

# **What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance?**



**Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights**

**Jane Barry with Jelena Đorđević**



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**Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights** is an independent nonprofit organization with a strategic mandate to protect and promote women's human rights through rapid response grantmaking, collaborative initiatives and research and publications. Grounded in a human rights framework and focused on women in civil society, Urgent Action Fund supports women human rights defenders responding to conflict and crisis around the world.

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*Fund for Nonviolence*



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For Čarna Ćosić  
(Novi Sad, 1974–2006)



# Contents

Thank You.....	VI
Prologue.....	X
Introduction.....	1
Peeling Back the Layers.....	6
Off our Backs.....	9
Unwritten.....	23
Keeping Safe.....	40
Generations.....	53
Members Only?.....	68
Consequences.....	76
Spirituality.....	97
Celebrating Resilience: Activist Strategies.....	104
Next Steps.....	114
Let's Dance (The End).....	137
Credits.....	138
Those Songs.....	139
Bibliography.....	140

# THANK YOU

## *The Bones*

---

In the very early stages of writing this manuscript, Terrice Bassler sent me an amazing book on writing with a Zen twist: *Writing down the Bones*.<sup>1</sup> I read it cover to cover twice in two days. Ever since, I keep hearing about bones. Sonia Corrêa tells us about feeling feminism in her bones in the 1960s. Emily Utz talks about being hated to your very bones for who you love.

It made me start wondering about the bones of this book. The pieces that form it, hold it together, bring it substance and strength. These are its bones:

The stories of more than 100 activists from 45 countries.

Nine years of work by the Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF)—drawn from a review of 2,256 grant requests.<sup>2</sup>

Honest, sometimes electric, conversations with the activists who are the heart and soul of UAF—Ariella Futral, Edwina Morgan, Emily Davis, Emily Utz, Jesse Wrenn, Keely Tongate, Julie Shaw, Kirsten Westby, Stefani Crabtree, Tonya Hennessey, and Trena Moya—as well as with the activists who give it wings—Anissa Hélie, Ariane Brunet, Kaari Murungi, Chela Blitt, Eleanor Douglas, Hope Chigudu, Rachel Wareham, Rita Thapa, Sunila Abeysekera, and Vahida Nainar.

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Those activists who took such care in reviewing and commenting on drafts of this book, in particular: Nancy Billica, Terrice Bassler, Ginger Norwood, Mary Jane Real, Julie Shaw, and Susan Wells. Anissa Hélie, who worked with us from the earliest conceptual stages, interviewed activists and contributed so much to the text. Our translators, Charlotte Maitrot (French), Marijana Stojčić (Serbian) and Nehama Jayewardene (Sinhala). Our diligent and dedicated designer, Susan Davis Churches. Our editor, Rick Jones, who patiently and skillfully rode that rollercoaster...

Dozens of books, articles and reports—although it was rare to find really useful material on activists’ mental health and well-being.<sup>3</sup>

We are grateful for those notable, and very precious, exceptions:

As background for the book, five gifted activists—Jo Doezeema, Vesna Draženović, Natasha Jiménez, Kirsten Westby, and Emily Utz—described, in their own voices, the sustainability concerns of sex worker, disabled, transgender, younger, and queer activists. Each essay deserves a book of its own.

Marina Bernal published a stunningly honest and practical manual on Self Care and Self Defense for Women Activists.<sup>4</sup>

Susan Wells wrote a beautifully observed account of activists’ experience of retreat and transformation in *Changing Course: Windcall and the Art of Renewal*.<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Rothschild, Scott Long, and Susana Fried dared to bring us the amazing *Written Out – How Sexuality is Used to Attack Women’s Organizing*.<sup>6</sup>

Lepa Mladenović has spent several years talking about feminist activism and well-being—putting a name to ‘activist guilt’.<sup>7</sup> Activists such as Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi and Pramada Menon have also begun to stand up, speak out, and write about sustainability among human rights movements.

Finally, Jelena Đorđević and I researched this book together. As for the writing, I put words to paper, and Jelena imbued them with her spirit, insight, charm, and humour. We are grateful to each other.

## *The Activists*

---

This book is a collective effort, and it is a compilation of many different activist voices. Every activist we spoke with infused this book with energy, power, and honesty. Sometimes we used their exact words to tell the story. Often, we simply wove the essence of their thoughts directly into the text. Always, we tried to be true to what we heard and felt.

Many observations and conclusions in the book are our own. And they are meant to spark debate.

We thank:

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# PROLOGUE

The research was finished.

I now faced the daunting task of writing up the thoughts of more than 100 human rights activists from around the world. Their fears. Their hopes. Their exhaustion. Their exaltation.

We had talked about grief and pleasure. Pain and loss and wicked black humour. About binary gender, exclusion, and invisibility. Spirituality. Funding crunches. Backbiting and burnout.

It was my job now to weave together all of these thoughts, experiences, and transitions into a coherent, flowing whole. To offer up an analysis that carefully, respectfully, and diplomatically melded deeply personal reflections and often grim professional realities. To construct a balanced, objective report on sustaining the well-being of women human rights activists.<sup>8</sup>

To write something that didn't make the reader want to collapse with despair. Or boredom.

And I was stuck.

Nothing I wrote rang true. It was either too distanced and cold, or too lyrical and idealistic. It was the hardest thing I've ever tried to write, bar none.

For the longest time, I couldn't understand why, with all the pieces in place, this was so difficult. It made no sense. Day after day, I went at it, but the words just wouldn't fall into place. They were stilted and awkward.

Until finally I got it. This was personal.

I couldn't spend years talking with other activists about their lives—about sustaining themselves—and write about their stories at a distance.

I couldn't simply ask questions about the culture of activism—about self-worth, desire, selfishness, and selflessness. About what drives us to give so much, sometimes tearing each other apart in the process. Or leave our lovers or families alone while we pursue our visions of justice.

Not without entering this very messy, complicated fray myself. Not without looking into the mirror and facing my own fears, prejudices, and guilt.

I had to let the process of exploring sustainability transform my own activism—forcing me to deal with the issues that pushed my own boundaries, rather than allowing them to be submerged and hidden somewhere in the text, or worse, ignored completely.

Issues like sexuality and pleasure (what did pleasure have to do with women's rights anyway?); spirituality; guilt and self-esteem; bad hair and child care; illness, blame and death; fear.

This meant challenging almost every aspect of my own beliefs about activism. And challenging others along the way.

In the end, it was a difficult and painful journey. Yet it was also surprisingly sweet, funny, and exhilarating.

So when you read this book, expect the unexpected.

Because as activists, this is one of the first times we've talked about the personal—in public.

It's new.

And that may make you feel ... Excited. Angry. Relieved. Profoundly uncomfortable. Hopeful.

That's all good.

It's the things that make you feel that hold the most power.

Enjoy the dance.



# INTRODUCTION

## *Beginnings*

---

In 1997, Julie Shaw, Ariane Brunet, and Margaret Schink came together to explore a new and exciting idea with activists from across the world: rapid response grantmaking for women human rights activists in urgent situations.

Money in a crisis. To stay safe, to respond to a threat. Or to seize an opportunity to change the political context. A one-page application form that you could fill out in your native language. A yes, or a no, in 72 hours. Funds wired within the week.

There was nothing else like it available to activists facing unanticipated, time-urgent crises. Everyone they consulted about starting this sort of fund answered with a resounding: yes!

So, with money gathered from other activists and with a staff of one, Julie started the Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF) in a single room in her home, supported by a board of activist advisers from around the world.

Over the years, UAF grew. Julie moved it out of her home and into an office in Boulder, Colorado. Other activists joined up, and together, they formed a team. And soon they realised that the time had come for UAF to do more than give grants. It had to make the sphere of women's rights activism visible, real and respected throughout the world.

So Julie and I came together in 2003 to work with UAF Program Officer

Kirsten Westby and 86 other activists from Kosova, Serbia, Sierra Leone, and Sri Lanka on exploring what happens to women's rights activism in conflict. Together we wrote a book, *Rising up in Response: Women's Rights Activism in Conflict* (RUIR). In it, we described the lives of women's rights activists and their work—who they are, what they do, what challenges them, and what gives them support.

It was during the research for RUIR that we began to uncover patterns in women activists' lives, which were both disturbing and surprising. It was disturbing to see what activists managed on a daily basis: high levels of chronic stress, exposure to trauma, and enormous workloads.

What was surprising was that it seemed that despite it all, activists just seemed to keep going.

We realised then that we needed to look further at how activists managed to stay safe, well, and healthy, physically and emotionally, in the face of so many daily risks and challenges.

Because, as Jeanette Eno told us in Sierra Leone:

*We're all just trying to manage the situation. We're not really looking at the stress levels that women are handling on a day-to-day level in Sierra Leone in a very deep way.*

So we began the next phase of our work together—what we initially called the *Sustaining Activism Project*, and what finally materialised as this book, based on the stories of more than 100 activists from 45 countries.

Our conversations took various forms: formal structured interviews, informal discussions, e-mail and phone dialogues, and snatched exchanges on the sidelines of conferences, over drinks, or during all too rare evenings of dancing.

Each activist brought us one more piece of the puzzle.

With them, we discovered that sustaining activism is an emerging trend and a very welcome idea.



But before we begin to tell you what we heard, we need to talk about that pink elephant in the room.

What does ‘sustaining activism’ mean, anyway?

## ***Naming the Elephant***

---

Sustainability is a useless word.

Karen Plafker told me that it made her hair stand on end. Now that got me worried.

It is true—it means everything and nothing at the same time. It’s a buzzword that got attached to too many ideas and lost its way: sustainable development, agriculture, environment, institutions, leadership.

It’s just too vague. It makes some people feel strong, and others feel uneasy.

So what can we do with that?

I waffle between turning my back on it and embracing it. Reinventing and reclaiming it. Just like the words ‘queer’ or ‘freaks’,<sup>9</sup> sustainability could make a comeback. We could make it ours.

It shouldn’t be this important. It’s just a word. But it’s a word we’ve been using at UAF for two years. And I’ve become attached to it. In the same way that I’m attached to my cat, Basil, who I love ... but very occasionally despise (she bites).

I had to crack the problem with sustainability. I tried to think of other words we’ve been using.

Burnout makes sense, but it may be too negative. Well-being is nice, although a bit new age. Stress management could work, but it verges on the clinical.

So ... I suppose sustainability is about having it all.

Being able to do the work you love, and still feeling full and happy in every part of your life. Feeling safe. Feeling connected. Feeling recognised, respected, and valued—for who you are, as much as for what you do. At any age. Working on any issue.

Living in balance. Authentically. True to your own values.

Finding a way to put the soul back into your life and your work.

## ***Putting the Soul Back***

---

We are at the beginning of something important.

Activists may be uncomfortable talking about themselves, but they are beginning to talk. The idea that the *personal really is political* is starting to come full circle: not only do we have the right to speak openly about our ‘private’ concerns, but also we have the right (and a responsibility) to ensure that they are considered equally important to our public work.

And that means there is a powerful and growing realisation in women’s rights movements that the time has come to make well-being and sustainability *a priority*.

Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi summed this up beautifully in her eloquent appeal for change:<sup>10</sup>

*Addressing the physical, spiritual and emotional needs of women has been a major shortcoming of our work as feminists. In the very social and institutional arenas in which we must work, the compounded effects of the growing backlash against the women’s movement, media harassment, cultural and religious fundamentalisms, the pressures of running organisations, and the challenges of balancing family and professional obligations, make the task of sustaining individual women’s energies very difficult.*

*Many of us are tired, burnt out, depressed and angry, and many of us have gone through intense periods of crisis characterised by a breakdown in relationships, problems with our families, betrayals of*

*trust, bitterness and deep hurt. Increasingly, we are cynical and are just 'going through the motions'. And while many of us are aware of this, we seldom talk about it. For a movement that has thrived on the slogan 'the personal is political', we have not reflected on how much of what we do to and with one another is both 'personal' and 'political'.*

*We need to go back to the old feminist strategies of consciousness-raising and developing women's self-esteem. We need to teach ourselves how to feel pain and how to talk about what we are going through rather than denying it or seeking comfort in all the wrong places. We have to learn how to like each other, to respect each other and to love each other, and most importantly, how to take great joy in doing that.*

*We want to put the soul back into our movement.*

One way of putting the soul back is simply this.

We begin talking about our own sustainability as activists. Put the personal on the table. Challenge taboos. Ask the questions, even if we don't have the answers yet.

We start by breaking the silence.

# PEELING BACK THE LAYERS

Most activists don't like to talk about themselves.

They can talk for hours about fundamentalisms, funding crunches, ending war and violence against women. Many have spoken publicly about these challenges. They've written books and articles about them. It's at the heart of their work.

But convincing activists to discuss their own hopes, fears, and concerns was much harder.

When Jelena and I first started interviewing activists about how they sustained themselves, some reacted with confusion, some with frustration.

During one group interview in Sri Lanka, for instance, after we had discussed how they were coping with stress, one activist stopped me and said:

*Look, I don't get it—what does this have to do with our work?  
What's your point?*

For them, their stress, exhaustion, and even safety were private matters—unrelated to the real business of activism.

Because these are the issues that are unwritten.

We don't talk about them, or write about them, because they are just too private. Too soft. Or, as Anissa Hélie points out, they seem simply too 'insignificant' in the political contexts of war, battered bodies, and dictatorships.

There is no place for them in the real discourse of human rights.

And so, initially, most of our conversations about sustainability began on comfortable, familiar ground. With the first, public layer of activist concerns. Usually from an organisational, rather than an individual, point of view.

We started with deeply unsustainable funding patterns—what Jo Doezema called the ‘cheap labour’ paradox. Because most grants don’t even begin to cover the most basic, core costs, such as reasonable salaries, benefits, or security measures.

How raising money is so exhausting, because most funds available are usually short-term, project-oriented, and have far too many strings attached.

How so much of human rights activism seems invisible to the outside world.

After a while, though, we peeled back the public layers. Beyond funding, beyond organisations, beyond the political.

And the ‘I’ started to come out. Activists began to talk about the personal. For many, it was a surprise and a relief, as Sujana Rai told us in Nepal:

*It is very nice to be able to talk. Because nobody asks us about these things. We talk about others, but no one asks us how we are feeling.*

So the conversations continued. And finally turned to *our own sustainability*, something Pramada Menon reminded us is far too rare in the activist world:<sup>11</sup>

*There is also the issue of sustainability, and when I say sustainability, I am not looking at funding, but staff. I think that all of us sitting here work on issues of human rights.*

*But we never think of our own sustainability.*

*Out of 365 days a year, we travel close to 200. We have jetlag; we have forgotten what our loved ones look like. Our children grow up with another partner supporting them, and they wonder why we ever had a child in the first place.*

*For us, the question is how do we sustain our own lives, get our own energy, and bring that change elsewhere?*

*We constantly talk of other people's sustainability, but we never talk of our own.*

What else are activists worried about? This is what they told us:

We're worried about ... Grief. Safety. Shoes. Sex. Family. Transitions. Overwork. Those stories we can't get out of our heads. Making ends meet. What happens next? What happens to our children? Getting respect ... and keeping it. Guilt. Responsibility. Staying safe.

And finally, together, we came *full circle* and made the connection: that worries about feeding your family or retiring without a pension are as important as concerns about finding funding or combating state-sponsored violence. That these are all part of the same sustainability equation.

That the public and personal don't just reinforce each other. They are inextricably linked.

Let's start from the beginning.

# OFF OUR BACKS

## *Rising Up*<sup>12</sup>

---

Here's how it begins:

Somewhere in the world, let's say Sri Lanka, a woman wakes up. She lies in bed watching sunlight work its way through yellow curtains. Like every other morning for the past five years, she organises her day in her head: clean the house, make breakfast, feed the chickens. Then, just like every other morning for the past five years, she closes her eyes and remembers.

It comes slowly at first, little flashes of tiny, wrinkled hands wrapped around hers, the smell of first shoe leather. Then faster. Starchy school uniform and first crush mixed with scraped knees and flashing brown eyes.

And then the questions begin, as always. Is he cold? Is he alone? Is he alive?

What does 'missing' mean anyway? It's a cheat. It can't decide to be one or the other. It's scattered bones in a valley. Or a knock at the door and his smile, his breath on your cheek ...

Enough, she thinks. Time to get up.

And just like every other day for the past five years, she goes through the motion of her morning, keeping time until something happens. She turns on the news and listens to the same story, different day. Fighting in Jaffna. Families scattered by the tsunami still clinging to hope.

She turns off the news, gets dressed, and heads out to a creaky one-room community centre. The place she goes every morning to see her friends. Other mothers watching and waiting for their sons to come home. Bound together in limbo.

She sips sweet tea and looks around her. The same as every morning.

And suddenly, the chatter around her fades, and she is alone with a single thought. It's warm and sweet and strong. It starts to beat slowly, then faster, until something breaks open inside and she knows:

Enough. No more waiting. It's time.

She turns to her friends and sees them differently. She sees everything differently. There is an answer. We can do something. We can stand up and demand to know what happened. We can fight back the fear. The horrors brought about by this war. By our own leaders.

We can challenge those responsible. Finally demand answers. Where are the children you took from us? And if they won't tell us, we can go look ourselves. To the north. To visit other mothers. To find out the truth. We can channel our pain and outrage through solidarity.

We don't have to wait any longer. We can act.

And so it begins ...

## ***Talk about the Passion***

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Beginnings can be lonely.

They start with vision. Passion. Drive. They are fed by discrimination, war, injustice ... the urgency *to take a stand, to say ... enough.*

Usually very little else.



As Rakhee Goyal said:

*What brings us to this is our passion. We are passionate about changing the world for women. We see the urgency of it—it has to be done today. That passion enables us to give all of ourselves to it.*

So you take what you have—your time and energy and what little money you can scrape together—and you begin building something.

At first, you use your own home as an office. You work every spare hour you can to organise, often after your ‘day job’ is finished and everyone else is in bed.

Slowly, other activists join you. Usually, for little or no pay.

Together, you keep building and creating. You take what you’ve grown from just an idea, and you reach out. To make change. By standing up to discrimination in all its forms. Finding the missing. Offering refuge from violence. Rebuilding lives after an earthquake. Changing laws. Reaching into the darkest, hidden places of human rights abuse: refugee camps, prisons ... or the house next door.

And when you do find a way to bring in outside support and funding, you are so driven and passionate about getting the real work done, at first, you only ask for money *to do more*. More initiatives, more work to reach more people.

Money to pay for things like liveable wages, health insurance, childcare, office rent, security, training, respite ... that would be a luxury.

When there is so much demand, so much more to do, what right do you have to pay for your own needs? You just go on stretching, working more hours at night, doing without. You keep pulling it off—off your own back.

This kind of organising is amazing. It is enormously powerful, flexible, responsive, grounded in real issues, and deeply connected to community.

For many, it is also the beginning of a cycle that will eventually threaten their ability to work safely and sustainably.

Because you have built everything yourself, those enormous contributions of time, energy, and resources—the true price of your work—are hidden.

Since the real costs of activism aren't factored into these initial requests for support, it creates an artificial impression that an extraordinary amount of work can be accomplished with tiny amounts of money.

It makes activism a bargain.

## ***Bargains***

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Everyone loves a bargain. That sharp, sweet sense of satisfaction at finding something you really want, and getting it at a fraction of its real value.

But here's the thing.

When you keep finding bargains, they start to lose that special something. That sense of value. You start to expect it, that you will always get that price. And if anyone asks for more, you're indignant.

And that's a big problem with activism.

We set the bar too low. Activism is cheap.

Many (though not all) external funders got used to these artificially low costs very early on—no overheads, low if any salaries, no benefits, no pensions.<sup>13</sup> Certainly no security measures, as Bernedette Muthien reminded us:

*If donors were reluctant to pay for something as basic as lunch when we are working in rural areas, do you think they pay for our security?*

Menaha Kandasamy echoed Bernedette's words when she described how,

in negotiations with one donor representative, she struggled to explain the need for safe transport in conflict-affected areas of Sri Lanka:

*A donor relentlessly questioned the need for me to go to Tamil areas by car. He insisted that travelling on a moped would do. After I managed to convince him, highlighting the security risks—he then questioned how many litres of petrol were needed ...*

The stage was set years ago. Now everyone's come to expect a bargain.

And that means that when finally we ask for the basics, what we need to do our work in a safe, sane, sustainable way, we find it's just not the done thing. Including real costs just increases this uncomfortable budget line called 'overhead'.

From a funding perspective, if we pay salaries or overhead, it will all get far too expensive. How could we continue to fund so many of these projects? We would have to do less. We would get less 'bang for our buck'. Can't you just keep doing it for free, like you always did? Or, maybe we'll just have to find another group to fund that doesn't ask for these 'extras'. Maybe we'll do it ourselves. It can't be that hard ...

It comes down, once again, to what we truly value. What we recognise as important.

And it also comes down to reinforcing beliefs that shoot through every culture, that are as old as time itself.

That women's work is private, and soft. That it isn't really work at all. It's in women's nature as mothers and daughters to care for others ... to build peace in the family.

So isn't all of this activism just a nice, natural extension of that?

Because activists are busy doing the work, there is little time or energy left over to fight these strange, deep-rooted ideas.

And to make their human rights work valued and visible.

## ***Bliss***

---

Which brings us back to money.

This time, raising it. With dignity. As equal partners. Wealth shared simply because the work is important. It is respected and valued.

Imagine a world where you were invited to submit a proposal instead of having to ask. Something really simple, let's say no more than two pages. In your own language. A proposal for multi-year, core funding—including benefits, pensions, money for security. With an answer in a week. Even a month would be extraordinary.

Imagine that. Bliss.

It does happen. And this type of funding is usually offered by other activists, acting as independent donors. Or by activists working within progressive donor organisations, foundations, even some government institutions.

These are the rare and very precious exceptions. The ones that keep us going.

The rest of the time, it's an uphill battle.

## ***The Broccoli of Activism***

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Juliette, my five-year-old, hates broccoli. We have to smother it in ketchup to get it down. It's always a bit of a negotiation. She puts up with it so she can get to the real business of eating—the good stuff. Yummy sausages or spaghetti. Maybe pudding afterwards ... but only if she eats her broccoli.

Many of us feel the same way about raising money. It's the bit we just want to get over with, so that we can get down to the real work ... the good stuff.

And it drives us crazy because often, it's hard. It's uncomfortable and it's embarrassing. It's asking for recognition, to be valued.

When someone gives money for your work, they are telling you that they think it's important, that it's valuable. And let's face it, when your work is your life and your love, they are telling you whether or not *you* are valuable.

Constantly justifying something so important—and so personal—can be offensive, as Krishanti Dharmaraj explained:

*We come into this because of a passion to work with women. But when you are a leader, in a high level position, your job is to raise money.*

*And most of us get burnt out raising money. It is stressful. Okay, it is part of the job, but having to justify your work and why women need this ...*

*It is just offensive after a while.*

We keep asking though, because it is so important. Worth the pain.

Nothing ever really softens the blow of 'no'. Though we get used to it. And a 'yes'. That's amazing. An affirmation.

But mostly, it's a yes with strings. And a few hoops.

## ***Dancing for your Dinner***

---

When you start talking to any activist about sustainability, one of the very first things that comes up is money.

The donor dance.

The hoops you have to jump through to sustain your work.

First, the really hard part. You have to find funders willing to support women's human rights activism. Then, you have to find a way to get an introduction ... hopefully to someone who will be around for more than a few months.

Once you have made that connection, you discover that funding criteria and proposal formats are usually long, complicated, and bureaucratic, and rarely in your native language.

Next, you have to contend with the type of funding on offer. More often than not, it's *only for projects*. This means that it doesn't cover your core costs, such as rent, staff salaries, and benefits.<sup>14</sup>

It is also often *short-term funding*—three months, six months, sometimes a year, if you're lucky. The fortunate few may get a couple of years, maybe even three. But that's rare.

To stay afloat, you also need to find many different donors, which poses another set of challenges, as Anissa explained:

*Organisational sustainability is linked to diversifying our funding sources. And different donors have different cycles throughout the year. Which means that much of our time is taken up with fundraising and reporting.*

This traps activists into an endless fundraising cycle.

By the time you've built relationships with funders, figured out the application processes and filled in all the forms, you realise you may have to wait months for an answer. Meanwhile your current projects are running out of money.

Since there is no money to properly train your staff, develop skills, or research funding options, you end up spending disproportionate amounts of energy on fundraising yourself.

Then you run into the strings attached to the funding ...

## ***Strings***

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Activists appreciate support from most any source. But when it comes with unmanageable expectations, with visible or invisible strings, it becomes part of the problem.

Examples include donor project visits, which take enormous effort to organise, and drain precious energy and resources.

Sometimes, individuals working for funders deliberately abuse their positions. One activist was asked to host a donor in her own home, who then helped himself to drinks while challenging her repeatedly about ‘using agency funds to purchase aperitifs’ (in fact they were bought using her hard-won salary).

Finally, there is abuse of power at an institutional level—when government funders deliberately seek to limit and control human rights activism by linking their funding to their foreign policies.

For instance, the United States’ Mexico City Policy—better known as the Global Gag Rule<sup>15</sup>—denies funding to groups around the world offering family planning services, including abortion. Further, groups accepting US funds under these restrictions are prevented from using non-US funding sources to provide legal abortion or counsel, or from lobbying for the legalisation of abortion in their own countries. This has forced family planning groups across the world to close or cut back on their services, leaving women with little choice but to undergo backstreet abortions or carry unwanted pregnancies to term.

Or the Prostitution Loyalty Oath, which requires both foreign and US-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that receive US global AIDS funding and/or anti-trafficking funding to adopt specific policies that state their opposition to prostitution. These policies and restrictions are having numerous adverse consequences for effective HIV prevention, human rights protection, and public health promotion.<sup>16</sup>

## ***Proof of Purchase***

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More and more, funders are looking for proof. Proof that human rights activism has an impact, that it results in concrete change. That’s fair enough.

And that’s changing the way we work together, as Marni Rosen described:

*Philanthropic organisations have changed. They used to focus on organisational effectiveness and the health of the organisation. But that was in the past. Now they are focusing on efficiencies.*

Funders also increasingly expect human rights groups to 'progress' from grassroots beginnings to professional status, and to use business-like tools to measure and report on their work. Because those are the corporate models they know and believe to be effective.

The Association of Women in Development (AWID) recently called this the 'corporatization of the funding community'. They explain how this trend is increasing the workload of activists and creating even more distance between activists and funders:<sup>17</sup>

*The past decade has witnessed a marked transformation of funding agencies to become more efficient, specialized and outcome oriented. Corporate management models have seeped into development cooperation, charity, social justice and philanthropic organisations with both good and bad results.*

*At one level funders recognize that they have contributed to the development of systems with excessive procedures, databases, targets and multi-layered decision making processes, to the extent that the grantmaking process seems to be reduced to meeting spending targets, ticking boxes and filling out elaborate and standardized application forms ...*

*It was also mentioned that funding partnerships that had developed over years were increasingly under pressure and that interactions between donors tend to be dominated by directives about administrative matters and donor agendas, rather than open dialogue about strategy, ambitions or reflection on each others' work.*

But human rights activism just doesn't work that way. It isn't corporate. It isn't development. There is no one-size-fits-all model.



*To be truly effective, activism has to be flexible.* That means activists take on many different forms.

Sometimes activism is extremely organised and structured. Often this is the kind of higher profile human rights work familiar to the public, conducted by the likes of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, or the World Organisation Against Torture.

More often than not, though, human rights activism is unstructured and fluid, ebbing and flowing in response to new and old challenges. Like grassroots movements, or spontaneous demonstrations, or individual activists, working in isolation, in the shadows:

*More and more, women are working in shadow networks where a women's movement is not sustainable. Not in the hubbub of a city, but in places of gem trafficking, sex trafficking, organ sales. Or in the middle of nowhere ... (Ariane)*

In many countries, activists working on some forms of human rights issues must keep a low profile. If they were 'out', they would be in danger. Like activists working to combat female genital mutilation (FGM) in Mali or Sudan, or to track and report disappearances and torture in Chechnya, 'honour' killings in Iraq or Pakistan, or abuses of queer rights in many parts of the world:

*Queer activism is so marginalised in so many countries, that many groups have to stay completely under the radar. Because of this, they are often unsupported, unregistered, possibly 'unprofessional' and—in the eyes of many—not 'strategic'. These are all the things that funders usually don't like to or can't fund. (Emily)*

Sometimes, in some countries (Uzbekistan and Burma spring to mind), hostile governments force all independent activism underground, as Ariane explained:

*Today we see more and more places where NGOs are banned and women's groups are not allowed to function.*

So there is no one, formal structure for women's rights activism. And for many groups, structure is not their end goal.

To truly bring about change, we need both ends of the 'professional' spectrum ... and everything in between.

And change, in the human rights world, takes time. As Eleanor Douglas reminded us, we can't promise to complete the revolution in three years, along with a baseline survey and an end of project evaluation. It doesn't happen like that.

Nor does change happen thanks to just one activist, because, as Anissa pointed out:

*We are talking about processes of social change. Processes that take ongoing efforts from a range of human rights defenders operating in diverse spheres. How can we claim 'impact' for the work done by one's own group without risking erasing the hard work of other actors and allies?*

## ***Toot Toot***

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So what makes all the hard work worthwhile?

Success.

And it doesn't have to be big successes. Like winning the right to vote, or universal acknowledgement of women's rights as human rights (Vienna in 1993, Beijing in 1995).

For Iman Bibars, it is as simple as a smile of thanks after her organisation spearheaded a campaign to change Egypt's nationality law.

For Trena Moya, it's hearing how crucial UAF grantmaking is to activists around the world:

*What keeps me going? The e-mails and reports from grantees telling us of their successes, thanking us for their grant. They never fail*

*to give me goosebumps and make me tear up. Or reading about a grantee in the paper or in the news and knowing we funded their cause. Or hearing from donors how much they appreciate what we do.*

*A little positive feedback goes a long way.*

That's the thing: small doses of success are fine. And we don't have to have them everyday.

But we do need to feel, most days, that our work matters. That it is making a difference to someone. That it is important.

That feeling of success can be very private. Just between you and the wall, something warm and bright you tuck away in your heart to hold close and savour in your own time.

Sometimes we need public displays of success. To feel valued by our colleagues, our community, the outside world. To be *recognised*.

Recognition comes in many forms: it can be an award. A congratulations call from a colleague. An appointment as the first woman ever on Nepal's Planning Committee. A thank you. A memorial service. Consultative Status at the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). An invitation to a conference. Women from abroad bringing you chocolate. Multi-year funding. A protest letter from friends around the world to the government that has arrested you. Often, though, it is the *recognition of our peers* that means the most.

Recognition gives you the strength and the energy to keep going. Sometimes it can even save your life.

But there's a catch.

There's a very fine line between recognition and self-promotion. Advocacy and grandstanding.

Tooting your own horn is one of the unspoken cardinal sins of activism. It's

okay, and usually welcome, if someone else toots it for you. But doing it yourself is a bit ... gauche. Grandiose. Self-interested.

Most activists tend to shun publicity. They don't generally ask for much recognition. And they've come not to expect it. It's just another part of the culture.

Many see the real work—the 'pure work'—in the doing, not in the talking about it. If the work is good, recognition will follow. Without asking.

That's one of the reasons why, for every well-known activist, there are literally thousands more you will never hear about.

It's also one of the reasons why activists write, and say, so little about themselves. Even if they did have the time to reflect and put pen to paper, would they really be that comfortable writing about themselves? Sometimes, yes, they would. And that would be a blessing, because activist stories are vibrant, rich, fantastic, funny, breathtaking.

But usually, humility, or self-effacement, gets in the way.

And so the cycle continues.

There is just so little in the public domain that truly celebrates, recognises, and values human rights activism. In all its breadth, depth, and power.

And that just reinforces a stunning silence about some of the world's most significant movements for change.

# UNWRITTEN

## *Work Overload*

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Oxana Alistratova is an intense, driven activist running an anti-trafficking centre in Moldova. When we first met in Dublin, at a Front Line Human Rights Defenders meeting,<sup>18</sup> we managed to squeeze in an interview between conference sessions. After talking for hours about her work, her life and safety, I finally asked her how she managed to juggle it all. She paused, and then said:

*Well, I don't sleep. The only time I ever really sleep is when I come to a conference like this.*

Oxana's answer seemed to sum up the experience of almost every activist we interviewed. Across the world, across all sectors of activism, activists are looking for more time. They are all constantly trying to balance too much work with too few resources and never enough rest.

When I began writing, I thought that this section on the causes of overwork would be brief. After all, it seemed like a simple, straightforward problem. Activists are underfunded, meaning they never have enough resources (time, money, staff, and equipment) to tackle human rights abuses in their countries. Similarly, they never have enough resources to allow themselves to take a break. End of story.

Like everything else we found out about sustaining activists, however, it is never that simple.

And it is usually about making choices.

## ***It's Never Enough***

Overwork is the first of many sustainability paradoxes. While activists are deeply concerned and stressed about the amount of work they have to do, they almost *universally accept this level of work as an inevitable fact of activism*.

One activist typically juggles the jobs of several people. On the one hand, she manages tasks that form the foundation of activism, such as raising funds, writing reports, managing staff, and organising logistics. On the other hand, she offers support, provides services, and engages in advocacy by counselling violence survivors, finding missing persons, taking cases to court, and coordinating peace demonstrations.

Activists *expect* to work too much—that is part of the bargain. So much so that if some of the work were finished, or taken on by a colleague, rather than rest or enjoy the opportunity to focus on remaining tasks, most activists would take on more work.

I soon realised that I was asking myself the wrong question. We didn't need to know what caused overwork. Rather, we needed to ask 'why do activists *consistently choose to take on so much work?*'

The answers bring us to the core of human rights activism. Because human rights activism is about tackling life's biggest, and most complicated, challenges—injustice, violence, discrimination, and suffering—it is messy, complicated, and confusing. And for any activist who dwells on it, the work seems never-ending.

In this world of constant and overwhelming need, activists are always battling a sense that they can never work hard enough. As Anissa pointed out:

*The work seems endless. It's like David and Goliath—just think what we are up against: taking on warlords, mercenaries and weapons manufacturing nations; denouncing dictators and state-sponsored*

*terrorism; exposing transnational corporations and the factory down the hill which polluted your water supply; fighting for legal equality and against the neighbour who just killed his daughter. The list goes on.*

Rather than go against the tide, though, activists feel an enormous *sense of individual responsibility* to right so many wrongs. They feel that they have to keep going, and even take on more work—if they don’t do it, who will?

Marieme Hélie-Lucas sees this sense of responsibility as a ‘double bind’:

*We just go on doing the work—we go so far in exploiting ourselves, because we feel that if you don’t do the work ... then things don’t happen ... You are in a double bind ... If you don’t do the work, it won’t be done, because others have so much on their shoulders already, they can’t take more on ...*

Then there is the other side of activism and overwork. The one we talk about only in snatched, guilty conversations. Usually on the sidelines of a meeting, at the end of an e-mail, or in that very rare ‘shedding the weight’ space (as Sierra Leonean activists call it) when activists manage to be with each other to talk, laugh, and cry.

This is the *private work of living*.

For women human rights activists, this means caring for and supporting loved ones, including children, elderly parents, friends, and partners. Increasingly, it means supporting extended families. Families that are growing larger as activists take in other children orphaned by HIV/AIDS, conflicts, and natural disasters.

It involves paying—or delaying—bills; working an extra job to make ends meet; making meals and beds; clearing up the mess of the day and preparing for the next; and foregoing sleep to finish that one last thing ...

## ***The Right to Rest***

Of all the questions we asked during our research, the one about rest seemed the most difficult and loaded.

Mostly it was loaded with guilt. Because no matter how long it had been since an activist had taken a proper break—several told us it had been *20 years*—the idea of needing to rest, whether on a holiday, a retreat, or a sabbatical, seemed shameful.

Although it was rarely said aloud, there was an underlying sense that many activists felt that they didn't *deserve* to stop and rest—they hadn't done enough to earn it.

Quite simply, rest seems selfish.

It's the context. How could anyone take a break, take time for themselves, when all around them others are suffering? When there is so much work to be done? When everyone around you *expects* you to work without stopping, as Marieme pointed out:

*I worked round the clock for 20 years. Everyone was telling me to rest ... But then, their next words are asking for the next thing you are working on.*

This is not to say that activists never rest, only that it is usually a rare and complicated process. And when activists do take a break, it is often far from relaxing.

First, such time is rarely for the activist herself. Instead, she will often use this time to care for family members, such as elderly parents, partners, or children.

Second, many activists work while they are on a rare vacation. Even if they don't work in a physical sense, they usually expend an enormous amount of time and energy worrying about work, rather than resting.

Finally, there are far too few opportunities for activists seeking rest and renewal, such as retreats and sabbaticals.



Ironically, even when activists know about these rare opportunities, they find it difficult to take advantage of them, for the very same reasons they find it difficult to take any form of rest.

Because they worry that only they can do the work, that it would be undone in their absence. They worry what their colleagues would think. It feels selfish.

Susan and Albert Wells gave a perfect example of this phenomenon. When they first opened their home—the breathtaking Windcall Ranch in Montana—as an unstructured, all-expense-paid retreat for activists 18 years ago, they sent out 3,000 invitational brochures to activists throughout the United States. They told me that they were nervous that they would be inundated with applications. So they prepared for a gruelling selection process.

But only about 30 activists applied in that first year.

Over time, they found that on average, those who did apply typically waited *three years* between receiving an application form for a retreat session and submitting it. Why?

For some, a retreat like this may simply not have appealed.

For others, though, as Susan observed, the answer lies within the culture of activism:

*Then we came across another deterrent [to coming to Windcall], one that haunts many in the field of social change and compromises both their health and effectiveness. A damaging non-profit work ethic still flourishes, one that encourages people to override their own needs in deference to the importance of their task. It holds that truly committed individuals should be willing to tackle the Goliath of social injustice regardless of the personal cost.*

*Even if potential residents feel that their organisation can survive their absences, each day brings fresh reminders of the backlog of*

*work that would pile up and be waiting when they return. They also know that taking time off will add to the burden of co-workers. It is easy for many to conclude that these consequences outweigh personal needs and that stopping to rest is an indulgence they and their organisations can little afford.<sup>19</sup>*

Activists are making choices every day about well-being. Their own ... and everyone else's. With so much to be done, and so many wrongs in the world to right, they almost always choose to serve others first.

Because they don't feel that they have a right to rest.

***For many activists, rest is just not an option***

Since I started working, I never took a break. There is no break in Jamaica—there is nowhere to take a break ... I get called from six in the morning, 24 hours a day.

There are times when they call me at three in the morning to find a homosexual male or female full of blood, or to go to their home that has been vandalised.

Or they need a ride to go home because they are scared or they need somebody to follow them to their doors.

Sometimes my partner says to me it is getting to her, but I have to do it.

— Yvonne Artis, Jamaica

## ***Private Grief***

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I started thinking about grief and activism on a trip to Kosova in 2003. Igo Rogova, the head of the Kosova Women's Network, had agreed to an interview for RUIR months in advance. Barely a week before I arrived, her mother died.

Despite it all, Igo said she still wanted to get together.

So we met for dinner at her favourite Thai restaurant in Pristina and talked for hours about her mother. Her love, courage, and strength, bringing up nine children in the war-torn province. And her last days, as she said goodbye

and slowly left her body. When, after words had left her, she simply pointed to her vagina to show her children she was so proud of having brought them into the world.

Afterwards, I felt conflicted. On the one hand, I had met with one of the most experienced, outspoken activists in the Balkans. Igo had let me into her world, and shared stories about her family and her life.

On the other hand, I felt guilty. I thought we hadn't talked about work, about real activism. I thought that I would leave Kosova without that all important, formal interview for the book.

It took me years to look back and realise we had been talking about activism the whole time, a side of activism that we rarely consider important: the private side.

There is so little space or time in busy activist lives for 'private' grief. Losses, and/or near misses, are briefly acknowledged, if at all, and the work goes on. We lose parents, children, siblings, lovers, and friends. They are taken from us by miscarriage, suicide, murder, cancer, and accidents.

These private losses are never part of the public side of work. They are something to get over, to set aside.

In the face of larger loss and suffering that is part and parcel of the daily work, how can an activist allow time for her own grief? It pales in comparison (always in comparison) to the pain of others.

Loss and death are an accepted part of the fabric of public activism. We witness it, read about it, and write about it.

Some activists are immersed in it, as Hope Chigudu told us about colleagues working with HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe:

*I find a woman, a home-based care worker, cleaning a huge wound, with maggots coming out. The stench of a rotting wound is strong. The mattress where many days of 'accidents' have happened is stinking. She has no gloves, no medicine, no food ... helplessness is written on her face as well as that of her 'client'. She has*

*cracked, sore hands but still uses them anyway to help another human being.*

*There is a baby who is sick and keeps whimpering, the mother is sick too. He is wearing a nappy. One of the women tries to remove the nappy; it comes off with bits of the baby's flesh. There is another baby, a boy in his own corner, he looks as if he is three years old, and he is playing with a broken glass.*

Despite it all, though, activists seem to find ways to cope with death as a fact of work. They use all of the tricks of the trade to distance themselves from it, to suppress it, until it is absorbed into their bodies, all but forgotten.

Except for the stories that stick ...

## ***The Stories that Stick***

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Barbara Bangura is a Sierra Leonean activist who works with women who rebel soldiers captured and enslaved during the decade-long civil war. When we met in her crowded offices in Freetown, I was struck by her composure. I wondered what it took to maintain serenity when surrounded by so much pain and sadness. When I asked her about it, she said that usually, she manages.

But there are always stories that 'stick to you', ones you can't shake off. Barbara told me about a young woman who was gang-raped and tortured by Revolutionary United Front (RUF) soldiers. It was the final words spat at this woman left pinned down in the dirt that made this the story Barbara couldn't push aside.

Every activist has at least one such story, if not a raft of them. Those that are simply too much to bear, that cannot be put to one side with the others. Those that seep, unexpectedly, into every other aspect of an activist's life, haunting her dreams. And her relationships with friends, lovers, and family.

These are the stories that can drive activists to the brink of despair, and to perceive their work as insignificant in the face of such horror, as Lama

Hourani described in Palestine:<sup>20</sup>

*I don't know why but since the last invasion of Beit Hanoun I have been deeply depressed or, one might say, even lost. I don't know why it took so long to make me feel like this, why my despair was postponed. It should have happened long ago.*

*I have not wanted to write but I have been witnessing so many events that I think I should write about.*

*The invasion of Beit Hanoun was as horrible and savage as Israeli invasions usually are, but this time it was bigger, longer and with many more victims, including women and children.*

*Going to Beit Hanoun was so difficult, meeting the families who lost their beloved ones while holding them in their arms. A mother described for me how the bomb separated her child from her hand when she was trying to escape. Her son was pushed to the wall and when she reached him his belly was open and she tried to put everything back in its place. He died and then she had to go to others, his cousins, uncles, grandmother, everyone who was lying, injured or dead, in the small alley. His 11-year-old cousin died while he was looking for his glasses. He fell while he was running, lost his glasses and a bomb killed him.*

*His other cousin was awakened in the early morning by the sound of the bombs hitting the house. While he was trying to call for help he was hit by a bomb, decapitating the hand that was holding the mobile.*

*A question beats in my head: 'for how long?'*

Somehow, the stories that stick are the sum of all the stories heard and filed away over the years.

They are important because in some way, just for a time, they stop our world. They halt the rush, the internal, obsessive chatter about the next thing to be done. They force activists to ask the big, unanswerable questions:

Why is this happening? Why can't it be stopped? Why can't *I* stop it? What's the point of my work?

As terrifying as it is to sit in silence with these stories—to face these questions—these are the times when activists allow themselves to feel their own humanity, to release, and share, some of their sorrow.

Maybe this helps explain how activists manage to get up again in the morning and keep going. And take on the responsibility to seek justice, and change the stories.

## ***Without Blame***

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Guilt and responsibility. At last, something activists will talk about ... after a while.

Many activists agree that guilt is deep in the heart of the sustainability problem. That it is ingrained in the culture of activism. And that there is a fine line between taking responsibility and feeling guilt.

Because human rights activism is about taking responsibility, individually and collectively.

But when the sense of responsibility becomes too much, it transforms into guilt. And this feeds on so many other sources. Like internalised cultural and religious beliefs. Survivor guilt. Self-blame and shame left over from activists' own experiences of violence.

There are so many different theories about where the guilt comes from. For Ouyporn Khuankaew, it is rooted in Asian expectations of women from day one:

*In Asia, women are brought up only to give. To our families. To our communities. The root cause of burnout for women is that we are trying to give all our love to others. Our love comes when we are nice ... women feel guilty when they stop working ... So women burn out because of guilt. Hopelessness. Anger.*

Sujan agreed:

*We take our threads, our characters, from what our culture teaches us. We are always taught that, as women, you should be there for your family all the time. This makes things worse. Every time I come early in the morning for work, I feel very bad seeing my mother-in-law cooking food for the family. I always feel I was supposed to be doing that.*

*Because we are taught that culturally, and it is difficult to come out of that cultural thing. Actually it is guilt. On my side it is guilt, it is a personal problem that might sometimes grow so badly that sometimes I am just inefficient. Maybe I am too involved in this guilt that I become ineffective. I won't say all the time, I have done my work well, most of the time, but at some point I have gone too insane juggling two or three things at a time.*

For Lepa Mladenović, it is a sense that we can never give enough:

*Women activists especially have to take care about the activist guilt. It comes from feeling that justice has not been achieved; that what we have contributed to the human rights of 'the other' is not enough—which then makes us feel guilty.<sup>21</sup>*

Tina Thiart thinks that among South Africans, guilt is also rooted in religion:

*When you see beauty and feel spirituality, you feel a great thankfulness ... but then, you think of everyone else.*

*Although you have relief and joy, it brings more responsibility. Eventually you have guilt. Because of religion, it is not easy to enjoy things. In South Africa, most of that guilt is brought on you because of your religious upbringing. Women recognise that feeling.*

*And for activists, the guilt drives them to do more, to work harder.*

And then there is another aspect of guilt—what happens when we turn it outwards, and start judging each other?

## ***Those Shoes***

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Sonia Corrêa's interview was beautiful. It flowed perfectly. It was full of great quotes and inspiration.

But there was one point where I got stuck.

She was telling us about well-being and money, taking care of her mother and her daughter, while denying herself. Then she talked about shoes:

*In addition to my mother, I had my daughter as my priority. She was living with me and whatever was left would go first to her. This means I was restricting my own costs to the minimum levels. I managed to keep going to the gym because I realised that without it, I wouldn't survive, so that cost was sacred. But all other costs were cut off.*

*Maybe two months after my mother died, I was walking on the streets and in a shop by my house I saw a nice pair of shoes. I thought: how nice!*

*But I simply moved on, because I had trained myself to do that. This was the way I had been coping with my small consumption desires. I walked until the corner. Then I stopped, and I said to myself: maybe now I can just buy them. Maybe the time is over for restraining myself.*

I had been with her right until she got to those shoes.

For some reason, I immediately imagined they were red leather boots with silver sequins. Something impractical and a bit decadent.

The gym, I could see. But shoes? That seemed just a bit ... self-indulgent. And that, of course, is part of the problem. We judge ourselves—and each other—on the very things that we need to sustain ourselves.

And everybody has their thing.



Rauda Morcos works out:

*I felt very embarrassed having a gym thing.*

*I didn't feel embarrassed about going to therapy, because you know what? I was raped, I was abused—I have very public social legitimacy.*

*Everybody gives you that legitimacy when it is about 'suffering or pain'. Well, you are fucked up anyway — of course you have to have therapy.*

*But to go to the gym because you need to have your own space—that is not legitimate. Especially in the activist movement, peace movement and women's rights movement ... they look at you like: 'You have time for that, aren't you working 24 hours a day?'*

Maria Nassali loves to dress up:

*One of the most common criticisms I get is that 'I am always over dressed'. Sometimes it makes me feel less deserving of being called an activist ... Underlying such comments is [a feeling] that I do not fit the profile of an activist, because I look like I over-indulge in myself and am more preoccupied with worldly things than the suffering and pain in the world.*

*But I always ensure that I pamper myself in order to be able to push on in the tedious and sad lifestyle of an activist, where one hardly hears a 'nice and happy story'.*

Then Maria talked about shoes, too. She spoke about why, for some activists, self-care seems selfish, and frankly suspicious:

*I believe that the problem here is conceptual. To quote Makua, the human rights edifice is premised on the imagery of victim and saviour.*

*So in this sense, the activist is expected not only to empathise with the victim, but also to shun self-care, in order to look 'very caring'.*

*Or to physically step in the 'victim's' shoes in order to fit the profile of the 'saviour image': fighters for the poor, vulnerable and helpless.*

Tina Thiart agreed with Maria's point about shunning self-care, and summed it up in two words, bad hair:

*You have cheap haircuts. Everyone looks like they have had a bad hair day.*

*Activists just don't spend time on themselves. They don't go home and relax, and they don't look after themselves. What free time, what family time, they have, they just pour it into the work. The work swallows their whole being.*

In those rare moments when activists do turn their attention to self-care, they run into the next hurdle: money.

## ***Balancing Acts***

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Human rights activism is a vocation or a calling, not a profession or a career in any kind of traditional sense.

Work is usually unpaid or poorly paid. Like overwork, this is part of the bargain; part of the self-sacrifice that seems integral to human rights activism in its 'purest' form.

Money is not something to talk about openly.

But money—and with it, the ability simply to survive as an activist—is, without doubt, one of the most significant and complicated 'private' concerns that came up in all of our discussions.

Zawadi Nyong'o summed up most activists' unspoken fears about money:

*I worry that I will never be able to afford the kind of lifestyle I want. That I won't be able to sustain myself or my family financially. Because social justice activism doesn't pay.*

Eventually, many activists face a stark choice: they must find a way to juggle their activism and pay the bills, or they must drop out of activism, temporarily or permanently.

Often, a life-changing event precipitates this dilemma, such as the birth of a child or an illness in the family.

Sonia told us how she managed to stay active while supporting her mother through a debilitating illness:

*My mother had Alzheimer's. She was in bed for five years, tube fed. This was very draining emotionally and financially ... My father died when she was getting worse. There was some money left, but I could not simply let that money drain entirely.*

*So for the last three years of my mother's life, I was working like a slave doing all sorts of consultancy because my salary was not enough. It was not a bad monthly salary, but it was not enough to cope with the crisis ... It was gone within a week.*

*Because of that, I was accepting each and any form of consultancy to add to the monthly amount. I was working Saturday and Sunday, night and day, for two years.*

She went on to point out that balancing activism and money often leaves activists in an untenable position:

*You have to make the difficult choice of being well financially and losing your political voice and your autonomy.*

Although it was difficult and exhausting, Sonia managed to continue her activism. For others, that may be impossible. Some step out of grassroots work entirely to join organisations that offer liveable salaries and benefits.

No activist takes such a decision lightly, and it is frequently a painful and guilt-ridden transition.

It is also a decision that other activists can sometimes react to with anger,

derision, and scorn. Leaving activism in pursuit of an adequate livelihood seems selfish—as though one is ‘selling out’ the cause—sometimes even when an activist continues to work in the human rights sector. Other activists may strip her of her activist identity, saying that she took the job just for the money, that the work isn’t dangerous enough, that the hours aren’t long enough, that she just wasn’t sacrificing enough to rate as a ‘real’ activist.

Alternatively, she may strip herself of her identity, not even considering herself an activist anymore.

Whatever choices an activist makes about money throughout different phases of activism, it is almost always a balancing act.

## ***Connections***

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So what happens when you have the opposite problem?

When, as an activist, you do have money? Your own, or decision-making power over someone else’s? And you use that money as part of your activism. How does that change the way you perceive yourself? How others see you?

Because the process of giving and receiving money in the activist world is loaded with the weight of so many taboos (class, power), it triggers so many uncomfortable feelings—anger, guilt, shame, irritation.

And of course, it’s all relative. Money is a resource, just like any other. Just like our time, our energy, our passion.

It’s how we choose to use it that imbues it with positive—or negative—energy. And how we, as activists, perceive those choices.

## ***Comparisons***

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After the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1996, more mass graves were being discovered. One was found near Mrkonjić Grad, south of Banja Luka, where I was living at the time. Since I’d come to Bosnia from

Rwanda, I had an idea of what to expect. When I asked how many bodies were recovered, I was ready. Looking grim, someone said they'd found a dozen or so.

I was shocked.

How could they call that a mass grave? What was mass about that?

In my mind, you didn't get to call it a mass grave unless it holds hundreds of bodies. Otherwise, it was just a grave.

It took me a long time to realise that somewhere along the line I had lost a bit of my humanity. Trying to get my head around so much death made me lose my ability to value each precious life. Each *equally important as the other*.

That's what comparisons do. They dehumanise us. They take away value. They set up a false hierarchy of importance. When we make comparisons, we deny the pain of some in order to validate the pain of others. We create inherently unequal relationships.

But as Maureen O'Leary pointed out (echoing Maria's thoughts about stepping into the 'victim's shoes'), equality has to form the basis of our work with others:

*One of us isn't the saviour, the other the victim ... it has to be a reciprocal, mutual journey. It has to be equal.*

And that means that as activists, our lives, our well-being, our happiness are just as valuable as those we work for. And those we work with.

If we believe otherwise, we remain distant ... separate ... trapped in a chain of comparisons, where some are forever up on a pedestal and others below, measured on a scale of relative suffering.

Because if we never truly value ourselves, how can we honestly value everyone else?

And how can we take care of our own safety?

# KEEPING SAFE

How can we talk about safety?

Honestly? Objectively?

When for so many activists, safe was ripped out of their lives. Once. Or on a daily basis.

As witnesses. As survivors.

There's only one way to do it. Once again, we have to get personal.

We have to talk about our fears. What stops us in our tracks? What releases us? What exhausts us? What does safety have to do with self-esteem?

And where are those rare, sacred places of safety?

## ***Tiger Burning Bright***

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Jelena pointed out one of the many reasons we don't talk about fear—because we aren't supposed to feel it in the first place:

*There's a stigma around talking about fear, because activists are supposed to be fearless. We need to be fearless. Because if we feel fear, we are weak. And when we're weak, we're not useful.*

So let's start by breaking an activist taboo. Let's talk about fear.

Everyone deals with fear differently. Oxana is hyper vigilant. She has to be:

*In summer 2004, I was illegitimately detained and questioned by staff of the State Security Ministry. They held me with my daughter (she was 10 years old).*

*For more than four hours, the local security service were making psychological pressure by shouting at me, compelling me to sign false certificates about the financial organisations and the other leaders of the Transdniestrian public organisations. They forced me into a room to take an examination.*

*Then, for the next two months, they repeatedly called my house at night (without talking). They threw acid solution, paint, petards into the courtyard of my house, where my family lives. I got a piece of paper from unknown people where they had written ‘bitch, treat syphilis’.*

*So, we need to be ready at any point. You always need to be on. You need to be able to get dressed very quickly.*

*We are always in a state of alert.*

Across the world in Brazil, Sonia echoed Oxana’s words:

*We have scarce resources and just too many emergencies. So you are operating in a perennial state of alert.*

In the face of a shock, a crisis, a conflict, our adrenalin kicks in and we go into that state of alert—the fight or flight response. That primal reaction when the Sabertooth tiger is chasing you back to your cave. You just run. As fast as you can. Without a lot of thought. And you survive.

That’s a good thing when you’re dodging tigers.

It keeps you safe.

But you can only keep running for so long.

## ***Under Pressure***

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Crises tend to last a long time. And I mean all kinds of crises. Whether you are fighting against a repressive regime in Burma. Challenging the prison system in the United States. Speaking out about human rights abuses in Iraq. Supporting people living with HIV in Zimbabwe.

After a while, living under constant pressure, the stress and anxiety of staying alert gets to be too much. When you're this tired, you have no time to rest or reflect. To plan or to strategise. To analyse threats.

You feel that you have to make a choice. You can stop the work you love. And let them win.

Or you can find a way to manage the stress and keep going. But that means shifting into a different way of being.

For some activists, that means becoming numb. And going into denial.

Accepting, and tolerating, the tigers hanging around you as part of the scenery. As part of the bargain.

More and more, you think, *'What's the point of worrying about security? I just don't have the time'*. Or, *'there's nothing I can do about it'*.

Or, this is nothing compared to ... the middle of the war. When it was *really* dangerous. And we survived that, didn't we?

Compared to other activists who live somewhere really terrible, like Chechnya. Or Zimbabwe. Iraq. Palestine. Darfur. Colombia. Afghanistan. The list goes on.

Compared to the danger that others face every day ... or in the past. For Staša Zajović, it is in comparison to the women who survived Srebrenica:

*What right do I have to worry about my own safety?*

*I make the hierarchy of risks, and I think that my security is not that important because I know what had happened to others during the*



*war. What kinds of crimes were committed against them. I don't know if this is a patriarchal attitude, or if I am morally sensitive, but I feel shame for what had happened to others—these war crimes.*

*And all this influences me and my thoughts around security.*

## ***Real Activists Die for the Cause***

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So we continue the work, trying to find the space between staying alert, staying alive, and descending into paranoia:

*I think it is important to distinguish between being careful about security and being paranoid. I refused the culture of paranoia (Staša).*

Sometimes we take risks very deliberately. Because we make the calculation that our work is more important than our lives.

Or to prove that we are 'real activists', as Rauda explains:

*For most activists, if you don't go to the demonstrations because you have to do something else, that is madness ... and if you don't get arrested in one of the demonstrations—then you are not a real activist ...*

It needs to be said aloud and clearly.

The logical, final extension of self-sacrifice is the 'ultimate' sacrifice. Dying for the cause. Martyrdom. If one of us falls, another will replace us.

And that is part of the unspoken, ingrained activist culture.

## ***Nobody Said it Was Easy***

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Human rights activism is tough. That goes without saying.

Because, at its most basic, human rights violations, abuses, omissions ... are all about power.

And people with power make choices every day.

Sometimes those choices mean taking power away from others. By confiscating a family's land. By taking a life, or scarring it forever. Fencing off an entire country. Bombing thousands. Denying some people, supporting others.

Human rights activists have power, too. We choose to use it to stand up and right wrongs. In whatever way we can.

That means diving right into the middle of a power struggle as old as humanity.

No one expects it to be easy.

But I'm not sure anyone expected it would just keep on getting tougher.

And it is. Because the world is changing. Increasingly, governments, communities, families are making choices out of fear. They are looking for simple answers. And they are finding them in extremes of all kinds. Extreme religion. Nationalism. Homophobia. Violence. Militarism.

For activists, that means much more work. And fewer safe spaces.

## ***Violence against Activists***

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So what are activists up against?

Some governments take the easy way out. They don't allow any organised human rights activity within their borders. Full stop.<sup>22</sup>

Other governments, from Zimbabwe to Uzbekistan, simply make activism almost, but not quite, impossible.

How?

They use violence.

Directly. Or indirectly, by turning a blind eye when activists are attacked by armed groups or organised criminal gangs. Members of their own communities. Their own families.

Across the world, activists disappear or are harassed, arrested, tortured, and murdered. Regularly. With impunity. Simply because they stand in the way of people in power.

Outright violence, though, is only one of the many ways in which governments are trying to suppress and control activism.

## ***Sowing the Seeds***

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How do you crush an activist, besides using outright force?

There are so many different possibilities.

Here's another.

Plant a seed of doubt.

Defamation works. Get the local media to run a few articles suggesting that an activist is part of an anti-government, foreign agenda. Or unpatriotic. Or against family values. Or you could change your laws to make it increasingly difficult to run independent organisations. Threaten to revoke non-profit status unless organisations restructure, and include government-appointed management. Freeze all assets. Confiscate files. Infiltrate staff.

Accusations of financial mismanagement are also particularly effective. Because for an individual activist or an organisation, even after your name is cleared, rumours will haunt you for years to come.

Rakhee told us about several other threats to activism rooted in rising fundamentalisms:

*We have had backlash from fundamentalists. In Jordan, the leading website on women's rights has been hacked successfully three times.*

*A partner in Morocco had their office burnt down, their records, institutional memory destroyed. Earlier, our Uzbekistan partner was shut down. These kinds of deliberate, unlegislated closures are part of the backlash we are facing ...*

All of these approaches are highly effective. And once in motion, it is very difficult to reverse the tide and undo the damage.

## ***Context Matters***

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Many activists face threats.

But context does matter.

When you leave work not sure if your home will be there when you get back. Because they've been bombing your neighbourhood again.

When you walk down the street and everyone stops and stares. Because you don't hide who you are. Or who you love.

When getting across town means hoping your wheelchair will fit and the taxi will take you this time.

When your allies suddenly turn against you because your work is just too ... controversial.

Context means you are faced with different pressures and fewer options. Fewer safe spaces within which to rest and renew. To find hope again.

Because you are fighting on too many fronts at once.

## ***Fighting on all Fronts***

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Let me tell you about some other fronts.

The ones we don't talk about nearly enough.

About what happens when, on the one hand, you are fighting for human rights, and when, on the other, you have to defend yourself against a world that hates you for how you look, who you love, where you live, what you believe in, and so on.

When the world you live in just isn't safe—not because of what you do, but because of *who you are*.

That drains you, as Pilar Gonzales explains about her activism in the United States:

*One other thing I usually do to sustain myself... I separate myself from white people, or white dominant culture, and I take safe harbour into my own culture. For instance, I withdraw into my community of women friends, or my Latino working class community. I actually need to hear Spanish spoken around me and somehow I'm reminded why I do what I do.*

*Because of the racism (and/or ageism) I experience around me in reaction to my skin colour, I have to seek safety in my tiny apartment or just be by myself to rejuvenate.*

*Defending oneself, or staying vigilant against racism, takes so much energy. It's exhausting.*

And when you work on 'taboo issues' in conservative societies, your private life is held up to scrutiny, and you are judged—not just by your community, but also by your own colleagues, as Mary Sandasi told us in Zimbabwe:

*My identity as a single parent makes me stigmatised.*

*We talk about sex and sexuality, HIV and AIDS, about sexual reproductive health and rights for many people. When it comes to dealing with the government head-on on issues of HIV and AIDS, some activists fall away. They become judgemental, with an attitude of being holier than others.*

*And we are left alone.*

As a single woman in a traditional society, Nighat Kamdar feels the same sense of isolation in Pakistan:

*Being single, I am also harassed by the people out in the city—these are men who are working in other NGOs or in the government. For example, because I am working with HIV positive people, a newspaper labelled me as one of the HIV positive. The reason they labelled me specially in my organisation is because I am single ... so they thought that if we put out this rumour, then she will be stigmatised as a bad character.*

Bernedette told us about the ways indigenous activists are made invisible in South Africa:

*First nations' people have extra burdens. For example, the Koi San people in Botswana have been moved off their land for diamond mining and herded into reserves. The world doesn't seem to care in the midst of all other kinds of degradations. But imagine the impact of forced removal ... which then translates into gender violence.*

*And the Koi San activists just can't get out there. They lack resources, and they are made invisible. They are still treated like vermin, even by progressive governments.*

Activists who work as sex workers also face threats on several fronts, because of their profession as well as their activism, as Jo explained:

*The problem of violence towards sex workers and others as they provide services to sex workers is severe and under-recognised.*

*For many sex workers, the threat of violence is ever present. Many assume that the main source of violence for sex workers are clients, bosses or partners. However, sex workers themselves place the police as by far the most violent towards them. According to the spokesperson from the Network of Sex Worker Projects:*

*Sex workers around the world cite the state as the prime violator of their rights. Police abuse, sexual abuse, and*

*extortion as well as government harassment, even in places where sex work is not a crime, is a perennial problem the world over.*

*For activists, the problems with safety are compounded, as an activist becomes a visible target not only for police, but also for local employers and business owners who are threatened by activism:*

*Activism for many begins with outreach in dangerous places—for myself in the first world, that has been crack houses, gang clubhouses, unsanitary sex industry venues, and situations that put me at risk of violence from civilians (fake clients, people who worried that I threatened their business, be it drugs or sex) and police.*

Natasha Jiménez described the ‘chain of marginalisation’—deeply rooted in discrimination and disinformation—that transgender activists confront in Costa Rica:

*The biggest obstacles to my activism have come from transphobic feelings in the different Costa Rican institutions (family, Church, health services, the Law, media, etc.) that discriminate and marginalise the Trans and Intersex populations, without even taking a minute to understand what that means for us, or what our needs are. They simply don’t care about it.*

*Most Trans people have very few opportunities to get an education, and that in turns means that they have few opportunities to enter the workforce, except as sex workers.*

*As you can see, there is a chain of marginalisation.*

*There is lots of disinformation on the issue and those of us trying to make it visible are ridiculed and discredited.*

As activists, if we don’t recognise each other’s realities, then we become part of those same systems that deny and discredit us all. We become the oppressors.

## ***Safe Places***

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So what makes activists feel safe?

Coming together is so important.

For many, the first time activists come together is one of the first times in their lives that they find safety—not just in numbers, but also in a common experience. And a common goal.

Vesna Draženović first felt truly safe at the Autonomous Women's Centre in Belgrade:

*When I first came to the Women's Centre to take part in a workshop on violence against girls and on sexual violence, it was the first time I had ever heard anything like this. I was a victim of abuse myself before and during that time.*

*And when I went there, and I listened and took part in the workshop, I knew this is it. **I felt safe there.***

But those safe places are not always available in your own community. Instead, many activists find them at conferences and gatherings, as Rita Thapa told us:

*The places that should give the most comfort are no longer safe for me. This is probably the case in traditional societies—unless there are extremely supportive families. Rest is supposed to be in a parent's home, but for someone like me, I wouldn't be understood anywhere—there is no rapport, no comfortable zones ...*

*It is only in international contexts, at conferences, meetings ... I can connect.*

Jelena Poštić echoed Rita's words when talking about organising a conference where activists could talk about different forms of gender, inclusiveness, and the right to self-identification:



*The conference empowered people. It was a safe space where we could discuss in what ways we are limited. It gave a lot of energy. People said it was amazing, especially as it created a safe space for people to freely express themselves.*

For Staša, safety is simple. As activists, we create it, together, as part of the work we do:

*We are each other's security shield.*

*When I invited women from Srebrenica to Belgrade, I protected them. And the feeling of me giving them protection helped me release my fear.*

*So we release each other from fear. By listening to each other daily we minimise our fear. That politics of peace can be spread through those new, small things, like when we sit together for a coffee, by doing this we refuse and reject state consensus.*

*After we brought women from Srebrenica to Belgrade they told me that no one believed them when they said they were in Belgrade. But now because we made them feel safe with us, they said they would give us their daughters ...*

Emily would agree. She told us that safety lies in creating, or joining, a community of activists:

*Of the many reasons that people become activists, realising that the world in which we exist hates your very person—your flesh, blood and bones, simply because of who you harmlessly, privately love—is surely one of the deepest motivators.*

*This realisation can take many forms, but often it happens in conjunction with the universal human experience of falling in love for the first time. Once you are 'found out' or decide to 'come out', sooner or later someone will express their disapproval—and often hatred—of you.*

*Often, the first to turn on you is your own family.*

*Once you come out, your family could disown you and/or kick you out—leaving you homeless. Others have their children arrested, beaten or assassinated, for the crime of shaming the family. Or institutionalised and treated with cruel and inhumane tactics such as electro-shock therapy.*

*Or, they could decide to keep you at 'home', but arrange for a corrective rape—sometimes by other family members such as an older brother—or through a quick, forced marriage.*

*What options do you have left in these situations?*

*Here's what keeps you whole, sane and safe.*

*You become an activist. If there is a queer activist community, you join it. And if there isn't, you start it yourself.*

*You create a new family...*

# GENERATIONS

## *We are Family*

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Families are complicated.

We need them. We push them away, then we let them in. Sometimes we deny them.

Sometimes they deny us. For who we are—going against the grain, speaking out at the risk of ... well, everything. For who we choose to love. How we choose to live.

Some families are our rock. They are loving, proud, and often long-suffering. They are a source of strength and solace.

Most families are somewhere in between, alternately driving us crazy and then reminding us in an instant of that precious, tenuous heart connection. The one we can't do without.

Those are the families that we are born into.

Then there are the families we form ourselves. The ones we choose (or think we choose).

For activists, we are each other's family.

On good days, we are honest about that. We talk about solidarity, call each other sister. Sometimes we even manage to say we love each other.

We laugh together and share the intensity that comes from shared success. And losses. It's more than just camaraderie.

But we don't want to look at it too closely, or we start to uncover some of the more tricky—and painful—connections. Mother–daughter comes to mind.

## ***Mothers and Daughters***

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'Sisters' means solidarity. Equality. We're okay with that.

Talking about mothers and daughters, though, makes us a little twitchy.

It boils down to power. How difficult it is for us as activists first to acknowledge, and then deal with, the power relationships between us, as Sandra Ljubinković explained:

*Within women's organisations, the mother–daughter dynamic is a symbolic model of how activists across generations relate to each other.*

*This model is about hierarchies, competition, control and approval. If a daughter wants to become a leader, she has to symbolically push her mother away. She has to reject her.*

*Mothers, on the other hand, set up conditions that daughters need to fulfil in order to receive their approval.*

*To me, this model is about power. It is about perpetuating the model of 'power over' somebody.*

The irony, of course, is that this dynamic is as old as time, as Sonia pointed out:

*One main problem we experience in society at large is the absence of recognition of others and their capacities.*

*A classic issue of recognition in feminist communities is generation, transition and transmission. Feminists by and large have great*

*difficulties with generational transition.*

*The fact is that we can very easily identify the lack of trust of the 'oldies' and the difficulty in transmission of power between the older and younger leadership.*

*I have a theory about that ... I think this happens because transmission or legacy of power is a technology. It's a social construct that for ages has been the monopoly of men: the inheritance role of the father, the main patriarchal rule.*

In this model, who came first matters.

That is one way of thinking. But what if we chose other ways? Ways that recognise that these aren't supposed to be one-way relationships. That we all come into this world as equals. We complement each other. All of us. And we come to each other for a reason.

These new ways of thinking have to be based on *mutual respect*, as Sandra suggested:

*In order to change the patterns of behaviour, our starting position should be respecting each other. Only then can we discuss how to overcome this model. Because when we respect each other, the idea of who came first—and questioning each other's capacities and capabilities—becomes irrelevant.*

*The issue is how we can make this world a better place with the authenticities of each of us individually. We all bring something authentic and valuable. Each of us has a lot to give.*

We all have something important to give to each other. And to the rest of the world.

The only way we are going to get to that place of equality is to recognise where we are right now. Honestly. That means acknowledging the mother-daughter models we keep repeating. And then moving on to the next level of being together. On to a new model.

Before we move on, however, there is one more taboo that we need to break. If we are going to go down the family road ... we need to talk about fathers.

## ***Fathers***

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My dad was a writer.

I forgot that until today.

I forgot a lot of good things about my father. I've been so used to being angry with him for so long. It doesn't matter why. It only matters that it's become an easy, comfortable habit. Being angry with him.

With men in general. For making me feel small and weak. For the power they have. To be violent. To protect ... or walk on by.

I've found working in this woman's corner of human rights comforting and easy. Often fuelled by a shared anger towards a common oppressor ... men.

Every time I heard someone mention the newest trend in women's rights—to work with men—I felt queasy. How can you fight so long, and so hard, for this tiny safe space and now expect us to share it with men? It's just not fair.

So I've avoided the idea of working with men, seeing it as an intrusion to the real work. And I rejected the idea of talking about men in this book.

Just like I rejected Sonia's comment about her father, and what he taught her about leadership transition:

*Generational transmission is something you can learn. And I say so because I had a biographic privilege in relation to that.*

*I am an only daughter. And I had an amazing father. He was an incredible person. I am really grateful to him for making me aware*

*of the world. Making me strong enough to say no. But also curious enough to go ahead into the world in search of adventures. He was also very good about generational transmission, or at least he has learned about it as he grew older.*

*And I have learned from him.*

I was looking for a good quote about mothers and daughters and leadership transition. And there she was, talking about her father. Not her mother. Well that wouldn't do at all. So I decided I'd have to skip that one. Until now.

Because that's what anger does. It makes you blind to the good stuff.

The gifts.

I didn't realise that until now.

I've been angry for so long that I forgot about early mornings and oatmeal ... just us. A beautiful voice and silly puns. Snow angels and midnight swims at Revere Beach. I forgot my dad was a writer. A poet. A singer. A good man. I forgot I loved him.

And in the forgetting, in the anger, I crushed a part of myself. I wrapped up all the good and the bad into a tight little ball and just forgot.

If we draw our energy ... our strength ... from a place of anger, what is the price? What are we forgetting in the process? Where is the balance?

Ouyporn Khuankaew talked about this when she said:

*With feminism you get the head but not the heart ...*

*When I got angry with my father, feminists made me understand patriarchy and how his behaviour was part of a patriarchal system.*

*But they did not make me understand that my father was not born like that. He also did not want to hurt people. He gave me my body ... So I meditate for him and for his rebirth.*

Like Ouyporn, Indrakanthi Perera sees another way:

*Generally, when you are an activist and involved in actions, anger, frustration and many other negative emotions build up within you. So sometimes activism is energised by rage and passions.*

*But there is another, more difficult way for activism to go, and that is even seeing the humanity and the weakness in the so-called oppressor, and giving a chance to creatively formulate actions that are energised by more positive sources, such as compassion for all and creativity of confrontation.*

## **Pull Her Down Syndrome**

Just one more thing about families.

Families usually bicker and fight. Compete for scarce resources.

That's natural.

But there is a fine line between healthy competition and betrayal.

A betrayal from inside our protective world, by the ones who are supposed to keep us safe, often the only people in the world you can count on.... That's devastating.

It can come in many forms, ranging from the low murmur of gossip or backstabbing, to withholding information, to the outright violence of false accusations—of misuse of funds, harassment, nepotism. Sometimes, these are the very same tactics that governments use to try to destroy human rights activists ... and we end up doing their dirty work for them.

In Sierra Leone, they even have a name for it. They call it 'pull her down syndrome'. The motives are straightforward, as Marina Pislakovskaya suggests in Russia:

*Why do women burn out? Well, a lack of resources is part of it, of course. But the basic issue is competition. Competition for money. For power. It ruins things in the women's movement.*



Often women are ‘pulled down’ in power struggles over the direction of their own organisations. Some activists drop out entirely afterwards.

Others survive, but the memory stays close, as Iman told us:

*I used to think that I would leave the scene if I was betrayed, or not appreciated, or attacked with no reason. Just out of spite. But all that happened to me by close people and by other women’s NGOs in 2005. And I survived. I thought I would decline and stay out of the field. But I didn’t.*

Like everything else we are talking about, this, too, is complicated and messy. Because there are often two sides to a story. And in an activist world as big and diverse as ours, of course there will be real problems.

The trouble is, we aren’t very good yet at solving some of them.

And it is very, very hard to take back cruel words once they’ve been spoken out loud.

## ***Stripes***

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I think that I finally understand one of the biggest problems young activists tell us they face. It has to do with earning respect.

Because everyone has to earn their stripes.

By 1995, I figured I had earned mine already. I was 29. I had made it through a firefight in the stark, snowy mountains of Garm, Tajikistan. Joined the first team sent to meet the thousands of Georgians fleeing to the Mestia Valley after the fall of Abkhazia. I had dodged ghosts in Rwanda, six months after a genocide that left one million dead.

By the time I got to Bosnia, I was ready for anything, or so I thought.

When I arrived in Zagreb from Kigali, I found that my new colleagues, while friendly, were worried. Early on, I could tell that they were thinking ‘what good is she?’

I hadn't been there during the worst of the Bosnian war. I would never be able to understand what it felt like to outwit snipers on the dark, icy roads of Mount Igman, or the horror of the siege of Sarajevo.

How could I possibly manage, on my own, in a war zone like this?

Time passed, and I thought I was doing fine. But though I always felt warmth from my co-workers and enjoyed their camaraderie, I still felt something else: a lingering suspicion that eventually, I might not make the grade. I had simply arrived too late in the war to earn real, extensive credibility. There was nothing I could do to make up for that.

At least not until I was taken hostage in Liberia.

It was 1996 and the Liberian civil war was still on. I had left Bosnia for a six-month stint to assess emergency food and livelihood needs.

Eighteen of us—English, French, Irish, Liberians, North Americans, Sudanese—were conducting a food security assessment in the far west, in a village on the border of Sierra Leone. We were returning to Monrovia late in the afternoon—muddy and exhausted, but elated to have made it to a village that aid hadn't reached for years—on a road that had only been cleared of rebel fighters the day before.

We were ambushed at a makeshift checkpoint.

Mostly I remember rebels screaming at us to get out and move, and really big guns. I tried to name the guns, to make some sense of it. AK-47s? Rocket launchers? Later, I thought about how unbelievably young the rebels were. How they reeked of marijuana. How much I wanted my cigarettes back.

Night fell as they debated what to do with us. Finally, they decided to take us through the bush to see their commander in his camp, four hours to the north. What happened next is a longer story. What really matters, though, is that no one was hurt and we weren't there long—the United Nations (UN) negotiated our release the next day.

Aside from surviving nicotine withdrawal, and eating raw cassava, I had done nothing particularly notable. It took no skill or courage. We were in the wrong place at the wrong time; it just happened.

When I got back to Bosnia, though, it turned out that at last, I had earned my stripes.

I had finally crossed that unspoken, elusive boundary of respect in the world of war-zone work—the one that distinguishes the young and green from toughened, slightly cynical, war-weary emergency aid workers.

I had made the grade.

For me, that sums up the problem with earning respect.

You never really know what it will take to get there. There is no formula. Just when you think you have done your time, put in the hours, and weathered enough storms, the goalposts shift.

Because it is so elusive, once you finally feel like you have won that respect and credibility, you will not share it lightly. Everyone else coming up behind you has to earn it the hard way. No short cuts allowed.

### ***All I Want ... is a Little Respect***

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All activists want to feel respect. We want to continue to learn and grow, to make it to the next level, whatever that might be, without having constantly to prove ourselves.

And we want to know what's coming next. That when we get up tomorrow, we will still be able to do the work we love. That there is a place for us.

Younger activists fear that they will never win respect. They worry that they will never make it across that invisible boundary of credibility. They want to know what it will take to earn their stripes, but no one will tell them. It seems that no matter how hard and how long one works, it will never be enough.

Their worries are real. When a younger activist says she is tired, stressed, or on the verge of burning out, older colleagues often view her comments with disbelief. She hasn't worked nearly enough years to be that weary. She hasn't seen enough, or sacrificed enough. She hasn't *earned the right* to exhaustion.

Younger activists want to know if there is a way to be active and to stay healthy. They want to know if they can do the work they love and still have a family or the money to finish their education. Kirsten Westby summed this up in her story of activism and burnout:

*My years working as an international women's human rights activist were eye opening. Never before had I been so inspired, so awed by the accomplishments of my colleagues.*

*Or so completely exhausted and stressed out.*

*In my fourth year I knew I was burnt. I no longer looked forward to going to work in the mornings. I looked to my mentors to see how they had managed to stay in the game for more than 20 years and clearly saw the sacrifices they had made in their own lives, and the gambles they had made with their health.*

But activists of all ages seem to agree that times are changing. The next generations are examining the 'old' models of activism critically, and looking for a new ways of working, as Ariane commented:

*Activism has changed—younger activists say they want a family life ... they want to have their cake and eat it too. So the work continues, but not in the way I understand it.*

The next generation is also bringing in new ideas—they are pushing boundaries and questioning ... everything. That can only be a good thing.

But there are only two ways that this change can play out.

We either face a painful split, based on our 'mother-daughter' models. Models that force us to reject and negate what has come before in order to begin something new.

Or we celebrate how far we've come. That an entire generation of activists has created the space we have *right here, right now* to explore change. And we change together, as Sandra suggested:

*How can we deny the feminist leaders of the 60s and 70s? If not for them, I wouldn't be here ... You know, we don't have to like each other—we just have to respect each other. We have to change our own internal, patriarchal patterns to move forward—otherwise, we are thinking too small ...*

Older activists are worried about losing hard-won respect. They fear that as they age, they will no longer be valued. Charlotte Bunch put this in context when talking frankly about an outright fear of aging in many cultures:

*There is a discomfort facing up to aging. With some exceptions in parts of Africa and Asia, there is a fear of aging and of youth domination ... an obsessive youth culture in much of modern life.*

*I think that part of that fear is about not wanting to look in the mirror and see one's own aging. You don't want to look me in the eye—to really deal with the fact that this is going to happen to you too. We don't value the aging process.*

*And in that sense, we don't value older women.*

Older activists are also worried about what comes next. After so many years of devotion to the cause, of building up organisations through nothing but sheer willpower and passion, they are anxious about what will happen when they leave. When the work is your life, this is where your energy is invested.

Besides, most activists can't afford to retire—most have no pension, and no other source of income. Few have health care. Many do not even have a 'room of their own' to provide shelter in old age.

These are issues all activists face eventually.

Everyone in the movement seems most worried, however, when it is time for an older leader to hand over power to the next generation.

## ***Leadership Transition***

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### ***Follow me***

If we are going to talk about leadership transition, we need to start by talking about leaders.

Here's the trouble with leadership transition: the current models aren't just unbelievably demanding – they require a level of almost superhuman energy and drive.

Let's face it. Every activist leader does the job of two or three people, leaving little room for anything else.

These aren't just tough shoes to fill. They are just plain scary.

Rakhee told us:

*We noticed that in general, across the leadership of so many organisations, leaders are overburdened because they are taking so many different roles. And they are dealing with both the external and internal environment. In addition to their daily work, they have so many other issues to deal with, such as writing proposals, fundraising, advocacy, reporting. Accountability, both internally and to funders. Project oversight and nitty-gritty project management. What we are seeing is that all this falls on either one or a couple of individuals at the top. Having to play these roles is so burdensome, especially if you are going to distribute yourself between being on the ground and also advocating on issues and funders. All of this has to be done 24/7 ... which includes family.*

*So self-care is at the bottom of the list. It is activism first, and everything relating to that, then family. And only then, the women themselves ...*

And if that's the job, as Rita pointed out, who is willing to take the risk?

*I am looking at transition in the next three to four years from TEWA and Nagarik Aawaz—but who wants to do this risk-taking?*

Once you have found someone willing to take over, as a leader, Rita continued, you still have to prepare for a final, exhausting push—you have to make sure you have an organisation to hand over:

*And I have to ensure there is enough money, especially if funding is only project oriented.*

One more thing about leadership: it really is lonely at the top.

You don't get to complain about how tough the work is, particularly when it was your idea in the first place. And, as Djingarey Maiga pointed out, because leaders are often role models—whether they like it or not. So they feel the pressure to be there for others who look up to them. They always have to be 'on'.

That takes its toll. Anne-Laurence Lacroix told me about an activist leader she knows:

*Because of her position in the community, she can't express what she went through. She has to show she is a leader. So she has no way—and no one—to express how she has suffered.*

Even in those rare moments, when there are friends you can talk with about your stress, you remind yourself that this is part of the activist bargain, as Kaari Murungi pointed out:

*When I feel stress, mostly I speak with my activist friends who are just as harassed, and we remind ourselves that activism demands certain sacrifices. We chose this path and therefore need to find coping mechanisms or quit.*

So when the time comes to leave—whether you want to or not—you face a huge challenge. One you can't always share.

And once again, many of the problems are personal.

## **What Next?**

Jelena summed up the problem with leadership transition best, something we'd been hearing from so many activists. It's about leaving a safe space – one that you created yourself:

*So often, you hear about a particular leader holding herself tightly to her organisation—even pushing everybody aside—just to keep herself in that position.*

*So what's the problem?*

*We have to remember that the same leaders we want to move on are the ones who started it all on their backs, risking and compromising everything, their lives, health, often falling apart from their families and their loved ones.*

*The organisations they started are the spaces we also built for ourselves. This is where we feel good, where we ARE. Where we are accepted when the rest of the society rejected us. The bonds and ties we make through this work are our support systems.*

*And now after so many years of giving everything to women's rights, as a leader, we are asked to leave ...*

Charlotte Bunch said the rest. It's about what comes next:

*There is a lot of talk about the need for power transitions in organisations. Older women leaders don't give over power well enough or soon enough. I have been thinking about the reasons for this ...*

*I think that it has a lot to do with a lack of spaces or places for older feminists to go. Where do we expect a leader to go when she hands over the leadership of her organisation?*

*Many have been not just leaders of their own organisations, but have played key roles in movement building and connecting. They*



*are part of the fabric and the history of the movements. We don't have in our movement much structure for this—not at the local or international levels. We ask women to hand over power, but where do they go next?*

*If we think there is not enough support for young women, then there is nothing for older women when they leave full-time overworked, overstressed jobs ... They still have a lot to give, but recognise that they just can't work that hard and long anymore.*

*A lot of women of my generation, some of the founders of the global process in the 80s and 90s, now comprise a critical mass of women of this age.*

*Also, in a good way, there is a critical mass of middle generation women in their 30s and 40s who are at a point where they need to assume leadership. They need to have space for this. Issues rise to the surface when there is a critical mass.*

*But, how do we stay engaged, have a role, when we are no longer leading an organisation?*

*Beyond livelihoods, is there a role for people as they are aging? Can they bring to the table their experiences in a useful way?*

*We won't see the kind of transition in leadership—of power—that we need without addressing this issue also.*

# MEMBERS ONLY?

## ***We Felt it to the Bones***

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Susan and Albert spent the last 18 years of their lives creating happiness.

They made their home a retreat for 400 activists, offering them an opportunity for solace, rest, play. A chance just to be, to rediscover themselves. To feel their bodies again. To dance.

They did it without reserve. They poured their hearts, energy, and resources into making the world a better place.

The day I called them activists, though, they were taken aback.

We were sitting together at Windcall, chatting about respite and retreats while smoke from forest fires hid the mountains around us.

I asked Susan why she didn't consider herself an activist. She thought for a bit, then said:

*It's about privilege. I have privilege. I don't live in the midst of it, I don't have to struggle to survive. I do this because I want to. Because I choose to.*

So who gets to be an activist? Who decides? When do you earn the right to call yourself an activist?

What's the difference between a human rights activist, an aid worker, an artist, an academic, a social worker, a journalist, a donor?

That's the thing about activism.

It isn't a members-only club. We don't get to choose who is, and who isn't, an activist.

The ability to stand up, to do the right thing—to be active—is in every human being.

Almost everyone does it at some point in their lives. They get angry, stand up, and say no. I won't move to the back of the bus.

Or yes. I will stand with you today. In silence. Asking for peace.

Some dip in and dip out of it.

Some, as Cindy Ewing and Luchie Tizcon put it, 'shape shift' their activism at different stages of their lives.

Some make it their life's work. Out of a passion to create balance, to right a wrong. From stopping the pillage of the Amazon forests to finding the missing in Sri Lanka.

It doesn't really matter in what corner we choose to fight.

Mostly our passions are based on our biographies. Our histories and experiences. Our sense of injustice born so early on. From a slap in the face. An uncle's clawing hands. A son gone missing. A sister sent to prison.

From a realisation that *we matter, we exist*, we have the power to change the world. Sonia put it best:

*My story is not very different from the one regarding all people of my generation ...*

*This was the 60s. Becoming an activist in that moment was kind of special.*

*In many parts of the world, students were on the street. Paris was being turned upside down. In Brazil we were also on the streets against dictatorship.*

*I was bitten by feminism when I went to France in 1973. This was a very peculiar moment. Feminism was in the air. In the university, young and not so young feminists would jump up and scream whenever a professor slipped towards any manifestation of patriarchy or sexism. This was the moment of street demonstrations in favour of legal abortion. There were demonstrations where I saw all those famous women like Simone de Beauvoir and Delphine Seyrig.*

*So I was exposed to feminist ideas in a very liveable and intense context ... And then I suddenly realised: oh gosh, there is something about it, about being a woman and feeling weird ... that makes sense ...*

*I think that in the beginning what motivated us—me personally, but also other people of my generation—was really very personal.*

*It was about identifying what was wrong with being a woman in the world as it was. It was really the daring step to cope with what French feminists called 'le malaise d'être femme'. This daring quest ranged from ordinary daily issues such as not being able to sit alone in a bar or restaurant, to more structural and difficult issues like sexuality, abortion and all the other challenges we were coping with at that age.*

*I started off in the feminist self-reflection collectives: we sat together and tried to figure out what was behind the malaise and find theories that could guide us to explore being women in a world where we did not fit comfortably as full persons.*

*So for me the beginning of feminism was fully through the mantra: the personal is political. My body is my body, my body myself. That wasn't just rhetoric.*

*We felt it to the bones. I felt it to the bones.*

Each story of activism has its own special power. It makes us realise that anyone can be an activist—for a minute, or for a lifetime. In whatever way we choose.

Recognising this doesn't diminish us. It connects us.

## *Ticking Boxes*

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When we started this project, we knew it would be complicated. But we were clear about one thing at least: we were talking about women human rights activists.

And that is who we talked to, in the beginning. Women who identified themselves as activists.

Eventually, though, we started to question the definition of activism. And later, when we started to talk about the limitations of binary gender, and to work with transgender and intersex activists, we started to question what we meant by women ...

Last year, while we were discussing her thoughts on sustaining queer activism, Emily mentioned binary gender. At that point I had no idea what she was talking about. I swiftly and silently reviewed my mental basket of feminist and women's rights lexicon. Nothing. I looked in the LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer) basket. Empty.

With some trepidation, I finally stopped her and asked what she meant — male plus female equals two genders. That's binary, so what's the problem?

She explained that by sticking with the limiting idea of just male and female, we were silencing activists who identified with other genders, or forcing them to conform to our narrow understanding of gender.

This was extremely worrying. We were writing about *women* activists... about *women's* rights.

Weren't we?

I kept trying to stuff these exceptions back into a neat box, make them fit with the idea of women's human rights. The one I was comfortable with. Those same boxes Anissa exposed as so limiting:

*One is often, implicitly or explicitly, asked to fit into one of the following frames: homo/hetero/bi. Trans and intersex activists have*

*complicated the equation by adding gender identity to the sexual orientation picture—but, more often than not, individuals are still expected to ‘tick one box only’.* She also goes on to remind us that ... *we seem to always conveniently forget celibates, who also very much challenge both heteronormativity and compulsory sexuality.*<sup>23</sup>

Sally Gross echoed the point:

*Intersex challenges the base premise that there are two checkboxes and only two. Because the truth is that the checkboxes work for most people, but there is a great more diversity than that, to adequately describe what nature produces.*

In the end, we realised that this work is ultimately about *human rights activism*. From the perspective of a range of activists. Many who would identify themselves as women activists—and many who have not even begun to discuss and question the idea of binary gender.

And some who reject the idea of ticking a ‘male’ or ‘female’ box entirely. They don’t fit clearly into a mainstream, traditional framework of women’s rights activism.

Because, as it turns out, the very idea of being fitted into, or ‘*included*’ in, that framework is a big part of the problem.

It comes back to the idea of ‘members only’. It reinforces a power imbalance. That transgender and intersex activists are on the outside, and get to be included only on very specific terms.

So I started to wonder what real power sharing would look like, suspecting that it would mean dropping the boxes entirely, and creating a new framework altogether. Whether it is called, as Joo-Hyun Kang suggested, ‘gender rights’, or something else.

Because, as Sally put it, the struggle for women’s rights is based on defeating *exactly the same oppression* that holds back intersex and transgender rights:

*The need for a focus on women's issues stems from patriarchy. What the oppression of women represents and what requires women to organise as women, is that patriarchal society is not a fully human society.*

*We are seeking to create a society in which there is a wholeness, in which diversity in gender is celebrated. In which there aren't power games or gender domination. In which gendering is not a violent process.*

*The violence and rejection that people like me experience is an icon of patriarchy and the violence of the power struggle.*

*The women's movement is all about breaking it. It seems to me that the phenomenon of intersex and the movement should naturally be seen by the women's movement as a godsend. Because the very fact of its existence is a challenge to patriarchy—objectively, it challenges the fundamental premise of a supposedly immutable dichotomy. It pushes the recognition that we are much more diverse as a species.*

*And that should be celebrated.*

I don't have the answers, and I know this is challenging.

But I do know that for this book, we need to be clear that we are not just talking about women human rights activists.

We are talking about human rights activists. Activists who all share a common goal of changing the varied, overlapping, interlocking systems that oppress, discriminate, and silence.

## ***The Sound of Silence***

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In February 2004, I chose not to interview a lesbian activist during the research for *RUIR*.

It seemed such a small omission at the time.

As always, we had a limited budget and so little time to complete the work. I couldn't track down and interview everyone (so I told myself). I was half way through a two-week trip to Sierra Leone, interviewing as many women activists as possible. I had the usual, higher profile, heterosexual activists on my schedule and I was keen to interview a broader range of women, to achieve more diversity.

So, I asked my colleagues whether they knew of any lesbian activists I could meet.

After an uncomfortable silence and a bit of awkward laughter, they said there was one woman who had been trying to get the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to fund a club for lesbians in Freetown. 'Could you imagine?' they said, 'who would fund something like that? That's not real activism.'

I realised then that I had to make a choice: pursue the issue, find her, and potentially alienate mainstream activists, or drop it. I didn't want to risk damaging new, delicate relationships when I had so little time to get the interviews I needed. So I opted for the easier route, the path of least resistance. I convinced myself there were only so many hours in the day—I could only manage so much. I dropped it.

The question I asked myself later, though, is why did I make that particular choice?

The very simple answer is that it was easier not to challenge the status quo. In a conservative, West African environment, where activists were struggling for 'basic rights', where speaking openly about female genital mutilation (FGM) was still taboo, it seemed impossible to talk about LGBTIQ activism. I accepted an unspoken hierarchy of rights that ranked LGBTIQ issues as less important than others. Or as more about personal choice and private lifestyle, than about women's rights.

I told myself that I could find her later; maybe we could get in touch through e-mail.

I never got the chance. FannyAnn Eddy was found brutally murdered in her Freetown office on the morning of 29 September 2004.<sup>24</sup>



Would it have made a difference if I had challenged that status quo and added her voice to those of the activists who shared their stories with us?

I'll never know for sure.

What I do know is that I made the wrong choice. I was afraid, and it was more comfortable for me to remain in my very heterosexual activist world, rather than challenge it. Despite identifying myself for 15 years as an LGBTIQ 'ally', when push came to shove, I didn't stand up for my values. So, I get, viscerally, how we can so easily silence other activists.

Simply by making easy choices. By not seeing. By perceiving a particular form of activism as less important, less of a priority, in relation to *our* hierarchy of human rights.

Like indigenous rights. HIV/AIDS. Disability. Sex worker rights. Transgender. Intersex.

By sidelining voices in the name of '*culture*', *unity*, or *patriotism*. Or by saying that it just *isn't time yet*.

And when we turn our backs on some activists because of who they are, or what they are fighting for, we aren't just silencing them, we're denying them safety. We are even denying them the right to live.

### ***Silence creates vulnerability***

You, members of the Commission on Human Rights, can break the silence. You can acknowledge that we exist, throughout Africa and on every continent, and that human rights violations based on sexual orientation or gender identity are committed every day. You can help us combat those violations and achieve our full rights and freedoms, in every society, including my beloved Sierra Leone.

—FannyAnn Eddy, Speech to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 2004

# CONSEQUENCES

For activists, the consequences of all of these sustainability issues turn up in so many different, unexpected ways.

Losing your memory is one. Walking into a room to get something one minute. Forgetting what you came for the next. All the way through to losing your memory for an entire day. Listening to your favourite music ... but you can't name the songs.

Here's another. Waking up in the morning and you can't move. Your body rebels. Just says no. I can't do it anymore.

Because sooner or later, the stress of the work gets absorbed into our hearts, minds, and bodies. Without the time and space to reflect and recover, for many, it stays there. And spins into cycles of increasing self-denial. And abuse.

Eventually, it may take form. As depression. A nervous breakdown. Suicide. A stroke. Heart disease. Cancer. Burnout. Or it may skip a generation.

Here are some of the consequences.

## ***This is Burnout***

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Christina Maslach's groundbreaking work, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*, first made the concept of burnout a reality in 1982, when she helped us to understand that it isn't a secret, shameful problem of a few, but a reasonably common, and natural, response to the chronic stress and emotional strain of caring for other human beings.<sup>25</sup>

This was the first time we heard about the burnout trinity depersonalisation or cynicism; emotional exhaustion; and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment.

Once you have all three, you are well and truly burnt out.

Aside from her work, though, very little else has been written about burnout in the world of human rights activism.

So, for now, the best way to describe activist burnout is just to tell you what we heard. This is burnout.

Some activists burn out from the grinding stress of working in conflict zones:

For Sarala Emmanuel in Sri Lanka, it's that overwhelming feeling that you can never stem the tide of violence:

*After the point when you hear about another rape, or another burn injury or killing, it makes you depressed. And you think—what is the point? In a way it does seem too much—that you can't even respond to it all ...*

For Daphne Olu-Williams in Sierra Leone, it is the worry that even peace may not bring progress:

*Even though we have been working so hard, the society seems not to be making headway. The community seems slow to show signs of recovery and people all around seem to find it difficult to keep their*

**Symptoms of burnout include:**

- ~ Excessive tiredness
- ~ Loss of spirit
- ~ Inability to concentrate
- ~ Somatic symptoms (e.g. headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances)
- ~ Sleep difficulties
- ~ Grandiose beliefs about one's own importance (e.g. engaging in heroic but reckless behaviour, ostensibly in the interest of helping others; neglecting one's own safety and physical needs, such as adopting a 'heroic' style of not needing sleep, not needing breaks)
- ~ Cynicism
- ~ Inefficiency
- ~ Mistrust of co-workers or supervisors
- ~ Excessive alcohol use, caffeine consumption, and smoking

—Ehrenreich, John (2002)  
*A Guide for Humanitarian, Health Care, and Human Rights Workers: Caring for Others, Caring for Yourself*  
(see bibliography for more details)

*head above water. First and foremost, I do need the reassurance that all is not lost.*

For Leyla Yunus in Azerbaijan, it's the haunting question of whether it has all been worth it:

*I started the fight for human rights in the Soviet Union, and now I live in independent Azerbaijan, where human rights are even more violated than in the Soviet Union after 1985. We had more freedom between 1991 and 1993 than we have now. And it wasn't even as terrifying in 1999–2001, as it is now in 2006.*

*To be honest, the stress and disappointment in the past years has been constant. What weighs on me the most is the fact that all of our work, and more specifically, my health, my time—which I took from my sick mother, my little daughter—my life went to my work and efforts, which did not bring any results.*

For Pinar Ilkkaracan in Turkey, it is losing hope for the first time:

*The entire world did nothing other than watch this USA supported attack (on Lebanon). And we, who had thought that five years ago we'd founded a solidarity network which could plant seeds of reform in the Middle East, we—though it is hard to admit—perhaps for the first time, lost our hope, and felt the helplessness, the deadlock, and even the horror of how this spiral of violence would grow even thicker in the near future and swallow us in a nightmare.*

Other activists burn out because of the isolation that comes from living in a world that denies them:

For Jelena Poštić, it is not finding safety to live a free life.

*I need support and understanding. I need to see that people actively talk about the issues that I address. There are no people who actively talk about issues that I am raising.*

*I know that the problem is not in me. I know who I am.*

*But living who I am is not allowed. And that burns me out.*

For Vesna, it was the sum of ‘smaller moments’.

*There were smaller moments up to 2004 that influenced my activism and made me decide to stop my work.*

*Women from women’s groups are more sensitive about disabled rights issues than other groups, like those in which men are in the majority. But they are not sensitive in full.*

*Sometimes, when I would ask for travel to be organised for me to take part in some of the events that are being organised like panels, or workshops—when I asked for a taxi—I would hear that it is only for women coming from outside Belgrade that there is money for a taxi. And that is the only way for me to come.*

*Luckily, I am small, and my wheelchair is small. So I can easily fit into the taxi. But can you imagine what happens with somebody who is bigger and has an electric wheelchair, for example.*

*These are the small things that were breaking me apart.*

*So I changed my activism. I was actually forced to stop being active due to discrimination. You know, if a woman activist decides to change the organisation she is working with and if she is skilled, she will find another place. But if a disabled woman activist wants to do the same she has less chances, there are so many barriers to that.*

And for many activists, it is simply the overwhelming, crushing pressure of too much work, as Anissa describes:

*I was running a relatively short international programme, but from day one, I found myself bursting into tears in the bathroom during each break, before going back to moderating sessions. By day three, I called colleagues for help and simply went home—quite unimaginable for me ... I felt I just couldn’t cope with one more minute of handling responsibilities. I spent five weeks in bed, only getting up to go to the toilet, not even able to make myself a cup of tea.*

## ***Burnout of the Soul***

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I was sitting one morning with Susan, out on their deck at Windcall, sipping hot coffee and chatting about burnout. I had prepared a neat little diagram that showed a straight blue line stuffed with ominous sounding boxes labelled 'high stress', 'burnout', 'stress-related illness', and ending with either 'death' or 'complete burnout'. I was very proud of that chart.

Susan looked at it, slightly bemused, but game on to have the conversation. Then she made the point that there was another possible conclusion to the burnout cycle: what she called 'burnout of the soul'. That's when an activist doesn't drop dead, or disappear from the movement, but instead breaks every boundary and enters a world of complete frenzy—one where they have burned every bridge and have given up every other part of themselves for the work.

Now that sounded scary.

And that's 'just' burnout. As it turns out, there are so many other consequences to consider. Including all the ways that activists can disappear...

## ***Walking on Broken Glass***<sup>26</sup>

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### ***Leaving Home***

The phone rings in the middle of the night and you feel that familiar, cold dread in your guts ... You don't answer. You don't need to. You know what it means. It's time. You grab a bag and pull your girls from their beds. You slip out the back door.

And you run.

You make it to the border by dawn and they are waiting with everything you need for 'safe' passage. For a price. So you hand over your life savings. Your mother's wedding ring. You get on the truck with everyone else. The girls are just waking up, confused, hungry, scared.

The doors close and the journey begins. Without ceremony, without goodbyes. It's done.

And you know you can never go back.

### ***Like a Refugee***

Exile is among the most painful and difficult choices an activist can make.

And it is a choice. Mostly between life and death. Your own life, and the lives of your children and other family members.

Usually, it means a long, dangerous, underground journey to a safe country. More often than not, that 'safe' country turns out to be hell on earth. Because for many, the first step to freedom is detention. And then an overcrowded refugee camp.

Suddenly, you are alone, unknown, invisible. An asylum-seeker. Sometimes reviled by your new neighbours. And much more painfully, often rejected by activist friends back home. Or by your children, who can't understand why you had to leave.

You have to start from the beginning. Learn a new language. If you are lucky, you might find work—but rarely the work you devoted your life to. The work that was your passion. Your identity. Your life.

There are a few 'lucky' ones who manage to keep working, and stay connected within the human rights world—activists who are generally well known and supported internationally.

But *all* activists in exile, temporarily or permanently, famous or hidden, share the same wrenching loss, coupled with what Mahnaz Afkhami called '*an inability to mourn*'.<sup>27</sup> Yet, against the odds, they continue to find their way, to rebuild their lives.

They are a special part of our activist world, and their courage to leave—to survive—should be recognised and honoured. As much as we honour those who stay. And those we've lost.

## *I'll See You Soon*<sup>28</sup>

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Loss, near misses, and transitions can bring intense clarity and presence.

When harnessed, they can become powerful catalysts, changing activists' lives forever. Terrice Bassler lost her six-month old baby daughter, Clea, in 2001. When we spoke about her life and death, Terrice said something that stayed with me: she talked about the way her daughter gave her the freedom to think and act differently—about *'the fearlessness that comes from the loss of a child'*. Clea sent her further along her path as an activist, helping her to find a way to work with balance, strength, and spirituality.

I found that inspiring and terrifying.

It was inspiring to think of openly combining spirituality and activism. It was terrifying, though, because I didn't know what to do with the fear that Terrice's experience struck in me—the visceral, gut-wrenching fear of losing a child. I felt ashamed. I tucked it away as long as I could.

Until I realised that unless I faced my own fear of loss, I couldn't honestly write about it here.

And that means finally writing about Čarna.

Čarna didn't want to die.

I thought that when we met she was ready. We talked for hours about everything—her life, her work, cancer, transition. Her biggest worry was what would happen to the Novi Sad Lesbian Organisation (NLO) when she was too sick to continue ... and after she'd gone. Her sadness—and anger—was reserved for other women at the conference. The ones who didn't see her. Wouldn't look her in the eyes when she talked about cancer. The way they made her feel as if she were 'diminishing' ... disappearing in plain sight. She wasn't angry about anything else.

I thought she was ready.

I was wrong.



Čarna didn't go quietly. It wasn't, as she called it, a 'happy story'.

She turned away from the doctors because they stripped away her dignity. She had turned away from chemo because it erased her mind. Her presence. Most of all, she wanted to be present. Awake, aware, and there for the work she loved.

*I made a decision to stop chemotherapy after six months. This medical treatment was really bad for me. I just couldn't go through it any more.*

*At one point, I don't know when the point was, I stopped feeling and thinking processes. I felt like a tree—I had no opinion anymore. No emotional mechanisms. I was not reacting to anything. I could not speak, I could not eat. I could not use my toilet. I was just vomiting all the time and staring at one point. I could not sleep either—I was just blacked out.*

*Since my cancer was not killed by that treatment, but it was progressing, I decided to stop it—because I lost all of my energy, physically, mentally and emotionally.*

*I had no more political attitude. I didn't want that. And I lost my human dignity—I could not take care of myself anymore.*

*And I just decided that I will quit, and that I will try to use alternative methods.*

*And just to use my time—whatever time I have—to use it in a way that I wanted. That is very important for me, that I could at least get in control of that—what to do with the rest of my time—because I did not want to spend my time, this dying process (in hospital)—I did not want to blow that time away. I wanted to stay active.*

So she went on holiday. Fell in love. Tried alternative therapies. She went on living.

And then she was dying.

I thought she knew that would happen. She had been so calm about it. So matter of fact. Not that it wasn't important, or sad. It was. But it was happening. And that was that.

When it came down to it, though, when the reality hit and life was really slipping away from her, that's when she balked. That's when she said no, this isn't right. I'm supposed to live. I want to live.

Then she started to fight. To look for help. For a cure.

We talked and corresponded by e-mail during that time, but she had little strength left for either.

Čarna died on the morning of 3 June 2006. She was 32 years old.

And here I am. Alive and angry and telling this story without knowing the point. Looking for the happy ending and the wise conclusions and just feeling empty.

I wanted this to mean something. For her to shine through these pages and demand that we listen and learn.

To face up to how uncomfortable we are with illness. Especially terminal illness.

*When you get killed, in a way, others recognise you. But into this diminishing process ... you are not recognised and accepted ...*

Dying for the cause, martyrdom—that we can celebrate, see as a reason to keep going. Fuel for the resistance.

But slow, messy, painful illness that drags on for months or years, that's another story. Because if we start to worry about that kind of diminishing, where would it take us? It's a Pandora's box. An abyss. We are surrounded by cancer. And what about HIV/AIDS? Where would it end?

And that's true. Illness. Death. It is everywhere, and it is endless.

And as activists, we choose to look some forms of death in the eyes. Isn't that the nature of the work?

So why can't we really look at it all?

We are all dying. And we are all living. We just don't want to talk about the dying part. Or so I thought until I talked to Marieme. She talked openly about illness, dying and denial:

*Illness is the transformation of the emotional into the physical; it has to come out ... So some activists have died, some are still living with cancer.*

*But illness is not spoken about. There is a denial, people don't want to look at cancer. Denial is their strategy ... this is based on not speaking about their fears.*

*So they go to treatment very late, knowing they have something, but dealing with it would mean accepting taking care of themselves. Rather than leaving activism, they push themselves when the cancer is really big. They don't go to Europe for treatment.*

*Women don't want to look at their deteriorating health—they don't want to look at the signs ... We just go on doing the work—we go so far in exploiting ourselves, because we feel that if you don't do the work ... then things don't happen ...*

*These issues will remain silent unless activists themselves begin to address them.*

Most activists will face illness eventually. The big question is: will we face it alone and afraid? Or will we face it in solidarity, surrounded and supported by our friends?

And when we do leave this world, will we fade away and be forgotten? Or will we be remembered for our spirit, the love we poured out, the drive, the passion?

There's a choice here about how we stand together ... or fall alone.

And there's a choice about how we decide to take care of our own bodies.

## ***Our Bodies***

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After Čarna died, I thought a lot about the connections between our bodies and our work. About how we choose to use our life energies.

About resilience.

And the thing is, activists are extraordinarily resilient.

It's almost as if those individuals drawn to activism have special, endless, unexpected reserves of energy. Sometimes, that may be part of the problem.

Because all that strength, focus, and energy gets directed externally, at your work.

There is just no time—or space—to worry about what is happening inside your body or your heart.

Which leaves you with nothing to fight off an illness when it comes. You've lost your shock absorbers.

And for many of us, illness will come ... eventually.

Because, as Jelena points out, over time, the sadness, stress, and violence activists deal with on a daily basis gets absorbed into their bodies:

*Along the way, we accumulate so many things as witnesses, as survivors. And it all gets written down in our bodies.*

Ouyporn agreed:

*I see how much women hold suffering in their bodies ...*

For some, it happens quickly. For others, it may take a while.

Mary Sandasi and Maja Danon have first-hand experience of stress-related illnesses:

*I haven't been doing well taking care of myself because I have been diagnosed with stress-related illnesses, high blood pressure and pain in the shoulders. So have our programme managers.*

*We have only been able to silence the symptoms of stress, without really treating them. (Mary)*

*One part of me burned out because of my work with refugees. Today, as a consequence of that work, I have high blood pressure, I often feel tired and I have a problem with my thyroid.*

*I think these health-related issues are maybe the consequences of the stress I experienced in the course of my work.*

*It is not easy to recover from all that. (Maja)*

For many activists, serious illness, even cancer, still doesn't guarantee they'll slow down, as Staša told us:

*When I was at a gathering in Canada on women's health, one woman asked all those activists who had interrupted their radiotherapy to come to that gathering to stand up ...*

*And so many women stood up ...*

All forms of human rights activism carry potential risk. But for those activists working on high-stress issues, such as HIV/AIDS and violence against women, the impact on their health is enormous, as Hope explained:

*I have seen activists do things for others, but no one does things for them ... Especially those working on violence against women and HIV/AIDS—these both take their toll.*

*I have been with an organisation that helps people with HIV. When I was there after two days I was sick myself, the energy could not get out of my head. Then I thought about people who are there everyday.*

*This is the same for violence against women—people come and leave parts of themselves with you—and take a piece of you with them.*

*I have known three activists who suffered minor strokes. One is Beatrice who works with babies who have been raped as young as three months to two years old. I have been taking her for massage and reiki.*

Coping with and recovering from illness, much like burnout, can be an uphill battle.

As one activist pointed out, however, illness can also be the best teacher in the world, because it can force you to stop. To intensely, urgently consider different ways of being, and of being active.

And to ask you to listen to your heart.

## ***Our Hearts***

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When you work with violence, often, it seeps into your heart. And you can't get it out.

Some cultures might call that trauma. Others might just say you are heartsick. It doesn't matter what we call it. We just need to understand it. Here's what Lama told us about trauma in Palestine:

*Hanaan doesn't laugh anymore.*

*She's thinking of leaving her house. But she can't go to a safer area. And she can't concentrate on her work. Her beautiful garden is ruined. They broke everything. Her dishes. Furniture. They wrote something on the walls.*

*We all come together each morning in the office and just talk. With news of the night before. Whose house got hit.*

*Even the psychologists here are stressed out.*

*And we just got adapted to this trauma 24/7. As activists, we just don't think about what we need. We just get used to it.*

So what do you do in a situation where even the psychologists are too stressed to help you?

Like Lama said, you adapt and you keep going. It is one more thing you absorb into your body.

Most activists witness traumatic events. For some, like Hanaan and Lama, their experiences are direct and daily. They are both the targets—and the frontline response.

For others, it is part of confronting constant violence ... whether it is picking up the pieces after a gang rape or offering shelter to families running from war. Or other forms of sadness and suffering. Working with HIV/AIDS. Working in a refugee camp after the tsunami.

And what about activists who don't see themselves as the 'frontline'? Activists who offer legal advice. Document stories. Provide resources. They absorb the sadness, too, as Eva Zillén pointed out—although they don't always realise it:

*A lot of activists work with hearing stories that can be a burden to them. If you are working on psycho-social issues, maybe you would think you might need some support.*

*But activists who are working on legal issues don't have that same awareness—when I asked them how they deal with the stories, they all started to cry. They don't think about the need they have themselves ...*

*Anyone working under so much pressure, working against governments like this, needs places to talk about their feelings. Otherwise they will burn out.*

We never seem to have the time to talk about our experiences, our sadness. To feel, truly, honestly. To reflect, grow, and move on, as Ariella Futral points out:

*The emotional aspect of this work is never really addressed. Although we sometimes cry, there is rarely space to talk about the pain and suffering we deal with on a daily basis.*

And that creates a vicious cycle, as Ouyporn explained:

*The issues that we work with ... if you don't think about them, if you don't reflect, you burn out. You work for peace, but you are not peaceful yourself.*

## ***Without Borders***

Eventually, you pay the price for adapting. You just keep taking it home with you, as Bernedette explained:

*When you are going into a community and doing a workshop on women's rights, these women are all traumatised. They've seen fathers burn mothers alive. It comes out with uncanny regularity—eventually you come to expect it. People want to bring up their trauma—whether you like it or not.*

*Then when you exit the workshop, you are really whacked. You are holding lifetimes of suffering from that room, from women of all ages.*

*You leave and take it with you when you go home ...*



Throughout the wars in the Balkans, Maja helped activists to talk about self-care and worked to prevent burnout. When she returned home to the Netherlands, though, she found that:

*Violence is endless. If there is no adequate supervision then we become borderless.*

*I have a friend who worked with people who have post-traumatic stress syndrome. Currently she needs a lot of support for her mental health. She had drawn into herself, she lives like a zombie now.*

*Another one who worked with people with HIV/AIDS is now an addict. She now brings people she supports into her house. She is still on drugs. She has no personal borders.*

And, sometimes, it's not just activists who pay the price.

## ***Baby Mine***

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The children of activists are special. Steeped in a world of activism from day one, many grow up to become powerful activists in their own right.

But living in the shadow of a saint, as Ken Wiwa called it, means that their childhoods are challenging, to say the least.<sup>29</sup>

So we ask ourselves about the price our children pay for our activism. What happens when your work puts your children at risk? When what you do directly or indirectly threatens their safety?

And when I say safety, I mean everything and anything. Because for children (just like for adults), it's all mixed together. So I mean the safety of their hearts. Their minds. Their bodies.

Safety is about the way they feel when you're not there. When they're left alone to take care of themselves. And their little brothers and sisters. Wondering when you'll be home this time. If you'll come home.

Or when you are there, but not really, because of everything else going on in your head. When they overhear snatched conversations about very bad things. When they feel your exhaustion and the stress in the pitch of your voice. Or the back of your hand.

All the way through to the primal terror only a child can really feel about losing a parent.

How can you reconcile that?

Years ago, Marina was threatened outside her Moscow flat because of her work on violence against women in Russia. She thought that her son didn't know about it. It was only later that she realised he did ... and how he felt.

And she asked herself the same question that so many activists ask—maybe only once in their lifetime, maybe every day:

*Is it right to put your child through this?*

Kaari wondered whether she'll find that answer years from now:

*I worry about my children's health and happiness. I sometimes feel that I do my work at their expense. Not having enough time with the children is not unique to me alone.*

*I know it will come back to bite me in the wrong place ten years from now.*

Sujan Rai said that she worries about it every day:

*One particular feeling I have is guilt, because you are not attending to your children. But that is very typical for women.*

*I am not worried about my husband, I am not worried about my in-laws—they are supported.*

*But what I feel very guilty about, and depressed at times, is that I am not giving enough time for my daughter. She is four. I have to*

*leave her and go to places, and I am away for a week, two weeks sometimes. And I feel it is not good for her. I had a very difficult time leaving her after my maternity leave, but then I had to because I had some other work as well. That is one guilt that I find very difficult fighting back.*

*I think I can fight any kind of discrimination relating to women's issues. But that is one thing I have difficulty fighting with.*

Mostly, you just keep hoping it's worth it.

That your children will understand that all the risks you took ... all the time, the energy you gave to the work ... that it is as much *about them* as it is about everyone else. About making their world safe and just, as Leyla told us:

*I travelled in all the former Soviet republics, on the Karabakh frontline and all over the world to different conferences. I wasn't home much.*

*I was lucky that my daughter had a good father. Today they are much closer friends with each other than with me. I am trying now that she is 20 to answer her questions more often.*

*But on the other hand, I hope that with time, she will understand that the work to which her mother gave so much of her time was important for everyone.*

*And for her, too.*

But here's the big, scary question. What if it isn't worth it? What if they don't understand why you did it? And what if we only find out too late?

*Among activists who have gone into exile, I can see the high occurrence of their children who have later gone into psychiatric hospitals—it is the hot potato passed onto the children.*

*It is trans-generational.*

*You don't allow yourself to go mad, so your children go mad. I know of several others who have paid a high price, there are no words being put on that. And psychoanalysts who handle these cases of children and young adults, they don't know how to deal with this.*

*They just don't see.*

## **What's Pleasure got to do With it?**

One last consequence ... what happens to pleasure?

I first noticed pleasure on the agenda at an AWID conference in Bangkok in 2005. But not just any kind of pleasure ... sexual pleasure.

I was stunned, then genuinely confused.

What did pleasure have to do with women's rights? What kind of issues could they possibly discuss during such a presentation? It seemed so incongruous, so frivolous.

I had to make some sense of it. So after some thought, I decided that it must be about the consequences of violence against women and subsequent constraints on sexual function. They must be talking about FGM or vesicovaginal fistula (VVF). That made sense.

I filed this away as a problem solved and went on to attend the rest of the conference, relieved. That said, I did give all pleasure-related discussions a wide berth, just to be sure.

Working with Jelena, though, meant that I couldn't avoid the subject of pleasure for long. Much as I tried, Jelena kept bringing it up, saying pleasure *was* about sex. Not the kind of sex used as a weapon of power and anger, not the type that is inextricably linked with violence, sadness, and fear.

No, this was the good stuff. The pleasure found through another's body—or one's own—without restraint, without fear. Sex that's fun. Sex that celebrates life.

Jelena kept saying that sex has everything to do with activism. I countered immediately that I had gone to see the *Vagina Monologues* twice. Wasn't that enough?

In the end, it was Bernedette and Maria who finally made me realise that we had to talk about sex, and that we had to talk about it here. Even if it was so very ... personal.

I met Maria, a Ugandan activist, in Kathmandu. I found her uncompromising, straightforward attitude to sex exhilarating, as well as a bit scary. To my surprise, she was one of the few activists to list great sex as a coping strategy:

*Occasionally during times of extreme emotion, regardless of whether it is extreme 'stress' or extreme 'happiness', I indulge in great sex, with or without a partner.*

Mary Jane Real, too, is clear that when it comes to sustaining herself, she turns to 'soul-shaking sex, and lots of it'.

Bernedette mentioned an entire organisation with a great attitude towards work and pleasure:

*In Nigeria, there is an activist organisation that keeps dildos and vibrators in its office ... now that's an idea!*

More often, though, we ended up talking about a lack of sex. Some called it 'bed death'. Others just called it exhaustion. Although Maria celebrates sexual pleasure as an important part of her life, she also pointed out that chronic stress, often combined with constant exposure to sexual violence issues, drains many activists of desire:

*An activist's life comprises 24 hours of stressed time. As activists we deal with very stressful issues, often involving sexual violence, which are aggravated by the fact that our work has no end. Many of us are familiar with having to wake up in the night to scribble down a bogus point, for fear of forgetting it. At what time do we ever stop to enjoy sex?*

Maja told us how working on sexual violence took its toll on a friend:

*A few days ago I had a conversation with a friend working with women who survived sexual violence. She told me that once she started working on sexual violence, she stopped being sexually active. Today she cannot imagine having sexual desires. She is on health leave now and has realised that her work is connected to how she feels about her sexuality.*

Bernedette went further, linking the spurning of sexual pleasure to a rejection of one's body:

*In South Africa ... we have been living with a survival mentality. So we have completely neglected our own bodily functions and the power and beauty thereof. For a lot of women—feminists—when you discuss menstruation, it is all awful. A phallus is lovely, but there is complete disdain and disgust about women's bodies.*

Sexual pleasure tops a long list of non-essential activities and emotions that activists strip from their lives just to keep going. Maria concluded that:

*Often sexual pleasure is trivialised as unimportant, selfish and something one can do without for a bigger cause.*

Like so many issues I was busy avoiding, it turned out that understanding our relationship with sexual pleasure is central to unlocking the complex web that encases sustainability and wellness.

I finally got what pleasure had to do with it.

# SPIRITUALITY

## *World on Fire*

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Activists face horrors every day. A gang rape in Pakistan. The presence of the Ku Klux Klan in the deep south of the United States. Thousands of families forced from their burning homes in Sudan. One million people slaughtered in three months in Rwanda. We think about them. We write about them. They wake us up in the dead of night.

Very rarely, though, do we talk about them.

And that makes sense, most of the time. Because, as Susan suggested:

*Activists face a dilemma. They have to stay objective—to maintain some distance from the horrors they face so they can keep their ability and commitment to address them strong. They have to find a way to numb their feelings, just to stay in the fray day after day. To stand apart, so they can bear being in the thick of it for so long. And that is a healthy self-protection.*

But this also leaves us alone with the BIG questions, the ones that Lama asked: why such terrible violence? When will it stop? What's the point of fighting for justice in a world that allows such suffering?

Some activists turn to their faith for answers, and for the strength to keep going.

In Sierra Leone, Gladys Brima described how her spirituality offers her the principles and values to stay active:

*There are a lot of links between my spiritual practice and my activism. In terms of my peace work, my spiritual practice stresses love, forgiveness and reconciliation. In my peace activism, as an active non-violent person, these concepts are my principles.*

Amy Bonnaffons, in the US, explained how her spiritual practice is *central* to her activism:

*Both my spiritual practice and my social change work operate with the goal of compassion at the centre. My spiritual practice is not only about developing clarity and balance, but also about cultivating compassion and love so that I can connect with others more deeply. It helps me develop the stability and wisdom necessary to address these problems; it also provides me with a useful philosophical framework (i.e. that life should be guided by compassion and kindness) that serves as a constant reminder to me of what I think is important.*

For some activists, spirituality can even be a tool for resistance, as Indrakanthi Perera reminded us:

*There is something spiritual when small actions multiply and give rise to mass outpourings—like what is happening now in Burma, which is lead by the Buddhist clergy. It brings tears to my eyes and hope to my heart.*

*Spirituality has definitely supported me to make a success of some small activist efforts. For example, when the Sri Lankan police detained a friend (a British scholar) and threatened to deport her, we went to the police station and began Buddhist chanting—the metta sutra—over and over again. At first, they threatened to throw us out... But later, they changed so much and gave into all our requests for her safety.*

For other activists, though, concepts like faith and spirituality are painfully—and for many, inextricably—linked to organised religions, patriarchy, oppression, and violence.

And rising fundamentalisms—whether Christian, Hindu, Islamic, or Jewish—are fast stripping away decades of hard-won women's rights.



Rights to our bodies, to choose who we love, to actively, equally participate in shaping our world. Worse still, they are complicit in perpetrating—and covering up—violence.

Activists who speak out against human rights violations committed in the name of organised religions often lose their families and friends in the process. Some lose their lives.

So where does that leave us?

Because the irony is this: human rights activism, by its nature, forces us to ask the most basic and unsettling questions about our mad world. To try to understand, and make some sense of, the reasons behind incomprehensible violence.

But with no time to reflect, and with so few safe places to turn to, where do we find answers to the questions that haunt us? Find respite from the shadowy images we carry inside? When, for some of us, as Emily explained, ‘we are robbed of our spiritual sustenance’ because of who we are and what we do:

*When our religious leaders are homophobic, where do queer activists turn for the spiritual guidance, meaning and rejuvenation that others can rely on?*

Where do we turn when we have been denied by—or deliberately denounced by—those very places that may have once offered us sanctuary?

## ***Feeding the Soul***

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As it turns out, many activists find the answers within themselves. Often very privately. Frequently through practices, ancient or new, that resonate within their culture. Some call it spirituality, or the ‘S’ word, as Terrice dubbed it. Others label it contemplative practice. For others, there is no name, it is simply as natural as embracing the elements or digging bare hands into the earth to help create life. Whatever its name, it takes us back to our deepest beliefs and values, our core understanding of humanity. To the source of our commitment:

*Trying to keep a balance, when all is burning around you, and then not running away and hiding, but doing your bit to the best of your ability—that needs spirituality as its source, for sure. (Indrakanthi)*

And it is key to sustaining ourselves as activists. Because, as Margaret pointed out:

*We'll never have peace unless people have peace within themselves. To really bring about significant change, people have to go within themselves and find peace ...*

Yet, since spirituality is so controversial, and so deeply personal, in the world of women's rights many activists still feel too embarrassed to share their practice openly with their own community of activists, as Katherine Acey described:

*Religion was a very, very important part of my upbringing, and it wasn't only the laws and the rules. Being in my religious community brought me to my feminist values and social justice beliefs. For a long period in my life, working for issues like reproductive rights and being a lesbian, I moved further and further away from religious institutions—but not away from faith. Nevertheless, I am very secretive about telling people that when I go back to visit my family, I actually go to church with them.<sup>30</sup>*

A lack of support within the activist community can leave some feeling isolated and alone:

*Many activists find and nurture their spirituality within themselves, outside of any formal religion. And that spirituality sustains them. But it is such a personal and sometimes very isolating process, because they are doing this on their own. There is such a need for a community of people seeking a spiritual path. Community is something that organised religion offers in a way that a solely personal practice doesn't, and many activists I know deeply struggle with how to maintain their spiritual practice when it is not reflected in or supported by their activist community. (Ginger Norwood)*

And reflection takes time. In our overworked, 24/7 activist culture, it is hard to choose to take that time, when there are so many other priorities, as Krishanti noted:

*Taking time and being slow is just not valued in the women's movement. There is a resistance to the kind of transformation that requires you to reflect and practice.*

But despite these obstacles, all over the world, some activists *are* making time for reflection.

Mónica Alemán said it best in the foreword to the extraordinary *Self Care and Self Defense for Women Activists* manual, when she described deep spirituality as a core source of indigenous activist strength:<sup>31</sup>

*We will continue to discover that the main source of this strength lies in the power that we have within. For us indigenous women, the original people of this America, we feel that we must live in a state of deep spirituality. We even 'cleanses' ourselves regularly and I invite you to explore what this cleansing of spirit is in order to be able to continue working.*

*Many of us derive this strength from our connection with the earth, spirits and our ancestors, who are our role models in life. So in this manner, let us identify all those elements from which we derive our inner strength from every corner.*

She goes on to remind us that there are many different paths to discovery:

*But sisters, we must take care that in trying to discover this holistic sense of well-being in our lives; we must not only think in terms of the western world and must give space to other forms of finding this integrality, duality and cosmovision.*

In Nepal, Indira Shrestha and her colleagues at Strii Sakti spend the first hour of their workday, every morning, in contemplative practice. They begin with meditation to ground and centre themselves. Then they read inspirational texts together. Sometimes they play music, or work on breathing or with sound.

In Colombia, indigenous women activists spend time with their brujas/spiritual mothers for guidance and renewal.

Natasha created her own path in Costa Rica:

*I grew up in a very religious family. As a teenager, I suffered rejection from my church but that has not made me lose my faith. So even though I am not a religious person, I consider myself to be very spiritual and I believe that is what keeps me going.*

*I still pray to a Supreme Being, but now I also do meditation, breathing exercises, Feng Shui and cleansing rituals that help me find peace in moments of turmoil.*

In South Africa, Sally meditates:

*Something that sustains me is my Buddhist meditation practice. This keeps me sane. And I try to carve out a little bit of time where I can rest, listen to music, a bit of reading, keeping my mind going.*

Many activists have no set practice or religious background. They simply feel deeply the sacredness of life, as Susan described:

*Nature itself can and does remind us of the gift of life. I have a favourite quote that I feel fits me perfectly. It comes from the short story 'High Tide in Tucson' by Barbara Kingsolver. In it she speaks of how, early in life, in the darkest of times, she learned how to 'fall in love with life again', and again, and again by concentrating on one beautiful natural thing and filling herself with its amazing perfection.*

*I did that too, although I never would have been able to phrase it that perfectly.*

Maja walks in the woods in the Netherlands:

*My way of dealing with [stress] is to enjoy culture and to enjoy nature. To walk along the woods. This is what gave a boost to my*

*morale. No one taught me to do that. That is something I learned in my home. These are the values I brought with me.*

*Along with the darkness there is always beauty.*

In North America, groups like the Centre for Contemplative Mind in Society, stone circles, and Vallecitos (to name a few) are exploring ways of supporting activists to integrate spirituality into their daily work. Capacitar works globally, teaching a combination of body/mind/spirit practices for unblocking and healing traumatic stress.<sup>32</sup>

In Thailand, the International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice (IWP) offers retreats for activists, as Ouyporn explained:

*When we invite women activists into our centre, we make them feel centred and grounded. We encourage them to do meditation and yoga. To change their personal practices, for example by going on long walks and not thinking about anything or eating simple food. We ask them to change their routine. We ask them to be silent even if they have amazing ideas at that moment—those ideas will come again. We support them to calm down. We support them not to think about others. Not to think about the world, not to think about their families.*

*We teach them that loving yourself is loving the world ...*

Spiritual practices don't just help us make sense of violence. They can also help answer the other big questions, as Ginger reminded us. The nice ones. About love in the world. Loving ourselves. Nurturing an inner spirit. Finding harmony within ourselves, in our relationships.

That's something worth exploring. Together.

# CELEBRATING RESILIENCE: ACTIVIST STRATEGIES

## *We Get Back up Again*

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Yanar Mohammed runs the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, one of the very few women's NGOs that continues to speak out about women's human rights abuses in the country, despite the increasing number of kidnappings and executions of activists.

I called her for a chat as she flew through London on her way back to Baghdad. We caught up on family and work. Bringing up her son as a single parent. Supporting her mother through a year of chemotherapy. The endless hours at her computer, managing programmes, writing reports and proposals. We debated security risks and the pros and cons of going back to Iraq in view of recent threats and her high profile as an outspoken activist.

When I asked when she'd last taken a break, she laughed and said '*What's that?*' She mentioned instead occasional snatched days, here and there, with a close friend or colleagues.

And then she said: '*Well, it is tough. But you know, Jane, I love it. I love this work.*'

With that, I finally got it.

Human rights activism is gruelling, stressful, insecure, low paid (if it pays at all). It leaves little time for friends, family, and lovers.

And at its best, it's one the most rewarding, challenging, and powerful vocations in the world.

Somehow that is a big part of what keeps activists going. It doesn't really take much—even just the knowledge that somehow, somewhere it all matters.

So how do we do it? How do we keep going? Stay strong? Keep a sense of humour? Maintain a capacity to love?

Shaya and Emily do it by dancing 5Rhythms first thing in the morning.<sup>33</sup> Maria has great sex, dresses to the nines and cooks sumptuous meals. Pilar gives gloves. Rauda hits the gym.

In Sierra Leone, they get together and 'shed the weight'. In the Philippines, everyone dives into their food for comfort.

We drink. We scream. We fight.

Almost everyone cries. Usually in private. Sometimes with friends.

And yes, I think there are more than a few of us who do hug trees.

We are resilient.

We get knocked down. And we get back up again.

Here's how.

## ***Lean on Me***

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For activists, spending time with friends is one of the most important coping strategies they have:

*This is something very important for feminists: friendship. Friendship that is more than solidarity. It is truly friendship—moving with a community in which, throughout the years, you achieved a common understanding. A common language. Where you are able to feel comfortable—despite the fact that you all have different positions on some issues ... In fact it is important to keep the windows and doors open to these differences while cultivating friendship. I think that at this stage of my life, the politics of friendship is very important—I would say that it is probably the most important element of my politics and of my feminism. (Sonia)*

They help us relax and sing:

*When I need to relax, I meet those friends I've been working with all these years—we get a guitar and sing OUR songs. (Leyla)*

In the Balkans, friends came in from outside the region to lend their support:

*What sustained us was women who came in from the outside to support us, women who were calm and objective. Not burnt out. (Rachel Wareham)*

And friendships can literally save your life.

I met Marina in the early 1990s in Moscow. It was soon after the fall of the Soviet Union, and there really was a sense of possibility in the air. An opening, a space for change. And in that space, Marina and her friends started something amazing: the first crisis hotline for women in Russia.

I called Marina about a year ago to catch up, and found out that the Anna Network now works with 40 centres to combat violence against women all over the former Soviet Union.

And while we caught up on the years between us, Marina told me a story about friendship:

*I was working flat out for years, often alone. The work was stressful and sometimes even dangerous. By 1994, I realised something was wrong when I lost my sense of smell ...*

*Then in 1995, at Beijing, my friends decided to do something about it. They took me aside—16 of them—and handed me a contract they'd written up. In it, I promised to take care of myself or else. The punishment for breaking the contract—I would have to drink Chinese rice liqueur for breakfast every day ... That part was funny.*

*But it really did make me stop and really think about taking care of myself.*



Our families (in the broadest sense of the word) are our friends, too. And when they support us, and our work, they are our touchstones. Our anchors. They are there at the very beginning, when we make that leap into activism, as Rita remembered:

*It was as if I was possessed by the idea of founding an organization to do the work I dreamed of ... Fortunately for me, my children were supportive and encouraging. Their undivided faith in me was poignant.*<sup>34</sup>

They listen when we just need to talk:

*I talk with my mother—she’s really my pillar of strength. But the older I grow, the more concerned I get that she is burdened with so much already that I want to make her load lighter, instead of heavier. (Zawadi)*

*I talk with my husband, he supports me. (Leyla)*

*I talk with my sister Rose. My support system at home is wonderful and has helped me cope, especially with the sadness that I feel from my association with the women with whom I work. (Kaari)*

## ***Crying it Out***

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Crying it out has universal resonance among activists. Alone or with company, for five minutes or hours, it’s a huge release.

In Zimbabwe, Hope pointed out that one group working on HIV/AIDS even has a ‘crying room’.

In Boulder, Colorado, Trena told us:

*When I am ready to burst and can’t take it any more, nothing works better than a good cry. I have literally come home, sat on the couch and said ‘Don’t worry, I’m OK, I just need to let it out’, and proceeded to cry for 15–30 minutes.*

## ***Those Gloves***

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Pilar gives comfort ...

*How do I deal with stress?*

*Well, I know what it is to be homeless and jobless in my lifetime.*

*So sometimes, I dive back into doing my 'glove giveaway programme' for day labourers.*

*This is something I do personally which in some small way pays back a debt to my community. I buy hundreds of pairs of work gloves and a couple of big boxes of brewed coffee, and I pass out gloves and cups of coffee to undocumented immigrants seeking work. There are groups of these men (women don't stand on these corners) waiting to be hired for work. I come to see them at six a.m. and hand out gloves and coffee. I get to talk to them too, to bring up their spirits. They are all Central American or Mexican and speak only Spanish.*

*While it is depressing to hear their stories, I am fortified as well.*

*Somehow, the act of giving comfort while needing comfort can be an incredible equaliser and allows me to decompress.*

## ***Saying No to Working Weekends!***

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Charlotte finally said no to working on weekends (well, mostly ...):

*You have these moments of clarity.*

*I was getting physically tired. I love my work, but I realised that physically and mentally I needed more breaks. I had been overworking for so long that I felt I had a lot of credit in the bank.*

*I should have done it earlier. I would feel guilty about maybe one*

*thing, but not generally. But it is still hard to do sometimes.*

*Some years back, I realised for myself that I needed to make a decision that as a rule I wouldn't work on Saturdays. In order to keep work from completely overwhelming my life (and because of pressure from my partner), I had to acknowledge I couldn't go the whole weekend because I would get too anxious. So no to all of Saturday, and only start working later on Sunday evening.*

*I made some boundaries. Whatever it is, some people may need to make boundaries, in order to say that work doesn't get all my time*

## ***A Little Bit Funny***

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Jelena is hilarious.

Within five minutes of bounding up the stairs of our little wooden office, she would have me on the floor laughing. Usually over something silly (like stinky lammie). Occasionally something raunchy.

Frequently over something deeply, deeply, politically incorrect.

Laughter keeps activists going. From basic slapstick to dark and dry, we need it. It brings light into the darkness. It frees up energy — and opens perspectives.

Like a good orgasm, it's the release we need to burn off accumulated stress. To celebrate life. In all its madness and all its absurdity.

*I believe we just don't place enough emphasis on the love and the fun and the funny. Because life always throws you something funny.*  
(Tina)

*Even the survivors of the worst violence still find room for laughter. There is more to life than a cause ... and we can all find time for laughter.* (Emily Davis)

## ***The Written Word***

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Sometimes, we pour it all out in our writing, published or unpublished. And it takes all forms.

Kaari writes op-eds, book chapters, and articles. Bisi writes poetry and edits a magazine.

Lutanga Shaba wrote a book: *The Secrets of a Woman's Soul*.<sup>35</sup>

Sarala wrote a letter:

*I was really upset. It was one week after a woman was raped and murdered, her body dumped in a schoolyard. Her body was found, but she was not identified ... she was just buried naked by some man from the hospital. We could not get the information in time to even give her proper burial cover. At that point I was feeling really sad and I came back and wrote about it all in a letter.*

*That helped. I didn't show it to anyone for a long time, I just kept it. After I had controlled my own big emotions, then I showed it to friends, close friends.*

## ***Collective Change***

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And it's not just individual activists who are finding ways to take care of themselves.

Across the world, a range of activist organisations has made well-being a collective priority. They offer great examples of how we can make change from within. Here are just a few:

In South Africa, thanks to Lesley Ann Foster, the Masimanyane Women's Support Centre has a massage therapist on staff to support activists working on issues of violence.

Claudia Samayoa described how the Unit for the Protection of Human Rights

Defenders, Movement of Human Rights in Guatemala recognised that it was time to change:

*After several years of attending to human rights defenders under attack, and being the object of attacks ourselves, without attending to our mental health needs, some of us suffered burnout. We recognised the symptoms within ourselves. Being a very small unit, we experience the various consequences of vicarious stress, as well as the trauma inflicted on ourselves. Because several of us were aware that what we were observing in others at the time was also there in ourselves, we decided to act.*

*What was designed for the Unit and for those that work close to the unit was a multilevel response, not only to deal with stress individually, but also as a team:*

- ***Psychiatric therapy:*** this consisted of 10 sessions of therapy with a psychiatric specialist with knowledge of political violence and trauma. Two members of the Unit had this assistance, as well as three defenders. It was very difficult to get two defenders into the programme since it requires discipline and time, and defenders usually do not have such time.
- ***Supervision of practice:*** one session of three hours a month to review the treatment of a case and the way we felt and we related to each other. It identifies areas of improvement.
- ***Self-help group:*** one session of four hours a month to try out different relaxation exercises and skills in stress release. The idea was to adopt one or two of these exercises, and to keep using them.

Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi told us that the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) in Ghana has developed policies to ensure staff well-being:<sup>36</sup>

*AWDF strengthens the African women's movement with its grantmaking and capacity building programs, and is committed to promoting and nurturing women's leadership across generations. In order to do this effectively, we aim to practice what it preaches in order to ensure that*

*organisations keeping the women's movement alive are healthy and sustainable, and this begins from the individuals within the organisation. These are some ways in which AWDF internally promotes a culture of feminist leadership, well-being and self-care:*

- ***Flexible working hours for all staff.*** All AWDF staff are women, and some are mothers of young children. Being able to work flexible hours is very important in this context.
- AWDF staff are entitled to a ***three-month, paid sabbatical*** for every three years worked.
- AWDF makes ***statutory pension contributions*** on behalf of staff. There is also a ***severance package*** for staff who have served the organization, calculated according to the number of years spent in service.
- There is a budget for ***staff medical services*** with an upper limit for each staff member.
- ***Time off in Lieu (TOIL)*** is offered when staff work overtime, which they do when they go on long trips. Staff can take time off on their return, i.e., one day for one week away, two days for two weeks away, etc.
- AWDF has a ***Staff Well-Being Budget***. Staff can use this to address self-care needs such as fitness training, stress relief, etc. Currently, most staff have decided to pool resources available from this budget to pay for the services of a personal trainer, who comes in to the office to work with staff in groups or one-on-one.
- AWDF has a ***'Social Secretary'*** who is a staff member responsible for keeping tabs on people's birthdays. We celebrate each birthday with a brief lunch gathering to cut a cake and relax.

- *AWDF has **written and openly displayed values and principles**, and these are discussed regularly within the organization to make sure people are comfortable with them, especially new additions to the staff and board.*
- *Generally, we try to promote a **safe space for women**, a place where women can work hard, play hard, have fun, dance a lot, and enjoy the revolution!*

## ***We Need to Talk About ...***

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So far, we've managed to talk about almost every hot topic: sex, betrayal, religion. Money.

There's just one last thing.

I know that we need to talk about drinking. I'm just not sure how.

Many activists don't drink at all.

For those who do, they may just have a glass of wine or two to unwind. And stop at that:

*I drink. Not a lot, but I definitely have a glass of wine after a hard day at the office. I've gotten better at recognising it as a crutch. But I still use it at times ...*

For some activists, it's their only outlet. The only way they can relax. So they can feel nothing, just oblivion. Or so they can feel something. Anything. To help them sleep, to have sex, to dance.

Enough said. Maybe we don't have to talk about it here.

But we need to talk about it somewhere.

## NEXT STEPS

Don't throw the baby out with the bath water.

That expression always worries me. It's silly and scary at the same time. And it keeps coming up when I think about what happens next.

If the way we've been active for generations isn't quite working anymore ... then what?

Maybe more importantly, does embracing a different way of working negate everything we've done until now? Does it mean we've been wrong, and this is right?

I've been thinking about this a lot.

And of course, it means exactly the opposite.

Next steps mean celebrating where we've been, what we've done—everything. Our successes, our losses. All the goodness, greatness ... and everything in between.

And then taking ourselves and our work to the next level. We can do even more, even better.

But we have to start by doing less, engaging in the '*extreme sport of stopping*', as one activist calls it.

And then recognise that we need to change the culture of activism. We created it. We perpetuated it.

And we can change it. It's our choice.



Here's what we need to do:

- *Start talking about it*—dedicate the time, resources, and commitment to putting well-being on the table.
- Explore, develop, and support a range of *experimental initiatives to support well-being*.
- Radically alter *our relationships with donors* and the way *we fund ourselves*.
- Discuss how to *take these ideas forward*.

## ***Let's Start Talking***

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*The first issue is to raise consciousness. You have to prepare this environment and a culture of looking at ourselves.* (Rita)

*First, women's organisations need to recognise that the mental and physical health of activists is a crucial issue. That is the first thing—that it is recognised.* (Čarna)

So we begin by talking.

But no longer by accident, on the edges of conferences or in rushed e-mails. Or during tearful, exhausted calls from the office at three in the morning, reaching out to friends in another time zone.

No, this has to be very deliberate. We put well-being on the table, at the top of our agendas.

We put the same amount of energy into finding ways to be active and stay well and safe as we put into our everyday work.

Finally, truly we make the private ... public.

And yes, that means dedicating significant resources to it. If we don't make our own well-being a priority, it will be relegated to the back-burner. Because

it is uncomfortable. It means radically changing our culture. Our entire way of being.

How do we do that?

Specifically by:

- *Asking ourselves*, as individual activists, what well-being means to us. What it would take for us to live in balance. And really taking the time to listen to what comes out of this. It means change, and change can be painful and scary.
- Dedicating real time *in our own organisations* to sitting down and talking about our well-being together, and the hard changes it might mean.
- Committing time to discussing all aspects of well-being at as many *different meetings and gatherings* as we can.
- *Convening dedicated international, regional, and national meetings* to discuss various aspects of well-being, culture, and ways forward. In beautiful places. Without packed agendas.

We start with ourselves, within activist networks, women's funds, human rights organisations. And we reach out to other activist partners and supportive donors.

### ***Beyond Women's Rights Activism***

It's also important that we take these conversations outside of the gender rights arena to **other social justice movements**. Activists working on the environment, land rights, against racism ... all face similar sustainability worries. We have more in common than we think.

Which brings us, at last, to the subject of **men in the activist world**.

Much of this book is very specific to the experiences of women, transgender,

and intersex activists. Many of their sustainability concerns are intertwined with their experiences of discrimination based on their genders.

But hopefully there is also a lot here that male activists will recognise as true for them, as well.

Men working in social justice movements also need space to explore their shared concerns with activists of all genders, as well as those specific to their lives and experiences as men standing up for human rights.

I'm not sure how to create that space, but I believe there is plenty of room for us to find it, together.

### ***The Right to be Safe and Well***

Finally, we need to start framing the idea of work in a healthy, balanced, safe, and sustainable way **as a right. Not a favour.**

As Julie de Rivero emphasised in her explanation of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders:

*The Declaration reflects a change in paradigm about rights and defending human rights defenders.*

*The conventional position was that human rights activists had to be prepared to be martyrs for the cause. That is no longer the case and should not be. All people are entitled to claim their rights and human rights defenders are no exception.<sup>37</sup>*

Mary Jane took Julie's point much further, when she clearly outlined her recommendations for our next steps:

*We need to articulate our concerns about lack of resources, trauma resulting from violence and responding to violence, and lack of personal security in terms of rights—to assert that these are entitlements we can rightfully claim as human rights defenders, and not mere favours owed us because we have done significant work in the advancement of human rights.*

*We need to continue to interrogate human rights norms and standards, as the women's and other movements have done, so well-being becomes a human rights principle, integral to the 'dignity' that human rights fundamentally speak of.*

*We need to find ways to reinterpret the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which is so far the only instrument that focuses on the rights of activists, to imbibe a 'feminist ethics of care and well-being' that Lepa talks about and as a result, programmatic, not sporadic, responses are developed to address our needs and change our stories of exploitation and neglect.*

In the introduction to the *Self Care and Self Defense for Women Activists* manual, Alejandra Sardá even suggests that we create, and commit to, our own Convention—on the Rights of the Body and Soul of Women Activists:<sup>38</sup>

*A particular merit of this manual is that it talks of realities that are almost ... never understood such as, for example, the distance that exists between our discourse on human rights and social justice, and the reality of the labour practices adopted by our organizations and work spaces. It is imperative that we recognize ourselves as workers, with rights and duties – just as teachers and nurses, among other professionals, have already done – let us once and for all break free of the rhetoric of “militant sacrifice”, which only serves to justify forms of violence that we would never accept in a factory or workshop but with which we live on a daily basis in NGOs, collectives and groups.*

*A few weeks ago, in a seminar on women human right defenders which took place in Mexico, Celsa, an incredible environmental activist, said with reference to the failure among women defenders to take care of their own and most personal tools of work – “It is we ourselves who are violating our human rights”.*

*This manual could serve as an excellent basis to draft the Convention on the Rights of the Body and Soul of Women Activists, which every person should endorse as a personal commitment.*

## ***Being Well***<sup>39</sup>

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Now to the how.

How do we change our culture? Angelika Arutyunova is unequivocal:

*Through complete solidarity—that's the answer to sustaining activism.*

Many of us would agree.

Of all the issues we discussed throughout our conversations, by far the most important was the relationship an activist has with herself. Staša put it best:

*Caring for others is powerful—but the culture of self-sacrifice is not sustainable.*

*I am learning now how to set my boundaries. How to make a balance between me and others. I am important to myself as well. I should not be unjust to myself. When we care for ourselves then we also care for others.*

*I want the care for myself to become equally important to me as the care for others. That would mean listening to music, walking by the water ... doing yoga. I care for myself when I listen to particular music, every day, at a particular time.*

Next came our relationships with each other. How we connect, how we support each other. And the opposite: how we sometimes hurt each other. Deny each other. Nothing is stronger in solving our problems than our own honest solidarity. Nothing is potentially more damaging than isolation, or betrayal.

As Rachel reminded us, it is sometimes *our own organisations* that are the first to turn away from us when we need them most:

*Burnout is seen by some organisations as almost an insult, a 'proof' that you don't know how to deal with activist work, somehow you are 'underperforming' or failing to stick to your personal boundaries...*

And that leaves us alone with the some of the toughest questions we'll ever face:

*Who tells us when it's too much? Where to go after, and beyond activism ... when our identity is so tied up with being an activist? And where is the space to go? To go home?*

So, how do we translate that solidarity into practice? Because, as Rakhee pointed out:

*You can't just say 'take care of yourself'. It is a process of building trust. It is a culture of real concern for each other.*

*It needs to be more than spoken.*

*It needs to be shown.*

How do we show solidarity then?

Let's explore a range of ideas and initiatives. Let's experiment. And, as Anissa reminded us, recognise that ways of supporting each other are deeply specific to context and culture.

Why not choose some ideas from the menu below and give them life, energy, and resources?

### ***Beep Beep: Invest in Visibility***

*Lack of recognition poses one of the greatest single obstacles to activist well-being and safety—both in their own countries and around the world.*

Activists are often *very deliberately* made invisible by governments and international organisations. This is part of the same strategy that allows for activists to physically disappear, or to be arrested, executed, or intimidated.

To silence a very powerful opposition.

Invisibility is also inherent in systems that oppress women—it is *structural*,

according to Mary Jane:

*For me, this book is an important reminder of the structural causes that brought about, or continue to reinforce, the non-recognition and lack of valuation for women human rights defenders and their work. These causes are integral to the activists' stories. For example, they talk about patriarchy, which underlies women's exploitation of themselves and the undervaluation by society of their contributions and their worth. This results in the unimportance that others, and also we ourselves, give to the 'private side'. It creates a binary gender that denies other sexual identities. It manifests in the unbelievable violence faced and witnessed by many of the women and 'made the stories stick'.*

Our answer back must be loud and clear.

Activists must be recognised for who they are, and what they do. For their individual and collective courage, determination, and passion. For the extraordinary changes they have made already, and for those they have set in motion.

There are countless ways to increase activist visibility. Here are just two:

- **Increase the amount of information on activists and their work around the world.** So little has been written about activists. That needs to change. We need to know much more about activism—successes, obstacles, strategies—the personal and the political. And that information should come first and foremost from the activists themselves. So we need to very deliberately increase opportunities for *activists to rest, reflect and write about their experiences*. That may be within the academic world, or within retreat spaces. Or through grants to write and reflect in home countries or in the region.
- **Support activist gatherings.** Activists need *the space to celebrate each other and themselves*. Their successes and their transitions. To organise, to network, and to rest. Many still talk about the Kvinna till Kvinna 10 Year Anniversary conference in Dubrovnik, 2003, as a

rare chance to celebrate, and relax, after so many years of working in war zones. So we need to be sure to support conferences, gatherings, and meetings—however activists choose to gather. Because these are some of the safe places where we find recognition, renew our energies and share strategies ... and at last, find the time to truly listen to each other.

### ***Finding our Rhythm Together***

Spirituality, in its many forms, sustains so many of us. Let's get the S word out of the closet and talk openly about how to embrace what works, and put aside the rest. For example, Zawadi talked about making sustainability a part of our every day lives by institutionalising contemplative practice within our organisations. She began the list of ideas below ... why don't we add to it?

- Take five minutes every hour to stop, drink a glass of water, meditate, stretch, or do whatever makes sense to you.
- Create a space within or outside the office (if possible) for peaceful reflection.
- Ensure that at least one day of an annual staff retreat (if applicable) is reserved for rest and restoration.
- Give each person five minutes during staff meetings to share with others whatever they choose (personal/professional challenges, successes, stories, songs, jokes, etc.).
- Fundraise for staff well-being—maybe each staff member could have a personal well-being budget that could be used for massage, touch therapy, reiki, pilates, or whatever individuals might choose.

### ***Lifelines and Hotlines***

Some activist organisations spend a lot of time listening. Supporting activists at an individual level. As Rakhee explained, it is intense and time-consuming work. And incredibly important:

*In the case of the recent Lebanon war, we were there every day, communicating with activists, staying in touch with them, so they had that lifeline, the only way to keep them in touch with the*



*outside world. To let them know that people supported them from everywhere. Partners in Nigeria, Egypt, Afghanistan—all relaying messages to them.*

*These messages were beacons of hope for them, but they also helped them to focus on the long-term issues. This daily, intensive, time-consuming means of communication is how we supported them.*

*This partnership and solidarity—taking time to send messages, to care about the others, to communicate that message. This is a connectedness, these daily connections, through phone, e-mail and through instant messaging.*

*This is very important to paying attention to the activists as well as the activism.*

Right now, activists reach out to each other as much as they can. But it isn't enough. Indeed, we can reach only those with access to communication tools and a good electricity supply.

For those organisations working to support activists (through grants, advocacy, training), too often, this kind of vital communication is relegated to the sidelines—it is left up to individuals to make midnight phone calls or send e-mails to check in with colleagues in difficult situations.

Talking with each other—sharing and walking through experiences together—that is the way that many activists reflect and learn, as Pilar told us:

*I am not an introverted processor. I need a listening ear, so talking to a friend is imperative. It is how we solve problems and strategise.*

If an activist feels alone, scared, worried, threatened, or hopeless, there is no dedicated place she can turn to for advice or just to talk. This means, in turn, that she loses the possibility to reflect and strategise—to work out the best way to keep herself safe. To plan the next phase of a campaign. To remember she is valued.

Let's change that.

Ariane suggested creating an SOS hotline for activists working in isolation, particularly in conflict-affected areas:

*We need to make sure that activists—particularly those working in isolation—are not alone. The fact that Julianne and my friends in Afghanistan can just phone me and talk, that is huge. They need someone who can empathise with them and support them. They need to talk, not to bureaucrats, they need people who love and care for them. That is extremely important. We need to create an SOS hotline for activists.*

That's a great idea. So ...

- Why not create those **SOS hotlines**—either within organisations, on their own, or as part of a new organisation?<sup>40</sup> We can be creative, using the internet (Skype or GoogleTalk, for instance), to make it happen. 'Hotlines', whether based on the internet or a landline, don't have to be physically located in one place. You could have a virtual group of activists supporting them throughout the world, in their own homes. Older activists who are cutting down their hours or retiring may be particularly interested in supporting hotlines. Specialists could be made available for referrals, if an activist needs to talk through a traumatic experience, for example, or is looking for advice on wellness or health (see below).
- If your organisation is dedicated to supporting frontline activists, *make supporting the activists with advice, information—human contact—an explicit, funded function* of your organisation's priorities. Let's learn from those organisations that do make ongoing contact a priority and find out what works.

## **Healing**

Many activists can't get the care they need to recover from illness, accidents or attacks—not to mention prevention. Sometimes, that's about access: because you live in areas where most health services have collapsed. Like Darfur or Chechnya. Or where there's great health care available ... but only for those who can pay the price. Like the United States. Or you can get to

health professionals, but they can't understand your symptoms (insomnia, headaches, nausea)...so they hand you some pills and send you on your way.

And there are times when seeking help will endanger you, and your family. In places like Aceh. Zimbabwe. Burma. When state-run health care institutions refuse you care, or even turn you in to the state. Or when the police beat you, throw you in jail and watch as you lose your baby:

*Irene joined a women's human rights organization named Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA). For her involvement in peaceful demonstrations with WOZA, Irene has been arrested at least eight times. During one detention, she was kicked in the abdomen while pregnant, denied medical attention, and later miscarried.<sup>41</sup>*

Activists have a *right* to health care. We can't replace what's missing. But we can make it a priority by:

- Consistently framing the **denial of health care to activists as a human rights violation**, and ensuring that access to health care is raised in our advocacy campaigns.
- Building an **international, multidisciplinary network of healers** (health care practitioners, psychotherapists, spiritual leaders/healers) to work together to support activists that:
  - Makes *health care information and advice* available—this can be through internet or phone-based health counselling and referrals.
  - Organises *multidisciplinary, mobile teams to visit regions* and offer check-ups, counselling, and basic wellness techniques.
- Designing a **basic wellness guide for activists** that:<sup>42</sup>
  - Captures the diversity of strategies activists use to stay well.
  - Incorporates lessons from a number of cultures and beliefs.
  - Links to the growing *spiritual activism* movement.
  - Builds on the work of groups like Capacitar.

- Integrating **health care and wellness awareness, check-ups, and consultations into all local, regional, and international meetings**—particularly for activists living with, among other things, HIV/AIDS, disabilities, and cancer.
- Make healers available at activist meetings.
- *Make sure there is necessary time for wellness built into agendas*—activists shouldn't be sacrificing time to rest, eat, or attend sessions. There should be dedicated time to relax and talk through all of their health and wellness concerns.
- Be prepared to discover something serious during the process—and ready, if necessary, to refer to a local health care facility or to organise transport.
- **Creating emergency wellness funds** to support activists in the event of, for example, illness, death, or bereavement. Funds might work best if they are based regionally, either as independent foundations, or integrated into regional women's funds.

***One... but not the same***

Activists' health can also suffer when international organisations overlook their well-being, as Julia Greenberg reminded us:

*The international community can be a huge drain on HIV+ activists. Those who are good speakers are claimed by internationals for advocacy, and while it is great exposure, there is never follow-up support to allow these women to return home and build up their own community organizations, or to work on their own local or national advocacy. If donors are going to use activists to promote their own agendas, then they have to realise that the perk of the trip is not enough.*

*HIV+ activist women are invited here and there, but their well-being is just not taken into account. It's become such an industry that at many international AIDS conferences, you will find these token massage and rest spaces. But, it's also the case that at women's conferences, there is often no space or acknowledgment of the presence of HIV+ women.*

- **Establishing activist retreats globally ... and networking them.** Around the world, there are only a handful of places that activists can find respite. We need many more. We could start by bringing together activists who run retreats and those who have created other kinds of safe spaces, such as fellowship schemes (in the academic world), and the torture rehabilitation networks.<sup>43</sup> We need to understand better the models of support out there, and what works among different activists from different contexts and cultures. Then we have to invest in supporting those retreats and support systems that exist—and creating many more safe places.

- **Celebrating Life.** No activist should face illness, and death, alone. Solidarity means standing by each other ... wherever we are in this life's journey. Here's how:<sup>44</sup>
  - Commit to honour and celebrate activists who are coping with terminal illness. Our recognition, our time, and our love are the greatest gifts we can offer.
  - Actively support colleagues—and families—through bereavement processes. Talk about what would help, and support memorials, rituals, ceremonies, celebrations of life—whatever fits.

## ***Building a Social Safety Net***

*We will all get old some day, hopefully. And already at 52, I'm starting to see what it means to get old without certain securities. The things one gave up for a life of activism are easy to see once we are older.*

*We should start retirement funds and co-housing for activist elders (retirement homes).*

*Retirement funds and housing are going to be especially important in this generation of late financial bloomers and others. Financial planning was not part of my activism, nor part of my family's life, so I'm going to have to be creative somehow. (Pilar)*

Many older activists have little to no economic security as they face retirement. For that matter, neither will most younger activists ... and everyone in between.

Establishing a safety net for retiring activists isn't just a priority for older activists—it should be a priority for us all.

But how do we begin?

The WISE authors had a good idea—they talked about bringing in **financial advisers** to begin discussing financial planning with activists in general. That got me thinking. We do some things very well. Others are outside of our expertise.

So let's talk to the experts and figure out ways to finance a global safety net for activists, including:

- Pensions.
- Adult education.
- Health insurance systems.
- Liveable salaries and benefits.

We should be able to build some of this into our externally funded budgets. However, we may also need to establish international, national, and regional funds, and we just might need to create many different systems. For example, maybe in some countries, we could strike special deals with friendly banks to support student loans for activists.

We need to find out who to talk with about creating these safety nets, and explore how other, similar sectors have managed. For example, the UK-based Rory Peck Trust has been developing health insurance and safety training for freelance journalists.<sup>45</sup> Aid agencies have slowly standardised some systems—People in Aid may be a good place to start.<sup>46</sup> The National Organizers Alliance in the US has set up a pension scheme for organisations working on social, economic, environmental, and racial justice.<sup>47</sup>

And finally, we need to think about activists who need more than a safety net ...

### ***Honour and Protect***

What do you do when the damage is done?

I asked Susan that one day. What could we possibly do to help an activist who had already been through too much ... activists who had completely burnt out? Or survived extreme violence? How could we help them get back to the work?

Susan answered: *'You don't get them back to work. That's not the point. You find a way to get them out, get them safe. And you honour and cherish them'.*

Full stop.

In some cases, that means supporting activists to get physically to a place of safety and respite. Temporarily. Or sometimes permanently.

Some organisations work to get activists to safety in or outside their country. They are rare and special.

The trouble is, though, there are very few safe spaces available for activists to rest and recover once they are out of immediate danger. To get the right kind of care they may need to truly heal. In a way that they choose. With the help of a healer, such as a doctor or a psychologist. Or they may just need time alone with white sand and the rhythm of the sea. Or time in the company of other activists.

It's time that we created these spaces. Because if we don't, no one else will.

#### ***... Safe Now***

- Create **safe spaces for activists** to recover after extreme experiences. These may take the form of specially designed healing retreats or safe houses, although they may be based on some of the same principles as other activist retreats (see recommendations above for more on retreats).
- Link this with other initiatives to bring together activist specialists—health care and mental health professionals, healers—who might be able to support recovery.
- There are activist groups all over the world that specialise in supporting violence survivors. We need to investigate whether they might be able to support activist survivors.
- Forge deeper links with groups like the World Organisation against Torture and the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims network in order to discuss concrete ways of supporting activists who have survived extreme violence and torture.

## ***Change the Way We Fund Ourselves***

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### ***Human Rights Grantmakers***

We need to be the change we want to see.

And we need to begin with those organisations whose entire *raison d'être* is to support activists in standing up for the human rights of others. These include, among others, the international and national women's funds and grant-making human rights organisations.

*And they may have the trickiest job of all in paving the way for sustainable activism.*

Since they are activists themselves, they will need to look first at their own cultures and decide what will make it possible for them to find balance and well-being internally. As Tina pointed out:

*Members of the International Network for Women's Funds for the most part have no pensions or benefits, though some have wellness days built in—especially in Central America. But that's one of the things that we've recognised is an issue.*

*A lot of the women's funds don't have enough money to survive a year. And there are just so many groups they know they have to support. For every grant pool, there are so many applicants. They don't feel they can pay attention to these issues. The board would say, pay yourself a pension. But it comes back to this question of how can we afford these luxuries? And we think, maybe we will do it next year ...*

But whether it is changing pay structures, taking more breaks, introducing contemplative practices ... or Friday afternoon dancing sessions (Nagarik Aawaz in Nepal and Urgent Action Fund in the US), it needs to happen. Whatever it takes.

Because the next step is *radically changing the way they fund other activists*. Eva framed this beautifully while talking about donor ethics:



*One of the things we are doing as funders is abusing activists. When we are giving funds, we are not adding funds for health insurance, benefits, etc. Activists are working too hard anyway, and then they have no security if they have to deal with a health issue or just getting older.*

*This is a huge issue. And it is about donor ethics.*

*As donors, ethically, we need to find ways to make the rest and recreation part of our support strategies. To create networking spaces, but not ones that are so packed with work.*

*Holidays are harder for activists to take—that is a big responsibility, when we see that activists are on the verge of burnout, how can we suggest they get away? It is hard, but we have to try.*

*We can be the examples—we can say, I need it, too, or otherwise I will be burnt out ...*

And it means not only funding the range of wellness and safety issues that are integral to sustainability, but also making sure that every step of the way, as much as possible, funding is provided in a sustainable manner. Offering multi-year, core funding, fast and flexibly.

Exactly how most human rights grant-makers would want their donors to fund them ...

So in order to fund other activists in a way that is sustainable, human rights grantmakers may also need to *change the way that they are funded*.

### ***Ask for it***

How do we change the way we are funded?

Lepa, Čarna and Rachel all gave the same answer.

*Once a decision is made to advocate for ethics of care, this factor needs to be planned in the budget, timetable, and resources of the organisation. This also means that mental health care for the workers/activists should be a part of strategic planning, the project*

*proposals, and project reports, including budget proposals of the organisation. (Lepa)<sup>48</sup>*

*Once we've recognised that mental and physical health is a crucial issue, then [we need] to make some decisions about it ... Like to include it into our budgets and strategic planning. (Čarna)*

*We need to include medical and social insurance and pensions (or the equivalent) to standard budget lines for donors funding NGO expenses.*

*For example, GTZ pays an extra salary a year for their national staff, because there is no national medical, social or pension scheme of any type available in Afghanistan. But if GTZ funds the running cost of an NGO, we don't put any allowance in there.*

*I think this could change if NGOs routinely asked for it. (Rachel)*

We start by asking.

And, as Anissa pointed out, we ask *collectively*:

*This is also about us collaborating among ourselves: letting each other know that one of us has approached donor X about this, what answer we got, who else will push the issue next, who else will bring it up again, with which donor (since they also talked to one another)—until we really pressure successfully. It is a long process, but it can be done, if WE work collectively.*

When it comes to changing our culture around money, we need to start with ourselves. Once we have done the thinking and the planning, we need to put the resources in place to move forward.

This means that first, we need to alter our requests to outside donors—to include the basics in our budgets. Without fear or shame. Including: liveable wages, holidays, health care, pensions, security, training, and education. Emergency funds. Space and time to reflect and strategise. And to make our work visible.

How do we get donors to understand that this is important? We transform our relationships.

## ***Donor Relationships***

Once we have started to change the way we ask for money, and how we fund ourselves, then we need to begin a conversation with donors who contribute to human rights work, but don't get it yet ...

Jessica Horn suggested we invest in donor education:

*Right now, a lot of donors just wouldn't pay for it. This is an issue of donor education—we need to phrase this in a way that would explain the context.*

*A lot of donors are not practitioners. They need a bridge—they need the narrative of the human rights defender who has been through these issues ...*

*In the end, donors are just people. Some haven't worked in these situations, so they need the practical realities spelled out for them, rather than hidden. You need to say this is what we are doing and why we need to be safe and well.*

*The women's funds are closer in on these issues, and are more open minded. They do more movement building support, so they would consider this their issue. So they may be the best ones to raise awareness among their donors ...*

Albert agreed that it will take time and effort to get donors to understand the value of sustainability:

*This is almost gibberish to foundation executives who are solely focused on products and measurable results—they are totally lacking in knowledge about sustaining activists. For someone without any understanding of the issues ... it all sounds like vacation. They have no basis of experience or education as to the importance of people's emotional and psychological well-being ...*

When I asked how we could begin to change attitudes among donors, he said:

*With persistence ... It took us a long time to begin to get across to people that Windcall is different, and here is what that difference means. We are up against a tall order, because people in the grant-making business, as well intentioned as they are, are lacking in tools. They are lacking in education ...*

*And sustainability is also going against the grain in western cultures. Because we are telling people what is not taught in our culture—what it is that our culture lacks that causes us to be unprepared to understand burnout and why it is so significant.*

*We need to get them thinking about the value of human beings—that if you lose your leaders from these organisations, what good has been your investment? I suppose these are ways to get at it from an outcomes perspectives.*

*But I'm less clear about how to get them to value the people for themselves.*

*We need to talk to them about their own context. Get them to imagine what would happen in their own foundation if they lost their CEO due to overwork. Introduce these subtleties to help them to begin contemplating the notion that the human beings are equally important to the work itself. It only works over time ...*

So, it seems, we begin by talking here as well.

But first we need to be clear with donors about who we are, and how we get our results—that movement building and human rights work are complex, collective efforts. They can't be measured in terms of a 'return on investment', within inappropriate, 'results-oriented' frameworks. It just doesn't work that way.

We need to have a clear, honest dialogue with donors that will reverse this trend, and that will help us to develop the right tools, together.

Maybe one of the best ways to engage donors in the conversation is to speak honestly about what we've learned, and ask them about *their worries*. How they cope with stress and pressure. What keeps them up at night? How they balance the personal and the private. How they balance their own values, the values of their organisation, and the way that they fund.

Because in the end, it does seem to come back to one thing: if we want to make changes, we have to start by talking about ourselves as individuals. And then, the connections fall into place.

## ***Taking it Forward***

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Finally, we need to talk about **how to take all of this forward**. These are all great ideas, but how can they be pulled together and infused with the energy needed to begin?

How can we incorporate all of these ideas about sustaining activism in a way that is in itself balanced? Yes, we have said that sustainability, wellness, balance all need to be *built into* activism. But so many of the initiatives highlighted above require more than that.

When I spoke to Marieme about WISE, she said that everyone thought it was a great idea. But no one could find the time to take it forward. Without the dedicated resources they needed to develop it, including people, money, space, and a home, it has stayed just a good idea. Nothing more. Not yet.

### ***Where are the Resources?***

So where are the resources—human and financial—needed to make these ideas a reality? They're out there ... but it's up to us to activate them. Here are just a few ideas:

- **Healer activists:** Many activists have 'shape-shifted' their activism to work as healers. Let's ask for their support.
- **Several foundations** are deeply committed to improving health care around the world. Women activists make up the frontline of that health response. Why not work with them to support some of these initiatives to ensure the health and well-being of women activists—increasing access to medicine, preventative care, healing, rest, respite?
- **Companies involved in information technology** and/or other forms of communications may be interested in supporting activist hotlines and information networks. As might foundations that focus on supporting information/ communication/ technology (ICT) initiatives.

So we need to talk about what comes next.

If these are ideas that we believe in, how can they live and grow?

Should we ... encourage some organisations—like the women's funds—to take on some of these initiatives and develop them as programmes? Publicise existing 'best practices' among activist groups? Start up a new organisation?

One thing's for sure. Activists change the world. Every day. So whatever we decide to do next, it's going to be amazing.

## LET'S DANCE (THE END)

Juliette and I were snuggled warm and close on our red sofa one night, lounging in that precious space between Totally Spies and pink word boxes starting with 'sh'.

She looked up at me and asked, with a little stage whisper, 'Mummy ... do you stay up here until 9 at night?' This was clearly a big deal for her. I said, 'Yes darling, sometimes even later. Like 10 or 11'.

She paused and absorbed that.

Finally, she said: 'And you dance naked then, don't you'.

It wasn't a question. It was a statement. I had no idea where it came from. My nights were filled with writing and e-mails and mindless TV shows about nabbing serial killers or cat fights over who would be America's Next Top Model. No dancing there. None.

But for some reason, in her five-year-old little world, hidden away in her ideas basket (as she called it), was a vision of her mummy free and wild. Staying up way beyond bedtime and dancing away in her birthday suit.

What an imagination!

And later I thought ... what an idea ...

Sometimes it just takes that fresh spark of an idea to get you thinking about different ways of being. To open up possibilities.

To wonder what it would be like to dance naked. Without worrying about wobbly bits and anyone watching.

And why not?

Let's dance and see where it takes us.

## CREDITS

We are very grateful to Women in Black (Belgrade) and LABRIS for inspiring the book's title with the postcard they designed for International Human Rights Day, based on a quote attributed to Emma Goldman. The text of the postcard is below, with an English translation kindly provided by Marijana Stojčić.

### ŠTA ĆE MI REVOLUCIJA

ako nemam slobodu da kažem šta mislim i koga volim ... ako ne mogu da uđem u pozorište jer koristim kolica ili u prodavnicu jer moja koža nije dovoljno bela, da držim svog dečka za ruku i sa devojkom se poljubim jer je volim ... ako me tuku jer nisam kao svi, ako pripadam onima koji su Drugi i Različiti ... ako imam pravo da glasam a za sve ostalo ćutim, ako na mene pokazuju prstom jer izgledam siromasno ili poštujem neki drugi praznik ... ako noću sanjam strah, a danju ga živim ... ako se ne družim- ne zato što neću, već zato što me se drugi stide ... ako nemam podršku jer se moj problem drugih ne tiče ... ako ne smem da kažem da mi je loše i da mi telo lomi virus ... ako se plašim od reči i pogleda, ako strepim od silovanja i batina ...

### AKO NE MOGU DA PLEŠEM

### WHY DO I NEED A REVOLUTION

If I have no freedom to say what I think and who I love ... if I cannot go to a theatre because I use a wheelchair or to a shop because my skin is not white enough, if I cannot hold my boyfriend's hand and kiss my girlfriend because I love her ... if they beat me because I am not like everybody else, if I belong to those who are Others and Different ... if I have the right to vote and I have to keep silent for everything else, if they point a finger at me because I look poor or respect some other holiday ... if I dream in fear during nights and if I live in fear in the daylight ... if I do not have friends—not because I do not want to but because others are ashamed of me ... if I do not have support because others do not care about my problem ... if I dare not say I feel badly and my body is shaken by a virus ... if I am afraid of words and looks, if I am anxious about being raped and beaten ...

### IF I CANNOT DANCE



# THOSE SONGS

Many of the titles of chapters, and more than a few phrases in the text of the book, were inspired by songs that Jelena and I listened to, and loved, as we worked together over the years. So we say thank you for the music:

Jamelia	Thank You
R.E.M.	Talk about the Passion
Donna Summer	Bad Girls (Toot Toot, Beep Beep)
Natasha Bedingfield	Unwritten
The Cure	Never Enough
Ismael Lô and Marianne Faithful	Without Blame
Paolo Nutini	New Shoes
Katie Melua	Tiger in the Night
Queen and David Bowie	Under Pressure
Coldplay	Nobody Said it was Easy
Tears for Fears	Sowing the Seeds of Love
Sister Sledge	We are Family
Aretha Franklin	Respect
Fatboy Slim	Right Here, Right Now
Genesis	Follow You, Follow Me
Simon and Garfunkel	The Sounds of Silence
Annie Lennox	Walking on Broken Glass
Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers	Refugee
Geoffrey Oryema	Exile
Coldplay	I'll See You Soon
Allison Krauss	Baby Mine
Tina Turner	What's Love Got to Do with It
Sarah McLachlan	World on Fire
Tears for Fears	Mad World
Chumbawumba	I Get Knocked Down
Al Jarreau	Lean on Me
Ewan McGregor and Alessandro Safina	Your Song (It's A Little Bit Funny)
U2	One
Mark Isham	... Safe Now
Eric Clapton	Change the World
Scissor Sisters	I Don't Feel Like Dancing
Madeleine Peyroux	Dance Me to the End of Love

While giving credit where it is due, we also drew inspiration from a wide range of sources, including among others: Alyssa, broccoli, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Dumbo, *Drop the Pink Elephant*, Eve Ensler's Vagina Monologues, Juliette, off our backs (the feminist newsjournal), olive oil, Ophelia's kindness in Sri Lanka, reiki, Robin, the 'sans frontières' (without borders) movements, sweet potatoes and taekwondo.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Goldberg, N. (1986) *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, Shambhala, Boston.

<sup>2</sup> Of these, 420 grants were approved and the remaining 1,836 requests declined or pending a final decision at the time of writing.

<sup>3</sup> Aside from the classic literature on burnout in the social services sector (Maslach and Leiter), there is very little by either activists or academics on issues of well-being and human rights activism.

<sup>4</sup> Bernal, M. (2006) *Self Care and Self Defense for Women Activists*, Artemisa, Grupo Interdisciplinario en Género, Sexualidad, Juventud y Derechos Humanos and Elige, Red de Jóvenes por Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos, A.C. English edition of the manual translated by Sharmila Bhushan and printed by CREA ([www.creaworld.org](http://www.creaworld.org)).

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<sup>6</sup> Rothschild, C., S. Long, and T.S. Fried (eds.) (2005) *Written Out – How Sexuality is Used to Attack Women’s Organizing*, 2nd edn., International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and Center for Women’s Global Leadership, New York.

<sup>7</sup> Including ‘Feminist ethics of mental health care for women human rights defenders’ in 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Though we soon realised that this work was not just about ‘women’ activists... and began to question our own assumptions about gender. Because we were uncovering experiences that are common to activists all over the world, who identify with a range of genders, including men, transgender and intersex activists, among others.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Queer’ is sometimes used instead of LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer); ‘freak’ is used by some members of the disabled community.

<sup>10</sup> Kerr, J., E. Sprenger, and A. Symington (2004) *The Future of Women’s Rights: Global Visions and Strategies*, Zed Books, in association with the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) and Mama Cash, London and New York, pp. 52–53.

<sup>11</sup> Menon, P. (2005) ‘We Constantly Talk Of Other People’s Sustainability, But We Never Talk Of Our Own’. *Highlights of AWID’s 10th International Forum on Women’s Rights and Development*. Bangkok, Thailand, 27–30 October. [www.awid.org/publications/primers/AWID\\_POSTFORUM%20REPORT-%20EN.pdf](http://www.awid.org/publications/primers/AWID_POSTFORUM%20REPORT-%20EN.pdf), p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> This section was inspired by Visaka Dharmadasa (Sri Lanka) and the stories of countless activists across the world with missing family members.

<sup>13</sup> This *does not include* those individual activists and activist organisations that give money as a part of their activism.

<sup>14</sup> In many countries, such basics are standard for employees of many funding agencies, and are regulated by labour laws.

<sup>15</sup> It is called a ‘gag’ rule because it stifles public debate on abortion-related issues. Private organisations located overseas have to choose between continuing their non-US funded efforts to change public policy on abortion in their own countries, or receiving US family planning funds. Restricting their freedom to engage in public policy debates undermines a central tenet of US foreign policy, the promotion of democracy abroad, and its core principle of free and open debate.

<sup>16</sup> AIDS Policy Watch: The Global Working Group on US AIDS Policy, ‘U.S. Anti-Prostitution Policy and HIV/AIDS’, [www.aidspolicywatch.org/sex-work/](http://www.aidspolicywatch.org/sex-work/).

- <sup>17</sup> Clark, C., E. Sprenger, and L. VeneKlasen (with L. Alpizar Durán and J. Kerr) (2006) 'Where is the money for women's rights?' Assessing the resources and the role of donors in the promotion of women's rights and the support of women's rights organizations, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Toronto. [www.awid.org/publications/where\\_is\\_money/weblibro.pdf](http://www.awid.org/publications/where_is_money/weblibro.pdf).
- <sup>18</sup> Front Line hosted 'The Third Dublin Platform for Human Rights Defenders' at Dublin Castle on 13–15 October 2005.
- <sup>19</sup> Wells, S. (2007) *Changing Course: Windcall and the Art of Renewal*, Heyday Books, Berkeley, CA.
- <sup>20</sup> Hourani, L. (2006) 'Palestine: Letter from Lama Hourani in Gaza, "Questions"', Women Living under Muslim Laws, London. [www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd%5B157%5D=x-157-546826](http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd%5B157%5D=x-157-546826).
- <sup>21</sup> Mladenović, L. (2005) 'Feminist ethics of mental health care for women human rights defenders'. In M.J.N. Real and M. Chai (eds.) *International Consultation on Women Human Rights Defenders: Resource Book*, International Campaign on Women Human Rights Defenders, Colombo. [www.ishr.ch/about%20ISHR/HRDO/Activities/WHRD-Resource-English-press.pdf](http://www.ishr.ch/about%20ISHR/HRDO/Activities/WHRD-Resource-English-press.pdf).
- <sup>22</sup> Countries such as Burma, Equatorial Guinea, Laos, North Korea, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights (2006) *Steadfast in Protest: Annual Report 2005*. [www.omct.org/pdf/observatory/2006/obs\\_annual\\_report\\_2005\\_eng.pdf](http://www.omct.org/pdf/observatory/2006/obs_annual_report_2005_eng.pdf). p. 475.
- <sup>23</sup> Hélie, A. (2006) 'Threats and Survival: The Religious Right and LGBT Strategies in Muslim Contexts', *Women in Action*, vol. 1, ISIS International-Manila. [www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=272&Itemid=165](http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=272&Itemid=165).
- <sup>24</sup> Human Rights Watch (2004) 'Sierra Leone: Lesbian Rights Activist Brutally Murdered', 5 October. [http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/10/04/sierra9440\\_txt.htm](http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/10/04/sierra9440_txt.htm).
- <sup>25</sup> This was an investigation of burnout among social workers in the United States. Maslach, C. (1982) *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- <sup>26</sup> This section was inspired by the stories of activist colleagues in exile (some anonymous), the powerful 1994 book by Mahnaz Afkhami, *Women in Exile*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, and London, and the work of Forefront, a global network of human rights defenders—Forefront (2005) *Continuing the struggle – human rights defenders in exile*, Forefront, New York.
- <sup>27</sup> Afkhami, M. (1994) *Women in Exile*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, and London.
- <sup>28</sup> I am grateful to Natalie Goldberg for bringing us Suzuki Roshi's dying words: 'I don't want to die'. They helped to release Čarna's story. Goldberg, N. (1986) *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, Shambhala, Boston.
- <sup>29</sup> Ken Wiwa is the son of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a renowned Nigerian poet and environmentalist, who campaigned to protect his Ogoni people against the encroachments of Shell Oil and a brutal dictatorship. Ken Saro-Wiwa was imprisoned, tortured, brought to trial on trumped-up charges, and executed in 1995. See Wiwa, K. (2000) *In the Shadow of a Saint*, Knopf Canada, [www.randomhouse.ca/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780676971736](http://www.randomhouse.ca/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780676971736).
- <sup>30</sup> Association for Women's Rights in Development (2005) 'Faith, Feminism and the Power of Love', How Does Change Happen? Highlights of AWID's 10th International Forum on Women's Rights and Development, Bangkok, Thailand, 27–30 October 2005. [www.awid.org/publications/primers/AWID\\_POSTFORUM%20REPORT-%20EN.pdf](http://www.awid.org/publications/primers/AWID_POSTFORUM%20REPORT-%20EN.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Mónica Alemán is an indigenous Miskita activist from Nicaragua. Quote taken from Bernal, M. (2006) *Self Care and Self Defense for Women Activists*, Artemisa, Grupo Interdisciplinario en Género, Sexualidad, Juventud y Derechos Humanos and Elige, Red de Jóvenes por Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos, A.C. English edition of the manual translated by Sharmila Bhushan and printed by CREA ([www.creaworld.org](http://www.creaworld.org)).

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, *Trauma Healing & Transformation: Awakening A New Heart with Body Mind Spirit Practices and Living in Wellness – Trauma Healing. A Capacitar Manual of body Mind Spirit Practices for Stress, Trauma and Compassion Fatigue*. Visit [www.capacitar.org](http://www.capacitar.org) for more details and to learn about other manuals.

<sup>33</sup> The *5 Rhythms™* are a practice; a moving meditation of listening and following, integrating our physicality, inner awareness, spirituality, and feelings. They are a powerful and deceptively simple map for releasing improvised spontaneous movement and dance. This work, also known as *The Wave*, was developed by Gabrielle Roth over 30 years of teaching experimental dance and theatre in the US. See [www.5rhythms.co.uk/5rhythms.html](http://www.5rhythms.co.uk/5rhythms.html).

<sup>34</sup> Thapa, R. (2002) 'Tewa – Doing the Impossible: Feminist Action in Nepal, The Founder's Story.' Sixth Annual Dame Nita Barrow Lecture, Centre for Women's Studies in Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto. <http://www1.oise.utoronto.ca/cwse/Rita%20Lecture%206.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> See [www.lutashaba.com/html/scholarship.html](http://www.lutashaba.com/html/scholarship.html).

<sup>36</sup> The African Women's Development Fund is an Africa-wide Women's Fund based in Accra, Ghana. AWDF currently funds over 400 women's organizations in 41 African countries, and has a staff of 20.

<sup>37</sup> In M.J.N. Real and M. Chai (eds.) (2005) *International Consultation on Women Human Rights Defenders: Resource Book*, International Campaign on Women Human Rights Defenders, Colombo. [www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/pdf/WHRD-Resource-English-press.pdf](http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/pdf/WHRD-Resource-English-press.pdf), p. 52.

<sup>38</sup> Bernal, M. (2006) *Self Care and Self Defense for Women Activists*, Artemisa, Grupo Interdisciplinario en Género, Sexualidad, Juventud y Derechos Humanos and Elige, Red de Jóvenes por Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos, A.C. English edition of the manual translated by Sharmila Bhushan and printed by CREA ([www.creaworld.org](http://www.creaworld.org)).

<sup>39</sup> Several years ago, a handful of activists started talking about how to address a range of emerging concerns about sustaining older activists. They came up with an idea to create an intergenerational solidarity network called the Women's Intergenerational Solidarity Endeavor (WISE), and produced a great concept note. So many of the ideas they suggested in the concept note echo the thoughts and advice of other activists we spoke to—not just about sustaining older activists, but all activists. We are grateful for their work, and have integrated edited versions of their recommendations in this section.

<sup>40</sup> Front Line - The International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders runs a hotline to provide 24 hour support to human rights defenders at immediate risk. The emergency number can be contacted at any hour on (+353 1 21 00 489). The service gives human rights defenders an option to be forwarded to someone speaking Arabic, English, French, Russian or Spanish who will be able to mobilise rapid international support and action in the event of an emergency.

<sup>41</sup> Amnesty International (2007) 'Zimbabwe: Between a rock and a hard place - women human rights defenders at risk', Amnesty International, London. [http://www.amnesty.ca/index\\_resources/resources/zimbabwe\\_between\\_report.pdf](http://www.amnesty.ca/index_resources/resources/zimbabwe_between_report.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> Thanks to Shaya Mercer and Emily Utz for their original ideas on creating a wellness manual.

<sup>43</sup> Such as, for example, the World Organisation against Torture (<http://www.omct.org/>) and the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT) network, which includes 130 rehabilitation centres and programmes from all over the world, representing an international movement against torture and for victims of torture. <http://www.irct.org/Default.aspx?ID=30>.

<sup>44</sup> Many thanks to Lepa Mladenović for her support and thoughts on honouring activist transitions.

<sup>45</sup> [www.rorypecktrust.org](http://www.rorypecktrust.org)

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.peopleinaid.org/>

<sup>47</sup> National Organizers Alliance (2001) *Practicing What We Preach: The National Organizers Alliance Guide to the Policies and Practices of Justice Organizations* (first draft), p. 29.

<sup>48</sup> Mladenović, L. (2005) 'Feminist ethics of mental health care for women human rights defenders'. In M.J.N. Real and M. Chai (eds.) *International Consultation on Women Human Rights Defenders: Resource Book*, International Campaign on Women Human Rights Defenders, Colombo. [www.ishr.ch/about%20ISHR/HRDO/Activities/WHRD-Resource-English-press.pdf](http://www.ishr.ch/about%20ISHR/HRDO/Activities/WHRD-Resource-English-press.pdf).

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**“I immediately** started feeling a cold sensation running inside me...as if someone had written about me and about countless others whose stories I’ve picked up along the way in my 20 years of journey as a feminist and human rights activist...we can certainly use this as an inspiration to come together and take a few more steps forward...

~ Edna Aquino

*One of the initiators of the gender and women’s human rights program of Amnesty International, currently an advocate/trainer on women’s empowerment*

**“I loved** the book’s honesty and I am glad that you made it real, direct. There was no faking it. The style is new, humorous, disturbing and open to numerous interpretations. As I read it, I parachuted through a rainbow of emotions, each blending into the other. I felt sadness, relief, amusement, confusion at how we let ourselves be martyred, and gratitude that it was all out in the air. I said to myself, this is revitalizing. Liberating. Naming the fears and anxieties enables us to confront them. Finally, we acknowledge that we are human beings with souls in need of nursing ... not afraid to simply BE.

~ Maria Nassali

*Urgent Action Fund-Africa board member, currently pursuing doctoral studies in human rights and governance*

**“I believe** your book is truly ground-breaking, and this comes from a quite hardened old activist who very, very rarely finds herself before something that is truly new, that opens up new landscapes. Your book does. And the most important thing is that, at the end of it, I felt hopeful. It managed to convince me that we can do something different with our lives, and with the world, because they are not as divided as we tend to think they are. Your book opens a whole world of possibilities for all of us, and in that sense is a rare treasure....

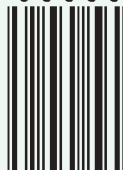
~ Alejandra Sardá

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