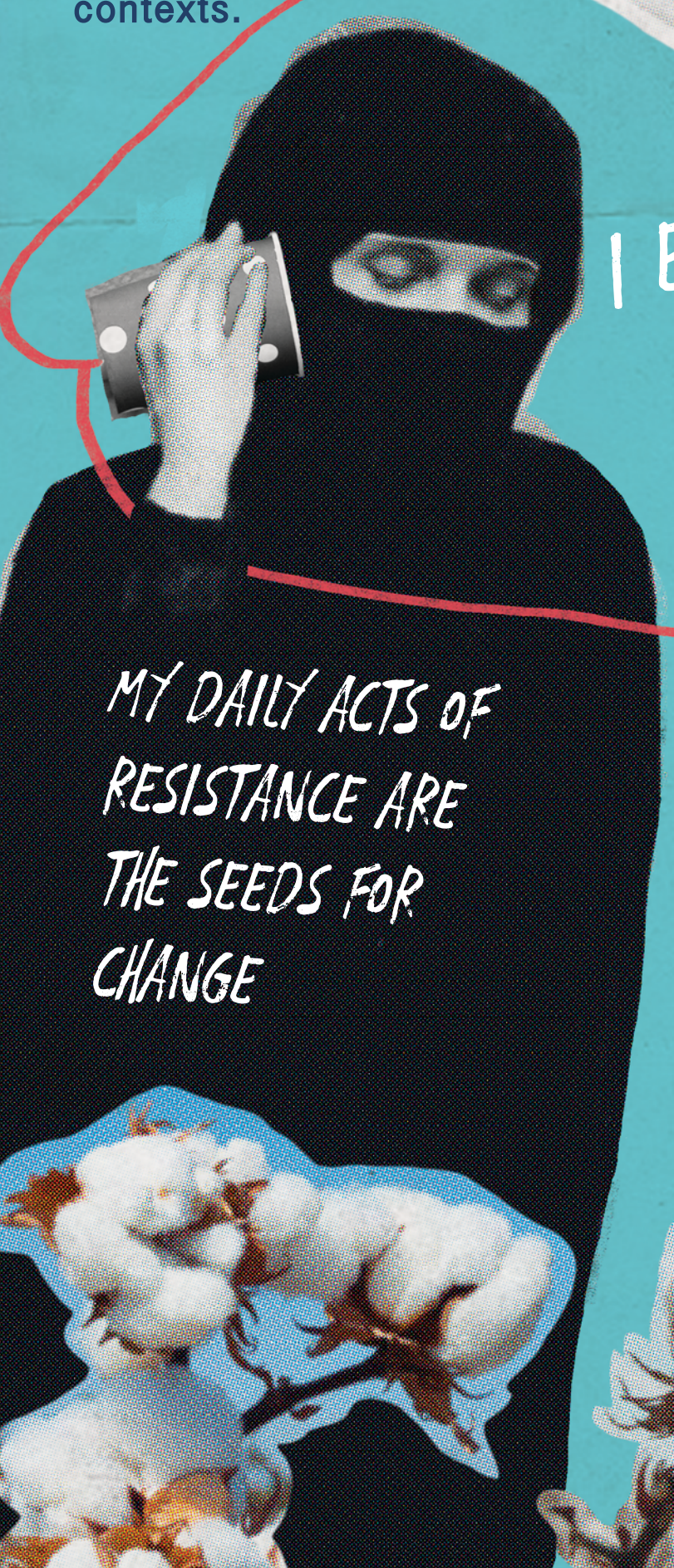
02

WORKING IN REPRESSIVE CONTEXTS

We reflect on and appreciate the different forms of resistance that are within our movements, **especially from women and girls working in repressive contexts.**





OUR ORGANIZATIONS DO NOT EXIST OUTSIDE OF THE POWER DYNAMICS THAT WE ARE WORKING TO DISMANTLE.

Working to end violence against women and girls (VAWG) in repressive contexts takes exceptional courage and creativity. This issue highlights our brave sisters **resisting in different forms.** We honor and celebrate them, share some of their tactics, and discuss how the global movement to end VAWG can join in **pushing back against fundamentalisms and repressive regimes**.

When we refer to repressive contexts **we mean cultural, social and political aspects that restrict the basic rights, equality, civic participation and safety of women, and aspects that normalize violence against women and girls.** Repression can include restricting our speech, movements, organizing, forms of dress, bodily rights, freedom to be us - to exist as women in society - all to maintain the power of patriarchal societies and structures, religious institutions, and discriminatory, xenophobic, or racist beliefs and policies. **These contexts pose great risks to our security and freedom as activists, including stigma, discrimination, lawsuits, incarceration, violence and threats against us, our family and friends**.

WHAT DOES RISING UP LOOK LIKE IN REPRESSIVE CONTEXTS OR ENVIRONMENTS?

Those of us who live and work in repressive contexts are forced to navigate the risks, fear and obstacles to plant small seeds of justice, peace and dignity for women and girls across the world. In order to make a change we must also strategize creatively as these contexts pose even greater challenges to dissent and push back against the cultural and social perceptions that sustain violence.

While all feminist organizing can face resistance and risk, some organizations and activists have more mobility and freedom of speech. **In repressive contexts especially, and on the frontlines, women and girls are policed and repressed more heavily**. Therefore, it is important to recognize the different forms of resistance that women are using as they navigate the power dynamics in their context to work for change.

CHANGE IS NOT LINEAR OR PREDICTABLE. STRATEGIC AND COLLECTIVE ACTION BY FEMINIST MOVEMENTS CAN SHIFT POWER, DISCOURSE AND REALITIES TOWARDS A JUST WORLD.



RESISTANCE CAN BE

Women organizing to challenge oppressive practices, policies or social norms on any level, local to global, and in many forms:



- **In contexts that constantly try to control, monitor, and restrict our movements, forming and organizing safe women-only spaces is a form of resistance**. Being together, walking, dancing, connecting, sitting, knitting.

- **Taking direct action when it is safe to do so** (blockades, boycotts, protests, vigils, petitions, strikes, and more).

- **Solidarity and protection for threatened local organizations and persons** - forging alliances with targeted, marginalized and more vulnerable groups.

- **Educating ourselves** - connecting to share knowledge, analyze power dynamics, laws and policies; knowing our rights.

- **Not speaking out - remaining quiet but visible in public spaces**; convening in private spaces, and respecting our sisters' decision to speak out or not.

- **Recognizing and celebrating incremental victories** - no matter how small or if they were in present or past - reinforcing historical memory, herstories, celebrating small steps.

- **Caring for ourselves** - self and collective care as acts of political resistance.

STRATEGIES USED BY SISTERS WORKING IN REPRESSIVE CONTEXTS

- **Careful communications:** Not naming incidents or issues directly when creating online campaigns to avoid surveillance. Encrypting our work to cover our online footprint. Saving all work to a cloud can be helpful in case our spaces are raided.

- **Digital activism:** Connecting to our diaspora groups abroad to help impact public opinions or change the official narratives about us and our work in our repressive contexts.

- **Collective protection:** Carefully designed strategies used by communities and networks to protect activists and activism that include proactive efforts to develop strong unity, shared leadership, and emergency strategies to protect targeted members.

- **Understanding visibility, privacy and safety:** Knowing what visibility of our work will attract broader support that will help us, and when visibility could attract more risk and violence.

- **Anonymity:** Can be an important tactic whether you are using an alias online or not signposting your organization's work space.

- **Safety first:** Tactics like group travel, allying with more accepted or neutral groups (church, universities), selecting a safe space, carrying out risk assessments before group activities, and assessing power dynamics so that our work does not put other women at risk.

FEMINIST FUTURES



✳ **Pausing:** Direct and public actions are not always strategic when the level of violence and repression that we can face as activists is very real. When we decide to pause, it is done for safety and to reflect. We know it is temporary.

✳ **Unlikely allies:** Lawyers collectives and legal aid services have been great allies when laws are changing quickly. In these moments, we need to work within the boundaries of the law while continuing to occupy the remaining democratic spaces that exist. Government employees of repressive regimes can also be unlikely allies.

✳ **Identify 'issue allies' within our movements:** Some organizations are in a safer position to address issues that put us at risk. Creating alliances with actors outside our contexts can be important when we have calls to action.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ABOUT WORKING IN REPRESSIVE CONTEXTS

✳ **How do we operate in times and places of shrinking acceptance of civil society and repression of civic participation?** How can we strategize among organizations to address attacks in our contexts, including: our supporters being expelled from countries, our bank accounts frozen, our organizations criminalized, and our activist sisters harassed, jailed, threatened and attacked?

✳ **How do we avoid isolation?** How do we mutually support and offer solidarity to others inside and outside our contexts in safe ways?

✳ **What safety strategies do we need to have in place while organizing?**

✳ **How can we avoid replicating patriarchy in our feminist activism and resistance?** Relations of power within communities and organizations may reflect ideas of leadership and strategies of resistance that replicate oppression and increase risk.

✳ **What kind of dialogue are we keeping with our donors, and our donors with us?** We need donors to understand our strategic decisions regarding advocacy and support our approaches to collective safety in risky contexts.

✳ **What do we need to understand about who and what is behind the violence and repression?** What does this tell us about power dynamics and sources of risk in our context?

TO GO DEEPER INTO WORKING IN REPRESSIVE CONTEXTS CHECK OUT THE RESOURCES IN THE ONLINE TOOLBOX

www.preventgbvafrica.org/understanding-vaw/zines

This magazine series emerged from a gathering of feminist activists working to prevent VAWG in the Global South co-hosted by Raising Voices and JASS.

JASS JUST ASSOCIATES Building Women's Collective Power for Justice

FURIA zine

Raising Voices