pro-democracy activist, exiled after facing political persecution and denationalisation. With over a decade of experience, she advocates internationally for civil and political rights, freedom of expression, and justice for victims of authoritarian regimes.

**Exile is not a
choice. It is a
form of forced
resistance (...)**

**Sometimes
surviving is
already an act
of courage!**



“The day I was declared stateless, I began to receive messages of solidarity almost like condolences. I didn’t know how to feel. I didn’t know what it meant. To be declared dead while still breathing.”

In this video essay, Alexa Zamora describes the great personal and political price she has paid for her human rights activism in Nicaragua. Following a popular uprising in 2018, state and paramilitary forces escalated their persecution of activists with targeted attacks and defamation campaigns on social media. Alexa endured daily harassment and direct threats, labeled and convicted as a “traitor” to her own country. Stripped of her nationality and forced into exile with her daughter, she continues to rebuild her life and to fight for her dream of returning to a country where speaking up is celebrated, not punished.

Exile is not a choice. It is a form of forced resistance (...) Sometimes surviving is already an act of courage!





THIS IS NOT AN EXILE

Colonialism, states and exile

Essay | Venezuela

**Laura
Vidal**



Laura is an education and digital rights researcher from Venezuela, studying resilience, information justice, and community-driven strategies under authoritarian pressure. She focuses on narrative strategies in contexts of censorship and surveillance as well as intercultural exchange in online and offline communities.

**Suffering from
violations of
my own rights
is the very
reason I can't
see others
going through
the same
without taking
a stand.**

The word “exile” has always felt too grand for me, a category I’ve never been worthy of. I didn’t cross any borders on foot while so many of my countrymen and women did. I didn’t escape in the dead of night. But here I am, unable to return freely or with peace of mind, burdened with a fear that feels old and unspoken. I left Venezuela over 15 years ago, not because I was in any specific danger, but because I could not go on in the same reality and I had carried a restless thirst to see what lay beyond these borders. Along the years and with the rise of authoritarianism, however, my voluntary departure became something else; particularly when I realised that coming home would be difficult for many reasons: internalised fears, complicated and prohibitive travel routes, among others.

In the middle of it: the comprehensible incomprehension of my family on one hand and the outrage of people around me on the other when they realise I had spent over 10 years without going back home, not even once. Not even when my grandmother or my adored grand aunt passed away. Economically it was extremely difficult: I had to manage to take time off – which meant making less money – and somehow at the same time make extra for the plane ticket, the expenses and a lot more. As I finally met the conditions to go back and see my parents, the answer I got from a couple of their friends when explaining I had been living abroad for so long was “oh, so you’re no longer Venezuelan.”

And yet, in that abroad, I’m anything but.

**There is a kind of distance that
doesn’t begin with geography. It
settles in layers, like sediment,
until one day you realise that you’re
not only far – you’re indeed foreign.**

This incomprehension, along with my inability to find the words to explain myself, also played a role at work and within activist spaces, where I automatically took a back seat and did my best to withhold any need to make noise. Some of my colleagues would state that I couldn't do advocacy work for Venezuela or Latin America from abroad, much less from France. I'm often told that other activists keep working from Caracas and time zones can't accommodate those across the ocean.

There is a kind of distance that doesn't begin with geography. It settles in layers, like sediment, until one day you realise that you're not only far - you're indeed foreign, to everyone and everything in different levels, craving for belonging and finding it in places you never thought you would. A mishmash of what you think of you and what others see, with the latter prevailing most of the time. Yet, in over 15 years I'm not sure I ever left completely. My parents are still in our hometown, dealing with incredible hardship in what is supposed to be their resting period. I send money, I help organise, I stay informed. I spend sleepless nights on social media with every new chapter of the crisis, just like most Venezuelans living abroad. When I first arrived in France and continued to participate in activist spaces, I was more or less an exception, feeling like I hadn't earned my place because I wasn't living in Venezuela. Today, we're all caught in a growing diaspora, like a wave we never saw coming. A diaspora that pushes to keep families afloat, one whose numbers continue to be fed with each violent peak of our political story. Each new rupture in Venezuela's crisis is like a cough from a dying beast, gasping through tear gas - spitting more and more of us into exile. Real exile, the one that comes with no choice.

Survivor's guilt, narrative violence and the fractured diaspora

I carry shame for not having suffered enough. And every time the news flashes with another activist's arrest, another disappearance, another round of protests – there it is again: a deep, all-consuming fury, directed almost solely at myself. I know I'm not the only one feeling like this, although I do wonder if any of those who feel powerless and helpless hate themselves as much as I do for being able to put my head above water from time to time.

There's also the burden of narrative. The constant explaining. The endless misunderstanding in spite of over 15 years of reporting, denouncing, analysing. International observers that know better as unavoidable interlocutors: Venezuelasplaining, we call it – when outsiders attempt to teach us the meaning of our own experience, our own collapse, our own grief. I've had to sit through long lectures by international colleagues who have never set foot in the country but felt confident explaining its “real” problems. The worst part is not their ignorance, it's their conviction that they know how it is. That because I'm “out”, my words are just emotional, biased, unreliable. I've had friends working with international universities refusing to sign statements that demanded the cease of technology-facilitated violence for reasons they “couldn't quite explain.” Others eagerly supporting government-led statements with the weight of their signatures and their credibility, deaf to the human rights violations we have been denouncing for years. Other colleagues have had their bosses or their organisations asking them not to sign statements on Venezuela as part of their teams, which translates to asking them to sign as just anyone, backed by no one, with their last and first name exposed with no safety net. On that particular statement I had no direct institutional backup either, but I did have my mother seeing my name on the list of signatories and saying, “You definitely cannot come back now.”

Venezuelasplaining, we call it – when outsiders attempt to teach us the meaning of our own experience, our own collapse, our own grief.

And then there's the diaspora itself, fractured and dissonant. We share origins, but not always ethics. Some defend other authoritarian governments simply because they carry the right slogans. Some romanticise a past that was already broken. Some write songs about Venezuelan women supposedly wanting to fight back the stigma that has grown all over the region, but what I heard was mainly a celebration of curves and voluptuous, normative bodies. One step forward, two steps back.

Inside and outside, we are pushed and pulled by polarisations that do not reflect our realities. Many have aligned themselves with new conservative movements, out of fear, out of trauma or exhaustion. I understand the impulse. I also fear the damage.

Gendered repression: Silences, fear and the heavy price of speaking

You don't have to be the direct target of repression to feel its effect. You just need to witness its waves. And it goes deeper when close ones are harassed, doxxed, threatened with rape or death. Every message one sends feels traceable. Every opinion shared online carries the risk of punishment – not just for us, but for the people we love. In Venezuela, the weapon is not just censorship – it's humiliation. Especially for women.

Repression can be deeply gendered, and it often includes sexualised threats, attacks against credibility, and mockery of our appearance with the weight of a generations-old hate over our bodies. State-sponsored trolls target our bodies and our families with cruel precision. It's not enough to discredit us politically – they must disfigure us symbolically. And it works. Many women disappear quietly from public discourse, not because they are silenced, but because the cost of being heard is unbearable. I never had the strength to fight back against any of this, so I'm part of those looking on, quietly, from the sidelines. Hoping to support those who have been – or were forced to be – by circumstance – more courageous than me in the face of such blows.

The burden doesn't end with state violence. It continues with the many kinds of silences among families, colleagues and friends. I know my family never tells me the full truth, for example. They know I know, and the sad cycle continues, as we all know no one has a full picture of anything. As much as my mother promises that she does tell me everything, I know she will always pretend things are fine so I won't send money I don't have. And I won't blame

her. I never tell her the full truth either; nor the precarity of most of my contracts working for international human rights organisations. Or how I often don't have any possibility to rest or to take much time off, being careful not to point at any issues that could make me the issue, having to overlap one project with another to make ends meet, to gain experience and validation, but always wondering with piercing worry if this contract will be the last one I'll ever find, as none of us have any protection in case a project suddenly ends, as has been the case far and wide lately. This is the price of working in a field we're passionate about, and in my case, a field that makes me feel useful and that connects me with people that inspire me greatly and with spaces where I feel I can belong.

My adopted family of friends often choose these protective silences as well. I've had friends crossing borders on foot, or being directly attacked, and I only find out months later. "It's a burden you don't want to put on your friends," one of them told me after crossing the border and afterwards being attacked online to make their return even riskier. I feel the weight of these silences anyway, and I pay them back with mine, because talking about exhaustion and depression feels completely out of place in such a context. When I finally do open up, however, it tightens my heart to find they still hold a space to care for me. They're there, they listen, they check in. And so we go through periods of full openness and try to deal with what we have, and then we go through silences, knowing something is wrong, but unable to say it or to ask what's going on. We wait patiently for the next cycle to open up again to jump on a call, to record a voice message.

While the world wonders what to do with Venezuelan narratives, our nationality gets new layers of reputational wounds, with many invisible cuts that only those on the ground know about. Venezuelan human rights defenders who find themselves pushed into exile have a hard time getting visas, or are humiliated and harassed when crossing borders; their passports annulled, their names sounding soundless alarms. Visas are often refused, expulsions keep lingering over their heads. They can't be named in work they've helped to achieve, always fearing consequences for one thing or another.

Between global deafness and the possibility of a new solidarity

International circles are not what they pretend to be, nor were their structures built thinking about us. And I take a leap in saying us, as I mean experts that are often on the ground, with little protection, working with the only resource possible to tell the story, which is money from abroad. And as activists, journalists, researchers and experts continue to advocate for human rights, international institutions demand proof that can be impossible to give – documents, signatures, timestamps, case numbers that no Venezuelan authority will sign, or that would be risk-free. They want experts on the ground, well-connected to local communities and who can also be fluent in English, no extractive AI, please. They want trauma in digestible, workable formats. They want survivors to be orderly and on time. They want clarity where there is only chaos.

They want trauma in digestible, workable formats. They want survivors to be orderly and on time. They want clarity where there is only chaos.

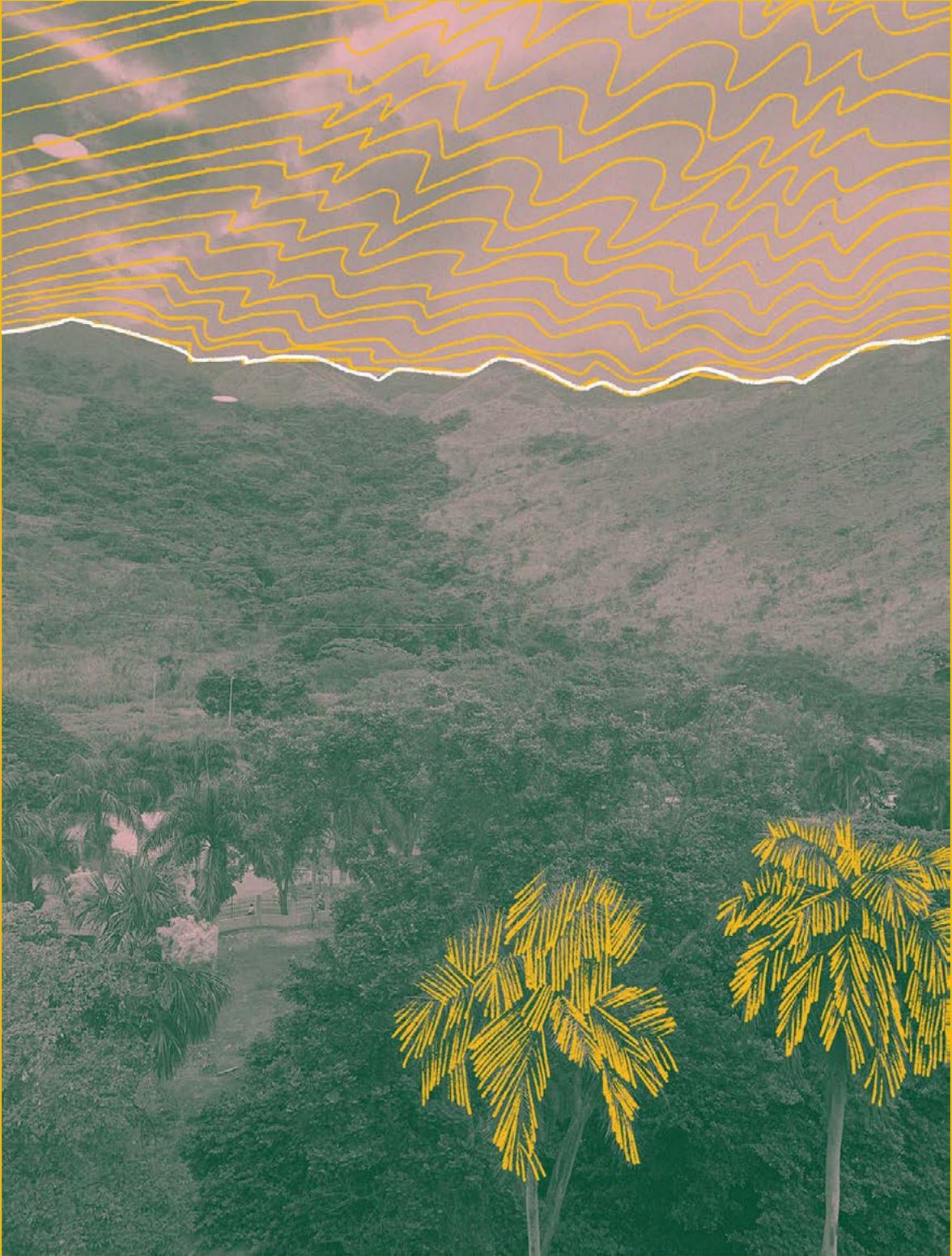
Venezuelan victims of human rights violations have been deemed “too radical”. Many of us are seen as “too emotional” or “too unreliable” to be taken seriously. Or worse, our story is invisible altogether – dismissed by academics, ignored by colleagues who would rather protect their ideological allies than support the people suffering under their slogans. Some refuse to sign petitions against violence because they don’t like the wording. Others celebrate their research credentials while refusing to believe what we say about the very countries they say they support, except that they’re not supporting a country, they’re supporting a government, and a very particular

government at that. “We don’t have enough context.” “It’s complicated.” “We need to stay neutral.” This includes specialists in causes infinitely more difficult to study that buy so easily the black and white fable, signing in favour and empowering a regime that imprisons and tortures journalists, activists, human rights defenders and their families.

We are not only exiled from our countries - we are exiled from the global narratives that claim to defend us.

We are not done, however. There is a kind of internationalism that doesn’t wait for permission. It grows quietly. In South-South alliances, in shared tools, in “broken” languages, especially English, a language I think is being - quite on the contrary - enriched by all of our ways of speaking it. Without these groups and these alliances, we would have never made contact with incredible voices from the region and beyond: from Nicaragua, Cuba, Colombia, just to give a few examples. We can now recognise that Venezuela’s internet shutdowns rhyme with those in Senegal, so experts can share, collaborate and co-create. In 2017, activists in Caracas watched documentaries and made shields inspired by those seen during protests in Kiev. I learned about internet censorship from friends and colleagues from Egypt and Tunisia. I also learned that beyond these capricious borders we’ve inherited, we are not completely alone, and that not being alone is a form of survival.

This is not an exile



Third spaces, radical care and the remnants of a shared fight

We talk about grief. We learn how to keep going – not just through strength, but through kindness.

We keep learning while we whisper and build. We send each other memes, books, videos, songs and audio messages where we go on about work, readings, ideas. A pack of personalised podcasts of sorts. We check in at odd hours. We validate each other, something that in my personal case has meant the world. We organise encrypted meetings and stay awake through different time zones. We teach each other tools for digital security. We talk about grief. We learn how to keep going – not just through strength, but through kindness.

I like to think of these as “digital third spaces” – networks that exist neither fully here nor there, and where we all bring our different mishmashes of identities. It’s in these digital third spaces where I feel I belong the most. Not in any organisation, not in any country, but in a constellation of people who refuse to let go. Especially in circles of women. It is feminist networks that have carried me the most these last years. They speak a language that is both local and transnational. They often offer clarity, not performance. They give me back a voice I often feel I don’t deserve.

And even these spaces are not free of hierarchy or exhaustion. The digital is not a utopia. But I believe it is a refuge we can keep building as a kind of resistance and a source of strategy. The people I've met through these networks – friends, colleagues, co-strugglers – have kept me afloat more than any formal institutions ever have, or ever could. Unsurprisingly, these are fluid spaces, moving constantly and adapting to what's available and what's right. It is these kinds of spaces, these invisible countries made of people from all over, bringing and negotiating their hybrid identities, that will bring us forward. It is in these spaces that I think we'll be able to imagine new kinds of world maps and defy the whole concept of the world we've had so far. However, this can only be possible if we learn to see them, really see them, and recognise the deep care they need. If we're ready to fight back old, useless power structures and keep them out of their liquid borders. Especially to do away with the old inequalities that are present in them today, and the silences that risk isolating us in spaces that should otherwise set us free.



JOURNALS FROM A RAINBOW SHEEP

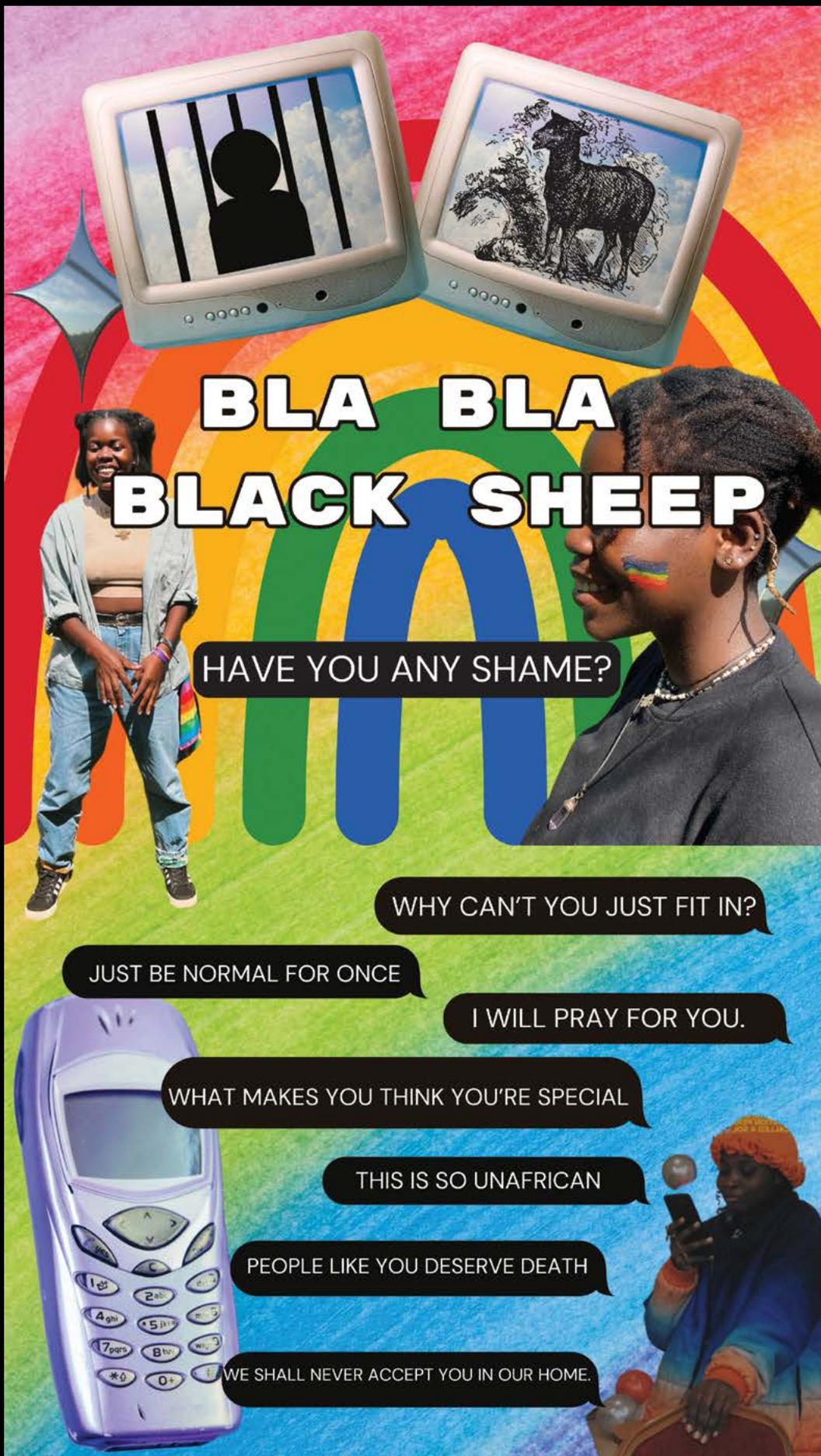
Imaginaries

Collage | Uganda

**Aida
Namukose**



Aida is a photographer and pan-african feminist driven by the belief that stories and narratives have the power to shift attitudes and shape culture. She is passionate about human rights for all, nature-based sustainable living and a united Africa.



BLA BLA BLACK SHEEP

HAVE YOU ANY SHAME?

WHY CAN'T YOU JUST FIT IN?

JUST BE NORMAL FOR ONCE

I WILL PRAY FOR YOU.

WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU'RE SPECIAL

THIS IS SO UNAFRICAN

PEOPLE LIKE YOU DESERVE DEATH

WE SHALL NEVER ACCEPT YOU IN OUR HOME.



I used to buy into stories of shame, question my beliefs, and hide my opinions. Then I met my tribe... witnessed their bravery, undying love for life and drive in the midst of stigma and persecution.



I saw my best friend walk barefoot in the red soil and come out to her boyfriend.



I saw my lover fearlessly organise queer events even when the law said she couldn't.

I saw sapphic women come together, laugh and celebrate with the threat of police looming above us.



I saw bravery, determination and selflessness worthy of history books.

I learned that we don't have to live in fear and shame, and that human expression wasn't meant to fit a box.



I learned this through my tribe- a beautiful, diverse, fearless, flawed, joyful and open collective.

KAMPALA: Gay Activist Stabbed Near Fatality on his way to Work

On Wednesday, a 25-year-old Ugandan LGBTQ...
www.theugandandaily.com

KAMPALA: Gay Activist Stabbed Near Fatality on his way to Work | The Ugandan Daily



a war was declared on your existence.
 are you ready for war?





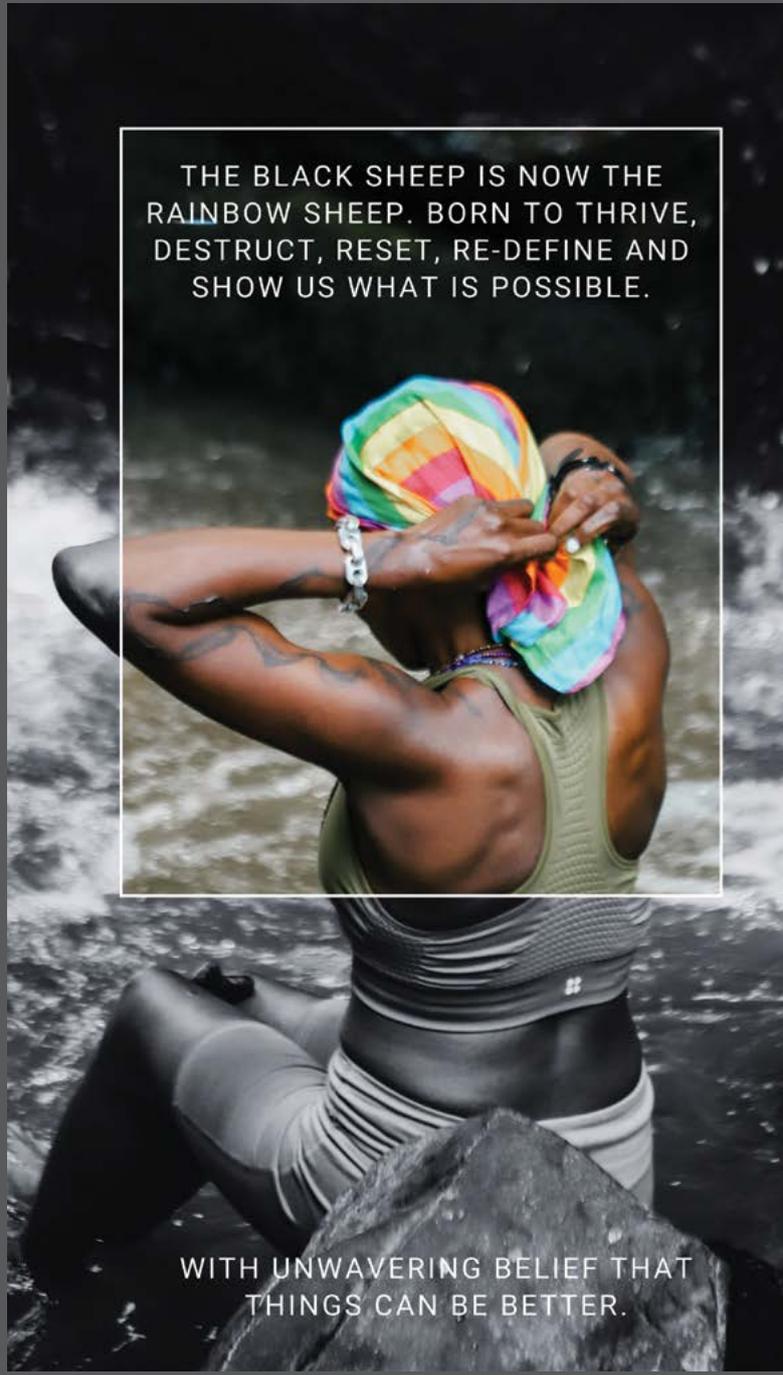
despair

fight



despair

fight



THE BLACK SHEEP IS NOW THE RAINBOW SHEEP. BORN TO THRIVE, DESTRICT, RESET, RE-DEFINE AND SHOW US WHAT IS POSSIBLE.

WITH UNWAVERING BELIEF THAT THINGS CAN BE BETTER.

a continent where we can all be. all thrive.

find quiet loving spaces to sit with our pain, not pass it on.

deal with conflicts in kind and restorative ways.

Find power in our diversity and diversity in our africaness.

prioritising human rights, self-care and joy within the war.

turn to the natural elements that exist without expectations or judgement

embrace the messy processes of community and becoming

yes it is possible. maybe, tell me...

bla bla black sheep...have you any dreams?





WHO CARES FOR THOSE WHO CARE?

Imaginaries

Essay | Philippines

Kristine Chan



Kristine Chan is a queer visual artist, designer and human-rights advocate from the Philippines. They are the co-founder and president of Filipino Freethinkers (FF), a civil society organisation that has been promoting reason, science and secularism in the Philippines since 2009. They find passion in combining art, design, storytelling and advocacy for progressive campaigns.

**Our very
strengths –
our passion,
empathy and
courage –
often lead us
into physically,
mentally or
emotionally
dangerous
circumstances.**

Too often, care is only sought or given when there's an emergency you can't ignore. In human rights and social justice work, our focus centres on the most vulnerable and marginalised. Yet, a systemic neglect persists: the well-being of the very people who dedicate themselves to protect the unprotected. Their vulnerabilities, their fundamental human needs, are frequently overlooked.

The human rights and social justice defenders I work with are some of the most passionate, empathetic and courageous people I know. But I consistently witness a culture that overworks, undervalues and demands endless self-sacrifice from them. A culture that thrives on exploiting their dedication, passion and empathy. A culture that glorifies personal sacrifices in the name of a good or noble cause. Too often, our vital work relies on the foundation of volunteer work and invisible unpaid labour, a challenge exacerbated by the constant struggle for funding in human rights work.

**Our very strengths – our passion,
empathy and courage – often
lead us into physically, mentally
or emotionally dangerous
circumstances.**

Our very strengths – our passion, empathy and courage – often lead us into physically, mentally or emotionally dangerous circumstances. Our safety is often jeopardised when we speak up, especially for women human rights defenders. Our mental capacity and stress levels are pushed to their limits by the continuous human rights violations, the constant bearing witness to trauma, and the tireless fight against powerful systems.

Our empathy ironically works against us, becoming a source of guilt. Setting boundaries, prioritising rest, or simply saying “no” feels like a betrayal. There is always an emergency, always a more urgent need, always another sacrifice to be made. But this constant guilt, fear and stress takes a toll. It leads to overwork, burnout and profound personal cost.

Yet, it is precisely this deep connection to care that is essential for building movements for change. Feminist care work – building trust with communities and partners, fostering solidarity and maintaining nurturing relationships – is not a luxury, but the very foundation of sustainable activism.

These are all expected from us, and yet are there systems in place to provide these for us?

Last year, Cat, a friend and colleague, passed away in the early morning of a very important advocacy day. She worked with an organisation that I closely collaborated with. At her wake, her mom told us that she was working until early morning, and she just saw that Cat was having trouble breathing. She suffered from asthma and didn't make it to the hospital. That advocacy day will never be the same for us.

During the programme, people expressed what a beautiful life Cat led. People mentioned how she was always ready to help, but also that she didn't ask for help for herself. People were praising her for her values and her passion and dedication to her vital work. Someone mentioned that Cat had been sending emails late into the night, preparing for the advocacy day.

Her passing forced a stark realisation: overworking seemed to be the norm and it is often praised as passion and dedication. A few weeks before, I had checked in with friends and colleagues, including Cat, asking if they were okay and if they needed any help. They'd all said they were fine. A tinge of guilt still hits me, knowing now that they were likely exhausted, but I didn't push further, thinking this is "normal".

So many things flooded my mind, a torrent of regret. Could we have done more? Should I have checked in on her more insistently? Could I have lightened her load, taken on some of her tasks? Should we question the amount of overtime spent for advocacy days? I can only imagine the weight of regret carried by those within her own organisation.

I spent days in guilt, regret, and sometimes anger. Cat passing away was an eye-opener. It made me connect the dots: our colleagues moving on to other work, citing various reasons. Was there something fundamentally wrong with the work culture in human rights and social justice?

I began to see the patterns, things that needed to change. These are things that are seen as normal and accepted, "just the way things are", or "everyone else does it anyway".

I observed a lack of organisational policies for staff well-being. Job descriptions often demand far too much work for a single person, or for the meagre compensation offered. It was common for roles to be vaguely

defined, expecting staff to be able to do whatever work is needed by the organisation, blurring boundaries and inviting endless tasks. There was little to no job security, as staff are typically project-based, constantly pressured to secure the next grant for stability. For smaller organisations, there seemed to be few viable career pathways to look forward to. Even when bare benefits existed, could staff be too overwhelmed to actually use them?

There is also a lack of professional time and project management. There are always reasons for necessary overtime, and tight deadlines that just pop up because of events, activities and reports that simply had to be finished by a certain date, regardless of the human cost.

This relentless pressure inevitably leads to burnout and a high turnover rate. People become exhausted, leaving voids that are hard to fill. In turn, leading to the loss of invaluable institutional memory, loss of appreciation and relationships built with those who helped unofficially, and the gradual fading of the spirit and how the work was done throughout the years.

We are not inexhaustible resources. We are humans who cannot live off passion and fulfilment alone; we deserve to thrive.

In recent years, “self-care” has emerged as a popular solution. But this relies on the individual’s responsibility to cope with systemic pressures. And we know this isn’t enough. We need to do more than cope; we need to fundamentally change the culture that perpetuates this silent crisis.

In recent years, “self-care” has emerged as a popular solution. But this relies on the individual’s responsibility to cope with systemic pressures.

I dream of a feminist intersectional future for human rights and social justice work.

A future where feminist and intersectional care and support are not isolated practices within only a few organisations, but are provided for the entire human rights defenders community. A future where care transcends individual coping mechanisms and becomes our collective responsibility, where the dangerous glorification of self-sacrifice is dismantled.

A future where care is proactive and preventative. It's about normalising personal time, understanding that well-being, joy and rest are not luxuries, but are essential for long-term impact and radical acts of resistance against oppressive systems. It's about empowering people to set boundaries that protect our energy and mental health, supported by robust organisational policies that make boundaries the norm, not the exception. It's a world where there is no expectation to be online 24/7 and where it's safe for us to share frustrations, grievances and struggles.

A future where our humanity is fully embraced. Where we are allowed to make and learn from our mistakes, fostering a culture of growth rather than fear. Where asking for help is seen as a strength, not a weakness. Where everyone is fairly compensated, acknowledging the value of all labour, even for work that is often invisible. Where people are encouraged to lead and speak up. Where small wins, both professional and personal, are genuinely celebrated.

A future where our humanity is fully embraced. Where we are allowed to make and learn from our mistakes, fostering a culture of growth rather than fear.

A future that celebrates our individuality and uniqueness, including our disabilities and diverse support needs. It recognises the invaluable work each person contributes and how it harmonises with the collective effort. A future where we counter scarcity by actively supporting each other through knowledge sharing on best practices, capacity building, and fostering collaboration for sustainability. Cultivating a vibrant culture of growth, with mentorship and empowering programmes, especially for the younger generation of defenders, ensuring that nurturing growth for everyone is celebrated.

A future where funders are excited to support organisations as true partners, rather than organisations fighting over limited resources. Where they're mindful of the hidden costs of an excessive focus on "impact", understanding that using people's stories can sometimes be demoralising. Where they recognise that project activities can only be done well and sustainably by happy, content and fulfilled people.

I've already begun cultivating this vision in my own community, in my own small way: hosting dinners and movie nights to foster deeper connection and a safe space, initiating more personal check-ins, and creating and sharing mental wellness workbooks.

I imagine a world where Cat and our friends would have thrived, sustained by a community where people truly take care of each other. A world where there's no worry for the present or the future because we are secure that we're being cared for. Only then can we truly continue taking care of others, powerfully and sustainably.

Come join us in making this vision a reality?



KEYS TO PROTEST

Imaginaries

Essay | Ethiopia

Kalkidan Tefaye



Kalkidan Tefaye is a feminist writer and human rights advocate whose work explores the intersections of gender, technology, resistance and social justice. With a background in literature, computer science and journalism, she brings a multidisciplinary approach to storytelling and advocacy. Her writing has appeared in international publications, focusing on gender equality and digital rights across Africa.

**You survive
one, another
emerges.
You fight
one, and the
others circle
closer. Still, like
the antelope,
we run.
And we resist!**

I am the hunted and hunter all at once,
a small-framed animal running the wild
from and to,

to and from.

Chased in the wild, cherished in the eyes,

a shadow shapeshifting in the bush,
dreaming and fleeing the rush,
always alert, doubting my shadows,
always stepping ahead;

with bigger marks.

As I sit to write this, my screen is crowded with open tabs with designs for campaigns, unfinished advocacy statements, regional and international protest preparations, unfinished reports, personal assignments, and research to support my family responsibilities.

I feel overwhelmed.

It doesn't help that I'm nine months pregnant, working from home while raising a very energetic three-year-old. One of the biggest, burning cases I'm holding right now is a campaign I co-lead on the death of a young social media figure. She died allegedly falling from her fifth-floor apartment inhabited with her partner who is a famous singer and the prime suspect in her possible murder. He was recently released on bail. Soon after, videos began surfacing on her TikTok page: images of her face bruised and swollen, clear signs of domestic abuse.

As if the tragedy in the case wasn't enough, many have attempted to politicise, even ethnicise, the case, turning gender-based violence into a battleground for other agendas. This is becoming normal here, in a country that's dealing with conflicts and ethnic rivalries. Those of us involved in the campaign know the risks it brings to our organisations, to our members, to our followers, and ourselves. But, hey, that's the life of a woman human rights defender in Ethiopia.

In the past, I have asked myself: why must I continue doing this? Why continue being a women's rights defender or calling myself a feminist in country where feminist is often defined as "God-hating woman who cannot get a man to marry her"? Why persist while slowly losing friends, support systems, and even my sanity? Why keep pouring myself into a fight where the impact often feels too small against the size of the problem? But now, I understand that this is not just work, not just a project; it is an everyday strategy for survival.

You survive one, another emerges.

You fight one, and the others circle

closer. Still, like the antelope, we

run. And we resist!

An antelope in the forest does not pause to wonder whether she should run from the tiger; she just runs. She knows the places to avoid; her senses are always alert. But, she also knows that running is not her only choice - as she has horns.

“You survive one, another emerges. You fight one, and the others circle closer. Still, like the antelope, we run. And we resist!”

The antelope is hunted by leopards, lions, civets, hyenas, wild dogs, cheetahs, pythons and humans. Just like we women defenders are hunted and harassed not by one enemy, but by a network of them: tyranny from individuals, systems, culture, politics, patriarchy, religion, and sometimes, our communities and families.

As a woman human rights defender, this isn't just a metaphor. It's a lived reality not only for me, but for the web of women around me. It isn't just my exhaustion, but a familiar rhythm for many of us here: working, resisting, surviving, all at once. This is how we have developed unwritten languages, memorised body signals, and learned to speak in heartbeats. I say this again: this is not work, not a project, but an everyday strategy to survive. The rights movement was never something I learned; it was something I lived. Beyond the daily catcalling, the double standards, and the harassment, the struggle speaks closer to home because I am the daughter of my mother: a woman who endured the sharpest edges of patriarchy. I saw her tossed between and against my father's large, strong hands. A small-framed woman, fragile in appearance, but anything but weak. Awfully kind. Numbingly patient. Forgiving always.

A flower who hugged and embraced

the thorns surrounding her.

Her silence shaped my current echoes.

Her fears designed my resistance.

Her dreams revived my slowing heartbeats.

I carry her with me in every march, in my well-crafted and charged protests, in every “no” I dare to speak. With her on my shoulder, I have an even greater reason to step onto the bridge and break the cycle. She is the very match to my candle, the very torch in my march.

Sometimes I wonder how my mother would be if she was living now in this time of screens and endless connections. She was a “caged bird”, fully blocked from the outside world, yet deeply intelligent and hungry for more. Would she have found a way to express herself digitally? To reach out, find the resources she needed, and maybe escape the cage earlier? That is the dream I hold dear to heart, knowing it’s a dream for the past. Picturing her behind a screen instead of closed doors feels like hope. I imagine her sharing her poems and creative works with the world, learning and finding real allies who understand her pain. It’s like having a slice of freedom online, which is what keeps most women I know afloat these days. This is also why digital advocacy is part of my journey. It’s always good to have different versions of ourselves and many gateways to the world. Women need as many doors as possible to keep going. As a woman and rights defender, my big dream is a world where the streets are safe and welcoming; where offices no longer hide unwritten rules meant to make me flinch from my position; where public spaces have warmer hearts and paved roads; and where digital screens allow me to extend my wings into creativity, innovation, and futuristic liberation.

I don’t just dream this for myself, but for the woman who whispers her truth in fear, for the girl who still believes silence is safety, and for the defenders building hope and resilience in the dark or behind bars. The world we live in is far from that dream. The streets still scan us like threats. Many look away, pretending not to see us. We are forced to shrink our ideas to fit someone else’s comfort and centuries-old privileges. We blink carefully behind screens, knowing they can both follow and cancel us.

Still, I dream. Because even a small light can save lives. Because dreaming is also resistance! Every digital device has eyes, every click can help me reach the power holders. Even as I sit here now typing, I am accessing the world, limited by the physical but reaching beyond it. While the personal remains political, the future of protest is definitely digital.

In a space where activism is becoming even more dangerous, sometimes I hide behind my keys. Not from a lack of commitment, but from a need to stay safe. As civic space fades, many of us are left strategising through viral posts and coded words. Following the “safe but not silent” rule, we create our own spaces and this is where I plant my digital dreams.

With tiny seeds in the broken grounds, we connect the future to our roots and breathe life towards the sky, unyielding in our shared manifestations, where the root, the trunk and the flowers bloom as one. Online.

Still, I dream (...)

Because dreaming

is also resistance!

I do know I have a choice
Beyond the escape, to charge for the fight,
Incognito but ready for flight.

When the earth splits in half,
Shapeshifting into might.

As choices are limited.

Survival is the choice.

So I hold my heart close
And type
questions,
quests
and dreams
I put on my glasses
and go digital!



Unyielding: Personal essays from women human rights defenders