



CARE AMONG ACTIVISTS

WEAVING NETWORKS FOR
FEMINIST RESISTANCE

GUACIRA OLIVEIRA
JELENA DORDEVIC

CARE AMONG ACTIVISTS

WEAVING NETWORKS FOR
FEMINIST RESISTANCE

GUACIRA OLIVEIRA
JELENA DORDEVIC

CFEMEA

BRASÍLIA/DF | 2015

Authors

Guacira Oliveira and Jelena Dordevic

Translation

Luana Guedes and Jelena Dordevic

Editing

Débora Vaz and Jill Haring

Graphic Design

Ars Ventura Imagem e Comunicação

Photography

CFEMEA archives, Angela Donini and Taís Lobo

Cover and Illustrations

Lídia Rodrigues

Address



Endereço: SCS Quadra 02, Edifício Goiás – sala 602/04
CEP: 70317-900 Brasília/DF – Brazil
Phone number: +55 (61) 3224-1791
www.cfemea.org.br

Support



2015, CFEMEA – Feminist Center of Studies and Advisory Services

Anyone may copy or distribute the content of this publication, as long as the authors and original source are properly cited. This publication can be found at www.cfemea.org.br

Table of Contents

7	Introduction and Acknowledgements
8	Inspiration
15	The Reasons and Emotions That Give Life to the Feminist Struggle for Freedom and ‘Buen Vivir’
16	Care Among Activists Generates Counter-Hegemonic Strength
19	Mutual Recognition, Dialogue, and Connecting Through Differences
21	Feminist Transgression Against Patriarchal Racism
28	Urgent Issues
35	“Just Give Me Room to Breath”
36	Bodies That Challenge
37	How Are You?
46	What is Missing in Our Political Organizing?
47	Possible steps
50	Methodologies
54	For Consultation
63	Bibliography
65	Online Bibliography
69	About the Authors



We dedicate this publication to the memory of Sunila Abeysekera, our dear friend and feminist activist from Sri Lanka who led in formulating proposals that were vital to organizing the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition and to mobilizing the International Campaign for the Human Rights of Women. We continue being inspired by her loving nature and strategic vision.



Introduction and Acknowledgements

It is with a great pleasure that we place this book into your hands! It is the first step in a new cycle for CFEMEA that began in 2015, with a focus on the sustainability of feminist and women's activism. This new cycle follows two lines of action: developing the political dimension of self-care and care among activists and militants, and feminist political education.

Our intention with this publication is to share what we have accumulated thus far: references, reflections, and exchanges related to care among activists and militants.

We start from one of the fundamental ideas of feminism – *the personal is political* – to further the debate and experiment with other possibilities that would make our political, countercultural, and counter-hegemonic strategies more radical, and to better organize and mobilize our fight.

Although we are currently in the middle of the building process, we have already been able to produce some results. To accomplish this, we immersed ourselves in learning from the many sources of feminist praxis and other initiatives from within fields committed to social transformation.

INSPIRATION

We looked at elements of self-reflection groups that launched the feminist wave of the 1960s, although any records of those experiences are scarce. We followed the trail blazed by Jane Barry and Jelena Djordjevic, who authored pioneering research with feminist activists across five continents on activism and self-care, which was published in Brazil in 2007 under the title “What’s the Point of Revolution if We Can’t Dance?”¹.

Since 2008, we have been building and consolidating the Free Feminist University², which is a collective proposal that uses feminist educational praxis as its methodological basis. On this journey we have participated in dialogues, conducted studies, and encouraged the sharing of practices and reflections, consistently seeking self-knowledge and bringing together, caring for, and giving shelter to participants³. More recently, in 2014, the exchanges we had while facilitating dialogues on Activism and Self-Care at Free Feminist University gave new reasons and emotions that confirmed the necessity and importance of continuing in this direction.

Over the last decade we have followed the lead of SOS Corpo - Feminist Institute for Democracy, in using Feminist Pedagogy. We have participated in many exchanges of knowledge while building a national program for educating activists of the Articulation of Brazilian Women.

1 Barry, Jane with Djordjevic, Jelena. “What’s the Point of Revolution if We Can’t Dance?”, Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights. USA, 2007..

2 www.feminismo.org.br. The Free Feminist University was launched in 2010 by CFEMEA, and is currently being built collectively and collaboratively by three feminist organizations (CFEMEA, Cunha - Feminist Collective from Paraiba, and SOS Corpo - Feminist Institute for Democracy) and a network of collaborators with the aim of bringing together, functioning as a catalyst, and stimulating educational, cultural and artistic work, as well as producing and sharing knowledge. <http://feminismo.org.br/metodologia/> (accessed in December, 2015).

3 <http://feminismo.org.br/metodologia/> December, 2015.

Our travels throughout Latin America profoundly inspired and motivated us to begin this new cycle for CFEMEA. The international dialogues organized by the Marcosur Feminist Articulation⁴ over the last ten years (Inter-Movement Dialogues, Intercultural Dialogues, Feminist Dialogues, Consonant Dialogues) and especially those on ‘Buen Vivir’ (Living well) and ‘Patriarchy’ have been precious. Our participation in some of the virtual dialogues sponsored by Alquimia - Escuela de Educación Popular Feminista (2012), and what we read about the experiences of the Mesoamerican Initiative for Women Human Rights Defenders were also inspiring.

More recently, our partnership with Institute Arcana to experiment with Activist Circles in Brasília (2014 and 2015) was instructive and creative, as well as enjoyable. Another valuable opportunity presented itself when we decided to form the Feminist Collective on Self-Care⁵ (2014) and organize national meetings on the issue in partnership with the Elas Fund (2014-2015). Many are the hearts and minds involved in this journey!

In addition to our experiences in the women’s and feminist movement, substantive references for our work was gathered from our participation in the Peoples Dialogues, organized by IBASE over the last decade, and from our recent adoption of the Integrative Community Therapy, a methodology that has accumulated nearly 30 years of practices and thought.

In the pages that follow you will find two articles – one authored by Guacira and one by Jelena. The first one focuses on the conceptual and

4 CFEMEA is a member of AFM (Marcosur Feminist Articulation), a chain of feminist political thought and actions that has as its core strategy to promote the field of feminism regionally and globally.

5 Members of the Feminist Collective on Self-Care: Guacira Cesar de Oliveira, Jelena Djordjevic, Louisa Huber, Maria Lúcia, Simone Cruz, and Tania Lopes Muri.

political framework that CFEMEA uses to position the programmatic development of its actions in order to show the political dimension of self-care and care among activists. The second one points out the strategic importance of self-care and care among activists, as well as the methodological needs and possibilities for sustaining (from this perspective) the activism of women that lead social transformation processes and radicalize democracy in Brazil. In the conclusion, we provide reading suggestions for those interested in further exploring other experiences and reflections on self-care and care among activists in Brazil and the world.

Before concluding this introduction, we would like to say that without the fervent willingness, commitment, dedication, care, and strategic collaboration of so many feminist militants and activists, it would have been impossible for CFEMEA to move in this new direction. We recognize and value the important contribution of each activist that has empowered our fight by caring for all of us who are part of the movement.

Closing CFEMEA's first 25 year cycle and starting a new one was not a simple feat. It impacted all of our lives, from the associates of the organization to the entire team. On a personal level, the path toward self-knowledge and self-transformation that we embarked on has also been difficult and demanding! For this reason we want to publicly extend our gratitude the bottom of our hearts to Carmen Silva who facilitated the process for the whole team with love, competence, and unbeatable political commitment; and to our therapists Joana and Fausto, who took care of us and helped us (Guacira and Jelena) individually as we processed all of this.

Finally, we are grateful for the support and funding provided by the Ford Foundation, the OAK's Issues Affecting Women Program, Heinrich Böll, the International Women's Health Coalition, and the French Embassy.

We hope you enjoy reading this material, and would encourage you to share any comments, suggestions, or criticisms with us.

Feminist and anti-racist greetings!

Guacira Cesar de Oliveira and Jelena Djordjevic
Members of CFEMEA's Managing Council









The Reasons and Emotions That Give Life to the Feminist Struggle for Freedom and ‘Buen Vivir’

We begin with the certainty that the feminist fight is nurtured by the strength of each woman individually and all women together.

GUACIRA CESAR OLIVEIRA

Dialectically, we know that it is in the collective that each of us finds nurturing and is given the strength to overcome the immense fragility imposed by an individuality devoid of connection.

There is a strong and vigorous bond that connects each militant or activist woman to the movement of transforming the world. It sustains us and gives us the confidence to move forward in doing something that is seemingly logical, but not as easy as it appears, which is to transform the world and ourselves in order to live better and be better. We try other ways of relating to people around us, of recognizing them and being recognized, and of respecting and protecting

the common heritage of humankind. We build in the present a future in which we can all have a chance.

The patriarchal and racist order requires us women to be caregivers, either by way of duty, imposition, or coercion. In the capitalist system, individualism is an expensive value, while reciprocity is unknown. The order is everyone fends for themselves. Care is not reciprocal, and self-care has become a commodity sold to those who can afford it and are willing consumers of products sold by aesthetic clinics, beauty salons, entertainment and tourism companies, spas, big pharmaceutical and medical businesses, and alternative and conventional therapies.

CARE AMONG ACTIVISTS GENERATES COUNTER-HEGEMONIC STRENGTH

Caring for ourselves, caring for others, allowing ourselves to be cared for, reciprocating care received; sharing our emotions, the lessons we've learned in the feminist and anti-racist fight, our pain and ways to cure it; valuing our knowledge, experiences, and capacities – all these are actions that escape the order, they are subversive. They depict our fight for personal independence and the guarantee of our self-organization. They are based on costly ethical and political principles such as horizontality, solidarity, and reciprocity.

In short, this is about us creating our own experiences in spaces we have created to help transform ourselves and the world. We understand care among activists to be a kind of political intervention that empowers us to deal with the elements and situations that stand in the way of our subjective transformations. It is a way to challenge individualism, sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination that we internalize and that continuously oppress us, day after day. This kind of care is also a way to eliminate oppressive



practices based on feminism, according to what Lilian Celiberti calls “the path of theoretical ruptures, decolonization, and questioning that runs parallel to ethnocentrism, patriarchy, racism, and the heteronormative order.”⁶

MUTUAL RECOGNITION, DIALOGUE, AND CONNECTING THROUGH DIFFERENCES

Due especially to the dialogical nature of these issues, we refuse to use general or holistic terms to talk about them. After all, the terrain upon which we have been developing this experience is hybrid and allows militants and activists to converge, thus blending differences and stimulating the processing the intrinsic conflicts that occur when we connect in our differences.

We want the places, practices, and meanings that have been suppressed by hegemonic culture to join us, to have a voice, and to be recognized. Otherwise, any possibility for dialogue or care among activists is extinguished.

We seek the mutual recognition of heart-mind-body-spirit that gives meaning to affectivity, strengthens the ties that bind us, and reaffirms our common desire to live well and be free. We seek and will keep seeking to exist in the name of, based on, and as actually being the real dream of dialogue; dialogue with experience; a channel, an instrument to perceive fields, cities, and fruitful fighting forests, all of which can only be

6 CELIBERTI, Lilian. Complex Dialogues – Women’s Perspectives on ‘Buen Vivir’. Available at http://www.cotidianomujer.org.uy/relatoria_indigenas_br.pdf.



collective and plural. In many colors and hues, often uncomfortable, which isn't even an issue, because we still want to be a channel, an instrument, a bridge, like an "at your service" placed for responsibility and "beginning with."

Natália Maria

FEMINIST TRANSGRESSION AGAINST PATRIARCHAL RACISM

What is behind the fallacy of the individuality of men in power?

As women militants and activists from many different movements, we inhabit public spaces. By definition, this means we are out of place, outside the boundaries of the home, the kitchen, and the bed that have been established for us by the patriarchal, racist, and colonialist power system. We are given public and private care-giving roles where we are to provide services to others, act submissively, and satisfy other people's needs and desires. All of this while abiding by the hierarchies of class, race, and ethnicity that separate us and organize us into categories of wives, lovers, prostitutes, housewives, domestic workers, abused children, harassed and sexually exploited workers, and so many other implicit and explicit scales used to grade the ignominious and secondary role given to women.

"Our steps come from far away," was the slogan shouted at the 2015 Black Women's March. We Latin American women have organized ourselves and fought against slavery in *quilombolas* (communities of former slaves); we have fought

against the genocide of indigenous people and black youth and for the end of violence; we have fought against capitalist labor exploitation, socio-environmental devastation, patriarchal oppression, the heteronormative order, and many others.

The feminist fight is transgressive. We threaten. We do not submit ourselves to the circle of patriarchal power, but rather survive on its edges, excluded from positions of power and decision-making. We frequently act from the outside in, subverting and exposing the violence that operates by maintaining privileges and excluding those who demand their rights.

We use a feminist perspective to pinpoint and dissect the false separations established by the patriarchal order between personal and political, emotion and reason, individual and collective, and body and spirit. We reject such dualisms as well as the connotation of superior rationality that is attributed to masculinity and whiteness, and the connotation of inferiority attributed to women and other races (blacks and indigenous peoples), who are typically further away from urban conglomerates and therefore more firmly dominated by patriarchal reasoning.

In this type of logic, the condition of inferiority or superiority is the result of cultural meanings attributed to phenotype traces (African or Indigenous), and to sex (female or male). Judith Butler⁷ states that there is a *radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders*, similar to what occurs with phenotypically differentiated bodies and races. This cultural construction surpasses bodily limits and classifies habits, mental constructions, beliefs, cultures, and all social relationships based on these same parameters (inferior/superior).⁸

7 BUTLER, Judith. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge. 1990. p. 6.

8 OLIVEIRA, Guacira Cesar. **Desigualdades de gênero e raça no desenvolvimento brasileiro**. Mimeo. 2003.

Ever since feminists made the assertion that the personal is political, we have been addressing, in different ways, the dissociation between reason and emotion that dominates the public sphere and controls spaces of power and decision-making. This misleading separation actually covers up the exploitation of women's time and energy that the capitalist patriarchy depends on to dominate and profit.

The social order that sustains patriarchal power and the individuality of men in power is built upon the foundation of sentimental and sexual ties, shelter, care, and all the emotional conditions that are created and maintained by women.

From a structural point of view, and in the absolute absence of a different model for power relationships, we must always be mindful and alert so that the militancy or activism of women does not imitate the parameters of patriarchal racism, thus reproducing the same order that separates the personal from the political and sustains asymmetrical gender, race, and ethnic relations.

It is key that we make a conscious effort to maintain sentimental ties and value emotions and feelings as indispensable to both supporting our activism and strengthening the collective political subject, which is how we can be individual subjects in the political fight. This awareness prevents us from falling into the trap of reproducing relationships of power and domination (in both domestic and public spheres) with other people (especially other women submitted to multiple types of discrimination), under the pretext of enabling or strengthening women in power.

Another recurring "error" in our activism is denying our feelings and insecurities in the very unequal confrontations we have with hegemonic powers.

This is a difficult struggle for each of us. Our way of being as political subjects (with libertarian desires-attitudes-practices) clashes with the logic of patriarchal, racist, ethnocentric, heteronormative, and ableist power. The confrontation between such unequal forces in public and private spheres leaves its mark, is unsettling, lowers our self-esteem, corrodes our self-confidence, and generates fear, panic, stagnation, trauma, tension, and depression, all of which weaken the our efforts.

When we deny our feelings and insecurities, they have no place to go and can become implosive, which makes us weak and depressed, and causes us to over sacrifice ourselves. While men take “their dirty political laundry home for women to wash,” women are left with no alternatives because the separation between the personal and political will never work in our favor. At most, it will privilege one woman at the cost of exploiting another. Thus, the feminist and anti-racist fight needs to be political-personal. We do not want the dissociations of patriarchal racism that creates subordinate positions on which to unload our frustrations, humiliations, and fears. The political dimension of care from the feminist point of view must be firmly established on cooperative and fair relationships, and on reciprocal care and mutual recognition. Almudena Hernando¹⁰ stated beautifully:

It is only when we abandon the discourse that legitimizes social order (and therefore, do not believe in its truths) that we can see what the discourse denies. We can then illuminate and clarify (using reason itself) this part of social behavior that we cannot see, albeit right in front of us, or that we even act out, because patriarchal discourse has taught us not to recognize it. If we do not acknowledge that emotions and connections play a role that is equally as important as reason and individuality in creating modernity's safety mechanisms,

“ We live in a totally corrupt city. Murder is a threat for which there is no justice. Even Dorothy (Stang) was murdered because of that. We went back to her house, sat down and talked. She said it was the last time we’d be together, but that she was happy because she had met a warrior woman, a courageous woman. You see, I was also being threatened at that time. ”

ELOÍNA ESTEVAN

Member of the Women’s
Movement of Anapu, Belém, PA



that individuals cannot sustain themselves without a community, nor reason without emotion, then we will not be able change social order and will only contribute to strengthening the logic that has guided it thus far. On the other hand, we will never understand women's essential contributions to our historical trajectory as long as we maintain the obscurity that makes their relational function practical to the patriarchal order.

URGENT ISSUES

Here and now, strategic and essential issues mix with the urgencies and demand a variety of answers.

(...) we must think outside this box, in a strongly cultural and savage mode.¹¹

There is an urgent need to reinvent politics and experience it as a feminist space, even if only as an experiment, without the dualism of patriarchal racism, and without separating the personal from the political. We believe it is strategic to create spaces to experiment, to contribute in the here and now to changing how power is exercised, to scatter seeds, and to create opportunities for germinating future political organization modes that are capable of promoting dialogues and of recognizing and valuing individualities that are gathered and prepared to construct the collective subject. It is important to create favorable

10 HERNANDO, Almudena. *La fantasía de la individualidad – sobre la construcción sociohistórica del sujeto moderno*. Madrid: Primera Edición, Katz Editores, 2012.

environments that will maintain and reproduce groups, movements, and ways of organizing and fighting that are based on the decision-making ability of each member; that will value and share the advantages and disadvantages of the fight in a way that is fair, equal, cooperative, and affectionate.

Almudena Hernando¹² states,

The supposed individuality of men in power (great or small) is profoundly dependent on outside support because it is the fruit of domination/subordination relationships and cannot survive without them.



11 BHABHA. Homi K. *O local da cultura*. 395 p. Coleção Humanitas. Translation of *The Location of culture*. Belo Horizonte: Editora da UFMG, 2003.

We are faced with the challenge of formulating new organizational concepts, new ways of living together; of establishing a feminist starting point for the concept of Buen Vivir; and of creating alternatives to the patriarchal way of doing politics. Additionally, we must occupy new and unforeseen spaces that will allow us to create these alternatives. As Natália Maria¹³ stated:

(...) above all, we evoke affirmative unforeseeabilities from 'the hidden voice that is everywhere'..., because it is important to state that 'freedom finds a way'. We also want the courage to surprise ourselves with incalculable magic, as we have been taught by the marked and resilient Playful Masters of Popular and Traditional Cultures in Brazil and Latin America. That which is material, immaterial, and alive is the legacy of life in collectivity, seeds that cannot be exterminated, sciences and powers that attest to our immense capacity for reinvention, even when overwhelmed by intense deprivation; we are insurgent and never give in to exploitation.


Laboratories, experimentations, and systematic processes of political education are imperative in order to advance strategically. However, we must also respond to the urgent needs of the women out there fighting. Thus, in addition to engendering political and intellectual commitments, we also need to value emotional commitments, build alliances, and make

12 HERNANDO, Almudena. **La fantasía de la individualidad – sobre la construcción sociohistórica del sujeto moderno**. Madrid: Primera Edición, Katz Editores, 2012.

13 Natália Maria. **Abrição, memória, movimento e giro do mundo - DjumbaiAR, djumbaiando...** Coluna Djumbai. www.cfemea.org.br. November, 2015.

ourselves stronger. Challenging patriarchal racism comes at a great cost to activists who must endure offenses, insults, moral harassment, institutional violence, arbitrary arrests, sexual abuse and violence, death threats, criminalization, femicide, exploitation, etc. These are some of the weapons used by the state and societal powers to immobilize, repress, control, and silence us in an attempt to hold back the social transformation processes triggered by the women's fight.





“ We are making a qualitative leap forward in our practices by recognizing the aftereffects and the damage this activism provokes in the absence of self-care or the lack of a supportive network. We can say that many cases of somatization are directly linked to this absence of care. ”

SUELI CARNEIRO

Geledés – Instituto da Mulher
Negra – SP



“Yo Solo Pido un Espacio Pa’Respirar”¹⁴

Self-care and care among activists as a strategy to support the activism of women who drive social transformation and radicalize the democracy of Brazil today

JELENA DORDEVIC

When the political system is restricted and violent, the way to guarantee rights is by strengthening social movements and its actors... Guacira Cesar Oliveira

Self-care is a political act, it is something revolutionary for us and dangerous for those who oppress us... Lidi de Oliveira

Emotions are not understood as political. This is what patriarchy has taught us. If we don't know our own emotions, if we don't know who are we in our own bodies, then how can we know who we are in public spaces, how to be political citizens... Lepa Mladjenovic

14 The title of a song by Colombian band Bomba Estéreo (free translation “Just Give Me Room To Breathe”).

BODIES THAT CHALLENGE

Women's rights activists in the current political environment, especially those subjected to multiple forms of oppression, are living, working, and fighting in very grave conditions, and place themselves at risk by confronting the power structures of Brazilian society. As women occupying political spheres, we challenge the dominant structures with our very existence as political subjects involved in various struggles. Our political actions go against the patriarchal, racist, ethnocentric, heteronormative, exploitative order. Therefore, we as a movement and as individuals are threatened, criminalized, delegitimized, arbitrarily arrested, morally disqualified, attacked, left to die, and killed just because we are women. Because we are black, natives, peasants, lesbians, trans, sex workers, domestic workers. Because we live in favelas, in *quilombos*, or ancestral lands. All of this, simply because we want to be free and stand for our own rights and those of our peoples and communities.

Based on these threats, we women recognize our numerous diversities and inequalities and affirm our role as political subjects. We build defense strategies to strengthen us. We acknowledge our different states of vulnerability and use it to mobilize social transformation processes and to uphold the interdependence of our many struggles.

These threats open our eyes to the need to strengthen our collective organizing by looking critically at our political spaces and practices. The implications of activism on the personal lives of each and every one of us demands a collective response. It is in the collective that each of us can overcome the immense fragility that the political context imposes on us. Hence, we recognize that the right to care for each other and receive care inside our organizing spaces is an important step towards empowerment.







themselves safe, well, and physically and emotionally healthy in situations of so many risks and challenges¹⁵.

One of the questions we asked all the activists was: “How are you?”

I vividly remember the resistance expressed by so many who retorted angrily:

“I don’t understand why you’re asking me that,” and “What’s that got to do with my activism?”

15 BARRY, Jane e DJORDJEVIC, Jelena. **What’s the Point of Revolution If We Can Not Dance.** JELENA, PUT COMPLETE REFERENCE IN ENGLISH! tradução em Portuguese by Madalena Guihlon, Fundo de Ação Urgente pelos Direitos Humanos das mulheres. EUA, 2007

Once we overcame the feeling of being exposed and the discomfort of sharing our personal lives as activists, we were able to talk about our private concerns and understand that they are equally as important as our public work. And so we began talking about fear, guilt, losses, and the loss of connection with our own selves and with our loved ones. We talked about the support we feel when we are strong, marching in the streets, and how good we feel when we are surrounded by people. But then later, how we fall into bed feeling depressed and hopeless, often feeling abandoned by the very same people that stood by our side us at the peak of our strength.

We have not doubt that it is radically urgent and necessary for our collectives, groups, and movements to talk about everything from sex and pleasure to transitions in our organizations and responsibilities. We must talk about our bodies, our exhaustion, how overworked we are, and the never-ending violence – violence we have survived, violence we have witnessed, and violence against which we resist every day. We must talk about the stress of not knowing if we can put food on the table, or if we will have a bed to sleep in, or a home to return to after an armed attack. We must remember all the people killed in our communities, all those we have had to bury – and the fact that we keep having to bury. We must remember the few tears we allowed ourselves to cry over those losses. We must talk about every aspect of our lives. We must listen to the needs of each activist and we must allow ourselves to be supported during and after traumatic events, and be comforted in times of fatigue. We must recognize that many of us do not have access to medical care; the right to health is still a privilege rather than a norm. Additionally, we must establish spaces of refuge for activists, and weave together healing networks, as well as raise and mobilize funds to support solidarity and care among activists.

There is a lack of understanding among ourselves and among those who support us, that our well-being as activists is important.

As women activists and feminist activists we live and work under great stress and in vulnerable conditions that are exacerbated by racism, heteronormativity, poverty, militarization, and impunity, which, reinforced by the traditional role of women as caretakers, results in a lack of care for ourselves.

Besides being socialized to neglect our own needs, we live in contexts of recurring traumas, and this deeply affects our health as well as how we help each other inside and outside our organizations.

Many of us became activists because of some kind of violence we or our people have suffered. We experience violence personally or witness its trajectory down through the generations of our families. We feel this experience in our bodies. We became activists because of profound experiences of injustice or because of daily threats of violence, because of the violence our families have been exposed to for generations, or the violence that we witness being suffered by others around us. In theory, activism is not always an option, but it is the only way deal with so much indignation. Because of this unfortunately deep and personal understanding of violence, we realize there is a strong link between healing our histories and healing ourselves. This can make our activism all the more powerful. If we do not make room for these processes in our activism, the impact of our transformative work will be limited and our contributions will be insufficient. How we deal with violence, with the traumas of others, and with the marks of our own traumas, determines whether they remain as open wounds, preventing us from moving forward in our causes.



WHAT IS MISSING IN OUR POLITICAL ORGANIZING?

The way we organize ourselves needs to provide spaces for dealing with personal issues. We need spaces where we can deal with pain: our own pain, the pain of lost causes, the pain for the people we lost. We already have strategies for helping others and the communities we support, but here we

“ When we vent all of this, when we vomit up all this stuff and transform it into something spectacular, in something to share with others, that reaches out ... that is also an exercise in self-care and self-protection. It means we are coming together and thinking collectively about how to confront everything **”**

ALESSANDRA GUERRA

Tambores de Safo – CE



are talking about strategies to meet our needs as activists, about methods for dealing with the personal aspects of our lives.

Our organization spaces are where we go for support, “protection,” and empowerment. It is where we go for shelter when we experience violence. If our collectives are our strategies for resistance, then they must also enable conversations about self-care and self-love. They should create open spaces for listening, for mutual recognition, and for caring for each other. They should allow us to question pre-established models of sacrificing for the cause, because we know that oftentimes our activism is ‘measured’ by how much we sacrifice. The way we go about activism is unsustainable in the long run and consumes our energy without any thought given to how we can renew it.

Although we must never lose sight of patriarchy, racism, machismo, neo-liberalism, the State, and impunity, we must also look inside ourselves and focus more on prevention. We must try and avoid burnout, illnesses, and sadness, and avoid rupturing personal, family, and community ties. We must address issues of power inside our organizations and question leadership styles that put women at greater risk. We need to debate the definition of the collective and the internal decision-making process that creates leadership in many different ways. We need to set limits for ourselves, and talk about self-defense. We must collectively name and discuss all the internal “enemies” that make our work dangerous, thus opening new space for other ways of being activists or militants.

As women, we are raised to take care of everybody except ourselves, at any cost.

Although we have been able to develop strategies for questioning the State and for demanding our rights, our organization strategies pay very little attention to our wellbeing, to what happens to us in our work as activists, or to what happens in different aspects of our lives, which is not disconnected from our public and political work.

For this reason we began addressing self-care and developing strategies to take care of ourselves and each other. We see this as a political response to what happens to us and our bodies. Taking care of ourselves is a political act.

There are many different ideas about what it means to care for ourselves and about how to place self-care at the center of our organizing spaces. However, one thing we know: there is no one single or correct way of doing it.

POSSIBLE STEPS

- » Give ourselves the right to care for ourselves.
- » Create and invent possibilities for living better in the midst of oppression and violence. Loving and taking care of ourselves and our bodies is an act of resistance. Self-care is about the possibility of reinventing ourselves and living better amidst all the oppression.
- » Share with each other inside our organization spaces. We need to talk to each other about the personal aspects of our lives because we are reaching our limits, our bodies are mutilated, our voices are silenced and distorted, our families have been killed and our people exterminated.
- » Build collectively – self-care needs to be constructed in a group where individual realities, circumstances, and needs are acknowledged. While

it is a collective journey, it also reclaims individual space. It is always amazing to see what happens when we are allowed to express our anger and frustration, when we can talk about our fears and hopelessness and happiness, our inability to enjoy life and feel safe anywhere in the world. But simply voicing what we experience in our personal lives does not necessarily change anything. This is a long process.

- » There is no consensus about the meaning of self-care. Our experiences differ greatly, as do the methodologies for addressing the self-care of activists. We must find out what works for us and our group/collective/community, and then deliberately make it part of our everyday organizing practices.
- » Create spaces for dialogues and share tools that can increase our awareness as people, as organizations, and as a movement.
- » Develop self-care and care among activists at organizational and individual levels to help us deal with outside “threats”. This is an important strategy for strengthening ourselves internally so we can face outside threats in the fight for our own rights and for those of our people and communities.
- » Self-care and care among activists is linked to the sustainability of our movements, struggles, and activities.

METHODOLOGIES

Our methodologies have been developed with the goal of creating spaces where activists can collectively work on internal issues. We have done this by



creating horizontal activist circles for the purpose of reflections and exchanges, where each woman's story is heard and valued. By sharing our personal stories, each of us can step out of isolation and be heard. Although we speak in the first person, we never lose sight of the collective we form. In these spaces our pain is witnessed and acknowledged, and we know that feelings play a central role in our work. This is not only about talking, but about acknowledging what we feel as we share our stories. Each person that takes the opportunity to share personal issues, problems, and needs is recognized, seen, and validated by everyone listening. Our stories are often about violence and injustices committed against us. Breaking the silence that surrounds the violence we have experienced means naming the injustice done to us, which is as Lepa Mladjenovic says, "... a crime and

not something that is part of 'normality' of women's destiny."¹⁶ When we gather to share our stories, when we break the silence that surrounds the personal injustices that have marked our lives and the lives of our collectives and communities, we are remembering and resisting, we are naming the aggressors, and we are disrupting the system. When this is done in a manner that encourages and welcomes the emotions that surround the stories of personal injustices, we are transgressing patriarchy where the rational is valued and encouraged and the emotional is disqualified and regarded as unimportant and reason for ridicule.

In our work we use art, creativity, and the body, and ceremonies are part of the healing method. We provide an environment of safety and trust where we have time to share our stories using our own words rather than someone else's. We also use the power of nature to remember, share, and listen to each other, and to heal. We have each other. We reflect and share in front of each other, and each of us has the chance to witness the pain of the others and to offer others the chance to witness our pain as well. We all share and witness at the same time. This is the beginning of the process of "replacing the cruelty of the injustices done to our bodies with tenderness towards ourselves".¹⁷

We also work with images and videos where we are the narrators. This is intended to give visibility to our activism and make public the stories that were not "meant" to be public, stories about what we face and what reinvigorates our fight. We direct our own content for the videos. Together we revise our organizational practices and inspire each other to take care of ourselves in the same way we take care of others.

16 Mladjenovic, Lepa: "Healing is Justice: Presente! I am the voice and the Body of Liberty. The Story of the Second Festival of the Memory of Women Raped in War, Chimaltenango, Guatemala, February 24 – 28, 2011."

17 Ibid.

While this methodology is based on face-to-face gatherings, virtual spaces are also important places for debates and political constructions where we meet to consolidate our reflections, and ensure the continuity of our communication between and after face-to-face gatherings. Furthermore, virtual meetings allow us to continue our collective constructions around “What is self-care and care among activists” and “The individual and collective practices of self-care and care among activists that we recognize and can promote in our organization spaces.”

FOR CONSULTATION

A Feminist Alternative for the Protection, Self-Care, and Safety of Women Human Rights Defenders in Mesoamerica

IM-DEFENSORAS

In terms of protection, a gender perspective entails a process of empowerment for the victims of rights violations, and an understanding of security that incorporates both the subjective and the symbolic, calling into question the patriarchal separation of the public and private spheres. Beyond articulating the situation of women, the approach requires an analysis of the power relations between genders, identifying the situation in which these power relations exist, and defining the actions and concepts to eliminate the power differentials and construct democratic power.

In response to these insights and through this feminist praxis, IM-Defensoras has created a space for dialogue, mutual recognition and solidarity among WHRDs from diverse social movements.

A priority for and a principle of IM-Defensoras is self-care as a feminist collective political strategy to ensure the sustainability of our struggles and movements. A feminist approach to self-care seeks to recognize and respond to





the many pressures WHRDs face, both in our work and in our family and community life, and takes into account the intersectional context and conditions of patriarchal oppression which blame women for 'not taking care of themselves'.

Self-care implies changes to our work practices that allow us to better resist, adapt and respond to the stereotyped role of women as 'caretakers of the world' and that help us to defend rights in inherently risky contexts but as political actors able to foresee and mitigate possible attacks. In order to incorporate self-care in the daily practices of WHRDs we have launched a series of workshops in collaboration with the national networks where together we explore experiences and challenges. We conducted an initial assessment to understand self-care experiences and needs in Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, and created a fund to support individual and collective self-care actions. The fund allows self-care mechanisms to be decided on within the organizations to address stress and burnout, and to provide gynaecological health exams, as well as medical and psychological care for WHRDs whose family members have experienced attacks as a result of their activism. As WHRDs, we face many challenges in prioritizing self-care, in particular accessing resources and support for self-care strategies, yet it is important to keep it on our agendas and those of our organizations. It is also important to build capacity so that as WHRDs we can, both individually and collectively, generate our own protection, safety, self-care and networking strategies in order to strengthen our struggles.

Well-being, Self-Care and Integrated Security (WeSIS): An introduction

Institute for Women's Empowerment (IWE), Hong Kong

The term Well-being, Self-Care and Integrated Security (WeSIS) was coined by the Institute for Women's Empowerment (IWE) and is regarded by IWE as a fundamental practice for building sustainable, transformative feminist leadership.

Building internal strength and resilience or nurturing our internal well-being has been a critical component missing from our approaches to activism. Feminist activists often neglect their own health and well-being in their constant fight for equity and justice. Many individuals who are regarded as extraordinary leaders and have accomplished great victories in their work for social justice have suffered enormous costs to their own well-being. This in turn has led to personal burnout, and stagnation and fragmentation in the movements. However, a social movement is only as strong as the individuals who comprise the greater collective. If these individuals are burnt-out, unable to recognise their physical and emotional limits or devote their lives to a movement without taking stock of their personal well-being, then the movement is likely to be unsustainable as the activists are working in a finite capacity. Well-being, Self-Care and Integrated Security concepts and practise guide individual activists and human rights defenders in building their internal strength so they avoid burn-out and damage to their health and well-being.

Through promoting well-being and self-care of individuals in the context of their organised activism, WeSIS cultivates the capacities essential for feminist leadership which is transformative and sustainable. Internal strength, resilience and mindfulness are all critical attributes for women to carry out sustainable and meaningful work towards transforming oppressive social relations to being equitable and just. The process of self-transformation has often been neglected in collective activism as activists become engrossed by meeting deadlines and achieving goals, however, this process is an essential element for achieving social transformation. Through nurturing strong, resilient activists who are mindful and self-aware we build the self-esteem and confidence for women to realise their value and potential as leaders, undermining the patriarchal culture which works against us.

Well-being is about internal strength and resilience, by nurturing these internal attributes we create stronger foundations for the networks, organisations,

**“ I send news to my Northeast
the weather here is a beast
but whether on the street or in your rap
breathe deep and do not give up
we’re the only ones that know the pain of our tune
we’re the only ones that know what’s behind our cry
we promised to resist, remember?
sister, do not desist, try.
no turning back, our name is revolt
no turning back, our name is revolt
anyone tries knockin’ us down, turn back aroun’
our ideas are more dangerous than guns
we were born in the back alleys of this so-called Brazil
our tune is bullet proof
repression don’t shake me
our fight echoes wherever it plays
repression don’t shake me
they belittle us all the time
but we’re in a movement
move to get strong
get strong to survive ”**

LIDI DE OLIVEIRA

Pagu Funk. Baixada Fluminense - RJ



communities and collectives that we are party to. And we build the power and resilience we need to sustain ourselves as feminist, transformative leaders.

Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights Latin America

In the midst of adversity, our proposal is to strengthen the sustainability of women's activism, bringing to light commitment and sense of responsibility of the individual social subject who is aware of the risks and who assumes self-care as a personal and collective alternative. And while individual responsibilities exist, real self-protection in the current context is only feasible as a collective decision, since it is only from the collective that possibilities and tools emerge. This is a process of self-affirmation, which has as its starting point the defense of life, integrity, liberty, personal and collective security and the continuity of activism...

...Sounds of the Conch grew out of Urgent Action Fund's initiatives in several countries of the world, regions where the Fund is present with support and rapid responses in favor of women activists. It came from the permanent need to showcase concepts and practices of Integrated Protection and Security and the Sustainability of Activists, in workshops, which are in and of themselves valuable but not enough to transform daily practice. This understanding led us to commit to a process of constructing concepts and complementary practices, created through consensus, and based on women's centuries-old experience, wisdom, and intuition.

It also comes from our profound belief that together we can revise our ideas, lifestyles, imaginaries, and practices, so we can construct joint proposals for an activism which strengthens our lives and actions together, involving solidarity, mutual help, care and self-care¹⁸.

18 Sounds of the Conch, Conversations to Promote the Sustainable Activism of Women Human Rights Defenders of Latin America by Luz Stella Ospina Murillo, Colombia, September 2012.

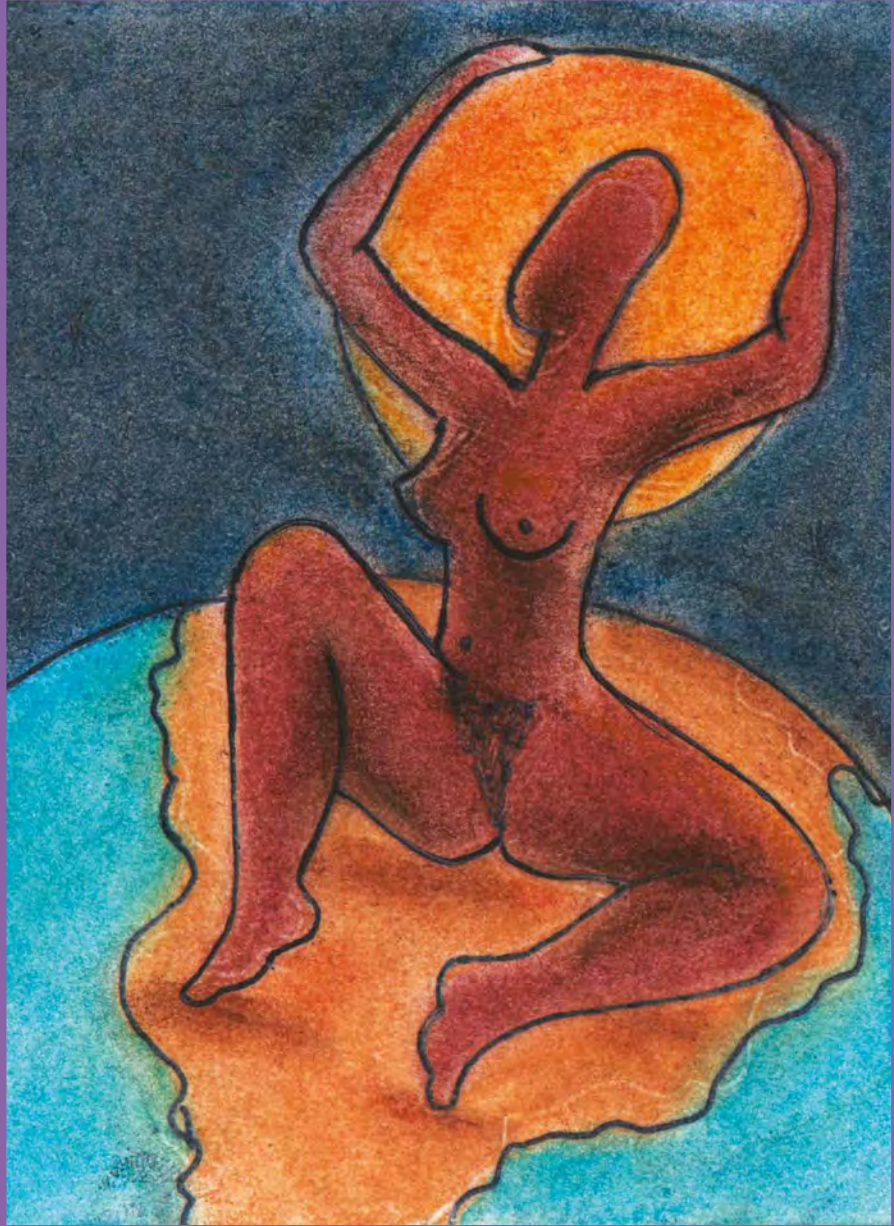
Politicizing Self-Care and Wellbeing in Our Activism as Women Human Rights Defenders

Jessica Horn¹⁹

Our work is to create societies that are just, where people are able to live well, healthy and balanced, and are able to conduct their lives without the fear of violence. Being emotionally well is central to being able to fully and actively participate in society. It is really fascinating to me that this element of human existence, and particularly activists' existence, has been neglected for so long. Many feminists argue (Audre Lorde being one of them) that we live in systems of power that are designed to make us unhappy - that are strategically designed to erase the happiness and well-being of certain groups of people. So it is in and of itself a political act to affirm the happiness of women in a patriarchal society.

I also think that we underestimate the amount of emotional and mental stress that oppression and injustice cause, and also fail to recognize that the stress is a collective stress. We tend to forget that when one person is attacked everybody is impacted. The person who is attacked has an immediate direct need, but the people around them and supporting them are also affected. As activists we carry the burden of that constant injury in our communities. So there's a need to address that burden because it runs us down.

19 Politicizing Self-Care and Wellbeing in Our Activism as Women Human Rights Defenders | 10 June 2015 | By Verónica Vidal and Susan Tolmay, at: <http://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/politicizing-self-care-and-wellbeing-our-activism-women-human-rights-defenders>



Bibliography

BARRY, Jane e DJORDJEVIC, Jelena. **Que sentido tem a revolução se não podemos dançar?**. EUA: Fundo de Ação Urgente pelos Direitos das Humanos das mulheres, 2007.

BHABHA, Homi K. **O local da cultura**. Coleção Humanitas. Tradução de *The Location of culture*. Belo Horizonte: Editora da UFMG, 2003.

BUTLER, Judith. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

HERNANDO, Almudena. **La fantasia de la individualidad – sobre la construcción sociohistorica del sujeto modern**. Madrid: Katz Editores, 2012.

OLIVEIRA, Guacira Cesar. **Desigualdades de gênero e raça no desenvolvimento brasileiro**. Mimeo. 2003.

ONLINE CONSULTATIONS

Universidade Livre Feminista – Metodologia. Available at <http://feminismo.org.br/metodologia/> [Consulted on 13-12-2015]

CELIBERTI, Lilian. **Diálogos complexos - olhares de mulheres sobre o Buen Vivir**. Available at: http://www.cotidianomujer.org.uy/relatoria_indigenas_br.pdf [Consulted on 13-12-2015]

HORN, Jessica. **Politicizing Self-Care and Wellbeing in Our Activism as Women Human Rights Defenders**. Available at <http://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/politicizing-self-care-and-wellbeing-our-activism-women-human-rights-defenders> [Consulted on 13-12-2015]

MARIA, Natalia. **Abrição, memória, movimento e giro do mundo - DjumbaiAR, djumbaiando...** Coluna Djumbai. Available at: http://www.cfemea.org.br/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4523:abricao-memoria-movimento-e-giro-do-mundo-djumbaiar-djumbaiando&catid=412:artigos&Itemid=194 [Consulted on 13-12-2015]

MLADJENOVIC, Lepa. **Healing is Justice**: Presente! I am the voice and the Body of Liberty. The Story of the Second Festival of the Memory of Women Raped in War, Chimaltenango, Guatemala, 24 – 28 February, 2011. Available at: http://www.womenngo.org.rs/english/images/stories/pdf/GuatemalaFestival_story.pdf [Consulted on 13-12-2015]

For More Information

BARRY, Jane e DJORDJEVIC, Jelena. **Que sentido tem a revolução se não podemos dançar?**. Fundo de Ação Urgente pelos Direitos das Humanos das mulheres. EUA, 2007.

Claiming Rights Claiming Justice: A Guidebook on Women Human Rights Defenders (with Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development) (2007). <http://defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/book3NeoWithCovereng.pdf>

International Consultation on Women Human Rights Defenders: Resource Book and Evaluation Report (2005). <http://defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/WHRD-Evaluation-Report.pdf>

ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN DEVELOPMENT (AWID) AND THE WHRD INTERNATIONAL COALITION

Our Right to Safety: Women Human Rights Defenders' Holistic Approach to Protection (2014). I. Barcia: http://issuu.com/awid/docs/our_right_to_safety_final

List of Materials and Resources for Women Human Rights Defenders (2010) http://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/list_of_resources_for_whrds.pdf

Barry, Jane on Nainar Vahida, Estrategias De Las Defensoras De Derechos Humanos Para Su Segridad – Insiste, Persiste, Resiste, Existe, Fondo de Acción Urgente para los Derecho Humanos de las Muheres, Front Line – La Fundación Internacional para la Protección de Defensores/as de Derechos Humanos, y la Fundación Kvinna till Kvinna (2008). http://media.wix.com/ugd/b81245_882ebb831ca34c19aefa24fa98398358.pdf

Luz Stella Ospina Murillo “Sonidos de Caracola – por un Activismo Sostenible de las Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres en América Latina”, Fondo de Acción Urgente de América Latina (2012)

Travesías para pensar y actuar – Experiencias de autocuidado de defensoras de derechos humanos em Masoamérica , Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos (IM-Defensoras), (2014)

Ana María Hernández Cárdenas, Nallely Guadalupe Tello Méndez, ¿Qué significa el autocuidado para las defensoras de derechos humanos? Diálogos entre nosotras, Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos (IM-Defensoras), Asociadas por lo Justo (JASS), Consorcio para el Diálogo Parlamentario y la Equidad Oaxaca A.C.

Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition, Gendering Documentation: A Manual For and About Women Human Rights Defenders. <http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/WHRD-IC-Gendering-Documentation-Manual-1.pdf>, (2015)

Bernal, M. (2006) Autocuidado y autodefensa para mujeres activistas – Manual de autoaplicación. México: Artemisa (Grupo Interdisciplinario en Género, Sexualidad, Juventud y Derechos Humanos) y Elige (Red de Jóvenes por Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos, A.C.), Versión en inglés: Artemisa,

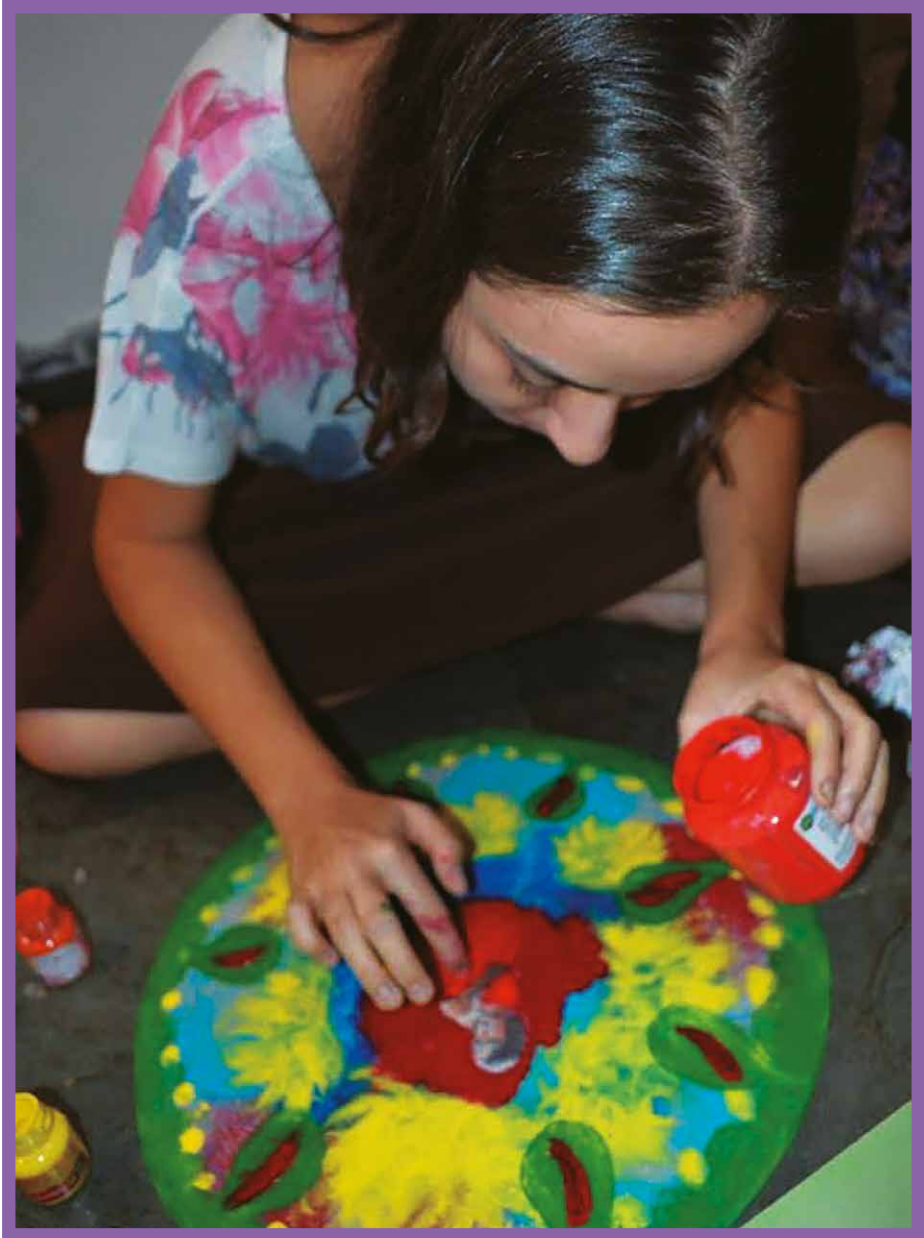
Elige y CREA (2008) Self-Care and Self-Defense Manual for Feminist Activists. Nueva Delhi, Nueva York: Artemisa, Elige y CREA: <http://files.crea-world.org/files/self-care-brochure.pdf>

Arcana – web pagina

Terapia comunitaria – publicacao/Livro da Terapia comunitaria

Flores de Dan – tem algo no web

Acemun – Amma – algo publicado em relaco a essa questao



About the Authors



GUACIRA CESAR DE OLIVEIRA

Is a sociologist and works as part of CFEMEA's board of directors. She is a member of the empowering collective of the Free Feminist University (Universidade Livre Feminista) and the Feminist Collective About Self-Care. She is a militant under the Articulation of Brazilian Women (Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras – AMB) and the MarcoSur Feminist Articulation (Articulación Feminista MarcoSur – AFM).



JELENA DJORDJEVIC

Is the co-founder of the AntiTrafficking Center organization in Belgrade, Serbia. She has been a member of the Urgent Action Fund Council for the rights of women and has belonged to the International Consulting Council for the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice. She is a member of the CFEMEA's board of directors and the empowering collective of the Free Feminist University (Universidade Livre Feminista). She is the co-founder of the Feminist Collective About Self-Care.

Photo descriptions



Photos of the national gathering sponsored by CFEMEA and the Feminist Collective About Self-Care

Photo of the Circle of Self-Care and Care among activists



Documentary pictures (**Superando Violações:
autocuidado e cuidado entre mulheres ativistas**)

WATCH THE DOCUMENTARY: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSG9LQmhThg>

Produced by



Supported by

