

The hidden costs of feminist resistance

European Journal of Women's Studies

1–5

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DOI: 10.1177/13505068261457012

journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw**Catarina Sousa¹**  **and Liliana Rodrigues²**

Abstract

Working as an activist at feminist NGOs requires commitment to the social movement and resilience to face the socioeconomic barriers and constant demands that characterize this sector. This scenario is particularly prone to activist burnout, which represents a hidden cost for physical, psychological, social, and financial well-being. Therefore, this essay examines experiences of activist burnout in a Portuguese feminist NGO and reflects on multi-level reforms needed to foster collective care.

Keywords

activist burnout, collective care, NGO, feminism, rest as resistance

Activism may look different for everyone, but it's agreed upon that it involves some degree of sociopolitical commitment to a particular issue/cause. The work toward social change may happen in a volunteering setting or via a paid role, for example, at an NGO (Roth, 2016). The latter context will be the focus of this analysis.

At first glance, 'professional activism' appears to promise stability, structure, and support. However, the reality is much more complex. Working at NGOs demands substantial physical, psychological, and financial investment that may easily result in exhaustion, distress, and burnout. Activist burnout is described as a condition that emerges from extreme levels of stress caused by activism-related work, leading to physical and psychological symptoms that interfere with activists' ability to act effectively (Gorski, 2019). Cox (2010) argues that people who work at NGOs are particularly prone to burnout due to the working environment characterized by excessive workloads, sociopolitical challenges, lack of human and financial resources, and invisibility. In addition, when it comes to feminist NGOs, activists are constantly exposed to various forms of gender-based

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violence and work directly with victims of domestic violence (Cox, 2010). This may lead to a process of role-taking, that is, the women who work at these NGOs develop the capacity to understand domestic violence victims' emotions and thought processes. This can be very distressing for these activists who have had similar experiences, since they have a deeper ability to take up the victim's perspective (Groggel et al., 2022). Therefore, role-taking can also be a predictor of activist burnout.

In the Portuguese context, Martins (2024) interviewed several feminist activists working at NGOs who stated that there are not enough human resources or financial support to address every problem. In addition, most of these activists do not have long-term job contracts, so they might work as freelancers, volunteers, or on a part-time basis. This results in uncertainty, distress, and precarity. Most NGOs working in this field are required to continuously apply for funding from external institutions as they lack financial autonomy. This process is extremely demanding for their workers because they need to be constantly informed about funding opportunities, draft proposals, and worry about the outcomes. To add to this vulnerable work environment, the sociopolitical context in which they operate is marked by multiple challenges, namely the rise of far-right parties and reduced public investment in social programs. In this sociopolitical context, the work of these NGOs plays a crucial role since they have qualified professionals and mechanisms to counter these political discourses and emerging ideologies and fight for social justice. This scenario appears paradoxical: on one hand, the current context constrains the implementation of feminist actions and projects, but on the other hand, it leads these NGOs to increase their efforts to respond to emerging forms of oppression.

Nonetheless, feminist activists keep challenging these barriers to implement social change, but at what cost? At the cost of their well-being, financial stability, and work-life balance, which increases their vulnerability to activist burnout and other mental health outcomes.

I have worked closely with a Portuguese feminist NGO that operates at a national level, not only preventing gender-based violence, but also protecting and supporting victims of domestic violence. I have witnessed the challenges that they encounter on a daily basis. Given these characteristics, I decided to conduct a brief psychosocial evaluation to assess the levels of burnout among feminist activists who work at this NGO. These women completed an online questionnaire, which measured burnout levels, symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, as well as activist identity. The results were consistent with expectations: the activists were, on the one hand, strongly engaged with the feminist movement, and, on the other hand, exhibited high levels of burnout. I've noticed that 55% of these women strongly relate to the activist identity; that is, they perceive themselves as activists and are committed to the activist work. These are the ones who report higher levels of stress and anxiety. This correlation reveals how the professionalization of activism weaponizes the political commitment of women. In a precarious labor market, the 'activist identity' becomes a tool for the extraction of unpaid emotional surplus, where the boundaries between revolutionary passion and labor exploitation are intentionally blurred to sustain underfunded social services. I have also observed that 75% of the women reported high levels of burnout, which might predict physical, emotional, and cognitive exhaustion. Women who report higher levels of stress and anxiety also report higher levels of exhaustion. Up to 45% of the women reported high levels of

disengagement with their work, which is associated with symptoms of depression. At least 20% of the women reported stress levels higher than average. When asked about the work environment within a feminist NGO, they mentioned both the autonomy and freedom they were granted and the precariousness and the low income associated with it. Some women added that there's a lack of resources that results in excessive workloads, as they have to work overtime on a voluntary basis to offset this scarcity. Others reported that, due to precariousness, they cannot implement any internal institutional mechanisms to protect their well-being, since all resources need to be allocated to working in the field. They argue that it would be crucial to have some psychological support and medical assistance, due to working in an environment characterized by significant psychosocial risks.

Moreover, working closely with these activists allowed me to observe that, besides all these challenges, they remain actively engaged. Their discipline and commitment to feminism are deeply inspiring and play an essential role in the sustainability of the movement. Daily interactions with these activists allowed me to observe that these women see themselves as part of a collective issue that extends beyond their realm of work and professional tasks, and they are willing to put in extra work to contribute to it. Even though that is inspiring, it is also the reason they are reporting high levels of burnout: they tend to deprioritize most signs and symptoms in order to keep working on their projects and keep the movement alive.

This brief evaluation revealed the multi-level issues that need to be addressed urgently to keep activists engaged with their work and to preserve their health.

At a political level, it is crucial to change the precarious working conditions of these women and promote stability and dignity through long-term contracts, health insurance, and other social benefits. Since the constant need to apply for external funding is unsustainable, it would be important to secure stable, long-term funding from the State or the EU, for example. This would reduce uncertainty and allow space not only for rest and self-care, but also for developing new projects and ideas (they wouldn't have to be constantly worrying about applying for funding). Securing stable funding is essential to challenge the 'projectification' of social justice, which reduces systemic change to short-term, bureaucratic cycles. This neoliberal funding model keeps organizations in a permanent 'emergency mode', preventing the development of long-term collective care and forcing workers into a state of chronic structural exhaustion.

At an organizational level, it is important to acknowledge this issue and start implementing some prevention strategies so they can reduce the controllable psychosocial risks that they face. The Portuguese Directorate-General of Health (2021) recommends that organizations create safe and supportive working environments, promote health literacy, reduce the stigma about mental health, and create mechanisms to report and discuss problems that might emerge. However, these strategies must move beyond 'coping mechanisms' that individualize the problem. Organizations must instead foster structures of collective accountability, where the emotional impact of the work is recognized as a shared political responsibility rather than a clinical symptom to be 'managed' by the worker. Even though these actions are essential to encourage rest and to build solid foundations for collective care, it is necessary that the people who work at NGO have the time and support from hierarchical superiors to engage in these practices.

At the individual level, not much can be done when an entire system is trying to silence these activists' voices and use their workforce without fair payment and work conditions. Nonetheless, activists have the right to rest. Davis (2018) argues that radical self-care should be practiced collectively. She states that it would change the entire nature of social movements and lead to social change in a much more distinct way. Lorde (1988) agrees that activists need to look at their bodies' signs and symptoms and rest, so they can keep fighting and working. We need to acknowledge that burnout can lead to a total disengagement with the feminist movement. Therefore, collective care would also be essential to guarantee the sustainability of the movement.

Although it may be unfair to place the responsibility for rest and collective care on individuals when they are fighting against a structure that demands strong emotional and political engagement, activists may benefit from finding a balance between their collective work and their personal needs. As stated before, people who work at feminist NGOs strongly identify with the activist identity, which leads them to behave in ways that reinforce this representation and neglect other dimensions of their *self*. However, this could lead to the suppression of their own needs, which may appear paradoxical in relation to the notion of women's empowerment. Feminists would benefit from starting to see themselves as worthy of rest, thus transforming rest into a collective act of resistance to the oppression that characterizes the structures in which they work. If we consider activists whose identity has been constantly marginalized, self-care can become 'an act of political warfare' (Lorde, 1988) and the only controllable way to preserve the self in a world that can be very hostile to their communities.

By reframing rest as a subversive act of resistance, we challenge the capitalist and patriarchal expectation that women must be infinitely available for the labor of care. In this sense, collective care is not a luxury but a political strategy to preserve the movement's agency against a system that seeks to deplete its protagonists.

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Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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