


**"WE CARRY GENERATIONAL
DEMANDS FOR HEALING THAT
WILL NOT REST":
AN AFRICAN FEMINIST EXPLORATION OF
HEALING JUSTICE AS AN ANALYTICAL
LENS AND A PRACTICE**

**URGENT
ACTION
FUND
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AFRICA**

FOR WOMN'S HUMAN RIGHTS





THE UAF-AFRICA TEAM collectively decided to focus on healing justice during a team meeting held in 2017.

NDANA BOFU-TAWAMBA played critical roles in leading these conversations that helped us arrive at healing justice.

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MASA AMIR wrote this report based on these collective efforts.

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ACRONYMS

AWHRD	African Womn Human Rights Defender
H	Healer
ACD	Academic
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
SA	South Africa
SEN	Senegal
BW	Botswana
UGN	Uganda
LIB	Liberia
NIG	Nigeria
KEN	Kenya
GH	Ghana



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report explores the healing justice framework from African, feminist, activist perspectives. It traces Urgent Action Fund-Africa's journey to healing justice. The framework shows the evolution of feminists toward healing, health and wellness. It reflects the analysis that lies at the heart of feminist theorizing: What is fundamentally wrong with the ways in which our realities have been structured to exclude us? How do these realities and the traumas they generate affect our wellness and the heaviness we carry to our organizing spaces?

Through this exploration, healing justice emerges as a **framework of analysis** that recognizes historical and intergenerational trauma caused by intersecting systems of oppression, and **a practice** that centers healing in social justice organizing. The research develops an analysis of major structures of oppression that create traumas and impact the wellbeing of African Women Human Rights Defenders (AWHRDs) in a variety of ways, and proposes avenues to center healing in our everyday activist structures.

The two overarching branches of the healing justice framework include:

- a. An analysis of structural violence, its root causes and the manner in which this violence becomes the normalized way in which we know and experience life. Importantly, structural violence becomes a critical foundation of our consciousness, affecting how we build organizing spaces and relate to each other. For example, the report illustrates the violence of criminal justice systems and shows how activist spaces often default to punishment, calling out and ostracization in response to internal conflicts—responses that mimic what we experience through criminal justice systems that are built on punitive measures and meting out pain.
- b. A practice of centering healing in organizing spaces. The report argues that since activists carry significant traumas, the “work” of activism cannot solely be about organizing. It has to incorporate healing. The report unpacks what healing could entail, including revival of traditional healing practices that have been systematically erased; shifting the ways we envisage and practice our activism; integrating healers as integral members of feminist movements; creating safer feminist spaces, among others.

The report is presented as an invitation for further thinking and analysis. It does not seek to chart a path that would create a utopia, but rather invites AWHRDs to collectively think about the sources of our pain and how to create structures and practices that would make for more humane realities.

INTRODUCTION: THE ROAD TO HEALING JUSTICE




African Womn¹ Human Rights Defenders (AWHRDs) operate in some of the most challenging contexts across the globe, facing high levels of exclusion and inequality with limited economic resources or institutional support. Urgent Action Fund-Africa (UAF-Africa or the Fund) established the African Womn Human Rights Defenders Platform (also known as the Feminist Republik) to support Womn Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) across the continent and respond to several trends, including shrinking civic space, increased political and religious fundamentalism, heightened misogyny and backlash, violent repression of dissent and several gaps in protection and wellbeing support available to WHRDs.

As a rapid response Fund that receives daily communications from WHRDs, primarily in the form of grant requests, but also through the sharing of updates, research and invitations to different meetings, UAF-Africa is privy to extensive conversations with activists from across the continent on issues that range from political upheavals and opportunities for mobilization to violations in digital spaces and struggles of indigenous activists against extractive corporations. UAF-Africa understands that thinking through trends pertinent to feminist activism on the continent is critical to its ability to provide relevant support in contexts that are constantly shifting in complex ways. The Fund's reflections from 2017-2022 point to a variety of critical issues that WHRDs on the continent are grappling with, one of the prominent issues being the need to pay increased attention to collective care and healing. The critique we hear from activists is that the support available to them is largely individualistic, pathologizes political distress and depression, and does not challenge the root causes of emotional, mental and spiritual distress.

It is exciting to witness movements, including the reproductive justice movement, environmental justice movement, indigenous people and transgender movements, increasingly digging deeper into issues of health and healing within activism work; an introspection that has not been traditionally done by movements focusing on political rights, for example.

¹ We use womn to challenge traditional ideas of what and who a womn is and can be, and disrupt the links to patriarchy where women are, in effect, subject to men or a sub-category of men. Other formulations used by feminists and others include womxn, womyn and womn. Womn' for us includes lesbians, bisexual womn and transwomn, as well as those who are non-binariad and identify with neither gender.



There are indeed deep reflections and imagining taking place, probing the root causes of trauma, collective experiences and memories of violence against our bodies and lands. We are witnessing a significant shift away from the sole focus on individual trauma, interpersonal conflicts in movement spaces and medical responses to feeling unwell. This is a period of focus on collective experiences of trauma and their roots. More and more, the critical importance of interrogating transgenerational and historical trauma and its impact on feminist organizing and present trauma, is becoming crucial to feminist movements across the continent.


We are also constantly reflecting on our contexts as a Fund and realize that there are complex, persisting trends that AWHRDs struggle against, such as the continuous criminalization of feminist activism by states. The form of criminalization evolves: militarization; different forms of fundamentalism; online violence; increased authority of corporate actors; the rise of conservative anti-rights movements globally; and the burnout and fatigue activists increasingly report, manifesting through chronic illnesses or the near collapse of groups.

These trends are not new—they evolve, take different forms, are experienced differently by different activists and we all know them by heart—but importantly, there are roots to the structures that create the difficult contexts in which we live. We rarely get the chance to reflect on these roots and wonder: why do we experience the world in the way we do?

We sat with all these reflections and realized that, while it is apparent that urgent responses and individual security measures remain vital, the times demand a revolutionary approach that focuses on why our realities are structured in the ways we experience them? Why are many feminist spaces grappling with internal divisions? Why do we all largely feel unwell? And what can we do about it? It strongly felt like something was missing from current conversations and available support to WHRDs.

The Fund acknowledged the need for a global conversation that seeks to address and explore many of the issues we are sitting with. Over the last two decades, healing justice has emerged as a political framework aiming to recognize and holistically address historical and intergenerational trauma, in a global economic context that marginalizes, discriminates against, disadvantages, and harms people due to extreme inequality and poverty; gender, race and class dynamics; combined with other intersecting identities such as sexuality and disability. The term “healing justice” coined by the Kindred Southern Healing Collective, arose from the need to identify political strategies that center the great impact of collective and generational trauma, and the role of healing and healing practitioners in our collective liberation. The context was that of Hurricane Katrina and the glaring “crisis of trauma, violence and social conditions” that became apparent in that region. Katrina brought to the surface the trauma of movement organizers; generational traumas; and the stark failures of the state. The affected communities recognized a pressing need for healing and healing mechanisms that also uncovered Southern indigenous and Black histories of survival. It was within this context that the healing justice framework emerged. At first, activists at Kindred did not want to use the term “healing” because it presumes a sense of purity or that there is something to be fixed. However, they could not use health because it names a system that was never made for black people, but one that systematically harms them. Healing justice is not framed as a movement, but rather a framework through which justice work is done and can be offered to movements as it brings critical strategy for political activism and liberation.²

2 *Turning Towards Healing Justice Convening Report*, The Urgent Action Sister Funds, 2019.



Healing justice acknowledges the gender, race and class dynamics associated with generational trauma and centers healing as an approach to social justice organizing. The importance of creating time and resources for healing in a global structure that isolates the symptoms from political and economic factors, is at the heart of healing justice as a radical approach to organizing.

While aware that the concept did not originate on the continent, we understand it as a useful conceptual framing in the constant feminist grappling with systemic injustice, the roots of trauma and the challenges of feeling well, at individual and collective levels. This is work and a thinking process that has been, and continues to be, done on the continent and globally.

We were interested in exploring how this conceptualization reflects work that has been, and continues to be, done on the continent, and the ways in which it advances the collective evolution of feminist thinking from individual to collective care and wellbeing.

The healing justice framework focuses on the underlying causes of WHRDs' emotional and spiritual distress due to systemic violence and past-present traumas. The framework prioritizes tackling transgenerational and collective trauma through collective healing processes as a form of political action. This framework is a useful way to organize the work that feminist activists continue to do, to transform systems of inequality while addressing the ways in which trauma is experienced and manifests in collectives, under the overarching umbrella of striving towards liberation.

The decision to start the research work of the Republik with healing justice comes from the attention that AWHRDs are increasingly giving to addressing collective trauma and concerted analysis of systemic inequalities. Added to this, is the stronger-than-ever focus given the COVID-19 pandemic and the manner in which it crystalized structural inequalities in unprecedented ways.³

RESEARCH PROCESS

The geographical scope of this research is three African countries: South Africa, Senegal and the DRC—each with very particular histories.

The DRC is a context of protracted conflict associated with a high prevalence of sexual violence as a weapon of war, and also innovative approaches to addressing sexual violence (including physical and emotional responses). WHRDs in the country have also engaged in exciting conversations around feminist reparations that are discussed in later sections of this report.

Senegal has a rich history of wellbeing and traditional healing practices adapted to feminist contexts. The authority of religious leaders in the country and the ways in which they play key roles in justifying rights violations, posing a challenge to practicing traditional healing, was another point of interest.

South Africa is home to wellbeing and healing spaces that are run by womn and political sangomas,⁴ and has a rich history of politicizing care and healing to engage with the country's complex history, which was interesting to explore.

3 For an in-depth analysis of the gendered dimensions of inequality made clear by the COVID-19 pandemic and African feminist responses, please refer to *Fire in the Rain: UAF-Africa's Feminist Response to COVID-19* <https://www.uaf-africa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Fire-in-the-Rain-UAF-Africas-Feminist-Response-to-COVID-19.pdf>

4 Sangoma is a Zulu term, but the term is colloquially used to describe Southern African traditional healers generally.

These were supplemented by additional interviews across different regions, including North Africa (Egypt), East Africa (Uganda, Kenya), West Africa (Nigeria, Liberia, Ghana), South Africa (Botswana). A total of 47 interviews were conducted with WHRDs, healers (including medical doctors and psychologists involved in women's rights work and traditional healers), and academics.

Quotes are referenced using the participant category: AWHRD, H (healer) or ACD (academic), followed by the country code and the interview number associated with that country. Regional interviews are identified as REG, followed by the participant category, country acronym and interview number.

Following an initial scoping study, several brainstorming sessions with WHRDs, internal reflections on grantmaking trends and consultations with feminist activists and practitioners, all resulted in an ever-growing realization that healing justice and the connected practices of collective healing are key priorities to shaping the Feminist Republik's support to WHRDs and feminist activists (2018). A research team from The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) collaborated with the Feminist Republik, under the auspices of UAF-Africa, to undertake this study which aimed to:

- *understand the current traumas and structural violence experienced by AWHRDs, including their perspectives about the historical and systemic roots of trauma;*
- *critically interrogate traumas faced by WHRDs from a political rather than medical standpoint;*
- *explore collective healing processes as pathways for feminist movement-building, with the ultimate objective of guiding future support to feminist activists and their organizations.*


A literature review was conducted to explore existing literature on healing and healing justice from a feminist and social justice perspective. IDS led three African research teams and a regional researcher who conducted online interviews with WHRDs and healers in the DRC, Senegal and South Africa and from across the continent in the aforementioned countries from December 2020 to March 2021.

Finally, two learning events were convened (the first from 20-22 July, 2021, and the second from July 26-27, 2021) with 16 AWHRDs from 11 African countries, representing the Feminist Republik (FR) network, and wider UAF-Africa stakeholders (including feminist healers, academics and activists), to deliberate and build on early findings.

A defining characteristic of the research design was that the focus is on theory building not theory testing, meaning we began with an analysis of the context of violence and trauma then moved to theory. Different country contexts informed this analysis, which guided us away from a reductionist approach and allowed for the commonalities of experiences and insights across contexts to inform this research. In addition to this research report, this process also resulted in the production of an academic working paper, with more focus on the theoretical underpinnings of the healing justice framework.⁵

This research entailed multiple cycles of interviews, collective reflection and sensemaking, going back to the drawing board. This was necessary with the expansiveness of the topic at hand, in order to allow us to digest the insights shared and understand different angles of the concepts.

5 Jacqueline Shaw et al.. *Contextualising Healing Justice as a Feminist Organising Framework in Africa*. (IDS Working Paper 576, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2022). DOI: 10.19088/IDS.2022.063, <https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/contextualising-healing-justice-as-a-feminist-organising-framework-in-africa/>



For the purpose of this research, we were interested in documenting the often undocumented roots of trauma and violence. We dug deeper, beyond the critical traumas associated with the closure of civil society spaces and the result was rich; emotional conversations with activists about their past, their ancestors, spiritual beliefs, tensions of organizing spaces, their lives as children and parents wrestling with historical traumas and their dreams for transformed realities.

The goal was not to extract and replicate knowledge produced by other communities, and not to merely describe what healing practices entail. We are not hoping to expand a repertoire of techniques or deepen understanding for the sake of understanding. This research rather has a transformative purpose—the voices and perspectives feed and transform our imaginations and actions.

This research was an attempt to present a broad framework to describe the consequences of systemic oppression and violence on our bodies and spirits, and reflections on how WHRDs can heal from traumas as a core component of the strive for liberation. This research does not, and did not aim to, present a one-size-fits-all approach to healing justice, but to present an African feminist take on the concept, that must be critiqued, further unpacked, and contextualized by activists in their different settings.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The interviews were conducted virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions and precautions. Learning events were also conducted virtually for the same reason. Plans to conduct physical meetings with activists to reflect on learnings and to create spaces to experiment with collective healing practices were cancelled. There certainly are nuances that are lost in solely virtual communications. Some interviews were conducted over several days due to network difficulties, which possibly had some effect on the reflections shared due to the interruption of an interviewee's thought process.

The deep dive into the focus countries revealed the manner in which the context determines the content of healing conversations. For example, in the DRC, conversations largely focused on healing from histories and current realities of sexual violence and there was a lot of focus on feminist approaches to reparations. Meanwhile, interviews conducted with South African AWHRDs had a lot of focus on the intergenerational trauma of apartheid, and experiences of activism lead by university students. The country's rich history of political sangomas meant that there were strong reflections on traditional healing practices in feminist contexts. As a research team, we could only imagine the richness of including more contexts to this conversation. However, due to resource and time constraints, the focus was predominantly on the three countries of interest.

Exploring healing justice from an African feminist lens is a young endeavor, meaning that there are many areas of exploration that need further research and discussion. This research is a first attempt at exploring the healing justice framework, which implies that there are limitations to the information presented here. The research largely focuses on shedding light on the processes that need to be thought about or explored further in feminist contexts. It is not a strategy paper and does not seek to offer concrete plans for implementing this framework in feminist activist spaces. The research team understands that the concreteness will only arise out of collective conversations and further engagements with this framework.




THE ROOTS OF TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE FACED BY AFRICAN WHRDs

The challenges, risks, threats and violations that WHRDs face in their activism are well-documented in many publications, including a report published by the Urgent Action Sister Funds that details the closure of civic space across the regions in which they fund. The risks are multiple and overlapping and are fueled by who WHRDs are as women challenging social and traditional norms about “acceptable” behavior. What they do, namely the rights they defend and advocate for, present threats to existing power structures.

WHRDs interviewed spoke of the different forms of violations, threats and risks they face in their activism from state and non-state actors, including their families and partners.

Violations faced from state actors are well-documented. They include factors that have collectively been dubbed the “closure of civil society spaces”. These include criminalization of the work of WHRDs, violent persecution (physical attacks, harassment and different forms of gender-based violence), restrictions on funding, surveillance, restrictions on freedom of assembly and speech, amongst other forms of closure of civic space.



Activists interviewed also spoke of the layers of complexity that the COVID-19 pandemic brought. They spoke of soaring levels of sexual, physical and psychological violence both at home and in the community, loss of income and high prices of basic and essential items, lack of access to health services, mental health challenges (such as anxiety and depression), greater burden of unpaid domestic and care work, lack of information on and understanding of COVID-19 and related issues.

In addition to the everyday lived realities of all women, to varying extents, feminists and women's rights activists further carried the burden of being present for their constituencies, available and responsive as well as creative in different organizing contexts.

2.1 STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

WHRDs interviewed observed that they rarely get the chance to reflect on the structures that cause and perpetuate our traumas—the why of how we experience the world and the roots of the structures that create the difficult contexts in which we live. The life of activism has not always offered opportunities to pause, reflect and analyze. Activists spoke of feeling that they were almost “pushed” to activism due to the inequalities they experienced and that they are mostly in response mode due to violations and threats. An interesting reflection that came up is that activists largely do not feel “in control” of their time, how their energy is spent or what they want to prioritize. For some, the latter entailed an analysis of the root causes of harm and of activism spaces and the ways in which they are set up. In this vein, activists interviewed deliberated on the gap in the support provided for their care, protection and wellbeing needs: the support does not address the context that causes the harm, depression, burnout and illness in the first place.

The struggle with therapy is that it encourages a disconnect—expecting people to be healed without dealing with the context that is at the heart of the struggles they are facing. At the same time, we also carry generational demands for justice that cannot rest until justice is achieved (H,SA09).

Even though WHRDs feel better when they care for themselves and their groups, or when they take a much-needed break from the stresses of activism, they find that these are largely short-term solutions because they eventually return to the same context that caused their illness, depression and burnout in the first place. Support for care and wellbeing needs thus feels truncated.

There is a need to incorporate a feminist critique of the context in which WHRDs operate and a feminist imagination of the contextual transformation required within the discussion on healing, care and protection.

Structural violence describes the ways in which social structures are designed to stop certain individuals and groups from reaching their full potential.⁶ The arrangements are structural because they are embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world. They are violent because they cause injury to people (typically, not those responsible for perpetuating such inequalities).

6 Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace and Peace Research.” J of Peace Res, Vol 6 (1969): 167–191, www.jstor.org/stable/422690

Violence here does not solely refer to physical violence, but to the “avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs or [...] the impairment of human life, which lowers the actual degree to which someone is able to meet their needs below that which would otherwise be possible.”⁷

Structural violence is not readily observable as it is embedded in longstanding “ubiquitous social structures, normalized by stable institutions and regular experience,”⁸ becoming the ordinary way in which we experience the world, so much so that it appears invisible, its normalization. Meaning that attempts at challenging such structures constitutes a stepping out of the norm that warrants severe backlash.

2.1.1 STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE OF HEALTH-CARE INSTITUTIONS

COLONIAL ROOTS

The medical model is limited [...] health workers are not necessarily equipped on what to do beyond just giving medical treatment (WHRD, SA06).

Activists interviewed spoke of the denial of access to affordable, culturally specific and anti-oppressive health care as one of the root causes of trauma. Critical to the absence of access to this kind of health care is the pathologizing of our experiences, an inheritance of the colonial dichotomy between body and spirit and erasure of traditional understandings of un-wellness that ties this state to social, economic and political factors.

WHRDs interviewed discussed the prominence of psychiatric models that pathologize the experiences of activists with depression, burnout, distress and fatigue, enforced by doctors and social workers. The psychiatric model has further influenced funding support that is available to WHRDs and feminist groups to address wellbeing needs. It is this model that prescribes support for individual counseling sessions, relocation, and other practices which, although are certainly useful, and in some instances, lifesaving, do

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7 Johan Galtung and Kultuerlle Gewalt, “Der Burger im Staat.” 1993;43:106.

8 James Gilligan. *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic*; (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 306.

not take into account the social, political and economic roots of distress.

People have gone into treatment [...] and yet we are all so sick. We are sick spiritually [...] we are not healing, and we are not healed (WHRD, SA10).

Health care is also rarely culturally specific, given decades of the erasure of traditional health practices with the onset of colonialism and the introduction of hospital-based medicine, and its entrenchment of the dichotomy between body and soul. This duality was not a feature of traditional understandings of health and illness, which focused on aligning imbalances in bodily systems with aspects of larger social and ecological systems.

Health was medicalized under colonialism, becoming a technical issue rather than a social institution that has cultural, social, political and economic consequences. Instilling a dichotomy between body and soul is apparent in the establishment of mental health institutions on the continent.

Accounts of French psychologists in Gabon, for example, point to the need to counter “the power of magic and the old imaginations of animism.”⁹ Successfully treating patients was often depicted as an impossible challenge due to their “radically different conception of a reality”: ‘They were talking about things that were much more important to them than any reality. Their entire world is often cruelly different from our own.’¹⁰ In order to entrench Western medical beliefs, it was critical to consciously counter and erase traditional healing practices that were based on “magic” and “imaginations.”

One area of traditional medicine and healing practices that were countered was women’s knowledge as midwives. The conflict between French male doctors and Moroccan midwives in French colonized Morocco, for example, is well-documented.¹¹ French doctors saw Moroccan midwives, who were the sole practitioners of gynecology and female health in Morocco and larger North Africa, as a threat to their power over the dominance of women’s bodies. The French colonial administration and doctors’ first response was to recruit French female doctors, nurses and social workers to penetrate midwifery and medicalize the field, incrementally regulating and disbanding traditional Moroccan midwifery practices, until they were finally outlawed.

The crackdown on healers also took place in Kenya, which inherited many colonial laws, including those governing health care such as the Mental Health Act (MHA) of 1933 and the Witchcraft Suppression Act (WSA) of 1925, which remain two of the most draconian and detrimental to the health and rights of those labelled with mental illness. The enforcement of these laws left an indelible mark, the effects of which continue to be harmful to the health and rights of persons who are diagnosed with mental illness. The WSA, despite being obsolete, is responsible for the policing, delegitimizing, criminalizing and basically wiping out of traditional and indigenous healers. To date, the security apparatus, especially the police service, continues to harass and detain traditional healers who provide alternative and culturally appropriate mental health services in

9 Zumthurn, T. “Chapter 5 Healing and ‘Civilizing’: Community and Safety in Psychiatric Care.” *In Practicing Biomedicine at the Albert Schweitzer Hospital 1913–1965*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill (2020) doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004436978_007

10 Ibid.

11 See, for example, Belrhiti Z, Van Belle S, Criel B, How medical dominance and interprofessional conflicts undermine patient-centred care in hospitals: historical analysis and multiple embedded case study in Morocco *BMJ Global Health*, 2021; and Amster, E. (2013). *Medicine and the Saints: Science, Islam and the colonial encounter in Morocco, 1877–1956*. University of Texas Press. Texas, USA.

Northern Kenya (Ibrahim, 2014). Despite the fact that the Northern region lacks any formal mental health services, the government, just like its colonial predecessor, continues to dismantle age-old community resources and, worse, still fails to provide alternative essential health-care services (Ibrahim, 2014).

It is not surprising that the task of unearthing traditional healing practices for the purposes of this research was challenging, given the decades of systematic erasure of this knowledge.

The colonial history of health-care institutions as we experience them today clarifies the frustration with the use of solely diagnostic medicine to explain and address our un-wellness.

Healing is not about diagnosing [...] which is what the West has been big at [...]. As a healer my biggest role is to make sure that the space is safe [...]. [Being a healer] is more than just working with herbs and throwing bones [...] but about being connected to the ground we work on [...] and understand that we need this connection [...] to then articulate our experiences (H, SA05).

The centrality of seeking connection with the earth stems from a specific understanding that the physical world we inhabit is alive, a position that is mostly rejected as superstition. There are examples of this rejection in colonial accounts of colonized peoples. An example is that of Marcelline Nyndounge, a Fang¹² woman who ran a “traditional hospital village” called “Meteghe,” which translates to “earth” or “soft.” Unfortunately, the only accounts of Marcelline and her hospital that we could find are those of Dr. Munz, a French doctor who worked at the Albert Schweitzer Hospital,¹³ who highlights the ritual singing and dancing that Marcelline carried out, critiquing the focus on bringing about an “individual and social re-equilibrium,” which is conceptualized as the approach of “primitive cultures.”¹⁴

The sole focus on a medical lens to explain human experiences with un-wellness paved the way for an oppressive lens of what constitutes “healthy bodies,” which, combined with the hegemony of patriarchy, capitalism, ableism and white supremacy, has meant that this “healthy body” is largely male, able-bodied and heterosexual. A clear example of the oppressive application of the notion of “healthy bodies” pertains to disability, which has been normatively understood through the lens of medicalization. This is not to say that medicine has not been of great benefit to many disabled peoples, but that it created a narrative that there is a “neutral body from which disabled bodies deviate.” Indeed, the founding eugenicist ideology that some humans are “fit” and others are “unfit” has a founding role in ableist frameworks that value certain bodies over others. Eugenics is strengthened by capitalist ideologies that value “productive” bodies to create contexts that disempower disabled people.


The most recent and apparent example of the valuing of “normal” bodies over disabled bodies is the COVID-19 pandemic, when doctors and nurses in different countries were required to make decisions on who to prioritize for receipt of medical attention, in many cases based on disability.¹⁵

12 The Fang are a Bantu ethnic group in Equatorial Guinea, northern Gabon, and southern Cameroon.

13 The Albert Schweitzer Hospital was founded by Albert Schweitzer in Lambaréné, Gabon, in 1913 and was one of the one of the first modern hospitals on the continent.

14 Woodbury et al., ‘Psychiatric Care at the Albert Schweitzer Hospital’, 148.

15 Disability Discrimination, Medical Rationing and COVID-19, *Asian Bioeth Rev.* 2020 Dec; 12(4): 511–518., <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7471485/>



Patriarchy and capitalism also work to convince us our bodies are a problem that need fixing through fatphobia, causing many of us to dedicate significant parts of their lives in the grips of eating disorders or disordered eating symptoms.

HEALTH CARE AS A TOOL TO IMPOSE CONSERVATIVE VALUES

The legacy of missionary hospitals and their role in the imposition of Christian values, especially those pertaining to sexuality, is also critical to our analysis of health care structures as they exist today. From 1908 until the 1920s, to respond to the epidemic of venereal disease in Uganda (which mostly affected Europeans and Indians who had been brought in for infrastructural development), hospitals and dispensaries were established throughout the country. In many cases, these institutions were used to exert social control and impose conservative notions about sexuality and Christian values by missionaries.¹⁶ These notions were later enshrined in the Venereal Diseases Act of 1977, including the requirement that a person who has suffered from a sexually transmitted disease (STD) shall name the person who infected him or her, prescribing a fine or a prison sentence for anyone who contravenes the law. The Act further gave powers to a medical officer to order the detention of any person in a hospital that they think has a sexually transmitted disease, with the aim of having the suspected person treated before he or she can rejoin their community. The Act further authorizes the forceful medical examination of any person suspected to be carrying the disease. Notions of shame around STDs were enshrined through this Act that promotes stigma and discrimination. The Act lives on, and it was only in 2019 that a petition was filed in front of the Ugandan Supreme Court to demand scraping it.¹⁷

Heteronormativity is a fundamental value and framework in this case. It plays a prominent role in the idea of the healthy body and informs notions about pure and sinful bodies which are deeply embedded into the concept of the healthy body. Here, sinful bodies are vectors of disease, including the bodies of sex workers and LBTQI individuals who are engaged in sexually “deviant” practices. The medical policing of these bodies is depicted as emanating from the “neutral” interest of maintaining public health, which necessarily warrants state intervention.

Similar to the institution of the police, institutions of health care are prominent sites of violence against bodies that deviate from “acceptable” identities and sexual orientations.

PATHOLOGIZING OF CERTAIN IDENTITIES

The pathologizing of certain populations to “other” their identities and experiences is a legacy that continues to be experienced today. Several WHRDs interviewed, for example, indicated that one challenge faced from both the state and their communities, is being labeled “crazy” for doing the work they do, and facing the threat of being thrown into “insane asylums” if they do not halt their activism.

The narratives around black womn leaders are also often about their “madness” and perceived natural inclination towards violence:

16 C. Summers, “Intimate Colonialism: The Imperial Production of Reproduction in Uganda, 1907-1925.” *Signs* 16, no. 4 (1991), pp. 787-807.

17 <https://www.hivjustice.net/news-from-other-sources/uganda-constitutional-court-asked-to-repeal-requirement-for-forced-disclosure-in-law-on-sexually-transmitted-diseases/>

I remember that when my peers who were expelled [in the context of the Fees Must Fall protests in South Africa] were undergoing their disciplinary hearings, the tropes that were used to expel them were racialized. The narrative around my white friend was that she was a student leader who should have known better, but my Black friend was depicted as an angry black woman who was just born volatile (WHRD, SA03).

Interrogating the role of mental health laws in suppressing the opposition to colonial rule is of critical importance. Across British ruled countries such as Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa, for example, mental health laws enforced oppression, racism and exploitation by declaring certain individuals “insane.” The well-documented story of the South African female spiritual leader Nontetha Nkwenke who resisted apartheid and was subsequently declared mentally ill and incarcerated for life at a psychiatric facility where she eventually died, is a classic example of the role of colonial medicine in enforcing political control.¹⁸

Accusations of black disposition towards violence is one that is based in racist ideologies, rooted in pseudoscience, of biological black “madness” that must be policed and repressed. Countering such accusations by emphasizing their historical roots in colonialism is necessary.

Pathologizing our experiences is an inheritance of the colonial dichotomy between body and spirit, and erasure of traditional understandings of un-wellness that ties this state to social, economic and political factors. The psychiatric model has further influenced the funding support available to WHRDs and feminist groups to address wellbeing needs, focusing on largely medical approaches which, although are certainly useful, and in some instances, lifesaving, do not take into account the social, political and economic roots of distress.


IMAGINING A WAY FORWARD

Fundamentally, we must ask: How do we transform systems of health and wellness into mechanisms that can respond to our conditions and generational trauma and violence? This overarching transformation entails many, “smaller” transformations that reject the medicalization of symptoms of un-wellness that stem from histories of violence, racism, eugenics and ableism. This entails access to basic information about care and healing practices rooted in our communities, and awareness of the historical contexts of their co-optation.

Transformation fundamentally entails asking: What does healing look like without ableism? What kinds of ableism have even healers who consider ourselves rooted in social justice internalized? Integrating disability justice into our work around healing entails rejecting ideas of “cure” as the end goal and “impairment” as a frame to engage with people with disabilities.

The legacy of medicalizing every feeling of un-wellness is one that should be addressed and countered as part of a feminist analysis and practice of collective care and wellbeing.

¹⁸ See, for example, Parle, J (2007) States of mind: Mental illness and the quest for mental health in Natal and Zululand, 1868-1918. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. ISBN 13: 978-1-86914-098-4 pbk. Pages xv + 334, <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/pins/n37/n37a06.pdf>



Transforming health care structures entails confronting notions of state, communal and private institutions that have touted only one kind of body as healthy. It entails redefining healthy and healing. In addition to uncovering and using healing approaches that used to be practiced in different regions on the continent for generations that have a long history of being used to respond to trauma, stress and pain. These include bodywork, sound healing, herbal medicine, movement practices (such as dance), energy medicine, among others. Integrating these practices in feminist spaces also requires that relationships with healers are built and nurtured and that healers are recognized as important actors in feminist spaces. Critical to activists interviewed was the centering of a sense of togetherness when an activist is dealing with trauma or burnout. Rather than default to the hospital system, the sense that there are others who feel the pain of the activist and check in on her, share cooked meals, has been comforting to many activists interviewed.

We heal when we feel surrounded (WHRD, SEN06).


Reviving these healing practices in affordable and accessible ways promotes a healing that is transformative in that it puts us in touch with our full range of emotions—happiness, joy, rage, fear, and more—making us more attuned with our bodies. Transformation further entails countering the stigma around mental health and creating spaces within feminist movements to openly discuss the roots of mental health issues and what structures need to be built that respond to the contextual traumas and violence that, in many cases, fuel mental health issues.

WHRDs interviewed also reflected on the need to create movement structures that cultivate tolerance for conflicts. However, tolerance was not discussed in the liberal sense of putting up with difference, but rather in the sense of being receptive to them and being willing to risk vulnerability.

[we need spaces where you can] bring your family's knowledge [...] your feelings [...] all the things that we are so afraid to bring into spaces. Bring your mental health struggles, the fact that we are not sleeping, [...] bring all of you, and all your feelings and exhaustion, bring it into the space. (REG, WHRD, GH05).

The issue of political depression emerged in several interviews, including the necessity of finding ways to survive disappointment and the slow, non-linear, nature of change, to remind ourselves of the persistence of radical visions and ways of organizing. The link between depression and political failure is important to make in our movements, which includes an awareness of the limits of political representation and legal recognition of our identities and needs, all requiring new visions of the future and the affective energy to sustain disappointment.

Equally traumatizing is when we fight, when we do all the advocacy work, doing everything we can with all our heart and soul, only to realize that we are still at square one, that we did not move an inch, that we didn't find solutions. For me, this is a source of major trauma (WHRD, REG, KEN06).



WHRDs interviewed also made clear the need to connect with histories of trauma that have not yet been overcome, and that burnout, depression, grief and distress can be related to long-term histories of violence that have sustained impacts on generations of feminist activists.

We have given birth to children but it's almost as if our children are born with that wound already, because we have so much trauma that we did not process [...] they don't know why they are struggling sometimes with mental health issues, why they have anxiety that they cannot understand (WHRD, SA05).

Fundamentally, WHRDs interviewed highlighted the necessity of engaging with historical traumas and their effects on our health at both molecular, emotional and spiritual levels. While historical trauma has often been framed as a response to a “big event,” such as acts of genocide, interviews reflected that trauma resulting from both big events and the enduring forces of structural violence that have remained for centuries need to be interrogated for the way in which they fundamentally impact the lives of activists, including certainly their experiences of health and wellness. A deeper analysis of what such an analysis of historical traumas entail will be presented in section 3.

2.1.2 STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS

In the conventional justice system, perpetrators of crimes and offenses are prosecuted. This system focuses on penalties in pecuniary terms that the judge requires the perpetrator to pay, but it forgets the victim (ACD, REG,01).

HISTORY OF JUDICIAL AND JUSTICE SYSTEMS

Interactions with justice systems (the various agencies, establishments, and institutions tasked with administering or enforcing the law, which are organized primarily around handling either civil or criminal law) are a constant source of trauma for WHRDs. For the purpose of this research, we will be focusing on how the criminal justice system, (comprised of law enforcement, courts, and correctional institutions) is a critical source of trauma for activists that deserves interrogation. Criminal law is predominantly used to hinder the work of feminist activists. Laws that criminalize terrorism, defamation, threats to national security, among other criminal law offences, are often used to restrict or proscribe the right to freedom of assembly and the work of activism itself. Activists often find themselves in situations where they are interacting with persecution in the form of arrest, imprisonment, prosecution and other forms of “punishment” meted by institutions of criminal justice. This arm of the legal system thus warrants special focus as a significant source of structural violence in the experience of AWHRDs.

The discriminatory application and passing of laws (that are patriarchal, elevate heterosexuality as the norm, instill the values of militarism, protect extractivist models of development, among others) to hinder the activism of WHRDs is well-documented, along with the resistance of WHRDs against these laws. This research is rather concerned with the violence and trauma that are a result of the ways in which judicial and justice systems were set up. This research shows how these structures further delay the healing of activists as victims/survivors of violations or the healing of traumas they experience because of the discrimination and persecution they face as a result of who they are and what they do. WHRDs interviewed shared that they largely do not experience justice systems as structures that truly mete justice. We argue that these experiences are not an accident, but a result of the systems working in the ways in which they were designed to work.

Law has been described as the “cutting edge” of colonialism; central to the civilizing mission of imperialism. The introduction of western law justified and legitimated conquest and control. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, British law represented to the colonizers a substantial advance over the “savage” customs of the colonized.¹⁹ Law was conceptualized as “the gift we gave them,” promulgating regulations on every aspect of life, from marriage to drinking, entertainment, land and labor. Law, along with other institutions of the colonial state, “transformed conceptions of time, space, property, work, marriage and the state”²⁰. Law’s role was in its capacity to reshape culture and consciousness. Given the great role that law continues to play in structuring our societies, it is important to unpack the philosophy underpinning Western conceptions of law to illustrate the manner in which it continues to mete out violence.

Western conceptions of criminal justice, exported through colonialism, center the determination of blame and administering pain or punishment—the pain of being locked up and sometimes the pain of imminent death. This orientation towards pain is not just confined to criminal justice, but becomes part of our shared imagination and expresses itself in homes, schools and spiritual communities. Pain here, has a purpose: to show the offender that crime does not pay, showing potential offenders that crime will not be tolerated, to satisfy a theological belief around punishing sinners.²¹ Pain is thus a communication tool, educational tool, therapeutic release and a prevention device. But in all cases, justice is pain. The focus on inflicting pain to punish individual crimes means that criminal justice has a case-orientation, which begins when someone breaks the law or harms someone else. This is a micro, rather than a systemic approach, which is not designed to address systemic problems. On the other hand, traditional justice practices, which were largely uprooted during colonialism disrupt this notion, and so can be seen as violating the fundamental purpose of justice because, in many cases, it saw justice as healing the causes of pain rather than administering more pain²². Examples abound of traditional practices such as Mato oput, practiced by the Acholi people of northern Uganda, which is based on acceptance of one’s responsibility for wrongdoing, with rites that acknowledge collective and individual guilt. The focus is on coexistence and the emotional restoration and repair of the physical and material wellbeing of victims.²³ In Mozambique, gamba spirit ceremonies are opportunities for victims and perpetrators

19 Joireman, Sandra Fullerton. “Inherited Legal Systems and Effective Rule of Law: Africa and the Colonial Legacy.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 39, no. 4, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 571–96, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3557341>.

20 S. E. Merry, ‘Law and Colonialism’ (1991) 25 *Law & Society Review* 889–922, at 890–1.

21 Megivern, J. J. (1997) *The Death Penalty: An Historical and Theological Survey*. New York: Paulist Press.

22 Kelsall, Tim, ‘Truth, Lies, Ritual: Preliminary Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone’, *Human Rights Quarterly*, no. 27 (2005), pp. 361–91

23 For more, refer to *Traditional Justice and Reconciliation After Violent Conflict – Learning from African Experiences*, Luc Huyse and Mark Salter (eds) Stockholm, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), 2008.


to engage with the past, a crucial element of it being acknowledgment of wrongdoing. In the context of the country's civil war, gamba ceremonies were an opportunity for war survivors to deal with unsettled disputes.²⁴

A key characteristic of pre-colonial African criminal law is its focus on serving community interests, more so than punishing the wrongdoer. Incarceration and punishment were, thus, unknown and instead efforts were made to compensate the victim, whose role was central to the process. This system of customary law served the continent until the advent of colonialism, whose protagonists enforced their conception of social control by reducing or even eliminating the application and influence of customary norms. As a result, even following decolonization, without exception, colonies adopted the legal system of colonizing nations at independence, retaining the legal and other political institutions left behind.

The result of the large-scale transfer of laws and legal institutions from one society to another, each of which had its own distinct sociocultural organization and legal culture, was the establishment of a dual legal system: one for the colonized people and one for the colonizers. Colonial powers controlled the extent of the applicability of indigenous law. In French West Africa, for example, matters concerning marriage and divorce were deemed "too important" to be handled by native tribunals. In Ghana, Britain added "repugnancy clauses" in the colony's dual legal system, excluding aspects of Ghanaian indigenous law that the British considered "appalling," "ridiculous" or "unhelpful to maintaining Christian ideals". In addition to these clauses, the legal system's ultimate decision-maker, the supreme court, had a British official at the helm. These dual legal systems were widespread on the continent, and many countries still grapple with this legacy as they debate how to fashion a unified legal system out of this duality and how to resurrect and implement remnants of precolonial law. The fact that almost all African countries adopted two or more legal systems at independence presents complex questions and contradictions for women's rights. The majority of countries operate under a dual system whereby statutory formal laws (based on British, French, Portuguese, Roman-Dutch legal systems) operate side-by-side with un-coded customary laws. Others have three systems operating simultaneously: for example, Cameroon (English law, French law & custom), Guinea (French civil code, custom law and Sharia—Islamic law) and Nigeria (English law, custom and Sharia).

LAW HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS THE "CUTTING EDGE" OF COLONIALISM; CENTRAL TO THE CIVILIZING MISSION OF IMPERIALISM. THE INTRODUCTION OF WESTERN LAW JUSTIFIED AND LEGITIMATED CONQUEST AND CONTROL. DURING THE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES, BRITISH LAW REPRESENTED TO THE COLONIZERS A SUBSTANTIAL ADVANCE OVER THE "SAVAGE" CUSTOMS OF THE COLONIZED.

²⁴ *Id.*, at 77.



Despite the fact that a revision of colonial legislation took place after independence (in the case of Ghana, this entailed eliminating the repugnancy clauses), many provisions of the criminal codes of African countries are a direct inheritance of colonial legislation. This prominently includes laws criminalizing homosexuality, a relic of British anti-sodomy laws. Thirty-eight countries in Africa currently have laws criminalizing homosexuality, 14 of them former British colonies that retain different aspects of the British anti-sodomy laws.

Mental health laws, discussed in the previous section, are also a prime example of the effects of colonial laws which deemed certain bodies to be “violent,” “crazy,” or “dangerous,” labels that continue to be used to target and punish activists for their work and their identities. An analysis of different forms of structural violence cannot be done in silos, as these structures were set up to complement each other and are based on similar lines of thinking. And so, Western understandings of healing have a number of similarities with Western conceptions of criminal justice in that both are problem-focused, regulation-focused, and are the sole realm of trained professionals. Modern societies have been structured to implement modern conceptions of justice. An analysis of the ways in which modern conceptions of healing and justice work in tandem to create a terrain of great un-wellness is necessary. Charting a different path to practicing justice and healing requires that we draw from various non-modern imaginations and traditions that veer away from the great focus on sole punishment and a micro focus on individual crimes. It is important to note that to argue for reviving aspects of traditional African justice systems is not to romanticize these mechanisms or argue that they were devoid of harmful practices, patriarchal beliefs or power struggles. Indeed, women were not permitted to assume decision-making responsibilities under many traditional justice practices. Rather, there should be an attempt to study traditional justice practices with critical feminist eyes in order to argue for which elements of traditional practices should be revived, rather than adopting practices as a whole.

The state is focused on ensuring that there is justice (from a punitive side), not healing [...] in a sense, they abdicate responsibility for this. It is the responsibility of the court [but it is] just a matter of ‘oh somebody was raped’. It is just a difficult case in the day of the court, and that is it. But these issues are not politicized in a way that is needed [...] We are not at a stage where we have politicized violence (WHRD, REG, BW,11).

Activists clearly saw the need for a politicized perspective to justice, and by that, what was largely meant is an approach that does not just focus on the specific case at hand, but the systemic cause of the violence. Which would mean politicizing the—in the case of the above quote— rape, so that it is not only about a specific case, but an approach that aims to address the systemic reasons behind violence against women. In this way, justice can be healing.

We have to work to see what kind of justice do we need? We inherited it from the colonists, it is not what we really want to have in relation to our concerns and social issues. We need justice that is close to the communities (H, SEN 10).

POLICING

An analysis of the structural violence of criminal justice systems must entail an analysis of the police system, which constitutes the “front desk” of the criminal justice system and criminal process.²⁵ In addition to their roots as a colonial establishment set up to uphold the authority of colonial rule, having “hardly anything to do with serving the community,”²⁶ the police institution is one that is largely governed by a cult of masculinity, celebrating masculine performances of aggression, violence and strength.²⁷ The police institution is one that is responsible for a vast array of violence that WHRDs experience. These violations prominently include the manner in which the police often violently enforce a gender binary—the idea that there are only two genders, male and female, each of which is characterized by specific conduct and appearance. This enforcement makes certain groups especially vulnerable, including transwomen, whose identification may not match their gender identity, often leading to harassment, physical abuse or arrest. This violence is often the experience of gender non-conforming people, who are regularly subject to invasive searches meant to satisfy curiosity, humiliate, or involuntarily assign a gender based on genital status.

Police violence is also often experienced by sex workers, either through exploitation of the law or acts that are outright illegal that reflect a discriminatory attitude against sex workers. In 2014, for example, Uganda enacted the Anti-Pornography Act, which defines pornography as “any representation through publication, exhibition, cinematography, indecent show, information technology or by whatever means, of a person engaged in real or simulated explicit sexual activities or any representation of the sexual parts of a person for primarily sexual excitement.”²⁸ The Anti-Pornography Act has led to further criminalization of sex work, as the police use it to arbitrarily deem sex workers’ appearance or attire “sexually exciting,” and thus grounds for arrest. In addition to exploiting laws (which are vague and discriminatory), the police also commit blatantly illegal acts against sex workers. A 2013 study by University of Witwatersrand researchers in South Africa found that all of the sex workers interviewed, including 25 from Uganda, reported being beaten and assaulted by police at some point in their lives. One transgender female sex worker described how police officers beat her, stripped her, and detained her on her way home from work.²⁹ A study by the Women’s Organization Network for Human Rights Advocacy (WONETHA), a sex worker-led organization that advocates for the human rights of sex workers and the decriminalization of sex work in Uganda, detailed a shocking account of an infamous police officer in Kampala who is known for arresting sex workers, stripping them, parading them through town, and threatening to shoot them if they report his violence.³⁰

These are not isolated incidents of corrupt police officers, but are indicative of a pattern of targeting women whose identities or work challenge patriarchal norms of “respectable” behavior, deeply rooted in the ways in which the institution of the police is built and the attitudes that sustain it. The structural violence perpetuated by the police lays the ground for calls of abolishing the police as an institution. Rather than a utopian dream, abolitionist literature illustrates the systematic violence perpetuated by the police across the globe, which is not the result of a “few bad apples,” but rather

25 <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/BF01308450.pdf>


26 ‘White Men’s Dog’s’: Colonial Policing and the Enforcement of Law and Order in British Colonial Africa: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270051331_White_Men's_Dog's'_Colonial_Policing_And_The_Enforcement_Of_Law_And_Order_In_British_Colonial_Africa.

27 R.W. Connell, *Gender and power*, oxford, polity, (1987).

28 Uganda Anti-Pornography Act, 2014.

29 African Sex Worker Alliance, “‘I expect to be abused and I have fear’: Sex workers’ experiences of human rights violations and barriers to accessing healthcare in four African countries,” (2011), at 34.

30 <https://uprdoc.ohchr.org/uprweb/downloadfile.aspx?filename=2813&file=EnglishTranslation>



ACTIVISTS SPOKE ABOUT AN APPROACH TO JUSTICE THAT DOES NOT FRACTURE OUR UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE TERM, BUT RATHER CREATES A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT WE WANT TO ACHIEVE AND HOW. AN EXAMPLE WAS SHARED ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE, THE FORMER RELYING ON RETRIBUTION, VIOLENCE AND VENGEANCE WHILE THE LATTER IS AN APPROACH THAT FOCUSES ON THE DISTRIBUTION OF BENEFITS, RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES.

a result of the institution working as it was designed to—to protect the control over land, labor, and people who threaten power structures. Abolition is also not about eliminating the police as an institution overnight, but rather about “shrinking the police” by decreasing funding while implementing wide-ranging policies that entail the development of “strategies, resources, and mutual efforts working to reduce harm in the broader society through investments in education, employment, health care, housing, and environmental preservation.”³¹ As such, abolition seeks to uproot systems of oppression that go beyond the police and that make the institution necessary. As such, abolition cannot be separated from wider struggles for freedom and liberation.


Examples of activist communities implementing measures to divest from the police abound. This includes South African women who, during the COVID-19 pandemic, created safe houses to take in women facing violence, which strengthened community responses to harm without relying on the police. However, further research is needed to analyze and explore community-based alternatives to policing on the continent to illustrate the potential and challenges of implementing such alternatives.

There are no comfortable answers to creating and implementing transformative visions of justice. Let us rather “Plan. Run. Dream. Experiment” toward transformative feminist futures.

IMAGINING A WAY FORWARD

Activists spoke about an approach to justice that does not fracture our understandings of the term, but rather creates a shared understanding of what we want to achieve and how. An example was shared about the difference between criminal justice and social justice, the former relying on retribution, violence and vengeance while the latter is an approach that focuses on the distribution of benefits, rights and responsibilities. There are thus different conceptions of justice, each following a different ethical standard, which might conflict with another ethical standard. There are many types of modern justice, based on ethics that sometimes conflict. Activists rather spoke of approaches that do not fragment and categorize, but that instead see a continuity between social, criminal, environmental, economic and civil justice. They noted that an overarching logic of how we want to structure our societies and relate to each other must guide us away from the current approach of fragmentation. Activists also critiqued the fact that justice is the sole realm of the state, as it has the power to administer retribution on a

31 Derecka Purnell, *Becoming Abolitionists*.



large scale. If we do not largely focus on retribution, we can imagine a different path where communities play a role in administering justice. So, what does that look like? How did activists interviewed understand justice?

Activists interviewed shared varied and rich understandings of what constitutes justice, based on their experiences and the experiences of womn they work with. Justice and healing are deeply intertwined concepts for WHRDs interviewed, feeding off of each other, and collectively composing the elements that WHRDs identified as critical for transforming our realities. The overarching theme that came out in interviews is that justice entails that we experience collective healing and liberation as our full selves. Rather than a set model, justice is understood as a set of guiding principles that focuses not on retribution but on repairing damage and restoring relationships. While WHRDs interviewed shared their dreams of a complete transformation of criminal justice systems as they stand today, they also shared that a more practical approach would be to focus on feminist approaches to justice that, cumulatively, would transform the nature of criminal justice as we experience it today.


Ultimately, this is justice with “a human face” rather than a “cold justice system” (AD10), that makes space for individual and collective pain, addresses the roots of violence and trauma, centers accountability in ways that do not perpetuate state violence and aims to address the individual’s and communal sense of pain and loss.

SOME OF THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF HEALING AND JUSTICE SHARED DURING INTERVIEWS

Before delving into the conceptions of healing and justice shared, it is important to distinguish healing justice from other approaches, prominently transformative justice, as it is likely that the conceptions shared in this section could conjure transformative justice principles. The latter is a framework that centers the need to address the roots of violence and uproot oppression to create a just society. Transformative justice approaches focus on a social analysis and critique of “power-over” dynamics and relationships; community education regarding dynamics of violence; centers community-based interventions and organizing to change social and political institutions, norms, and access to resources. At the heart of transformative justice approaches is the need, not just to respond to current forms of violence, but to prevent future violence from happening, thereby disrupting generational cycles of violence. In its focus on disrupting cycles of violence, analyzing systemic roots of violence and building alternatives to current justice systems, transformative justice embodies and promotes an abolitionist politic that demands the end of prisons, policing and surveillance which are inherently violent.³²

This brief description of transformative justice makes it clear that the concept intersects with several areas of focus for healing justice, which will be highlighted when we delve into the history of healing justice. The healing justice movement is clear in the fact that this framing is rooted in the long history of several movements, including the economic, environmental, reproductive, disability and transformative justice movements, and the ways in which these movements shed light on different manifestations of systemic oppression, violence and trauma and their impact on our bodies, lives and dignity.

32 <https://transformharm.org/transformative-justice-a-brief-description/>



The healing justice framework pioneered emphasis on healing and collective wellbeing and un-wellness in activist and social justice spaces and communities. It presents a movement building strategy to sustain the imagination and boodies of organizaers and movement building organizations. With this clarity, the resonance of the below reflections with the transformative justice framework is to be expected.

Addresses the Collective Impact of Injustice

One of the main understandings of justice shared is a collective one. It acknowledges that the search for justice is a collective endeavor, seeing that not just the victim/survivor, but also the community gets harmed from experiences of violations.

Justice [...] is not only about convicting the perpetrator, but also [...] rebuilds the victim as well as the entire community on a new foundation [...] so that the same situation never occurs again (WHRD, DRC10).

The necessity of a collective approach to justice also means exploring what communities think constitutes justice, which is difficult when we are “conditioned” to think of the police, courts, social workers, etc. as the experts to resort to when conflicts arise. Rather, we should focus on building on existing mechanisms through which communities seek to understand, discuss and agree on how to address and heal injustices (H, SA06).

Does not Romanticize Communal Approaches

Activists, however, were very aware that a challenge of relying on, or focusing on growing, community justice mechanisms, is that their communities are, in many cases, patriarchal themselves and constitute a source of trauma and violence.

There is healing from your family pain, the community you live in - that pain (H, SA02).

Activists also critiqued some traditional justice practices which do not give space to women to fully express themselves, make decisions regarding the harm that was done and proffer possible remedies. Such practices leave them with the sense that something is missing, as they have only spoken about the harm but no remedy has been suggested or implemented. WHRDs strongly expressed that the focus of some traditional practices on largely creating the space to vent is far from sufficient. In addition, being part of traditional healing and justice practices often necessitates an acceptance from the community, a perception that many activists struggle with as their activism challenges many traditional values and societal understandings of acceptable behavior for women.

I don't want to romanticize collective ways of healing, or communal ways of healing, [...] because that has also been problematic, we know that [...] if you're considered different [...] these mechanisms can be really unhelpful (WHRD, SA12).

Another crucial critique of collective approaches to justice is the fact that some traditional approaches largely focus on the collective, but not the individual. One activist wondered if “the push for collective healing isn’t a way to erase individual

suffering" (WHRD, SA01). Rather than a solely individual or collective focus, a balance needs to be struck that acknowledges the individual as a "cosmology" in herself (that is, a cosmology composed of physical traits, emotions and the spirits and souls of our ancestors, making the individual a collective unto herself) (WHRD, SA01). Thinking of the collective, then, as various cosmologies coming together is an interesting approach that at once prioritizes the complexity of the individual, and the fact that the collective is composed of many individual, complex cosmologies. The "collective" is no longer a single unit with the same experiences, beliefs and needs but a complex, varied whole. Such a lens is critical when thinking of collective justice and healing needs and methodologies, because it necessitates the thinking through of our differences, similarities, priorities and histories, and the creation of a toolbox of strategies resulting from conversation, rather than a one-size-fits all approach.


Seeks a Transformation of Contexts that Gave Rise to Harm

It is interesting to note that visions of justice shared in interviews also entail working towards transforming the circumstances that caused harm in the first place. This is essentially an approach to justice that seeks to address structural issues that cause harm and sustain violence. The structural issues referred to by activists interviewed included sexism, ableism, homophobia, heterosexism, capitalism, all of which are systems that create and sustain violence and which must be addressed and transformed if we are to experience lasting justice. Activists also reflected that such a vision of justice cannot be prescribed as it is not a one-size-fits-all solution, but should rather be arrived at through collective thinking in order to be "close to the communities," (H, SEN 10).

Goes Beyond Punitive Measures that Rarely Heal Injustices

Complementing an approach to justice that centers healing is one that critiques criminal justice as it generally stands, with its focus on the person accused of a crime, on punishment through imprisonment and granting increasing power to police, military and other security personnel. All of whom belong to institutions that valorize militarism and violent masculinity, and that would never be able to understand or act from spaces that center healing and the health of communities. Activists interviewed highlighted the need for approaches whereby accountability does not refer to the use of violence to respond to violations or harm, but one that centers changes in behavior and ensures that the harm is not repeated. Activists interviewed were not hopeful that

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justice systems would change as states have an interest in maintaining the status quo. In order for these visions of justice to manifest, revolutionary organizing must happen in order to change social and political institutions and norms. Related to the previous point on the need to transform our contexts, going beyond punitive measures also means that the context as it relates to the political orders that govern us must necessarily change in order to uproot injustices.

The state is focused on ensuring that there is justice (from a punitive side), not healing [...] in a sense, they abdicate responsibility for this. (WHRD, REG, BW11).

Review and Repeal Conservative and Discriminatory Laws

Activists interviewed highlighted the colonial roots of many laws that continue to affect womn and LBTQI individuals today. These include laws that stipulate what constitutes “normal” versus “deviant” sexual orientation, based on the success of colonial missionaries to erase Africa’s history of sexual diversity and the fact that there are no examples of traditional African belief systems that singled out same-sex relations as sinful or linked them to concepts of disease or mental health, except where Christianity and Islam were adopted. The section on structural violence of medical systems above also illustrated several laws inherited from the continent’s colonial past that continue to affect our perceptions of mental illness, creating normative attitudes that are difficult to shake.

Colonial legal structures are not the only malaise to consider in thinking about legal reform. Indeed, there are several laws that affect the activism of WHRDs that must also be repealed, including laws that restrict the receipt of funding; severely restrict the activities of NGOs; and vaguely worded laws that seek to protect “public order,” “traditional values” and “morality,” among other vague concepts to crack down on dissent. Justice, thus, essentially also entails reforming discriminatory and conservative laws that provide a firm basis for the injustices WHRDs experience.

Gendered Understanding of Reparations

It is interesting to note that the majority of WHRDs interviewed from the DRC indicated that the provision of reparations is essential to achieving justice. This is not surprising, given the prominence of the reparations narrative in conflict settings. Activists interviewed stressed that financial compensation must be accompanied by an acknowledgement of the harm that was done and a public apology that informs a collective reckoning with the crimes committed. Reparations claims must also center the need for accessible physical and mental health facilities, in addition to economic development measures. Activists interviewed also stressed that a gendered understanding of reparations is necessary, and is one that must push beyond an understanding of harm built on civil and political rights violations to incorporate structural violence and pre-existing inequality and discrimination. Reparations would thus need to address economic, social and cultural harms in order to fully address womn’s experiences of conflict (01, DDHF).

Essentially, reparations should not aim to “repair” the harm by seeking to return to old ways of life, which were themselves unjust and discriminatory. A return to a pre-existing condition of injustice cannot be the promise of reparations. This feminist lens on reparations cannot be instilled in reparations programs, according to interviews, until feminists assume decision making roles in spaces where the vision and details of what reparations would entail are established (WHRD, DRC01).

Centers Healing

Activists also shared that justice should concern itself with the feelings that the experience of violation caused, beyond addressing the physical consequences of violence.

We dream of justice that repairs and reduces the pain of a person who has long been destroyed, who has long been aggrieved (WHRD, DRC07).

Related to the theme of addressing psychological and emotional impacts is the view that justice systems must think about healing and focus on it as an integral aspect of achieving justice. Essentially, the discussion of healing cannot be separated from the discussion of legal and policy reform (WHRD, REG, UGN11).

A focus on healing entails replacing punishment and punitive measures with accountability, collective forms of support for those who are directly impacted by harm and the people they are close to and holding perpetrators of harm accountable in ways other than existing models that do not question state violence in the different ways in which it manifests as the sole avenue for justice.

The theme of respect also came up in many interviews when activists discussed justice that is healing. Experiences of violations faced by WHRDs are almost always accompanied by a narrative that normalizes that violence as what they deserve for being “disrespectful womn,” “loose womn,” “foreign agents,” among other accusations, rooted in patriarchy and heteronormativity and respectability politics. The latter refers to the idea that marginalized communities must adhere to dominant cultural norms to receive respect, lack of respect framed as the reason behind discrimination and social exclusion. Individual behavior is thus the focus and terrain for change, not the structures rooting inequality. This framing translates to a reality in which being a sex worker, lesbian, queer, an activist that advocates for rights that are considered “taboo,” are all synonymous with guilt. In targeting WHRDs, the discussion is often around their respectability and innocence, and not the violation. Respectability has also meant that advocating for social change must be conducted in a way that is acceptable by social norms and behavioral standards. This is a tactic to control, distract and tire womn.

Such claims contribute to building a popular narrative that legitimizes the violence activists face, alienating them from their families and communities that gradually believe that they are indeed a group that must be violently kept in place. In this context, activists interviewed spoke about feeling the violence of invisibility, constantly having to fight to illustrate their sincerity and worth. Public acknowledgment of the important roles they play and of their right to practice their activism without violence and intimidation would make them feel “seen,” which, in itself, heals them from feeling alienated from their communities (WHRD, SEN05).

SO WHAT STEPS CAN BE TAKEN NOW?

Activists shared understandings of justice that are deeply intertwined with healing. Taken together, the ideas posited above would create true transformations in the ways in which we experience and understand justice. However, this requires the realization that the world is a slow, long journey. True transformations will entail contextual feminist analysis of structures of power that create and maintain the system as it is now, an exploration and awareness of the roots of justice systems, a feminist political analysis of the transformations that are needed and plotting for the realization of that vision. This is collective cross movement work that requires creative strategizing and funding. Activists interviewed shared their vision of how and what feminist activists can start with now.

One idea shared by activists is to start by understanding the root causes of the failures of the legal system as it stands today. Activists shared that we can get comfortable with doing the work of troubleshooting the system through “legal aid service provision, accompanying women to court, etc., but not the hard work of saying these courts do not work” (Sibongile). And while the passing of laws that uphold women’s rights is certainly critical and is work that must continue, activists shared that favourable laws, when they are passed, have largely not changed the fact that “we live in a misogynistic society, a patriarchal society, and that the people [in power] actually do not want to see women. They do not believe women” (ACD, SA01).

As a starting point, you [women] are crazy (ACD, SA01).

Engaging with the structural drivers of injustice is difficult work that requires the development of a shared political, feminist analysis of the roots of the violence of justice systems and a firm grounding in the histories of the establishment of these systems, which is critical for a full appreciation of the theoretical underpinnings of the misogyny, patriarchy and ableism we experience in our engagements with the law. This is not work that many feminist movements have engaged in because it requires time and resources that movements in most cases do not have the support for. In addition, this is deeply disruptive work that would most likely result in significant persecution from the state.

Another reason behind the few engagements with the root causes is that the legal field is a technical one, dominated in many contexts by men, who not only train women lawyers, but also “bully” them into acceptable areas of engaging with the law in order to be “taken seriously” (ACD, SA01). The legal field is also largely dominated by activists from older generations. Coupled with the inability to engage inter-generationally to train young generations in feminist legal methods, these factors create a context of “stiffness” and legal conservatism, not a place for revolutionary approaches or analyses.

Changing the nature of legal support as it is provided today, would require going beyond the understanding of cases as legal events to understanding them as one step towards the liberation of the affected community. As engaging with legal systems is technical work, this change requires close collaboration between lawyers and feminist activists so that lawyers are trained to act as organizers, and not “like members of the diplomatic corps assisting a community.” This means that lawyers must be invested in the “broader outcome of the struggle” in order to be able to visualize the ways in which a case can be an opportunity to contribute to that bigger outcome.

*Once the lawyers show up,
[there is an understanding
that] the issues have gone
legal and the affected
groups are nothing more
than bodies at that point.
You can buy t-shirts, bus
them to court, or have a
workshop explaining the
process. Nothing about
this approach has the
potential for transformation
(ACD, SA01).*

Environmental justice activists shared that one challenge of engaging with lawyers who do human rights and social justice work is that they often fail to have the feminist political analysis of what justice and rights could mean within the context of resisting extractives. It is in this sense that lawyers would need to reimagine their roles and also be “displaced” (ACD, SA01) so that the communities they are working with decide when to litigate, what to litigate and how to litigate. The work that takes place in the courtroom must also be closely intertwined with the advocacy work that happens outside courts. Otherwise, believing that courts alone can effect change, what one activist dubbed “trickle-down legal change” has been proven to be largely ineffective.

Activists emphasized that in order to dismantle current legal structures that do not work for women, we need a starting point that is “not as overwhelming as saying let’s take it all down.” The starting point differed according to the context. Several Senegalese WHRDs, for example, suggested that we must start by knowing what laws affect activists and in what ways, which is information that is missing in many cases. As such, activists are not sure “what it is that I will be able to get, or what it is that I am entitled to” when seeking different legal avenues. Although this “sounds very basic,” this knowledge is critical in order for a discussion of “what needs to change” to start.

Several activists in South Africa, however, highlighted the need to create an environment that would enable activists to use the law to seek historical justice for apartheid and the ways in which it continues to reverberate across the country today. This entails cross-movement engagements between activist lawyers and WHRDs to discuss how apartheid laws and practices continue to affect communities and

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what it is that we want to resist, and how.


The need to think of community accountability frameworks also came up in several interviews, especially with Congolese activists, as a critical way of imagining and implementing alternative approaches to accountability that do not rely on the criminal justice systems. Activists shared that, when thinking of policies to address sexual violence in organizing spaces, the suggestion to rely on the criminal justice system to hold offenders accountable left them with reservations. That said, if the police and criminal justice frameworks are generally actors and spaces where violence is perpetrated against WHRDs, how can we create strategies to address violence in our communities without relying on these actors? Community accountability processes do not offer one-size-fits-all tools, but are based on strategies for abusive community members to account for their actions and transform their behavior. They also call for strategies that aim to develop community members, and the community itself, to transform the political conditions that reinforce oppression and violence. They encourage communities to think through ways of supporting community members who experience violence through strategies that center their self-determination.

Starting at the level of our communities and imagining accountability frameworks outside the state was identified as a possible critical first step that helps us start to imagine, and implement, an alternative reality. Some activists pointed out that this entails rethinking the manner in which some activism spaces are becoming ones where it is very costly to make a mistake, apparent in the **violent ways used to hold each other accountable**, one example being “call out culture.” Holding an activist who has spoken or acted in harmful ways accountable is sometimes done through public parading of activists with bitter critiques that delete our histories with these activists. It is especially tragic, according to one activist, that we call out our feminist sisters with the same violence that we call out the systems that oppress us (WHRD, SA07), rather than an approach of respect “for the energy, the time, the self” that the activist has given to the movement and an extension of good faith that an “utterance of something that is anti-feminist or that I do not agree with does not delete everything you have done in this movement.” Instead of public parading of activists, a respectful and feminist approach would be to have private conversations around the ways in which the words or actions that were said hurt the movement and what should have been done or said instead. Activists explain that “call out culture” is driven by the fact that activists are always in resistance mode—rioting, protesting and pushing back (WHRD, SA07). While such tactics are useful when resisting systems of oppression, we should think of strategies to use to tackle conflicts within our movements, as we are not resisting each other, but working in collectives where tensions and disagreements are bound to take place.

Embedding healing into the ways in which organizing spaces seek justice and accountability means that **healing should not center around crisis or a reaction to trauma**, but simply become our everyday reality, not connected to privilege (WHRD, SA05).

An interesting approach suggested by activists is to allow **accountability and healing conversations to be led by feminist elders**, who have valuable insights and also have more brain space to lead this kind of work, as they are likely not occupied with the day-to-day work of organizations and have the capacity to see the overall picture to make recommendations concerning the health of organizational spaces. This would also be an interesting way to integrate older activists into activism spaces.

It is apparent that the road towards transformation will differ according to the context, with different starting points and goals. Activists generally agreed, however, that the



work of transformation must start with the “basic” work of understanding the laws that affect them. This would entail understanding the laws that affect their rights, the ways in which different laws create different vulnerabilities, a feminist political analysis of the legal structures that exist and their roots, cross-movement work that changes the current ways in which legal activism is practiced, and cross-movement work on creating the different world we dream of. Importantly, activists also highlighted that the need to imagine and create a different world is work that can start internally, at the level of movements, right now. It is by engaging in difficult conversations around accountability, power sharing and imagining new ways of thinking about distributing responsibilities that feminist alternatives to difficult questions can be created and scaled “externally.”


What does it mean to conceptualize and then to develop the tools to be able to challenge institutions? What does it mean to really kind of come together around agendas that almost reset conceptual frameworks? So that at least there are some tools and resources that people can draw on [...] because it's lonely up there and often you are left on your own to take on an institution and you know institutions are monsters (WHRD, SA10)

2.1.2 STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE OF ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

My grandmother had cows, chickens, a field [...] And I start remembering that actually I was never hungry [...] It is when you get to the city that you start seeing how hungry you are, how thirsty you are. This work [is about] opening our eyes and making connections to understand that we are not just fighting the queer war, but fighting the fight of being able to eat, of being able to have shelter [...], you start connecting all of these things that you should have but they are not there because someone took them bit by bit. And so, it's working backwards to remember (WHRD, SA07).

PATRIARCHY, CAPITALISM AND NEOLIBERALISM

The idea of thinking about economic violence in terms of memory and remembering is an interesting one that came up in several interviews. This entails the importance of keeping the memory of the past alive to illustrate that other ways of life were in fact in existence until they were stolen “bit by bit,” as argued in the above quote. It is in the interest of current powerholders, argued some activists, that we forget about these lives, and also about how current realities came to be, so that the belief that inequality is the norm is ingrained. Our memories are an important source of resistance. It is thus fitting to commence this section with an analysis of the colonial and patriarchal roots of our current economic systems. Rather than analyze the economic violence in any specific country, the focus is on analyzing the systemic underpinnings of violence of global economic systems, in which local, national, and regional economies are embedded.



Global economic systems are deeply rooted in patriarchy, capitalism and neoliberalism. While patriarchal societies existed before capitalism, since its emergence, the latter has incorporated and depended on patriarchal structures for its survival. Patriarchy has also embraced capitalism to uphold the exploitation of womn and their work, an exploitation that continues to maintain the current economic order as we know it. Patriarchy and capitalism, for example, are at the heart of the definition of productive and thus “valuable” work and bodies, a central illustration of this definition being the status of unpaid care labor. Estimated at 10.8 trillion US Dollars per year, according to Oxfam’s “Time to Care” report, it is this unpaid care labor that sustains and reproduces workers and maintains capitalist economies, while being unvalued and unrecognized as work.³³ This lack of recognition is not a mistake, but rather is the intention of a capitalist patriarchy that seeks to limit womns’ opportunities and keep them subjugated to the economic control of men.

The control of the bodies of womn is an integral aspect of capitalist patriarchy, apparent in the policing and objectification of womn’s bodies. This includes sustained efforts to control and curtail reproductive rights so that women are not in full control of their bodies. At the heart of this vision is the belief that womns’ bodies serve the primary functions of procreation and please the sexuality of men. It becomes apparent, then that womn with disabilities, queer and trans womn who deviate from this vision face physical and psychological violence and violations such as forced sterilization.

Neo-liberal capitalism is another pillar of the current global economic order and is characterized by the financial hegemony of global capital, “free” markets and placing profit above people and the environment. From an ecofeminist perspective, the exploitation of womn and the environment and the violence exerted against them are not byproducts of this system but rather a precondition to its functionality. At the heart of this global economic order is a focus on “growth” that entails an emphasis on export-oriented models for the Global South through extractions of natural resources and private investment governed by Global North countries. The focus on the extraction and export of natural resources is an extension of decades of colonial extraction of the resources of colonies, albeit with an expansion in scale and sophistication, with no thought given to the sustainability of projects, nor to the environmental and social degradation caused in the countries producing the raw materials (Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, et. al, 2013). The neoliberal economic agenda means that ever new opportunities are created for corporations to invest and accumulate profit. This has led to the intensification and growth of extractivism, the increased commodification and appropriation of land and resources historically under the control of Indigenous and other land-based communities, and environmental degradation. The struggle of WHRDs in extractives-affected communities against extractivism should thus be recognized as deep and systemic, not the actions of individual “greedy” corporations that are protected by uniquely corrupt governments. This is rather the system functioning as it was designed to function. Ending the exploitative dynamics of extractivism as a development model thus requires systemic change.

The commercialization of public services is another key aspect of the neoliberal capitalist system. Rather than improve and increase social programmes and spending to respond to the burdens of care shouldered by womn, more than two-thirds of countries are reducing their spending on, and privatizing, public services.³⁴ While privatization has

33 Time to Care: Unpaid and underpaid care work and the global inequality crisis, <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/research-publications/time-care/>, p. 12, 2020.

34 Center for Women’s Global Leadership (2009). The Impact of Economic Reforms and Austerity Measures on Women’s Human Rights. <https://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/docman/reports/832-the-impact-of-economic-reformsand-austerity-measures-on-women-s-human-rights/file>

been shown to increase economic inequality,³⁵ it continues to be a main advice and condition that international financial institutions impose on many governments. Public spending cuts have been proven to diminish womn's physical, economic and emotional wellbeing. Research by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) has found that in the aftermath of fiscal crises, womn's burden of care work increases, they are more exposed to gender-based violence, more likely to lose their jobs or be pushed into lower-paid work and more vulnerable to losing social benefits and protections, including pensions.³⁶ The privatization of public services is accompanied by the dismantling of the welfare state, which means that access to health care, education, a decent wage and social security increasingly become privileges rather than rights.

The privatization of public services is clear in discussions around water justice. Neoliberal arguments back the increased privatization of water services on the continent, the rationale being that water scarcity is a technical issue "caused by increase in population size, climate change and lack of national governments' ability to manage and distribute water effectively".³⁷ The solution is thus to delegate these responsibilities to multinational companies, converting water into a commodity, a strategy that is marketed as a positive one because "if water is free it will not be valued." A radical feminist perspective on political economy and political ecology points to the fact that such approaches do not interrogate the effects that this privatization has on womn rooted in, among others, the unresolved social dynamics of colonialism based on racial capitalism and sexism, which manifest in unique disadvantages to womn when such policies are implemented.³⁸ An African eco-feminist perspective argues that the water crisis should not be seen as a siloed crisis, or one that is of human making, but is rather one that is the direct result of unchecked capitalist development, which is


THE CONTROL OF THE BODIES OF WOMN IS AN INTEGRAL ASPECT OF CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY, APPARENT IN THE POLICING AND OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMN'S BODIES. THIS INCLUDES SUSTAINED EFFORTS TO CONTROL AND CURTAIL REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS SO THAT WOMEN ARE NOT IN FULL CONTROL OF THEIR BODIES.

35 E. Seery (2014). Working for the Many: Public services fight inequality. Oxfam. <http://oxf.am/RZn>

36 Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) (2011). Impacts of the Global Financial Crisis on Women's Rights: Sub regional perspectives. <https://www.awid.org/publications/impacts-global-financial-crisis-womens-rights-subregional-perspectives>

37 Chikozho, C., Mapedza, E. (2017). Free-Market Economics and Developmental Statism as Political Paradigms: Implications for Water Governance Theory and Practice in Developing Countries. In: Karar, E. (eds) Freshwater Governance for the 21st Century. Global Issues in Water Policy, vol 6. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43350-9_4

38 Womn & water in Africa: an overview of water justice struggles, <https://uaf-africa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/UAF-AFRICA-WOMN-AND-WATER-JUSTICE-STRUGGLES-REPORT.pdf>



at the heart of increased cycles of drought and floods. African feminist analysis also points to the trend of disaster capitalism appearing in moments of crisis to propose solutions to the problem it creates, often through technological and militarized strategies that contradict the experiences and needs of communities and solutions and approaches proposed by WHRDs.

In analyzing the structural violence of economic systems, there is much to learn from the environmental justice (EJ) movement, which has broadened the understanding of “environment” beyond the scope of conservation and preservation of natural resources, defining the environment as “where we live, work, play, learn and pray.” EJ is based on a structural analysis of “environmental racism”, which refers to the disproportionate impact of environmental harm on certain groups, including people of color. Environmental justice is the movement’s response to this racism, which is rooted in economic, environmental and health issues. The EJ movement posits that, in order for communities to be safe in their environment, we must demand for “decent paying and secure jobs; quality schools and recreation; decent housing and adequate health care; democratic decision-making; and personal empowerment.” Unpacking structural issues that put certain communities at risk is at the heart of this analysis, believing that environmental justice is realized when people can realize their highest potential, without interruption by environmental racism or inequity. The expansive vision of EJ is one in which cultural and biological diversity are respected, and where there is democratic decision-making and resources for communities to grow and prosper.³⁹

Any of us might get evicted because this kind of work has got very little pay. The majority of women are doing the work as volunteers, and that’s problematic because the system reinforces the feminization of poverty, that it is okay for women to work for no remuneration. Let alone even having to fight for equal pay, we are not there yet (WHRD, SA01)

Activists interviewed spoke of structural economic violence in terms of the difficulties of economic inequalities that are a result of them being structurally vulnerable individuals, for example, identifying as queer, being an activist with disability, being a sex worker. The systemic inequalities they face, which increasingly pushes many activists towards poverty, coupled with the pressures of the work, makes it difficult to survive while also working towards a better life for their communities.

If we say we are taking care of activists, feminists and women human rights defenders, people doing this work on a daily basis, why is it that only ten of us have houses? (WHRD, SA08).

In order for movements to continue the important work they do, these structures must be challenged and replaced within the funding landscape. The economic insecurity activists faced was framed as a “major source of trauma” (WHRD, SA11)). After all, how can we start to imagine just alternatives when that is not our experience within our movements?

39 <https://greenaction.org/what-is-environmental-justice/>

IMAGINING A WAY FORWARD

Activists reflected on systemic shifts within current economic models, suggesting alternatives to the ways in which feminist movements are presently resourced. These alternatives have to challenge the economic structures in the “external” world that they mobilize to transform.

Imagining alternative economic realities requires concerted efforts to highlight and work towards **eliminating the discriminatory, patriarchal and colonial underpinnings of current neoliberal economic models**. This work also entails a radical revision of what constitutes “growth” and “development” and the necessity of analyzing dominant approaches to growth, such as extractivism, as an extension to exploitative colonial trends. The struggles of WHRDs against extractivism, for example, must thus be seen as “deep and systemic.”⁴⁰ In order for this grand revision to materialize, democratic institutions that are representative of the people must be in place and various communities must have access to these institutions. It becomes clear why the environmental justice approach, which centers cross-cutting strategies to arriving at a just economy, is necessary.

A way forward also entails **changing the narrative on the plurality of economic systems** to acknowledge models including community economies, informal economies, and solidarity economies, all of which are critical and play significant roles in the survival of womn and their communities. A change in narrative is a condition of ending the dogmatic belief in the superiority of neoliberal economic structures. Particularly as these structures create conditions that eliminate endangered models, such as the informal economy, in which many womn are diligently active in order to sustain themselves. The linguistic vagueness of terms such as “informality” reinforces a stigmatization of this economy, often labelled the “shadow economy,” imbued with an air of illegality. Feminist activists point to the value of these models to local communities, which are often the reason why millions survive the violence of neoliberal economies.

The **work towards economic justice cannot be siloed**, but must rather be understood in terms of other rights. This impacts conceptualization of economic justice issues, and the strategies employed by activists, making clear the necessity of cross-movement work. For example, the necessity of advancing reproductive justice is central to economic justice. It is increasingly the case that population growth alarmists pin economic inequalities on womn’s reproductive capacities, claiming that there are “too many people” for resources to be equally distributed. Such arguments divert attention from the fact the economic inequality is premised on structural injustices, the capitalist growth paradigm and policies that elevate profit seeking above all else. Womns’ sexual and reproductive health and bodily autonomy are also not possible until womn enjoy economic rights and independence. Womns’ rights to bodily autonomy, including to sexual and reproductive rights in all circumstances, thus cannot be seen as separate from the struggle for economic justice. The work of countering anti-rights right wing movements must be centralized in our feminist struggle for economic justice. A decolonial stance means that we cannot deny that we live in a world where black, brown, feminine, queer and working-class people endure acts of dehumanization.

In order for **feminist movements to be able to do this difficult work, they must be better resourced**. Activists interviewed spoke of the essentiality of core grants that would enable feminist groups to pay members, and pay them well. Operating in “economic precarity,” as several activists framed it, makes it difficult to focus on the work or plan their lives.

40 Behind the Scenes: Exposing the Funders and Enablers of Extractives, the Count Me in! Consortium (CMI!), p.18, https://www.mamacash.org/media/cmi/_cmi_briefing_paper_november_24_2021_english.pdf

The insecurity is not knowing where food is coming from in the future. So you can say, I am here eating now, but what about tomorrow? And what about the next day? It is a huge trauma (WHRD, SA11).


FEMINIST APPROACHES DO NOT SEEK THIS KIND OF POWER, BUT DEPEND ON COLLECTIVITY, EXPERIMENTATION AND CONTINUED LEARNING IN IMAGINING AND CREATING ALTERNATIVE MODELS AND STRUCTURES. RATHER THAN A DESTINATION, FREEDOM IS UNDERSTOOD AS A PROCESS.

This work needs imagination. Feminist economists have written extensively about the need for regenerative economies that center systemic alternatives, including addressing power structures, the commodification of natural resources and reliance on extractivism. In addition, they argue against the centrality of indicators such as GDP, preferring instead a vision of socially just economies that center environmental sustainability, respect nature and center the role of communities in determining the manner in which land and resources are utilized. The alternatives will utilize measures other than GDP, center wellbeing and quality of life, and adopt a systematic approach that centers care in formal economies while challenging the gender disparities in care work.⁴¹

The work of imagining this alternative world is ongoing. In 2018, WoMin (an organization that supports women's organizing to build a movement aimed at challenging the destructive large-scale extraction of natural resources and to propose developmental alternatives that respond to the needs of the majority of African women) published the Mogale Declaration in solidarity with peasant and working-class women as they build a collective vision for a just and sustainable future.⁴² The Declaration is seen as "the birth of a process of building an African ecofeminist charter for a just transition." The content of what this "just transition" entails should be driven by the perspectives and interests of African women in communities and those on the frontlines of struggles for feminist alternatives. Imagining and building alternative feminist systems and realities is difficult, messy work that entails factoring in the experiences and needs of women from across the globe. At the heart of this feminist approach is the fact that it does not follow the nation-state approach of creating systems based on the knowledge and comfort that it can coerce people into its vision with the threat of violence. Feminist approaches do not seek this kind of power, but depend on collectivity, experimentation and continued learning in imagining and creating alternative models and structures. Rather than a destination, freedom is understood as a process.

41 https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Feminist_bailout_manifesto_EN.pdf

42 <https://womin.africa/mogale-declaration-living-the-future-now/>



In a report that is mainly concerned with reflecting on the varying states of wellness and un-wellness of feminist activists on the continent and what they believe is required for movements to feel better, to heal, it might not be clear why this research has dedicated significant time to interrogate systems of power that perpetuate violence and harm—what does the economy, the law, or healthcare institutions have to do with healing? Interviews made it very clear that WHRDs are aware of the role these systems play in their feelings and experiences of unwellness, in addition to being a major source of trauma. After all, how can we feel well when we largely live in constant economic disparities, lack access to living wages, decent housing and running water. How can we feel well when we lack access to dignified healthcare that is responsive to the needs and realities of womn. When we exist under legal structures that are patriarchal and heteronormative and either criminalize the different identities of womn (lesbian womn, trans womn and sex workers) or are based on patriarchal understandings of the acceptable roles of womn?

These sources of constant trauma are created and sustained by structures and institutions that are working as intended. WHRDs interviewed were clear that it is only by challenging and transforming these structures—to create realities where womn, their experiences and identities are respected, and where they have access to resources that would enable them to live well—that WHRDs start to heal from the daily traumas of existing in the world as it currently stands.

I have been so angry [...] political anger of not seeing the systems changing [...] not seeing life changing. This is a difficult healing journey because it is a sickness of systems; we need to find the root cause of this sickness (WHRD, SA02).

In addition to systemic violence and trauma, transgenerational and collective trauma featured prominently in activists' reflections on the roots of the traumas they are experiencing.



ROOTS AND MANIFESTATIONS OF TRANSGENERATIONAL AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

*I know that some of the burdens I carry in this lifetime are
not because of this lifetime; they're because of various
lives (WHRD, SEN10).*

Transgenerational trauma refers to the collective sharing of an experience of trauma, such as state or communal violence against a community or structural stressors that adversely impact the physical and mental health of an affected group. The impacts go beyond the individual to having broad social and political consequences. Research in epigenetics, the study of how our environment can change the ways our bodies read a DNA sequence, describes the complex ways in which the environment can suppress or activate certain genes. The transmission of these molecular factors can determine how DNA is read and expressed across different generations.⁴³ In addition to the increasing evidence provided through research in epigenetics, traumas of previous generations can also leave an imprint through experiences with traumatized parents in the early years of life. Human birth theory,⁴⁴ for example, posits that mental illness develops

43 Lind, M.I., Spagopoulou, F. Evolutionary consequences of epigenetic inheritance. *Heredity* 121, 205–209 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41437-018-0113-y>

44 Maccari, S., Polese, D., Reynaert, M., Amici, T., Morley-Fletcher, S., and Fagioli, F. (2017). Early-life experiences and the development of adult diseases with a focus on mental illness: the human Birth theory. *Neuroscience* 342, 232–251. doi: 10.1016/j.neuroscience.2016.05.042

primarily within the first year of life but becomes clinically evident later in life.⁴⁵ Activists reflected on the roots of transgenerational and historical traumas and also the ways in which these manifest in their lives.

ROOTS

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Historical oppressions do not only live in epigenetic memory, however, but in the current lived experiences of womn, as the legacies of these oppressions live on through entrenched structural violence and inequalities that were analyzed in the previous section. Systematic economic marginalization that has its roots in histories of colonialism, racism, sexism and ableism that have resulted in unequal distribution of resources have had, and continue to have, a salient traumatic impact on womn. One activist interviewed reflected on the persistent stress of having to deal with the constant threat of eviction and having to support numerous colleagues who experienced evictions. The activist related this economic trauma to operating within a capitalist system where womn, and especially womn activists, are not sufficiently paid as their labor is not seen as “productive” to a capitalist system and as we continue to operate within funding structures that need to be decolonized. Operating within this system is “brutal” for activists, and “there is a limit to what a womn who is working in that system can carry [...] a limit to what the body can carry” (WHRD, DRC10).

LIVING UNDER UNRELENTING THREAT AND VIOLENCE

Activists spoke of the realities of their contexts, and the characteristics of these contexts that have held for generations, as a source of constant trauma. This includes deeply rooted homophobia and transphobia; control of womn’s bodies that is guarded by the state and religious, social and cultural structures; militarization; hyper nationalism; violence from family members; evolving criminalization of the activism of AWHRDs and their identities, among others. The characteristics of what is often dubbed the “closure of civic space” is a source of trauma that spans generations of activists.

We never feel free, we always expect somebody to say something or some violence so we are constantly in a state of tension and I wonder the impact that has on our physiology (WHRD, REG, NIG11).

45 Ibid.

CARRYING MEMORIES OF GENERATIONS OF HARM

Activists spoke about feeling that they are not just trying to cope with their traumas and the histories of violence they have experienced. Dealing with this and the knowledge that other feminists have gone through similar, and sometimes worse, experiences is a weighty history that activists carry.

I grew up understanding that the people who have departed leave things behind that the ones who are here need to carry. I need to acknowledge that there are many queers who have come before me, and some of them have passed away doing this work. So, some of the heaviness that I carry is not my own heaviness. It's the heaviness of other feminists. I need to acknowledge people I may not have known, but people who were carrying light because they did this work. We need to acknowledge the spiritual community, which is around connectedness, shared history, shared intention
(WHRD, SA09).

ISOLATION OF DISCREDITED NARRATIVES

An interesting theme that came up in interviews is the manner in which collective trauma manifests as the isolation that activists feel. They have to deal with the knowledge that their narratives may be deemed unbelievable, dramatic, unnationalistic and, in the case of activists working on “taboo” issues, as “improper” narratives and values. Activists spoke of often feeling “gaslighted” by the wider public because we are “claiming too many bad things have happened and it’s a lot for people to process.”

Critically, activists do not “have the power to be believable because we don’t have power over the narrative”
(WHRD, SA03).

In the same vein, other activists interviewed reflected on the directive they often hear to be “happier” because reality is not as bad as they think it is (WHRD, DRC05). The collective trauma of isolation and of being directed to feel happiness evokes Sara Ahmed’s analysis of feminists as “strangers at the table of happiness.” We bring others down, not only by talking about unhappy topics such as sexism but by exposing how happiness is sustained through consistent and structural inequality and violence.⁴⁶

46 Ahmed, Sara. “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness.” *Signs*, vol. 35, no. 3, The University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp. 571–94, <https://doi.org/10.1086/648513>

MANIFESTATIONS

FEELING "BORN WITH A WOUND"

Several activists interviewed reflected on the parenting challenges they face as a result of traumas endured.

It's almost as if because of that trauma (anti-apartheid struggle), our growth and our development was emotionally stunted at 15 so physically we as 40/50 (year olds) but we are stuck there. Nobody talks about how are we coping now, how are we being parents now?
(WHRD, SA05).

Worrying about the effects of their traumas on the ways in which they parent their children was an important theme that came up in interviews. Activists also worried about the confluence of their behaviors affected by trauma and what almost feels as if their children were “**born with the wound**” of the traumas that their parents experienced. The feeling of being “born into a wound” was reflected in interviews of second-generation activists whose parents were active in anti-apartheid struggles. One activist explains that exploring the histories of her family traumas has become critical to her understanding of why her “body and soul feel so heavy” and why she constantly feels “so sad and traumatized” (DM10). Making connections between her feelings and the historical traumas her parents endured as part of the generation that was active in anti-apartheid struggles was critical to her healing journey.

RESENTING EACH OTHER

The manner in which woundedness and trauma play out in feminist spaces was a frequent theme in interviews. Activists reflected on the ways in which trauma within feminist spaces is largely unprocessed. Activist spaces become the location where anger, frustration, fear and hurt are expressed, often against other activists. This leads us to think that the problem is in other activists, when it is actually in structures of harm that have left their mark on our psyche and the manner in which we relate to ourselves and each other.

A part of our work has to be a reflection of our woundedness and we are not accurate in thinking it's each other who is the problem. We are not the problem, but we are mirroring the bigger system and our healing lies in recognizing that and dealing with it. But it's a huge challenge. How exhausting just thinking about it
(SA, WHRD04).

HARMFUL COPING MECHANISMS

Feminist spaces must engage with the greater impact of collective trauma as a result of generations of oppression and the ways in which these manifest in our movements as activists who are physically and emotionally unwell: sick, angry, depressed, burnt out and perpetuating toxicity in movement spaces. A critical aspect that was raised by several activists was the harmful coping mechanisms that activists resort to, in some cases, to alleviate the “weight” of trauma, including alcohol and substance abuse.

We deal [with trauma, depression and violence] through drinking. Substance abuse and alcohol are a common thread even though the people I know [who cope through alcohol and substance abuse] are brilliant and gifted [...] but there is nothing to help remind us of our greatness [...] so we act out, we escape (WHRD, SA04).

Knowledge of how to care for brokenness has been erased.

An interesting point brought up was the manner in which the historical trauma of colonialism meant that we are not sure how to care for ourselves, and for other activists, when we are “broken.” Outside of medical and psychological interventions and “classical” ways of showing solidarity (the example of being present in court hearings of other activists was mentioned), we are not sure how else to provide support.

We are able to respond by bringing our bodies into spaces [such as through presence in court hearings for other activists]. We are equipped to do that but we do not know what to do with ourselves when we are broken, and how to hold each other when we are broken (WHRD, SA07).

As we are dealing with trauma, what is required is not just organizing, but healing the impacts of generations of state violence. This is important to helping us understand ourselves and our movements within context and to begin to see the seemingly unexplained toxic behaviors, pain, poor collective relationships as part of a coherent narrative. Trauma, in this sense, is not an individual experience or an isolated incident, but a transgenerational experience that manifests in different ways in our collective psyche and memory. It is with this awareness that we can begin to make sense of what may have felt like fragmented pieces of our collective story.

So, what would it look like if we create activism spaces that are informed by this awareness of the roots of our collective, transgenerational traumas? The next section focuses on this vision.

TAKE A BREAK!

This was a heavy read!

BEFORE WE CONTINUE, AND WHEREVER YOU ARE READING THIS, TAKE A DEEP BREATH AND NOTICE HOW YOU FEEL IN YOUR BODY, AND HOW THE WORLD AROUND YOU FEELS.

OUR IN AND OUT BREATH CONNECTS US ALL IN THIS MOMENT ACROSS TIME AND SPACE—THIS IS AN INVITATION TO LEAN INTO OUR CONNECTION.

Take a breath for the day you have had so far.

And a breath for this precious moment, which cannot be recreated.

Now, another breath for the night and day coming.

Let our breath connect us in this moment—and hold ourselves and each other in solidarity through breath.

(This breath exercise was shared by the Healing Solidarity Collective)

ALTERNATIVELY, PRACTICE A PHYSICAL GROUNDING TECHNIQUE.

Place both feet flat on the floor.

Lean back into your chair, and make note of the feeling of the chair under you and against your back.

Cross your arms over your chest.

Gently tap your shoulders, alternating one side at a time.

Alternatively, you can place your hands on your thighs if you are in public, tapping one leg at a time.

Although not as effective as shoulder tapping, this technique can still calm you down.

(Source: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LgndXhvmM25k5JxV8025X2WiwVp-AwilV/view>)



IMAGINING A WAY FORWARD: WHAT COULD FEMINIST POLITICAL STRATEGIES FOR LIBERATION LOOK LIKE IF THEY CENTER HEALING?

As is apparent from the aforementioned discussion on activists' understandings of justice, healing, closely intertwined, is an integral outcome that should be felt as a result of justice processes. While healing features prominently in activists' dreams about justice, healing was also discussed in the contexts of reimagining activism spaces so that they embody personal and generational healing from the various sources of traumas analyzed in previous sections.

Activists dream of an approach to healing that entails a transformation of structures of oppression and violence and the structures through which activism is practiced. Healing for them goes beyond creating spaces for wellness activities, such as yoga or storytelling circles. While these are important to individual care and building team spirit, when done collectively, healing emerges as a much more transformative approach. One that seeks to create feminist spaces that would not cause illness, stress, depression and

burn out in the first place, and seeks wider structural transformations that place healing of structural traumas at the heart of the work. Activists interviewed share rich understandings of what constitutes healing. The themes that came up include:

Our healing is not an outside thing; our healing is a merging of worlds (WHRD, SA09).

Changing the nature of activism structures was an overarching theme that inspired many rich suggestions and discussions. These included ritualizing healing within institutions (WHRD, SA10). This is the opposite of making space for healing “events” within retreats and other staff meetings, as it entails an ongoing engagement with the traumas of activism in the daily work of organizations.

Activists interviewed critiqued the manner in which practices such as healing circles are introduced in spaces like meetings with the assumption that a safe space has been created, when that might not necessarily be true. Such spaces are also sometimes facilitated by individuals who have not done adequate preparation for healing conversations, which are often heavy.

An activist/healer shared that getting ready for a session entails


“a week of preparation [and] observing particular diet, waking up at 3am, 6am, 9am [...] so that I could come to that engagement with as little distraction of my own self, open to receive whatever was happening [...] I don’t think that people who hold healing sessions in our work spaces go into that level of preparation or know how to” (WHRD, SA08).

While the integration of healing sessions in meeting spaces is often framed as a way to integrate healing into the work, it, in effect, separates healing and our wellbeing from the work by creating a specific space for healing discussions to be had, usually involving discussions of personal stories and dwelling on wounds, rather than integrating these conversations as an essential part of the work and politicizing them as such.

This insight sheds light on a critical issue, namely that creating healing spaces is increasingly perceived as an aspect of the work akin to facilitating a meeting space, when healing conversations are not to be a segregated session on a schedule, but a **shift in the way we envisage and practice our activism**. This entails discussing the *woundedness that often brings us into activism spaces*.

Activists reflected on manifestations of the fact that many organizing spaces are built on wounds which bind its members together. These include spaces where there is constant competition over who has sustained the most trauma and harm. In endlessly dwelling on those experiences that come to define who we are, gradually, we become “wound addicts,”⁴⁷ not able to let go of our wounds or understand them as one part of our journey that we can reflect on without these becoming our mantras.

It is understandable, however, why wounds become our defining experiences. Wounds carry significant authority, imbuing the wounded with the power to enforce a certain narrative, remain in a position of power (in the case of organizational founders, for example), or act in certain harmful ways without others having the heart to pose questions or demand change.



In order for our experiences of activism to change, we must stop investing in the authority of the wounds and focus on healing them.

We are more focused on fighting an external enemy, there is an enemy within [...] And as long as we don't deal with the internal enemy, there is no way that we are going to conquer the external one (WHRD, SA06).

Building organizing spaces that are based on our wounds means that **we relate to each other from a place of woundedness**, which often manifests as efforts to create uniform ways of thinking and acting within organizing spaces, quelling voices that seek to introduce new ways of thinking or being.

We bring our brokenness into the movement [...] and it ends up being a silent war [...] amongst us [...] it could be related to how we identify as womn, and queer and trans. There is no space for different womn within the movement and womn who self-identify differently. There is no space for them to be their authentic selves (WHRD, SA06).


Operating from a place of woundedness also means that **we are constantly triggered by the work**. Activists reflected that experiencing the work from a personalized perspective is useful, as it gives us a unique drive to fight for justice because we are not just demanding justice for an “other,” but for individuals that we strongly empathize with as we have also lived through very similar contexts and experienced similar traumas.

In a sense, in fighting for justice for the constituencies we serve, we are also fighting for justice for ourselves and our traumas. However, personalizing the work and the triggers that follow suit also result in feelings of exhaustion, depression and ultimately burn out, as the triggers entail significant emotional drainage.

Activists discussed that healing, in this sense, would mean that we are “in control” of which triggers to entertain and the ways in which we use them to provide the drive needed to do the work passionately, but that we are not driven by our traumas.

Are we healing the world from our own point of view, or are we healing the world from an “objective” place? Are we able to create that “objectivity,” for lack of a better word? (WHRD, SA09).

In order for groups to have the opportunity to voice frustrations and needs openly, there is a need to interrogate power structures as they exist within many organizations openly and painfully. This includes conversations around the foundation of wounds, the reasons why the work continually triggers us and the ways in which a healing lens should be our guiding star. Healing should be the frame through which we speak about the work, highlighting what drives us beyond our wounds and traumas. It also includes challenging the authority of wounds and addressing toxic individuals and environments without the fear of being called out for speaking our minds, and focusing on healing our wounds rather than perpetually stressing their relevance.



This is an enormous task, as it necessarily means **creating a culture of trust** that enables us to speak about what we are all bringing into our activism spaces, what worries us, what we are stressing about and how we want to collectively organize in ways that depart from the violent patterns and experiences that inspire our activism. The speaking out, in this sense, is not about storytelling sessions, but having the ability to voice concerns about structural barriers to healing in feminist spaces. The necessity of creating a culture of trust is a challenging endeavor and this report does not aim to present guidance on how to go about creating this culture. We believe that this is a collective feminist project that requires much deliberation for it be done in meaningful ways so that the label does not merely replace the “safe space label.” In its interrogation of power relationships and demands on changing the nature of the way we work, it becomes apparent that activists view **healing as a revolutionary process** that “resets organizational templates” (WHRD, SA10) and ushers a new reality.

In addressing the question of creating spaces that are built in safety and trust, activists reflected on the close relationship between these spaces and the concept of healing. In this way, safe spaces are not spaces where harm does not take place, but rather spaces where we know that when harm happens, it will be addressed and not “swept under the rug.” As a result, we build spaces where experiences of harm are not met with violently calling out the person causing harm (a tactic critiqued by activists in earlier sections) or isolating them from the community, but where collective healing is centered.

ABILITY TO FRAME ADVERSITY AS AN EXPECTED REACTION TO RESISTING THE WORLD AS IT EXISTS

While activists spoke of the importance of feeling seen and acknowledged by their communities, they also raised the need to balance that with the realization that adversity will naturally be the result of their challenging the status quo in radical ways. In the words of Sara Ahmed, we must be accustomed to the role of “feminist killjoys.” Feminism, in this sense is “an inheritance of the sadness” that accompanies the consciousness of the role of gender, not just in the “restriction of possibility but also of how this restriction was not necessary.” We have to be willing and ready to venture into “secret places of pain.”⁴⁸ The ability to withstand the resistance that comes from “killing joy” can be created and sustained when activists have the space to speak about the pain they experience and seek healing from spaces that are “truly safe” for the expression of vulnerability and seeking of support (WHRD, DRC10). It is under these circumstances that there can be “joy in killing joy.”⁴⁹


ADDRESSING THE TRANSGENERATIONAL AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMAS THAT HAVE A GREAT IMPACT ON OUR MOVEMENTS

Addressing transgenerational trauma does not always entail massive political events, such as apartheid, but **the effects of sustained political repression of womn over generations** and the ways in which that violence has been systematized. The nature of this trauma will necessarily differ according to the context in which activists operate.

The importance of a feminist analysis of structural violence becomes apparent, as this analysis will greatly inform our understanding of the transgenerational traumas at play. In some contexts, such as that of the DRC for example, this analysis will make clear the importance of tackling the ways in which sexual violence continues to be used as a powerful tool by different players to punish and control womn. It is also relevant to

48 Ahmed, Sara. “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness.” *Signs*, vol. 35, no. 3, The University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp. 571–94, <https://doi.org/10.1086/648513> :

49 Ibid.



understand the role that the memory and prospect of the trauma of this violence plays in shaping the psyches of womn activists, the traumas they bring into organizing spaces and even the ways in which they imagine what constitutes justice.

Many activists interviewed, especially LGBTQI activists, discussed that just “moving through the world” is triggering, as they are in a constant state of anticipating different forms of violence because of who they are, and knowing that cultural norms and traditional values will most likely mean that the violence they face is committed with impunity (WHRD, REG, NIG11).

Even if an activist escapes the violence she fears, the trauma of carrying the pains of other activists has an enduring impact. To restate the words of one activist, “I need to acknowledge that there are a lot of queers who have come before me, and some of them have passed away doing this work. So, some of the heaviness that I carry is not my own heaviness. It’s the heaviness of other people” (WHRD, SA09).

Activists also spoke about addressing collective trauma through efforts to **change public narratives and perceptions** of the critical roles and contributions of WHRDs. Being seen is critical to alleviating the collective trauma of invisibility and isolation that several activists spoke of.

Developing Feminist Leadership was highlighted as critical to healing feminist movements. This entails critically analyzing leadership models that further our feelings of isolations and un-wellness through behaviors including instilling a culture of overwork. Models that do not elevate the need for reflective spaces that solidify our shared political analysis and clarity. And models that fail to prioritize the development of leaders within the feminist movement beyond organizational founders or directors.

A transformation of these practices is necessary in order to respond to our emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing needs. This entails discussing how stress and oppression manifest in our political work and lives, and strategizing on the ways to intervene through building and organizing spiritual, emotional and physical environments that sustain wellbeing and balance.

A critical theme that came up in interviews is that of **healing as self-confrontation**. In other words, for healing to take place, we must confront all issues that we believe contribute to our un-wellness (WHRD, SA01). This entails a shift in organizational cultures to ones that prioritize trust and feminist approaches to accountability in order for activists to comfortably raise issues that contribute to un-wellness and strategize on how the work can be done differently.

EXPLORING COMMUNAL AND TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

Activists reflected on the ways in which several factors are used by states to continue to exert dominance over conceptions of, and practices of, health and health care. These factors include colonialism, the power and dominance of solely medical frames to understanding wellness and sickness, and the ways in which traditional practices continue to be deemed “dangerous” and “unscientific.” Efforts must be placed into unearthing traditional practices that have been consciously erased and to elevate existing feminist practices of care that utilize traditional practices and understandings of reality.

*Our healing is about bringing things together, but because
it's not only this world, it matters that we tap into these
other worlds too (WHRD, SA01).*

Activists reflected that bringing up spiritual dimensions into the work is consistently viewed as strange, and that many who speak about the importance of spiritual work come from families of healers and so have been exposed to the idea that some of the ailments we carry are “beyond this lifetime” (WHRD, SA01). Some activists thus felt that feminist spaces should be more welcoming of a diversity of beliefs around trauma and how to address it. While many feminist spaces are consciously secular for understandable reasons (a response to the great harms often meted by organized religion), this reflection from activists does not aim to convert feminist spaces to religious ones, but rather to spaces that are open to explorations of traditional practices and spiritual approaches to addressing traumas..

CREATING MODELS THAT CAN BE REPLICATED

Activists interviewed shared a critical need for healing models to be replicable in other contexts. Focusing on the traditional healing practices of a specific community can lead to the introduction of models that are difficult to replicate in other contexts (WHRD, SEN11). Interrogating and reviving traditional practices must focus on extracting features of these practices that can be applied to feminist contexts, and on generating models that have the same overarching features, even if the content slightly changes per the context in which it is applied.

CREATING SPACES THAT FRAME STRUCTURAL CAUSES OF OUR TRAUMA

Activists shared that it is critical that feminist spaces are built on a political analysis of the structures of power and injustice that are the cause of the trauma experienced. It is only with a clear feminist analysis of these structures and the manner in which they perpetuate violence that strategies can be formulated that respond to these roots.

We need spaces that look at how the systems have made us who we are and what it means to fight against oppressions [...] and the oppressions we carry within us, the internalized oppressions which is very often where black women feel their pain, deep sense of insecurity. This is solo work, collective witnessing work with each other and consciousness raising work (WHRD, SA04).

There are challenges to dedicating time and resources to generate this analysis, mainly due to the fact that, in many cases, feminist groups are built as a response to specific harms or violations and activists' energies are largely response and action-oriented, with less thought given to the origin of the problematic context. Operating in contexts where the state has failed, to various extents, to respond to immediate needs, feminist groups also dedicate extensive efforts to responding to the needs of communities and not the structures that have excluded these communities in the first place.

Useful tools for such an analysis exist, including “Naming the Moment,” from the Latin American tradition of structural analysis and popular education.⁵⁰

Environmental justice activists pointed to existing frameworks that can be helpful starting points, including ecofeminist ethics of care that critique the fragmentation between ourselves and nature, rooted in patriarchy, capitalism and involving an articulation of values including that of care, empathy and friendship.

50 See for example, 'Naming the Moment' A participatory process of political analysis for action, Chris Cavanagh, <https://pubs.iied.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/migrate/G01898.pdf>.



REFLECTIONS ON CREATING SAFER SPACES

A recurrent reflection in interviews was around what it would take to create spaces that are truly safe. Activists critiqued the fact that, in many spaces, a declaration is simply made that a space is safe without any proof that that is the case. Here, we reflect on what creating a safe space could entail.

The idea of “creating a container” is a useful one. This phrase is used in some facilitation contexts, and we are borrowing it as it could be useful in feminist contexts:

A container is likened to the old alchemist flask. The flask is over the fire with the chemical compound inside. On top of the flask is a tube that holds the heat generated and loops it back to the substance itself. By looping it back on itself, the flask uses the heat generated from the fire interacting with the compound to transform the chemical substance itself. For this to happen, a strong container is required.

Too often, when the heat is generated that is always part of the reciprocity of relationships and courageous conversations, we have not built a strong enough container. Instead of being strong enough to hold, the container blows apart, creating harm amongst the members who are part of it. But if a strong enough container has been built, then when the heat gets intense, the container can hold, helping transform the content in the container and the container itself as well as the participants and the DNA or soul of that collective community (source: Creating a Container for Courageous Conversations, <https://gilliamandassociates.com/ittakesdeepgrace/2017/8/8/creating-a-containers-for-courageous-conversations>).

An important aspect of creating such a space is for attention and energy to be placed on facilitating ease and trust among a group. This could entail involving conflict facilitators to address issues of harm that group members might have experienced or caused to other members of the group and addressing these, putting in the time for group members to work closely together, be involved in bonding activities then checking if a comfortable container has been created to enable a safe space to be experienced. This process should not be rushed – spaces where a facilitator declares as safe to a group of strangers is not helpful.



EXISTING PRACTICES AND APPROACHES

Activists shared many dreams and reflections on the shifts that need to take place for activism spaces to become spaces where we experience the liberation we want to see in the “larger world.” This does not mean, however, that such practices do not exist in organizing spaces. In fact, there are age-old practices and traditions that have been critical to our collective survival. Some of these are traditional practices that are deeply ingrained in our feminist movement strengthening strategies. Others are practices that present the ways in which feminist activists have created alternatives to state systems that are, at best, inadequate to their needs, and at worst simply harmful. This section also presents feminist approaches to addressing systemic violences and inequalities.

COMMUNAL RESPONSES TO DEPRESSION AND BURNOUT

Several activists spoke about the practice of doing home visits to activists they know are isolating themselves from the group due to extreme exhaustion, depression, burnout, or other emotional and physical distresses. Activists described taking turns to prepare home cooked meals and calling the activist to inform her that they will be visiting. They described that the practice works well to illustrate that there is a community that cares about the wellbeing of the activist. The sense of being a part of a wider community is “redeeming,” as one activist described it (WHRD, SEN02).

RECOGNITION OF THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF ACTIVISTS

The majority of activists interviewed expressed the feeling that activism spaces, and their private lives, are often overtaken by dwelling on setbacks, challenges, or pushback on gains. There are few opportunities to reflect on, and celebrate, wins. Spaces for celebration are lacking and were identified as important to support activists’ wellbeing. Several activists from Senegal mentioned the “the invisible giants” initiative, created by Coumba Toure, which celebrates women who do remarkable work.

I have attended these ceremonies which are quite moving. They are moments of recognition. It's festive and moving, but it also encourages and strengthens women not to give up, to continue the fight (WHRD, SEN10).

CREATING SPACES FOR CELEBRATION

In addition to the aforementioned initiative, an activist from Senegal spoke about the practice of getting together just to celebrate and dance. These are not spaces to speak about the work or any kind of stress, but solely to have a good time.

Women activists meet at their homes, buy food and drink, dance, and let off steam. The women tam-tam drummers are also there, and it allows us to relieve stress. They are spaces for collective therapy (WHRD, SEN10).

CREATING NETWORKS

Activists spoke about the centrality of networks to their safety and wellbeing. Networks were highlighted as a way for activists to avoid defaulting to the state. Networks that provide medical support to activists who need it, for example, allow them to avoid resorting to “mainstream” health-care providers who (in the cases of trans women and sex workers, for example), mete different degrees of violence and, in some instances, report them to the state. Similarly, networks that provide AWHRDs with legal support provide essential expert opinion on their legal situation, what avenues of justice are possible and if there are vulnerabilities that should be taken into consideration. Trans women activists interviewed specifically raised the importance of having lawyers from legal networks represent them and act as a buffer between them and various state agencies, that are often sources of violence and discrimination.

In addition to serving as spaces of first resort to many activists, it was also highlighted that networks are spaces where activists feel “understood [...] speak the same language”; networks were even described as “therapeutic” (WHRD, SEN10).

An interesting example shared by an activist from the DRC was the creation of a support network that gets activated when women experience rape. The sole purpose is for women to come together and provide support to the woman victim/survivor and think of her needs.

Women heal other women’s hearts through group healing. In these collective trauma healing sessions, women come together to heal the trauma they experienced following rape through bonding and compassion. This also includes music therapy with dance (WHRD, DRC07).

ESTABLISHING AN ACTIVIST FUND

Activists spoke about funding challenges, including the necessity of rapid response and core funding and simplified application processes. One response from activists in Nigeria was to create a fund for LGBTQI activists. The fund is completely run by a group of five activists who receive requests of rapid support from LGBTQI activists facing threats, risks or violence. The activists review the requests and decide on the kind of support to provide. While establishing such a fund and ensuring its sustainability is not without its challenges, these are interesting models to explore for their potential of creating support that responds to the specific needs of activists.

UTILIZING TRADITIONAL HEALING PRACTICES

Activists shared different examples of traditional healing practices they have found to be helpful, including healing circles:

A ceremony is arranged during which a healer performs some rituals. It is usually a group of 12 women. They sit down in a circle first, and then the healer sits down after. The healer starts by reciting a prayer, then gives everyone the opportunity to take turns and talk about their issues. Before the healing circle ends, everyone must have had a chance to share their story uninterrupted. This practice helps correct imbalance of the mind, emotions and the soul. Then a cleansing ritual is conducted to cleanse the soul and mind. After that, they perform other ceremonies, which include dance. They play music and women start dancing and singing (WHRD, REG, LIB07).

An activist who is a medical doctor shared:

We have techniques like “Moja Kamba” i.e. “one rope” in Swahili. Activists and patients are joined with one rope and do some exercises. At some point we all think of ourselves as individuals who need healing, not as doctors and patients (WHRD, DRC10).

It was challenging to uncover traditional healing practices, however. The majority of activists interviewed reflected on the fact that traditional healing and healers are largely seen as ineffective, unscientific and unreligious. Given the belief systems it challenges, uncovering and reviving these practices was identified by some activists as an act of rebellion in and of itself.

THE MAJORITY OF ACTIVISTS INTERVIEWED EXPRESSED THE FEELING THAT ACTIVISM SPACES, AND THEIR PRIVATE LIVES, ARE OFTEN OVERTAKEN BY DWELLING ON SETBACKS, CHALLENGES, OR PUSHBACK ON GAINS. THERE ARE FEW OPPORTUNITIES TO REFLECT ON, AND CELEBRATE, WINS. SPACES FOR CELEBRATION ARE LACKING AND WERE IDENTIFIED AS IMPORTANT TO SUPPORT ACTIVISTS' WELLBEING.



UAF-AFRICA'S CURRENT PRACTICES, COMMITMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO FUND FROM A HEALING JUSTICE LENS

Through this exploration, we have arrived at healing justice as a practice and framework that centers healing as a core feminist practice and strategy. Healing is a necessary intervention to respond to generations of violence, harm and traumas meted out by different structures and actors. Healing is understood as an act of justice to ourselves and communities that have survived, and continue to survive, long histories of trauma, harm and violence. Before embarking on this research to explore the healing justice framework, UAF-Africa had embarked on a revision of its grantmaking, to respond to feedback from AWHRDs on necessary support that is aware of the need to address collective care, protection and healing. This revision entailed:



WIDENING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT PROTECTION ENTAILS

The Fund consciously provides politicized protection support, which understands protection as wellbeing in action. This entails challenging approaches to wellbeing that largely focus on mental health and managing or reducing psychiatric symptoms, rather than addressing the root causes of the collective emotional, mental and spiritual distress caused by persistent forms of exclusion, violence and marginalization.

Wellbeing here is not a question of cost (affording leisure time and activities)—these are still important—but a focus on the community and the nurturing provided by networks. This entails supporting organizations that seek to engage with issues they have identified in their organizational cultures; developing security and risk assessment plans, including thinking about mental weariness, burnout and exhaustion which affect our ability to accurately assess risks. Additionally, supporting networks which we have learned are essential to protection as the responses are developed and led by the women themselves. Related to care needs, networks can provide shelter for WHRDs /activate networks of practitioners when needed.

As such, our understanding of protection support has become much more expansive and aware of the contexts of wounds, burnout and physical and mental challenges that AWHRDs live with, that must be addressed before true protection can be achieved.

In order to adequately cover these growing areas of support, the Fund has also increased holistic security grant amounts. The Solidarity and Support team also provides accompaniment support to structurally excluded groups, supporting their processes of power analysis and strengthening their grant requests by, among others, thinking through adding collective care elements to planned interventions.

SUPPORT TO EXPLORE INDIGENOUS RESPONSES TO TRAUMA AND HARM

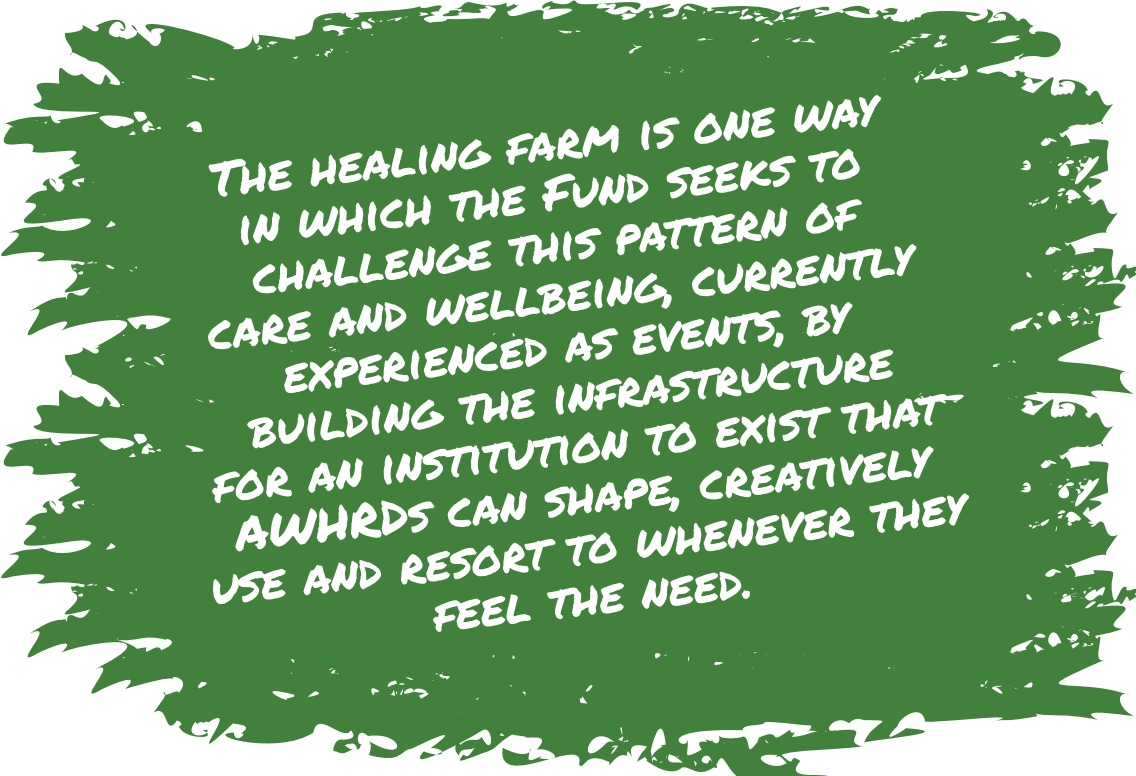
The work of the Feminist Republik entails consistent virtual meeting spaces for AWHRDs, primarily through periodic Ubuntu Sessions. These monthly meeting are opportunities for healing gatherings, knowledge sharing and exchange, and feminist engagements with pertinent topics (some have included wellbeing needs for AWHRDs with disabilities, delving into a feminist popular education tool for WHRDs to engage with questions around the extractives industries), among others. A strong feedback heard during Ubuntu Sessions was the need expressed by activists to explore indigenous responses to trauma and harm and ways of integrating them in feminist spaces. This translated to support for activists in Sierra Leone to document indigenous responses to trauma and trauma healing.

COMMITMENT TO CONSTRUCT A HEALING FARM

In 2021, the Fund purchased land in Kenya to construct a healing farm. The seed of this idea originated from the feedback we constantly hear from AWHRDs that the opportunities they have to focus on wellbeing and care are still largely experienced as external events—happening during occasional convenings or when funding is available for such initiatives, but not an integral part of their lives. The healing farm is one way in which the Fund seeks to challenge this pattern of care and wellbeing, currently experienced as events, by building the infrastructure for an institution to exist that AWHRDs can shape, creatively use and resort to whenever they feel the need.

The Farm will be a space with various offerings, including a healing center that offer medical and traditional healing practices. Wellbeing programmes will also be planned that incorporate dreaming, laughter and movement in an effort to reflect and analyze the many personal and collective sources of knowledge from across the continent. The Farm will also be a space for activists to be in touch with the earth— to farm vegetables, fruits, a herbal garden and a flower garden. This will be a green space run by womn to nourish us and to offer space to connect with nature by growing and caring for flowers and other plants.

The space will also be built from a deeply political perspective. While we truly hope that activists leave this space feeling better, we are also keen on keeping the farm from becoming solely a “feel good” personal experience— which is a risk of many stand-alone wellbeing approaches. In order to avoid that, it will be critical to ground the work in analysis, strategizing and organizing. This could mean having conversations around healing justice to develop strategies that challenge destructive systems, behaviors and beliefs. By centering healing as a political endeavour and journey, the Fund hopes to create a space that supports activists in transforming their activist spaces and lives. This way, the Farm does not simply give activists a break by taking them away from harsh realities that they are only bound to return to, but supports them in transforming these realities in revolutionary ways.



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RECOMMENDATIONS

The Fund is cognizant of the fact that a funding ecosystem needs to be present to fund healing frameworks in ways that reflect their importance. Our recommendations to funders include:

- **SUPPORTING ACTIVISTS TO EXPLORE THEIR COLLECTIVE HEALING NEEDS.** Activists are keenly aware of these needs but require the support of funders who can provide the resources with an understanding that healing is a messy process. It demands cultural shifts within movement spaces, difficult conversations, and facilitation of spaces that move groups away from a focus on wounds to a focus on healing.

Healing certainly entails addressing traumas (individual and collective). Activists carry significant traumas, which means that the “work” of activism cannot solely be about organizing, but also healing. This support can entail analyzing the traumas that activist spaces are dealing with and their impact on organizational cultures, implementing feminist approaches to trauma, attending to physical ailments or exploring indigenous healing practices, among many other possible responses. In order for this range of support to be offered, ideological shifts that are informed by the structural violence analysis need to take place so that this work is not seen as insignificant to supporting feminist organizing.

- **SUPPORTING FEMINIST POLITICAL EDUCATION EFFORTS.** Activists interviewed reflected on the paucity of support to raising political consciousness within movement spaces and that funding realities often push activists into becoming technocrats. The radical feminist fires need to be supported and this starts with giving groups the time to develop feminist analysis of power and structural and historical violence and dreams of alternatives. This can be through providing technical resources (for example, through collaborations between feminist scholars and seasoned activists who can work with feminist groups to develop this analysis) or the financial resources to enable groups to focus on this work. Activists interviewed reflected on the fact that they realize the critical need to conduct this “base building” work, but are taken over by the need to secure resources, which mostly necessitates working on specific projects with measurable outcomes. It is also often the case that “reality” takes over and activists are busy responding to what feels like never-ending crises. Conscious funding for spaces to pause to conduct this critical work is a first step.
- **THE AGE-OLD CALL TO PROVIDE CORE, FLEXIBLE FUNDING TO FEMINIST GROUPS IS VERY PERTINENT.** As groups are grappling with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their bodies and minds and the painful economic shifts that are a global reality, core funding is critical for economic security and for groups to be able to think about, and decide, how they want to care for themselves at this time.

REFLECTIONS:

WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE IF HEALING IS RITUALIZED IN OUR MOVEMENT SPACES?

The healing justice framework stresses the connection between personal, collective and social transformations. Healing is not an event, neither is it just about a specific spiritual or physical practice, but a *process* that entails:

1. **CHANGE CONSCIOUSNESS** to transform internalized practices of violence and oppression: Deep and difficult reflections about our organizing spaces and the ways in which these can be spaces that recycle trauma and violence. Activists interviewed shared that this could entail interrogating power structures; the ways in which we often manifest structural systems of harm in our spaces through responses that center shame, blame, revenge, isolation rather than heal wounded relationships; challenging the fact that many spaces are built on, and sustained by wounds.

This entails pushing ourselves to proactively practice values and relationships that reflect the world we want through, for example, healthy relationships in movement spaces, expressing our anger in non-destructive ways, holding each other accountable without defaulting to retribution and shame; and working on creating organizational cultures that value and nurture trust and openness to discuss harm and ways of addressing it.

2. **CHALLENGE DOMINANT APPROACHES TO HEALING AND HEALTH** through a revival of traditional healing practices that have been practiced in our communities for generations. These include facilitating healing circles, body work, grief circles, grief rituals, singing and drumming. This also entails creating spaces to discuss triggers and healing needs in the group without waiting for group dynamics to reach an untenable stage to address them. This entails a recognition of the role and value of healers in movement spaces.

3. **BUILD COMMUNITY RESOURCES OF HEALERS** who can strategize with activists and offer support to group members when needed. This entails exploring where the healers are in our communities? Do they have an understanding of the realities and experiences of AWHRDs? It is possible that healers have not interacted with AWHRDs or social justice activists generally. In that case, working on orienting them to the politics of feminist spaces would be critical. Importantly, for healing to be integrated in feminist organizing, they must become integral parts of our communities, not solely invited to provide support that runs parallel to organizing work.




CONCLUSION: "WE DON'T JUST LIVE FOR OURSELVES; WE LIVE FOR PEOPLE WHO WANTED TO LIVE"

We embarked on this research at a uniquely challenging period—the height of the COVID-19 pandemic that ravaged the world, but had especially difficult impacts on womn, their communities and their activism.

The pandemic made the structural failures of our global economic, labor, health models, public services and social infrastructures very clear. The ways in which these structures systematically exclude groups who live at the margins of society, including womn in rural and urban slums, womn refugees and prisoners, womn in the informal economy like street vendors, care and sex workers, womn with disabilities and those with HIV & AIDS among other chronic illnesses, and gender non-conforming people, was all very clear.

Descending on a context of multiple crises—which manifest differently across the continent, including crises in democracy; the capitalist crises; militarism, conflict and violence; heteronormativity, misogyny and patriarchy; racial and ethnic oppression and the climate catastrophe—meant that the pandemic quickly took root and was sustained




over almost two years with soaring death and infection rates.⁵¹ While these systems of oppression have always existed, the pandemic was an opportunity to witness the ways in which they systematically fail the majority and leave most of the planet insecure and vulnerable during times of crises.

It is in this difficult, seemingly unprecedented global context, that we decided to have conversations with activists about their traumas (individual, collective, and transgenerational). What makes them feel un-well? What sustains them? What would it take to heal from the layers of trauma they have experienced? What would that feel like? What are their visions for transformation?

As we reflect on the interviews, learning events that were conducted and the many moments of pause where we collectively, virtually sat together to reflect on this research, it becomes clear that healing justice arises as a way to structure life. And, in so doing, transform, usher in realities where we can cultivate joy. The following specific trends appear about what constitutes healing justice from an African feminist perspective:


1. A way to imagine how communities can be structured in such a way that healing is not seen as an individualized, siloed activity. Healing cannot be separated from the daily work of activism. Rather than an activity, it is a complex process that entails thinking about histories of trauma, spirituality, economics, law, internalized wounds, and challenging the mirroring of trauma and violence in feminist spaces. This is daily work and a difficult process.
2. Focus on economic violence. Activists agreed that the current economic system (based on colonialism, patriarchy, racism and ableism) militated against our healing in every way. Activists, almost uniformly, spoke about the necessity of alternative feminist economic realities, even if they were not completely clear on every aspect of what that would look like.
3. Moving away from violence and vengeance as the basis of our thinking about justice and security. This entails shifting the focus from symptoms to root causes in responding to harm.
4. Broadening the scope on time considered for harm. Our context and experiences can only be understood if we look back and look forward generationally. Many activists spoke of how the wounds and gifts of our ancestors were passed down to us and present in our every cell.
5. Focus on interconnections and wholeness. Activists spoke of the need to find wholeness, balance and interconnectedness in our lives. This can be through spirituality, ways of connecting outside the work and sustaining ourselves through leaning into our communities. A strong theme that emerged in this vein was understanding healing as a way of recovering the wholeness that we lost.
6. Recovering then embodying sacred teachings in our ways of being. Activists spoke about the intentional erasure of sacred teachings and approaches to life that resulted, primarily from colonialism. While recovering traditional approaches is not an easy task, activists interviewed are excited to embark upon it, realizing the importance of integrating the spiritual with the physical as a source of healing. Rather than seeing sacred or traditional teachings and approaches to life as an end goal, they should rather be framed as approaches that can guide us in facing the consistent traumas of the world we inhabit.

51 Fire in the Rain: UAF-Africa's Feminist Response to COVID-19, UAF-Africa <https://www.uaf-africa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Fire-in-the-Rain-UAF-Africas-Feminist-Response-to-COVID-19.pdf>, 2022.

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7. Recognition that we are the land and that the separation between human and non-human needs to be dissolved. An integral aspect of reviving traditional ways of being is an awareness that land is as much a part of healing justice as people. As such, the earth is not a dead recipient of the values of social justice, but a giver and a facilitator. Our interconnectedness with the whole world is at the heart of knowing who we are, how we are connected and what kinds of suffering and gifts have been passed to us.
 8. Centering the logic of community. This logic extends the timeframe from individuals to generations. As such, when thinking about institutions of harm, the concern should not just be about the impact on direct victims, but also on ways of structuring life so that the harm is not repeated to human or non-human life.
 9. Taking responsibility for our healing paths. We should recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to justice, whether by the state, restorative or the healing justice framework itself.
 10. Need to interrogate power, especially in movement spaces. Activists spoke of movement spaces that often mirror the injustices that brought us into activism in the first place. The need to think about and build spaces that embody the radical transformations we want to see in the world is a must.
 11. Organizing as a movement not as organizations: we need to see this as a healing movement not a healing project. Rather than operate from the logic of self-preservation, we should organize as members who need each other.

In reflecting about what kinds of practices could facilitate healing of structural, individual, collective and transgenerational traumas, activists shared some of what these practices could entail. These are approaches that:

1. Seek transformation. Activists spoke about their brokenness being the brokenness of violations committed by state and non-state actors, colonization, patriarchy, heteronormativity, ableism, racism and classism. Activists spoke of the need for practices that facilitate staying in the present and engaging in these sufferings in ways that do not just entail speaking about the wounds, but transforming them to reflect the visions for changed activism spaces explored in an earlier section.
2. Transform individual suffering, violence and complicity. This means that we do not stand outside violence, suffering and harm, or see them as “external” problems, but rather work to transform our own suffering, violence and complicity in the causes of violence.
3. Build community. This entails the difficult work of creating spaces that are truly safe, in the ways discussed in earlier sections, so that they truly become spaces of healing. Community is understood here as the end and the means.
4. Interrupt current social structures to build structures and spaces where our needs are met, where we feel cared for and where we each have responsibilities for the care of others— this creates the basis for alternative structures.
5. Cultivate sacredness—whether dancing, singing, crying or feasting. All activists spoke of practices and ceremonies to cultivate a feeling that there is more to life than fighting and resisting; that there is a sacred bond that ties feminist communities and that bond must be cultivated and cared for.

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6. Approaches that encourage being in relationship with the earth. Activists spoke of the necessity of feeling “rooted” to the earth, either in resisting extractives strategies, as a way of being close to the communities they advocate for, or the earth being the location of their healing practices and a coming together of community.
 7. Approaches that entail ongoing reflection, learning, strategizing, discovering and applying, not necessarily in a linear manner.

“There are opportunities even in the most difficult moments.”

Wangari Maathai

Healing justice thus presents an overarching framework to think through ways of liberating ourselves and our collectives from decades of sustained trauma and violence. This is necessary if we seek to build strengthened movements with the analysis, alliances and power to transform systems of harm.

At a time when feminist movements across the globe are contending with the “new normal” after the COVID-19 pandemic and the great rise to power of anti-rights movements, it seems that now is a very pertinent time to interrogate how we can collectively be well when we are inside these experiences of injustice and violence. How can we be well in our different contexts? And how can we take care of each other when we are systematically persecuted and targeted?

**“LIBERATION ITSELF IS THE JUSTICE WE DESERVE.
WE WILL GET THERE.”**

(Quote from activist interviewed)

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