

Weave

Global Report

Weaving stories from the margins

A study on women's movements against violence



Acknowledgements

This report is the result of collective effort, collaboration, and the generous contributions of many individuals, organizations, and communities.

First and foremost, we extend our sincere gratitude to the many activists, researchers, and advocates who generously shared their knowledge, experiences, insights, and artwork with us. Your voices are at the core of this research, and your courage in sharing your stories has made this work possible.

In Australia, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to Elders, both past and present, whose leadership has been instrumental in grounding this research in historical and cultural contexts. Across all countries, we acknowledge and pay respects to First Nations communities and the custodians of lands, waterways, and skies where this research was carried out.

We acknowledge the support of various organizations involved in this project including the Global Women's Institute, the Equality Institute, University of Cape Town, Gender at Work, Her Story Mparntwe, Galiwin'ku Women's Space, and Strong Women Talking.

Specifically, this report was written by Emma Fulu, Mary Ellsberg, Shanaaz Matthews, Kalyani Menon-Sen, Uma Chakravarti, Chay Brown, Thelma Oppelt, Benita Moolman, Kayla Glynn-Braun, Chelsea Ullman, Flavia De Campos Dutra and anonymous Nicaraguan colleagues (whose names have been withheld for safety reasons). National reports, including their full list of authors, are available at www.weave-collective.org.

We greatly appreciate the generous funding support of the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund and the Ford Foundation, without which this project would not have been possible.

Special thanks to Merike Blofield and Ashwini Tambe for acting as advisors to this project, to Margaret Trombly for copy-editing the report, and to Catrin Harris for the beautiful design of this document.

This report is dedicated to the women's organizations, feminist movements and activists—past, present, and future—who continue to resist, organize, and work for a world free from violence against women and girls. Your work is our inspiration and our guide.

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● 1 Introduction

Weaving is the artistic medium through which thread and yarn are transformed into textiles and fabrics. In this practice, the vertical *warp* yarns remain stationary, while horizontal *weft* yarn is woven over and under the *warp* thread – both playing a vital role in this creative process. Similarly, the WEAVE Collective underscores the mutual significance of the *consistent and evolving* elements within feminist struggle and resistance.

Arts and crafts, such as paintings, songs, dances, quilts, and woven fabrics have historically served as cultural tools for representation and celebration of resistance and progress. In a similar fashion, **feminist movements transform the very fabric of our societies, weaving a rich tapestry of experiences united by common threads of power, pain, and resilience.**



Violence against women and girls (VAWG) remains one of the most pervasive human rights violations worldwide and based on current progress, it is very likely that global targets will not be met. Despite considerable evidence of what works to prevent and reduce VAW, limited investment and implementation of policies and interventions at scale have resulted in the rates of violence remaining alarmingly high. While most global efforts have focused on evaluating and scaling individual programs, these approaches have often been siloed and disconnected. To achieve transformative and lasting change, we need to look at the foundational force that has driven progress for generations—women’s rights and feminist movements.

The following report presents findings from a multi-country study led by the WEAVE Collective to document and explore the role of women’s movements in ending VAWG. This research explores feminist organizing within four unique communities: **Indigenous women in Australia, Black women in South Africa, political prisoners in Nicaragua, and socially and politically marginalized women in India.**



Throughout this work, the WEAVE Collective centers historically marginalized voices and experiences. In recounting and reading these histories through an **intersectional feminist lens**, the Collective strives to bring the voices and experiences of women back to the center of the discourse.

National Case Studies

In each country, researchers and activists came together to design and conduct research grounded in feminist and Indigenist research methods. The national reports for each country are available [HERE](#) and present more detailed findings from each site.

This report collates data from all four sites, identifying common themes across unique political contexts. It also chronicles acts of feminist resistance to structural oppression, with a particular focus on the following areas:

- Patriarchy and capitalism, including backlash against gender, sexuality, and human rights.
- Authoritarian regimes, state repression, and the shrinking of democratic spaces.
- Systemic racism and its intersection with gender inequality, including the devaluing of Black/Blak women's bodies.
- The legacy of colonization on women's organizations and the role of resistance and decolonization.

While documenting the enormous contribution of women's groups and feminist activists the report also highlights the current questions and dilemmas surfacing for women's movements. This project is the Collective's contribution to the ongoing discourse around the future of women's movements and their continuing struggles and resistance against violence and oppression.

About the Weave Collective

Established in 2021, the Women Engaged Against Violence Everywhere (WEAVE) Collective was forged out of a shared commitment to uplift women's movements that are addressing VAWG.

Researchers and activists from Australia, India, South Africa, and Nicaragua have joined the WEAVE Collective to identify emerging patterns and explore how feminist movements can contribute to ending VAWG at a local, national, and global level.

What began as a straightforward inquiry into women's movements against violence and their impact on global policies quickly became a deeper investigation into the unique historical and political narratives of the four countries of interest.

Employing a collective, transnational approach, WEAVE members seek to share personal experiences and co-create knowledge through mediums such as artwork, academic research, and documentary filmmaking.

A critical moment

The WEAVE research project emerges at a critical moment when women's movements worldwide face backlash, shrinking democratic spaces, and the criminalization of activism. Violence continues to be wielded as a tool of economic, political, and social control.

While progress is fragile, the influence of women's movements is undeniable. This research reveals the transformative power of women's rights movements, and counters the erasure of women's stories, especially those at the intersections of multiple oppressive hierarchies.

Methodologies

The WEAVE Collective, inspired by feminist ways of thinking, uses methods that reflect their experiences as both researchers and activists. We challenge the idea that knowledge must be completely "objective" and rooted in hard data. Instead, we focus on the lived experiences of women, especially those on the margins, as a valuable source of knowledge.

The Collective also rejects the traditional approach where researchers are seen as separate from and "above" the people they study. Instead, we work to bridge this gap by blending academic research with practical, action-based methods. Participants are not just subjects of the research—they actively shape and contribute to it. This approach emphasizes collaboration and the deep connection between researchers and the communities they engage with.

Using feminist and Indigenous-inspired research methods, the Collective documented the history, key moments, and achievements of feminist movements in fighting VAWG. This included studying political campaigns, research efforts, landmark court cases, and collaborations with other social movements.

To do this, we used a mix of qualitative and participatory techniques. These included interviews, focus groups, creating timelines, digging into archives, and analyzing documents and policies. In some cases, we also used quantitative data, like national studies on femicide, to help paint a fuller picture of each country's story.



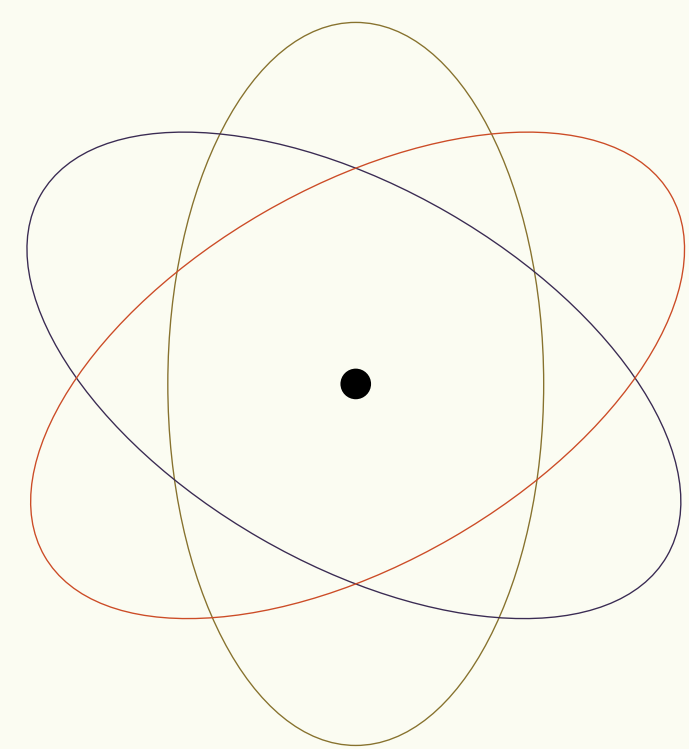
● 2 Characteristics of the struggle and resistance: “We’ve always been here”

The structural nature of gendered oppression: annihilation, erasure, and the state

Heteropatriarchy is the engine of VAWG, but the form it takes changes depending on historical and socio-political factors. Heteropatriarchy does not work in isolation, rather it is embedded within the intersections of capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy. Gendered violence is produced at the intersections of these structural systems of oppression.

Historically, feminists have identified these multiple systems of oppression as the ‘triple burden’ of oppression, signifying the multilayered dimensions of gender, race, and class. More recently, intersectionality as a concept has been used to demonstrate the layered connections and interlinkages of oppression and privilege for women and people with gender-diverse identities. Intersectionality, while often applied at the level of the individual and/or interpersonal, is also useful to examine at the state level.

Figure 1: Intersectionality.
How power, privilege,
discrimination and
oppression fuel
gender-based violence



○ Discrimination and oppression

Colonization	Racism	Discrimination
Homophobia	Ableism	Sexism
Ageism	Religious	

○ Social status and identity

Aboriginality	Age	Migration and Refugee Status
Ethnicity	Sex	Caste identity
Parent/carer	Religion	Political affiliation
Status	Cultural Background	
Sexuality	Socio-economic status	
Gender Identity		
Disability		

○ Structures and instruments of discrimination

Welfare	Education	Legal/Justice
Economic	Labour	Health



The state has a duty to protect citizens, yet global statistics suggest that women are still exposed to danger and harm at alarming rates.

In many countries, states subvert, rather than promote, justice on VAWG because women are not fully and intentionally regarded as equal citizens. Many states are ambiguous and ambivalent on the position of women as equal citizens — even self-purported Democratic states maintain regulations that restrict women's freedom and autonomy.

Globally, feminist social movements have identified and problematized the complex relationship between women and the state. The disciplinary nature of the state often regards women as infantile and inferior, which results in a lack of political will to address, respond to, and prevent gendered violence.

This section examines the role of the state in perpetuating structural systems of oppression as well as state resistance to feminist social movements.



● Australia: Ambiguous positions and the erasure of human rights

The Australian state's ostensibly noble advocacy for human rights becomes conspicuously flawed when examined through the lens of its inconsistent treatment of First Nations people. The continuous marginalization of Indigenous women's rights unveils a narrative that spans from historical annihilation to assimilation.

Both historically and within contemporary Australia, the state resists feminist social movements that seek justice and equality for Indigenous women, both through overt policies and the erasure of their rights. Indigenous women, often at the intersection of colonial violence and patriarchy, have historically been subjected to a double layer of oppression: one that is both gendered and racial.

Policies like the forced removal of Aboriginal children to state and church run 'schools' – called the stolen generations – continued long into 1970s. This disrupted traditional family structures and inflicting deep traumas that cycle through the generations. Such policies enacted colonial violences upon the minds, bodies, and spirits of First Nations people. They were gendered in their enforcement and impacts, including the mass sexual violence perpetrated against First Nations women and the enforced domestic servitude of First Nations girls through to the stolen generations.

A stark illustration of this inconsistency is the government's suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act to enforce an intervention upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples in the Northern Territory, a move that raised serious concerns about the prioritization of human rights for First Nations people. Measures of the Northern Territory Emergency Response – otherwise known as 'The Intervention' – included mandatory income management, mandatory health checks on Aboriginal children, increased policing, and the enforcement of "dry zones" to control the sale and consumption of alcohol and pornography. These measures often disproportionately impacted First Nations women, who are often the primary caregivers

in their families, and who, studies¹ show, continue to do more unpaid care work than their non-Indigenous counterparts. The suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act implied a disregard for the rights and well-being of Indigenous communities, perpetuating a cycle of systemic injustice.

Policies such as annihilation, assimilation, neglect, and then intervention in First Nations people's lives were responded to by a strong and passionate Indigenous rights movement, advocating for recognition, land, and basic human rights.

Simultaneously, a women's rights movement in Australia rallied for their priorities of economic and political rights for women. Arguably, the priorities of First Nations women were not forefront in both movements – marking a 'double erasure'.

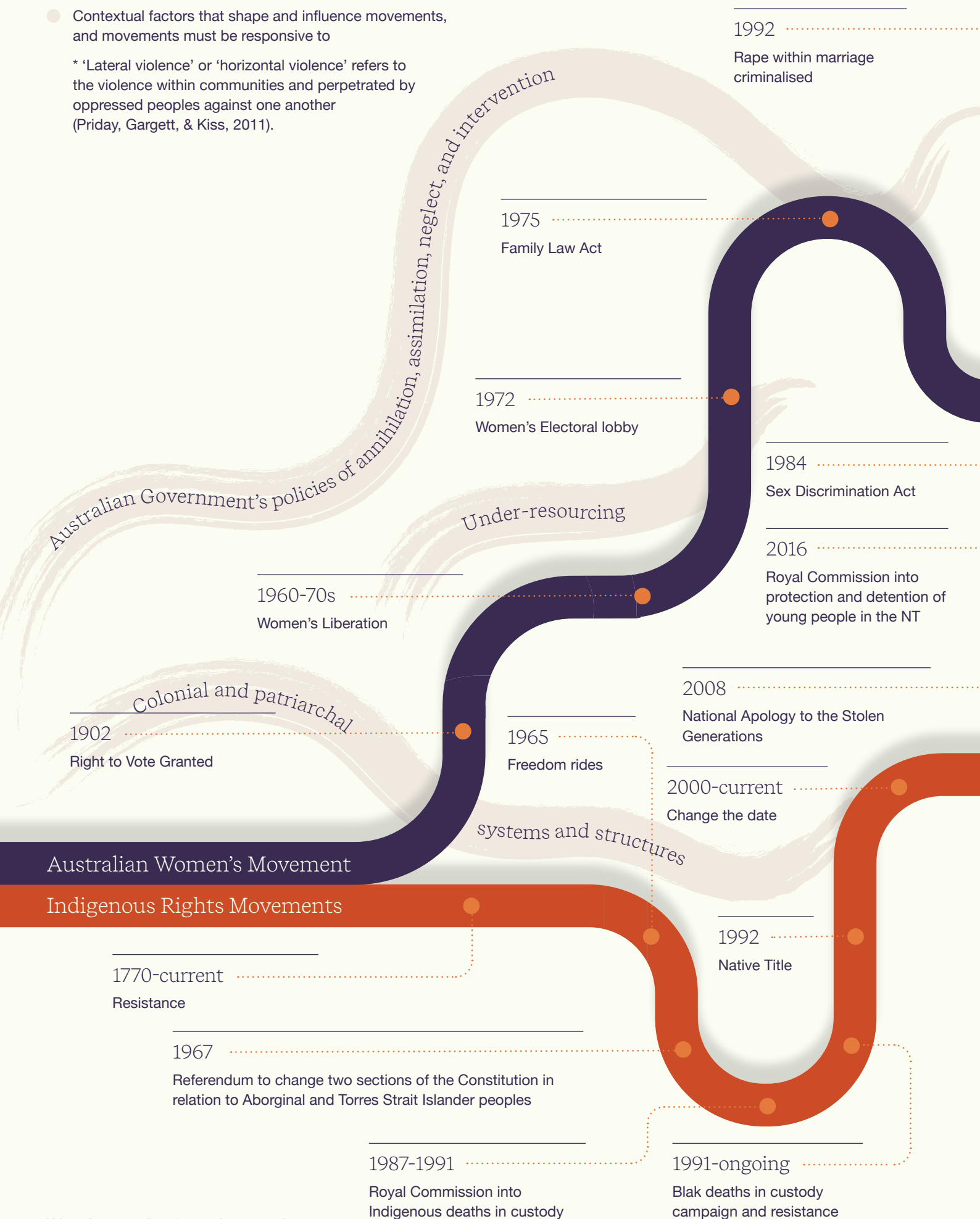
In a pivotal moment in 2023, the aspirations of First Nations people for constitutional recognition faced a significant setback. The defeat of a Referendum seeking the establishment of a constitutionally enshrined voice to parliament marked a profound missed opportunity for acknowledgment and empowerment and left First Nations communities grappling with an overwhelming sense of loss and disappointment.² This defeat not only reflects a systemic resistance to acknowledging and rectifying historical wrongs but also exacerbates the existing disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

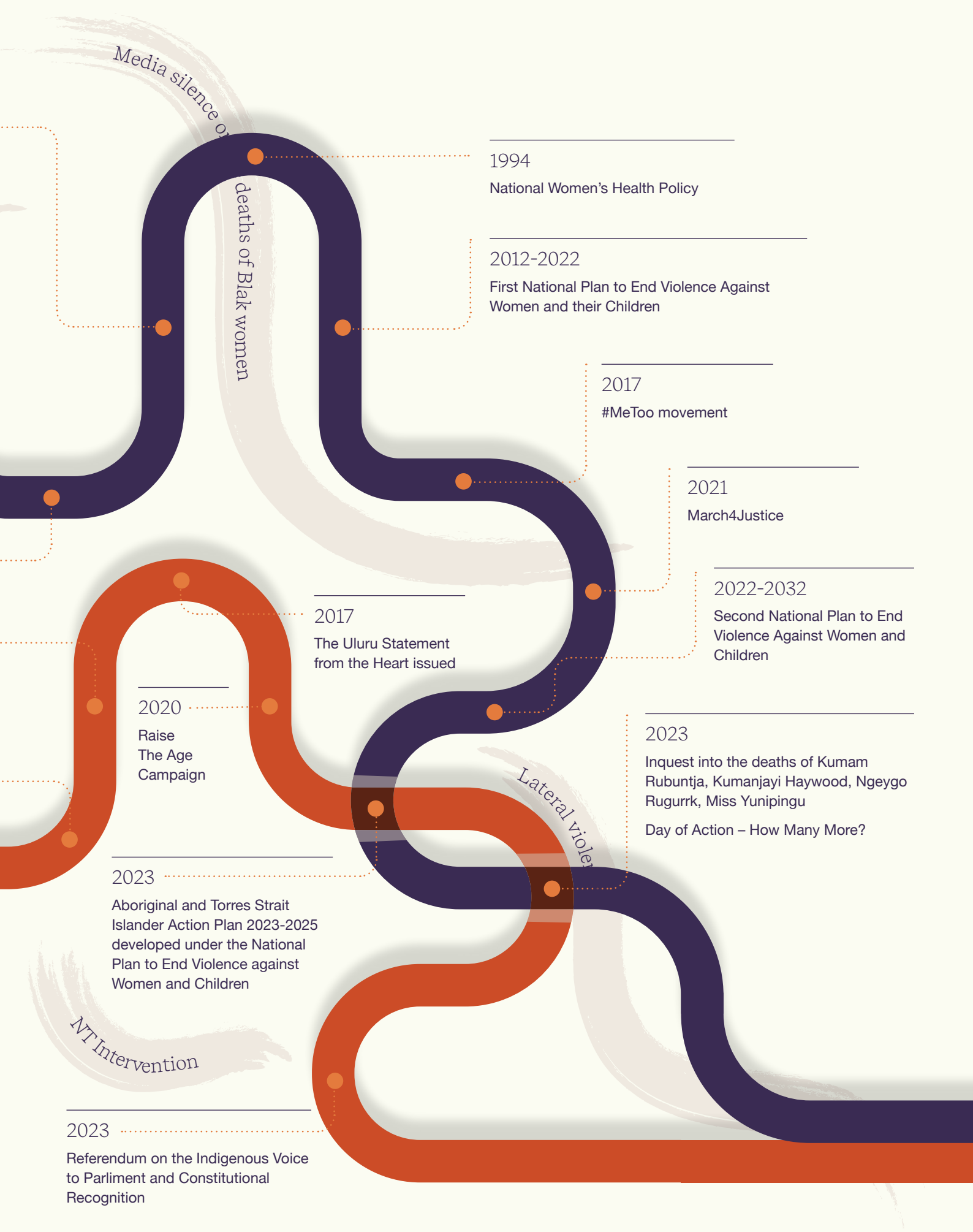
The unresolved issues surrounding the recognition of First Nations people within the constitutional framework perpetuate a legacy of inequality and undermine the foundation of a just and inclusive society. As a result, the struggle for human rights for First Nations people in Australia remains an ongoing battle, highlighting the need for sustained advocacy and meaningful reforms to address historical injustices and ensure a more equitable future. At the forefront of these movements are First Nations women and organizations who resist both colonial and patriarchal violence, and push forward advancements for both Indigenous people and women.

Figure 2: Australian timeline

● Contextual factors that shape and influence movements, and movements must be responsive to

* 'Lateral violence' or 'horizontal violence' refers to the violence within communities and perpetrated by oppressed peoples against one another (Priday, Gargett, & Kiss, 2011).







● Nicaragua: The state as dictator

The women's movement in Nicaragua has a rich and diverse history with roots in the Sandinista Revolution of the 1980's. During the 1990's, the Nicaraguan Network of Women against Violence emerged as one of the most important social movements in the country. The network carried out massive public awareness campaigns and lobbied for legal reforms and services for survivors of violence.

In 1995, a group of activists and researchers carried out a landmark prevalence study, *Candies in Hell*, finding that over half of Nicaraguan women experienced physical violence by an intimate partner. These findings were instrumental in the passage of the country's first domestic violence law.³ Two decades later, a follow-up study discovered that physical partner violence was reduced by 70% between 1995-2015. Further analysis of these data indicated that feminist organizing played an important role in the enormous decrease in violence, by increasing women's access to services and justice, as well as awareness of their right to live without violence.

In 2007, the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN)⁴, led by Daniel Ortega, regained political power and many of these incredible gains were eroded. Setbacks included the loss of access to therapeutic abortion, even in the case of rape or risks to the life of the mother, and the elimination of the specialized Women and Children's Police Stations in 2016. In 2018, a political and social crisis erupted in Nicaragua. This resistance was catalyzed by student protests and was met by the Ortega government's violent repression of opposition groups, including women's rights organizations. This wave of authoritarian repression continues to this day, and has resulted in a breakdown of the Rule of Law and the dissolution of community networks and support services for survivors. The government has closed more than 1,000 NGOs over the last two years, including 212 women's rights organizations. The government seized the property and assets of 14 organizations that provided services for survivors of violence, promoted women's economic empowerment, and defended the rights of Indigenous or Afro-descendent peoples.



Violence against women and girls has intensified and many feminist leaders have been incarcerated under inhumane conditions.

According to the national registry of women human rights defenders (WHRDs), The IM-Defensoras, a Mesoamerican Initiative for WHRDs, have registered more than 8,000 attacks in five years. These attacks include illegal and arbitrary detentions, harassment, threats, sexual torture, torture by solitary confinement, torture by starvation, stripping of nationality, exile, and public shaming for exercising their political rights rather than 'being good mothers staying at home with the babies'. More than 300 defenders of human rights have been illegally and arbitrarily detained in the last five years. In most cases, these detentions have been followed by forced disappearance for weeks and even months, as well as spurious judicial and criminal processes.





● India: The state as custodian

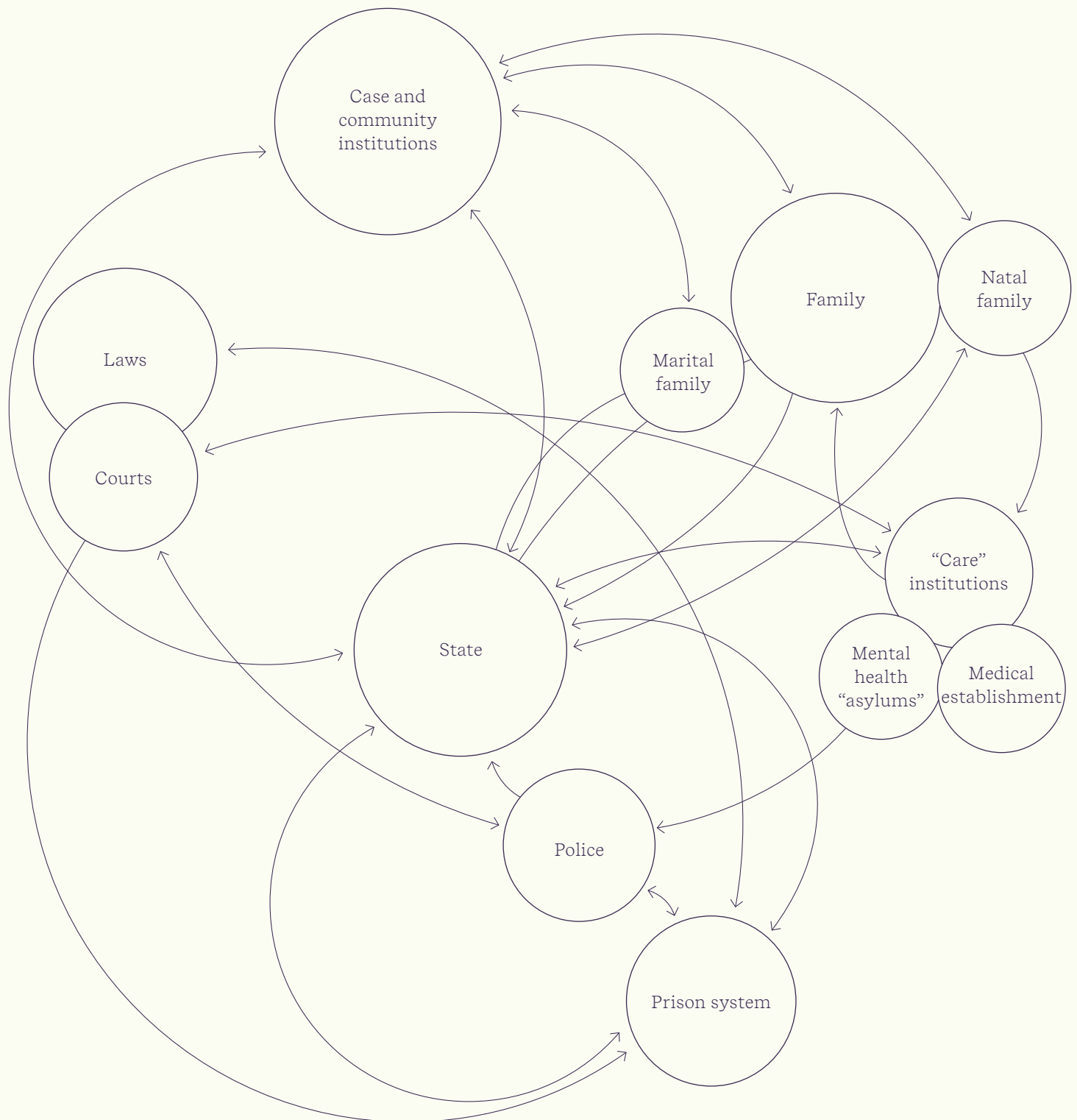
The history of Indian women's movements against violence is one of almost continuous engagement with the state, whether through collaboration and cooperation or through confrontation, resistance and struggle. The India research report is a virtual archive of experiences, reflections and insights around some landmark women's movement struggles against rape and sexual violence.

Women's movement campaigns in India, as in all the countries in this study, have been instrumental in bringing about amendments in laws against rape, and in introducing new laws on domestic violence, sexual harassment at the workplace and sexual violence against children. Faced with the apathy of the official system, women's movements have taken on the onus of monitoring these laws, supporting survivors, and bringing cases to court.

Public outrage and coordinated campaigns by women's movements across the country have succeeded in shaking and destabilizing power structures but have not dismantled them. The struggle against impunity continues.

What emerges from the India research is a map of the "citadels of power and impunity" that sustain Brahminical patriarchy, a term coined by Uma Chakravarti to describe the interlocking hierarchies of caste, gender and economic power. Caste endogamy, compulsory heterosexuality, and material connections⁶ between the family, caste, and state institutions are the mechanisms that ensure control of women, framing them as perpetual subjects of custody. Families, religious bodies, and caste councils are seen as primary enforcers of this regime, with legal frameworks further infantilizing women (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: India system map: A web of control and custody



The state is a custodian in its own right for people – women, girls and queer people – who have fallen foul of the law or are deemed to pose a threat to society. Apart from validating the power of the family and informal institutions, the state also plays a custodial role, creating institutions like care homes to deal with women who deviate from their socially assigned roles. This includes women who have left or been thrown out from the family, women who have been “rescued” from sex work, minor girls who have been trafficked or sexually abused, and women with mental illness. These facilities often blur the line between care and incarceration. Testimonies reveal that the majority of women prisoners in India are undertrials, mostly Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims from poor backgrounds, reflecting systemic biases.

Although the custodial impulses of the state are not new, they have acquired a sharper political edge in the last three decades, driven by majoritarian and nationalist agendas that envision India as a Hindu state. At the same time, the arena of women’s rebellion and resistance has grown, challenging not only familial and community power but also the state itself. Young feminist activists protesting recent citizenship laws have faced arrests and charges of anti-national activity, reflecting how deeply the battle for women’s rights is intertwined with broader struggles for justice and freedom.



● South Africa: The confluence of benevolence and hostility

In South Africa, democratic state responses to VAWG can best be described as fluctuating waves of benevolence and hostility. The state's responsiveness to feminist organizing was noted by many as the strength of the first democratic dispensation; however, this amity began to shift at the turn of the 21st century.

Hostility toward feminist resistance began to grow with the elections of Presidents Thabo Mbeki (1999-2008) and Jacob Zuma (2009-2018); these leaders challenged the feminist movements in South Africa and resisted the increasing transformative state response to VAWG. Setbacks included Mbeki's public refutation of the South African Police Statistics on rape and domestic violence, as well as his denial of the damage caused by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The rollback of progress toward feminist goals resulted in a mass exodus of activists and feminist policy-makers, leaving feminist causes without a champion in the National Assembly.

Another key moment that severely threatened the gains made by the women's movement was the 2006 rape trial of then Deputy President of the African National Congress, Jacob Zuma. The trial demonstrated the cultural, political, judicial, and social backlash women risk should they lay claim to their constitutionally protected rights to safety. The trial also surfaced the misogyny and culturally entrenched belief that women are at the behest of men, particularly in relation to sex.⁶ As these beliefs came to the forefront of social consciousness, the foundational work of the Women's National Coalition was met with major setbacks. The systematic erosion of a strong women's movement lost impact, so did years of progress to ensure gender rights became central priorities in South Africa's legislative agenda.

Amidst this turmoil, several pieces of legislation were instituted to promote and protect the rights of children and the LGBTIQ+ community, including the Civil Union Act of 2006, the Children's Act of 2005, the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act of 2000, and the Prevention and Combatting of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill. Despite optimism for this promising legislation, Black lesbians throughout South Africa reported ongoing experiences of dehumanization, violence, and even death due to hate crimes and discrimination. While marginalized communities gained greater protections through the legal framework of South Africa, the implementation thereof did not translate to social progress.

For feminist activists, it became alarmingly clear that the first twelve years of democracy had not shifted societal gendered beliefs.⁷ For feminists, the discourse about gender equality and the objectives of activism needed to confront deeply held cultural beliefs about 'good' women and 'bad' women.⁸ Standing up against Zuma at the time of his trial came at great personal cost. But, holding the state accountable became pertinent to the movement to prevent, but to also repair some of the damage caused. During and after the Zuma trial, it was evident that the coloniality of gender remained a discourse and practice that shaped South African patriarchy and shaped sexual and



gender-based violence. Patriarchal dominance is not only about a state that is disabling but also that is disinterested or that lacks political will.

In 2018, feminist activists challenged the South African masculinist state once again when they issued a national call to protest the state's inaction on VAWG. Utilizing social media, organizers called for a total shutdown of economic activities for one day, marched through Pretoria, and presented the President with 24 demands. Demands included the development of a National Action Plan to address and eradicate gender-based violence, implementation of sensitivity training for criminal justice personnel, creation of gender inclusive shelters, and the provision of psycho-social support services for survivors of violence.

Following a National Summit, the National Action Plan was adopted in February 2020, and a budget was created to combat rising instances of VAWG. And in 2022, a second National Gender Summit was held to further discussions on the goals of the National Action Plan. This period of activism resulted in renewed interest from the state, and a strategy to guide implementation. VAWG service delivery and the implementation of the National Action Plan across South Africa has been made possible by collaboration between NGOs and activists across generations.

What does this tell us about the nature of oppression?

The cases in these four countries demonstrate that state repression exists on a continuum. While some states are actively engaged in dismantling systems that uphold human rights and imprisoning women and human rights defenders, others champion human rights for certain groups, while denying them to others – often on the basis of race. In some cases, the state functions as a custodian or disciplinarian of women and feminist social movements. The common thread across differing contexts is that states exist as highly politicized machines of social control and social reproduction; and, their commitment to protecting women from violence remains fleeting and uneven.



● 3 The threads that bind feminist movements

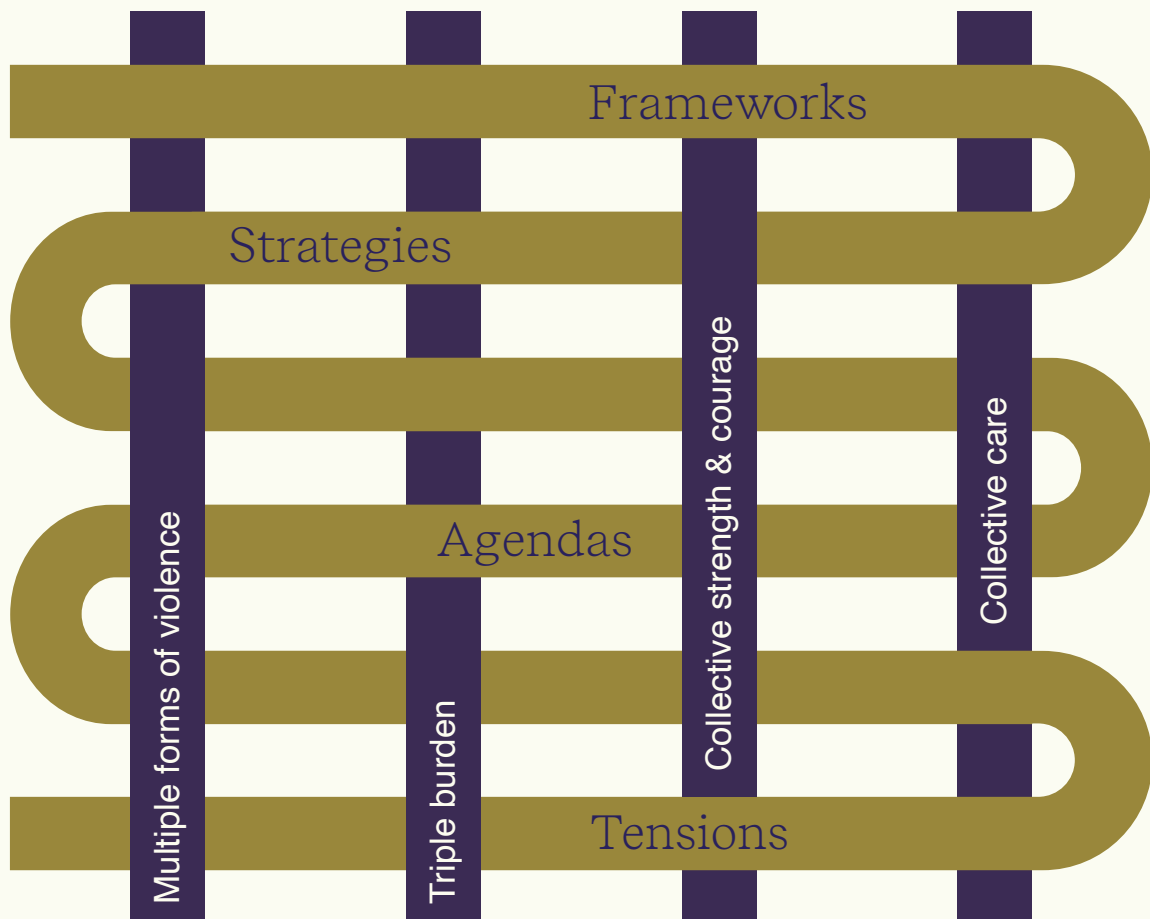
Across the world, feminist movements are as diverse as the societies they emerge from, shaped by unique histories, political struggles, and cultural contexts. Yet, despite these differences, certain foundational threads consistently weave through their activism. From fighting multiple forms of violence to shouldering the burdens of advocacy, service provision, and survival, feminist movements demonstrate remarkable resilience, adaptability, and collective strength.

This section explores the common characteristics that define feminist organizing across different regions—how movements sustain themselves through solidarity, navigate shifting political landscapes, and evolve their strategies to confront oppression. It also highlights the ever-changing external forces that both challenge and shape feminist resistance, from state repression to rising religious fundamentalism. By tracing these patterns, we uncover the deep interconnectedness of feminist struggles, revealing not just the obstacles they face but the unwavering determination that keeps them moving forward.

Warp yarns: Consistent characteristics of feminist movements

Despite the diversity of the socio-cultural contexts and differences in the movements, there are consistent and foundational elements the research identified in all sites of study.

- Warp Yarns
- Weft Yarns



Multiple forms of violence

The patriarchy, racism, colonialism, and neoliberalism coexist, fuse, and mutually strengthen themselves, structuring and intensifying inequalities that express themselves in the continuum of violence that affects poor, feminized, and racialized bodies.

Globally, women's movements are simultaneously tackling multiple, interconnected forms of violence, discrimination, and oppression, as well as applying an intersectional lens to their work.

Activists address multiple forms of interpersonal violence, including intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and harassment. Additionally, they face political violence, cyber violence, police violence, and more.

In Nicaragua, for example, members of the feminist movement are facing mass political imprisonment. In South Africa, the feminist movement was directly aligned with the anti-apartheid movement. In India, feminist movements stand at the frontlines of democratic struggles. And in Australia, activists stand in solidarity with Indigenous rights movements, anti-racism campaigns, and police brutality.



Triple burden of responsibility

Across all sites, feminist movements face a “triple burden” of responsibility. These responsibilities include advocating for policy change, providing direct services to survivors of VAWG, and fighting for their own survival. They manage these competing burdens with incredibly limited resources, often while juggling the demands of different funders, including governments that give them money with one hand and oppress them with the other.

For example, in Australia, First Nations women are faced with delivering essential services when governments withdraw or fail to provide funding, navigating personal experiences of violence, and advocating for systemic change all while providing care to others, as well as themselves. This triple burden reflects the complex interplay of historical, social, economic, and cultural factors that intersect with violence against women. It is a heavy weight to bear and creates a complex environment, which First Nations women and organizations must navigate.

Collective strength and courage: “We are still going because we’re still together.”

There is power in collective action and solidarity. Resilience and collective strength are central and consistent characteristics of feminist movements across all research sites. Even when individuals have been prevented from meeting, imprisoned and oppressed, they are held together by a sense of collective belief.

In addition, the movements generally do not have a single ‘face’—they are built around collective networks. This horizontal structure enables them to survive despite external repression or imprisonment of a single movement leader.

Collective care

Care is political and the research shows the importance of collective care in the context of exhausting work across all sites.

Caring for each other is instrumental in sustaining individual lives, and the movement as a whole. The movements demonstrate that the only way to continue their work over decades, as they have done, is to take care of themselves as individuals and as a collective.

For example, in Nicaragua, women activated their pre-existing feminist networks at the local, national, and international levels and developed new networks of a humanitarian nature in order to respond to the urgent needs of survivors of VAWG and state repression. Similarly, feminists in Australia integrate healing ceremonies into their organizing efforts.

“We were doing the humanitarian work there. So, it was like looking for and obtaining provisions, cooking and taking food for the youngsters, certain medical supplies, bicarbonate for the teargas, white vinegar; anything we could find that we knew could be of use to them...”

— Trans woman, Nicaragua

In India, body and healing practices have often been the first introduction to feminism for rural women’s groups. In the 1980s, the Shodhini initiative brought together women’s groups across the country to build a repository of women’s traditional knowledge and healing practices. Feminist groups like Jagori, Swayam and Her Space have created safe spaces for rest and healing where feminist activists and violence survivors can process their experiences and rediscover their transformativ energies.

Weft yarns: Evolving characteristics of women's movements

Feminist movements exist within an ever-changing political, social and women's environment. Colonial, imperial, and apartheid legacies have influenced feminist and activist responses to gender-based violence and gender inequalities. Therefore, the frameworks, narratives, and strategies and agendas of these movements have, and continue, to evolve over the years.

Frameworks

Not everyone sees themselves as 'feminist', and we have seen women's movements align themselves with various frameworks in the fight to address violence against women and girls.

For example, in the 1970s and 80s, women's movements were deeply aligned with movements for democracy, civil rights, and racial justice.

Then, in the 1990s, VAWG was framed within a human rights context.

Women's rights are human rights, was the catchphrase. There was a focus on documenting VAWG as a violation of women's rights and presenting them to regional and international bodies.

Intersectionality and decolonization as frameworks for addressing VAWG have been introduced in the past decade. In South Africa, the #FeesMustFall and #EndRapeCulture campaign emerging on university campuses, and the explicit GBV #TotalShutdown movements, at their core, tackled gender-based violence as a feminist concern that raised complex intersectional struggles. This movement led to the mass mobilization of women from communities through the use of explicit social media.

In Australia, we have seen organizing around a greater recognition that First Nations women experience disproportionately high rates of violence, driven by the intersection of gender inequality and the ongoing impacts of colonization.

In India, feminism and gender equality have been attacked by the right-wing as conspiracies to undermine Indian civilisational values. Women's movements are confronting a situation where the state is using the rhetoric of decolonization to roll back the hard-won gains of the last decades.⁹

Strategies

Women's movements are constantly evolving their strategies to respond to internal and external factors.

Initial efforts to raise concerns about VAWG were often informal – grassroots and even clandestine – including poster-making in India and small gatherings in women's homes. Women's movements then partnered with researchers to 'prove' to governments and others the scale and consequences of this problem. For example, in 1995, *Confites en el infierno* (Candies in Hell) was the first study to measure the prevalence of intimate partner violence in Nicaragua. This study was accompanied by a multisectoral awareness-raising campaign.

Across countries, women's movements have used specific cases of VAWG to ignite mass protests and catalyze legislative changes. In India, the Mathura case was the spark that ignited a movement against rape that still burns bright today. Amendments to the rape laws in 1983 and 2013, the law against domestic violence in 2002, the law against sexual harassment in the workplace, and the laws against child sexual abuse in 2013 – each of these were outcomes of sustained campaigning and mobilization by women's groups.

Yet, alongside the success and strength of women's leadership, patriarchy continues to impede women's meaningful participation and women remain at the socio-political margins. In the post-apartheid period, Hassim and Gouws¹⁰ note that women continue to be alienated from political processes. In Nicaragua, the dictatorial context of generalized repression that started in 2018 and the direct aggression against feminist organizations and leadership have left the broad women's movement operating in clandestine ways. For women's movements and organizations, space – both physical and political – is something to be regained and fought for and is often taken away.

External tensions

The specific agendas that feminist activists have aligned themselves with have evolved over time and place to strategically meet their respective political moments. Organizers in certain contexts have focused efforts around reproductive rights and bodily autonomy, while others have chosen democracy, or a right to live free from violence – to name a few.

Despite alignment within social movements, these movements have also faced external tensions. In South Africa, feminists who championed democracy were still alienated from political processes. In Nicaragua, the relationship between the state and the feminist movement has been tense since activists supported Daniel Ortega's stepdaughter, Zoilamérica Narváez Murillo, when she filed charges of sexual abuse against Ortega in 1998. Following this scandal, Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo have demonstrated a particular hatred of the women's movement, expressing their rejection of Nicaraguan feminists by labelling them "false prophets," "schizophrenics", and "bitter women" with a goal of family disintegration.¹¹

The last decade has seen an intensification of religious polarization and backlash towards women's rights and gender equality. In India, crimes against women per one hundred thousand of the population increased from 56.3 in 2014 to 66.4 in 2022. Feminists and women's movement activists are at the forefront of resistance to the shrinking of democratic space and the crackdown on dissenting voices. Ironically, young feminists who came together with the slogan "Smashing the cage of Brahminical patriarchy" were arrested and charged with conspiring to overthrow the state.

Women's movements are at a crossroads. This project comes at a time of intense backlash against women's rights and feminist movements. Violence against women is being wielded as a tool of economic, political, and social control. Around the world, we are witnessing a rise in authoritarianism, the criminalization of activism, and the withdrawal of critical funding. In addition, women at the margins—particularly Indigenous women and women of color—are increasingly excluded from key policy processes and reforms.

Progress is not linear, and gains are often fragile. Yet progress is being made—largely due to the relentless efforts of feminist organizing.

Tracing women's rights struggles across four countries reveals that, for decades, feminist movements have led the fight against gendered violence, overcoming systemic obstacles and adapting to shifting political and social landscapes. They have produced groundbreaking evidence that has captured national and international attention, shaping interventions to end VAWG. They have catalyzed legal reforms, established safe houses, and provided life-saving services for survivors. They have led awareness campaigns, advocating for women's inalienable right to live free from violence. They have pushed for policy change, shaped national action plans, and held governments accountable. And they have done all of this while fighting for their own survival!

Ultimately, women's organizations and feminist movements have transformed the very fabric of our societies for the better: their work saves lives, strengthens democracies, and transforms communities. They offer hope and inspiration—without them, hard-won gains in gender equality and safety for women and girls will be lost.

Join us in weaving a future free from violence.

We will not be silenced.

We will not be broken.

We will never give up.

We will continue to care for our families, communities, and the planet.

We do it with joy in our hearts and fires in our bellies.

We weave stories from the past, into the future, to create a beautiful tapestry of life where we are free and equal.



Female liberation leaders celebrate the formation of the National Women's Coalition at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1991. Photo credit: Alf Khumalo, African Pictures

End notes

- 1 Klein, Elise, Janet Hunt, Zoe Staines, Yonatan Dinku, Chay Brown, Kayla Glynn-Braun, and Mandy Yap. "Caring about care." (2024). Commissioned report No. 7/2023, Centre for Indigenous Policy Research, Australian National University. <https://wiyiyaniuthangani.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-03/Caring%20about%20Care%20Report%202024.pdf>
- 2 In 2023 the Australian public were given the opportunity, through a referendum, to change the Australian constitution to include and recognize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in the document for the first time, and to constitutionally enshrine a representative voice to the Australian parliament so that First Nations people could inform the policies that affected them. The dream for constitutional recognition was borne out of a consultative process in which at Uluru hundreds of First Nations leaders from different nations called for 'Voice, Treaty, Truth'. This became known as the Uluru Statement from the Heart and this was seen as an important step in addressing colonial legacies and harmful policies that have been enacted against First Nations people since the forced settlement and colonial project of 'Australia' began. There were massive campaigns both for and against the constitutional change and long held prejudices and divisions were highlighted. In the end, the Australian public resoundingly voted 'no'. Overall, the results were approximately 60% 'no' and 40% 'yes', except in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory who almost universally votes 'yes' with huge majorities.
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- 6 Moffett, Helen. "'These women, they force us to rape them': Rape as narrative of social control in post-apartheid South Africa." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32.1 (2006): 129-144.
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- 8 Ibid.
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- 10 Hassim, Shireen, and Amanda Gouws. "Redefining the public space: women's organisations, gender consciousness and civil society in South Africa." *Politikon* 25.2 (1998): 53-76.
- 11 Thaler, Kai M., and Eric Mosinger. "Nicaragua: Doubling down on dictatorship." *Journal of Democracy* 33.2 (2022): 133-146.



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