

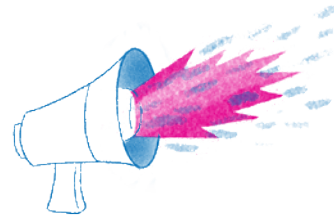
# **DIVERSITY ON COMMON GROUND**

Ten Perspectives  
on Contemporary  
Feminism



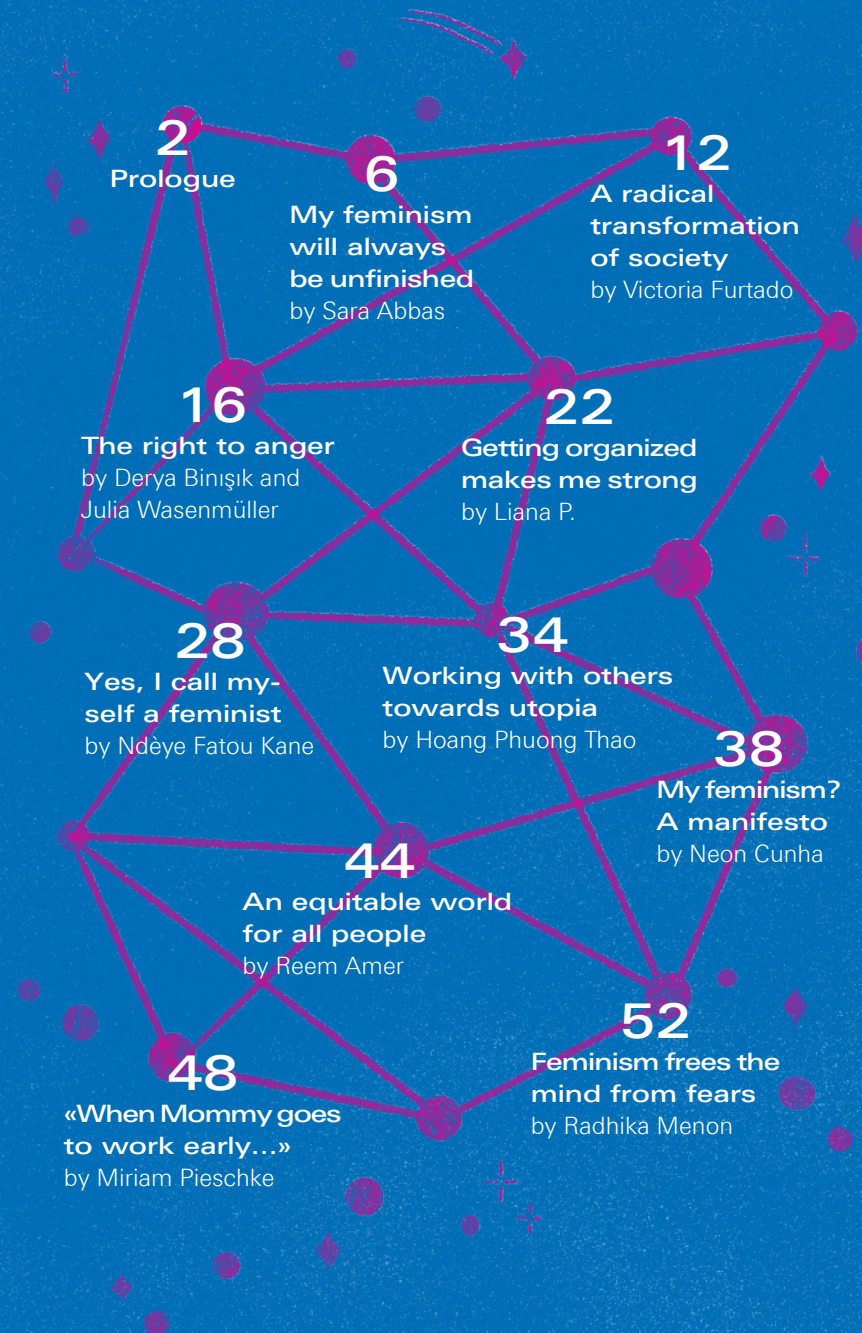
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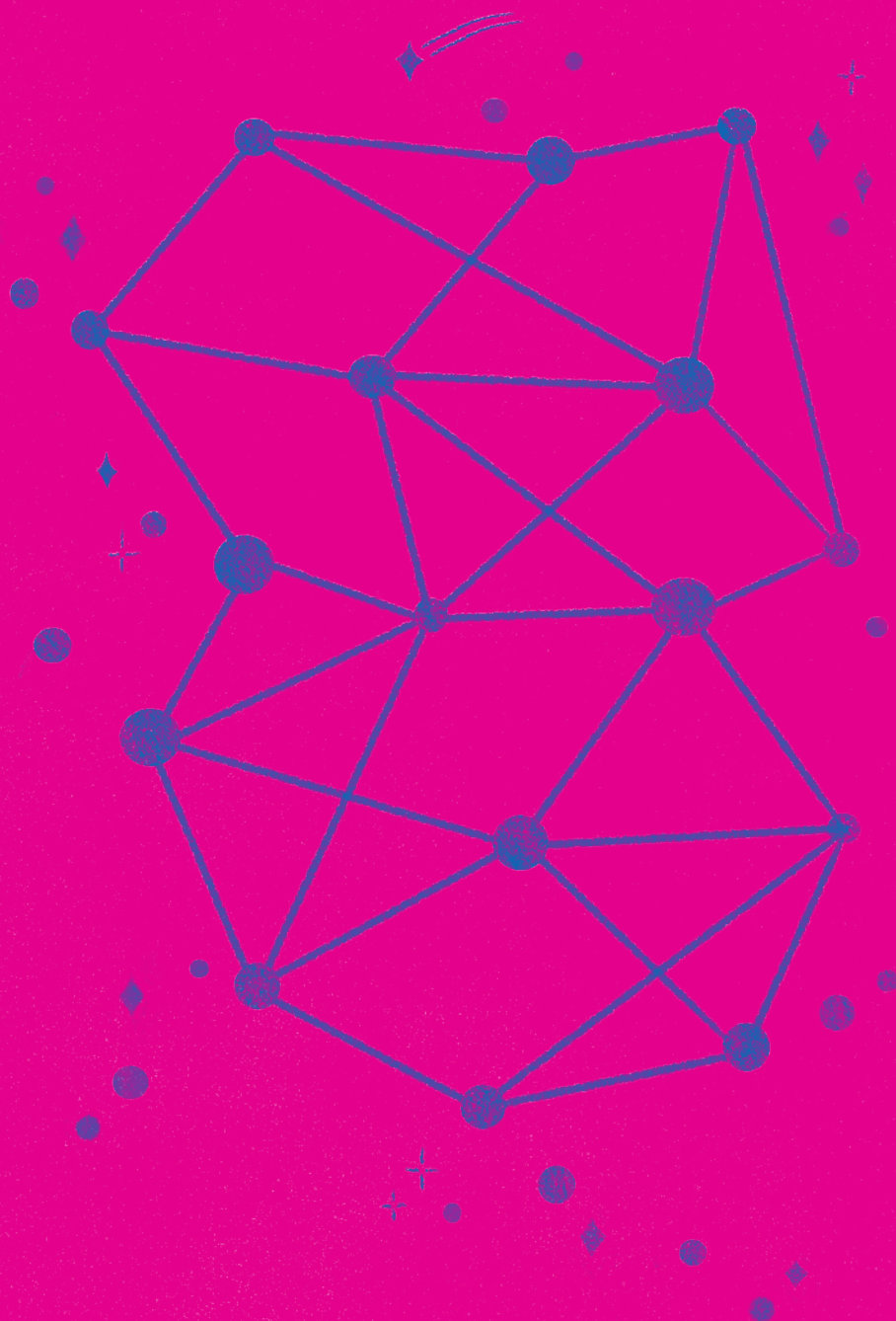




## Content



# Prologue



«**W**hat is your feminism?» It's a question that is not easy to answer, as the contributors to this brochure realized. Though many consider themselves feminists, delving deep into one's own understanding of what that means or what it does not mean goes to the heart of the self. We are therefore very grateful to the eleven womxn who agreed to share their views.

The testimonials were first presented in a workshop at the Feminist Futures Festival which took place in September 2019 in Essen, West Germany. The festival was the first of its size in decades. Over 1,500 people came together, many of whom had already been feminists, while others had their first encounter with feminist debates—and some fell in love with feminism during the event. Many travelled a long way to take part in the festival.

Reckoning that there might be as many feminisms as feminists present at the festival, we wanted to make this diversity visible. Though it is not always easy to abide with differences, it's still a prerequisite to finding out where and how we can find common ground. On this path, we have to get to know and to feel each other and listen to each others' stories if we are to understand where we come from and where we are going. As we recognize our own dreams in the dreams of others, we realize that the distance between us is smaller than we think.

To foster this process, we organized a workshop entitled «Feminist Encounters: Diversity on Common Grounds», and asked womxn from various

parts of the world to give us an insight into their respective struggles and perspectives. It turned out to be a special event, where personal stories were told; a space where the power of the womxn talking was contagious, and which gave an idea of what a feminist utopia could look like: in solidarity with people we do not know, respecting our differences while feeling our commonness.

This booklet thus aims to invite all those who could not be at the workshop to share a bit of that special moment of genuine interest and empathy, which was warm and powerful and highly inspiring.

We learn from Sara Abbas, Sudanese-US-American activist currently living in Berlin, Germany, why her feminism, strongly influenced by her mother, is constantly progressing. Victoria Furtado describes how her collective in Uruguay uses a feminist companionship as political practice and also Derya Binişik and Julia Wasenmüller share ideas grown in a queerfeminist action group in Berlin. A different perspective comes from Liana P. who gives an insight into the harsh reality of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. Local variants such as a Senegalese feminism are necessary for a true transnational feminist solidarity, argues Ndèye Fatou Kane, and Huang Phuong Thao reflects on the necessity of such alliances to combat gender inequalities in Vietnam. Neon Cunha contributes her furious and mourning manifesto for humanity from Brazil, while at the other end of the world, Reem Amer explains her dilemmas of living as an Afro-Palestinian in Israel. Miriam Pieschke searches for the lost

experiences of a womxn's equality specific to the German Democratic Republic, and Radhika Menon explains how in the Indian context of a power system built on caste, state, and capitalism, feminism forms her critical quest for freedom. Thoughtfully illustrated by Patu from Berlin, this booklet is a beautiful encounter of diverse commonalities.

The authors' experiences, the inspiration they drew and continue to draw from others, and the alliances they seek may vary. But what becomes clear in each of these ten perspectives on feminism is that while all those differences exist and might at times be painful, all are also searching and struggling for a world where every person feels safe and lives in dignity. Even if some struggles seem at first to be far away from each other, activists who might never have met in person refer to one another. Concepts, instruments, slogans, and recently, dances, cross all kinds of borders and are adopted and adapted in the different contexts where feminists are active. With augmenting speed, feminist messages spread all over the world and show that there is a transnational movement growing, in which we all are able to recognize ourselves, for the struggles of others are also our own.

Franza Drechsel & Caroline Kim, Berlin, January 2020

We use the word womxn to reflect in written language the fact that there exist many varieties of female identified bodies outside heteronormative gender roles.



Sara Abbas

MY FEMINISM WILL  
ALWAYS BE UNFINISHED

**M**y feminism is a work in progress. There has been no single moment of arrival or of epiphany, but multiple ones that have set me on new paths.

One thing that I've learned is not just what my feminism is about, but what it rejects. I reject feminisms that strip away gender and sex from their relationship(s) to other forms of structural violence. Gender oppression so often intersects with other forms of oppression that it really baffles me when self-professed feminists understand sexism but fail to understand racism, or how the two build on and feed off each another. Many feminists speak of intersectionality, but don't actually engage with it in their practice. While I understand that there are multiple feminisms, —probably as many as there are feminists—as a political project, feminism can only be emancipatory if it is also anti-racist and anti-capitalist—and it has to be so in its practices, not just its discourses. This is a hard job for all of us, myself included, but it is necessary, because womxn don't experience the world in discrete boxes. And also because intersectionality has become increasingly detached from its radical roots in the African-American feminist tradition, where it was born as part of an emancipatory project.

My feminism has at its heart a recognition that colonialism, settler colonialism, imperialism, and the enslavement of Africans radically reshaped the world. This is by no means ancient history; it continues to determine who lives and who dies, through trade regimes, militarism, structural racism, sexualized violence, and exclusion. «Feminism must be anti-colonial» might sound like a banal statement, one with which most feminists would agree, but I've been surprised how threatening it is for some in certain contexts. For example, over the last few years living in Berlin, I've been met with hostility, even in some leftist feminist circles, for stating what to me is a simple fact—that the occupation of Palestinian Territories is modern-day apartheid, and that we can't call ourselves feminists if we don't stand with Palestinian women's dual struggle: against the brutality of the Israeli state's occupation, and against norms within Palestinian society that subordinate women.

I was born in Khartoum, Sudan, and spent the first eleven years of my life there. Arabic was the first language I learned. There must've been a word in Arabic for «feminism» then, but as a child, I doubt I ever heard it. Today I know the word but it still feels odd on my tongue. I'm getting more used to saying «nasawiya», but a twinge of discomfort remains; it still feels a little alien. As we're seeing in the recent revolutions in Sudan, Lebanon, Chile,

and elsewhere, feminism is being made into a powerful tool for emancipation through struggle, and feminists are exporting their own conceptions of it, that are powerful.

As a feminist, my main concerns are how capitalism reinforces and creates racialized gender hierarchies, how poverty makes womxn more vulnerable to abuse, the murderous border regimes that are currently in place, and how womxn in the global South and working-class womxn of colour in the global North are treated as disposable.

My feminism also asserts that Black womxn's lives matter, not just in the context of the U.S. and Europe, but also in Sudan. In the U.S., I am Black, but in Sudan, other womxn are Black, since my ethnicity translates to racial privilege in that context. There, the oppression of Black women is in part done in my name. Racial oppression shifts across time and space, since there is no one racism, but rather racisms. I've realized that my own understanding of my role as a feminist also has to shift if it is to stay relevant in the multiple spaces I inhabit.

One of the things that fascinates me the most is the world of children, the glimpses they get of adult life, and the fragmented nature of their access to knowledge about the wider world. It is this fragmentation and partial access that we associate with childhood innocence. I think a lot about this when I see the situation of so many children in the world, violently pushed into the market by poverty. So many girls are not just forced into work, but into marriage and the reproductive sphere, or even sexual enslavement. They learn so early that in this world, you are as valuable as what your hands can make or your womb can produce, and that even if you can produce, your labour will be stolen.

Today, I embrace the term feminist, but it wasn't always so. The politically active women in my childhood, those who worked to defend other women, didn't use many labels to describe themselves. One of my early memories of my mother is from the period leading up to the 1985 intifada in Sudan, the mass uprising which toppled the sixteen-year military dictatorship of

**«Feminism for me is a reminder that no matter what life throws at me, I want to understand more, live as close to the truth as I know it, and always show up for womxn who face multiple and intersecting oppressions.»**

Ja'afar Nimeri. My mother is the first feminist I knew. Memories are tricky of course, but what often matters is not the event itself but how we remember it.

What I remember is finding my mother sitting in her room, sewing a large banner for one of the protests that had been planned. The curtains were drawn because this was dangerous work. Another time, I remember seeing her sneaking off with a neighbour, a woman whose husband had just been arrested by state security, to bury incriminating documents so that they wouldn't fall into the wrong hands. My father, a university lecturer, was the political activist in the family, a trade unionist who worked to overthrow the regime. My mother, on the other hand, didn't speak of herself as an activist. Women like my mother and her neighbour were doing dangerous political work, but most of it was invisible—much like the care work they performed at home. They supported each other not just through «political» activity, but by helping each other take care of children, by lending each other things when times were tough, and by listening. There must have been tens of thousands if not millions of Sudanese women like my mother and her neighbour, most of whom were in far worse economic situations than they were. Those women are the ones who kept both the families and the resistance going. My first feminism was therefore a feeling that the sky isn't held up by the Greek God Atlas, but rather by women like my mother.

When it comes to political identity, I really believe that one has to try and be honest in order to evolve. And to be honest, we must occasionally go to that place inside us where we are least comfortable. Those places of comfort and discomfort remind us of how we grew up and the structures we grew up in—the extent to which they shaped us. I've had to confront myself over the years, starting from my late teens, in order to expand my notion of gender and my understanding of it as both constructed and fluid. My mother is still the most important feminist influence in my life, but there is sometimes a dynamic between us where my feminism feels to her like an indictment of her own understanding of the world and of the sacrifices she made. I know that there is no way I would have gotten as far in my consciousness without her, but my feminism has also departed from hers in significant ways.

To give what to me is an important example, the home culture I grew up in was mostly quietly homophobic. This issue only came up once we migrated to the U.S. following the 1989 military coup d'état in Sudan. My sisters and I were given the impression that homosexuality, or any kind of



queerness for that matter, is a western thing that should be rejected as a «lifestyle choice». My formal education in New York City, because it was also devoid of any queer perspectives, didn't help challenge this impression. The schools I went to were also homophobic; I don't remember a single kid who was «out», which of course meant that kids did not feel safe enough to be open about themselves in that atmosphere. It didn't bother me and I hardly paid any attention to it.



What helped me to begin to grapple with this was neither school nor books, but curiosity and a desire to form human relationships. It was encounters at university with womxn activists and non-activists who identified as queer that changed me and, later in life, made me an ally. My mother had raised me to be open to people—even if that openness ended up leading me down paths she would have preferred, perhaps, that I never tread. Those parts of my feminism that I gained through struggle «against» the self I was given—by school, family, and even to an extent friends—are the parts I value the most.

I continue to try and educate myself, still mostly through human relationships, but now also by reading. What I find helpful when I am unclear about things is to try and put my value system front and centre. I really believe that we must push ourselves to show up and stand up for oppressed communities, even if we feel out of place or uncomfortable. Solidarity breeds understanding, it's not only the other way around. Feminism for me is a reminder that no matter what life throws at me, I want to understand more, live as close to the truth as I know it, and always show up for womxn who face multiple and intersecting oppressions. My understanding of truth is constantly evolving, and as a person, my courage still falls short of my convictions. This is why my feminism will always be unfinished.

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**Sara Abbas** is a Sudanese-American feminist and political scientist. She is a Ph.D. candidate at the Freie Universität Berlin.

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**Victoria Furtado**

## A RADICAL TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY

**M**y name is Victoria Furtado. I come from Uruguay, a small country in the South of Latin America that has been utterly shaken by the feminist revolts of recent years. I consider myself a feminist, and like many of my comrades, my *compañeras*, I became a feminist because I felt outrage, long before I knew what feminism was all about.

Feminism came to me as a collective political construction, but my intuition tells me that it originated in each gesture of autonomy passed on to me by my mother. I am the feminist daughter of a mother who is no feminist, who does not recognize herself in that label, but who—like so many other women—every day keeps up community and political practices that are profoundly feminist. Recognizing women’s multiple practices of resistance, and placing their efforts to reproduce social life at the very centre, are key elements of the feminism I adhere to.

I am a feminist, and for me feminism is both a way of being in this world and of fighting to transform it.

The collective that I am part of—that is to say, the political-affective community from which I think these questions—is called Minervas. It arose in 2012 as a space of encounter between women who had the need to think themselves as activists and to think the social struggles which we are part of from a feminist point of view (fights to defend public education, union struggles, cooperative housing projects, fights to defend the environment and against the extractivist model, and many more).

Right from the start, we set out to build an anti-capitalist and anti-colonial feminism that believes a radical transformation of society is possible, and sets its horizon of desire far beyond the state agenda of legal rights and liberal policies. We took and continue to take a critical view of liberal-institutional feminism, sometimes referred to as *lean-in* feminism<sup>1</sup>. For us, capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism are deeply intertwined systems of oppression, which reinforce each other by producing vicious circles of domination, violence, and suffering for all women, but particularly for working women.

**«Right from the start, we set out to build an anti-capitalist and anti-colonial feminism that would believe in a radical transformation of society.»**

In these years we have tried to build a feminism that starts from the concrete problems of women while at the same time engaging in social struggles in a broad sense. In the course of our search, and together with *compañeras* from other collectives that share this political perspective, we have called our feminism a working-class feminism (*feminismo popular*), a feminism from below, a «feminism of companions», or *feminismo compañero*.

**«Our feminism is a feminism that makes politics by accompanying each other.»**

In dialogue with ourselves and other *compañeras* from Latin America, especially from the South, the Mexican philosopher Raquel Gutiérrez summarizes three characteristics of this *feminismo popular* that is under construction:

- It is a feminism that seeks to transform the ways in which we reproduce life materially and symbolically.
- It is a feminism whose horizon of desire pushes beyond what is enshrined in institutional frameworks and the politics and discourse of rights; instead it tries to imagine and produce the common, here and now.
- It is a feminism that places relationships between women at the heart of its political practice; that does not forget that men exist, but systematically tries to avoid falling into patriarchal mediation of women’s relationships. Instead it works at building an alternative symbolic order of its own, where we can meet each other and create bonds that are neither competitive nor exploitative.

From the Argentinean activist and political educator Claudia Korol, we adopt the idea of *feminismo compañero*, because as she says, in our feminism we make politics by accompanying each other. When we say that we are not alone, that if they touch one of us, all of us respond, we make our politics out of our certainty that we are together. When we provide support around an abortion, a break-up, a house move, or the very struggle that each one is fighting in her place, we accompany each other. When we say «I do believe you», and when we open spaces where we listen to each other, where the word of the other counts, we accompany each other.

Because we know the political power of being together, the central concern of our feminism is to contribute to the construction of multiple and diverse women’s spaces. To act together, to share experiences, to create contacts and common strategies, are the way to overcome the isolation,

<sup>1</sup> «Lean-in feminism» commonly used to refer to a one-dimensional and career-oriented feminism in the US, which tends to reinforce other forms of discrimination that are often intertwined with sexism. The term goes back to the title of a book (*Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, 2013) penned by one of the richest women in the world, Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg (editor’s note).



the disconnection, and the forgetfulness that reinforce the multiple systems of oppression that cross us as women and feminized bodies.

It is important for us to build connections with other *compañeras* and organizations. We believe that the way to go is united, not pretending to have a homogeneous unity, but to weave bonds of struggle and self-care that discover what is common among us, knowing how to knit together our differences without denying or hierarchizing them.

On the other hand, we do not understand feminism as a set of issues on the gender agendas of institutions or professional politicians, nor do we understand women as a sector that needs to be organized within the framework of a greater struggle. We believe in building a feminism that thinks all the dimensions of social transformation from the base provided by those organizational spaces where women and queer people have symbolic and political autonomy.

This is because our struggle is not only to change the lives of women, but to build a new world for everybody, a world where all worlds fit in. And also because we are convinced that it is through the revaluation of political-affective relations among women that we will be able to build collective paths of struggle, resistance and emancipation.

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**Victoria Furtado** researches on language and gender and social movements and feminism. She is a member of the feminist collective Minervas from Montevideo, Uruguay.

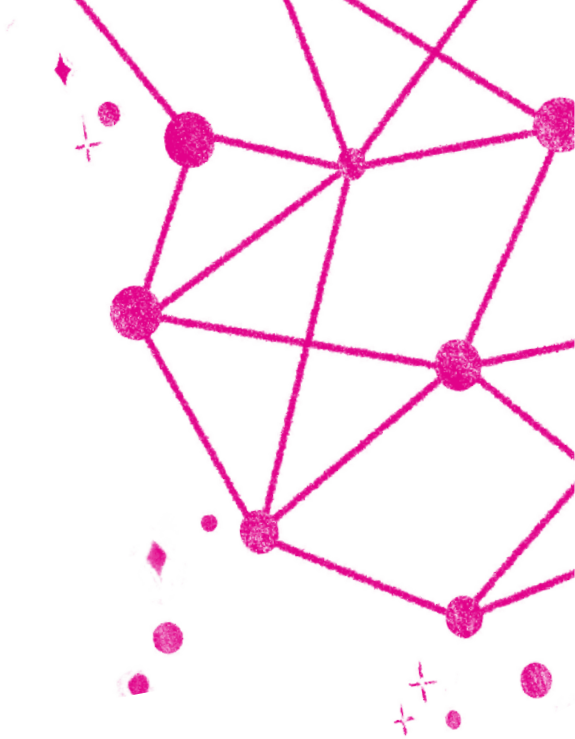
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**Derya Binişik**  
**Julia Wasenmüller**

## THE RIGHT TO ANGER

**«Our struggle is to build  
a new world for every-  
body, a world where all  
worlds fit in.»**





**F**eminism is a constant daily struggle towards a good life for all. It means the right to anger. It means no longer having to smile, to apologize, or to make yourself smaller just so as not to step on anybody's toes. On the contrary—feminism means occupying and taking up spaces, positions, jobs, panels, streets, and making it blatantly clear: we belong here.

Feminism is and remains the fight against capitalism *and* patriarchy. Feminism means supporting one another, having the right to be sad, sharing similar experiences with people in safer spaces, and thereby becoming stronger and louder in larger alliances. Feminism means self-care, respect for one another, and valuing one another. Feminism does not mean settling for a little more equality or a few more privileges for some, but tirelessly demanding more for all. Feminism also means occasionally stopping, listening, taking a step back and giving space to those who are never heard no matter how loud they speak. Feminism does not only mean pushing feminist politics, but also fighting for a feminist practice: acting in solidarity with one another; not separating the private and the political; and rethinking relationships and power relations/dynamics of any kind.

Currently we are fighting and organizing for a feminist strike movement. We are posing many interrelated questions: from who is entitled to what, to what kind of work matters, to who is regarded as part of a productive community, to why it is that womxn and queers\* are so overrepresented in poorly paid reproductive and care work, and are made responsible for doing most of the unpaid labour required for maintaining a capitalist society.

For us it is important to collectively find and develop methods of resistance and thereby «sabotage» patriarchy. We support and are in solidarity with all migrant labour struggles and strikes, —like the outsourced cleaning staff at the Alice Salomon Hochschule (ASH) in Berlin, who have drawn attention to the scandal of their precarious working conditions and are demanding direct employment and permanent working contracts—as well as with all other labour disputes in precarious and feminized fields, e.g. in kindergartens, at Berlin University's Charité hospital, as well as at other hospitals.

We fight for the right to bodily autonomy and believe that the denial of abortion rights is simply another patriarchal attempt to control what womxn,

trans\* people, and queers\* do with their own bodies. Although access to abortion exists in Germany, as of today the procedure remains illegal. We therefore demand the abolishment of §218 / 219a!<sup>1</sup>

**«We want a queer feminist movement that isn't nation-bound but transnational.»**

We demand to have the right and choice to define our own gender and civil status.

A third option for non-binary\*, inter\*, and

queer\* gender identities must be a given, including for legal documents such as passports etc.

Furthermore, we are constantly thinking and rethinking our own queer/ feminist practice. How should we organize around self-care and emotional labour? How can we empower and support each other in strong, inclusive, and sustainable ways?

We oppose all forms of sexualized violence, street harassment, and rape culture, and stand in solidarity with the #metoo movement and all people who call out sexualized violence and thereby shed light on how deeply the structural and normalized violence against womxn, trans\* people, and queers\* is rooted in our societies.

<sup>1</sup> §218 and 219a are the sections of the German criminal code regulating abortion, which is illegal under section 218 (exceptions to the liability for abortion are provided by section 218a), while section 219a holds liable whoever advertises services for abortion, including health professionals (editor's note).

We are in solidarity with sex workers and stand with them in their fight against the racist and sexist «Prostitutes Protection Act»<sup>2</sup>.

For us, climate change is undoubtedly a feminist issue. Young people all around the world are being politicized through climate justice youth movements and the global climate strike.

We question all beauty and body norms, and oppose the standard of a White, skinny, fit body as the only form of desirable or socially acknowledged beauty.

Our feminism is at all times anti-racist: we take issue with and challenge all racist structures and practices, we oppose an exclusively White feminism, and we want to be allies to Black feminists and feminists of colour who

have too often been silenced in the feminist discourse in Germany and internationally. We stand in solidarity with all refugees who are organizing collectively (e.g. Women in Exile and International Women's Space in Berlin) and who criticize the current asylum system from personal experience.

**«We call those cis-guys who want to get applause for wearing a feminism-patch on their jacket cookie feminists.»**

Our feminism is also anti-classist. We want to raise awareness about discrimination

based on social background, and can no longer deny the structural inequalities that exist, including within our own communities and in our daily lives. Class isn't just an abstract concept that will be abolished in some eventual revolution; we want to make space, here and now, for the empowerment and voices of people who have been consistently marginalized and ignored.

The feminist movement faces numerous challenges and obstacles. There is a large discrepancy between perspectives on Germany from within and from the outside. The image of Germany as a rich and progressive country veils the important questions about who actually has access to the fabled German luxuries and who is being exploited, silenced, and excluded from them.

Furthermore, there is a growing tendency towards right-wing appropriation of feminist issues, and we are facing the reality of an increase in right-wing violence at the same time as a growing tolerance for and even approval of fascist politicians claiming to support women's rights within the context of a racist, anti-feminist discourse.

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<sup>2</sup> The Prostitutes Protection Act is a German Federal Law that came into force in 2017, introducing a permit requirement for all prostitution trades and a registration certificate for prostitutes, which, as experts and interest groups argue, penalizes and endangers sex workers (editor's note).

Our language is often too academic, too exclusive, too pseudo-intellectual. We want a feminism that is able to put across the realities of all those who are marginalized by patriarchy, regardless of whether they «talk the right way».

We want our feminism to be inclusive and make joint struggles across societal divisions and privileges (e.g. racism, class, disability, residency-status, language) possible. We are constantly searching for how to make solidarity practical, asking ourselves again and again if somebody is being left out. Too often we fail to come together in order to find a consensus as a feminist movement and not crack under the strain of debates about identity politics, language barriers, residency-status etc.; or else we fail to make bridges over the gaps of (mis)understanding to build a cross-generational feminism.

While many feminist topics have already been picked up by the mainstream, —a victory we owe to the feminist movement— it is clear how far the mainstream is willing to go in terms of political change: nothing that actually threatens or destabilizes the status quo of neo-liberal politics today is capable of winning a majority. Therefore it is important to remain wary of appropriations of feminism «for the few», to increase the political pressure for substantial change, and to never stop demanding more.

Also, feminism is still dismissed as a secondary issue within leftist structures where macho and patriarchal dynamics continue to prevail unquestioned. We demand a critical reflection on masculinity from everybody.

**«Nothing that actually threatens or destabilizes the status quo of neo-liberal politics today is capable of winning a majority.»**

We call those cis-guys who want to get applause for wearing a feminism-patch on their jacket «cookie feminists». Feminism is not about cis-guys changing minimal things and therefore being the heroes of critical masculinity, but it rather aims at deconstructing profoundly and constantly any kind of power structure.

Trans\*- and homophobia remain problems in the mainstream as well as in feminist spaces. Heteronormativity has not been abolished through the passing of laws like the «marriage for all» act, but requires ongoing examination and confrontation within our societies.

We are fed up with reacting to the shit this world throws at us; we've had enough of being in the defensive. We want to seize the freedom to create, build, and shape the world we live in, proactively.

In order to collectively answer the question: What kind of society do we want to live in?, we need to redistribute money and power. That's why we fight for queer spaces that enable us to experience completely new possibilities and forms of interaction and living collectively.

We want a world free from authority, a world in which people are no longer attacked or excluded due to appearance, names, gender identities, sexual orientation, language, or disabilities.

We dream of a world where we have the safety to experiment in our relationships and to try out new forms of love, lust, and desire.

We want solidarity to be the foundation for interaction among each other; we want a queer feminist movement that isn't nation-bound but transnational.

We want a queer reading of reproductive justice—not just heteronormative concepts reformed or questioned, but physical and bodily self-determination for all, for real, and now.

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**Julia Wasenmüller** lives in Berlin and writes for several German newspapers on feminism, anti-classism, and her post-soviet background.

**Derya Binişik** works in political education, empowerment, and awareness for young adults and is active in feminist and anti-racist groups in Berlin.

Both are organized in different queerfeminist and antiracist struggles in Berlin.

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**Liana P.**

## GETTING ORGANIZED MAKES ME STRONG



**M**y name is Liana, from the Philippines. I am 48 years old and a mother of two boys, aged 21 and 19. I am a migrant domestic worker in Lebanon, I came here back in 1994. I am an activist for 9 years now.

I decided to stop my studies before finishing, 'cos I wanted to work. We were nine siblings. My parents were working, it was my decision to work abroad. I said before, I will only stay for two years, but I was wrong. In February 2020, it will be 25 years that I am here in Lebanon. It became my second home. But I have an agenda: my youngest son still has three years in the university, my plan is only five years more, then I will leave for good.

Honestly, as a woman and as a mother who is far from her children, I face a lot of struggles. Being a widow, now day and night my mind is busy thinking about my children being independent and alone in the Philippines. Also being a migrant domestic worker is not easy.



Most women who work in private households suffer from abuse. I am one of them. The first time I came to Lebanon, I was beaten by my employer, as were the mother of the family and her son. With the second employer, I was beaten too. With the third employer, I was deported because she accused me of stealing diamonds and 10,000 USD of her money, which was not true. For now, with my current employer, I can say that I am doing better. I mean, I didn't have to face any abuse, just too much work. But unlike before, I can still manage it and I have time to be in the protests after my work, and attend workshops on my day off. Not like before, when I used to «live in», which meant that I was living in the house of my employer.

My activism started when I was the secretary of a Filipino group with 500 members, all of them Filipino workers here in Lebanon. There are a lot of migrant domestic workers from the Philippines in Lebanon; in 2006 the embassy counted 35,000. When I came, I had applied for work through a private agency. The contract was only written in Arabic. When you arrived at the airport, you had to go to the isolation room and stay there and wait for your employer to come. These things have changed now. When I first met this Filipino community in 2011 and they invited me to attend workshops, I was amazed that being a migrant domestic worker, I had all the rights. But it's sad to say that these rights do not exist here in Lebanon.

Within the group we organized trips and helped to encourage women to go to the Philippine embassy whenever they had problems with their employers. In 2017, we started to organize in an alliance of migrant domestic workers here in Lebanon; I am a founding member of this alliance. In this alliance, we are women from seven different nationalities: women from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Madagascar, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Togo, and Ethiopia. So we help each other and organize events and spread awareness. We do workshops on gender equality, organize English lessons, give legal advice or sessions with a lawyer. We have solidarity, because we struggle the same struggle. We face and experience the same racism and fight the same fight.

**«Feminism is that people can accept me for who I am... that I am able to do things freely and equally with men.»**

Yes, racism in Lebanon is the worst. We migrant domestic workers face a lot of discrimination. Once, there was a beach and a swimming pool here in Lebanon where they didn't allow us to enter. But there were some NGOs that talked about this on social media and then it was everywhere. About the reason why we weren't allowed to enter the beaches and that it was because we are migrant domestic workers. Thanks to their support it's O.K. now, we can go there whenever we want to.

From then on I always participated and joined the protests here every year, on International Women's Day, Labour Day, and International Migrants' Day. I join for the same chants and the same words, I am shouting to abolish the Kafala System!

The Kafala system or sponsorship system links a migrant domestic worker's legal status to one single employer. Domestic workers lose their status if their sponsor ends the contract or if they decide to leave their employer. Receiving legal status independently from your employer is not possible. The sponsorship system usually prevents migrant domestic workers from seeking and obtaining help in case of violation of rights or abuse. It is a horrible system that creates misery and equates to modern day slavery.

Since I became an activist, my life has changed. That I go every year to the protests and I shout for my rights has made me strong.

Once, I was invited to a birthday party and my friend asked me to cook Chinese noodles. So I did. But when I was in the taxi, the driver asked me to sit next to him. I refused, I said no, 'cos I was sitting in the back already. He kept talking and talking, he wanted me to sit next to him. I was wearing a skirt, but not a short one. I ignored him, but when he put his hand back and touched me on my legs, I threw all the Chinese noodles on his face... and got out of the taxi. I arrived in the party without the food. They asked me: where is the food? I told them that the driver ate it all...🤡🤡🤡

Getting organized made me strong and it also motivates me. The energy to protest is already in my veins. This is also the case for other women who get organized. We get in touch by WhatsApp or other social media. The women who are always with us in the protest become strong and they are more aware of what's going on. Especially when it comes to their rights. They are more eager to join and participate. But sometimes they are afraid because some of them are undocumented. Some of them are

domestic worker runaways. Organizing honestly changed them, because before they didn't know anything about their rights. There are a lot of Lebanese feminist women who support us migrant workers. Without the support of the NGOs and feminists we couldn't do anything. They help us; the Lebanese NGOs, especially, organize police clearance and permits for protests, so that no one will arrest us during the protest. They do it because our alliance and other groups here are not allowed by law to form a union or to organize, because we are not registered.

I consider myself a feminist. I want to be the voice of the voiceless migrant domestic workers, especially women. I want to be their voice against domestic violence and sexual harassment and to stand with them on behalf of women's rights and interests. The energy to protest is already in my veins. For me honestly, feminism is that people can accept me for who I am... and that I am able to do things freely and equally with men.

But even though we are fighting for our rights every year, there is no assurance that the Lebanese government will give us what we are fighting for. But we never lose hope. We still want to be in the streets and shout out for our rights.

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**Liana P.** is a migrant domestic worker from the Philippines in Lebanon and a founding member of an alliance of international migrant domestic workers there. The text is based on a chat conversation as she was denied her visa to attend the Feminist Futures Festival.  
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Ndèye Fatou Kane

YES, I CALL MYSELF  
A FEMINIST





**M**y name is Ndèye Fatou Kane, I am 33 years old, I am Senegalese. My history with feminism began three years ago: I returned to Senegal after a long absence and was interested in Senegalese feminism for the first time from a critical perspective. I wondered about its loss of momentum, because most of the feminist leaders, known and recognized in French-speaking Africa for having driven the feminist movement, had become as though voiceless. They were given the floor only occasionally, notably on the International Women's Rights Day on 8th March, a day dedicated to feminist demands in theory; in Senegal, however, it was like a gigantic party.

At the time I was born, Senegalese feminism was already losing ground. We were talking about it with a touch of nostalgia, combining it with the past. Meanwhile, *Yeewu - Yeewi*, the first structured Senegalese movement, was an example that was being emulated in other parts of Africa. At that time, Senegal was cited as the country where women's rights were understood and respected. So my time did not coincide with Senegalese feminism. The only occasional appearances by the feminist activists of the

first wave were on the International Women's Rights Day, or when they had to express themselves on a completely different topic affecting women.

I made my first contacts with feminism from a foreign perspective, that of Simone de Beauvoir, the famous French, and therefore... White feminist. So I

**«Feminism must have local variants, which will make it possible to think of a true transnational feminist solidarity.»**

rejected feminism as an imported ideology not adapted to my realities. Three years ago, after I had read Chimamanda Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists*, I began to look at the feminist prism from an African, particularly Senegalese, perspective. That is how I started the research for my book, *Vous avez dit féministe ? (Did You Say Feminist?)*.

Feminism as I see it can be defined as an ideology that has stood the test of time and which aims to improve the living conditions, treatment, and freedoms of women. There are various schools of feminist thought and struggles depending on geographical area. Some focus on equality, others on complementarity, and then there are other nuances in the basic approach. But obviously the actions are complementary. What matters across all the debates and struggles are the woman's place in society, her own perception of her place, and how she perceives herself in a reflexive way.

For this reason, today we distinguish between several feminist movements: for example, decolonial, Afro, Muslim, materialist feminism (which connects capitalism and patriarchy as sources of oppression), and finally African feminisms (I insist on the notion of plurality, because I am of the opinion that there are as many feminisms in Africa as there are countries on the continent...).

The particularity of Senegalese feminism is that it emerged in a post-independence African context, at a time when most African countries were

acceding to national sovereignty, and intellectual elites were being formed. As a result, during this period, women acquired a strong political consciousness, first organized in women's, then in feminist, associations; this was the birth and baptism, if you like, of the Senegalese feminist movement.

Since I am increasingly positioning myself as part of a new Senegalese feminist wave, I define myself as feminist. I claim this label despite its not being easy to wear, certainly in view of the religious and societal prism in Senegal. So yes, I call myself a feminist.

Feminisms are born in particular geographical situations and are expressed in local terms; thus I would say that my feminist perspective is 100 percent influenced by my Senegalese context. Before I try to understand the feminist perspectives of other countries, I must try to grasp and appropriate that of my own. And especially in a context of «glocalization», feminism must have local variants, which will make it possible to think in terms of a true transnational feminist solidarity. The research I did in gender studies (combining feminisms and intersectionality, but also the study of masculinities) allowed me to delve into the history of Senegalese feminism and to understand its foundations in order to be able to contextualize it.

**«Independence was the birth and baptism of the Senegalese feminist movement.»**

My utopia in terms of gender relations would be an egalitarian society where sex relations would not be based on hierarchical gender relations. In Senegal, religion is mixed with culture; in terms of women's rights, it is a little blurry. Women's minds were inculcated with the idea that they had duties and no rights. Feminists of the first generation failed in their mission, because their legacy is almost non-existent.

Today, the young women of my generation (and the younger ones) have largely distanced themselves from feminist theories, because they have assimilated the ideology that being feminist means being an advocate of Western civilization and therefore detached from our Senegalese concerns. One of the recurring criticisms of Senegalese feminism is linked to its westernization as well as its academicism, and its retreat has in turn favoured the growth of this criticism.

All this makes the utopia I imagine with regard to gender difficult to put in place. The male sex, primarily, is the one that is preventing the realization of this utopia. Androcentrism and patriarchy mean that the male entity needs to be deconstructed in order to achieve gender equity. Moreover, this utopia is difficult to achieve because out of all the forms of discrimination, the one against women (gender inequality)—because of the prevailing tradition—is particularly hard to eliminate.

Since I am convinced that Senegalese feminism can only grow back in its own soil, it is necessary to identify and deconstruct classism and patriarchy—these two components which are intertwined in the power relations that counteract feminism—so that it can be given a new lease of life.

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**Ndèye Fatou Kane** is a Senegalese blogger, novelist and researcher working on Senegalese feminism, intersectionality and the construction of masculinities.  
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Hoang Phuong Thao

## WORKING WITH OTHERS TOWARDS UTOPIA



**T**o many people, feminism has different facets. To me, feminism is a social movement, a way of life, and the foundation for a world of justice and sustainability. Feminism has always been there since patriarchy started, as it challenges abuses of power by the oppressors, whether they be men or women, kings or republics. However, only recently were feminists able to become better organized and more effective with new tools of organization and mobilization.

Feminists are those who value the harmony among people as well as between people and nature. Feminists use their power to respect their own rights and those of others, including other genders and other species in this planet, so that a sustainable life and just world can come into being.

I will not call myself a feminist; I am striving towards becoming one. It is not easy at all, because everyone wants to have their own kind of power and it is much easier to abuse it for one's own benefits and gains, rather than seek to respect others' rights and those of nature. I believe in feminism and it has to go with all my actions, in both professional and personal life. It must accompany the way I work, I consume, I care for my team and family. I cannot be a feminist if at work I talk about feminism and practice its actions but at home I train my daughters that the household chores should be done by girls/women.

In Vietnam, it is still a strong belief that if someone has a son, it is a child that represents the whole family. On the contrary, if that same person has no sons but a hundred daughters, they don't have any worthy children and their duty to their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents has not been fulfilled. An ActionAid Vietnam study conducted between 2014 and 2018 reveals that men in Vietnam are spending on average five hours less per day than women on unpaid care work, as it is the belief that men should pursue «big duties» and the unpaid work is the small chores that women will need to do. Every hour, at least one woman is beaten by their own partner, and this does not include the number of women/girls who get beaten or trafficked by their own fathers or family members.

**«What we need to do is to ignite self-esteem and power from within, and link it up with others', to build claims for the rights and the power that have been abused and taken away from people.»**

At the national level, after so many years of different commitments, less than 25 percent of deputies in the National Assembly are female; at the provincial level, this number has never exceeded 20 percent in the past three general elections. This is closely related to the inadequate investment in education for girls. According to census data from the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, for every 100 boys enrolling in primary schools, there are 98 girls; this number goes down to 80 by secondary school, and 55 at the university level. The Labour Law of Vietnam identifies 87 jobs that women are forbidden from working in, and at the same time women are only allowed

to work until they turn 60, while men can continue until they are 65 (until recently, the ages were five years less respectively).

**«Feminism challenges abuses of power by the oppressors, whether they be men or women, kings or republics.»**

At work, at least 87 percent of migrant women workers confirmed that they have been sexually harassed, and 67 percent of them chose to stay silent

about it as they do not think speaking out will do anything good for them—they will get stigmatized, discriminated against, or sacked. These findings come from a study conducted with 4,000 women migrant workers in the Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City garment factories, carried out jointly by ActionAid and the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs in 2017, 2018, and 2019.

These figures go on and on... And mind you, all of these things are happening in Vietnam, a country with a relatively high gender development index, where women have relatively more space and liberty to decide on their own ways of living, learning, loving, and being a woman.

On the contrary, in a feminist world, all people live in harmony with nature, in harmony with each other, in respect, love, and care. This would be the utopia that I am dreaming of and trying for in my everyday work.

In the organization I work with, ActionAid, we believe that feminism is a social movement. Social movements can build or destroy different regimes, but they need to be aligned with political parties and other forces to ensure the sustainability of the results of struggles. Therefore working with others towards utopia is crucial. We have spent years and a great many resources to build alliances with women from ethnic minorities, with migrant women workers, sex workers, people living with HIV and AIDS, trafficked women,

and young girls and their grandmothers, to understand patriarchy and how to address it. We also work closely with academia, media, policy makers, and government authorities to expand the space, to get people to know more about the situation and join hands with us.

All of our work is based on a Human Rights based approach, and we believe that everyone can be and will be the agent of change for their own life and future. What we need to do is to ignite self-esteem and power from within, and link it up with others', to build claims for the rights and the power that have been abused and taken away from people. So all of our work begins from empowering the self, and widening change from the private out to public spaces. These are the three Ps—Personal, Private, Public—the horizons that our work on empowerment will need to challenge and change.

In our way forward, capitalism and consumerism are the big challenges. Neo-liberal policies have taken away a lot of resources that could have been invested in public services, which could ease a lot of the burdens for girls and women that are preventing them from enjoying their rights to education, health care, and time to rest, as well as inspiration to development. For their own profit, the corporates have slowly taken over the policy space that should belong to the public and people, depleting our rivers, our forests, and polluting our air.

All of these could only be overcome if we all united, joining hands in actions to end patriarchy, challenge our own ego and greed, and ensure that our politicians are not only listening to corporate voices. We are so inspired by the Fridays for Future, #MeToo, the 99%, Occupy, and many other movements around the world, where people start from their own small actions to build a better planet for us all.

In solidarity,  
Hoang Phuong Thao

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**Huang Phuong Thao** is a member of ActionAid International and the Executive Director of Aid for Social Protection Foundation Vietnam, the mother of two daughters, a yoga lover, and a believer in a utopia where people live in harmony with each other and with nature.  
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## Neon Cunha

# MY FEMINISM? A MANIFESTO



**A** child perceives, recognizes, and affirms that she is «just» a girl when she is two and a half years old. She lives as a girl. By the age of four, she already knows misogyny and hatred once she is prevented from being who she is.

At the same time, she sees her mother down on her knees cleaning the houses of White and Japanese women. At 11, this girl already has a formal job. She tries to be invisible in the workplace. She barely speaks, spending most of her time with her hands in her pockets so she won't be noticed. At 12 she's working a double shift. Her formal job is at the city hall and, on weekends, she is on the sidewalks in the centre of São Paulo, watching for the police or any other dangers, in order to warn her peers who are working as sex workers on the streets. At the same time, she has to be the best student and the best employee.

**«My feminism is built over trenches on which modern societies are raised up, where the bodies of my ancestors are hidden and still sprout.»**

While she is still young, she sees a Black trans woman being executed by police officers, and understands that every woman bleeds, but not every one of them does so for the sake of contemplation according to sacred meanings. In a White, xenophobic, sexist, patriarchal, misogynist, capitalist, cissexist society, we decide who is more or less of a woman. We decide whose lives will be negotiated over and destined to die, sometimes more than once in a lifetime.

My feminism is built over trenches on which modern societies are raised up, where the bodies of my ancestors are hidden and still sprout. My feminism has the fury of *lansã*, the god of wind and change in Brazil's Candomblé. My feminism has «dolor-ity» (*dororidade*), the shared pain of Black women that the sisterhood (*sororidade*<sup>1</sup>) of White and cisgender feminism can't reach. Dolority, yes, this fundamental concept created by Vilma Piedade, a Black and cisgender woman from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

The feminism that I represent spread across Barcelona in 1998 with another Black trans woman who was raised by native American people in French Guiana. She teaches me that we have to study our enemies before we take the next step, that we need to understand what language foreigners speak, in order to protect ourselves. We have to learn this the same way as mothers who have lost their children to state genocide, who have to protect themselves from those who should be protecting them.

<sup>1</sup> *Sororidade* refers to a feminist sisterhood, understood as solidarity and political acts of affection amongst women in a patriarchal system (editor's note).



My feminism bleeds when incarcerated women are abandoned by their families inside women's prisons, while at the same time women incarcerated in men's prisons have their identities denied, and are constantly forced to negotiate over their lives and submit themselves to segregation. Segregation is the only way they can avoid being violated by men—and they may not even be granted that, when one of these women can be placed in a jail with 99 men, a situation we have seen many times.

My feminism demands dignity, when women who have been inside the prison system come out desperate for jobs that resemble slavery. That's how capitalism works: it takes your humanity out of you, it puts

your life on the market. Many of these women survive by living on the streets, and suffer from emotional and mental health issues. They live off garbage, or create cooperatives—like Mara Sobral, a Black cisgender woman, lesbian, and mother, who does not comply with any norms. Like Veronica Bolina, a Black

**«While hearing the silence of the guilty, my feminism claims and produces humanity.»**

trans woman who was exposed and tortured by agents of the state when incarcerated. Like Luana Barbosa, who also survived the prison system, lived for 4 years as a trans man, and was executed by the state in front of her son.

My feminism screams out of Dandara's death, executed by 16 men in broad daylight in 2017, in Brazil's north-east. It bleeds out of the rape of women in their 70s, even 101 years old. It bleeds while watching the struggle of a mother to rectify her intersex child's documents.

My feminism screams when I think about the fires in the Amazon, about Native American and Quilombola women having their land invaded, their lives wiped out yet again, under the eyes of a lethargic society that has been systematically neglected in terms of education and professional opportunities.

My feminism doesn't forget the body of Cláudia Silva Ferreira, dragged a thousand feet by a police car, in Rio de Janeiro. Nor will it forget the gunshots that killed Marielle Franco.

My feminism doesn't feel welcomed by the idea that «no one lets go of anyone's hand». My hand has been dropped again and again since I was a child, and I've learned to run and to be invisible in myriad ways. My feminism has decided that being avant-garde is a necessity, but doesn't forget to make alliances in order to keep the fight going after this body rests.

My feminism doesn't forget the past, or its enslaved ancestors, like Xica Manicongo, who is considered to have been the first non-cisgender Black woman in Brazil, who was condemned for dressing up as a witch, in Bahia, 1591. My feminism also celebrates life when it encounters other pluralist Black feminists such as Sueli Carneiro and Angela Davis.



While hearing the silence of the guilty, my feminism claims and produces humanity. It argues for a feminism without ageism, classism, racism, ableism, cissexism, and other norms imposed on diverse bodies and affections. My feminism stands up for a new and equanimous humanity.

**«My feminism stands for dignity in life and in death also, for every woman.»**

While I wait for my denied humanity, my feminism celebrates life, as when I feel embraced by the Black Women's March Movement in São Paulo, or when Erica Malunginho, Erika Hilton and Robeyoncé Lima, all Black and non-cisgender women are elected for Congress in Brazil.

My feminism celebrates life while asking where strong women fall, or if they actually die on their feet like ancient trees do: they feed, protect, and end up being forgotten.

My feminism stands for dignity in life and in death also, for every woman. My feminism is for us not missing that girl's hand, for all of us, so that dreams can be possible. My feminism is right here and right now.

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**Neon Cunha** is an independent activist from São Bernardo do Campo, Brazil, working on the intersections of race and transgenerness.

Translation: João Bertholini

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**Reem Amer**

## **AN EQUITABLE WORLD FOR ALL PEOPLE**

**A**s an Afro-Palestinian woman living in Israel, I was born into a complex reality: on the one hand, there is the Palestinian national struggle against military occupation and for liberation and, in Israel, for equality; and on the other hand, there is the fact that I'm part of an ethnic minority within a national minority. I was always faced with a dilemma. What should take priority? Do I have to choose between the Palestinian national struggle and my ongoing struggle against racism as a Black woman in a patriarchal and racist society?

Since my early youth this reality has meant that I have to fight in more than one context. My feminist utopia can only be built in the understanding that we need to connect struggles. Feminism is not a sectarian struggle; rather we should be struggling to achieve an equitable world for all people. We need to take a clear stand for justice, and against militarism, colonialism, and racism. We need to stand in solidarity with all the struggles for justice around the world.

In my view, we as feminists in Palestine and Israel have taken a few steps back especially relative to those who are making the power-political decisions, and focused on social change and the provision of services for women facing violence. In my opinion, we have allowed a vacuum to emerge in the feminist struggle against the Israeli military occupation. We are facing another big challenge in addition to this: we are losing the younger generation. I ask myself, why are we no longer able to inspire young women?

I don't have a clear answer, but I think we can identify more than one factor that led to this situation. NGO-ization entailed women and feminist organizations working on definite «projects» that are limited to achieving minor changes, and come to an end once these are achieved, oblivious to the fact that we live in a constantly changing reality where new challenges pop up all the time. We need long-term strategies that enable us to deal with such a reality.

**«We need to take a clear stand for justice, and against militarism, colonialism, and racism.»**

Generally, however, it's not easy these days to find partners and allies for long-term political struggles. But without feminist solidarity, we will not be able to keep going. The support of women from around the world in our ongoing struggle is what will give us the strength to continue until we reach our goal, freedom.

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**Reem Amer** was born in a small Palestinian town in Israel and is a feminist and political activist; amongst other things she trains youth in gender sensitivity, non-violence and digital security.  
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Miriam Pieschke

«WHEN MOMMY  
GOES TO WORK  
EARLY...»



«**W**hen Mommy goes to work early, then I'll stay home. I'll put on my apron and sweep out the living room.» This East German children's song has perhaps already become a cliché, although or perhaps because so much can be learned from it about gender relations in the GDR. There is the mommy, who of course goes out to work, and the child, who takes over part of the reproductive labour. And, since the child is a girl, we learn a little later in the song that she's already practicing «being mother to a doll.»

I was born in 1981 in East Berlin in gender-specific (family) arrangements, as probably most GDR citizens knew them: children were put into crèche and kindergarten at an early age, and later almost all of them went to after-school care. They helped in the household, looked after younger siblings, and were often alone at home until their parents got back from work in the evening. Womxn were economically independent. They had a job that was important to them and, if they wanted to, usually became mothers for the first time in their early 20s. (In the late 1980s, over 90% of womxn in the GDR were employed, the majority of them mothers). Otherwise, from the early 1970s onwards, there was the legal possibility of abortion. Womxn could leave their partners and the fathers of their children without fear of the financial consequences. Being divorced, being a single parent, having children with different mxn, none of this was a scandal. Although everyday life was a particular challenge for single parents, childcare was geared to full-time (female) workers, and single parents (mothers) were given preferential treatment for the scarce crèche places and could not simply be thrown out of the apartment. This social security was a great help. And if a new mxn appeared in the mother's life, she would simply say: «This is the new daddy.»

**«Being divorced, being a single parent, having children with different mxn, none of this was a scandal.»**

Dads who did housework on equal terms, dads who remained present in the lives of the children even after they had separated from their mothers, and single dads were not known to me, although they did of course exist. *Aber Vati! (But daddy!)*, a popular TV miniseries from the 70s, portrayed a single widowed father who decides to remarry because he is overwhelmed by the care work.

Many East German womxn of all generations still refer to the positive aspects of these experiences today when presenting their views on gender relations. This partly explains why they often do not feel quite at home in the debates and struggles of West German-influenced feminism. Demands for collective care work, feminist language criticism, debates about sex work or queerness—when I brought such ideas home with me when I began studying political science in the 2000s, my mother was confused, with good reason: she thought some of these debates had long since been settled and others seemed trivial to her, while she found that the economic question was criminally neglected. Yet my new feminist verve was at least as justified and had as many gaps as my mother's insistence that she had already lived on equal terms in the GDR.

**«Today's debates could build on and benefit from the experiences of older and younger East German womxn.»**

In 1979, in the preface to Bettina Wegner's book *Wenn meine Lieder nicht mehr stimmen (When my songs are no longer true)*, Sarah Kirsch wrote that the GDR was a country «with which one grapples in the hope of

socialism». This was Kirsch's way of expressing her disappointment at how far so-called real socialism fell short of its ideals. And this is equally pertinent with regard to gender relations. It is true that equal rights for womxn and mxn in the GDR were anchored in the constitution of 1949, and proclaimed as the redeemed legacy of the proletarian's womxn movement in the form of the actual state of affairs. But in her article *Frauenfragen zum Marxismus: Marx, Engels und die feministische Debatte um Arbeit (Women's Questions on Marxism: Marx, Engels and the Feminist Debate on Work)*, sociologist Hildegard Maria Nickel speaks of «patriarchal equality», because legal equality did not simply abolish patriarchy. Rather, family and social policies, even if they brought great relief for womxn and families, consolidated traditional gender roles.

Which is why, contrary to what is often claimed, and also contrary to what many East German womxn remember, there were autonomous womxn's groups in the GDR that evaded state control and criticized many of the existing conditions. This is exemplified by, among other things, the 1995 documentary *Frauenengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre (Women's groups in the GDR in the 80s)* by Samirah Kenawi, or the anthology by Eva Schäfer et al., *Frauenaufbruch '89: Was wir wollten - Was wir wurden*



*(Women's awakening: What we wanted – what we became)*, from 2011. There were several reasons why these groups formed. Firstly, the rigid social structure left little room for emancipation outside of expected role behaviour and heteronormativity. In addition, the womxn of the GDR also recognized that economic independence did not lead to a fair distribution of domestic and care work. Even though the official aim of state-controlled education and politics was to bring about changes in these fields, the necessary care work remained a private problem of the womxn wherever social arrangements—public child care, etc.—could not help. And in the GDR, too, the career of womxn usually ended at the glass ceiling just above the middle management level. In her comprehensive documentation of autonomous womxn's groups, Kenawi distinguishes three main currents of the GDR womxn's movement: «A) The groups 'Women for Peace' as women's groups within the civil rights movement, as well as the non-church women's groups inside and outside the church, B) the church women's groups, C) the lesbian groups inside and outside the Working Groups Homosexuality».

The experiences of these groups, their debates and insights, have found little entry into Western-influenced German feminism. This is a pity; relevant insights, from which feminist debates could still profit today, are being neglected. Despite all the justified criticism of gender relations in the GDR, important feminist demands were met, above all the high level of employment integration and the extensive social infrastructure with regard to care work. But since new contradictions resulting from these became apparent, while other questions remained open, today's debates could build on and benefit from the experiences of older and younger East German womxn—from their questions, and also from their unease with at least parts of current feminist debates. In return, East German womxn of all generations who are involved in feminist debates have important contributions to make, as well as a lot to gain for themselves. My mother and I can still argue and learn from each other. That is good news.

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**Miriam Pieschke** is a political scientist and adult educator. She currently works at the Magdeburg-Stendal University of Applied Sciences.

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**Radhika Menon**

## FEMINISM FREES THE MIND FROM FEARS



Is it possible for humanity to liberate itself when half of it is in bondage? Is it even possible for anyone to be free when we live in a social order that allows human destiny to be determined by the unequal distribution of power and privilege? I arrived at these questions in my personal quest for freedom. It also led to the realization that my destiny, like that of others, was tied down by an unequal social order. Ever since, it has led to a restlessness, a clear sense that it need not always be like this. Things have changed in the past, and they will change in the future.

I find feminist ideas extremely important for moving towards an egalitarian and just world. Feminism challenges the authoritarianism that is deeply rooted in patriarchy, and frees the mind from fears. In the Indian context, it has enabled me to understand how caste is so deeply linked to women's subordination, and how feminism can chip it away. Feminism also exposes the machismo of the state and its functioning. It also shows how and why global capital preys upon women to feed its appetite for profit.

Feminism thus offers insights for anti-capitalist and anti-caste analysis. It strengthens struggles by challenging structures of power, domination and inequality. The eleventh of Karl Marx's Theses on Feuerbach is that «Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it». I find that feminist concerns are very closely aligned with this sense of change, of challenging the status quo. Feminism also frames the possibility for making social movements that are rich with creativity, kindness, and care. This is important if we are to move towards a world that is more aware and inclusive.

Women in India have to battle out a space for themselves under extremely challenging conditions. The country's colonial past, the long and complex history of caste, the remnants of feudalism in society, and the shift towards neo-liberalism are the contemporary contexts for feminist struggles.

For a woman, the domestic sphere is steeped in feudal values and the control of all aspects of her existence. A kind of protectionism, always in the name of security and honour, robs women of agency and autonomy. Feudal structures and familial control go hand in hand. A popular slogan in recent

years responds to this: «baap se bhi azadi aur khap se bhi azadihv» which translates to «freedom from the father, and freedom from caste assemblies».

At the same time, the neo-liberal capitalist marketplace makes a great show of offering women choice and freedom. But markets have mostly objectified women or considered them as consumers, confining their agency accordingly. While capitalist expansion has offered some financial independence, it has treated women as cheap labour, undeserving of labour rights and equal wages. Women are increasingly unwilling to function as a pliant player within an exploitative market that then periodically sends them back to the domestic sphere. In recent years, there have been huge mobilizations of women workers demanding that they be treated as genuine workers with full wage and labour rights.

While women have had to struggle for every opportunity, there are many obstacles posed by social norms, the internalization of inequality, and fractures in societies. When women try to overcome them, the law of the land, the state machinery and its overall outlook, remain protectionist when benign. However, in situations where the state is afflicted by patriarchal malignancy, it begins to throw its entire might into establishing that women are second-class citizens and inferior people. Such discourse has been at the core of recent right-wing populist movements. State violations and the denial of equal rights to women are commonplace. In cases of violence against women, there is a disturbing trend for the state either to align with the perpetrators of crime, or to act in the role of dishonoured patriarch seeking revenge. This has side-lined women's rights and placed the narrative within a medieval notion of justice based on honour and retribution. It has thus become increasingly important to assert justice for women within democratic discourses.

**«Things have changed in the past, and they will change in the future.»**

Women have fought and won places for themselves, after long struggles. Yet we do know that whatever chances do exist, these are often qualified not only by gender but also by class, caste, ethnicity, religion, and disability. In each of these situations, women rarely surpass men born in the same social location and circumstance.

Today the struggles are not only for the expansion of rights, but also for the preservation of what has been fought for and won in the past. As right-wing

populist movements align with the state, women are being planted on a mythical pedestal of «goodness». Corollary with this, women who refuse such narratives are declared «bad» and thereby deserving of violent retribution and denial of their democratic rights. New technologies and media are being deployed to harass and «troll» women who do not fall into line. Attacks on the minds of women are being launched from public spaces. Significantly, today, women are no more willing to give up what has been won, and young women are still coming out in large numbers to claim their public place. And there lies the hope.

When I say the struggles of women, it represents not only those biologically designated at birth as such, but also those who culturally choose to be one. They have a common struggle in a context where women are socio-linguistically positioned as being «weak» and social hierarchy thrives on machismo. Those who choose to be women are hence subjected to derision and disdain by a patriarchal, power-obsessed society. Feminist concerns hence bring those designated and those who choose to be women onto a single platform.

Freedom is a critical marker in the feminist movement of India today. This includes not only getting the freedoms that men have, but also expanding the freedoms of all people. This includes speaking up for the rights of

oppressed communities and resisting the politics of hatred. Feminist struggles have to be alert when reactionary forces try to stand on the shoulders of women in order to take aim at other communities and criminalize them.

This involves resisting majoritarianism

and authoritarian policy, and in fact has become the biggest struggle of Indian women today.

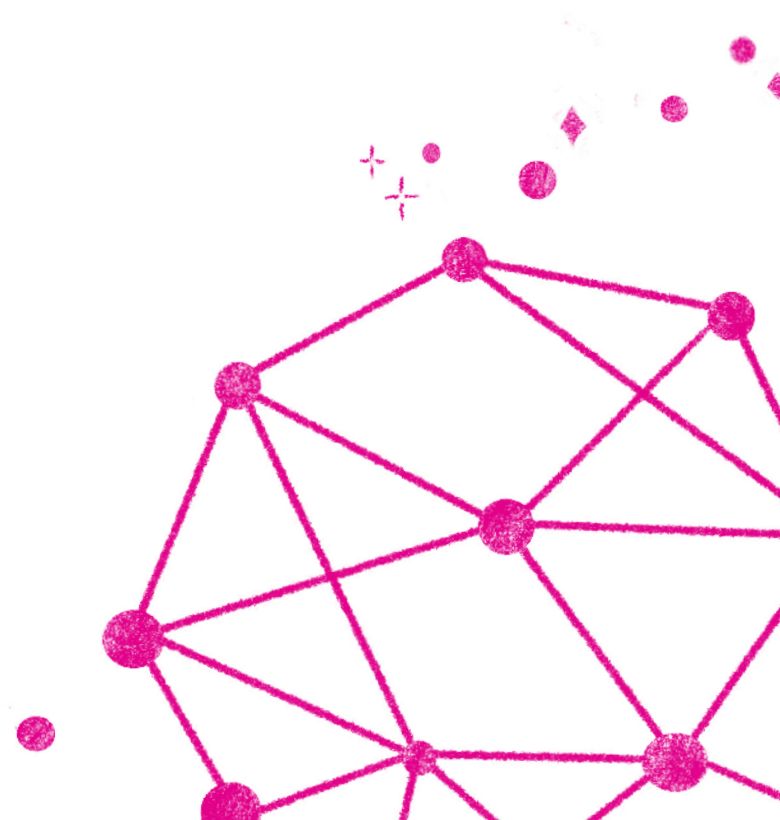
Increasing cooperation based on ecologies of love, equality, and freedom between human beings is not too much to ask for. Gender relations which are not based on domination and control are more likely in a society which allows for the public sustenance of all individuals. Here I recollect the slogan popularized by Karl Marx, «From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs», which I find as inspiring as ever. I think of a society where personal choices about cultural identity and sexuality do not infringe upon an individual's right to be in the world. A society where

diversities flourish, inequalities are overcome, and violations are absent. It may sound like utopia now, but it is possible. Struggles lead to it.

The feminist movement in India has built alliances with a variety of movements, by taking on the concerns of these struggles. Women have struggled for and taken on leadership roles in a variety of social-political movements. The alliances have led to discourses calling for greater democratization and equality. And it is in the course of these struggles that women also free themselves from centuries of enslavement.

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**«Feminism thus offers insights for anti-capitalist and anti-caste analysis.»**



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