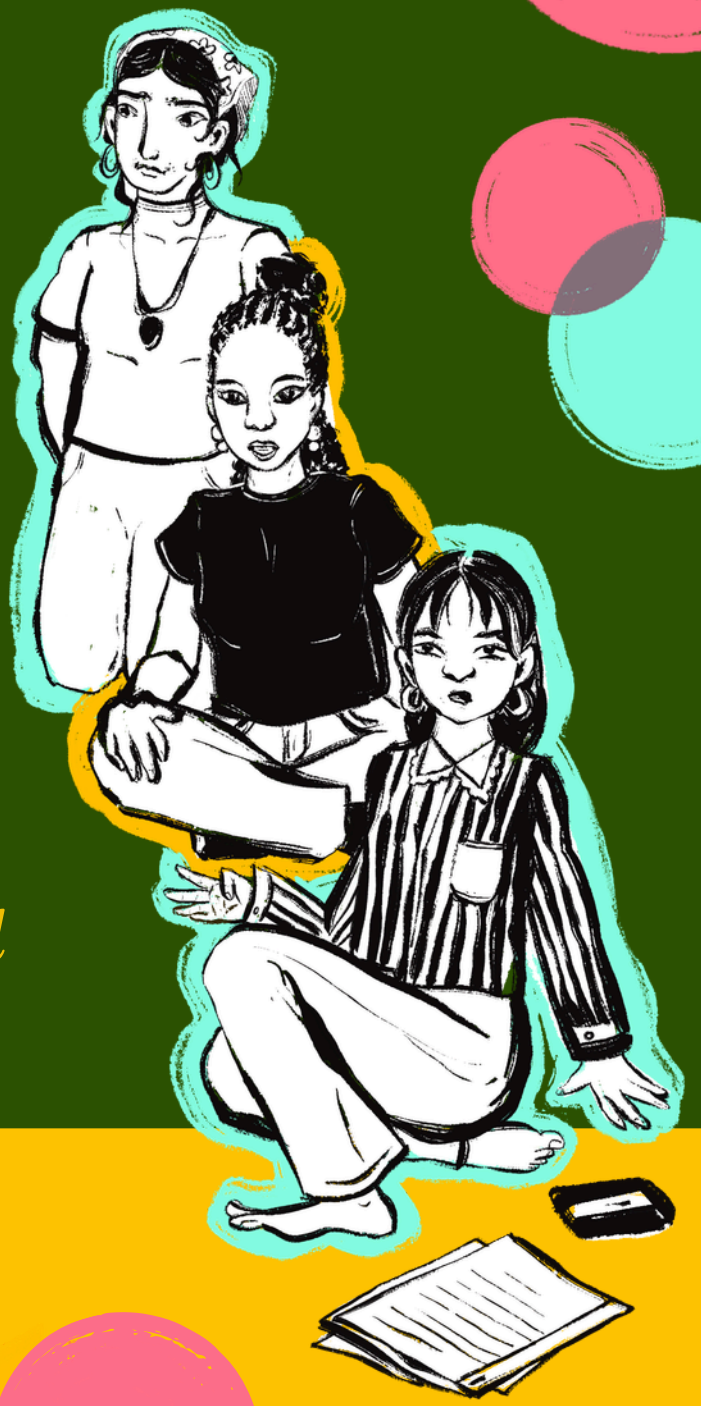
Ask **harder** questions, *Imagine* **different** futures:

reflections on gender-based violence work





Convening partners

Just Futures Collaborative

COFEM

APC Association for Progressive Communications

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Acknowledgments

This document reflects a three-part Thematic Dialogue on Gender-based Violence convened by the *Association for Progressive Communications (APC), COFEM, Just Futures Collaborative,* and *Realizing Sexual and Reproductive Justice Alliance (RESURJ),* between February and April 2026.

This document synthesizes the brilliant minds that came together to think critically, build nuance, and advance alternatives to criminalization in relation to gender-based violence (GBV).

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- **Alessandra Pauncz** (Italy)
- **Anne Gathumbi** (Kenya)
- **Dana Zhang** (Taiwan)
- **Elizabeth Onyango** (Kenya)
- **Erika Smith** (México/USA)
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This document was collectively written and edited by the co-convenors of this thematic dialogue. We thank **Kika F.B.** for her support and input in designing and producing this document.

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August 2026

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Contents

Background 4

What's in this document? 5

GBV in the current context 6

A dynamic understanding of GBV and who experiences GBV 8

GBV and the Law:

- What are the benefits of having laws that recognize GBV in our contexts? Does the criminal law help to reduce incidents of GBV? 11
- Do GBV laws, which are gender-neutral, harm our efforts to combat GBV, or do gender-specific laws work better? 12

Consent and GBV 14

Addressing GBV: *Punishment and services* 16

Justice beyond the binary of "perpetrators" and "victims" 18

Hierarchy of harm and victims 19

What does it mean for something to work? 21

The role of feminists in activism to end GBV 22

Feminist strategies to advance in our activism to end GBV 23

Background

22 feminists came together across time zones, geographies, languages, issue-based silos, and different ways of working, to ask:

What is the future of gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and activism?

We are feminist academics, activists, community organizers, service providers, journalists, researchers and lawyers. We come to GBV work from different vantage points: working at the intersections of violence and caste, disability, sex workers' rights, HIV, drug use, digital rights, war and militarization, LGBTIQ rights, young people's rights (including sexuality), sexual and reproductive justice and restorative justice. We occupy strands of advocacy and organizing at different scales, from the hyper-local and national levels to the regional and international levels.

Across the globe, GBV is well-recognized as pervasive and persistent, leading to consistent and widespread feminist engagement with the issue.



Decades of feminist activism has demanded states recognize GBV as a grave human rights violation. These strategies were aimed at protecting those experiencing domestic violence and other forms of GBV. However, the current response infrastructure has largely relied on punitive and carceral measures, punishing individual perpetrators at the expense of system change, survivor-centered care and community healing and well-being.

These measures—while strategic in some ways—have proven imperfect: often discriminatory in their implementation, and ineffective at best, they are also ill-equipped to address newer dimensions of GBV such as technology-facilitated GBV (TFGBV). They often cause further harm to survivors and their communities, as they rely on a logic of cruel, state-sponsored violence to counter violence.

To this end, we came together to grapple with dilemmas and concerns, to listen to and learn from one another, and to collectively envision alternative pathways for justice, towards cultivating violence-free communities.

What's in this document?



This document offers a taste of our collective reflections, dilemmas, and enduring questions from these conversations. It is intended to give you, the reader, a sense of how this exercise went and how our different points of view guided us toward both consensus and divergence.

You can find:



Questions,

"Quotes",

Perspectives,



and, when possible,

Collective conclusions.

Feel free to read them all, or go to the theme that interests you.

In some sections, you will find tools, reflective questions, and practical exercises to invite more candid and critical conversations about your own work, or for leading discussions within your own community/network/organization. You will see these prompts in **highlighted boxes**.

Food for thought

Through sharing these reflections and documenting the path we took, we hope that you—our allies, colleagues and friends in GBV and gender justice spaces—will feel less alone as you grapple with difficult contexts and complex questions in your own work. We found it easier to be curious, critical, analytical and vocal about the limitations of GBV response strategies we encounter, when we did so together. We can all feel more hopeful that, through dialogue, we can arrive at more sustainable, humane outcomes for all affected by violence and injustice.

GBV in the current context

"How do we build communities where violence doesn't feel inevitable?"

As we began our conversations, we quickly agreed that since GBV does not occur in a vacuum, responding adequately requires us to transcend our issue-based silos. We felt a collective sense of overwhelm and despair when considering the current polycrisis. We felt validated in our decision to come together, to sit and accompany each other's feelings and concerns.

We live in a world where new forms of GBV are emerging every day. Digital technologies like AI have complicated the problem of GBV, expanding how harm can be inflicted and spread, and creating complexity in achieving accountability. Urgent crises, such as environmental degradation and climate change, authoritarianism, wanton military destruction, occupation and genocide, unprecedented corporate greed, economic inequality, extractivism and exploitation, and the surge in global migration patterns bring new challenges for those working on GBV.

"It's difficult to think about gender-based violence in isolation when we are also living through war, militarization, and political violence. These forms of harm are deeply interconnected, but hard to hold together."

All this happens against the backdrop of major fissures in multilateral systems and the breakdown of international cooperation. Major international donors are defunding gender equality work, including GBV work, with escalating attacks on the inclusion of "gender" in national, regional and international law and policy. Increasingly, many states are abandoning their commitments to addressing GBV.



Criminalization is a favored tool of oppressive, anti-democratic regimes, as they wage war on bodily autonomy, freedom of expression and the right to protest, migration and gender justice. Many bad faith actors weaponize legitimate concerns about GBV for their own agendas, and under the guise of "protection", expand surveillance systems and violently police borders. They divert public resources to carceral and punitive policies, while divesting from, and openly undermining, effective feminist strategies—all in the name of GBV victims.

Meanwhile, the violence itself continues unabated.



What came up for us when we talked about GBV in the current context:

It is essential to expand the lens. Interpersonal violence is not separate from structural violence, war and genocide. GBV is often imagined as an act of violence between two persons, where one is the victim and the other the perpetrator. However, our experience shows us that the violence that occurs within families or relationships is connected to the violence that is perpetrated by the state against entire communities.

Even when manifestations of GBV may appear different, these various forms share systemic, interlinked roots. Traditional masculinities prop up and protect the people and the institutions that do the violence, who are often connected by corporate greed and fascist agendas.

"It's very hard to feel like, in the way things are organized today, that we have any leverage to change the course of things, but how do we stay hopeful that we can?"

A dynamic understanding of GBV: *Who experiences and who perpetrates GBV?*

When we engaged in an exercise to define the parameters of GBV and name those we think it harms, we generated many diverse responses. We agreed that GBV is a systemic issue, emerging from social, political, economic, and cultural structures and settings that shape behavior and dictate who is harmed, who is punished, and who is granted impunity.

While there are many ways to think about how to define GBV and who experiences it, we wanted the conversation to disrupt normative or traditional ideas about GBV. We wanted to represent the diversity of perspectives and experiences in the room, while acknowledging our group's limitations in achieving an exhaustive list. Some under-recognized forms of GBV came up in our discussion. They were:

Carceral violence

Incarceration is an unrelenting, violent experience marked by state brutality and impunity. Gender plays numerous roles within carceral settings: it shapes who can be seen as a victim of violence, who as a perpetrator. For example, this renders the violence invisible when men are brutalized or tortured, or grants impunity to female correctional officers who engage in violence. It marks trans and gender diverse persons in prison settings for further violence.



State violence

"States enact violence to build legitimacy, mainly by weaponizing of concerns for safety and security. Governments surveil and censor, and deploy military and police violence in our public spaces, at our borders and in detention centers. For example, in Uganda, police violence has gone as far as removing women's clothes during arrests."

Institutionalization

People with disabilities experience physical and sexual violence, and coercive control, at the hands of caregivers, both at home or within institutional settings. Some people are institutionalized in prison-like settings that create enabling conditions for interpersonal and structural violence.

GBV in medical or health settings

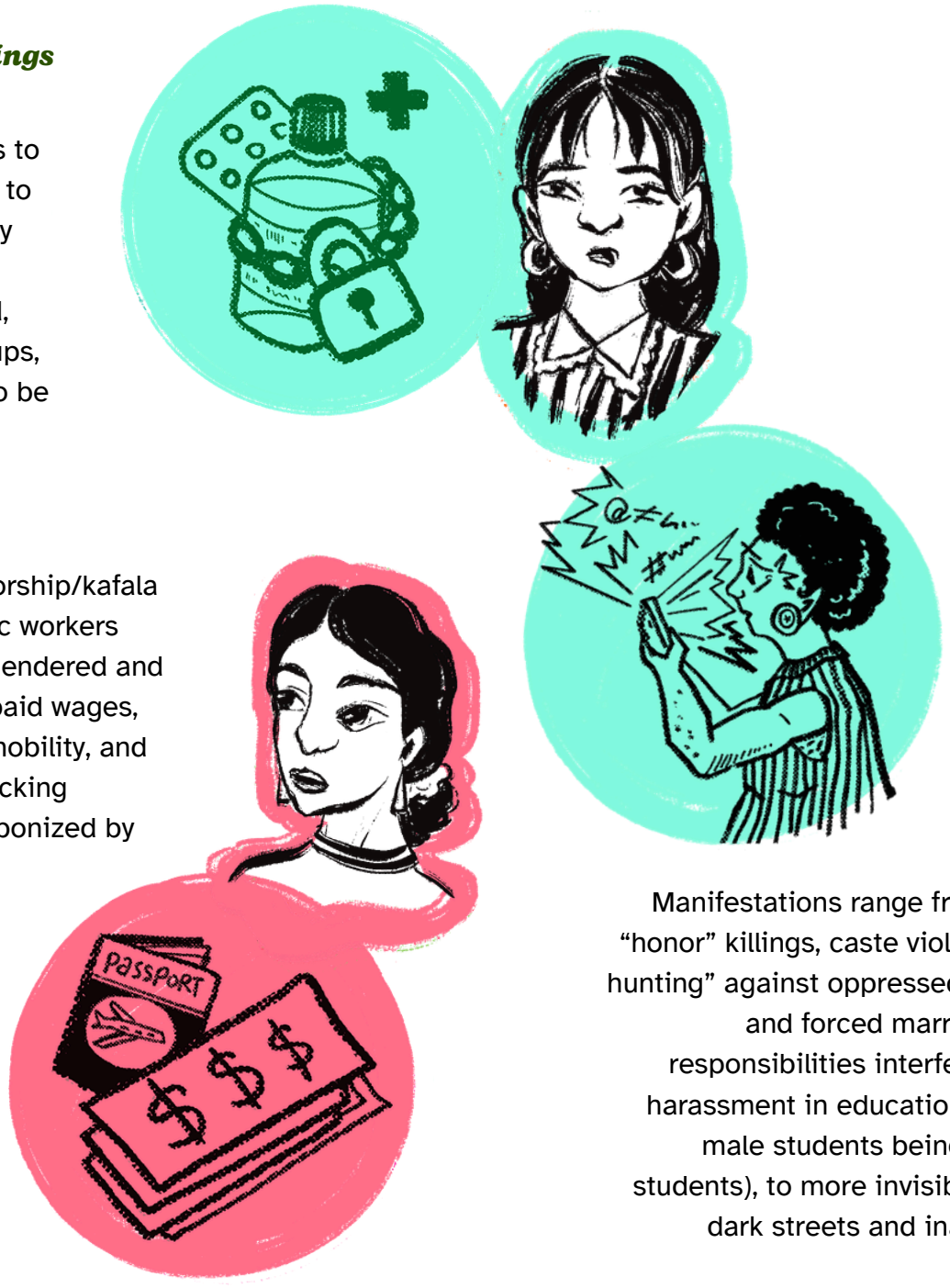
Medical institutions frequently discriminate when granting access to services and violate people's right to bodily autonomy, often informed by stigma. For example, obstetric violence in hospitals is normalized, especially among minoritized groups, to the extent that women expect to be mistreated during childbirth.

Sponsorship/Kafala systems

In parts of the world where sponsorship/kafala systems operate, migrant domestic workers lack proper protections and face gendered and racialized violence. Many are not paid wages, have restrictions placed on their mobility, and are criminalized by the state for lacking papers—only to have this risk weaponized by exploitative employers.

Financial abuse and control

Although this is one of the primary manifestations of GBV, it is perhaps one of the more invisible, least documented forms, and one which often enables multiple types of violence.



Technology-facilitated GBV

Emerging technologies such as AI facilitate TFGBV. Numerous problems with the current technological paradigm impact us: disinformation campaigns during disasters, elections and military conflicts, AI-generated non-consensual content targeting women, user data collection and sharing without consent (e.g. menstruation tracking apps), the use of AI in warfare, as well as labor issues such as content moderators' (mostly in the global majority) exposure to harmful content with no mental health support.

Social/cultural violence

Manifestations range from more explicit forms such as so-called "honor" killings, caste violence (such as mob lynchings), and "witch hunting" against oppressed communities, to practices such as early and forced marriage, gendered carework (e.g. girls' chore responsibilities interfering with academic achievement), sexual harassment in educational settings (e.g. professor harassment or male students being pressured to facilitate access to female students), to more invisible forms, such as poor urban design (e.g. dark streets and inaccessible spaces that amplify the risk of violence).

Food for thought

These are some questions for you to answer on your own, or for your group to discuss in a candid conversation.



What are some manifestations of GBV that are most pertinent in your context? Who is affected by them, who is held accountable? How do they look?

In your experience, have you observed or experienced advocacy for criminalization to protect against any of them?

Are any of those manifestations of GBV similar to the ones documented here?

How are they connected? Do they arise from the same systemic issues?

What potential strategies do they bring up for you? For example, do they make you think of new laws? Do they make you think of community care or services?

GBV and the Law

Some questions arose about the law's role in recognizing, preventing, and addressing GBV. Although we couldn't capture every perspective, here are some of the questions and answers we discussed, noting that we didn't always reach consensus.

What are the benefits of having laws that recognize GBV in our contexts?

In some contexts, laws about GBV have symbolic and practical value because they provide language, recognition, and a basis for claiming rights — even if they are criminal laws.

In some other cases, laws have also created new issues for survivors due to their failure to recognize the structural nature of GBV. These laws also fail to serve GBV victims when they are sex workers, LGBTIQA+ persons, young people, poor or class/caste oppressed persons, disabled persons etc., who are targeted for criminalization, (e.g. for consensual sexual behavior), and who face discrimination within the legal system. The law has never been neutral.



In many other cases, simply having laws has not translated into protection, accountability or justice, especially where institutions are discriminatory, patriarchal, or authoritarian. Our discussion raised the question of whether failures lie in the law itself, in its implementation, or in the broader system of power within which the law operates.

Does criminal law help in addressing GBV?

We made an effort to distinguish between criminal/punitive laws and laws that recognize rights. Based on the context, the moment, the community, we may understand the harms and benefits of criminal law differently. We also have to grapple with the reality that criminal laws are never applied equally, even when they are implemented.

"A lot of survivors and victims—justice for them is seeing the person in jail or paying a fine. So for me, then, if I'm a feminist, and...my value is to...center the victims—so if the victims want that, how can I be against it?"



Should GBV laws be gender-neutral or gender-specific?

We grappled with the utility of laws which contain the implication that any person can be a victim or perpetrator of GBV vs those which assign gender to the category of victim in their language, for example, India's "Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act" (2005) or the United States' "Violence Against Women Act" or VAWA (1994).

While some of us were concerned that gender-neutrality can obscure the gendered nature of GBV, others noted that having gender-specific GBV laws has historically tended to erase the experiences of trans, queer and gender diverse persons when they face GBV.

We learned that in some of our contexts, particularly those that are restrictive, using gender-neutral language has been the only way to secure passage of a GBV law, thus making this decision strategic.

Food for thought

During our sessions, we played "The Spectrogram" exercise to help us make sense of our different points of view around certain questions.

Use this tool with your colleagues or friends and document what things you agreed on, what you did not agree on, and what nuances came to light.

Instructions:

Read out the following statements and arrange yourselves along a spectrum based on your personal positions, from **Strongly Agree** to **Disagree Strongly**. Discuss after each statement. The goal is not for everyone to agree, but for everyone to share why they stand where they do. After some discussion, people should be allowed some time to shift their position along the spectrum if they so wish! Here are some examples:

"Criminal law works better than other kinds of law to reduce incidents of GBV."

"Some perpetrators of GBV must be incarcerated if survivors are to feel safe."

"If criminal laws against GBV were fairly and equally applied,
I would support criminalization of GBV in some cases."





Consent and GBV

During our discussions, we agreed that consent is central to our work on GBV, yet it remains sticky. Since much of the carceral and punitive system relies on neat narratives about victimization and violence, there is little room for a more nuanced acknowledgment of consent from the victim. If the victim admits that their own consent played a role at some point, their story may be disregarded and their voice discredited.

Particularly for specific groups whose consent is frequently disregarded or used against them, such as sex workers, victims of trafficking or labor exploitation, young persons, or persons with disabilities, systems designed to "protect" become powerful tools of control.

In one exercise, we delved into three scenarios: obstetric violence and the issue of mandatory reporting; young people's sexuality and the criminalization of their sexual behavior; and non-consensual digital sharing of personal erotic images—who should be held accountable?



This discussion presented us with substantive complexities. Key concerns emerging across the discussions were:

- **Treating victims as active subjects with agency.** Asking them about their own ideas of what happened and acknowledging that their consent matters, while also addressing more subtle domains of violence, such as control, coercion, manipulation—naming power imbalances.
- **Consent should not derail accountability:** When the victim reports consenting in any way, they are held responsible. Consent should not be treated as a binary yes/no.
- **Multiple "perpetrators" and the question of who to hold accountable.** Because of the systemic roots of GBV, there is not usually a single person who is responsible, and many can participate in the violence in different ways, including by turning a blind eye.
- **Always prioritize systematic or institutional responsibility**, rather than relying on individual responsibility to report violence.

We teased out some overarching strategies to guide our work:

- Building institutional systems that do not rely solely on individual whistle-blowing, such as internal accountability processes that reduce individual risk and prevent retaliation.
- Prioritizing measures that center safety, security, repair, and healing rather than punishment or criminalization as a first response.
- Dismantling harmful power hierarchies and cultures of impunity within institutions, which can act as a shield for the powerful when they participate in abuse.
- Creating safe conditions for disclosure, especially for the most marginalized communities.
- Supporting community members to identify harmful dynamics and violence.
- Restoring agency to the person harmed when harm is reported.
- Targeting systems, culture, and norms (e.g., advocating for public ownership of digital material) in our advocacy.

Food for thought

Justice can mean different things to different people and even vary across contexts. To shed some light on those particularities, we ran a scenario exercise. Give it a try with your team, or run it as an experiment on your own.



Instructions:

- Develop scenarios derived from real-life case studies. Draw from your legal context and weave in aspects of cases with which you may have dealt.
- The scenarios should put you and/or your group in a particular role (e.g., you are a group of lawyers, or doctors, or a community organization offering services to a particular community), and pose a challenge to you in some way.
- Try to answer: What are you going to do next?
- After you've done this work, discuss:
  - *Were you able to come up with responses outside the criminal legal system, or that did not propose punishment?*
  - *If not, how many steps did it take before you arrived at a criminal legal response/punishment?*
  - *If yes, where did you draw those ideas from?*

Here is a scenario we used:

You work for a nonprofit focused on digital rights. A young person approaches you because some personal erotic photos of them were shared without their consent, and they want to take action. They tell you that they took these photographs one year ago and sent them to their now ex-partner, whom they have not talked to in a while.

When reached out to, he insists he did not distribute or send the photos to anyone, but that his phone was stolen a few weeks before, which may how others were able to access and leak them. What are your next steps?

Addressing GBV:
Punishment and services

When discussing our advocacy, activism, and the tools we use to address GBV, we talked about punishment and services. This sparked a lively discussion, multiple points of view, and no easy consensus.

It was clear that many of us approached the concept of "services" differently, including when they come into play across the prevention-response spectrum.



"When I hear 'services-based,' I think of something that comes in to play after the harm has already happened. I feel it focuses on the outcome, not the root."

"I think of services as prevention. When services are provided equitably and robustly to a community, it can act as a prevention measure against future violence."



We also grappled with the issue of punishment — specifically, incarceration — of perpetrators of GBV. We take the issue of danger and harm to victims seriously, while also acknowledging the severity of incarceration and the deprivation of someone's freedom.

"I believe there are situations in which someone is extremely dangerous, and some form of containment is necessary to stop harm—but that is not the same as saying incarceration produces justice."

While some of us felt that incarceration could be instrumental in bringing about a feeling of safety for the victim, many of us agreed that incarceration on its own cannot deliver accountability, justice, or even real safety for victims.

We broadly agreed that incarceration temporarily interrupts the initial form of violence rather than serving as a transformative response. Others also pointed out that, in their experience or contexts, incarceration commonly exacerbates instead of reduces violence; thus, it does not have the potential to ensure “no repetition” of harm.

When we talked about contexts of war, or instances of large-scale state violence and atrocities—e.g. Sudan, Syria, Palestine—we found ourselves left only with questions and uncertainties. We grappled with the practical use of tools such as prosecution and incarceration for GBV in these contexts, on the one hand, and their long-term futility, on the other.



“In contexts of mass violence, like what we are seeing in Sudan, it becomes very difficult to think about justice outside of accountability for large-scale harm, but even then, incarceration alone does not address the systems that produce that violence.”

After this conversation, we are left with some questions:

- *Are services alone enough?*
- *Is punishment needed, in some instances?*
- *Can we have containment—especially if the perpetrator could harm again—without punishment?*
- *How can we realize justice without addressing the systems that produce violence?*
- *Are “services” the opposite of “punishment”?*

Beyond the binary of “perpetrators” and “victims”

The existing systems for accountability in our world produce categories of “perpetrator” and “victim,” even though this binary does not reflect real-life experiences of violence.

We know that many people who end up perpetrating GBV are often victims of family violence, social, state or structural violence and exclusion. Perpetrators of GBV are conditioned into violence by patriarchal social norms and structures—the common point of origin for GBV, for which there is no accountability.

“Perpetrators are a result of a system of violence that is asking them to be violent.”

Incarcerated individuals are often survivors of violence, and face further violence in carceral settings, raising questions about how these existing systems reproduce harm and keep people trapped in cycles of violence.

Traditional justice systems create simplistic categorizations, and require people to be “good victims” before they can be afforded services. This leaves out many survivors of violence (e.g. sex workers, migrant persons, drug users) who do not fit that criteria.



When people demand incarceration as a measure for justice, it is because they believe that it can create a sense of safety for victims.

Nevertheless, the group also emphasized that safety is deeply contextual and varies by individuals and situations. Safety cannot be equated with justice, and incarceration is not a reliable pathway to achieving either in the long-term.

“The system requires you to identify as a victim to access it, but people’s realities are much more complex than that.”



A hierarchy of harm and victims?

We discussed relativity, the quantification of harm, and deciding on what is "proportional". Some questions arose:

- How do we—or can we—measure how much harm has occurred?
- How do we validate experiences of violence in ways that do not exclude or sideline other experiences?
- How do we find a pathway which acknowledges the material impact of harm?
- How do we validate in a way that honours the fact that various experiences of harm can be different—but are linked?
- In this context, how do we contend with structural/state violence, such as genocide, GBV as a tool of war, occupation or conquest?
- How do we hold space for complex experiences of structural violence without creating a hierarchy of harm or victims, that invariably tells some victims that their experiences are "not as bad" as those of others?
- How do we contend with violent systems, such as prisons or psychiatric institutions, or violent social institutions, such as the family?



Instead of thinking in hierarchical terms, we concluded that it serves us better if we think relational terms:

- What is the relationship between the violence that takes place within homes and the violence in a carceral setting?
- How is the violence in a psychiatric institution related to violence within an intimate / family relationship, where "care" is a factor?
- How is violence of war related to interpersonal acts of violence in our communities?
- Essentially: how do violent institutions/states/societies (which shape us all) inform the way in which we do or experience harm ourselves?

Food for thought



“Not all violence is equal.”

Some of us who work with the practice of reparations highlighted that this work forces us to quantify harm in a way that is unique and may be uncomfortable. We have to make distinctions between different kinds of violent incidents, because we have to propose reparations.

Here, we have to deal with the factor of “proportionality”: the reparation has to feel *proportional* to the harm done.

Can you think of a reparations process for your workplace or collective?



Instructions:

- Sit together with at least 3-4 other colleagues and decide what steps you should take if someone in your group harms another person.
- Start with, how the person who was harmed should make their case known. Who should they talk to? What should that person then do?
- End with what reparations would look like, and what it would require from both the person who did the harm and the person who was harmed, as well as you, the collective.
- Do the same exercise with a different example of harm. How different is reparation looking in each case? How much harder or easier was it to achieve a realistic reparation in each case?

What does it mean for something to work?

As our conversations progressed, a question lingered:
If not what we have now, then what works?
Inevitably, we arrived at the question of:
In the context of GBV, what does it mean for something to "work"?

We strongly felt that we need to move beyond binary perceptions of "victim" and "perpetrator," to grapple more courageously with the grey areas of GBV response and prevention, and to be more honest in our conversations with each other.

Transformation should be central to how we understand justice. We want to move beyond approaches that focus only on individual redress/individual accountability and instead address the systems that shape and enable violence, and communities which are impacted. Our approaches must engage multiple levels of engagement—e.g. working within our communities, as well as to shift law and policy—and we should work together to move beyond fragmented responses.



"If we say something works, we have to ask: Works for what? For punishment, for containment, or for actual change?"

"There is no single intervention that works on its own."



We see that entire communities are impacted by GBV and therefore, communities should be a part of the solution. Justice is not delivered solely through formal systems, but requires collective responsibility, building ongoing relationships, and creating the ability to continue living and working together after harm has occurred.

Can we rethink systems meant for punishment as systems meant for transformative change, repair and healing?
Would this be enough?

"What works in one moment may not work in another. In Syria, sometimes immediate measures are needed to prevent harm, but that doesn't mean they are a long-term solution or that they address [the issue of] justice."

To realize justice, we need:

- Holistic responses that combine legal and other services, policy change, community involvement and a focus on well-being, without defaulting to criminalization.
- Institutional cultures of accountability, instead of mere reporting mechanisms that rely solely on individual action.
- Restoration of agency and autonomy to the person harmed, and transformation of the person who did the harm and their communities.

The role of feminists in activism to end GBV

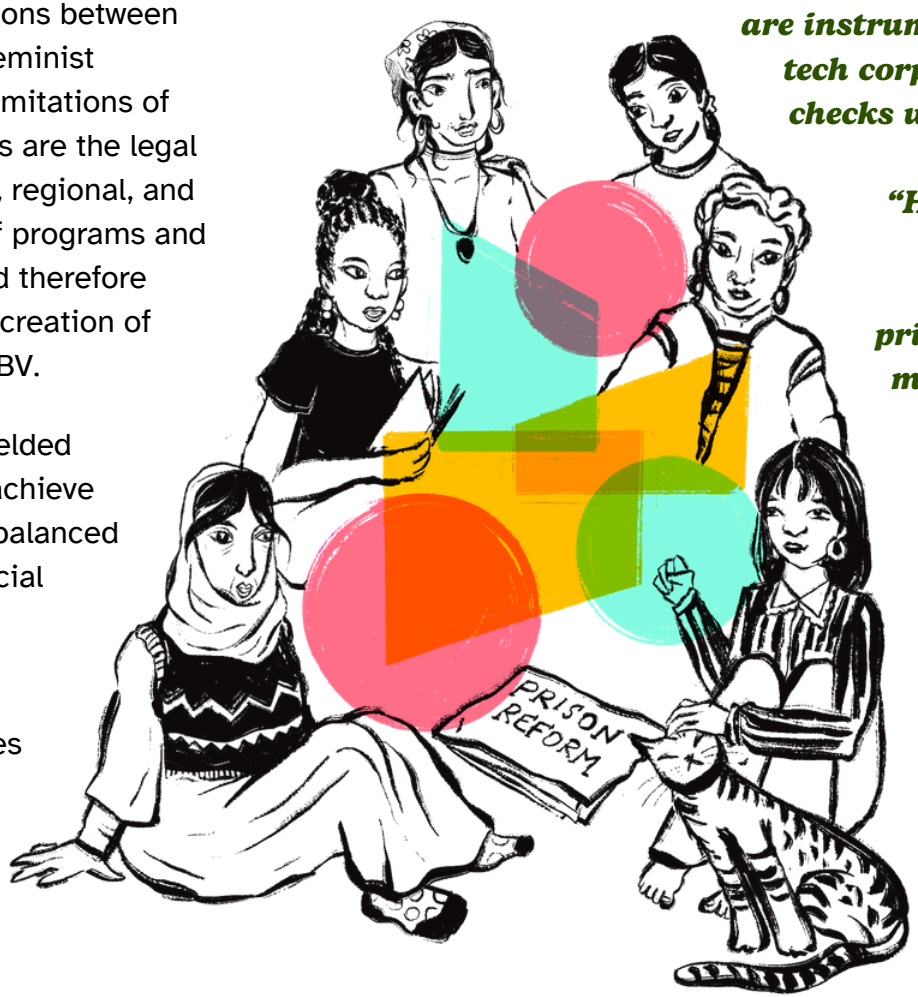
"In the GBV arena, there is often an assumption that the only way to have justice is incarceration, without questioning the systems that support incarceration. After these discussions, I felt less alone as a feminist with radical concerns around punishment/imprisonment."

Our conversations unearthed tensions between what have been historic gains of feminist movements around GBV, and the limitations of these strategies. Some of the gains are the legal recognition of GBV at the national, regional, and international levels, the creation of programs and policies meant to address GBV and therefore allocation of public resources, the creation of services to prevent and address GBV.

While some of these gains have yielded benefits, many are insufficient to achieve justice, and others stand on an unbalanced scale, where costs—particularly social ones—outweigh the benefits.

We agreed that there is an urgent need to question our own strategies and acknowledge that we don't yet have all the answers.

So, where do we stand now?



Some lingering questions

"What is our role, as feminists, in challenging criminalization as it harms rights and dignity?"

"Does feminist support for criminalization and punitive systems make us complicit in systems of oppression and violence, particularly when they are instrumentalized by state actors or powerful tech corporations writing themselves blank checks under the guise of 'protecting' us?"

"How do we prevent our legitimate concerns and calls to end violence from being co-opted for projects which build more prisons, border detention centers, and unlock more funding for surveillance and killing?"

Although our questions remain unanswered and it feels like we need urgent solutions in an increasingly unjust world, hope is more essential than ever. We found hope in coming together and accompanying each other.

We must grapple with our own impulses to resort to old strategies like punishment and criminalization. We can do this better by tackling our questions about the future of our activism together.

Feminist strategies for the future of GBV activism

Our conversations shed light on strategies we agreed would help us move forward in our activism on GBV. These strategies aim to foster spaces for building consensus and finding nuance, and compel us to consider approaches that can bring about systemic change.

These strategies include:

Contextualizing GBV in the current moment:

Violence is produced and sustained by contemporary social, political, and economic crises. Without engaging with these conditions, our responses remain partial, depoliticized, and insufficient. We need to deal with GBV in a material sense. For this, GBV practitioners need a dynamic theory of the state /society / economy more than ever.

Destigmatizing feminist work with perpetrators of GBV:

Many feminists can and do work with perpetrators to advance accountability, work towards reparations, and reduce further harm. This does not mean “standing with perpetrators,” but rather centering the survivors’ needs, and seeking ways to transform communities, while seeding practices of care, healing and growth.

Prioritizing survivors’ needs and community transformation:

We wrestled with the fact that so many of our responses still rely on centering a single victim or survivor in our strategies. We know that GBV impacts not just one person but an entire community – including the person who did the harm and the person who experienced the harm, as well as their friends, families, and loved ones. To break the cycle of violence, we must address the very systems that initiate violence, and interrogate how the delicate web of our collective is impacted.

Creating more spaces for candid conversation between us:

We may not agree on everything, but coming together in mutual respect, with a commitment to listening, sharing honestly, and learning, can be transformative and help us break silos. We need to reflect together more frequently to envision better, more effective strategies that align with our values and politics. These conversations help us to move forward but also foster gratitude and mutual understanding, while reducing the risk of exclusion or harm resulting from our strategies.



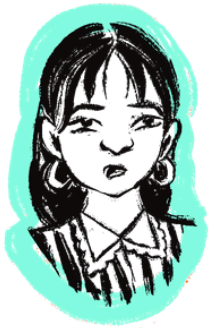















Ask **harder** questions, *Imagine* **different** futures:

reflections on gender-based violence work

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