

Self-and Collective Care to Strengthen Movements

The Power Up Programme



February 2023



“

The mind and body need to be whole to be optimally productive.”

**Akudo Oguaghamba,
WHER**

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1. Why is self and collective care relevant to power and movements?

There are complex, persisting trends that women's rights activists / human rights defenders struggle against. Their activism is frequently criminalised – ranging from actions taken by militarised states, to those taken by conservative anti-rights or religious fundamentalist groups or governments, to online violence, or abuse of power by corporate actors.

Continuously tackling these challenges leads to activists' burnout and fatigue, manifesting through chronic illnesses or the near collapse of groups.

Women activists and women's rights organisations and movements strengthen their own power and influence by naming, recognising and addressing the impacts of the broader political and patriarchal contexts on their personal lives and organisational cultures; recognising that wellbeing is part of the work of movement-building and social change.

This is also essential for moving from competition, naming and shaming to sustaining collaborative movements.



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Urgent Action Fund–Africa

Aims

- focus on the underlying causes of WHRDs' emotional and spiritual distress due to systemic violence and past-present traumas.
- centre healing as an approach to social justice organising (while continuing to support individual and organisational security measures).

Sources:

- Jean Kemitare, Urgent Action Fund – Africa, its annual report to Comic Relief Oct 2022; and the research reports – see 'resources'.

How we built and used our power – strategies

- Held the first Feminist Republik in Dec 2019 on self and collective care, centering cultures of care as the new frontier for strong movements.
- In 2019 initiated research on what healing justice means to African Human Rights Defenders with 47 interviews.
- Feminist Republik Festival in November 2022 applied the analysis, focusing on the role of healers and healing and asking how can we centre healing as a radical strategy for transformation / liberation.
- In November 2022, at the Feminist Republik Festival, launched the research findings and a framework (see below) on healing justice – [Contextualising Healing Justice as a Feminist Organising Framework in Africa](#) – with partner Institute of Development Studies, and [We carry generational demands for healing that will not rest](#).
- Initiated the process of establishing a healing farm. The Healing Justice Framework: A political, collective and holistic process

How we influenced power – achievements

- Responding to the inputs of WHRDs, UAF-A expanded its understanding of protection support by increasing holistic security grant amounts. Also its Solidarity and Support team provides accompaniment support to structurally excluded groups, supporting their processes of power analysis and strengthening their grant requests by, among others, thinking through adding collective care elements to planned interventions.
- Feminist Republik has run three festivals, run monthly webinars and produced [Dwuza Feminist Digital Magazine](#) edition 1 and [edition 2](#), co-authored by women with disabilities.
- After the second Feminist Republik, activists from South Sudan reached out to one of the healers and organised their own healing retreat and further convenings are planned for Senegal, Mali and a regional one for Francophone West Africa hosted by XOSE, the Francophone Women's Fund, in Togo.



Healing justice involves understanding and addressing the systemic injustice and intergenerational harm experienced by African WHRDs and feminist activists in context. This requires that:

- (i) there is a feminist interrogation of how structural violence manifests in womn’s everyday realities, including an intersectional analysis of the interplay between wider histories, situational nuances, and individual differences due to identity/economic and geographical factors.
- (ii) recognising that living with/within oppressive and unjust structures creates collective trauma, and
- (iii) this results in embodied impacts on activists’ bodies (e.g. falling sick with physical symptoms or emotional and spiritual distress such as feeling constant anger, anxiety, or depression), and in the ‘social bodies’ of feminist movements (e.g. cultures of overwork, self-exploitation, and burnout, and toxic movement dynamics).”

From Contextualising Health Justice, IDS/UAF-A Research and framework developed by Urgent Action-Fund Africa and the Institute of Development Studies



Women’s Health and Equal Rights Initiative, Nigeria

Aim

Advance the wellbeing and resiliency of WHER and our community through individual and organisational collective care and healing.

Source:

Akudo Oguaghamba, WHER

How we used our power – strategies

- Researched and identified for our use, various West African modern and ancient ‘do it yourself’ holistic tools for long-term self- and collective care.
- Assessed and adjusted WHER’s organisational care strategies to include:
 - Weekly assignments for staff: meditative and breathwork exercises; song and dance therapy; storytelling and expressive writing; and movement flow and trauma-releasing activities.
 - Monthly virtual healing sessions for WHER staff and volunteers including: check-in conversations, child-like laughing therapy, breathwork and meditation, movements flow and holistic body scans.
 - Quarterly face-to-face healing class for WHER activists: check-ins, Yemoja dance, holistic body scan, ubuntu healing circle, bonfire purging ritual, mediation and breathwork, child-like laughing therapy, expressive art and gardening.
- We built in collective care as part of our organizational schedule.
- We have offline days and take breaks before and after hectic projects to recuperate. We also have a therapist and a native healer on retainer.
- Instead of closing daily at 5pm, we changed into exercise gears and move to the rooftop for exercise. Staff take turns to lead all staff daily with any form of exercise they want.
- We are entering the second phase of the project where we adopt 4 sister organizations to raise their organizational care consciousness. We believe that this will create a ripple of effect of improved health and well-being in our community.
- Staff have 30 mins each to use the Zen room where they can escape from work, call loved ones or catch up on their favourite shows.

How we influenced power – achievements

- At first, staff were disorganised due to a lack of self-accountability, but once the team realised that it is not a one-off project but a culture to be adopted, they started easing into this new way of doing things.
- Staff are increasingly taking initiative in implementing our collective care approach.
- The various activities have served to bond the team and continue to do so as new staff join. This enables team bonding as staff numbers grow.

Healing resources explained

- Yemoja dance – Yemoja is a river goddess and known to be the mother of all deities. The dance is achieved by slowly moving your body, feet and head to the sound of drums, flutes and other traditional equipment as the spirit leads you.
- Holistic body scan – This is an exercise to connect with the entire body. Lying flat on the floor, facing up, eyes closed thinking, connecting and appreciating all parts of your body.

- Child-like laughing therapy – Chitchatting and laughing.
- Ubuntu healing circle – Ubuntu is derived from the African phrase "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" – a person is a person through other people. Ubuntu means "I Am Because You Are". Ubuntu embodies the concept of common humanity, you and I together. Ubuntu healing gathers participants in circles guided by an African healer who facilitates the space. The participants narrate the sources of their pain and receive hugs and shared tears to enable them to feel heard and seen while the other participants empathise with them.
- Bonfire purging ritual – This is a ritual our ancestors used to do. Set a fire in a contained place and speak to the fire about all your pain and frustrations. It is believed that the flame burns away those negative emotions. It is accompanied by face paintings of tribal lines to liberate inner peace. In the new world, instead of speaking, people write the pains on a paper and throw them into the fire.

2. Cross-cutting challenges and lessons learnt

Challenges

- Pervasive narrative that has equated personal value to tirelessly and constantly working as women human rights defenders.

Lessons learnt

- Women's rights activists and organisations need to recognise self and collective care, healing and wellbeing in how they set up their systems and do their work.
- This requires ideological shifts to provide a politicised analysis to wellbeing.

Challenges

- Negative consequences of overwork and burnout on staff and community members' health, relationships and social life, as well as on their work performance.
- Inappropriate deadlines also contribute to burnout.

Lessons learnt

- An African adage says, walk alone and you will walk fast, walk together and you will walk far. Work together and collaborate with others towards a common goal. When change is viewed from this perspective, it helps activists and their organisations to pace themselves and not run out of steam.
- Practicing emergent learning – where we continually interrogate what worked and why, and what that means for us going forward also helps us understand what time we need to budget to do the work well. We need to be realistic in our own planning, and firm with funders who seek unrealistic time-lines.



Challenges

- Initial reluctance or discomfort among some staff to adjust their time and mindset for the culture of care organisations are trying to build.

Lessons learnt

- Involvement of all staff in thinking through the rationale for the culture shift helps build their willingness and self-accountability to try new approaches.
- Emphasising that time for self- and collective-care is not a one-off project but a culture to be adopted.

Challenges

- Even once an organisation pivots, social pressures, tight deadlines and imposter syndrome, among others, may lead staff to feel obligated to work harder and longer, to prove their dedication and ability to succeed, creating layers of stress in both their personal and professional lives.

Lessons learnt

- Emphasising that it is important both to promote individual mental and physical well-being and to support productivity.
- Recognising that centring care and healing as collective, political, processes and holistic practices is critical for true politicised work and liberation.

Challenges

- There is an over-focus on a highly securitised architecture of HRDs work.
- This includes a rather narrow focus of funding on security without a broader political analysis of self- and collective-care as key to successful movement-building and influence.

Lessons learnt

- Psychosocial wellbeing, self- and collective care, personal healing and healing justice need to be emphasised more in this work.
- There's value to supporting funders in shifting their own analysis and ideologies to take on board the importance of self- and collective care.



3. Resources

Resources for human rights defenders needing urgent protection

Victoria Forsgate at Urgent Response Funding to Protect and Resource Human Rights Defenders: 2023, 14 March 2023 (with minor addition):

“Are you a human rights defender or activist looking for urgent protection or rapid response funding? Here are some grants you could apply for - all of them are rolling (no deadline). Please share with your networks and if you know of any others do add them in the comments. *Edited to add more opportunities shared since posting.

- CIVICUS Crisis Response Fund welcomes applications from formal or informal civil society actors and consortia, including social movements. Grants must be for a 3-6 month period. Amount: US\$10,000 - US\$20,000 for Advocacy Grants or Resiliency Grants. <https://lnkd.in/dxRPe2z5>
- The Lifeline Embattled CSO Assistance Fund offers Emergency Assistance, Advocacy Grants and Resiliency Grants to CSOs under threat or who are responding to broader threats against civic space. Lifeline supports a variety of human rights CSOs, including human rights organizations, journalist associations, student groups, labour unions, think tanks, and others. <https://lnkd.in/deDNR3DE>
- Front Line Defenders offers Protection Grants to improve the security and protection of human rights defenders and their organisations including medical, legal, physical/digital security, and family assistance. Amount: Max. €7,500. <https://lnkd.in/dNaqanBp>
- The Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund provides rapid, flexible funding and direct logistical support to women human rights defenders from/working in crisis and conflict-affected areas, working at community, national, regional and/or international levels. No deadline (rolling). For individuals they have an Advocacy Support Stream and a Safety Net Stream. <https://wphfund.org/whrds>
- ProtectDefenders.eu supports organisations, human rights groups, or communities defending rights through small grants to develop innovative projects, strengthen your capacities, or to ensure your financial survival. Apply for grants for emergency support, temporary relocation, and human rights groups. <https://lnkd.in/dspv2HDG>
- Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights Rapid Response Grants offer quick, flexible funding to respond to security threats or unexpected advocacy opportunities experienced by women, transgender, or gender non-conforming, activists and human rights defenders. [Africa; Asia and Pacific; Latin America and Caribbean; Europe-Central Asia- Middle East-North America and Canada](https://lnkd.in/dspv2HDG)
- Dignity for All LGBTI Assistance Program provides human rights defenders and civil society organizations, who are facing threats due to LGBTIQ+ human rights work, with small, short-term emergency financial support to address urgent needs. Send application inquiries to info@dignitylgbti.org; https://lnkd.in/e_EDss9J

Resources for self- and collective care

- [FRIDA Happiness Manifesto](#)
- [We carry generational demands for healing that will not rest – An African feminist exploration of healing justice as an analytical lens and a practice, Urgent Action Fund – Africa, 2022](#)
- [Contextualising Healing Justice as a Feminist Organising Framework in Africa, IDS and UAF-A, 2022](#)

Resources from the field we can draw on

- Hope and Rudi Chigudu, [Strategies for Building an Organisation with a Soul, African Institute for Integrated Responses to VAWG & HIV/AIDS \(AIR\), 2015](#)
- Jane Barry with Jelena Dordevic [What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance? Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, 2007](#)
- [HEALING CONGREGATIONS Nurturing Love, Life and Hope in a Hurting World, Barefoot Guide.](#)

4. Acknowledgements

This report was collated by Barbara Klugman based on the expertise and thinking of members of all Power Up groups who have participated in the Power Up learning process since March 2020; the Annual Reports to Comic Relief of the groups featured in this flashcard; and issues raised during many Power Up workshops, but specifically Jude Clark and Hope Chigugu, 'Beyond Coping – Wellbeing in These Times', 18 June 2020 and 'What I know now, revisiting how we've been personally and organisationally since the June 2020 workshop' and 'Winnet Shamuyarira, WoMin's Risk Strategy', Power Up Peer Learning Conference, 13 October 2022. Specific inputs for this card by:

- Jean Kemitare, Urgent Action Fund – Africa
- Akudo Oguaghamba, WHER

Interrogating Power and Movements

These Learning Briefs form part of a series on diverse topics developed by participants in Comic Relief's Power Up Initiative. The initiative comprises 16 grantees with 34 partners, and aims to support work that builds power for women and girls. The initiative included contracting a learning facilitator, Barbara Klugman, to enable connections and learning between organisations to build their strength as movement constituents. Groups funded through Power Up are addressing a wide diversity of issues, and are themselves very different – from community-based organisations to funders to international NGOs and networks. Yet through conversations that began with lockdown in March 2020, they have found common cause in bringing a feminist analysis of power to movement-building and influence.

The Learning Briefs pick up some of the cross-cutting issues they have addressed. Each topic includes participants' understanding of how the issue is relevant to power and movements followed by examples from a few groups of how they have both built and used

their power – their strategies, and how they have influenced power – their achievements. They end with challenges and lessons learnt in addressing these, based on the collective experiences and insights of participants.

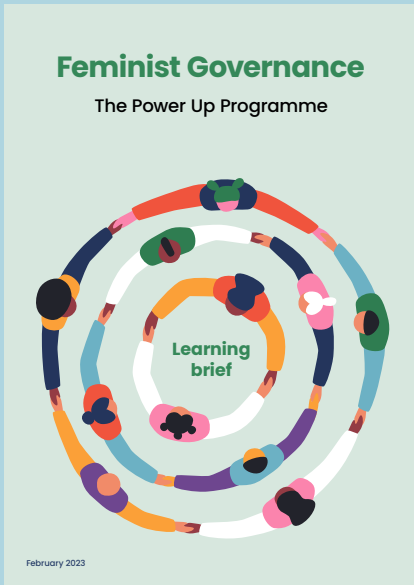
The Learning Briefs form Power Up's Year 3 Report to Comic Relief, and build on the previous reports each of which unpacked questions of power in movement-building and influence:

- [How has work funded by Comic Relief's Power Up programme contributed to shifts in women and girls' power? 30 June 2021](#)
- [Feminist Resilience and Innovation in a Pandemic.pdf, February 2022](#)
- [Reporting back: How one funder succeeded in doing better, and realised they'd never get it completely right, February 2022](#)

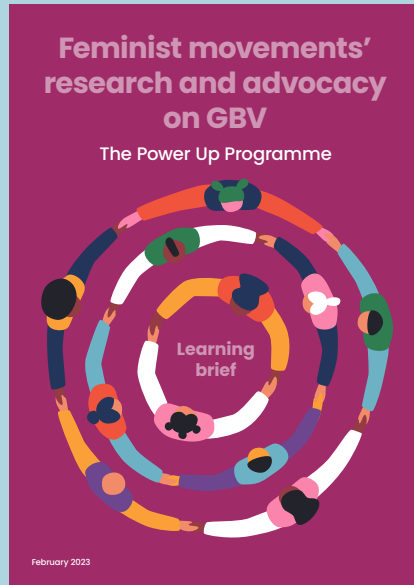
Barbara Klugman, February 2023



Other titles in this series:



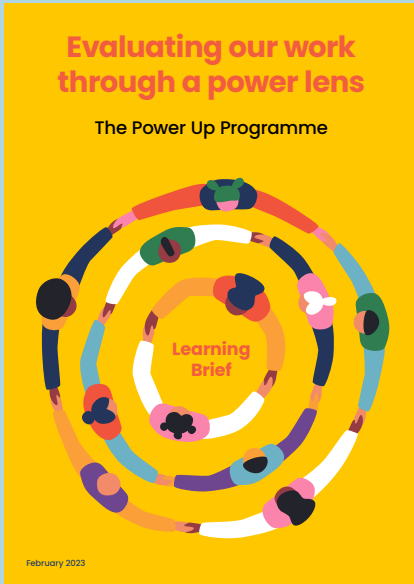
Feminist Governance



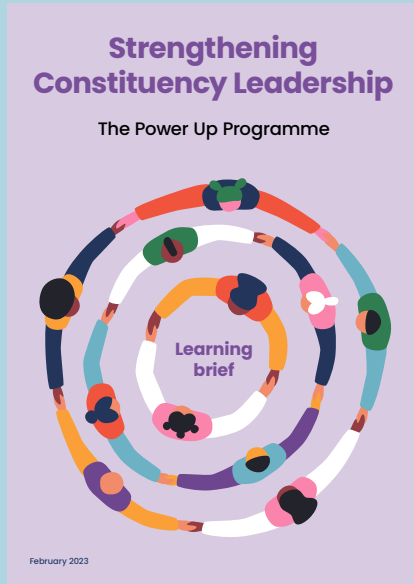
Feminist movements' research and advocacy on GBV



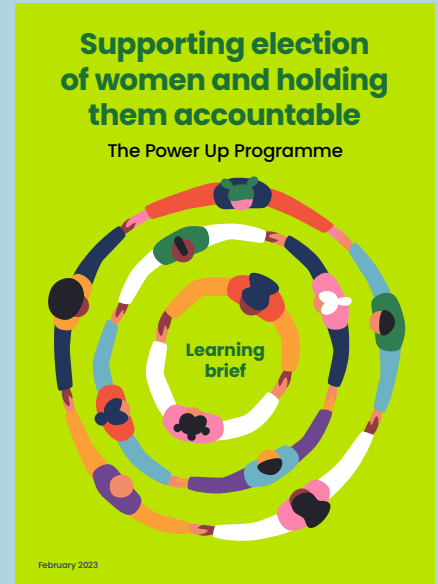
Feminist principles on Power in Funded Partners



Evaluating our work through a power lens



Strengthening Constituency Leadership



Supporting election of women and holding them accountable

Go to www.comicrelief.com/funding/reports-and-publications to access them