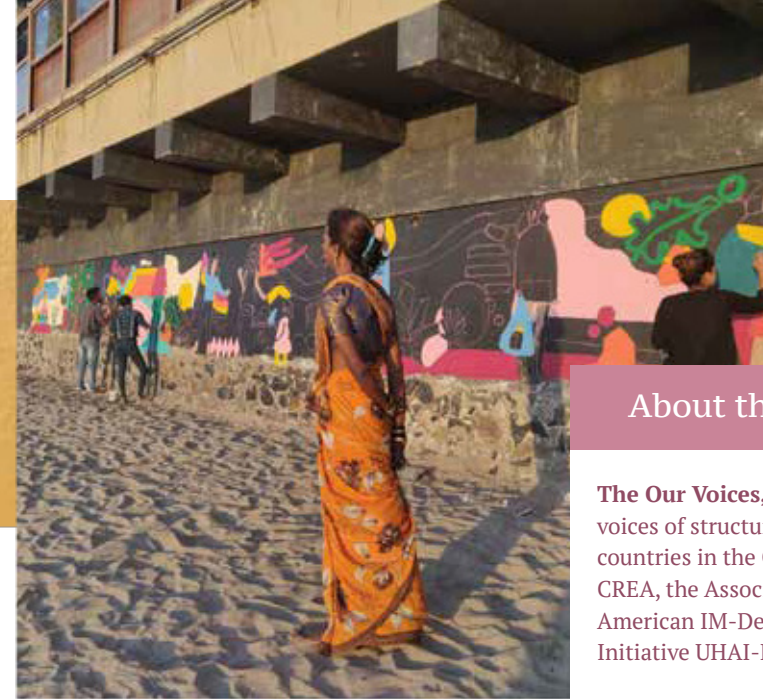


The school of holding on to hope

Where hard-fought rights perish, gender and equality rights are often the first to go down. For those already facing oppression and criminalization – women activists and LGBTIQ people from the Global South – it hits twice as hard. In this story, they speak up. “When I see the younger generation of feminists... Such power!”

Text: Marlies Pilon

Illustration from the Queer Muslim Futures collection of visions/utopias and dreams by Reya Ahmed



Members of Aravani Art paint a sea-facing mural in Mumbai, India.

About the partnership

The Our Voices, Our Futures consortium (OVOF) aims to amplify the voices of structurally silenced women and the LGBTIQ+ community in six countries in the Global South. The OVOF comprises the Indian organization CREA, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), the Latin American IM-Defensoras, the East African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative UHAI-EASHRI, and WO=MEN | Dutch Gender Platform.

“My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.” It is a famous quote by African American author Audre Lorde, who describes herself as black, lesbian, mother, warrior, and poet. In her activist and feminist poetry, she expressed anger at the way people of color, women, and the LGBTIQ community were silenced.

She called on all of society to break the silence because the lack of freedom for some ultimately means that we are all unfree. Those who remain closeted or do not speak out against injustice may think themselves safe. But Lorde encourages them to step out into the light anyway – because the only real safety comes from claiming acceptance, respect, and rights together.

It is a deep human need to be seen and heard. How can a community or society fully function when a particular part of it has no voice because power structures oppress it? In that context, writer Rebecca Solnit, who invented the term *mansplaining*, calls the history of women’s rights the history of silence and breaking it.

The people in this story can relate: among others, transgender and queer Muslims from India, women rights defenders from Mexico and Sudan, the LGBTIQ+ community in Uganda, and transgender people from Bangladesh are muzzled for their identity, work, or activism.

The purpose of discriminatory laws, taunting looks, or invisibility is to erase their voice from the civic and political space – and because of the conservative wind blowing over the world and an anti-gender movement that is well-organized and well-funded, many of these people’s lives are currently in danger.

Despite the lack of freedom, the harassment by police and neighbors, and the criminalization of these women, they embrace Lorde’s advice and let their hearts speak. It is high time we listened to it.

The first time she had to flee her home was in the summer of 2014. Sudanese soldiers raided her organization in Khartoum without warning: direct orders from the president at that time.

Fahima Hashim recalls watching her life’s work, the Salmmah Women’s Center, go under lock and key. In twenty years, it had grown into the beating heart of the women’s movement in Sudan. Via Zoom, she looks back wistfully on the early days of Salmmah.

“At first,” she tells us, “the focus was still on providing gender training to employees of big NGOs. In 1999, when the decade-long civil war between the government and the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) began, I decided to spend a year in South Asia.

“In Bangladesh, I attended workshops on gender and sustainable development, joined by activists and trainers from Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka. I learned a lot there, both from the farmers’ movement and from the Indian women’s movement. The focus there was on transforming the organizations through feminist leadership.

“Part of the intention was to improve the leadership skills of girls and women and to criminalize sexual violence within the home as well. These encounters changed how I saw the world – and made me proud to call myself a feminist. I was determined to turn all that knowledge and those encounters into pillars of the women’s center – to celebrate the cross-pollination of all that feminist wisdom.”

Hashim brought all the knowledge she had gained back to Khartoum. In addition to gender training, she also began attracting young academics with knowledge about building feminist movements and courses on transformative leadership for girls and women.

“Through Salmmah, we worked to build solidarity with other Sudanese women’s groups,” she says, “and we documented structural forms of violence against women at regional and national levels through campaigns. We increased political and legal pressure to change existing laws.”

Our highlight was *One Billion Rising*, the worldwide campaign

to end sexual violence against women: “That day, we chose to make a statement and danced through the streets with other women’s groups. You have to understand – in a conservative Islamic context, that was particularly radical! We shifted the boundaries by continually pushing the limits and created more space for participation.”

“That courage... it works infectiously, and I felt *completely at home in no time.*”

Until that day in June when the dictator’s men cleared out her women’s center. Not only did the books and materials disappear into the trash, but the symbolic heart of Sudan’s women’s movement became off-limits.

Two days after the forced closure of her life’s work, the dictator accuses her of “letting Sudan’s civilization project crumble.” Hashim says that it filled her with some pride nonetheless because that had always been her intention:

to dismantle the patriarchal system of violence.

She was no longer safe in Sudan. “It quickly became even more unsafe for me. Security agencies harassed people whom I worked with, and the country threatened to descend into war again. When I had to flee, it was the women’s groups that arranged for me and my infant daughter to apply for asylum in Canada.”

From that country, Hashim saw how fruitful her work had been because the women’s groups played a significant role in toppling the dictator during the revolution in 2019 – the iconic image being the young woman Alaa Saleh, on a car at sunset in a white robe, her hand forcefully in the air.

Hopes that the fall of the regime would usher in a new age of equal rights and women’s political participation in the peace process were, unfortunately, short-lived. Military fundamentalists ignored the female voice and supported a coup in 2021 that eventually led to another explosion of violence.

When the situation calmed down, Hashim decided to return in 2022. Although the Salmmah Center is no longer there, she talks about how impressed she is by the new generation of feminist Sudanese women on the streets of Khartoum.

“I met girls and women who had experienced the revolution, who were aware of the fight: they called themselves feminists! That courage... it works infectiously, and I felt completely at home in no time.”

But her mission is not easy: “I wanted to ensure there was more cross-pollination between the feminist groups so that our voice and influence become even more powerful. We wanted to create a safe space in Khartoum



Illustration from Queer Muslim Futures by Reya Ahmed

for sex workers and the LGBTIQ+ community, together with female human rights defenders and feminists. I can tell you one thing for sure: that was no easy task.”

Thanks to the revolution, there was nonetheless more openness; it was the right time. She remembers the first time very well. “Look, working with human rights defenders like myself is easy, but put together sex workers, feminists, and LGBTI people, and you are guaranteed fireworks!”

She used the knowledge about feminist leadership she learned during her journey through South Asia. “First, you use special assignments to ensure everyone relaxes and enters the body. Next, do exercises on unconscious biases: What is, let’s say, a good or bad woman?”

“It is about learning to listen without judgment and seeing through various interlocking forms of oppression everyone faces. What strategies do you use, and what can you learn from each other? How can you work together and protect one another?”

The cherry on top was the woman who stood up at the end of a multi-day workshop and said, for the first time in her life, “I am queer.” Hashim: “It was a touching moment.”

Almost a year after her return, she wakes up to gunshots: armed militias fight each other in Khartoum and drag the whole country into a new war. She hides in her home for two weeks until the rations are gone – that is when she, her infant daughter, and millions of Sudanese must once again flee.

“Our entire house was looted. There is so much you cannot bring when you have to flee: books, pictures, small trinkets that mean nothing to others... Sudan has become one of the biggest humanitarian disasters of the past decade.”

Now based in Canada, Hashim is doing what she can to connect young women and their families who fled the war, organize training for young activists, and provide gender-specific assistance to get people to safety.

“When I had to flee, I could count on the solidarity of a broad network of feminist organizations from India, Bangladesh, and East Africa – now I can make sure other women become part of this too, welcoming them into a warm international network.

Unfortunately, the most crucial demand of the women’s movement in Sudan remains the same: more input and a place at the peace negotiations table. Repeated studies show that the presence of women creates a prolonged and lasting peace. “When will the men who have been destroying our country for decades see the light?”

As Hashim’s story shows, speaking out for minority rights can be life-threatening. Human rights defenders like herself deal with intimidation and repression all over the world – and in her case, to such an extent that she has to organize her work from the diaspora.

On most lists of the world’s most dangerous occupations, logging workers rank first: for every hundred thousand loggers, an average of 111 of them lose their lives due to a severe injury or fall. Miners and crude oil haulers are also among the top five high-risk occupations.



Illustration by the Queer Muslim Project, which receives support from CREA. As OVOF’s lead organization, CREA develops and deploys activism to create social change.

Nevertheless, those shrink into insignificance compared to the work of human rights defenders like Hashim and the 69-year-old Isela González Díaz from Mexico: between 2012 and 2022, Global Witness calculated that a colleague was murdered on average every two days.

Just like her colleagues González Díaz has had to deal with physical and digital intimidation as well, and she too was bugged and threatened countless times. That is why the kind woman with shining eyes is now guarded 24/7 by armed men in military uniforms and has a panic button in her study.

What does she do? She is a human rights defender who stands up for the land rights of Indigenous people in Chihuahua, a state in northern Mexico. She is trying to protect the land and its inhabitants from illegal logging and mining – which is literally life-threatening.

While women globally own only 15% of all land, they are on the front lines worldwide to protect their communities from the violation of their rights and the destruction of nature.

“We are in the middle of a climate crisis,” says González Díaz, outraged via Zoom, “which is already causing millions of refugees through floods, forest fires, and famines... We know that polluting oil companies knew forty years ago that they were killing nature and the world – and yet it continues!”

“It affects girls, women, and the LGBTI community the most: they have contributed the least to the causes of a destabilized earth, but also fewer resources at their disposal to adapt and less say in climate policies.”

Although she could spend her days with a cup of tea on the porch,



I am not a gardener by Jordan, from Dhaka. This artwork was made during an activism workshop organized by the BRAC University in Bangladesh. It shows a transgender woman's love for a baby, in which the umbilical cord runs not from the womb but from the heart.

she does not stop her research, campaigns, and lawsuits despite the harassment. As director of the Alianza Sierra Madre (ASMAC), she works extensively with Ódami and Rarámuri communities, providing her organization with legal advice and training to defend their habitat and collective rights.

“Yes, I am a woman, and yes, I am a little older... I cannot deny that it gives me a kind of satisfaction to refute the misogynistic ideas of men in power: look how brave I am!” she laughs.

The reason there is little international attention to the fate of female land and human rights defenders like González Díaz may have something to do with financial interests. The narco-gangs form de facto power blocks in the area, and international corporations pay the Mexican government under the table huge sums of money for licenses to exploit finite natural resources such as oil, gold, and minerals: the engine of our destructive consumer society.

In light of the climate crises – about which Simon Stiell, the UN climate chief, said as recently as April that the next two years are essential if we are to save our planet – you would think González Díaz deserved a medal. However, after a fierce death threat a year and a half ago, even the courageous mother of two struggled to keep going.

She had to go into hiding and could no longer properly run her organization from afar: “In my shelter, I felt incredibly lost and very alone in my struggle. Frankly, I thought about giving up.”

“I cannot deny that it gives me a kind of satisfaction to refute the misogynistic ideas of men in power: look how brave I am!”

She is by no means alone in this: Amnesty International has been raising alarm about the threats and criminalization of female human rights defenders and environmental defenders for years. Governments and companies are now increasingly focusing on amending existing laws to isolate and silence women like González Díaz, who threaten their financial interests, from everything and everyone.

That is not unique to Mexico; it happens all over the world, and it has, in fact, significantly increased in the last few years, according to Alice Harrison from Global Witness: “While judicial systems routinely allow the killers of defenders to walk

free, they are also being used to brand the activists themselves as terrorists, spies or dangerous criminals.”

The political and legal space for criticism of a destructive system of exploitation and oppression continues to shrink. From her shelter, González Díaz, like her colleagues worldwide, hesitated: maybe she should just give up?

Fifteen thousand kilometers away lives Amina – for her safety, she prefers that pseudonym rather than her real name. When she tells us her “crime” it sounds like a sweet Netflix rom-com intro.

“When I was in high school, I met a girl from the soccer team. I saw her and was instantly bewitched. Soon, I could think of little else but the prettiest girl in the school... every day, I would count the minutes until the bell rang for lunchtime. I would sprint as fast as my weak legs could carry me to the cafeteria, where she always sat – then, I would admire every move she made from a distance.”

So much for the rom-com content: “I had very strict parents and no access to magazines or the internet. We did not get sex education at school, although they did tell us to wait with sex until marriage.”

Amina’s crush brought about confusion because she did not quite understand what was wrong with her. “I felt different, and no one was allowed to know. I lacked sex education about your body, sexuality, gender, and consent.”

While her friends giggled around the boys, she felt drawn to someone of the same sex. The lack of knowledge and contraception also impacts adolescents differently: students who get pregnant are expelled from school. In countries where abortion is illegal, it occurs more frequently than in countries where it is legal.

The only difference is that an illegal, unsafe abortion is often life-threatening. The only “salvation” for a young teenage mother is to hope the child’s father wants to marry you – that way, you avoid disgrace for your whole family and have a chance of some financial security... and a lifetime of dependency.

Amina’s fate was different. As a teen, she mostly felt misunderstood, frustrated, and all alone. She did not even have the words or the context to describe her feelings. Although she does have the information she lacked at the time, nearly twenty years later, as a black queer woman, she still has to hide.

Ten years ago, Uganda’s parliament passed one of the most deterring anti-homosexuality bills in the world. Last year, they took it a step further: a sexual relationship between two people of the same sex is even punishable by death in some cases. The same is true in six other countries.

According to the current Ugandan law, which the population vehemently supports, Amina is a criminal because she is attracted to women and, therefore, deserves life in prison. Just like the activism and work of González Díaz and Fahima Hashim are life-threatening, Amina’s life is in danger because of the gender of the one she loves.

Through the East African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative, Amina receives support for her work. UHAI EASHRI is the first African fund by and for sex workers, activists, and members of the LGBTIQ+ community, and works together with OVOF. For the Director of Programmes, Cleo Kambugu, a Ugandan transgender and queer feminist, it is primarily about asking questions.

“For me, the simple ‘why’ is one of the most liberating, insightful questions ever. Most problems remain because we stop asking ourselves questions: we blindly accept things without pausing to think about them and wonder why things are the way they are.”

Kambugu was one of the first Ugandan trans women to change her gender on her official papers. She nevertheless had to flee the country twice because of the draconian LGBTIQ laws.

The hate against the LGBTIQ+ community in Uganda originates from the anti-homosexuality laws that the strict Christian Brits implemented in a quarter of all African countries during colonization. “Not coincidentally,” explains Amina, “these are the same countries that now have the toughest laws against our community.”

That means the West exports virulent hate against people who do not fit into patriarchal and heteronormative boxes. Especially American Evangelicals – who lost the battle against the gay liberation movement in their own country at the end of the twentieth century – annually pour millions into the anti-gender movement of African governments.

With tremendous success: even renting a house to a gay, queer, or non-binary person is now an offense in Uganda, as well as not informing the police that your neighbor, uncle, or colleague is a member of the LGBTIQ+ community. Above all, the mandatory snitching constantly puts Amina on guard and causes her to lose her freedom of movement.

She calls it a true witch hunt: “We are literally not safe anywhere anymore.” In the living room, parents decide their abnormal child should go to “gay-conversion therapy,” in church, priests shout that homosexuals gather around schools to prey on children, and on television, the president says that the LGBTIQ community is a Western export product to destroy traditional society...

Tabloids like the *Red Pepper* feature pieces with titles such as *Kill the Gays*, including pictures and addresses of the East African country’s two hundred most prominent LGBTIQ members. “Everyone I meet,” says Amina, “could report me to the police. I have friends who were ‘correctively’ raped, with the idea of making them heterosexual through violence and coercion. Why? Would you like to spend a day in my shoes?”

The connection between Amsterdam and her location in Uganda completely falters and drops a few times – it seems symbolic of her situation, cut off from a free life. Or perhaps we are bugged? Fear is contagious, just like hate – as similar laws in other countries demonstrate.

Yet an identity or heart is difficult to cage: Amina found a way to connect and express herself. She runs a feminist art organization that strives for social justice and to end gender and sexual discrimination through poetry, photography, drawing, and painting.

“Art has an aesthetic value and works very well for advocacy. I believe in ‘activism’: where propaganda tells you what to do, art can stimulate empathy, imagination, and critical thinking. It can bring people of different ages, classes, cultures, and religions together because it speaks a universal and visual language.

“When, like us, you have to deal with complicated emotions, sometimes it is hard to put it into words, or maybe you do not even know the terms; you literally have no words for it. Some paint and a piece of paper can do wonders!”

She says that art allows her to question the violence and intimidation in a public space *without* having to be physically present – as a victim. This will enable others to sympathize with her life and raise awareness of her situation.

Artivism is a fusion of art and activism: artists are a mirror for society that can make people reflect on their ugliness, beauty, dreams, and brokenness. In this sense, artists are as much human rights defenders as activists, operating on a more emotional level.

OVOF wants to change how people think about gender, sexuality, power, and autonomy by collaborating with and funding feminist organizations and activists who use art and culture to expand their voices and change perceptions about them. Likewise, consider painting, poetry, movies, film festivals, and photo exhibitions.

For example, in India, Poornima and her organization, Aravani Art, work with a community of transgender people to create huge murals in public spaces to increase their visibility and break taboos in society. BRAC University students in Bangladesh work with the LGBTIQ+ community to create artworks that are up for exhibition, such as the fate of women in violent marriages or a painting of a transgender woman holding a baby whose umbilical cord connects to her heart.

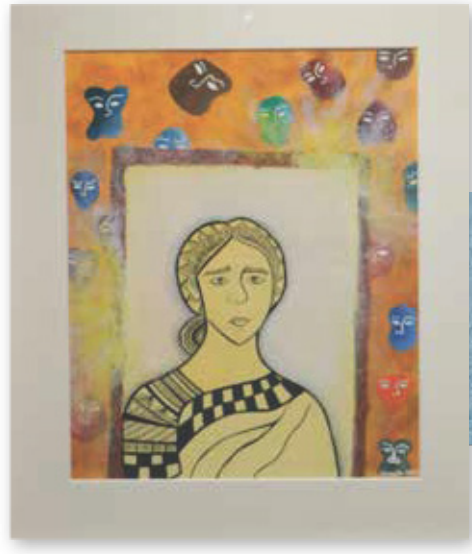
“They are on the front lines of a deadly hate campaign *against their own identity and feelings.*”

For many peers in Uganda, taking part in Amina’s free workshops feels like a form of therapy: they are socially and legally excluded from participating in society – which is why mental health is a top priority in the workshops.

“Many of them are bordering on burnout,” says Amina, “and that is not surprising: they are on the front lines of a deadly hate campaign against their own identity and feelings. We come together and create and build mutual solidarity and networks.

“This is nourishing for our hearts and our fight to survive, and it also relieves: when I write short stories, all my anger flows from my pen into the paper. As if a weight was lifted off my shoulders.”

After the workshops, the art is sold, and the money goes toward the most basic needs that the community lacks: food, water, and shelter. The level of stress within the organization is rising.



Sumaita Afrid Nuha is a student at the Birshreshtha Noor Mohammad Public College. She created these three paintings during an artivism workshop, depicting the “invisible pain” that women can experience in domestic violence, trapped in the anonymity and silence of the private space.

At first, there was a permanent studio, but when that became too dangerous, Amina chose hotels where she would stay with twenty activists for a few days to make art together.

Until a hotel owner said the police had been called and that they had to leave. “Now we always go to a city where we have not been, where there is the least chance they will know us – or we work in someone’s home, with the door locked.

“People do not enjoy being locked up like animals, but it is the safest way because then we can be sure no one will see us, eavesdrop, or call the police. I continue anyway: I have noticed that the human desire for recognition and justice is greater than the fear of violence or prison.”

The same was true for González Díaz when she was in her Mexican shelter. She remembers the moment well. “After weeks of drizzle, I woke up one morning and thought: *if I do not go back right now, I have lost... then they have succeeded in silencing me too.* That is when I came into contact with IM-Defensoras.”

That Central American network of organizations of women human rights defenders is dedicated to taking action together against the violence that women like herself experience because of their work, identity, or activism. Over the past fifteen years, they have gained a lot of knowledge and experience, thereby developing an approach they call feminist holistic protection.

It consists of a collection of values and strategies. In addition to providing immediate support for women at risk, shelters, digital security, and documentation of human rights violations, the network also engages regionally and internationally through advocacy, both political and legal, including to UN Special Rapporteurs.

“I learned then how, despite everything, you keep hope and may lean on the knowledge and networks already there,” González Díaz says. “I also became even more aware of how connected our fight against capitalism, racism, and misogyny really is... it gives a sense of solidarity that little can match.”

The most important thing she learned? “Together, you

are always stronger – both literally and figuratively. Make what you do visible and keep track of human rights violations according to established protocols. Do not let your fire burn out, but warm up by physically coming together and supporting, singing, dancing, and dreaming – that is how you keep your heart powerful and gentle.”

The vast network she became part of made her feel much less vulnerable and alone. Although she could still be hit at any moment by a bullet from a killer hired for a few hundred pesos, she left her shelter and returned to the Ódami and Rarámuri communities.

“I learned to see reality through different eyes, thanks to IM-Defensoras. We are working on a horizontal, connected, and embodied solidarity where our protocols and networks and being in the same space is a political weapon of resistance. In this network full of lawyers, rapporteurs, activists, and journalists, we hold on to each other and are each other’s lifeline.

“Taking care of yourself and your *compañeras* is essentially a deeply political and necessary step. Combined with love and the connection to nature, I feel unconditionally carried. I have realized that every activist needs that feeling to keep going in this world.”

At first glance, Hashim, González Díaz, and Amina might not seem to have much in common: one is a diaspora with decades of experience in the Sudanese women’s movement, the other is in Mexico fighting for land and human rights, and the third is in Uganda, connecting activists through art.

But those who look further see that all three lives are in danger because the ruling power or social norms use violence and exclusion against them. It is a patriarchal, heteronormative order that places man above nature, man above woman, straight above queer, white above black, rich above poor, rational above emotional, and mind above body.

Hierarchical and binary opposites are a relatively rigid and unequal way of categorizing an intimately connected, dynamic, contradictory,

and holistic reality and lead to the oppression and marginalization of those who are often at the bottom of such categories.

González Díaz learned to see the connection between the violence against the land and the Indigenous people and the violence against her body. By becoming part of the physical networks of feminist connectivity, she felt less alone and dared to leave her shelter.

For Amina, it feels liberating to give workshops to peers, each with their own story, and to share in creating art and knowledge to improve their situation.

Hashim stopped all her international feminist meetings at the center and had to flee the country, but she returned and continues to fight for the Sudanese women’s cause.

Many organizations and activists that support OVOF meet at the two-day interactive exposition and workshop space ARTivism in Action during the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the UN’s annual women’s summit in New York.

It included paintings by young people from Bangladesh, a screening about the *hijras* located there, and a movie about migrant sex workers with a subsequent Q&A. There were also workshops about using painting and poetry in activism and zine-making (magazines) about the dreams of the LGBTIQ+ community.

There are even more forms of international cross-pollination: IM-Defensoras has developed a training together with OVOF on feminist, holistic protection of women and LGBTIQ people. In it, the experience and knowledge of the Central American network will be extensively covered, and the strategies of activists from Uganda, Kenya, Sudan, Lebanon, Bangladesh, and India will be shared.

And OVOF has yet another pillar for building strong communities along different identities and locations: a feminist internet. Technical expertise is needed to achieve open and secure digital spaces, explains Smita Vanniyar, who works on sharing knowledge about the feminist internet on behalf of APC with all OVOF partners and organizations.

The primary focus is on the intersection between gender, sexuality, and technology: “Think about how gender-based violence can happen in physical and digital spaces. It is not one or the other and plays out differently for different genders, so the internet is certainly not gender-neutral.

“The reactions to a strong opinion of a heterosexual cisman from the North will be more substantive, while those directed at a young transgender person from India will be more violent and appearance-based.

“Precisely when you start looking at how oppression and structural silencing work in reality, you see that it is not just about oppressing voices. It is also about oppressing identities, deleting personal data, censorship, and surveillance.

“Here in India a while back, they used open and free software that targeted empowered female journalists from Muslim backgrounds. It had put their identities and photos online and auctioned them through an app.

Those kinds of actions to undermine journalists, activists, or human rights defenders are becoming easier with the increased use of fake photos and videos, and AI... The OVOF fund needs to be flexible in design to continue to respond to current events that are changing so quickly and to really understand the technology behind them.”

So there is work to be done, and it is all against the current. It is no coincidence that UN chief António Guterres said on this year’s International Women’s Day: “Patriarchy is far from disappearing; it is actually gaining ground.”

Under the guise of protecting “traditional family values,” the anti-gender lobby has declared war on the fundamental rights of girls and women and queer, trans, and non-binary people.

This Christian, heteronormative attack on the “gender ideology” originally came from the Vatican in response to the enormous leaps in gay and women’s emancipation from the 1990s. The Christian right frame was popular and has since been adopted by a group of nationalist populists.

Around the world, fearmongering images are rising of transgender people allegedly trying to “convert” young children or harassing women in bathrooms. In 2024, we see more countries worldwide banning abortion, even though a safe abortion is not possible in 80% of the world.

Almost 95% of all transgender people are forced to do sex work to get money because of discrimination – and because it is still illegal in most countries, it remains a life-threatening job. Meanwhile, we see on Instagram that “*trad wives*” is trending: women pursuing old-fashioned gender roles.

The U.S. has banned the sale of some anti-racism books, and the effort-filled DEI movement – designed to make organizations and companies more diverse and inclusive – seems to be slowly scaled back because it is supposedly “too woke.”

In other words, who will ensure we are not thrown back to the days of our grandmothers in terms of rights?

White women with privilege have claimed feminism for a very long time. Anyone who googles what “feminism” is will read that the movement was born in Europe at a time when most of the world was trying to rid itself of the burden and wounds of colonial rule.

Feminism in Western countries came in waves, ranging from the right to vote to the right to self-determination and empowerment to making individual life and career choices. Slowly, the movement grew to include more queers, transgender people, and women of color.

There was increased awareness of the overlapping layers of oppression and exclusion they experienced. Slowly, the realization grew that it is not just about fighting for increased gender equality and career opportunities, but that those injustices are connected, such as colonialism, race, and class – issues that the majority of the world must deal with.

OVOF is about amplifying Southern-led feminist solidarity: not surprisingly, Indian CREA is the lead organization, and Latin American IM-Defensoras is the strategic partner. Besides APC and UHAI EASHRI, the team does include a Western organization: WO=MEN | Dutch Gender Platform.

The latter wants Dutch stakeholders to take action to support female human rights defenders, LGBTIQ activists, and sex workers and give them access to international meetings, such as the Commission on the Status of Women and the International Court of Justice.

“Hope is necessary to continue, and I get hope because I know there are millions of us”

While it remains questionable to what extent the South has ownership over a grant formulated and spent by The Hague, it is crucial that intersectional feminism decolonizes and that the organizations in the South become central and decide for *themselves* what to give funding to.

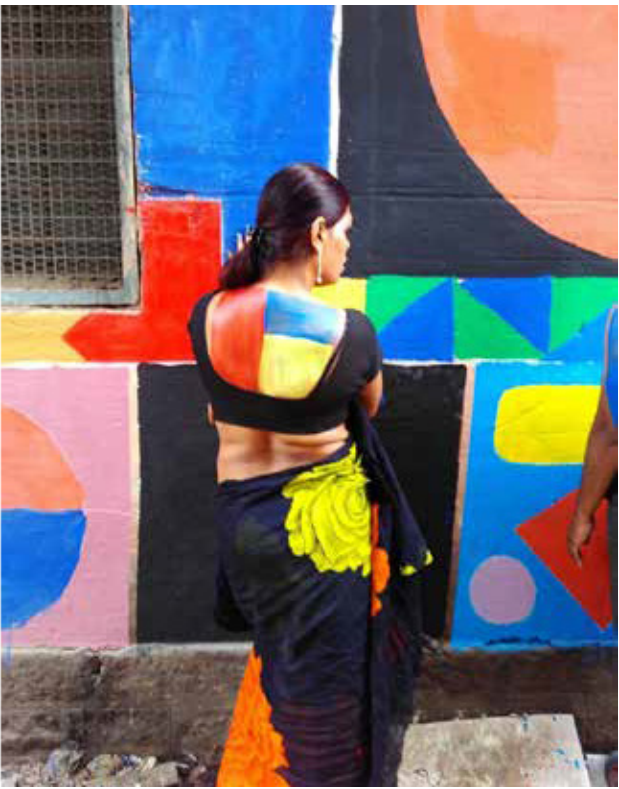
If only because the current system often deliberately avoids providing direct, flexible funding to feminist organizations and communities on the front lines. The requirements and hoops you must jump through are usually far too complicated..

OVOF’s organizations now act as intermediaries between the major donor and the communities, ensuring that funds truly reach the most structurally marginalized women. All OVOF members note that those who do not have official papers, speak only a local dialect, or are of the lowest class are still sometimes not on the radar. Moreover, 99% of all development funds still do not go directly to women’s rights and feminist organizations.

It is not the donors but the activists who know best how to use the funds to resist the pushback – after all, they live in that reality themselves. They are the experts, and they have the solutions. That is why it is important that they have a say in making policies that affect their daily reality.

The Netherlands has always been at the forefront internationally when it comes to funding activism by girls, women, gays, transgender, and intersex people fighting for more rights, space, and justice.

Over the last century, women’s rights organizations and feminist movements have achieved women’s right to vote,



A large city mural is painted in Bengaluru

expanded access to reproductive healthcare, education, and economic opportunity, and begun to enshrine gender equality and LGBTIQ rights at the domestic, national, and international levels.

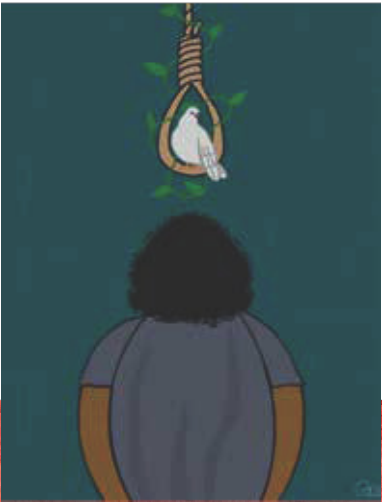
They need support to continue emancipation work, especially in times of crisis. If that support disappears – now that the new Dutch government has announced merciless cuts in the budget for international collaboration – it will not only affect all these communities, but the Netherlands will also lose its ties and influence worldwide.

González Díaz, Hashim and Amina feel supported and remain optimistic. Thus, González Díaz is looking forward to a lesson in *artivism*, Hashim feels safe thanks to lessons on the feminist internet as she digitally trains the new generation of activists in Sudan, and Amina is eager to learn about feminist protections from Latin America.

González Díaz: “I could never have imagined 20 years ago that I could connect with you now to talk across all national borders. That is truly a source of hope, and the great thing is: when I go offline later, I will still feel that connection.”

So, she is hopeful for the future? “*Si, tengo esperanza!*” she says with a wide grin. “I see how the younger generation of feminists is fighting for respect for their bodies and against violence and how they come together and claim space. Such power!

“Hope is necessary to continue, and I get hope because I know there are millions of us, and it is up to us to make a better world possible. We do not have to be exactly the same, but we do have to be united in the fight for justice for those who need it most.”



Taapan Das Gupta (Tanmoy) is passionate about creating artwork through drawing and painting, using digital and canvas media. In collaboration with a transgender woman, he made a series of three paintings that beautifully depict her life story, promoting understanding and empathy for gender-diverse people in Bangladesh