

PROTECTION, SELF-CARE AND THE SAFETY OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Simone Cruz and Jelena Dordevic

- *A perspective of feminists and black women* •

ABSTRACT

Threats against feminists, LGBTQI+ people and black women in their diversity are becoming increasingly evident. This violence exposes civil society's lack of preparedness to handle the considerable risks to human rights work, in the current political scenario. Therefore, it has become very important to act quickly, to guarantee the day to day safety of women defenders, but also to support sustainability and protection in the long term. The analysis presented in this article was produced based on the testimonials of nine women who are feminists and human rights defenders. This article is an appeal for the need to deepen reflection on developing protection mechanisms to respond to the way in which gender and race inequality operate in preventing women from claiming their human rights, from living free of violence and participating fully in democratic processes.

KEYWORDS

Activism | Self-care | Safety | Gender | Race

1 • Introduction

Since the victory of the candidate of the extreme right in the last Brazilian presidential elections, attacks on the human rights agenda have been numerous. This has had a direct impact on civil society organisations and movements in that there has been an increase in hostility towards activism and activists. Threats against feminists, LGBTQI+ people and black women in their diversity have been increasingly evident. Rural workers, community leaders, social movements, indigenous people, *quilombolas*, legal aid lawyers and organisations that support the process of redistribution of land continue to be extremely vulnerable.

Following the assassinations of the local politician Marielle Franco and her driver, Anderson Gomes in March 2018, safety and protection have become areas of concern for the majority of human rights organisations and social movements in Brazil. The impunity that transpired in this act of political violence exposed the lack of preparedness of civil society in handling the current political scenario and the considerable risks to human rights work.¹ Since then, it has been very important not just to observe and act quickly in guaranteeing the day to day safety of female defenders, but also to support sustainability and protection in the long term.

The analysis presented throughout this article was produced on the basis of the testimonials of nine women who are feminists and human rights defenders, collected from the results of consultancy work carried out by the authors at the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) Themis – Gênero e Justiça, in Rio Grande do Sul, and Criola, the headquarters of which are in Rio de Janeiro. Our principal concern was to look at the vulnerabilities to which women defenders are exposed in the context of the fight for human rights.

2 • Self-care and safety: concepts under debate

2.1 - Self-care

Although feminist movements have been making efforts for some years to make care and self-care part of the culture of social movements, there is no specific definition of these concepts from the point of view of activists. However, based on work that has been done in this field, we can confirm that they are being constructed and that the reasons why we are speaking about self-care in the context of social movements are also being looked into. On this basis, we have identified feminist activists' different perceptions about self-care which we will investigate here from two dimensions: internal and individual and external and collective, in the knowledge that these are directly correlated.

From the point of view of the internal and individual dimension, the concept of self-care, in the view of the activists interviewed, is experienced with contradictions. This is because, when they perceive a need to care for themselves, they have to deal with the sense of guilt

arising by their inability to respond to considerable external demands. As one of the activists said: “It is important to stop, hear yourself, listen to yourself, feel and pay attention when you are faced with something you never imagined you would go through and it is as though you cannot stop because everything depends on you.”

The above comment is similar to that of other women and the concept of individual self-care is identifiable as also being directly related to freedom. Also, when self-care is experienced as something collective, as in the *terreiros* (religious setting), this is related to spiritual care received in that particular space, as one activist who was interviewed mentions:

In the terreiro we have that thing of nurturing, receiving and caring. It really is [a place] for listening to each other, the terreiro nurtures, the terreiro listens, the terreiro gives guidance, the terreiro sets you straight. So, we are used to living like this, it's our way [...] So this thing of caring, of self-care, of caring for each other, is from the terreiro.

Meanwhile, the experience of self-care in the external and collective dimension is pooled from testimonials that bring to mind the idea of self-preservation related to external factors brought on by something threatening that is beyond individual control. As well as life-threatening, the practice of racism at all levels is considered to be a threat that is perpetrated by the State. This type of threat has been increasing and leading to different types of deaths: psychological; political and physical. Activists, principally black women, perceive and experience their options as limited when their lives are at risk. They are restricted to either facing the local threat or leaving and moving away from activism which means losing contact with other defenders.

2.1.1 - Self-care from the perspective of black women

When we focus on race relations, black activists present an idea of care and self-care that goes beyond the personal dimension: care in the relationships between activists as indispensable; reflection about the way this relationship is constructed and maintained and also the need to have a structured life, in other words, a guarantee of physical and emotional stability (or safety).

According to black activists, it only makes sense to think about self-care in relation to activism. Particularly when they acknowledge where they are and what they are doing. It is as though they perceive and care for each other from a point of view of ‘being’ in the struggle and facing important issues that are often not given priority. For this reason, in their comments they draw attention to the need for us to look at individual violence, racism and violence that happens within activism itself.

Furthermore, the structural issues indicated in the testimonials emphasise the need for

radical decolonisation of the body. And in this sense, self-care is an important strategy of activism in that it tackles the reasoning of the system by directing attention to processes in relationships with others.

We must bear in mind that for activists 'affecting' always pertains to relationships. So that, when we are reflecting on decolonisation we must take into consideration that, in indigenous communities, for example, the dimension of care is related to care of other individuals in the community – as well as of animals and plants.

For black women, the concept of self-care and care among activists is approached in an integral way. In a reflection of feminism, in a patriarchal society like ours, women are not constituted as autonomous beings, but rather as existing in relation to others. Women exist, therefore, to take care of men, children and the home. This situation is made worse by racism, because the condition of women existing to care for others, generates greater humiliation and subjection when it is racialised.

Despite many years' experience in activism, many of the women interviewed, often expressed the impossibility of 'being', as though they could not think of themselves, because they had to think of others. In this situation the formation of connections is very important for survival and to carry on the fight. The testimonials showed that the connections black women have with other black women are different from those they can make with white women and these connections are fundamental in facing a number of issues. When there is a recognition of equality, the fight is seen to have more possibilities. For this reason, a space of self-care must be established in the same way that ideas of resistance are established, like the case of the Black is Beautiful movement.²

Thus, self-care is understood as a space for affirming one's existence, that is not related to the individualism of market capitalism, based on competition and the absence of social relations. In this case, self-care is seen in both autonomy and in relationships with other beings. Autonomy is also formed in reciprocity and in solidarity.

For another activist interviewed, there is a need to radicalise the discussion and seek collective safety at the heart of the feminist movement. The effects of the process of the aforementioned colonisation of the body need to be investigated, given the high level of violence. This violence means, for example, that a black woman, even when dressed in white in a hospital, is not recognised as a doctor because of her colour. Worse still, it is often the case that the person inflicting violence on someone else is also subject to the same kind of violent situations, as they are black too.

On the question of violence between activists we identified a 'romantic' view of the feminist movement as being a space for meetings and discovering identity. However, it is noted that the violence seen in society is reproduced in these spaces. In fact, a way of strengthening relationships of trust, both personal and as a movement must constantly be sought, through

the recognition of the women's different ways of participating. How can other women be seen as being neither enemies nor competitors? These forms of violence must be acknowledged, in particular the damage that racism and sexism have caused us. And from this starting point the construction of collective strategies to fight these patterns in activism are needed, taking into account the human dimension, even when there is a tendency to see feminist activists as either heroines or villains who only do what they do for power.

2.2 - Safety

Safety, as a right, is unattainable for many people. The deterioration of the fabric of society caused by the advance of the neoliberal economic model, a legacy of impunity and a safety model based on police interventions, justified on the pretext of combatting drug trafficking, has served solely to oppress and control the population:

Safety is when you have the freedom to express your faith. Safety is when you can come and go without being made to feel uncomfortable by a police officer or a person in a shop, this is safety. Safety has never been exercised in our favour or to serve us. Safety is having a collective that will shout and miss you if something happens to you. So, I have to search around a little to think about what safety actually is. (Activist interviewed)

The context in which this analysis emerges is the increase in violence against women human rights defenders, particularly black women in urban and rural areas, as well as those who identify as lesbians, bisexual and transgender women and who work in different areas of human rights: sexual and reproductive rights; political participation; economic empowerment; land and territorial rights; women's rights; LGBTQI+ rights; the democratisation of communication and in the fight against the militarisation of the favelas and peripheries.

An understanding of the types of protection, care and safety these women human rights defenders need, stems, in the first instance, from pinpointing how women activists perceive safety. Which factors contribute to increased risks that can lead to direct attacks on them?

One of the factors that influences the experience of threats, risks and violence against defenders is gender. Women human rights defenders, along with anyone who does not conform with traditionally prescribed gender roles, are exposed to specific risks that must be considered in developing more suitable protection measures. Human rights defenders run great risks as they challenge the structures of oppression that contribute and feed into gender inequality, of which they are frequent targets. The system, that requires the subjugation of women, is maintained through a number of forms of violence against them: intimidation; threats; death threats; physical violence; online violence; defamation; sexual assault; disappearances; murder; attacks on their families and children; restrictions on their movement; sexual aggression and rape; homophobic, lesbophobic and transphobic attacks, silencing, isolation and censure.

However, we can affirm that the category of gender is not sufficient in discussions on the protection of women defenders. As racism is structural and is used to defend economic and political interests, as well as to justify the persecution of activists, a more complex analysis is needed to examine the inter-relatedness of oppressions that black women face. One of the activists interviewed, who identified herself as a black lesbian, said:

I think the risks we suffer, black women suffer most because racism is clear now. People are publicly admitting that they are actually racist. This means the following – we are more vulnerable and the risk we run is that everyone is arguing over our bodies [...] everyone is arguing about us, but everyone wants to dominate us, nobody wants to free us, everyone wants to speak for us [...] So we are under threat and we are the most vulnerable sector of all those who are vulnerable. It's going to fall to us, but we don't know what to do about it [...].

What are the dynamics that underpin violence against women human rights defenders from a perspective of race and gender? This was one of the questions at the national meeting of activists and organisations of women's human rights defenders convened and organised by Themis and Criola in June 2019, with the collaboration and participation of the authors of this article. At the national meeting we also sought to identify whether there is a difference between protection and safety and finally what the current imminent risks and threats faced by feminist organisations and black women's organisations are.

This meeting instigated a discussion on the creation of a network of Women Human Rights Defenders. In November of the same year, several of the participating organisations, met and formed a Network of Women Human Rights Defenders with the objective of establishing a benchmark protection, defence and safety network with a view to strengthening women defenders in order to preserve their lives and the lives of other women.

2.2.1 - Why do we need to talk about safety? What does this have to do with our political organisation?

As women defenders have achieved success in their political projects, some conservative sectors have been systematically organising, in order to suppress this part of civil society. Arbitrary imprisonment, murder, sexual violence against women defenders and defamation are just some of the strategies used by the State and by non-state players to restrict and limit the influence of the women who are at the forefront of social transformation.

In response, recognising the impact of oppression and systemic violence on their subjectivity and also on their ways of organising, these women defenders started to develop safety and protection strategies. Resilience, safety, well-being and sustaining their lives and the political fight are at the essence, in different places and under different names.

In 2006, the Kindred Healing Justice Collective, a network of women organisers and practicing healers in the area of health, from the south-east of the United States, started to use the term 'healing justice' as a concept to identify how we can holistically respond and intervene regarding trauma and generational violence. They presented individual and collective practices that can collectively transform the oppression of our bodies and lives. Based on the stories of the black organisers from the south, indigenous women, women of colour, LGBTQI+ people and allies, that connected the reality of generational trauma to the continued stories of slavery, genocide and the deprivation of economic rights based on a slave labour economy and on colonisation, 'healing justice' elevated the resilience and survival practices that are at the core of collective, emotional, psychological and spiritual safety and the environmental and mental well-being of the communities.³

At almost exactly the same time, in circles close to the Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights in 2007, activists started to look at self-care and the sustainability and integral safety of activism and activists. In the following years, the organisers started to speak about holistic safety, which led to the recognition that psychological/psychosocial well-being and physical and online safety were fundamental components of strong movements and organisations.

3 • Self-care as a political strategy of the feminist and black women's movement

According to Ana María Hernández Cárdenas and Nallely Guadalupe Tello Méndez,⁴ self-care not only ensures the sustainability of the social movements, but is also a politically ethical stance that involves the analysis of working practices and of relationships at the personal and collective levels.

In 2009, the Fund for Urgent Action for Latin America and the Caribbean (FAU-ALC) was set up, with headquarters in Bogotá, Colombia. It originated from the Fund of the same name in the United States. FAU seeks to strengthen activists and the social movements in which they partake. Through fast response to the injustices and inequalities experienced by women defenders facing risk situations, the Fund places full protection and care at the centre of its work as an organisational culture. To this end, FAU created a specific programme on sustainable activism,⁵ following the publication of the book "What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance?"⁶ This programme promotes space for reflection and strengthens abilities and potentials through training sessions, thus seeking to build a culture of prevention to transform the practices of activists in conditions of well-being and physical and emotional health. In this sense, FAU considers the concepts of self and collective care to be inseparable, and treats them as the body-territory, in other words physical and virtual body as indivisible parts of this care.

In Brazil, in January 2014, the Feminist Collective for Self-Care and Care among Activists was created by seven women who are feminists and activists. In a meeting that lasted three

days, at the home of one of the activists in Cabo Frio, in Rio de Janeiro, they talked about themselves and about their experiences and feelings in activism. The objective was to open up a space for exchange and reflection on activism and self-care practices as well as care of each other (reciprocity of care), in feminist organisation and social mobilisation.

The idea of creating a collective with this objective arose following the critical situation experienced in the same year, by a feminist, the organiser of the Slutwalk. After the event, she was exposed to a series of misogynist and fundamentalist threats, that were investigated by the police. She experienced a situation of high vulnerability that affected her physical and mental health. The Collective was thought up with the intention of deepening reflection on what was happening with each one of the activists, their bodies, hearts and minds, as one of the members, Rogéria Peixinho, reflects:

When we look at 'our world' we notice that many of us, after years living and working as activists, are feeling exhausted, disillusioned and disconnected, with no idea of the meaning of all of this, in other words we are tired! Some of us have already decided to leave the spaces where we have been working, others are ill, some have said "I don't have any more to give. I need to look after myself so I can carry on our feminist and antiracist struggle," and others have not found ways to fortify themselves. The stories that we have heard from many of the activists/feminists with whom we share organisational spaces and articulation of the movement, put us in check. These are issues that have been making us feel uncomfortable, discomfited and have caused a number of activists of the women's movement and feminists to make changes, both from a personal point of view and from the point of view of militancy!⁷

The psychologist Maria Lucia da Silva,⁸ from the AMMA Psyche and Negritude Institute, reflected on the themes of self-care and safety, stating that they are directly related to each other and involve thoughts and actions related to healing. In this context, the activist talked about the subject mentioning how racism should be faced by the feminist movement from a perspective of care and safety:

As we are talking about a diverse movement, in order for the matter of the care and safety of activists to become effective we need to understand that racism is not just a matter for black and indigenous women and that confronting racism means giving up the privileges that are preserved by racism. This is the only way we can really work as a collective.

In the same vein as Anna Haddad's⁹ statement on growing interest in the matter of self-care, related to the political crisis in the country, the journalist, Helena Bertho wrote an

article in which she recounts her conversations with activists who have been working on the theme with a view to understanding why the word 'self-care' has become so urgent among black feminist women activists in the country.¹⁰ She noted that the activists' demand for self-care is a criteria in continuing the struggle, in the current political scenario which is becoming less tolerant and increasingly extremist.

When the matter of care and self-care is related to health we see that this is not a new topic in the feminist and black women's movement. Commitment to life, because of the damage caused by slavery, due to the cultural differences of the diaspora, sexual violence, psychological and physical violence and the loss of children, situations that are still experienced today by black women, has always been a focus of attention of the black women's movement. The doctor and activist Jurema Werneck¹¹ highlights black women's need to talk about health through the lens of self-care:

Health in this case is more than a pretext. It is a privileged place to explain who we are. For us, health goes beyond fighting disease and is closer to the concept of general, physical, mental and psychosocial well-being, as defined by the World Health Organisation. Furthermore, we propose a definition of health that includes seeking a dynamic balance of life and its elements, living and dead beings, humans, animals, plants and minerals. And this search translates into individual and collective responsibility. This responsibility can also be read as the power of fulfilment. The terms axé (from Yoruba) and muntu (from Bantu) can mean the same... discussions on disease and imbalance affect us and our capacity to act and transform.

Speaking about their own voices has been an instrument of care for black women for years. Observation and admiration of themselves is a construct of individual and collective care.

4 • Conclusion

It is important to take into account that the concept of "human rights defender" does not have a universal meaning for women and men. A community leader who fights for the rights of women and suffers persecution is also a "women's human rights defender."

The distance that separates the threats, and even execution, suffered by people with public profiles from those faced by activists who fight for social change on a daily basis can create a skewed functionality in the way protection programmes for defenders, of both sexes, are conceived and carried out. This can occur when one profile of activist is privileged (a man who is a public figure) and other profiles (woman, black, indigenous, young) and their daily work become invisible.

As a central element of this conclusion, we bring an appeal for the need to deepen our reflection on the development of protection mechanisms that respond to the way in which inequalities of gender and race operate to prevent women from claiming their human rights, living free from violence and participating fully in democratic processes. For this reason, we see the existence of the Network of Women Defenders as the principal strategy to drive actions of protection, safety and self-care for women activists in Brazil, as it is only in these spaces that collective struggles can grow stronger.

Therefore, organisations, foundations, institutions and individuals who support men and women defenders of human rights must make a commitment to the political fights of these segments and consider specific aspects that mark each social context, such as regional and territorial particularities, race and gender ethnicity and access to the public resources of justice and safety.

NOTES

1 • For example, a few months after the assassination of Marielle Franco, the left-wing congressman Jean Wyllys, the political candidate Marcia Tiburi and the lecturer and feminist activist Débora Diniz left the country fearing for their physical safety.

2 • A movement created in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s as a means of subject affirmation at both the personal and political levels with a view to confronting racism.

3 • "Healing Justice: Building Power, Transforming Movements," *Astraea*, 2019, accessed July 21, 2020, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/astraea.production/app/asset/uploads/2019/05/Astraea-Healing-Justice-Report-2019-v7.pdf>, 10-11.

4 • Ana María Hernández Cárdenas and Nallely Guadalupe Tello Méndez, "Autocuidado como Estrategia Política," *Revista Sur* no. 26 (dec. 2017), accessed July 21, 2020, <https://sur.conectas.org/o-autocuidado-como-estrategia-politica/>.

5 • "Sustainable Activism," Urgent Action Fund – Latin America and Caribbean, 2020, accessed July 21, 2020, <https://fondoaccionurgente.org.co/pt/que-fazemos/ativismo-sustentavel/>.

6 • Jane Barry and Jelena Djordjevic, *What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance?* (United States: Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, 2007).

7 • Internal documents. Feminist Collective for Self-Care and Care of Activists (2014).

8 • At the event Women in Movement Dialogue: Rights and New Directions, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, in 2017 held by the *Elas* social fund.

9 • Helena Bertho, "Autocuidado: A Próxima Fronteira do Feminismo (E Que Deveria Ser Estendida A Todas As Mulheres)." Marie Claire, December 30, 2018, accessed July 21, 2020, <https://revistamarieclaire.globo.com/Comportamento/noticia/2018/12/autocuidado-proxima-fronteira-do-feminismo-e-que-deveria-ser-estendida-todas-mulheres.html>.

10 • *Ibid.*

11 • Jurema Werneck, Maisa Mendonça and Evelyn C. White, orgs., *O Livro da Saúde das Mulheres Negras: Nossos Passos Vêm de Longe* (Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, Criola, 2000).



SIMONE CRUZ – *Brazil*

Simone Cruz is a psychologist, has a Masters in Collective Health, is a member of the Cultural Association of Black Women in Rio Grande do Sul and of The Articulation of Brazilian Black Women (AMNB). She is one of the founders of the Feminist Collective for Self-Care and is a member of the Guidance Committee for the Urgent Action Fund for Latin America.



JELENA DORDEVIC – *Serbia/Brazil*

Jelena Dordevic is a feminist activist. She was born in Serbia and has lived in Brazil for 8 years, assisting a number of feminist and human rights organisations. She has a Masters in Migration Studies from the University of Sussex, in the UK. She is one of the founders of the Feminist Collective for Self-Care. She has worked on the prevention of violence against women and the trafficking of women in the Balkans. She is co-author of the book “What’s the Point of Revolution if We Can’t Dance?” (Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights, 2007). She was on the Board of Directors of the Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Right. In the last 12 years she has been working on improving the practice of self-care and on the protection of human rights defenders around the world.

Received in June 2020.

Original in Portuguese. Translated by Jane do Carmo.



“This journal is published under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License”