



# BUILDING WOMEN'S POWER

Learn. Share. Organise. Build.





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# CONTENTS

<b>Welcome to your feminist workbook</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Introductory activity</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Tell it like it is</b>	<b>11</b>
Women can also be patriarchal	12
Women workers create a safe space to grow in	17
We need to build sisterhood	20
Taking our power back	24
Not safe in our homes, not safe outside, not safe anywhere	30
Changing the balance of power	34
<b>Learning from women’s struggles around the world</b>	<b>41</b>
Women and the Russian Revolution	44
Rojava: A feminist revolution in the Middle East	49
Egypt and the women of the Arab Spring	54
Mexico Chiapas women’s long struggle	60
“I am not the guilty one!” – a Chilean women’s cry	66
The Abeokuta Women’s Union in Nigeria	72
<b>Check out activity</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Explanation of concepts</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>82</b>

# Welcome to your feminist workbook

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A warm welcome and thank you to the formations who have participated in ILRIG workshops and events. You have contributed to the richness and texture to this workbook.

We live in a time of feeling the actual impact of climate change. Climate change didn't happen on its own. It is largely due to developed nations and corporate greed putting profits before people and a liveable planet at risk. Our continent, Africa, is most seriously impacted with severe droughts in some parts. The work society expects girls and women to do has been made even more difficult and time consuming, such as collecting fuel, water and growing food.

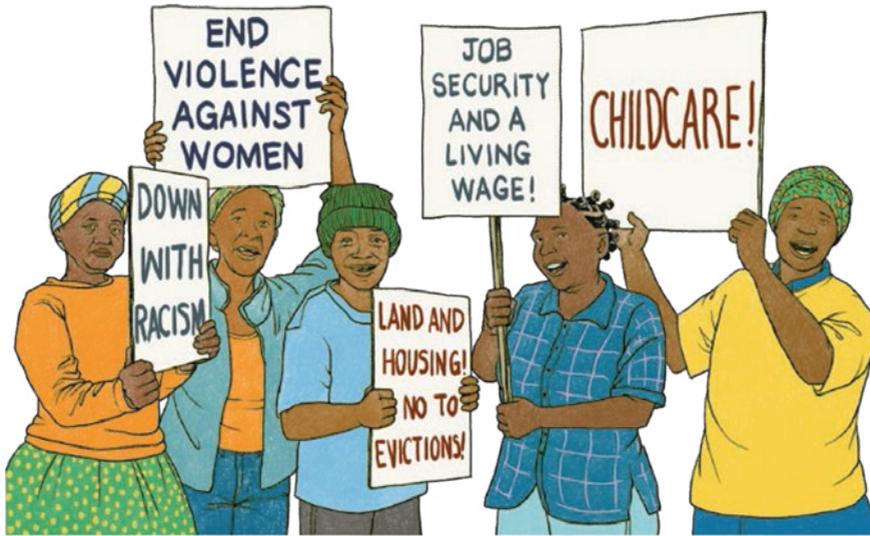
The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the greed of big pharmaceutical companies in holding on to vaccine patents and even hoarding vaccines. It also deepened people's poverty through the impact of lockdowns from large multinationals to survivalist street level businesses. Businesses have expanded casualisation of their workers, creating even more instability, anxiety and trauma in people's everyday lives.

If this wasn't enough facing us all, boys and men continue to harm and kill girls, women and members of the LGBTIQA+ community. There is hardly a story in this book that gender-based violence isn't talked about. Their weapons are verbal and physical.

We need stronger civil society organisations and movements to challenge all of these things in a holistic and coordinated way. Dissolving patriarchal attitudes and values in our homes, communities, organisations, businesses, government structures at all levels is an essential part of all of our struggles. As the saying goes, "A nation will never be free until women are free." And neither will the world be free until boys and men stop their gender-based crimes.

We need new ways of doing things. We hope this book will help us to build women's power. This feminist workbook is part of ILRIG's Building Women's Power Programme to build feminist alternatives to the challenges and effects of patriarchy and racial capitalism. Its aim is to:

- Share and learn from our own and international stories about women's struggles both past and present;
- Grow our knowledge, and make a habit of using critical thinking and other skills, such as assertiveness and strategic thinking to make our voices and participation respected and responded to in a meaningful way;
- Understand more deeply how the intersection of patriarchy, the state, racial capitalism, global capitalism and other systems of power continue to sabotage women's right to equality, equity and freedom;
- Identify practical strategies and tactics to mitigate those brutal systems and to insert feminist socialism into all we do so that it becomes a natural part of life for women and men, including LGBTIQA+ communities;
- Build a feminist culture into our worker organisations, worker forums, community and worker alliances, and trade unions;
- Acknowledge and celebrate all the women who imagine and contribute towards a new and just society.



## Using this workbook

Anyone can use this workbook in workshops, political education courses, study groups, or for general education and training. You can start from the beginning of the book and work through to the end. Or you can choose a section and use it as a standalone.

You could also use this workbook together with the other tools we have developed for ILRIG's Building Women's Power Programme. They are:

- an animation on social reproduction;
- video interviews with women activists sharing their feminist activism; and
- a podcast series on international feminist movements.

## Themes in the book

Through the sections, many themes emerge, including:

- Systems of power: capitalism and patriarchy
- Feminism as an alternative to patriarchy
- Building feminist organisations and movements
- Gender-based violence
- Creating safe spaces
- New ways of running organisations

# Introductory activity



## Activity 1: Let's begin our workshop with a reflection on feminism

**Step 1:** Freewriting, also known as private writing, is a thinking tool. The most important thing to know about freewriting is that you are not expected to read out or tell about what you have written. It is only for you. That is why it is free. Once you know the rules, you can use it for the rest of your life, and for different things you want to reflect on. Here are the rules:

### Freewriting rules

Rules *From Natalie Goldberg's book Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*

- 1) Keep your hand moving the whole time.
- 2) Don't cross out or erase.
- 3) Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, or grammar.
- 4) Lose control.
- 5) Go for the jugular.

### Tips for freewriting

- 1) Write only for yourself. This is private writing.
- 2) Don't judge yourself.
- 3) Write fast..
- 4) Don't stop to think about what you have written. Capture your thoughts on the run.
- 5) Use a prompt phrase. Rewrite the prompt over and over if you get stuck.
- 6) Set a time for your freewrite. You could set a timer on your phone.

**Step 2:** Your workshop prompt phrase is: For me, feminism is... Write for 10 minutes without stopping.

**Step 3:** Your facilitator will not ask you what you wrote. She will only ask how the freewriting felt for you.



## Activity 2: Q & A about feminism

Let's interview each other. We are not expected to agree with everything everyone says. We can agree to disagree.

**Step 1:** Read the information about feminism in the glossary.

**Step 2:** Do a tiny survey. Sit in groups of three. Take turns to ask each other to answer these questions, and also to either voice record or write down each other's responses:

- 1) Do you privately and publically identify yourself as a feminist?
- 2) What does feminism mean to you?
- 3) What reactions do you find men and women have to the word feminism?

**Step 3:** Read the information about patriarchy in the glossary.

**Step 4:** Continue your survey in your small group as before.

- 1) Name three significant ways in which patriarchy and patriarchal attitudes have affected your life in either a positive or negative way.
- 2) How does patriarchy affect boys and men?
- 3) Do you think patriarchy should be dismantled?

**Step 5:** Share the results of your tiny survey with the big group. Discuss and debate whilst remaining nonjudgemental of each other. We can agree to disagree. End with suggesting small ways that we can shift attitudes so that everyone can eventually be free from patriarchy.

**Step 6:** Make a group poem. Consider voice recording your poem so that you can share it. The topic is anything you have discussed in this session. The facilitator will begin with one sentence for the poem. Then go around the circle and each comrade adds a sentence.



### Activity at home: Make freewriting a habit

You can make up your own prompt phrase, depending what you want to reflect on.

#### Ideas for future freewriting topics

In five years' time...

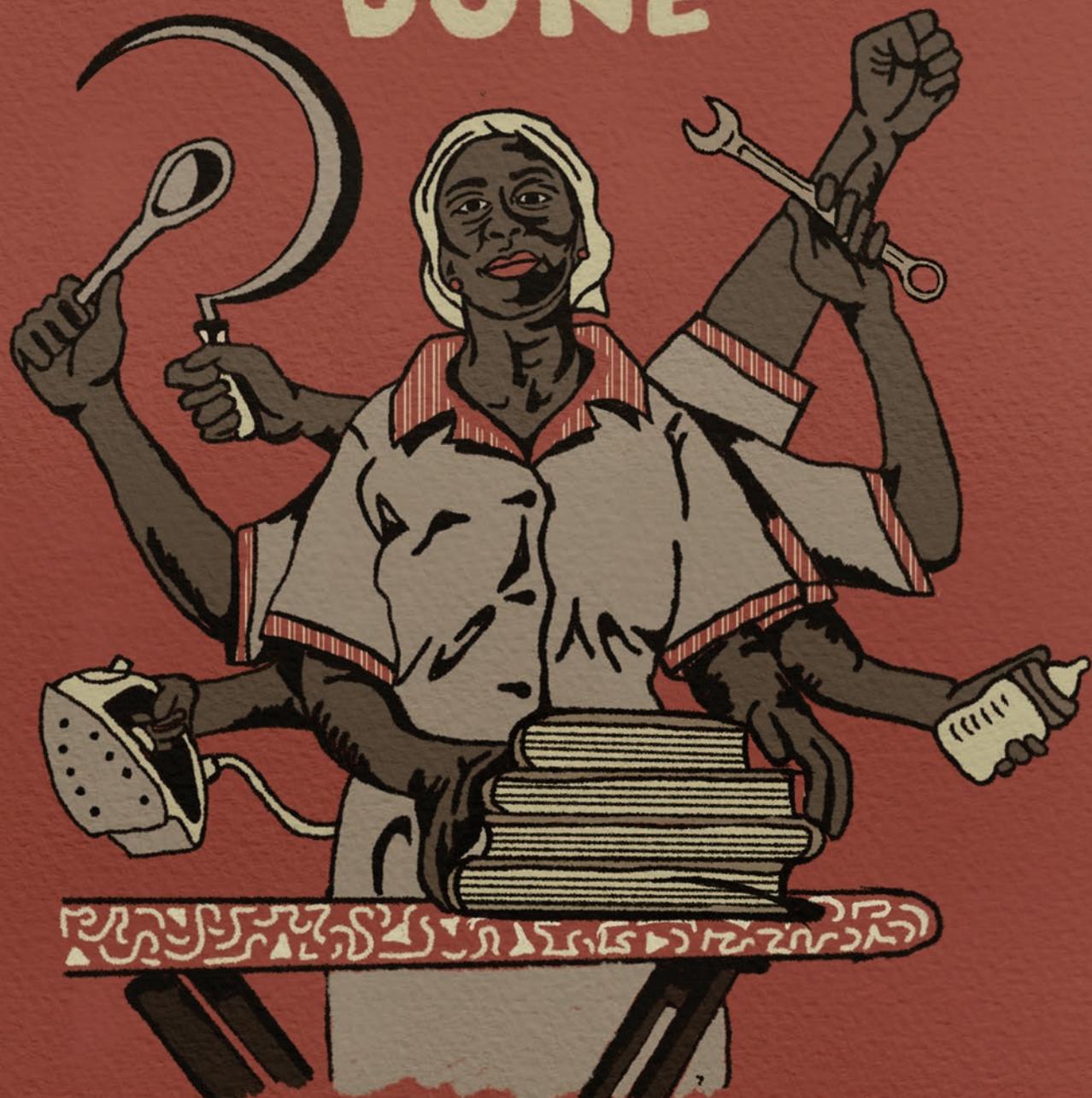
I describe myself as a person who...

We can build our movement by...

Our biggest challenge is...

We can change people's patriarchal practices by...

# A WOMAN'S WORK IS NEVER DONE



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## Tell it like it is

Six South African women activists reflect on challenges of male domination, and how they and their comrades have found ways to build feminist principals into their organisations and movements.

It isn't easy.

Each story is followed by talking points and activities. We hope you find them helpful as we create new ways of seeing and doing towards socialist feminism.

Womandla! Forward!

# Women can also be patriarchal



Ayesha Rajah, on patriarchy

Ayesha Rajah has been active in a women-dominated civic organisation called Sofasonke in Robertsham, Gauteng for the past two years. Sofasonke means “We’ll die together”. Ayesha says it’s true, “We live together and we’ll die together!”

In this edited interview, Ayesha shares her views on sexism and patriarchal attitudes in organisations. She says both men and women can hold patriarchal attitudes. She believes we have to reflect on the impact of patriarchy, and change the way we think and do things. Ayesha says, “When I say patriarchal attitudes, I’m talking about a world where there is an assumption that men are the natural leaders.”

“ Even within working-class women’s organisations, as much as men are patriarchal, women can also be patriarchal. All of us have been socialised. In a women-dominated organisation such as ours, that rears its head now and again. The way we often deal with it is by having very robust discussions. Sometimes we can get upset with each other. But we know that we have to come back and be in solidarity with each other. We enjoy the contradictions coming up, and reflecting on how much we, as women, may be part of keeping patriarchy going. How many prejudices might we ourselves carry?

What are the underlying things that keep us in this patriarchal nightmare? We have to debate and argue about it. Debate is a fantastic thing! It’s wonderful! We as women also must ask whether we want to continue stereotyping. Do we want to raise our children with these sexist and patriarchal ideals? We really have to make a change.

Men feel that because they can speak louder, what they are saying is automatically more sensible. And I can tell you that is not the case. There is this idea in the movement, even within socialists, in the left movement, that men are intellectually superior. And I can tell you that is not the case! Sometimes, it’s like the hidden curriculum. Even comrades who are in leadership positions would be guilty of sexist behaviour.

”

Ayesha says often leadership is slow to deal with sexism and patriarchal attitudes because some of the comrades in leadership are themselves sexist and patriarchal. She thinks the best way is to deal with it “head on” and not let things “fester”.

“ Sometimes, women get scared of powerful women. We deal with it head on. If you make a sexist remark, we immediately have a debate. Whether you’re a male, a woman, we deal with it, right there. It gives us the opportunity to have a discussion, and for everybody to then reflect. But if we don’t come to an agreement, the majority will say to the comrades, ‘You are out of order, and, if you do not change, you are out of here’.

There are certain things that we can’t tolerate. Some men recognise it for what it is — that these are strong women. Some men feel less than, because of it. And it’s not a full frontal attack. It’s almost like a sniper, you know, such as stopping the comrade from talking in the middle of her sentence. Those comrades need to be put straight immediately. Especially when it comes to sexual harassment. Not just sexism, but sexual harassment. You know, where I can touch your leg or something. Those things must not be tolerated at all.

If you don’t know how to respect your comrade, you must go. You must go. In our organisation Sofasonke, when women are outspoken, we celebrate! We clap hands, we stamp our feet, we get happy because we know our comrades. We know that what they have to say, and what they have to do, is very valuable.

”

## Ayesha’s tips on building an organisation

- ★ If someone is new, shy and hasn’t been long in the struggle, tell them: “What you have to say is very worth it. Just say it! And say it in the language that you are comfortable in.”
- ★ Find ways for women to feel empowered, and always support that development. Ayesha says, “For women to be able to reflect on their traditional roles, and suddenly for them to realise, “It’s not about who I am as a woman only. It’s about who I am as a human being, as a person, and I am worthy.”
- ★ If you’re going to have a workshop, make sure there is also childcare so that women can engage and be there without having to worry about their children. At the same time, we are not saying that childcare is women’s responsibility. Men must share the responsibility.
- ★ Education is everything. Make reading and other resources available to activists. Ayesha says, “The more you read, the stronger you become. The more you know, the more you are able to join the struggle.”

## Talking points

- Have you experienced double standards with what is expected of boys and men, and what is expected of girls and women? Share your experiences.
- What patriarchal prejudices do we ourselves carry? For example, do we frown on those of us who do not want to have children of our own? Do you believe it is only girls and women who should do most of the unpaid labour for the home, such as collecting water and fuel, cooking, cleaning and caring for the children, those who are ill, and the elderly?
- Explore your values around boy children and girl children. Do you have different social expectations of each from the time they are born? If yes, how does this shape them? This is part of gender socialisation when we treat girls and boys differently.
- Patriarchy only recognises ‘opposite sex’ couples, such as a woman with a man. This makes the many of us who do not conform to heterosexual/straight ways of feeling being uncomfortable. How can we make sure that those of us from the LGBTIQ+ community are respected and feel at home in our organisations?



### Activity 1: Looking at life through a gender lens

“We too, just like the apartheid government did, want to put people in certain boxes of identity. The old government created a society where how light or dark your skin was, how straight or curly your hair was, how thick or thin your nose or lips were would then determine your identity and station in life. Remember, there was a time when love across the colour lines was banned and punishable by courts and you could go to prison. Well, as a society, we too punish people who do not fit neatly into identity boxes. We too, want to decide for other people who they can love and what their identity should be.” – Ayesha Rajah



#### What is a gender lens?

You use a gender lens when you are on the lookout for how babies, children, teenagers, parents and guardians and other adults, and the elderly are treated based on whether they are identified as girl/woman or boy/man. This includes how society expects us to behave and what we are expected to do.

#### Let's not label

How other people identify someone, is not always how someone identifies themselves.

Some of us identify with the sex we are born with. Some of us do not, for example transgirls and transwomen, and transboys and transmen. Transpeople identify as opposite to what we were defined as at birth by whether we had a penis or a vagina.

Some of us describe ourselves as gender-fluid or gender-free. Sometimes we call ourselves ‘queer’. We don't want to be labelled in any particular group. We want to be free to be who we feel we are at any point in time.



When talking with people, it is important to ask what pronoun people want us to use for them. For example, he/his/him; she/hers/her; or they/their/theirs. Just like we got used to changing from chairman to chairperson, the more we practise these pronouns, the more it will become 'normal'.



**Idea: Keep a gender detective notebook**

Use a gender lens in your everyday life, such as in your family and among your friends and comrades, at work outside the home, in your organisations. This becomes 'evidence' in research. From evidence, you can start to develop gender equality policies.

**Step 1:** Talk about whether boys/men, and girls/women are valued for different things. Are we expected to play different roles, and have different responsibilities? If yes, what are the consequences for this in each person's life?

**Examples**

- Do people comment on girls and women's looks and appearance more than they do on boys'?
- What are girls/women praised and valued for?
- What are boys/men praised and valued for?

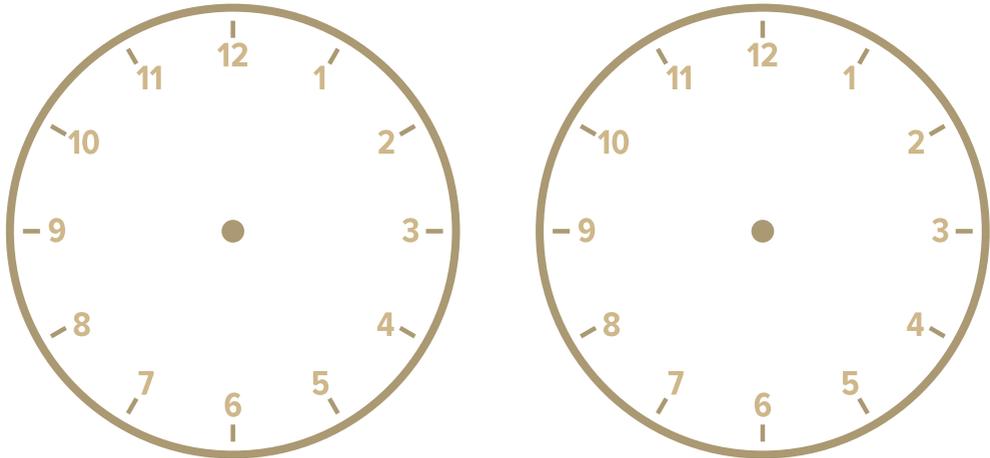
**Step 2:** Share ideas for strategies for how to change gender stereotypes so that all of us can be free to live in the world without being put into boxes.





## Activity 2: Who is expected to work harder and have less 'own' time?

Draw two clocks. Fill in all the things you do on a working day, such as going to work, cleaning, fetching fuel, caring for people in need, and looking after children. Then draw a clock for a man, if one lives in your home. Fill in all the things he does in a working day. Compare the two clocks.



### Answer these critical thinking questions:

- What is the difference between your clock and the man's clock?
- Why do you think the clocks are so different?
- Discuss whether you think the situation is fair.
- What change do you think should happen?
- What strategies can you think of to make change happen?



## Activity 3: Who does what and why?

Keep a gender record in your organisation of who does what to find out if women and men get gender stereotypical roles.

- For example, are women expected to organise refreshments, take minutes and do traditional women's tasks?
- What are men expected to do? For example, are men more likely to be chairpersons and lead delegations and be spokespeople for the organisation?
- What, if any, change do you think you need to bring into your organisation?
- How can it happen?

# Women workers create a safe space to grow in



Collet Gadisi, Simunye Workers Forum

“My name is Livhuwani Collet Gadisi. I am a 33-year-old woman. I am a mother, a spouse. I’m a member of is the Simunye Workers Forum in Gauteng. Our aim is to build unity across sectors towards a workers’ movement. We also have a Simunye Women Workers Forum where only women attend the meetings. I will share with you why we started it.”

**Question:** Why did you decide to have a separate women workers’ forum?

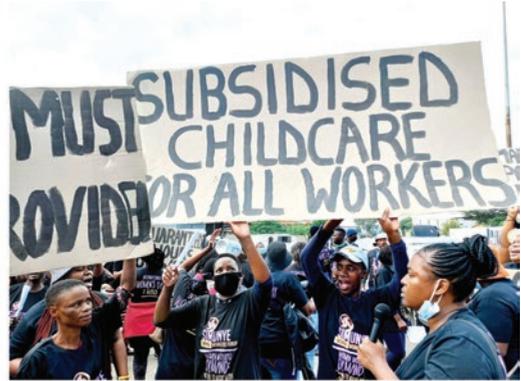
**Answer:** We decided to start Simunye Women Workers Forum because most of the time, whenever we’re in a general meeting, we find that most women do not participate. Whenever there was a question, it was only men who had to answer, or come up with the decision, or come up with the idea. It’s very rare to find a woman to raise a point in front of everyone. It’s difficult for them to stand up for themselves. And then we realised that if it’s difficult for women at the general meeting that means even at the workplace, they are doing the same. So we said, ‘How about we start a space whereby it’s only women?’

**Question:** How did men in the Simunye Workers Forum (SWF) respond?

**Answer:** They never had a problem. They even supported it. They also even influenced women to come to that meeting so they understand the reason why.

**Question:** Has anything changed as a result of the women’s forum?

**Answer:** We normally put women as first preference, like in the fortnightly workers’ general meetings. We have three volunteering chairpersons. It has to be two women and one man. So it went well. It really helps many women, because even now, at the workshops, the people who are more participating are women. So we can see the results. So it really works. And even at the workplace, as myself, I can stand up and raise whatever I want in front of everyone. I don’t mind who’s going to say what.



Members of the Simunye Workers Forum in action. Images from the SWF Facebook page.

**Question:** What is the relationship between the Simunye Women Workers Forum and the SWF?

**Answer:** If ever we find that in Simunye Women Workers Forum we have a challenge, we bring that challenge to the Simunye Workers Forum general meeting. So that even men can help us with ideas or any advice. In our organisation, we prioritise women. So they've already adjusted that if ever a woman raises a point they have to support and respect whoever came up with the point. At Simunye Workers Forum we also have workshops where we learn and are being educated in everything. Whenever there is a meeting or workshop, there is someone who will be taking care of children for those who will come with their children.

**Question:** What type of other support does the workers' forum give to members?

**Answer:** Those of us who never got a chance to go to school to learn how to use computers, and how to do other skills. We have training in everything.

**Question:** How do you see the women's forum in the future?

**Answer:** Women need their forum to become better leaders, so that as a woman, you can be able to stand up, you don't need to go to man for him to help you to go through whatever that you are facing. So even when it comes to the representatives at the workplace, like shop stewards, you will find women say, "I'm volunteering to be a shop steward". They don't have a problem. We see our Simunye Women Workers Forum existing for the long term because it really helps more women.

## Talking points

- What did Collet's interview remind you of, or make you think about while you read or listened to it?
- Chat about the root causes of the situation that Collette describes.
- What do you think are the pros and cons of having separate structures for women?



### Activity 1: Making women's voices heard

**Step 1:** In small groups, take turns to share an experience of your own, or one you have observed, of girls or women being undermined. Create an awareness-raising statement that women could use in such situations.

**Step 2:** Create a short drama of a situation that shows how women feel intimidated or shy to speak up. It could be in a meeting, or in other organisational activities.

#### Your drama brief

- Use body language as well as words in your drama.
- As your drama unfolds, members of your organisation take this up, raise awareness about why this often happens, and come up with a strategy that changes this so that women's voices are heard, listened to and taken seriously.
- Enjoy!

**Step 3:** After the group performances, have a discussion about different types of practical strategies you can use to ensure that a shift in gender power relations happens in a real way in our organisations, homes and communities.

## We need to build sisterhood



### Elizabeth Ann Thomas, the Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU)

Elizabeth Ann Thomas, though everyone calls her Marietjie, is a member of the Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU), and a shop steward at Kent Flowers. The union fights for women's and worker's rights. It fights to create a better work environment for their members.

Elizabeth says their working conditions are not safe, and that "Our people get sick in our places of work, get nothing out of it, except for the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) which you get in the future. There are no benefits for our people. There are no benefits for us women on the farm. Women are not treated equally." In this story, we focus on what Elizabeth identifies as challenges for women, and what she thinks women can do to help develop themselves in the union.

### Sexual harassment in the workplace

"As women, we can participate in the decision-making process in the organisation," she said. "I have not yet experienced sexism in our workplace. But this is something that is common in other workplaces." She gave examples of colleagues in the union who "were touched, where videos were taken, or pictures were taken when they bend over in the workplace or things like that. These are things that occur in other workplaces." Elizabeth said as far as she understood, a charge was laid, it was discussed with management, and it went further to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA).



## Women need to support women to build our movement

“In CSAAWU, men find it good when women are empowered,” she said. “They believe that women’s voices must be raised.” But a challenge Elizabeth identified was women feeling intimidated by other women.

“In our women’s meetings I’ve experienced where a woman feels, ‘You want to be better than me, you want to say more than me, you think you know more than I do,’” she said. “I don’t think our women help each other to really speak out.”

Elizabeth believes that women should avoid thinking things like, ‘Marietjie wants to know more than I do. Marietjie thinks she is better than me.’ They need to know that they can do the same as her.

“I think women feel inferior,” said Elizabeth. “When I talk about inferior, it is when you don’t have a lot of confidence.” She said that she tells them, “You can do what I do. All I do is read a lot. I like to build my knowledge. To know what’s going on.”

She said women need to grab opportunities in the union because “CSAAWU provides good opportunities for us as women to be promoted, to be part of what they are doing. We get very good opportunities to participate. We go to workshops regularly to get more information about what must be done. It feels good. For me, it feels really good as a woman, to be able to raise my voice.”

Elizabeth loves all the workshops which she believes are good for her because she learns so much. “Workshops are the only way we can become leaders,” she said. “You must learn. We must learn.” The union offers opportunities to go to different places. They understand that workers have children and homes and so they make arrangements before time to help. They provide transport, accommodation and catering.

“Our children can go with us,” said Elizabeth. “They are included with us so that, especially when there is no one to look after the children, they can come with us.”



## Elizabeth's tips for women in the union

- Tell yourself, "I am not inferior. I can do what others do."
- Build your knowledge by reading and having discussions.
- Accept opportunities to participate and learn, such as at workshops.
- Avoid any temptation to undermine other women.
- Support each other.
- Help and encourage women to speak out.
- Believe in yourself and that you can develop and grow, just like confident leaders have.

## Talking points

- What do you think of Elizabeth's views on women in the union?
- Is there such a thing as sisterhood? Explain why you say yes or no.
- What challenges do you think women face to fully participate in organisations that men don't face in the same way? What needs to change and how can change be organised for?
- What do women need to think about and do to promote solidarity among women? Also, ask yourselves who benefits from women not supporting women?
- What makes it often very difficult for women to report sexual harassment at the workplace? Include in your discussion the problem we have of victim blaming instead of blaming the perpetrator.



### Activity 1: Sexual harassment

**Step 1:** In small groups, describe the different ways in which women experience sexual harassment in different contexts, such as on public transport and walking down the street, at workplaces, and at school.

**Step 2:** Prepare a presentation of any type to raise awareness about the severe consequences harassers cause the people they choose to harass. This could be to a women's only, or a mixed-gender audience. Include in the presentation:

- a brief description of different types of sexual harassment;
- at least one short personal testimony about the impact of sexual harassment and trying to report it;
- facts about the extent of sexual harassment; and
- practical suggestions for strategies for men to understand what sexual harassment is, the legal implications of harassing (it's against the law), and how to stop harassing.

**Step 3:** Make a presentation to the big group. This could be a play, poem or even music. Give and receive feedback in a constructive way. Try not to tell groups what they 'should' do. Rather, suggest something for them to 'consider'.



## Activity 2: Create personal affirmations

Personal affirmations to say to yourself can help you feel confident. Each person should create an affirmation on a piece of paper. Put them all in a container and mix them up. Then each person takes a turn to pick out a piece of paper and reads out that affirmation.

### **Examples of affirmations**

I love and respect myself

I am enough

I believe in myself

I forgive myself for my mistakes

I make a difference in the world

# Taking our power back



Henriette Abrahams, Bonteheuwel Development Forum (BDF)

“ My name is Henriette Abrahams and I am from Bonteheuwel, on the Cape Flats in the Western Cape. I am the chairperson of the Bonteheuwel Development Forum (BDF). Our organisation is made up of street and block committees. We develop activists and have activist community members on the ground. We are taking our power back. And here’s how. ”

## Putting democracy into practice

“ We’ve always had a bias towards building women’s leadership. It’s our women who do the work, says Henriette. But when it comes to chairpersons and media and other positions, then it would be men talking. ”

That is also why the BDF is formed in the way that it is. There are various community development forums which are normally dominated by men and people with business interests, even by people who don’t even live in the area. They would be talking on behalf of people in that area.

We said, ‘If you want to be a part of this development forum, you have to live on our streets.’ A lot of people didn’t like that. Because people want to come in, if you’re doing good work, they want to get involved. They say, ‘Can I do something?’ Or they want to be the spokespersons and get the ‘glory’ of the work that our women are normally doing on our streets.

There are not a lot of men who want to stand under the command of a woman. So you have that dynamic also. It is important to understand the patriarchy, the set up. So we needed to then learn: how do you capitalise on the different levels of active support? ”

## No one person holds power

“ The BDF is structured so that no one person holds power. My role is more of a holding and a mentorship one. I'm like one link in the chain. You may not serve more than one two-year term in a particular position. I cannot stand as a chairperson again. There are no chairpersons for life in the BDF. I can stand in a different position, but not in the same position because I must make space for growth, for other people to come through. You may not serve on the executive for more than two terms because we must build and grow and give other people the space to lead.

The wonderful thing about our elections is that all the blocks must look at all of the positions. They consider who would be the best person in which positions, and why? If he or she is short on something, we ask how can we improve this person to take up that position?

So L Block, J Block, K Block, whatever block, they have their discussions in their blocks about who would they want as the next chairperson, or food security person and so on. We go away and we discuss. We come back and open up the elections process. So, we also had a lot of men participating and so forth. But men came in wanting to lead. And when they saw that their voice wasn't the leading voice, they would start stepping back.

”

## Talking points

- Henriette says not many men want to stand under the command of a woman. Do you agree with her? Say why. What impact can this have on your organisation?
- Identify what different things can weaken organisations, such as a dominant leader who doesn't listen to members, or weak communication which means members don't know what is going on. Suggest what activists can do to build strong sustainable organisations and movements.





### Activity 1: Act out patriarchy and challenge it

In groups, do a role play involving a man in a meeting who clearly doesn't want to have a woman chairperson. Your role play should highlight different responses from women and men members. Draw on your own experiences. The final scene should show an organising-building strategy to deal with this type of patriarchal attitude.

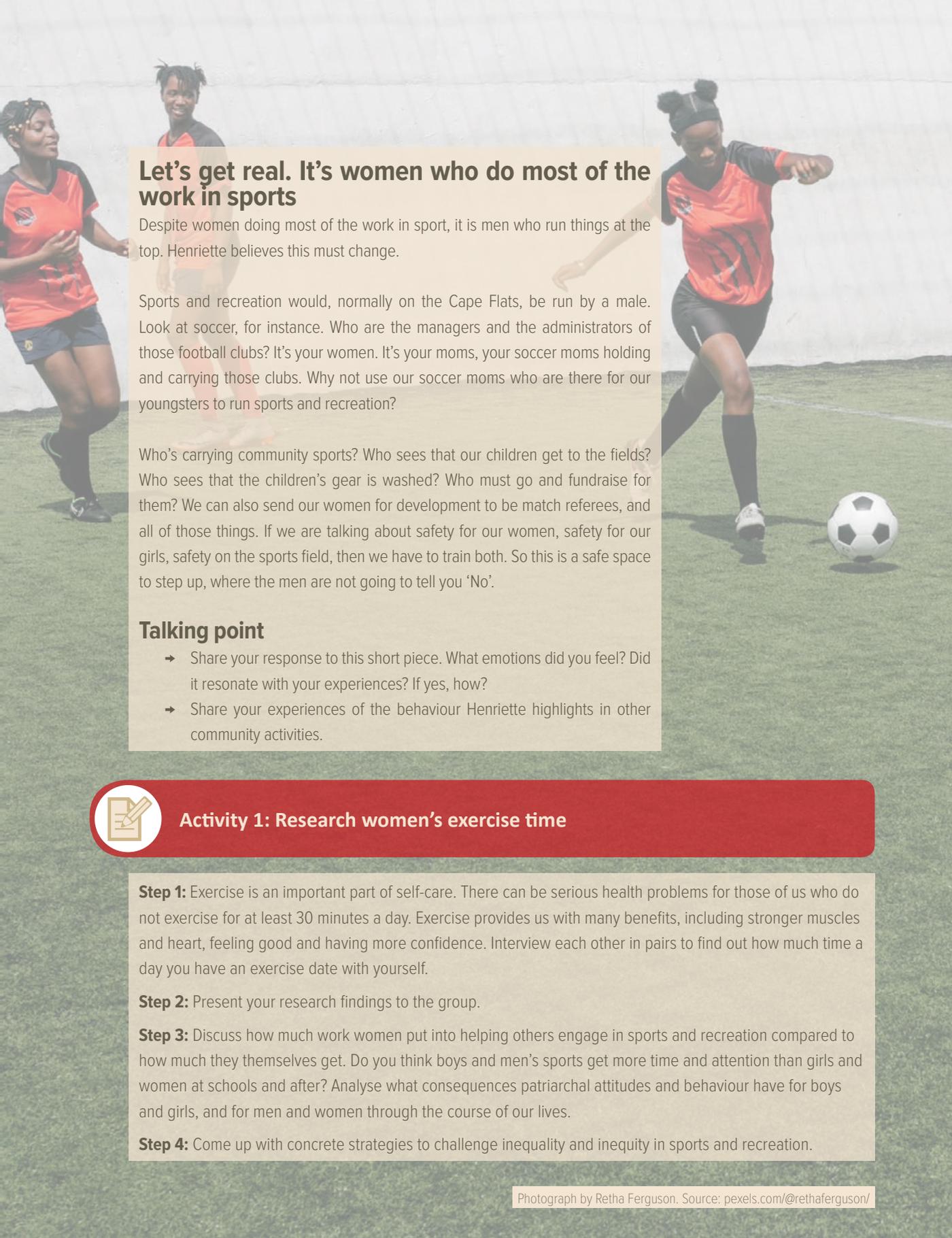


### Activity 2: For you to do at home: Random acts of challenging patriarchy

- At home, for a week, keep a note book and write down instances where you have noticed boys and men behaving in a superior way to girls and women.

Use an 'I' statement to come up with ways to challenge that behaviour. For example, 'I feel disrespected when you talk over me.' Or, 'I feel I am being treated as if I don't have intelligent views when you ignore me.'

'I' statements help reduce defensive, dismissive and angry responses.



## Let's get real. It's women who do most of the work in sports

Despite women doing most of the work in sport, it is men who run things at the top. Henriette believes this must change.

Sports and recreation would, normally on the Cape Flats, be run by a male. Look at soccer, for instance. Who are the managers and the administrators of those football clubs? It's your women. It's your moms, your soccer moms holding and carrying those clubs. Why not use our soccer moms who are there for our youngsters to run sports and recreation?

Who's carrying community sports? Who sees that our children get to the fields? Who sees that the children's gear is washed? Who must go and fundraise for them? We can also send our women for development to be match referees, and all of those things. If we are talking about safety for our women, safety for our girls, safety on the sports field, then we have to train both. So this is a safe space to step up, where the men are not going to tell you 'No'.

### Talking point

- Share your response to this short piece. What emotions did you feel? Did it resonate with your experiences? If yes, how?
- Share your experiences of the behaviour Henriette highlights in other community activities.



### Activity 1: Research women's exercise time

**Step 1:** Exercise is an important part of self-care. There can be serious health problems for those of us who do not exercise for at least 30 minutes a day. Exercise provides us with many benefits, including stronger muscles and heart, feeling good and having more confidence. Interview each other in pairs to find out how much time a day you have an exercise date with yourself.

**Step 2:** Present your research findings to the group.

**Step 3:** Discuss how much work women put into helping others engage in sports and recreation compared to how much they themselves get. Do you think boys and men's sports get more time and attention than girls and women at schools and after? Analyse what consequences patriarchal attitudes and behaviour have for boys and girls, and for men and women through the course of our lives.

**Step 4:** Come up with concrete strategies to challenge inequality and inequity in sports and recreation.



## WE WANT FOOD JUSTICE

**OUR COMMUNITY NEEDS FOOD TO BE NUTRITIOUS, AVAILABLE, ENOUGH AND SUSTAINABLE.**

Women need knowledge and skills to become more self-sufficient. They need to get into the spaces which they are kept out of, such as knowledge about the profit-driven economy and understanding the jargon, says Henriette.

We started with 'Women, Food, Health and Power.' The women are there. Right? We looked at power, we looked at the value chain. We asked,



Women went back, worked their own land, and planted their own food. They said, 'This is what I'm going to start doing for now.' We have to grow our own food now. This is part of the solution. So, we are creating this space for working-class women, in particular, to get together, to analyse our circumstances. To see that we are not alone, and look at the small things we can start doing for ourselves.

We need information available in our people's languages. And I am not only saying isiXhosa, Afrikaans, English, whatever. What is the jargon that's being used? What are the discussions? Is it over our people's heads? Or is it their language?

There's not a lot out there for us that speaks to us. Why aren't there sufficient resources available for our women to teach and train themselves?

## Talking points

- Share stories about difficult situations you are in, or know about, linked to not having food justice.
- Why is it important as activists to know about all aspects, from farm to shop, about the food system?
- In what ways does living under capitalism deepen food injustice? What additional costs are added at each step in the food value chain to make food cost even more? What could be done about it?
- In South Africa, we have a serious problem with obesity. Those of us who are over a healthy weight for our size and who are obese are at higher risk for heart and other diseases, such as type 2 diabetes. It is often caused by eating foods, such as takeaways and other foods high in sugar, fat and salt.
- What role do food companies play in promoting us to eat such foods?
- What do consumers need to know about the food we eat?



### Activity 1: Campaigning for food justice

**Step 1:** In groups, share information about your community and the food injustices, including access to clean water that people struggle with.

**Step 2:** Draw a map of your community. Include these if you have them:

- ‘Hotspots’ for very fatty, sugary and salty foods;
- Government departments linked to health, such as clinics;
- Places where people who need assistance with food go;
- Places where exercise is for free, such as a park gym;
- Places to grow or buy fresh fruit and vegetables;
- Access to clean water sources; and
- Any other places or people where community members can get assistance for their livelihoods, such as social grants.

**Step 3:** Rate the situation facing your community.

**Step 4:** Come up with a ‘Vision for our day in the sun’. Think about all the services and resources you need to make your community safe, healthy and equal.

**Step 5:** Choose one aspect of food justice that you could take up as a campaign.

# Not safe in our homes, not safe outside, not safe anywhere



Nokuzola Bulana, Housing Assembly

Nokuzola Bulana lives in Khayelitsha, not far from Cape Town in the Western Cape. She is a member of the Housing Assembly that fights for the people’s rights, such as housing, electricity and water. In the Housing Assembly, there are four women and three men as office bearers. In this story, Nokuzola focuses on women’s difficult lives in her community, especially because of men’s violence, and how the Housing Assembly tries to support women.

“Firstly, we are not safe outside there. They kill us,” said Nokuzola, referring to the violent behaviour of men towards women. “And also, we are not safe even inside the house.”

Talking about intimate partner violence, and how women can get trapped in a relationship because of financial dependence, she explained, “When you are not working, you depend on someone who is bringing something to put food on the table. So sometimes you stay in that relationship which is not nice. And you struggle with how to move out, because this one is feeding you.”

## The violence of poverty

The violence of poverty impacts on women’s mental and emotional health too when it comes to children.

“It’s not nice when you see the small children outside there,” explained Nokuzola. “They are not going to school. They are suffering outside because the mother also is not working. They can’t take them to the crèche, because they don’t have money to pay the school fees. So the money they have is too little to buy food and clothes.”

## Women's workshops help build confidence

The Housing Assembly has noticed that in the meetings mostly women don't participate. But when they have workshops, or a speak-out, they do begin to participate. To help build women's confidence, the organisation offers workshops for women in the community.

To recruit women Nokuzola said, "We mobilise, do door-to-door." Naturally, they don't want to leave their small children alone. "They like to participate in our workshop," said Nokuzola, and so we tell them, "There is someone who's going to look after your children and then you can participate." The organisation understands only too well how little money members of their community have. They assist with transport and provide food at the gatherings.

Nokuzola says welcoming women warmly with a hug is very important!

"You hug the person and then you say 'welcome,' she said and then you tell them, "Feel free to talk. Feel free to speak any language that you want to speak."

"It's very sad because when you hear a woman is suffering with something, it makes me as a woman want to assist because we know how the struggle is, especially when you are unemployed."

It is not easy, for different reasons, for the women who come to the workshops to speak out. "They feel afraid," explained Nokuzola, "and it can be tense." But this does change as women get used to the meetings and build their confidence.

"But as we continue to have the meetings, some try to speak out," she said. "To me, it's very sad. It's serious because when you see a woman has bruises, then you hear their story of, 'He is beating me. I didn't sleep,' and all of those things, in front of the children also, it's not nice."

It takes time for women to begin to feel free to speak about what is going on in their lives. Nokuzola says that speaking out about her own problems is very effective.

"Because when they hear me speaking about my problem, they can speak because they understand me now, how I'm dealing with it." Their organisation tries to do follow-ups from these support groups. And Nokuzola herself does as much as she can.

"We say to the women, 'We must be strong,'" she said. "And also we chat individually." In Nokuzola's case, after a workshop she will try to visit those participants who do not stay far from her. "I do a visit, and check how she is coping," said Nokuzola.

## Talking points

- Discuss whether you think it is fair that the burden of stopping men's violence mostly falls on those, such as girls and women, they perpetuate the violence against? You could later write short presentations or make voice notes on this topic in the spaces you are active in.
- What role do you think men in our organisations and movements should play in stopping men's war against women at home and elsewhere? Think of practical things they can do. You could take these strategies back for discussion in your organisations, and other places, like schools, work places, and youth organisations.
- Identify what your organisation or movement does to encourage women to come to workshops and join the organisation. Share your tips on building your organisation with new members.



### Activity 1: Take to the streets!

March for women's rights, including the rights of transwomen, all people who identify as woman, and your allies.

**You need:** Big pieces of paper and pens, or paint and paint brushes.

**Step 1:** In pairs, look at the photograph carefully.

- Make a list of all the different demands and other things that are written on the posters and placards.
- Describe the mood of the people in the photograph.
- What would you write on a placard if you went on this march? Tell each other why.
- Make your placard on a big piece of paper

**Step 2:** Get together and march with your placards, inside your workshop, or even somewhere else.

**Step 3:** In small groups, choose one or two of the demands or statements on your placards. Brainstorm practical things you can do to achieve your demands.

**Step 4:** Share your strategies with the whole group. Discuss and strengthen them. Decide what you want to do next, or what ideas you want to take back to your organisation.

**Step 5:** Think of where, at home or in your community, you can place your placard so many people get your message about gender-based violence.



## Activity 2: Community mapping for resources and support for women

**Step 1:** Draw a map where people in your community can get support for different types of gender-based violent crimes against them. Remember, violence is verbal, financial, emotional, psychological and physical. Explain your map to someone at your workshop in pairs. Add to your map.

**Step 2:** Plan how you will raise awareness on where to access or demand resources by doing a community mapping activity with your organisation in the future.

# Changing the balance of power



Zanele Nomdikinya, Gauteng Community Healthcare Forum

Zanele Nomdikinya, from Orange Farm south of Johannesburg, is a community health worker (CHW) in Extension 7A Clinic. Zanele belongs to the Gauteng Community Healthcare Forum, which the CHWs created. Most CHWs are women, working in the clinics and so the Forum decided that women should hold 75% and men 25% of the power. Zanele explains their women's activism.

## Changing the status quo

The Gauteng Community Healthcare Forum's constitution set out to change men's dominance of leadership positions both in numbers and in how women are treated.

“ We don't want this thing of there is a job that women can't do. You can see in other organisations, or other companies, women are just secretaries taking notes, while the boss is the man. So, we said we are not going to work like that. The Forum's secretaries will be the men and the chairperson and the deputy chair is going to be elected by the Forum. Even if we elect from the clinics, we told them that we want the women to be in power. Although the constitution of the Forum says 75% and 25%, we still, in the organisation, have those issues because we still have those men who still think they can't be led by a woman. ”



## There is gender-based violence every day and in every circumstance

### In our organisation

“ We had five office bearers. Now we have four. The man stepped out because he couldn't take the rules from a woman although he's bound by the constitution.

When we tried to call him down to say, 'No, you know the rules ... you know the issue of gender-based violence, you know the constitution of the Forum.' He would just walk in and out of the meetings, and go and do other things.

That showed that he didn't respect the women's leadership. We said, 'Can you please sit down. We can't be dealing with this thing whereby you don't respect the leadership of the Forum, and you don't respect the constitution of the Forum.' He stepped out of the Forum completely. ”

### If you abuse, you lose Forum membership

“ We do not allow men who are abusers to stay in the Forum. This is in our constitution. We say, 'You are not going to be a member of the Forum while we know you are abusive within your home, you are abusing your own children, you are abusing your own wife at home and within the community.'

We cancel their membership. Even if you didn't practise the gender-based violence within the organisation but you are doing it outside, we are not taking it as an organisation. ”

### In the field

“ We are facing gender-based violence every day and everywhere. Sometimes we are undermined by community members. They say, 'You are the woman, what are you going to say to us?' If you go to human resources at work, they take advantage of you being a woman. You get paid less. They don't take women seriously. It is difficult for us to go out to the very same community we are working in. As a woman you feel afraid to go alone because you don't know what is going to happen to you. You are going to get to the household where there are thugs. You are going to get raped. You are going to get beaten. ”

## Strategies to make change happen

### Turning the tables

“

We as the Forum have joined the feminist workshop which is led by Khanya College. Once a month we have a feminist workshop. All the Forum women and community women are members of this feminist workshop. We invite men to these feminist workshops so they can hear the cry of the women; so that they can understand how we feel.

I remember the other time in that feminist workshop, we exchanged chores. We said, ‘Today, the men are going to the kitchen to cook for us. We as women, we are going to sit here in the workshop and discuss our issues. We are expecting men to go to the kitchen to cook for us and bring food to us, and after that take the dishes back to the kitchen and wash them.’ So, in that way we want the men to be part of this feminist workshop. To understand the issues of women.

”

### The potential of dialogue towards understanding each other

“

There are two men’s organisations, Men’s Calabash and Khuluma Ndoda. They have their own free space to talk about their issues. We as women have our own organisation, the Forum. I believe we should hold dialogues so that each side hears, listens to and tries to understand the other.

There is an anger within the man that we don’t know. They should also know in our feminist workshops, what is it that we are saying, so that they must not cry on their own.

We must sit with the abuser to say, ‘This is how you are abusing me.’ And women need education because you can see most women are abused because they don’t get the training for them to have that stability to stand for their rights.

The thing that makes men abuse us this much is that we are so dependent on them. But if, as a woman, I can wake up every day and go to look for work, and not depend on the man’s wages, it can help us to have a free space.

”

#### What needs to be done?

- build unity between working class women and men in the fight against patriarchy;
- develop women’s skills;
- promote women’s employment;
- reduce women’s financial dependence on men; and
- run training programmes, including assertive skills training and awareness not to commit gender-based violence, from primary school level.

## Talking points

- What did you gain from Zanele's interview?
- Unpack the different types of power that exist in organisations, and different ways power is used. Think about whether there is:
  - the sharing of power in a democratic, organisation building way;
  - power that some members hold over other members;
  - individual power that members have within them.
- Talk about strategies you think might be valuable to use in your organisation that will work towards men stopping abusive behaviour. Remember, abuse is not only physical. People who use verbal and emotional abuse can cause an enormous amount of trauma.
- What would you include in training around patriarchy, sexism and gender-based violence at these different age levels: pre-school; primary school, and high school?
- When a man hits his partner, sometimes people ask, 'But what did she do to make him angry?' In this way, we blame the victim instead of the perpetrator. How do we raise awareness that there may be reasons why someone abuses another person, but that there is no excuse for their abuse?



### Activity 1: Express yourself!

**Step 1:** Read this poem about femicide, about a man who killed his woman partner. After you have read the poem, share your feelings that the poem evoked.

#### I Got Flowers Today

I got flowers today!  
It wasn't my birthday or any other special day.  
We had our first argument last night;  
And he said a lot of cruel things that really hurt;  
I know that he is sorry and didn't mean to say the things he said;  
Because he sent me flowers today.

I got flowers today.  
It wasn't our anniversary or any other special day.  
Last night, he threw me into a wall and started to choke me.  
It seemed like a nightmare.  
I couldn't believe that it was real.  
I woke up this morning sore and bruised all over.  
I know he must be sorry.  
Because he sent me flowers today.

I got flowers today!  
And it wasn't Valentines Day or any other special day;  
Last night he beat me and threatened to kill me;  
Make-up and long sleeves didn't hide the cuts and bruises this time;  
I couldn't go to work today because I didn't want anyone to know—but I know  
he's sorry;  
Because he sent me flowers today.

I got flowers today!  
And it wasn't Mother's Day or any other special day;  
Last night he beat me again, and it was worse than all of the other times;  
If I leave him, what will I do? How will I take care of the kids? What about  
money?  
I'm afraid of him, but I'm too scared and dependent to leave him! But he  
must be sorry;  
Because he sent me flowers today.

I got flowers today....  
Today was a special day—it was the day of my funeral;  
Last night he killed me;  
If only I would have gathered the courage and strength to leave him;  
I could have received help from the Women's Shelter, but I didn't ask for  
their help;  
So I got flowers today—for the last time.

By Paulette Kelly

**Step 2:** Discuss the power relations that exist in the situation.

**Step 3:** Do something creative, such as a drawing, poem, meme, gif, social media message, photograph, song, rap, dance or anything to express something that you felt strongly about when you read Zanele's interview. You can express any emotions, such as anger, sadness, hope and happiness. Then, perform or show your creative piece to everyone, and perhaps, after the response, you could continue to present it in other places in your community.



## Activity 2: It's your life

**You need** things to draw a picture.

This is a private activity. Think about a difficult relationship in your life. Draw a picture to show how you would like the relationship to be. Don't use words. Then rate how much of the relationship is negative and toxic, and how much of it is respectful and kind and pleasurable. Ask yourself if you realistically believe there is hope that it will change. If not, write a letter to yourself to say what you think you could do for your own wellbeing. You matter. Your life matters.



**THE  
PERSONAL  
IS POLITICAL!**

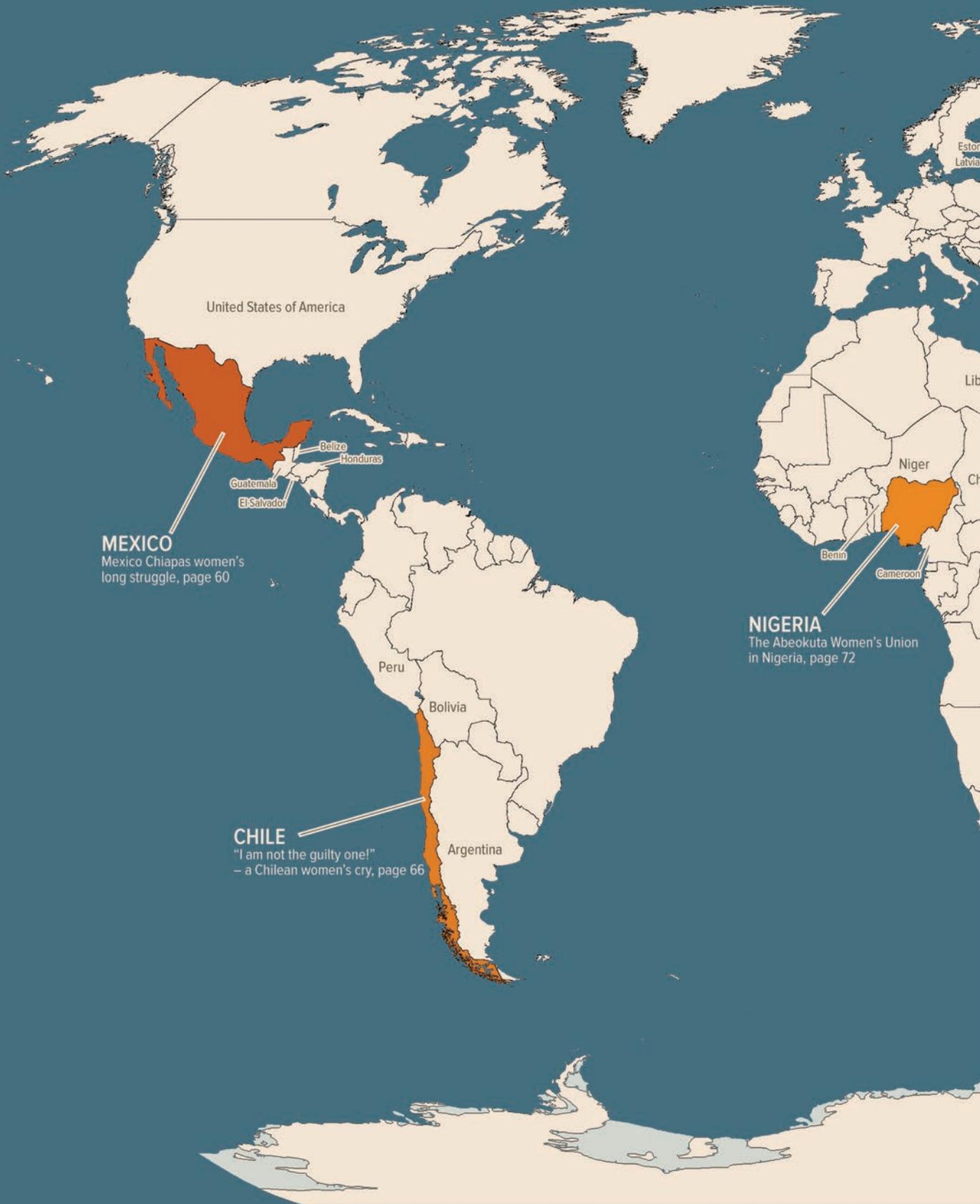
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## Learning from women's struggles around the world

We can learn so much from exploring the experiences of women's struggles, past and present, around the world. International networks can be powerful ways to share stories and strategies.

This section has stories from Russia, Mexico, Egypt, Nigeria, Rojava and Chile for us to discuss in talking points and follow up with activities.

Viva international feminist socialism, viva!



United States of America

**MEXICO**  
Mexico Chiapas women's long struggle, page 60

Guatemala  
El Salvador  
Belize  
Honduras

**CHILE**  
"I am not the guilty one!"  
– a Chilean women's cry, page 66

Peru  
Bolivia  
Argentina

**NIGERIA**  
The Abeokuta Women's Union in Nigeria, page 72

Benin  
Cameroon  
Niger

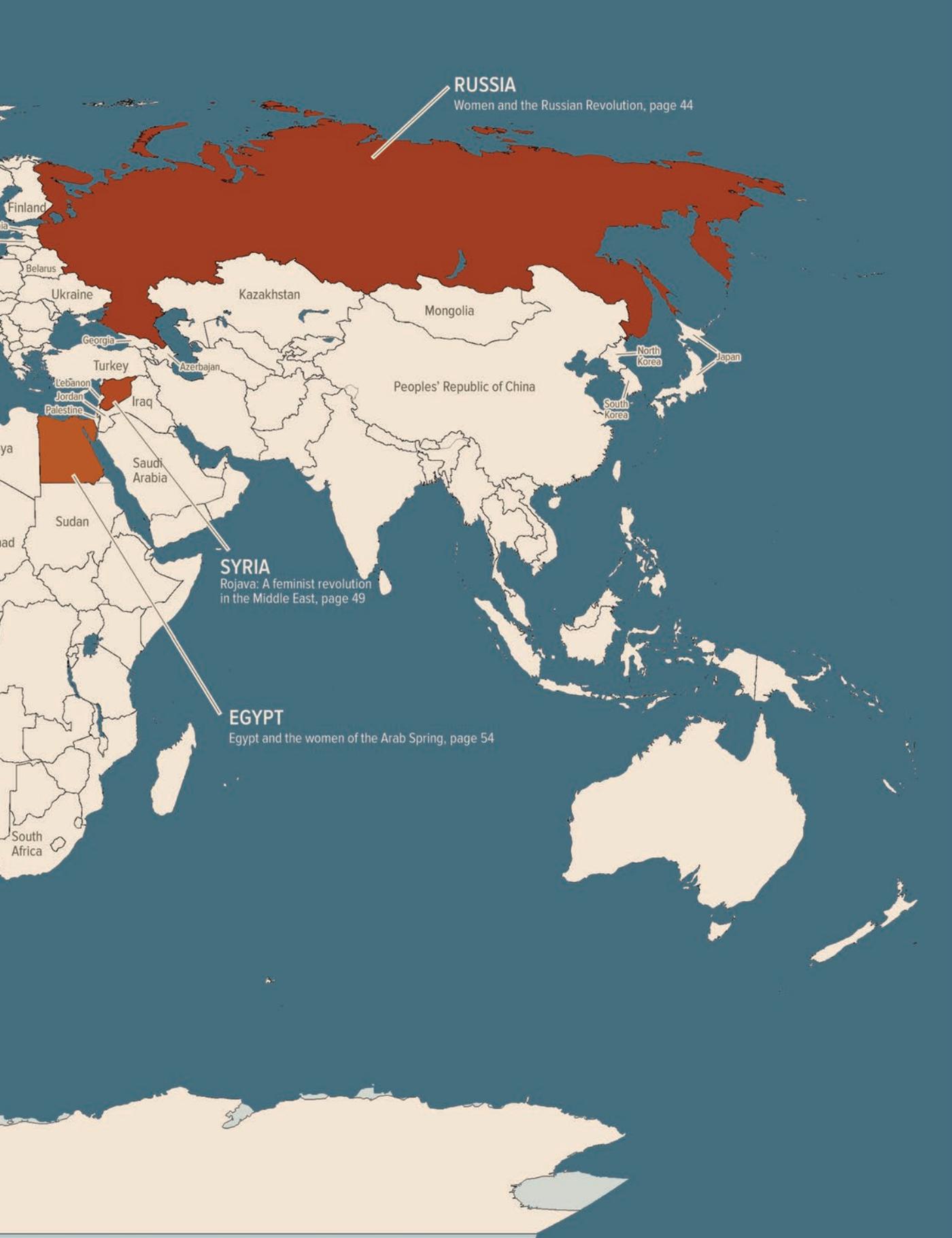
Estonia  
Latvia

Lib

Ch

**RUSSIA**

Women and the Russian Revolution, page 44



**SYRIA**

Rojava: A feminist revolution in the Middle East, page 49

**EGYPT**

Egypt and the women of the Arab Spring, page 54

Finland

la

Belarus

Ukraine

Kazakhstan

Mongolia

Georgia

Turkey

Azerbaijan

North Korea

Japan

Peoples' Republic of China

South Korea

Lebanon

Jordan

Palestine

Iraq

Saudi Arabia

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# Women and the Russian Revolution

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Much of the story of the women involved in the October 1917 revolution in Russia, and in the years that followed, can be told through the wall posters of that time. This type of poster art is known as 'social realism' or 'socialist realism'.

Social realism poster art showed confident, dignified women in charge of their own destinies in the new, post-revolution society. Women took their place in the Russian revolution as equals in defending the gains of the revolution, and the reconstruction of the country. Social realism was the first type of art to show Russian women in this way, instead of as add-ons in a patriarchal social order, or in men's imaginations.

One of the most famous examples of social realism poster art of that revolutionary time is of a woman factory worker holding her weapon with factory chimneys in the background. The poster says: Women workers, take up your rifles! In other posters, women were shown as heroic, proud, defiant, and determined.

Posters like these aimed to mobilise women to join in defending the revolution from the counter-revolutionary White Army. This was the army of the wealthy, the nobility who were overthrown, and the landowners whose land was to be redistributed to poor peasants.

What motivated women to respond so enthusiastically to the call to join in the task of building and defending their revolution? And how did artists come onto the idea to tell these stories through the frame of socialist realism? The answer to that goes back some way.

Women's life experiences in the Russian empire before the revolution were very different. Wealthy women had access to limited education. But peasant women – and they were the majority of the empire's population in the 19th century – were mostly illiterate.

Towards the end of the 19th century, peasant women began to migrate to the cities in large numbers, to work in factories, or in domestic service. Although their working hours and conditions were long and difficult, this was the first time that many women experienced independence from the patriarchal village traditions and structures.

Despite class differences, society was very patriarchal. Women were not allowed to vote or hold public office – no matter their background – until 1917. In Russia, the idea of liberating women and transforming the family really began with the two revolutions in 1917.

The first revolution, in February 1917, removed the unelected, tyrannical and wealthy czar and the rich landowners. The following month, on 8 March 1917, the first International Women's Day in history took place in the city of St Petersburg. Many thousands of women marched in the streets to demand bread, and better rations for the soldiers' families. Soon after, Russia became the first country in the world to pass laws that guaranteed equality and freedom for women. Later, in October, the Bolshevik party came into power.



Source: Baburina, N (ed.), 1993. Russia 20th Century: History of the country in poster - artists and their works. Panorama Publishing House, Moscow (Russia).

The Bolsheviks answered the women's demands and equalised women's legal status with that of men. They reformed the czar's oppressive laws, such as those dealing with marriage, the family, and guardianship. A year after the October 1917 revolution the law was changed to allow both spouses to retain the right to their own property and income. Children who were born outside of marriage now had the same rights as those born within. A divorce would in future be granted on request. Russia became the first country in the world to grant women the right to terminate their pregnancy if that is what they wanted.

To organise women, the Bolsheviks launched a women's section of the party. Under the leadership of Alexandra Kollontai, and with the support of women like Inessa Armand and Nadezhda Krupskaya, the women's movement spread the news of the revolution. They set up political education and literacy classes for working-class and peasant women.

Both men and women revolutionaries printed and distributed propaganda, including the many examples of socialist realism posters. Thousands of revolutionaries went to the countryside to live among peasants in the hope of improving living standards and raising socialist consciousness.

Of course, many of the improvements that Russian women fought for and won, had champions. That leadership came from the women of the Bolshevik party.

### **Alexandra Kollontai fought for women's freedom**

Alexandra Kollontai was deeply committed to the emancipation of women. She believed that for women to be free, they had to be free from capitalism also. She worked very hard to make socialism take women and children's needs seriously. Her ideas about love and sexuality, especially for women, were radical. She wanted society to abandon its old, conservative and oppressive thinking about love and sexual fulfilment, and create a new sexual morality. For example, Alexandra believed that society should free people to love whomever they wanted, whenever they wanted, and however they wanted. Activist comrades especially, she believed, should struggle to transform their personal relations as part of the struggle for social change.

Many women were attracted to the revolutionary movement because of Alexandra's ideas and activism. The women created women's study circles. They took advantage of the revolutionary mood to press for achieving their demands.

When Russia and other countries formed the USSR – the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – in 1922, the new country gained a large number of Muslim citizens. Muslim women especially supported the new order. That was because the women's section of the Bolshevik party began campaigns to promote literacy and education among women. They also campaigned for wearing the veil to be voluntary for Muslim women, rather than compulsory as was often required at the time, when the republics of Central Asia had joined the new USSR. The women's section had high regard for Muslim women. They were considered to be agents of the revolution, whose task was to bring socialist values to the USSR's traditional pre-capitalist society.

### **A different war came in 1939**

But by 1939 the drums of World War II were beating. The German Nazi invasion finally came in the middle of 1941. At first women grew food and helped care for the war casualties and orphans. They became involved in building new hospitals, schools, and railways. They worked on the factory assembly lines to build the planes, tanks, weapons and ammunition needed to fight the German army. They also produced essential goods such as light bulbs, soap, matches, cooking oil, and medicines and medical supplies.

But Russia did not have enough men to fight off the Germans alone and produce the things the new society needed. As war intensified and millions of Russian soldiers died on the battlefield, the call finally came for women to join the army. Great numbers of women enrolled in all-women units.

Artists then created posters that showed women in their fighting units, and in the factories. In the recruitment posters, the determination on the faces of the women is plain to see.

## A new leader reverses women's freedom

But even as the war was being fought, and women were defending their country, patriarchy was still in force. The women's section of the Bolshevik party was shut down in 1930, six years after Josef Stalin became leader of the Communist Party, as the Bolsheviks became known. There was a current of patriarchal prejudice that ran through the great party of the Russian working people.

Many members of the women's section believed that women's challenges and rights had been addressed and were now resolved. Some leaders in the broader party persuaded them that this was so. But in the 1930s, Stalin reversed many of the rights that had been granted to women and families in the 1918 family law. Termination of pregnancy was banned, divorce became extremely difficult to get, and the law on the rights of illegitimate children was revoked.

The early Bolshevik party's vision of equality and liberation for women did not come to be. The hope that women would be able to work in any profession, and that communal institutions would take responsibility for caring for and raising children was not fulfilled. Nor was the promise that women would eventually be freed from the burden of housework. Russian society returned to the traditional family unit. Under Stalin, the spouses and children of those who were arrested, jailed or executed were also sentenced to forced labour in camps far from their homes.

Just as disappointing as the end of the militant women's section of the party was what became of the socialist realism art form. One of the last great socialist realism posters celebrating the valiant role of Russian women fighters in WWII, shows a peasant mother embracing her soldier daughter. Her daughter, in full uniform, and with her machine gun slung over her shoulder, is returning home after the Red Army victory over the German army at the Battle of Stalingrad in 1943. The poster exclaims: 'You gave us back our life!'

But in the years after Stalin came to power, and even more so after he died, the once revolutionary poster art form was used more and more to profile top party leaders in the regions. It was no longer concerned with valuing the contribution of women and ordinary Russians. Instead, it became part of what we now know as the 'cult of the personality', meaning that the posters were used to glorify and praise powerful party leaders.

## Talking points

- If you had to choose three main things that stood out for you in this story, what were they? Why did they stand out?
- What do you think of the social realism of the posters? If there is a poster that you particularly like, explain why it appeals to you.



## Activity 1: Create your own social realism poster

**You need** things to make posters with.

**Step 1:** Work in pairs. Brainstorm images you think you would enjoy creating social realism posters of.

**Step 2:** Choose one of the images and make a poster of it.

**Step 3:** Stick up all of your posters on the wall and have an exhibition where everyone has a chance to look at them carefully and enjoy them. You might decide to do something with your posters, such as sending them on WhatsApp to comrades, putting them on your organisation or movement's website, or on ILRIG's website, or using them in your media, such as pamphlets and posters.

# Rojava: A feminist revolution in the Middle East!

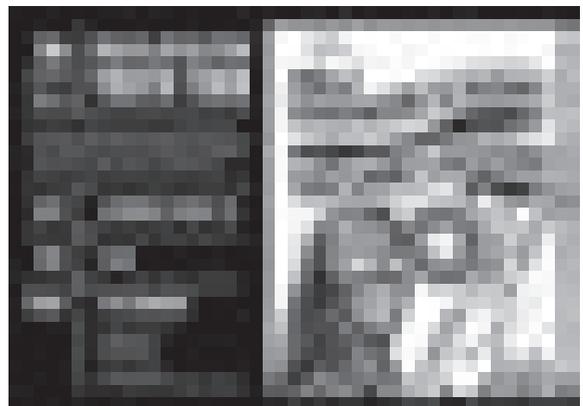
Rojava is an autonomous, predominantly Kurdish area in north-eastern Syria. The Kurdish people are an indigenous people who have traditionally lived in parts of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Armenia.

In late 2010, Tunisians rose up in anti-government protests. Many people in neighbouring countries were inspired, and the movement quickly spread throughout North Africa and the Middle East. This movement is known as the Arab Spring. The protestors faced backlash from the governments of their countries, and many governments used their armies to try to end the protest actions.

The Arab Spring reached the Syrian Kurdistan regions of Al Jazeera, Kobane and Afrin in 2011. The protests in those three regions were very strong and effective. Their participation fast-tracked the withdrawal of the Syrian army.

Once the Syrian army had withdrawn, the three regions declared themselves autonomous of the central Syrian government in 2012, and named their region Rojava. But their fight was not over yet. In 2013, the jihadist group Islamic State (IS) began attacking the newly-declared self-governing region. Fighters from the People's Defence Units (known as the YPG) and later the Women's Protection Units (known as the YPJ) defended the areas under their control.

The all-women fighters of the YPJ played an important role in liberating the city of Kobane from the jihadists. Their efforts, struggles and victories have captured the attention of feminist activists everywhere, including in South Africa, as the poster shows. The Kobane Kurdish women fighters have become the symbol of resistance in the region and elsewhere in the world. This is a story of that feminist revolution.



Source: ILRIG

Because of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), people around the world know about the challenges the Kurds faced in Syria, and elsewhere in the Middle East. Today, the YPJ proudly takes its place in defending what the women fighters themselves call "The most feminist revolution the world has ever witnessed."

The YPJ is a vital force in the Kurdish people's struggle for democratic self-government. They work under their own operational and command structures by forming their own organisations and programmes. The women's militia is an important part of Rojava's official army. The YPJ is also responsible for many development tasks, such as building a new society and making Kurdish women's empowerment a reality.

## Let's take a step back

How was the uprising of women built? And how did it keep going?

After 2010, the women's army of the Kurdish resistance in Turkey, known as the PKK, began training women in Rojava. They received training in understanding military theory. They learnt practical skills in self-defence, such as handling weapons. The PKK women shared with the Rojavan women their many decades of experience in fighting the Turkish state.

As a result, more women joined the training, and, at the beginning of the revolution in Rojava in 2012, even more women joined the fight. The militarisation of women became, in the struggle for national liberation, a necessity to preserve the identity and existence of the Kurdish movement. Since women fighters were considered essential to the defence of Rojava and to the struggle for women's liberation, autonomous women's units were created in early 2013.

The YPJ militia was founded on 4 April 2013. Some women previously in the mixed-gender People's Defence Units (YPGs) elected to become part of the all-women YPJ militia unit. With the establishment of women's forces, YPJ centres and women's defence academies were built in every district.



A poster encourages women to join the fight and rise up for Rojava  
Source: Marcus Spiske, Creative Commons

## Legitimate self-defence

A core principle of YPJ is legitimate self-defence. This principle is enshrined in Rojava's Social Charter. It is not meant as a way to destroy the enemy but rather to react to an external threat. It is also a tool to protect the people and the kind of society they want to build in Rojava.

In each of the larger cities, the YPG and the YPJ have a centre to assess and vet those who want to join the militias. Through the centres, the YPG and YPJ fighters can maintain contact and communication with their families.

The first thing the women are taught is that their struggle is not only against the jihadists. Their theory discussions also open their eyes to patriarchy, and the systems that kept Kurds under the control of landowners and the capitalist system.

## Freedom for women means freedom for all

The Kurdish women learnt from their experience of resistance that if women cannot be free, society and men cannot be free either. The Rojavan revolution challenged Western colonial powers' patriarchal, cultural, and nationalist influence in Syria and Turkey, and of British colonialism in Iraq. Women and feminism have played a crucial role in the territorial, political, cultural, and ideological liberation of Rojava.

Rojava adopted and improved the model of democratic confederalism in Kurdish-majority areas in Turkey. In this system, power goes from the bottom to the top, instead of the other way around, as almost everywhere in the rest of the world.

Before 2011, Kurdish women in Syria experienced domination and oppression because of their ethnicity and their gender. Women were only expected to be at home and in the kitchen, and sometimes in the market places. The structures of patriarchy — male domination — meant the most senior man in the family had the power and authority over everyone in a household. Parents married off girls into new households where they were treated as inferior to both the men and the more senior women in the family. It was very hard for women's demands to be voiced, heard or taken seriously. This applied especially to patriarchal practices that cause women social and psychological harm, such as forced marriages.

This explains why, until the revolution, women in Rojava had generally been absent from public life. It is also why they experienced physical and mental harm, and why men have exerted control and domination over their lives.

Because of their historic resistance, and because they defeated the jihadists at Kobane, the armed Kurdish women revolutionised life. Their movement was recognised and powerful. This is how they came to make the city a base for their struggles. And from there, they started to build a women's revolution and an alternative society.

After the uprising, women began gathering in numbers in the squares, the school yards, and in the streets. They started to participate in the newly-established councils, and they became involved in different aspects of public life and society.

Public spaces became a place for an unexpected eruption of women in dialogue with each other. They were exercising their rights to occupy communal spaces, to be heard, and for the advancement of their urban environment and personal development.

## Building a gender-equal society through communes

What role do women now play in creating a new society in Rojava? In the regions, power does not belong to one person, or a minority group of people. Power is decentralised. Neighbours and regular members of the community make most of the decisions that affect them. This forum of decision makers is called a commune. It is really a neighbourhood assembly, usually made up of between 100 and 150 families. Instead of politicians deciding how their community should be governed, the people living there do, through direct democratic structures.

Communes are linked together. Each commune elects their delegates to a neighbourhood council which is the next level of leadership. People who elected their delegates can remove them. Neighbourhood councils elect delegates

to a city or district council. From commune to neighbourhood, to district to region, to the Rojava-wide People's Council — each resident is free to be involved in decision-making. This process ensures an inclusive, bottom-up and grassroots structure of governing.

The communes have various committees that mobilise around the different areas of life. Committees include: women, youth, healthcare, food production and distribution, and peace and safety. This system of self-organisation is Rojava women's vision for a radical democracy that is non-hierarchical, non-discriminatory, and autonomous.

## Ensuring women are decision-makers

In Rojava, the principles of gender equality and dual leadership are applied:

- There is dual leadership at every level of commune, council, commission and court. Each must have two democratically elected co-chairs; one must be a woman.
- A gender quota applies in a similar way to all mixed-gender institutions to make sure there is equal political representation. Democratically-elected women must make up a minimum of 40%.
- There are separate women's communes and women's councils in every district, in addition to the mixed-gender councils. This is to advance women's interests.

Women initiated revolutionary demands, leading to several changes to laws and the justice system. Child marriage, forced marriage, polygamy, dowry payments, honour killings, female genital mutilation (FGM), and gender-based violence, including rape and domestic violence are now illegal. Termination of pregnancy has been legalised. The revolution followed feminist principles, and improved the lives of the women in the region, which is why it is known as a feminist revolution.

## Talking points

- ➔ Discuss whether you think there is anything you and your organisation could take away from their story and put into practice in a way relevant for you own organisations and lives.
- ➔ Women are often excluded from public life, dominated and oppressed because of their gender. Share experiences you might have had with this type of patriarchal oppression.
- ➔ Discuss cultural systems based in patriarchy that in your experience infringe on women's rights?
- ➔ Do they harm either men or women in any way? If yes, share ideas for concrete and realistic ways to change them.
- ➔ One of the core principles of the YPJ is self-defence. Do you think self-defence is important for women's liberation movements? Share your reasoning.



## Activity 1: Making change happen

Life for women in Rojava was much improved after the revolution, in part because of their bottom-up leadership structure. In small groups, compare top-down and bottom-up leadership systems.

- Think about your own organisation. Share with your group whether you think you use a top-down or bottom-up leadership style, and what you think the impact of this is for individual members and your organisation.
- Brainstorm ideas with your group about how you can help change things so even more people's voices are listened to and respected.



## Activity 2: Research: Equality is personal and political

The personal is political. What does it mean for women and girls to be respected as equals, listened to and respected in your family and your organisation?

In your notebook, complete the following survey by rating the statements from 1 to 5, with 1 being not good at all and 5 being very good. You can choose to answer the survey about your organisation or your family.

How do you rate these?	1 Not at all good	2 A bit okay	3 Reasonable	4 Good	5 Very good
a) Everyone, regardless of gender, has an equal say in decision-making.					
b) Everyone's opinions are listened to and valued.					
c) Women's concerns are taken seriously.					
d) Women are allowed to take on leadership roles.					
e) Women are comfortable asserting their authority.					

If you answered 1, 2 or 3 for any of the statements, think about the impact this has on the girls and women in your family and organisation, and how you can change this. Write down any ideas you have for improvement. Start conversations within your family and organisation about the changes you think should be made.

# Egypt and the women of the Arab Spring

There is a powerful photograph, taken on the afternoon of Sunday 17 December 2011 at Tahrir Square, in Cairo, the capital city of Egypt. It signalled that the women of the Middle East were very much part of the Arab Spring protests that swept through the region.

The photograph shows two policemen dragging a young woman on the ground by her arms. A third policeman stands over her. He is about to stomp his foot on her stomach. The upper part of her body is exposed, fully revealing her blue bra, even though she is wearing the *chador* full-body cloak that many Arab Muslim women in the Middle East wear when they are outdoors. Other policemen stand around, watching. They do not react. As gut-wrenching as that moment was, it told the world that women of the Middle East were active participants and not just observers of the uprisings.



The Girl in the Blue Bra  
Source: Wikipedia, Creative Commons

## About the Arab Spring: Women were part of making it happen

The Arab Spring began in Tunisia in December 2010. A protest movement to demand democracy, it went on to sweep through much of North Africa and the Middle East. It continued until around the middle of 2012, when it started to fade. However, the impact has lasted much longer, and continues to inspire women's struggles.

Until the moment the photograph, *The Woman in the Blue Bra*, as it became known, made its way around the world, most people who were not there thought the demonstrations were driven by angry men. The photograph went viral on social media. People all around the world were shocked. Seeing it was like a kick in the stomach for feminists everywhere. The woman's identity was never made known.

Most countries in North Africa and the Middle East had demonstrations, and the Arab Spring impacted them. By looking at how the protests changed their realities, including bringing new freedoms, we get a sense of just how important women were to this revolutionary movement.

## Patriarchy: Men attack women to silence us

The photograph reminded feminists of something they had long known: men inflict brutal attacks on women's bodies as a method to silence them when they show their rejection of life under patriarchal domination.

Almost all of the countries that took part in the Arab Spring were then run by conservative, male-dominated governments. But a new generation of women had arisen and made their voices heard. They had been educated, or were studying at universities or colleges. They used the internet to their advantage, sharing their thoughts, demands and struggles on platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

## Inspired by past feminists and feminism

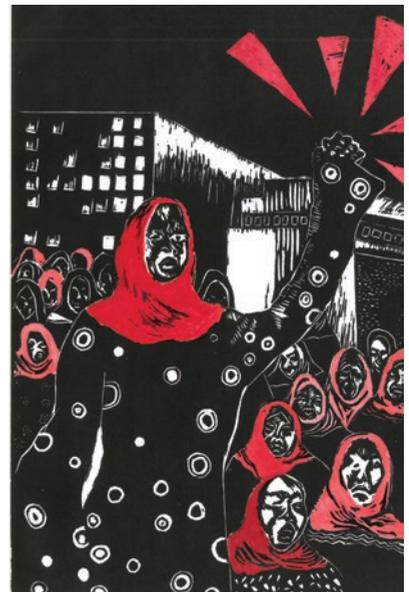
The Egyptian feminists of the Arab Spring were following in the footsteps of earlier generations of women who struggled for women's rights. They laid the groundwork for what was to come. Their activism inspired the new generation of women activists.

Inji Aflatoun was one of these inspirational women. She was a spokesperson for Egypt's progressive feminist movement in the late 1940s and 1950s. Latifa Al Zayyat's ideas about sexual freedom for women were inspired by the Russian feminist Alexandra Kollantai. Doria Shafik organised a storming of the Egyptian parliament by hundreds of women, and an eight-day hunger strike. All of the gains by these early feminists led directly to women being granted the right to vote under Egypt's 1956 constitution.

It was not only the middle class intellectual feminists of an earlier generation who inspired the women of Egypt's Arab Spring. It was also women workers' strikes that set Egypt on the road to revolution.

Women workers in the giant textile mills of Mahalla al-Kubra started a two-year strike in December 2006. Three thousand women garment workers demanded that their male colleagues stop work. "Where are the men? Here are the women!" they chanted. It was followed by women at the Mansura-España garment factory who led a workplace occupation for several weeks in 2008. The workers organised a sit-in to stop the factory owner from locking them out and selling the land to a property developer. They slept between the machines at night. Their managers threatened to report the women activists as sex workers, because they were spending the night with male colleagues in the occupation.

In 2011, just 18 days after the start of the protests, Egyptians — women and men, young and old, Christian, Muslim and secular — overthrew the dictator Hosni Mubarak. His National Democratic Party was dissolved. However, a more difficult period lay ahead. In August 2012, the caretaker military council placed Abdel al-Sisi at the head of the armed forces. Less than a year later, al-Sisi led a coup to remove the democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi from power, and suspended the new 2012 constitution.



Source: ILRIG

## Fighting a military dictatorship

al-Sisi was not satisfied with the detention of tens of thousands of people arrested after the revolution, and that their trials were being held in the civilian courts. He gave the military courts the power to try the demonstrators, even though many had only been arrested on minor charges, such as breaking curfews, or trespassing. The military courts did not even pretend to follow a fair procedure. They claimed their actions were necessary for national security.

An organisation called No To Military Trials was established to shine a light on the Egyptian generals' crimes and their violent attacks on the demonstrators. They accused the soldiers of unlawful arrests and detentions — they forcefully carried out 'virginity tests' on women who took part in the revolution. The women were detained and tortured. The military quickly set up show trials in the military courts. They forced the women to defend themselves against false charges.

One courageous young woman pressed charges against the soldiers who had attacked her. Soldiers dragged Samira Ibrahim, a protestor in her mid-20s, out of Tahrir Square when they were ordered to clear the area. A male officer put Samira through a brutal 'virginity test'. He had been trained to intimidate women in this way.

Samira laid charges against those who had violated her. She won her case in a civil court. She spoke about how the soldiers had given her electroshock torture, and beaten her so badly she still carried the marks of their brutality a year later.

But Samira was not satisfied with the justice she had received in the civilian court. She wanted the guilty ones to be jailed and expelled from the army. She said: "They wanted to humiliate me. I want to make sure they don't get to do that to anyone ever again."

Cleverly and subtly challenging the president's intentions for military courts, Samira herself turned to the military court, and had the soldiers tried there. Her case is an example of brave Egyptian feminists using the military courts against the army to pursue justice.

After the trial, Nazly Hussein, the leader of No To Military Trials said, "No one would talk about this [actions of the soldiers] even though it's against human rights, against the constitution. [Once people heard the details from survivors of the military trials], now everyone is with us."



The graffiti reads: Salute, solidarity and support for Samira Ibrahim, the girl from Upper Egypt  
Source: Gigi Ibrahim, Creative Commons

## The power of all types of activism everywhere

The Tahrir Square resistance gave rise to many young women-led grassroots women's initiatives. Most did not have experience in social or political organising. They simply got together for gender-specific causes. This included protecting the women-only passenger carriage on Cairo's metro train from men who regularly flooded it to harass women passengers.

Women activists developed a mobile phone app that offers a live map of reported incidents of sexual harassment. They wrote up their experiences and shared them as feminist posts with each other. On social media, a performing arts project documented and gave voice to censored art stories about gender in different communities in Egypt. Initiatives like these died down after the political crackdown that followed the 2013 coup. But feminist voices continued to assert themselves in the public space.

Real change for women is difficult. It doesn't always happen quickly, especially when women have only themselves to rely on to make it happen. Egyptian feminists are now in a rebuilding phase. They have many struggles ahead to win the kinds of freedom they desire.

## Women elsewhere in the Arab Spring

### Tunisia

For the women of Tunisia, also a North African country, the Arab Spring resulted in a more hopeful outcome to their protests. Tunisia was the birthplace of the Arab Spring. It began when a single, poor vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi, set himself on fire. Local police had harassed and traumatised Mohammed. For many poor and working class Tunisian women, this type of harassment happened daily. Until then, the oppressive state had suppressed any outpouring of discontent.

Mohammed's death was the trigger for demonstrations. Many women, especially from the rural areas, joined the protests because of Lina Ben Mhenni's efforts. Lina was an independent journalist who reported on the situation of women in Tunisia's rural areas. She helped to drive women's involvement in the revolution, and to bring their actions to the world's attention.



Lina Ben Mhenni  
Source: David Sasaki, Creative Commons

The angry wave of strikes, marches and rallies that followed Mohammed's death led to Tunisians voting in their first post-revolution election in October 2011. Women made up 42 of the 217 representatives elected to the Constituent Assembly. Such a large number of women elected to an assembly with the power to make laws had never been seen before in the Arab world. It was a huge breakthrough. In January 2014, a new constitution was adopted that guaranteed gender equality.

## Libya

The Arab Spring reached Libya in February 2011. Mothers and families began a protest because of 1 200 men who were massacred in the Abu Saleem prison in 1996 in Tripoli. They staged protests after Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, jailed the lawyer representing the families of the slain men. Activists used a Facebook campaign to mobilise citizens of Benghazi, Libya's second city. Gaddafi responded with a violent crackdown. That action triggered very large demonstrations in Benghazi. The Libyan government tried to crush the protests but the people were successful: Gaddafi was removed from power.

## Talking points

- The picture, *The Woman in the Blue Bra*, sparked outrage across the world.
- Powerful images have often spread awareness about injustices and started activist movements. In South Africa, for example, when activists told the world that the apartheid regime had detained many children, the world sat up and took detentions even more seriously. The *Free the Children* campaign got into action. It made a difference having the spotlight on detentions of political activists. Share with each other any images that have stuck with you and made you think about an injustice, and want to do something about it.



### Activity 1: Inspiring change

Egyptian women took inspiration from feminists that had come before them, and women in other countries fighting the same injustices they faced. Have you ever been inspired by a woman or a movement? If yes, who?

Write a letter, or record something, to a woman, organisation or movement that has inspired you the most. Tell them, even if they are no longer with us, what impact this has had on you. For example:

- What changes they inspired you to make in your own life, or fight for?
- Read or play your recording of your letter to the group.
- If you can, give it to the person you did it for when you next see them.



### Activity 2: Rise up!

Lina Ben Mhenni used her job as a journalist to inspire women in Tunisia to join the protests. In small groups, write a message aimed at encouraging women to rise up against a specific injustice. Your message doesn't have to be long. Read what you have written out loud, and get feedback from the other comrades in the workshop.



### Activity 3: Men's physical and psychological violence against women

Men attack women in different ways to silence us. It can be verbal, non-verbal or physical. It can be financial. All are very damaging, and men know this. Rape is considered an international war crime because soldiers use rape as a weapon of war.

The soldiers deliberately wanted to humiliate, hurt and silence women protestors in Egypt during the Arab Spring by forcing so-called 'virginity tests' on them. What they did was rape the women. They used rape as a weapon of war. Read the information about 'virginity tests' and discuss the questions that accompany it.



#### **Virginity tests are unscientific and used to judge and keep young women subordinated**

We say such tests are 'so-called' because they are not scientifically accurate. This is often done by checking for the girl's or woman's hymen. The hymen is a thin layer of skin that partially covers the external vaginal opening. There are many ways a hymen can break, including during exercising. There is no bleeding when the hymen breaks. That the hymen breaking is accompanied by bleeding is a myth that has caused young women immense trauma and false accusations over centuries.

Virginity tests can be considered a human rights violation when not consensual, just like rape is a crime. There is no equivalent 'virginity testing' for boys.

**Step 1:** Society does not pressure men to remain virgins until they marry. Discuss:

- Why does society place this expectation on girls and women only?
- How does this affect girls' and women's lives?
- What needs to change for girls and women to be free from sexual discrimination and being shamed?

**Step 2:** What can we do in everyday life to challenge and change patriarchal attitudes so that patriarchy slowly but surely dies?

# Mexico Chiapas women's long struggle

**1994:**

## **A very different Mexico emerged**

On 1 January 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Canada and Mexico came into effect. It was a day on which Mexico and the world woke up to a new reality. Television screens everywhere beamed images of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, wearing black balaclavas and red bandanas. The Zapatistas were staging a show of force against their government. It regarded them as outlaws, so they needed to cover their faces.

The Zapatistas are a movement of the indigenous people of Chiapas state in the south of Mexico. A great number of women participated in that New Year's Day mobilisation. Armed with wooden clubs and machetes, farming tools and very few guns, the Zapatistas had left their homes in the jungle with a plan to take control of six towns. The women especially had declared they would no longer accept the powerlessness, violence and poverty of their existence. They had had enough.

The Zapatistas emerged in the 1990s as a social movement to organise the indigenous people's right to self-defence. They had suffered great violence at the hands of the Mexican army, police and private vigilante groups. Building organisation and their power in society was the only way to achieve an end to the violence. They knew that without the constant fear of violence against their families and their communities, they could achieve so much more.

In 1993, Zapatista activists were still underground. They consulted indigenous communities about the exploitation of women. They then came up with the Revolutionary Laws of Women, which communities throughout Chiapas eventually adopted. Demands that the women put forward included:

- a say in community decision-making;
- freedom to choose a romantic partner;
- that women decide the number of children they will bear; and
- greater opportunities to pursue an education.



More than anything, the indigenous women of Chiapas wanted an end to poverty, and to gender-based violence (GBV). That's why theirs is such an important story. The women of the Zapatista movement created a new path for poor women. As activists, many of the indigenous women felt empowered. They felt a sense of freedom after leaving their homes, and their traditional gender roles, to join the rebellion. After the 1994 uprising, stories of women leaders and how their traditional gender roles within the family had changed inspired many other women.

### **New women's organisations emerged**

Because of indigenous women taking action, many communities in Chiapas for the first time had access to health care and health education. New women's organisations were created to fight for justice and resist oppression. One of those organisations was Fray Pedro de la Nada Committee for Human Rights. It was started shortly after the 1994 uprising to train indigenous people about their fundamental rights. Pascuala Perez Gutierrez and Margarita Vasquez Boloma worked with the Fray Pedro de la Nada Committee.

Perez Gutierrez said that after the Zapatista rebellion, she and other indigenous women began to organise and educate themselves about their rights. They did this because there were no spaces for women to organise, to participate, and to be valued.

Vasquez Boloma was a younger woman and grew up in the Zapatista community of Nueva Jerusalén. She is a trainer with Fray Pedro. She educates both women and men in workshops as part of a 14-month gender equality education programme. The women in the Zapatista movement realised the importance of educating and organising both women and men around women's issues.

Vasquez Boloma believes the workshops are necessary to give women the means to defend themselves. She said that although violence against women was widespread, through training, women learn to defend themselves.

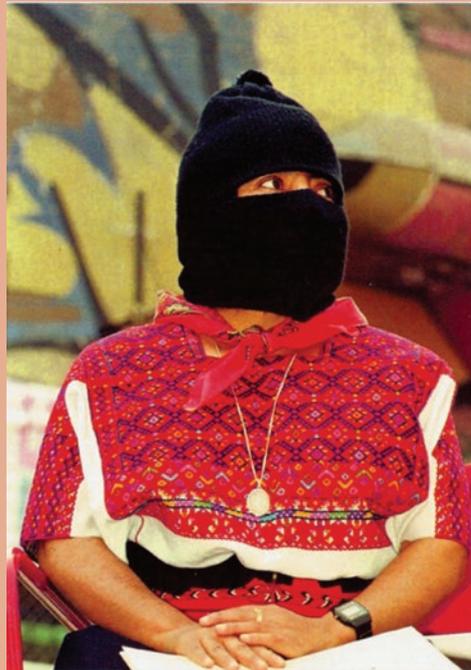
Both Perez Gutierrez and Vasquez Boloma said some men had mixed reactions to women receiving the training. Some men didn't like the idea of women defending themselves. They felt threatened. And they thought it put 'bad' ideas in the heads of women. The trainers saw the same reaction over and over again. When they held a workshop and a woman spoke, the men didn't respect her. Some men believed that only men should have a say. But other men in the workshops supported women being empowered.



## Meet Comandanta Ramona

Like many indigenous women, Ramona left home in search of work. She experienced the challenging differences between rural life and town life. She saw that there was an imbalance: indigenous women had it harder. She decided to join the Zapatistas to make life better for rural people, especially rural women. Comandanta Romana went on to oversee the military leadership of the Zapatista in the town of San Cristóbal, an area they controlled.

In February 1994, the Zapatistas called a cease-fire to the twelve-day-long uprising. Ramona was the first woman Zapatista representative to speak during the peace talks with the government. Two years later, when the Mexican authorities forbade the Zapatistas from participating in the National Indigenous Congress in Mexico City, Ramona was in poor health. But she agreed to address a crowd of 100 000 supporters in Mexico City's main square.



Comandanta Ramona  
Source: Heriberto Rodriguez, Creative Commons



Source: Nathan Gibbs. [flic.kr/p/3eMx1h](https://www.flic.kr/p/3eMx1h), Creative Commons

Comandanta Ramona dedicated her life to the struggles of the poor women of Mexico, and the world. She died while still quite young, and is celebrated throughout her country and the world. She holds a special place in the hearts of indigenous people. In the streets of Mexico, it is common to find the vendors selling Comandanta Ramona hand-crafted dolls. It remains an important symbol that marks the great struggles of the Zapatista women.

## Mexico in recent times: Men continue to harm their partners

What Lesvia Entzin Gomez's husband did to her helps us understand the all-too-common life experience of indigenous women in Mexico.<sup>1</sup>

Because a rain storm was coming, Entzin Gomes had to return to her mother-in-law's home. But she returned without the apples she had earlier left to cut. Her drunk and angry husband, Jorge Navarro Hernandez, pulled out a shotgun. Entzin said she did not think her husband had a bullet in the shotgun. She thought he was pretending. He pointed the weapon at her. She heard a loud bang. Jorge shot her in the face and eyes. He made his wife, a 24-year-old mother of three children, blind. She suffered from headaches and dizziness from then on. Her husband was jailed, but his relatives threatened her. They caused her to be in constant fear for her life.

### Gomez found the courage within her

Entzin Gomez found the courage to tell her story at a news conference nearly eight months after her husband shot and blinded her. She kept her eyes downcast as she spoke and partially covered her face with a grey woven shawl. Her scars were still visible; she moved slowly. She had a companion to help her. Entzin spoke about how she and her children were suffering. Their meals consisted of only mealies and beans. Government officials failed Entzin Gomez and her children. They left her deprived of the essential rights that allow people to live with dignity.



Lesvia Entzin Gómez  
Photograph: Laurie Liles

### Men's violence against their partners is common

Thirty percent of women in Chiapas state aged 15 and older were victims of domestic violence in 2011. This is what Mexico's National Survey on the Dynamics of Relationships in the Household found. Entzin Gomez's story is a shocking example of the damage men cause women. What Entzin lived through is what many women still endure at the hands of men in Mexico, and in many parts of the world.

### Political education to empower women

In 2016, inspired by the Zapatista rebellion, women started a nongovernmental organisation called Fases de la Luna, which means Phases of the Moon. It is made up of women from the city of Las Margaritas. Fases de la Luna promotes political education to empower women to resist violence. They promote alternative, feminist practices as another way for indigenous people to live their lives.

Members of Fases de la Luna also support three other women's groups in Las Margaritas. These groups participate in and influence neighbourhood councils. Their aim is to create joint strategies with other women and men to fight violence in their communities.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from [Chiapas women work toward a 'life free of violence' | Chiapas: State of Revolution \(asu.edu\)](#)

While helping local women to organise for the defence of their territories, Fases de la Luna identified the need to join forces with organised women from other areas. It was important to weave a community network of women interested in preventing violence. They knew there is power in numbers. So, in 2017, they began to meet with organised women from the neighbouring towns of Comitán and Trinitaria.

They found that femicide was rife in those regions. Femicide is when a man murders a woman simply because she is a woman. The murder is also sometimes linked to the sexual orientation and/or the gender status of their victim. For example, they could be lesbian, bisexual, or transwomen. Femicide is a gender-based hate crime.

Fases de la Luna joined forces with a men's group, Hombres G. The men's group created spaces with indigenous and rural men to reflect on their beliefs of male superiority and domination. Political, religious and moral authorities also attend the meetings. In this way, influential women's voices could gain allies in educating for men's behaviour change.

## Talking points

- Discuss the value we can gain in building our organisations and movements when we learn about feminist struggles in other countries.
- Why do you think boys and men commit acts of gender-based violence? Remembering, of course, that there may be reasons for it, but that there is NO excuse for abusing other people.
- Share your own knowledge about international feminist struggles.
- Come up with ideas for how you can grow your knowledge about feminist struggles around the world.



### Activity 1: Research feminist struggles in other countries

**You need** access to the internet, resources about feminist struggles around the world, and materials that will help with doing a presentation.

**Step 1:** Arrange yourselves into small groups of three or four. Look at a map of the world, either in this book, or online. Choose a country you would like to find out more about regarding its feminist struggles.

**Step 2:** Using the internet and other sources, do research, including looking at photographs and illustrations. Create a short presentation about that country's feminist struggles. Include:

- The name of the country, and where it is in the world.
- The specific demands that were taken up.
- The challenges activists faced and strategies they used to overcome them.
- What they gained and how they gained it.
- Whether they have been able to sustain their gains, and if yes, how.
- If they were not able to sustain their gains, who and what stood in their way.

**Step 3:** After each group's presentation, discuss what you have learned from it, and whether we can adapt any strategies for achieving women's equality and equity in our organisations and movements.

**Step 4:** Build international solidarity. Come up with practical ideas for how you can build a network with feminist organisations and movements around the world.



### Activity 2: Feminist learning circles

**Step 1:** We have learnt from stories in this book about how important it is to be curious, to think critically, and to always keep learning. We can learn from listening to other people's experiences, we can learn from reading, watching videos, the radio and TV programmes. And we can learn from sharing our own stories and listening to people's responses. Share ways in which you keep learning and growing, and any interesting articles, radio or TV programmes, podcasts or books you have read.

**Step 2:** Consider the possibility of starting a regular in-person or online learning circle, either with this group of activists, or in your organisation or movement. If you already have one, tell everyone how it operates.

**Step 3:** On a piece of paper or a voice message, write three things you would most like to learn more about.

**Step 4:** Share what you have written or said. Those of you who have written similar topics, get together and chat for about five minutes.

**Step 5:** Each one teach one. Share ideas for how you can spread what you learn to many more people.



### Activity 3: I dream of travelling to...

**Step 1:** It's important to dream and set goals. If money was no problem, where in the world would you like to visit? Write the name of that place on a piece of paper. Don't write your name on it. Put it into a container.

**Step 2:** Shake up all the pieces of paper in the container. Then each comrade takes one out. Take turns to read the name of the country on the piece of paper you have in your hand. Everyone must try to guess who wrote it!

**Step 3:** As each person's dream destination is revealed, ask them why they would love to go there, and maybe if there is anyone they would like to take with them on their trip, or whether they would prefer to go on their own.

**Step 3:** Turn to the person next to you and give them an affirmation and a wish for them about their dream.

# “I am not the guilty one!” – a Chilean women’s cry



“The patriarchy is a judge, that judges us for being born and our punishment is the violence that you don’t see.”

These are the words that the women of Chile chant when they gather to protest gender-based violence. The words are part of the protest performance called *A Rapist in Your Path*. But the performance is more than just a protest. It has become a symbol of the essential part Chilean women played in the struggle for a new society. It places their demands for an end to all types of patriarchal domination at the very centre of the struggle.

## Protesting men’s violence against women

*A Rapist in Your Path* was made popular during the protests against social inequality in Chile in 2019 and 2020. Large groups of women from all sections of Chilean society performed it: young and old, rich and poor, rural and urban, indigenous people and those of Spanish descent.

The women who perform *A Rapist in Your Path* accuse the system of patriarchal rule of being responsible for men’s violence against women. More than just condemning rape and other kinds of gender-based violence, it draws our attention to how the power of men is deeply rooted and dominates women’s lives.

From 1973 to 1990, military generals led by Augusto Pinochet imposed a dictatorship on Chile’s people. Then, violence, including rape, was widely used as a type of torture against Chileans resisting their rule. Life under the dictatorship was very hard for poor and working class people, and continued under the new government that replaced the rule by the generals. Women and the Mapuché indigenous people especially bore the brunt of rising prices, unemployment, cuts in social services, and violence.

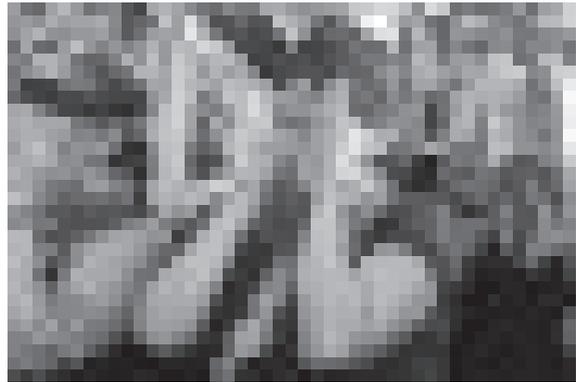
Chilean women refused to be victims. They put together *A Rapist in your Path*, so that we never forget the violence they were subjected to. The idea to develop the protest performance came from a group of four feminist artists from the Chilean city of Valparaiso. They’re known as *Las Tesis*.

Videos of the protest performance went viral around the world. In many countries, women began to adapt *A Rapist in your Path* to their own situations, and perform it. Through their work, *Las Tesis* wants to hold the state, the police, the judges and the courts accountable for the violence that is perpetuated against women.

The constitution that the dictatorship left behind had barely changed. Chile's democracy protests of 2019 and 2020 were part of citizen mobilisation to draw up a new constitution. The new constitution includes a chapter on women. The cabinet of the newly elected Chilean president consists of 14 women and 10 men, with women holding leading portfolios traditionally associated with male power, including the ministries of the interior, foreign affairs, defence and justice.

The most powerful protest performance was when participants performed it wearing blindfolds. They did this to symbolise the brutality of the security forces who suppressed the protests.

When they perform *A Rapist in your Path*, the women squat three times. They are recalling a type of torture the security forces used. They forced women to strip naked and then searched their bodies. The blindfolds and the squatting directly condemn the Chilean police for their history of claiming to protect women while using violence against them. Before the government of Gabriel Boric was elected in March 1922, the Chilean police still used this torture.

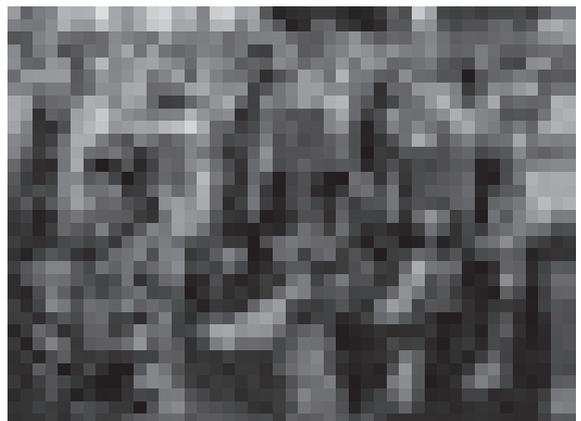


Source: Paulo Slachevsky, Creative Commons

On one occasion, a student protester lost a part of her lower lip when she was struck in the face by a gas canister during the demonstrations. The police were known to deliberately target the faces of demonstrators, and many suffered eye injuries from the brutal tactics used against them.

One of the founders of *Las Tesis* says when women perform the movements and chants, they are expressing their pain. This is what makes the performances so powerful, and what gives the women the energy to do them.

"I am not the guilty one," the chant goes. "Not because of where I'm from or how I'm dressed."  
"The rapist is you!" the women shout and fling their arms forward to point in front of them.



Source: Paulo Slachevsky, Creative Commons

On their website, the women of the *Las Tesis* collective say:

“They want us to stay in the kitchen, performing only domestic tasks, out of sight and silenced. They do not want us in public life ...They want to make us return to that place of subordination to which we have been confined.”

Paula Stangé is responsible for the group’s creative and digital design. She said that when the police and legal system fail to protect women, it is an abuse of power. She said the system tries to criminalise their art and activism, instead of the institutions that violate them. By this the women of *Las Tesis* mean the court and the judges who punish demonstrators. They deny people the right to use artistic expression as a way to understand and criticise the violence they have been forced to live with.

Daffné Vargas is a member of *Las Tesis*. She says they wanted to stage their first performances in public places, such as police stations. The chant continues:

*“Sleep calmly, innocent girl  
Without worrying about the bandit,  
Over your dreams smiling and sweet,  
watches your loving cop.”*

These lyrics mock the Chilean police’s claim to be protecting women when they use sexual violence against female demonstrators in their custody.

## Using feminist theory

The development of the performance grew out of *Las Tesis* members reading and understanding feminist theory.

*Las Tesis* want to demonstrate to women that they have the capability to understand feminist writing and theory, even if it can sometimes seem difficult to read. They try to encourage women to use feminist analysis and feminist struggle methods. They gave themselves the name *Las Tesis* because it means ‘The Theses’. A lot of their work is inspired by academic theory.

To develop the piece, *Las Tesis*, working with other women and gender-based violence activist nongovernmental organisations, researched sexual violence in their country. This included looking at the way the media report on sexual violence. They also gathered information about their local context to include in their performance.

*Las Tesis* established itself as a collective; all four members take responsibility together for the group’s creative efforts. This way, all the members feel valued, and collaborate creatively. Lea Díaz, who takes care of costume creation for *Las Tesis*, was asked why performing *A Rapist in your Path* had such great appeal for the women of Chile and elsewhere. She said that, firstly, women everywhere experience gender-based violence, or the threat of it. The chant speaks directly and powerfully to their reality. Secondly, the chant and the performance can be heard, seen and performed and other women can easily adapt it for their own performances.

Wherever they adapt and perform it, women connect the protest performance to their local context. Barbara Astudillo participated in a spontaneous performance at an environmental protest in Santiago, Chile's capital. Afterwards, at a local discussion in her home town, she said that for her feminism is connected to struggles over water rights where she lives. The struggle inspired by *Las Tesis'* work excites her when she thinks that all over the world, so many women can express themselves.

## Feminists unite

In May 2020, *Las Tesis* and members of the Russian feminist group Pussy Riot, released a new song. The new song condemns police violence against women in Latin America. It also attacks those responsible for the rise of levels of domestic violence since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The song is also critical of the economic inequalities that contribute to many poor workers dying because they cannot get adequate public health care.

A member of the Pussy Riot said that *Las Tesis'* performances in public spaces show how art can be more about changing the world than just entertainment. She says their work is important because almost all societies blame and shame survivors of sexual violence, instead of tackling the real problem, the perpetrators.

*And it was not my fault or where I was or how I dressed  
And it was not my fault or where I was or how I dressed  
The rapist was you  
The rapist is you  
The judges  
The state  
The president.*

If you'd like to see a video performance of *A Rapist in your Path*, you will find one on YouTube. There's also a link to it on ILRIG's website on the Building Women's Power page: [www.ilrig.org.za](http://www.ilrig.org.za).

## Talking points

- Watch the performance of *A Rapist in Your Path*, and share your thoughts and how it made you feel. Watch it again. This time, follow the movements and the chants. What did this feel like for you?
- One of the women mentioned attended an environmental protest about water rights in her community. In what ways do you think women and girls are affected by the climate crisis? Is the burden equally shared by men?
- Chilean artists combined forces with Russian artists to spread their message. Are there any international organisations or movements you have learnt about that you would like to collaborate with, or that you think you and your organisation can learn from? Write down the names of these organisations, and split into groups to see if you can find out how to contact them.



### Activity 1: A victim is not the criminal

A member of the Pussy Riot said almost all societies blame and shame survivors of sexual violence, instead of tackling the real problem, the perpetrators.

**Step 1:** What questions do people often ask, or what statements do people often make, that puts the blame on the survivor of gender-based violence, including verbal violence. Re-read the words: *And it was not my fault or where I was or how I dressed.*

**Step 2:** Write victim-blaming questions and statements on chart paper. And then re-write them in a way that puts the blame on the perpetrator.

**Step 3:** Come up with a media strategy to make people aware of victim-blaming and how to challenge it.



## Activity 2: Share your messages

**Step 1:** On your own or in a group, write a poem or chant about issues women face in your community. Include body movements to strengthen how you express your poem or chant.

**Step 2:** Practise it and then perform your protest performance for the whole group. Give and receive comradely feedback to help strengthen each performance.

**Step 3:** Discuss if, how, where and when you could do more performances, including more comrades from your own organisations. Your protest performance can change and grow as time goes by.



## Activity 3: Protection. What protection?

One of the biggest problems the Chilean women face is the violence from police and other institutions that are meant to protect them. This is a major problem in many parts of the world.

**Step 1:** Discuss whether you think police officers, soldiers and the legal system protect women in your community and province. How do, or don't they?

**Step 2:** What needs to happen to stop police, soldiers and the justice system committing gender-based harm?

**Step 3:** Compile a resource list of helplines, people and places, including government organisations that support women in the struggle for gender justice. Share knowledge about them. For example, does a women's shelter struggle to get funding?

**Step 4:** Consider ways, including social media, of passing on helpful organisations for women.

# The Abeokuta Women's Union in Nigeria



In the late 1940s, the Abeokuta Women's Union in Nigeria played an important role in resisting colonial taxation and traditional leaders' abuse of power.

Women's contributions to fighting injustices are often unrecognised; they are not taught in schools, and women are generally silenced. What we are taught instead is that women must be submissive. We are told that "the struggle" is a place for men. But history shows us otherwise. Women all over the world have always resisted their exploitation and oppression.

This story begins in the early 1900s, in Abeokuta, Ogun state, in southwest Nigeria. At this time, European colonisation was in full swing all through Africa. European nations had divided the African continent amongst themselves. They did this to extract resources from the land and use African people's labour for their own gain. The British colonised Nigeria in 1844. However, for a long time, they struggled to assert their control over Abeokuta. The Egba people, who live in this area, resisted. They managed to stay in control of their own economy for many decades.

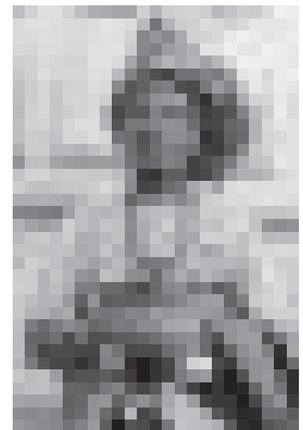
But eventually, the colonial government took control over Abeokuta. They installed a new Egba United Government made up of only men. Before this, the area was governed by local councils which included women.

The government was appointed to do the dirty work of the colonisers — to try to make as much money as they could from the people of Abeokuta. They tried different ways of making money, such as introducing new fines and taxes. The people resisted, but they were unable to get rid of the tax. Women in particular were furious about being taxed because they were not even represented in the new government. They had no say in matters which affected their lives. They were also angry at the government of men who agreed to represent the interests of the colonisers over the interests of the Egba people.

## The Abeokuta Ladies' Club

In 1944, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti formed the Abeokuta Ladies' Club. She was a teacher at a local school.

It was an exclusive club, with educated, middle-class women from the area. They focused on the issues that concerned them, such as handcraft, charity work, and motherhood. This was not really a radical organisation because it did not appeal to the majority of women, such as the women who worked at the markets. The Ladies Club didn't address their issues.



Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti  
Source: UNESCO, Creative Commons



Abeokuta Women's Union.

Source: Women in African History: an E-Learning Tool, UNESCO, Creative Commons

At the time, working-class women were struggling. It was World War II, and people in the colonies suffered. Women working in the markets in Abeokuta had to deal with food shortages and price controls. The police also confiscated their rice and other goods to give to the soldiers.

When the women in the Abeokuta Ladies' Club found out about this, they recognised it as unjust. They realised that their organisation should serve the needs of all women. They came to the conclusion that if anything in Abeokuta was going to change, market women needed to be included. They knew that there was great power in working-class and middle-class women coming together to fight against colonialism and patriarchy. And so, the Abeokuta Ladies' Club became the Abeokuta Women's Union.

### **Uniting to fight injustice**

The women's union quickly mobilised to fight the police's confiscations. They wrote to newspapers to raise awareness about their struggle. They held large protests against the Alake, who was the local chief appointed to serve the colonial authorities. As a result of their actions, the confiscations were finally ended. This was a huge victory for the Abeokuta Women's Union!

Funmilayo provided training to members at the school where she worked. Women learned to read and write. They also learnt about strategies and tactics for organising. They learned to call their protests 'picnics' or 'festivals' because they could not get permits to protest. They learned how to protect themselves when tear gas was thrown at them, and they learned how to throw the tear gas back at the police in self-defence.

But the Abeokuta Women's Union faced a problem. The women started to come late, or even worse, stopped showing up for the training sessions. The union soon discovered that the situation at the market was getting worse. Tax officials were harassing, beating and arresting women. That's when they decided enough is enough! The Abeokuta Women's Union started to organise against the tax.

They decided to refuse to pay any taxes. Many women were jailed and fined because of this. But that did not stop them. In late 1946, the women wrote petitions against the Alake. A delegation of women met with the Alake but this did not change anything. In fact, the Alake, with the support of the British, increased the tax for women.

### Successfully sitting on a man

The Abeokuta Women's Union were enraged. They took to the streets. They held a mass march to the Alake's home in October 1946. They demanded an end to the tax. But the colonial authorities came down hard on the women. They beat them and they used tear gas to disperse the protest. The women did not give up. They continued protesting, petitioning, and writing to newspapers.

In November 1947, the women once again marched to the Alake's home. It is estimated that over 10 000 women participated. The protest lasted for two days. Protestors took food and water. They sang protest songs, chanted and danced through the night. They wanted to intimidate and frighten the Alake. They sang lyrics like, "For a long time — YOU HAVE USED YOUR PENIS as a mark of authority...Today we reverse the order...O you men TODAY, vaginas will seek their vengeance."



Source: ILRIG

Gathering like this outside a man's home is called 'sitting on a man'. It is an organising tactic Nigerian women used to scare and shame men who mistreat women.' Sitting on a man' continues until he offers an apology and agrees to change his ways.

The women repeated this type of protest in December 1947. They refused to leave the home of the Alake until those who had been jailed for refusing to pay tax were released. The women were released! The Abeokuta Women's Union continued to push for an end to the colonial tax. They also demanded that the Alake step down. They were such an influential and powerful organising force that men in the community joined the protests in solidarity with the women.

The women's persistence eventually paid off. In April 1948, the tax on women was suspended, and women were once again allowed to participate in the local government. Four women were elected onto the council in 1949. The Alake was forced into exile and formally stepped down.

Some of these gains did not last. The tax on women was eventually brought back. The Alake once again returned to power. However, the women continued to put pressure on the colonial and traditional leadership in the years to follow.

## Learning from the Abeokuta Women's Union

There is a lot that we can learn from the determination of these powerful women and how they organised. The Abeokuta Women's Union was a highly effective organisation. It grew fast and had a membership of 20 000. The women paid a fee for their membership, which assisted with the paying for the cost of running the organisation. They had a detailed constitution to make sure that the organisation remained accountable to its membership.

The aims of the Abeokuta Women's Union, detailed in their constitution were:

- To protect and preserve the rights of women in Egbaland;
- To encourage mass education among all women members through providing literacy classes;
- To draw together women of all classes and cultural backgrounds;
- To support any organisation fighting for the economic and political independence of the Nigerian people, or of any oppressed group of people; and
- To become a national organisation.

They resisted cultural, ethnic and language divisions and expanded to other areas of Nigeria. They organised based on women's mutual struggles. In 1949, the Abeokuta Women's Union became the Nigerian Women's Union. It was able to mobilise up to 100 000 people nationwide. These women and their organisation provided a model for women's organisations in other parts of Africa, as well as China and the Soviet Union.

## Talking points

- ➔ Share what you found interesting in the story. Say why, if you thought there was anything your organisation could learn from the Abeokuta Women's Union.
- ➔ Many of the taxes and fines implemented in Abeokuta in the 1940s mainly affected women. Are there any ways that women and girls today are taxed, or negatively discriminated against in some way that men are not? If so, give examples and ask if it is fair? Explain why you say so.
- ➔ What do you think of the union's tactic of 'sitting on a man'? Could you use it in your activist work?
- ➔ Women's political organisations often play an important role in developing democratic systems. Do you know of any women's organisations working this way? Share any organisations you know, and as a group, collect their contact information. Share the contacts you have compiled with all members of the workshop. You could network with them.



### Activity 1: Men's role in supporting feminist struggles

The Abeokuta Women's Union was so influential that men in the community supported them and participated in their protests. In groups, discuss these questions and then report back to the big group.

- What is your experience of men supporting women in your community and organisations?
- What is your experience of men standing in the way in your community and organisations?
- In what ways would you like to see men demonstrating their support for women-specific struggles and women's organisations?
- Do you think men have a place in these types of organisations? If yes, why? If no, why?



### Activity 2: The power of song

The Nigerian women activists sang songs and danced while protesting. Songs often help get our message listened to.

**Step 1:** If you know any songs that protest patriarchal power, share them, sing them!

**Step 2:** In small groups, write a protest song or poem that focuses on patriarchy, or women's liberation. Protest songs can be easy to learn and remember, and often have lots of repetition. Find things you can use as musical instruments, such as a container.

**Step 3:** Sing your song for everyone, and teach them the words.

**Step 4:** Think of places you could perform them, and share ideas on how to plan performances.



### Activity 3: Spread the messages in your community, organisations and movements

**Note:** This activity is for you to do after the workshop.

- 1) Share your favourite protest songs from the workshop with people in your life. Teach it to them and sing it together. Discuss what you are protesting about, and gain support for the struggle for women's rights.
- 2) Tell both women and men you know about 'sitting on a man'. Ask them whether they think it would be effective in their communities, and why. What violations would they use it for? Later, reflect on whether women and men had different responses, and where they did, try to explain why you think they responded the way they did.



# Checkout activity



## Activity 1: How are you feeling?

We have come to the end of our workshop. Let's do a check-in and reflect on what it has done, or not done for us, and also how you are feeling about it.

**Step 1:** Using the rules for freewriting, write for 10 minutes on: 'This workshop has made me feel...'

**Step 2:** Share how this freewriting made you feel. Remember, not what you wrote privately.



## Activity 2: You matter

There are many resources on the internet, in magazines and advice from friends about self-care.

**Step 1:** Share tips for how you care for your wellbeing: your physical, intellectual, emotional, mental and social wellbeing. Spend some time demonstrating tips, such as meditation, yoga breathing, affirmations and how you get physical exercise and have fun socially.

**Step 2:** Our facilitator will demonstrate, or invite someone to demonstrate, some elements of mindful breathing, focusing the mind on something pleasurable and restful postures.

**Step 3:** Celebrate and appreciate each other! Hugs, songs, dancing — whatever will help you leave the workshop feeling happy, affirmed and relaxed.

# Explanation of concepts

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## What do we mean by patriarchy?

Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold power and dominate over everyone else. Often the system of patriarchy is allowed to continue because we are taught from when we are born in our religious spaces, at school, in our homes and in our workplaces that it is 'normal' or 'natural' for men to have power over women. We can see it play out in our lives, from being told that women's role is to cook, clean and look after children, that women can only have specific types of jobs like a secretary, or that women must wear specific types of clothing. But patriarchy is not 'natural' or 'normal' and at different times in history societies have not separated people into 'men' and 'women' and given some groups power over the other. Patriarchy must be challenged along with other systems of power that lead to violence and inequality.

## Understanding power

It is difficult to understand patriarchy without understanding power. When we talk about power we mean the level of control a group of people or a person has over other people and resources. Power can change – it is exercised in the social, economic and political relations between individuals and groups. Power under systems like patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism is also unequally distributed; some individuals and groups have greater control over the sources of power, while others have little or none. Unequal power is sustained and continued through social divisions like gender, age, caste, class, ethnicity, race, and location, as well as through institutions like the family, religion, education, media, the law, government.

## What do we mean by race and racism?

Race is a way of dividing people into groups based on physical characteristics, like skin colour, hair texture and ethnicity. The apartheid government argued that race was biological, and that it was natural for people to be separated into racial groups. The truth is that race is a social construct – this means that it is artificial, made up by people, and not based on scientific evidence. There is no real reason for people to be divided into these groups. Racism is when certain groups are seen as superior and have the power to discriminate against and exploit the other groups. Because land and wealth are still divided along racial lines, with white people holding the most and black people holding the least, racism continues to operate. The majority black population in South Africa live in areas with poor service delivery that are far from jobs, quality schools and healthcare. This creates a cycle of poverty that is very difficult to escape from. We must also think about how racism and patriarchy operate together, so that even amongst racially oppressed groups ('African', 'coloured' and 'Indian'), women suffer most. They are not only oppressed because of their race and class, but also because of their gender.

## What do we mean by capitalism?

Capitalism is an economic system where the wealth of society, such as the money, farms, mines, factories, banks etc., is privately owned and controlled for the benefit of a small group of people (the rich/ ruling class). Under this system, the majority of people (the poor and working class) have no access to these resources. They own nothing except their ability to work, and have to sell their labour in order to survive. For capitalists to make money, they have to compete with other capitalists who are producing the same thing. This means that they have to keep their costs low so they can sell their products for low prices. This is why capitalists pay low wages – so they can make as much

profit for themselves as possible. This is why the poor get poorer and the rich get richer, Workers are exploited for their labour in this way – they do not get to enjoy the wealth that they help to create because wealth is privately owned under capitalism.

## What is feminism?

There are many different types of feminism, and there have been many debates and disagreements between feminist groups throughout history about how to define and practice feminism. This is why it can be difficult to define feminism – there are many definitions! However, feminism can be broadly understood as a political movement which challenges patriarchy. For some, feminism is about women being equal to men, having greater representation of women in leadership, and helping women succeed within the capitalist system by changing laws and policies. This is called liberal feminism, and usually only benefits privileged and wealthy women. For others, feminism is about putting an end to patriarchal systems of inequality. It is not about having the same power as men because they understand that within the systems of capitalism and patriarchy, this power comes from violence, oppression and inequality. Feminism cannot just be about putting women in positions of power or having more representation of women, because women can also uphold and reinforce patriarchy. These feminists argue that we need to disrupt patriarchal power and fight for a completely different world. This is the position of radical feminism. There are many more kinds of feminism, including within the categories of liberal and radical feminism. This workbook embraces a radical definition of feminism and draws lessons from radical feminist principles and practices.

## Some misconceptions about feminism

### “Feminists want a system of female domination”

Feminism is not about having the power to oppress men; it is about equality and ending the harm and violence caused by patriarchy. Feminism is against all forms of domination.

### “Feminists hate men”

While feminists may criticise men who refuse to recognise their privilege, who refuse to be held accountable for their actions, or are violent and abusive towards women, feminism is not about hating men. Most feminists organise alongside men as comrades, and have loving relationships with men. Many men consider themselves feminists. In reality, feminism promotes love in its struggle to end patriarchy. Feminists ask, “How do we get rid of a system that is based on unequal power, punishment, violence and war? How do we build new systems based on love, power-sharing and collective care?”

### “Only women can be feminists”

It is not true that feminism is only for women. Feminism is for people of all genders, including men. As feminist author bell hooks states, “Without male allies in struggle, the feminist movement will not progress.” She argues that patriarchy also harms men: “Patriarchy as a system has denied males access to full emotional well-being...To truly address male pain and male crisis we must as a nation be willing to expose the harsh reality that patriarchy has damaged men in the past and continues to damage them in the present”. For this reason, and because men hold power within the system of patriarchy, it is also their responsibility and in their interest to fight against it. We must all learn about feminism so that we can all work together to end the violence of patriarchy. Feminism is for everybody.

### “Feminism is a Western invention”/ “Feminism is unAfrican”

Many people try to discourage women from learning about feminism by arguing that patriarchy never existed in African cultures and societies, or that the concept of feminism was imported from Europe and the USA. They argue

that, for these reasons, feminism is unnecessary or unsuitable in the African context. While it is true that the word 'feminism' was coined in the West, there are many examples throughout history of African women organising against patriarchy in ways that can be considered feminist, long before the word itself was introduced to the continent. African feminists have always existed, and have actually challenged the ways that Western feminists have made their struggles invisible and have failed to see that patriarchy works hand in hand with racism, colonialism and capitalism. Saying that feminism belongs to the West ignores the important contributions to the fight against patriarchy by women in Africa and all over the world.

### **“Women who bring up feminism are being divisive”**

This statement is used particularly within activist organisations against women who try to talk about their experiences of patriarchy. The argument is that feminism causes divisions within movements, prevents unity of the working class, and is a distraction against a 'common' struggle (e.g. against racism or capitalism). When people use this argument, they are actually saying that women should keep quiet about their struggles and endure violence, and that men should not be held accountable for their actions. Patriarchy and sexism is what really causes divisions and breaks down movements! If we do not hold each other accountable and end violence in our own movements now, how will we create a society without these problems in the future? In the same way that feminism will not be successful in the struggle to end patriarchy without the involvement of men, any movement will not be successful in reaching its goals if it ignores, intimidates and excludes women. If we want a society in which everyone is safe and equal, we need to recognise that the struggle against patriarchy is indeed a common struggle.

### **The personal is political**

This is a feminist slogan which highlights the fact that the personal experiences and suffering of women form part of a broader system of oppression. Feminists use this slogan to help women realise that their personal experiences of violence and abuse can be understood as part of a systemic political problem, which must be challenged collectively. This has helped many women see that they are not to blame for their suffering and abuse, and that they are not alone. The idea that 'the personal is political' has inspired women to form consciousness-raising groups, which are spaces for women to share their experiences, learn from each other, connect their experiences to the broader problem of patriarchy, and come up with strategies to defend themselves and improve their conditions together.

### **Reject gender roles**

Patriarchy tells us that society is divided into men and women, and that there are strict gender roles that must be followed, meaning that men must behave in certain ways and hold certain power, and women must behave in certain ways and should be submissive. Patriarchy also says that if you behave in a way that is different from those expectations, you should be punished or excluded – think about how women who choose not to have children are talked about as if there is something wrong with them, or how men are shamed for liking pink, makeup, dresses or anything that is considered 'feminine' under patriarchy. These roles and expectations are reinforced everywhere, including in the workplace, in unions, cultural institutions, and in the home. But feminism reminds us that gender is a social construct – there is no biological or scientific reason for these different roles and expectations. Feminists reject the false idea that our reproductive organs should determine what we are allowed to do and what we are not allowed to do, and that many people do not fit into the boxes of 'man' and 'woman' as defined by patriarchy. Some examples of how feminists challenge gender roles is through demanding that housework and childcare is shared by men, or by training women activists to chair meetings so that they feel more confident to take up leadership roles in their organisations.

# Glossary

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<b>Feminism</b>	A political movement which challenges patriarchy.
<b>Gender</b>	Gender is a social construct based on different understandings of masculinity and femininity. It can relate to different roles and expectations that are placed on people. Patriarchy says that there are only two genders - man and woman. But because gender is actually socially constructed, its meaning constantly changes depending on how an individual or society defines it. Before colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy, many societies did not use gender as a way to differentiate between people and concepts like men and women didn't exist, while other societies had lots of different gender identities.
<b>Gender roles</b>	The roles and expectations placed on people based on the categories of 'man' and 'woman'. Gender roles are learned and accepted in a given society or community to the extent that certain behaviours, activities, tasks and responsibilities are arbitrarily perceived to be for men or for women. Often those who do not live up to these gender roles and expectations experience violence.
<b>Gender-based violence</b>	Gender-based violence refers to acts of violence directed at a person/group of people because of their gender.
<b>Hierarchy</b>	A system that organises people into different groups and ranks those groups from lowest to highest. Usually, those who are lowest in the hierarchy have the least power and importance, and those at the highest level are the most powerful and important.
<b>Oppression</b>	When power is exercised over people (for example through laws or violence) in an unjust and unfair way.
<b>Patriarchy</b>	A society based on the superiority of men and the domination of men over others through hierarchy and violence.
<b>Sexism</b>	The belief that men are superior. Sexist attitudes are used to justify the domination and oppression of women in a patriarchal society.
<b>Sexual harassment</b>	Behaviour characterised by the making of unwelcome and inappropriate sexual remarks or physical advances in a workplace or other social situation.
<b>Social construct</b>	An idea that has been created by people in a society and is accepted through beliefs, attitudes and institutions.





The International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG) is a support organisation dedicated to research, education, training, the production of popular materials, and the provision of reflective spaces for working class movements in Southern Africa.

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