Development
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-017-0131-8

THEMATIC SECTION

Self-Care: An Act of Political Warfare or a Neoliberal Trap?

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Abstract There is a momentum for self-care and well-being in feminist movements. Beyond neoliberal trends, we can find deeply politicized and inter-generational practices of care, and feminist ways of conceiving self-care and collective care, building sustainable and transformative organizations and movements, and comprehending what being well means in situations of injustice. In different corners on the world, feminists are developing provocative and creative models of care for survivors of violence, human rights defenders, activists, and organizations.

Keywords Well-being · Feminism · Care · Movements · Activism · Trauma

Self-Care: An Act of Political Warfare or a Neoliberal Trap?

There is a momentum for self-care and well-being in feminist movements. For many years, feminists have been engaging with self-care and collective care, well-being and healing justice, protection and safety, as themes of political significance for movement-building and social change. Yet, so far this work has been led by a few committed and impassioned activists, educators, and practitioners. Several pioneering collectives and organizations have dedicated resources to building knowledge about the lives and well-being of feminists and women human rights defenders, in a holistic approach to our activism and our movements.

In *What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance* (2007), Jane Barry and Jelena Đorđević beautifully capture how difficult this conversation is to start. Activists readily speak about politics, human rights, and ending violence against women; but reflecting on one's own activist life, stress and workload, financial or family concerns, hopes and dreams, seemed irrelevant and required overcoming quite a bit of resistance. So they started these conversations from public, organizational concerns—gradually proceeding to the personal, discovering the linkage of the personal and the political:

> And finally, together, we came *full circle* and made the connection: that worries about feeding your family and or retiring without a pension are as important as concerns about funding or combating state-sponsored violence. That these are all part of the same sustainability equation (Barry and Đorđević 2007: 8).

In the lead up to the 13th International AWID Forum, an inter-regional advisory group of activists, educators, and practitioners expressed self-care and collective well-being as a holistic and feminist philosophy of being in the world:

> We are made up of not only heads full of intellect and discernment, but of hearts that fuel our passion for social justice, and bodies, without which we would not be able to engage in the world around us. A symbol of patriarchal societies the world over, however, is the separation of mind, heart and body; feeling disembodied, disconnected rather than whole.

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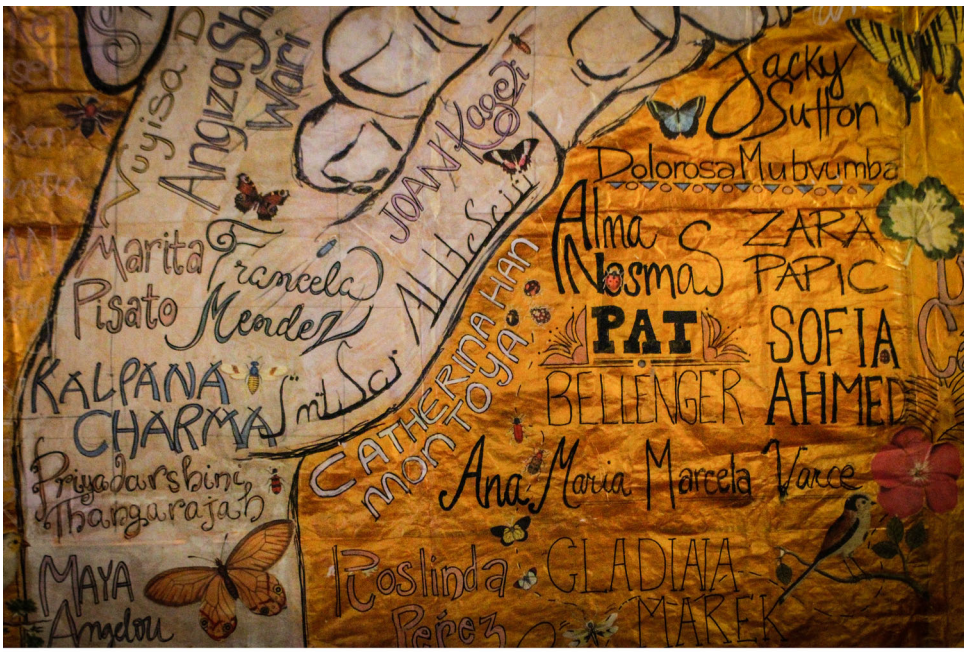
These forms of separation create stress for individuals, organizations and societies.[1]

In *Strategies for Building an Organisation with a Soul,* Hope Chigudu and Rudu Chigudu (2015) ground self-care and collective care as central elements of organizational sustainability and strategic leadership for feminist and social justice agendas. Building on their knowledge and experience as African women's rights activists, the authors outline concrete strategies to help organizations increase sustainability and impact, and to help activists thrive, feel energized and motivated to make a difference in the world. They tell us organizations have souls—and soul songs—and they remind us of the vitality and power of singing our organization's soul song in unison. I smile as I recall the songs of the political projects I took part in, even if we never paused to write down any lyrics or melody. Suddenly I realize I carry those songs in my heart.

These publications, efforts, and initiatives recognize that feminist and social movements and organizations are living beings, and so are the activists who inhabit them. As our political work enmeshes in our daily lives, our lived experience may include exposure to trauma and the pain of others; misunderstanding and even violence in our own families and societies; multiple care-giving responsibilities; and often unsustainable cultures of activism. Working for social and political change can have a high price for the activists who do this work.

Can we make our work for rights and justice less draining and stressful, likely leading to burnout and exhaustion? Can we recall from our past—or envision in our future—cultures of activism that are mindful of our safety and well-being, healthier, kinder, caring? In other words, how do we bring our feminist values and politics to life in our organizations and movements? How do we center the well-being of those historically marginalized, and dismantle oppressive and social hierarchies and gender binaries in our own organizational structures? How can our movements be transformative and embody the change we wish to see in the world?

Today, these and other questions are increasingly taking center stage.



Mural from the WHRD Tribute Event at the 2016 AWID Forum

Preparing for the Revolution

The 13th International AWID Forum plenary on 'Co-Creating New Futures;' firmly placed self-care and collective care at the center of our attention. Created through experimental methodologies by the Fearless Collective, this plenary invited us to imagine feminist futures through

[1] The Concept Paper is a living document (http://bit.ly/2hSkmwu, accessed on 17 December 2016). I am grateful to all the members of the Wellbeing Advisory Group for the privilege to work aside you and learn from you. The Concept Paper and our time together have all enriched my mind, body and heart, and informed this piece, for which I of course bear sole responsibility.

villages, because it takes a village to imagine and create one.[2] Laila Malik reports:

> In the village of love, joy and pleasure, Nidhi Goyal, a young disabled feminist who works for disability rights and gender justice evoked a village in which members were connected with themselves, without internalized stigma and pressures, corporatized media, the medicalization of bodies or the gender binary. She revelled in the laughter and excitement of this village, in which sex, sexuality and pleasure are openly discussed, with complete and informed consent and without judgement or shame, and where social, physical, infrastructure and access to reproductive services are available to all. At the same time, she spoke of revolutionary relationships focused on self and collective care, and of open spaces shared with everyone, from the heart.[3]

These words resonated deeply with the audience, judging by the enthusiastic applause, so why are we still far from incorporating these dreams and visions into our cultures of activism?

The need to sustain feminist movements is more urgent than ever, given the political developments in our world. The rise of right-wing reactionary forces and fundamentalisms; the impunity of war crimes and military violence; the unbound power of corporations; and anti-environmental politics all pose great risk not only to our feminist futures, but endanger all past wins and achievements of women's rights, LGBTIQ rights, civil rights, and social justice movements to date. In the face of shrinking civic spaces and persecution of human rights defenders, energy and resilience are indispensable. There's no doubt about it: We're in for a long ride.

Rationally, we understand that sustaining ourselves—as individuals and organizations—is critical to our success, our survival even. Yet there seem to be real obstacles to transforming this understanding into a set of individual and institutional priorities, practices, and structures. Activists testify how self-care can become a daunting task, another slot in our busy calendars, one more source of potential stress and a new form of guilt.[4] Organizations are still reluctant to include well-being and self-care in their work plans and budgets. Funders are even more reluctant to allocate funds needed for it.

Moreover, the momentum for self-care in feminist and social movements is shaded by its fashionable embrace by mainstream media and popular psychology in many countries. Self-care is found in an abundance of self-love and self-help books and programs, articles, and tip lists. This apparent obsession with self-care brings about extensive critique from the Left and from feminists as well. Critics of neoliberalism rightly point out that dogmas of self-care, self-love, and self-help focus solely on the individual, while obscuring the role of society and structural sociopolitical reasons for pain and injustice (Rottenberg 2014; Penny 2016). Emotions are now a commodity on the market, 'the happiness industry' (Davies 2015). The market is clearly interested in stressed and overworked employees keeping on being productive with the help of some positive thinking, meditation, and breathing instead of organizing and unionizing to change their working conditions or rally for public healthcare.[5]

How are we to reconcile and make sense of these challenges and this critique as we keep time and again coming back to Audre Lorde's words: 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare'?

What Makes Self-Care Neoliberal?

I suggest that the neoliberal version of 'self-care' embraced by the mainstream society is profoundly different from self-care and well-being as rooted in radical feminist thought and activism, and that these differences are important to account for. We can then center feminist traditions and conceptualizations of self-care and collective care and well-being, and move the neoliberal frame aside, rather than allowing it to take over and monopolize our discourses and imaginations.

Neoliberalism is not intended as a buzzword here. I believe it can help us understand that the mainstream trend for self-care and well-being is part of the current social, economic and political system. The French philosopher Michel Foucault identified 'care of the self' as a technology of power, as early as 1976 (Foucault 1986). We can see this perfectly well in how patriarchal power operates. So many oppressive practices and misogynist ideas about female

[2] http://www.forum.awid.org/forum16/posts/imagining-feminist-future-plenary-three, accessed 16 December 2016.

[3] Fearless collective is a 'fearless network of artists and activists reclaiming public and digital space through art and participative storytelling'. Established following the Delhi Gang Rape in 2012, the collective 'dreams to create a global movement of public art that is inclusive, collaborative, and replaces fear with trust, empathy, and curiosity.' Read further and view their inspiring work online: http://fearlesscollective.org (accessed 16 December 2016).

[4] This and other points came up during the Webinar on Self-Care and Collective Wellbeing co-hosted by AWID Forum's Wellbeing Advisory Group, and the Black Feminisms Forum. Read the highlights here: https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/webinar-summary-self-care-and-collective-wellbeing (accessed on 16 December 2016).

[5] For example, Peter Fleming, The way to a better work-life balance? Unions, not self-help, Guardian 11 October 2016 (https://www.theguardian.com/careers/2016/oct/11/way-to-better-work-life-balance-unions-not-self-help, accessed on 16 December 2016).

beauty are forced on girls and women, violently policing our weight, looks, and body shape, under the guise of self-care and 'spoiling yourself,' for the sake of our sexual availability and attractiveness to men (Bartky 1988). Entire industries of fashion, cosmetics, plastic surgeries, diets, and advertising flourish and profit immensely from inducing self-hate and inviting consumption as self-care.

What else is wrong with self-care in its populistic neoliberal configuration?

First, privatization of responsibility: One's well-being perceived as her own responsibility, rather than the collective responsibility of society to create structures enabling and facilitating one's well-being.

Second, obscuring the social, economic and political sources of physical, emotional, and spiritual distress and exhaustion. These may include war and violence; poverty and hunger; failed social policies, inadequate or inaccessible health care, the pharma industry that out of sheer greed lets people suffer and die; the double burden of productive and reproductive labour on women; the global economy that frees more privileged women from household and childcare labour by shifting it on the backs of poorer women and women migrant workers, overwhelmingly women of color from the Global South. These and countless other factors influence our life (and death) expectancy, health, and well-being.

Critically, our vulnerability and the care we can (or cannot) expect from our families and societies, as well as our social movements, are influenced by our gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability, and other identity markers of privilege. Long after Audre Lorde, Black feminists still take the lead in politicizing self-care as a radical act for Black women and women of color.[6]

Third, its effects are deeply depoliticizing. If we are frustrated, sad, or angry, we mustn't act on it, get angry together, protest and organize for change. The mainstream self-care discourse invites us instead to breath, meditate, and—if we can afford it—enjoy a day at the spa.

Let us be cautious of such models. As feminists, we are familiar with co-optation of our concepts, ideas, and practices. Similarly, in *Taking the Power out of Empowerment,* Srilatha Batliwala describes how empowerment, originally understood by women's movements as involving social and political shift in power relations locally and globally, is now often reduced to individual experience (Batliwala 2007).

Let us be cautious, but also let us not exaggerate their totalizing reach. Some forms of self-care, empowerment and feminism, can be co-opted, but certainly not all, just like breathing in itself isn't neoliberal, of course. Breathing is life, and few practices are as powerful in creating intimacy and solidarity between individuals and groups as the act of breathing together.

What Makes Self-Care an Act of Political Warfare?

Our feminist legacies and conceptualisations of self-care and well-being are anything but individualistic and depoliticized. This is because they are rooted, I believe, in distinctively feminist analysis of the relationship between self and collective, between personal and political. Women, queers, transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming activists and feminists have long been politicizing the 'personal': our bodies, our sexualities, our family dynamics and relationships, our pain and our fears, our pleasures and our desires. The personal has been a source of knowledge and radically new theorizing about the political, a way of redefining what the political is. Moreover, for decades feminists have politicized care work and reproductive labour, its gendered, racialized, and class-based distribution in societies, colonial histories, and the global economy today.

We are not talking about a generic 'self' here, an abstract individual, but about a self which is grounded in particular political histories and present situations of violence and vulnerability. Self-care in a world that denies you care means revolting against the unequal distribution of life and death, health and illness, well-being and suffering, of care-giving and receiving roles, as fixed by patriarchy, white supremacy, global capitalism, and other systems of domination and exploitation.

At the well-being area of the AWID Forum, where group and one-on-one activities were offered by practitioners free of cost, it looked like this: Amazement at how a treatment feels, if it was the first time you ever experienced one; conversations about safe houses and retreats for activists; wanting to talk about stress, pain, and hurt; wanting to talk about and experience joy and pleasure; thanking the practitioner with tears and hugs; moving your body in new ways, discovering rhythms, imagination and force you weren't aware of; sharing love. I also learned new terms like Capacitar, Jin Shin Jyutsu, TRE (Tension Stress Trauma Release), Smai Tawi also known as Afrikan Yoga, and much more. I hope you'll get curious and look them up.[7]

[6] See for example an interview by Sarah Mirk with Evette Dionne, Audre Lorde thought of self-care as an 'act of political warfare' published on 18 February 2016 (https://bitchmedia.org/article/audre-lorde-thought-self-care-act-political-warfare, accessed on 16 December 2016).

[7] CAPACITAR is an international network of practitioners teaching simple holistic wellness practices https://capacitar.org. Jin Shin Jyutsu physio-philosophy is an art of releasing tension and energypathways

In stark contrast to the neoliberal 'happiness industry,' we are not speaking here of being happy and relaxed as the world around us crumbles into pieces, but the opposite.

Lin Chew, feminist human rights activist, co-founder and Director of the Institute for Women's Empowerment (IWE) focusing on transformative and sustainable feminist leadership, defines self-care in direct relation of mindfulness of the world:

> 'Self-care is learning how to live our lives in a way that we are mindful of how we are, knowing ourselves in a way that is holistic – how are we mentally, physically, spiritually, in our relationships, in our emotions. It is the understanding that the personal and the political are together. The personal has to be mindful of the collective, and the collective has to be mindful of the individual'.[8]

Aina-Nia Ayo'dele, feminist spiritual activist, founder and managing director of Sacred Women International (SWI), underlines the strong connection of inter-dependency between the self and the movement, particularly for women activists:

> 'As activists and women who lead, we often forget ourselves. We take such good care of everyone else, and the truth is, we cannot give fully to others from an empty cup. How do we create sustainability and resilience in our movement when we ourselves are not well, tired, burnt out? Self-care for me is the beginning of the movement'.

From these critical positions, many roads lead from the self to the community, and back to the self. In her own engagement with Audre Lorde's words, the feminist scholar Sara Ahmed states:

> Self-care: that can be an act of political warfare. In directing our care towards ourselves we are redirecting care away from its proper objects, we are not caring for those we are supposed to care for; we are not caring for the bodies deemed worth caring about. And that is why in queer, feminist and anti-racist work self-care is about the creation of community, fragile communities, assembled out of the experiences of being shattered. We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other.[9]

Similarly, the experience of women activists in Chechnya reiterates the importance of self-care, when workout and meditation may seem like luxuries, but are in fact 'essential components of sustained and effective social activism. They help people to manage the accumulated stresses and strains of a life lived in constant danger.'[10] But self-care is not enough. Keely Tongate from the Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights acknowledges the lack of self-care resources and opportunities for activists (and their unequal distribution among activists), and makes a strong case for *collective communities of care*:

> We need strategies for collective sustainability that make sense for activists and their communities. That doesn't mean abandoning self-care, but it does mean integrating it into broader cultures of community care that can sustain more people in relationship to one another (see footnote 10).

Thus, making self-care an act of political warfare (in its feminist sense, of course) involves historicizing and politicizing the 'self' and the 'care,' inevitably placing them in context, thus bringing into the picture the collective and the community. Grounding care in concrete local and global contexts also means that there is no one answer to my question: What makes self-care an act of political warfare?

What self-care is, what being well means to people and specifically to activists, varies from one cultural context and community to another, from one region to another.

These differences may go farther than we imagine. That is, if we are willing to dig deep enough to find the answers that are meaningful and relevant to us, our movements, and our communities. In the next and concluding section, let us see how such journeys may look in practice.

Decolonizing Wellness, Queering Self-Care

South American and African feminist models of care for survivors of violence, women human rights defenders and grassroots activists, challenge traditional Western and medicalized conceptions of trauma. They pose the questions: What does it mean to be 'well' in the face of

Footnote 7 continued
in the body https://www.jsjinc.net. TRE: Tension Stress Trauma Release is a series of exercises for releasing deep muscular patterns of stress https://traumaprevention.com/.

[8] Webinar Summary: Self-Care and Collective Wellbeing, 3 November 2016. (https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/webinar-summary-self-care-and-collective-wellbeing, accessed on 19 December 2016).

[9] Ahmed, Sara. Selfcare as Warfare, feministkilljoys blog, published on 25 August 2014 (https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/, accessed on 16 December 2016).

[10] Keely Tongate, Women's survival strategies in Chechnya: from self-care to caring for each other. openDemocracy, 29 August 2013 (https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/keely-tongate/women%E2%80%99s-survival-strategies-in-chechnya-from-self-care-to-caring-for-ea, accessed on 16 December 2016).

injustice? How can safety be cultivated amidst conflict? These questions and models touched and resonated with activists and practitioners from other regions as well, such as Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Mpumi Zondi is the Clinical Director of Sophiatown Community Psychological Services (SCPS), based in Johannesburg, South Africa. In her presentation at the AWID Forum she shared their inspiring journey to become a community-centered psychosocial organization. SCPS is also a founding member of AIR for Africa (African institute for integrated responses to violence against women & girls & HIV/Aids), sharing feminist transformative approach to well-being and re-politicizing trauma work together with other African feminist practitioners.[11]

This journey, tells Mpumi Zondi, involved questioning theories that might work in some predominantly Western contexts, but made less sense in their contexts, and required learning anew from their clients and communities. One example is the perception of trauma as a onetime event:

> For us and the women we journey with this is not a reality. The historical trauma is not one off, and it continues as they continue to live through extreme poverty, exposure to HIV, war, forced displacement, gender based violence, in other words multiple layers of discrimination, oppression and exclusion. Theirs is not a story of "a one off sudden unexpected event" – instead it is one [that] has been their continuously lived experience- in the past, the present, and the anticipated future (Zondi 2016).

These stories cannot always be told in words; when this is too difficult, they can be told in pictures, symbols, arts, or silence.

For SCPS, recognizing social, economic and political realities can manifest in different ways and practices: understanding material needs, poverty, and hunger, and offering sandwiches and tea to the clients before a session, providing transport money, helping to fill out an application, advocating for children of refugee clients to be accepted to schools. This also means challenging the conventional boundary between the client and the therapist, acknowledging that 'the healer is wounded too,' and that therapists don't hold all the answers.

Mpumi Zondi said that 'the art of healing belongs to ordinary people,' expressing belief in the capacity of people to support and heal each other. I sense that this capacity has implications for our responsibility for each other, for creating these communities of care in our life, work, and activism.

As African feminist practitioners push us to go beyond Western and medicalized conceptions of self-care, queer theory can also prove useful in imagining a whole new spectrum of self-care and coping mechanisms. In an interesting article entitled *Queering Self-Care: Reimagining the radical possibilities of self-care in healing from sexual assault*, Emily Dutton (2014) draws on queer theory to articulate self-care beyond neoliberal models. She notes how self-care is often perceived as a narrow pre-defined selection of activities, primarily directed at calming oneself and appearing calm to others, creating a convincing illusion of well-being. Moreover, healing is often understood as a linear process toward the manifestation of 'positive' feelings, like joy and happiness, although it can in fact involve a whole range of human emotions and unpredictable ways of coping:

> Recognizing the fluidity of self-care also means avoiding a hierarchical categorization of coping techniques, and acknowledging that while self-care might look like "lighting candles, putting on a Nina Simone album, and rereading The Animal Family, it could also mean BDSM, intense performance art, mixed martial arts fighting, smashing bank windows or calling out a person who abused you" (Traven 3). Self-care might look calm, relaxed, and happy; or it might look like deep depression, sadness, or failing to function at all. (Dutton 2014)

Queering self-care also involves a suggestion to go beyond binaries of healthy/unhealthy, positive/negative ways of coping, thereby opening radical possibilities of what being well can mean for you, in this time and place.

I am completing this essay as I return from an unusual activist meeting. We gathered to offer support to three women who endured negative and distorted media attention for an artistic project, a labour of love and creativity. We also wanted to discuss strengthening our networks of support and solidarity. Having your work misrepresented in the mainstream media, being misquoted in an article, even having your name published despite guaranteed anonymity are experiences familiar to many activists. This can be stressful and in some cases dangerous, especially when you are singled out. And so I sat there, being hosted in a home I've never been to before and tasting the most delicious home-baked bread. Taking this time to ask 'how are you?', sharing food and drinks and laughter, relieved some of the stress and exhaustion accumulated for weeks. Before you know it, we were brainstorming ideas for future actions. Activists, I thought to myself, well of course, what can you expect?! Plotting can also be a form of care.

Ultimately, the momentum for self-care and well-being in feminist movements is a precious opportunity to comprehend and experience what being well in this world means for us, our communities and our societies. For many feminists, women human rights defenders, LGBTIQ

[11] http://airforafrica.org/, accessed on 19 December 2016.

activists, self-care and collective care and wellbeing are not the themes where we feel most comfortable. Many of us, however, are already first-class experts in burnout, exhaustion, stressful, and unsustainable cultures of activism. We can change that by looking back to the knowledges and practices of care and compassion passed in our communities through generations, especially among women. By looking around us, paying attention to ourselves and each other, offering accountability for ourselves and each other. By taking a breath together. This journey will be as feminist and as political as we make it.

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