

# STORIES OF HOPE: LESSONS FROM HUMAN RIGHTS WORK IN RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENTS



**CFFP** THE CENTRE FOR  
FEMINIST  
FOREIGN POLICY

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### **Acknowledgements**

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We recognize the difficult and often dangerous conditions under which many women's rights and LGBTQI+ activists continue their work. In a time when anti-feminist and anti-rights movements are gaining ground, these stories remind us that resilience and solidarity remain powerful forces for change.

### **Legal Notice**

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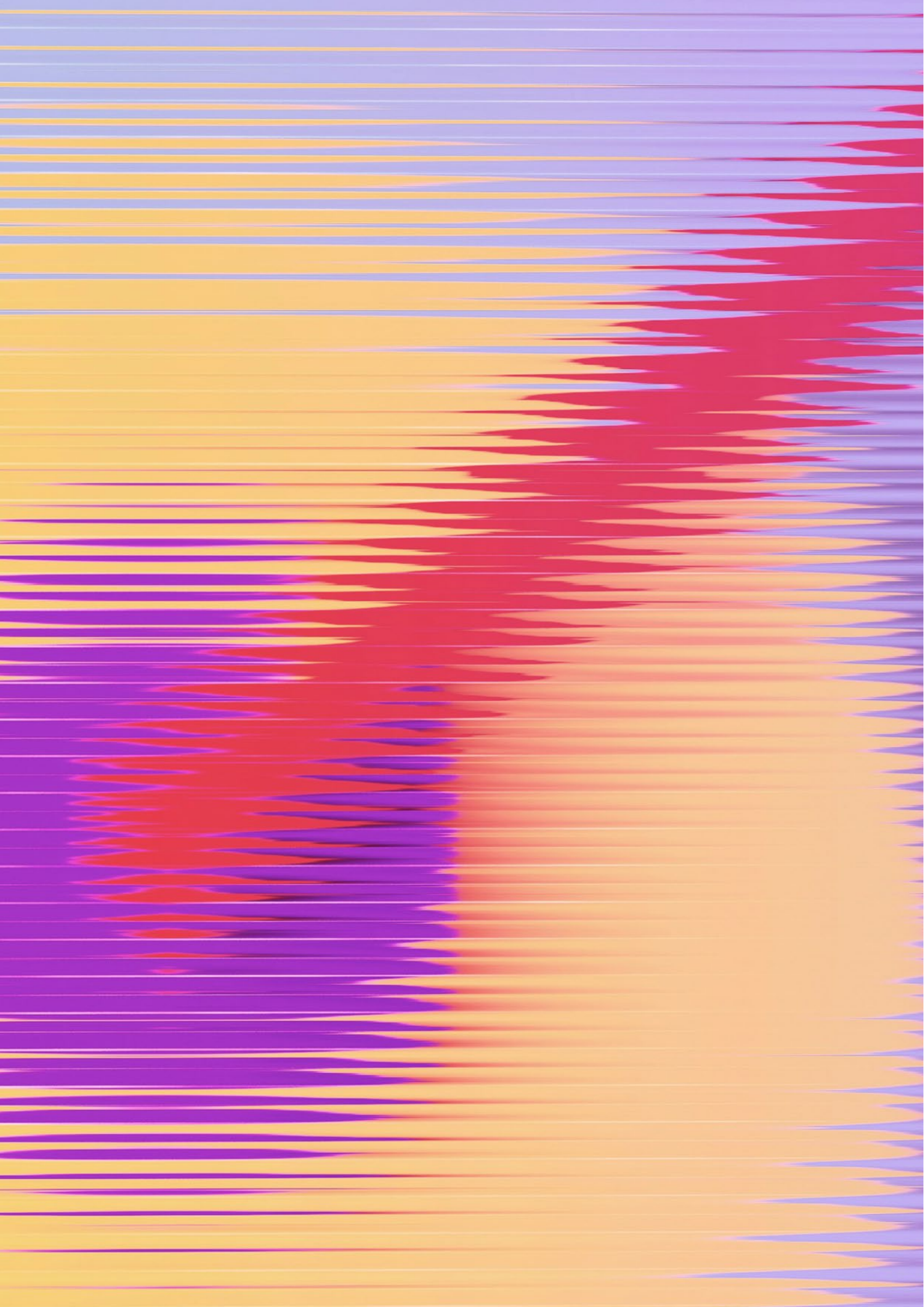
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# INTRODUCTION

In a time of rising authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, and escalating attacks on gender equality and human rights, feminist movements continue to show up for each other and for the future we refuse to give up on. The Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy's (CFFP) Women's Rights Task Force was created as a space for connection, learning, and strategizing across borders, bringing together activists and changemakers who are navigating shrinking civic spaces and deeply polarized public debates. What emerged from this space is more than a network—it is a collective practice of resilience and solidarity, as well as a testament to hope against all odds.

This publication documents stories of feminist resistance and hope, drawn from the lived experiences of task force members across the globe. Whether through public campaigns, legal battles, or quiet organizing under pressure, each story reflects a vital piece of feminist resistance. Each story is different—but all are rooted in solidarity and the shared belief that change is possible, even when the odds are against us.

These are not just stories of what happened. They are stories about the process—how movements adapt, how activists hold each other up, how values shape strategy, and how hope is not naive but fiercely intentional instead. In telling them, we aim to document not only feminist resistance but also feminist ingenuity. And above all, we hope that they offer something else that we all urgently need: a reminder that we are not alone, and we will not give up.



# EMPATHY IN ACTION

## AILBHE | IRELAND

In Ireland, the road to abortion rights was long and steep. For decades, abortion was criminalized under the Irish Constitution—legal only if a woman’s life was at risk. Even then, hospitals often refused to provide care. The only option for many people was to leave. “She had to take the Ryanair” became code for traveling to the UK for an abortion.

Ailbhe Smyth was one of the leaders behind the movement that changed that. In 2018, Ireland voted by a two-thirds majority to repeal the constitutional ban on abortion—a historic shift that had once seemed unthinkable.

The campaign’s success didn’t rely on confrontation or moral argument. It was based on connection. “Appealing to people’s humanity,” Ailbhe says, was the heart of their strategy. Rather than engaging in divisive debates about foetal rights, campaigners focused on women’s health, dignity, and lived experiences. They didn’t tell people they were wrong—they invited them to listen. Personal stories, like that of Savita Halappanavar, who died after being denied an abortion in 2012, made the issue tangible and urgent.

Coalition-building was another key strategy. Feminist groups, trade unions, health professionals, and community organizers came together around a shared message: abortion is healthcare, and healthcare is a human right. By stepping outside activist bubbles, the campaign reached people across the political spectrum—and across the country.

Social media played a role, too, but even in 2018 online spaces were already turning toxic. Ailbhe now believes that online campaigning must evolve. In today’s climate, when anger dominates timelines, “we can’t keep doing the same things,” she warns. What’s needed now is not just reach, but resonance as well. She points to deep canvassing—longer, face-to-face conversations that build trust—as an effective model. Its main focus is talking with people, not at them: listening before trying to persuade.

For Ailbhe, legal victories are milestones—not endpoints. Access to reproductive care remains uneven in Ireland, with some hospitals still refusing to provide it. The long-term goal is the full integration of abortion into public healthcare—without stigma, delay, or political interference. “You never win everything at once,” she says. “You keep going.”

Considering today’s global backlash—from the U.S. to Poland to Russia—she doesn’t sugarcoat the challenges ahead. But she doesn’t retreat either. “When things get tough, that’s not the time to back down,” she says. “It’s the time to adapt. Rethink the strategy. And push forward.”

# ONE STEP AT A TIME

## MARIANA | ARGENTINA

In Argentina, feminist movements have made history—from the mass protests of Ni Una Menos to the legalization of abortion in 2020. But as journalist and activist Mariana notes, none of these recent milestones happened overnight. Change came slowly, through collective effort, strategic storytelling, and many hands over many years.

The Ni Una Menos campaign did not emerge spontaneously. But its immediate trigger was a journalist's tweet about the femicide of a 14-year-old girl, buried by her boyfriend in the backyard, which called for collective action. In response, a group of women journalists and communicators, came together to organize a demonstration in front of the Palace of the National Congress. They coordinated efforts across sectors, authored a manifesto, mobilized public figures to share the call to action, and amplified the message across media outlets. At this historic march on 3 June 2015, the Ni Una Menos document, with its nine demands, was read aloud by a well-known actress, an actor, and a female cartoonist specially invited by the organizers.

The message was simple, powerful, and impossible to ignore. What began as a cry of exhaustion in the face of femicides became the spark for a new wave of feminist organizing in Argentina.

This moment of mass mobilization and flourishing of feminisms was key to fuelling the groundwork for La Marea Verde, the Green Wave—a national movement for abortion rights. In 2018, the National Congress of Argentina held three months of televised hearings on legalizing abortion, with

hundreds of public testimonies. Broadcast nationwide, these sessions helped normalize conversations about abortion, as women of all ages—including mothers, grandmothers, journalists, actresses, and doctors—shared their experiences.

The “My body, my choice” feminist slogan was deliberately set aside to strategically reframe the debate. It was framed as an issue of public health and social equity. This shift moved the conversation away from moral arguments, positioning abortion instead as a question of justice, access, and survival. In 2020, abortion was legalized—backed by mass mobilization in the streets, cross-party lobbying, medical data, and years of feminist activism.

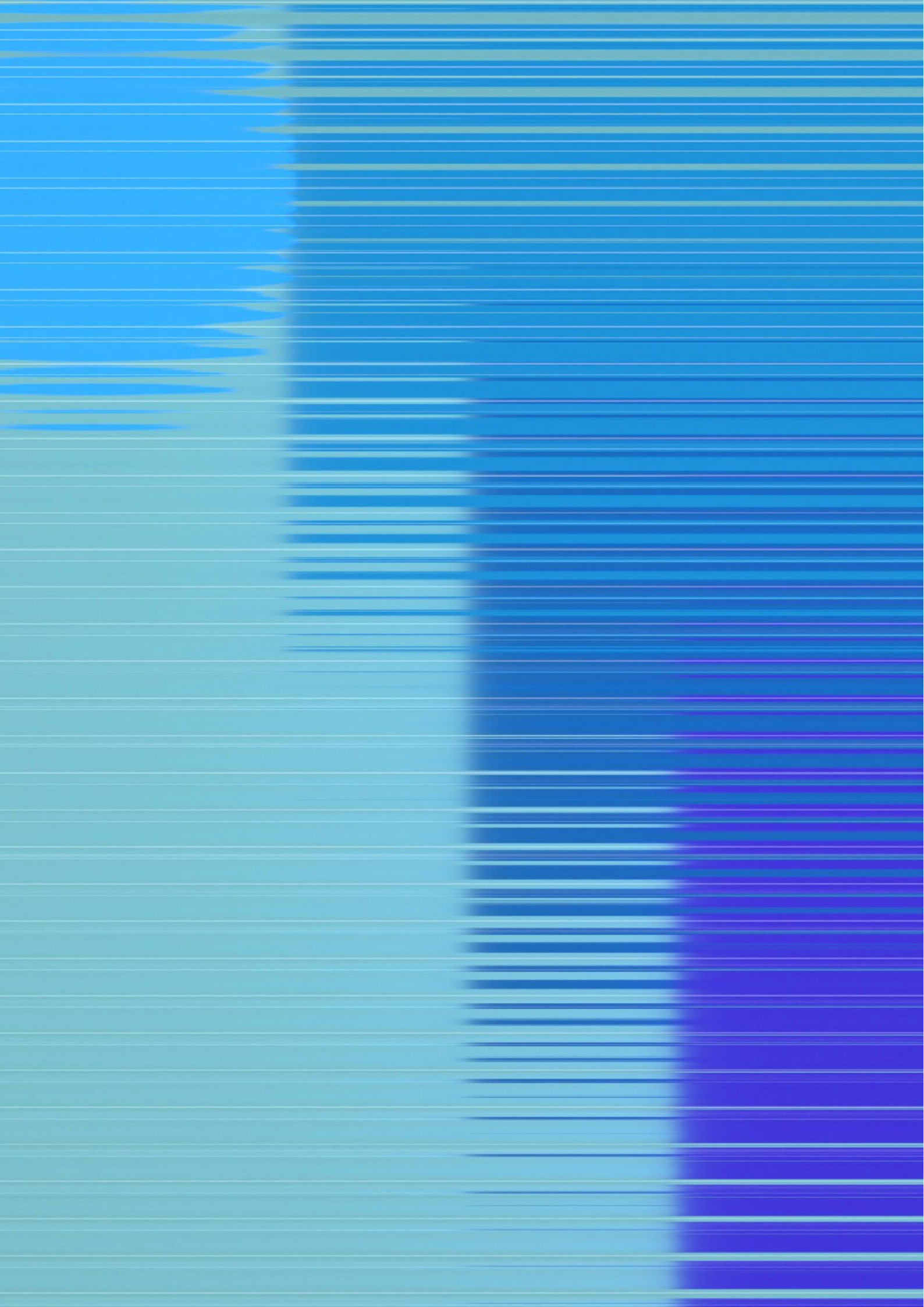
Today, those achievements are under threat. Argentina's current government has targeted feminist policies, normalized attacks on gender rights, and made public dissent more difficult. The backlash has been heavy. But the movement is not starting from scratch. The networks are there. The stories are there. The lessons learned from past struggles—how they were fought, lost, adapted, and won—still guides the movement's path forward.

Mariana's current work focuses on recovering those stories and strategies—through journalism, podcasts, and documentation. One of her recent podcast series, *Soberanas*, traces the arc of reproductive rights in Argentina, from the first birth control pills in the 1960s to the legalization of abortion. She documents not only laws but also the stories behind them: the activists, the journalists, the networks. In so doing, she constructs what she calls a “red thread”—a through line of resistance across generations.

The movement, she reminds us, began long before any one campaign. Feminists were organizing for abortion rights as early as Argentina's democratic transition in 1983, and Mariana herself began writing about abortion in the late 1990s. At the time, legalization felt almost unimaginable. But just the goal itself was a source of hope.

That hope still exists, even amidst the backlash. “When I look back, I see that nothing we did was in vain,” she says. “Every protest, every article, every conversation added up. And because we kept going, we got there.”

What gives her hope now is that long view: the knowledge that no single campaign stands alone. Ni Una Menos fuelled the Green Wave. Legal battles inspired narrative shifts. The wins of the past were built on previous generations—and they, in turn, are laying the foundation for what comes next. “Even if today’s moment feels hostile,” she says, “we have proof that change is possible. And we still have the tools to fight for it.”



# SOLIDARITY AS INFRASTRUCTURE

## STELLAH | KENYA

When the USAID funding cuts hit, their effects were immediate and broad. “It wasn’t just about people losing jobs,” says Dr. Stella Bosire. “It was the disruption of services entire communities relied on.” Clinical trials ended prematurely. Women’s economic empowerment programmes, gender-based violence programmes (a vital part of holistic healthcare), and cervical cancer screenings were all shut down overnight and deemed irrelevant. Feminist and grassroots organizations across Kenya and Uganda were thrown into crisis. Despite the brutality, Stella says that the resilience of their movements shone through in the ways they quickly reorganized—restructuring resources, relying on each other, and adapting on the go to keep the struggle alive. This resilience was evident in how feminist organizations quickly mobilized resources to sustain the movement. For instance, her organization, Africa Center for Health Systems and Gender Justice, identified seven frontline groups, drawn from a wider network of over 120 grassroots organizations in their Community Health Hub, who were doing essential work to support women, girls, and gender-diverse persons through economic empowerment during the crisis.

Though they were not traditional grant-makers, Stella and her organization stepped into the role of resource mobilizers to protect their shared ecosystem. They redirected \$70,000 to these grassroots organizations and leveraged their own strategic position to connect the smaller organizations with both established and emerging donors.

The urgency of the moment also pushed them to rethink partnerships, looking beyond conventional donor spaces to explore ethical collaborations with the private sector and further feminist-aligned funding models that could sustain this kind of work well beyond the crisis.

This moment also deepened the call for intersectional approaches and healing spaces. “Resilience isn’t romantic,” Stella says. “This work brings trauma too. We need to organize from a place of care—of love and dignity. And that means looking inward: how do we treat each other in this feminist community, which at times feels fragmented?”

Solidarity, she concludes, is both strategy and sustenance. “If we combine our efforts, we can push back faster and stronger. It’s about seeing each other, hearing each other, and moving together.” That includes transnational solidarity—a phenomenon she witnessed firsthand. “The Trump administration made damaging decisions, but people in the U.S. called their senators. That pressure helped. It mattered.”

Looking ahead, she envisions a different kind of philanthropy: one that is accountable to movements, not just donors. “We need funding rooted in lived experience, participation, and trust. Let’s open up space for communities to speak for themselves. Let’s build networks that hold, not burden.” “We’ve been in the trenches before—this is just another one,” Stella says. “There’s pain, yes, but there’s also glitter. Let’s enjoy the glitter! Let’s feel each other. That’s how we keep building.”

# “TOGETHER WE ARE MORE POWERFUL THAN FEAR”

## DARYA | BELARUS

In the summer of 2020, Belarus experienced the largest protests in its modern history. Half a million people filled the streets in the wake of the rigged presidential election—among them Darya, her wife, and their infant child. The risks were immense, and the crackdown could have been devastating. And yet, in that moment, they chose to believe in the possibility of change.

That experience, shared with strangers and loved ones alike, had a lasting impact. It taught Darya that hope, even when reckless or irrational, can be a radical force. “Activism offers no guarantees,” she explains. “But holding onto hope, even when it defies logic, is what makes change possible.” She describes that period as a fireball for the Belarusian community: a moment of shared courage and hope that continues to sustain her today.

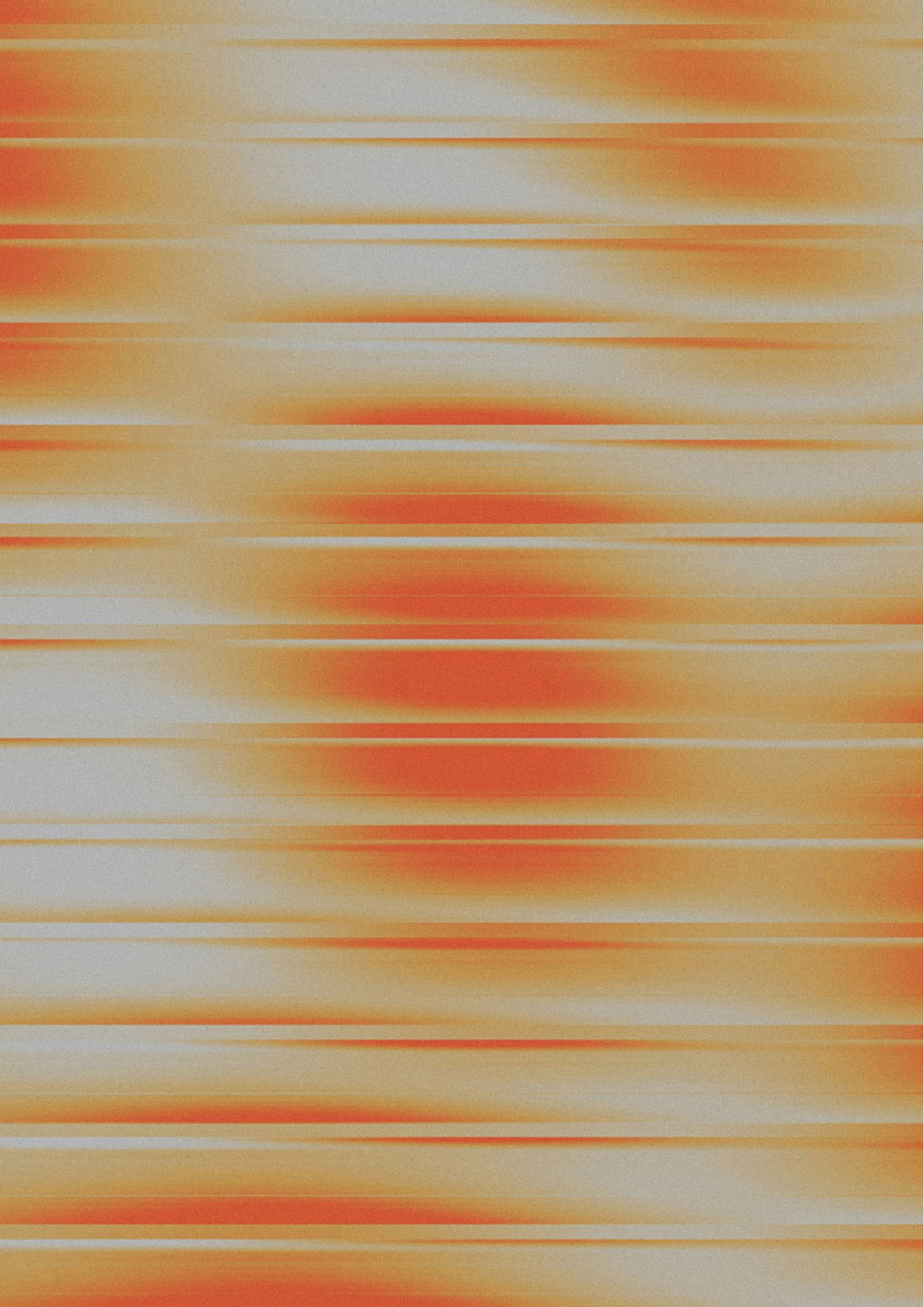
The 2020 revolution was led largely by women. In a deeply patriarchal society, their peaceful protests were initially dismissed. But as the movement grew, the regime’s disregard turned into repression, targeting feminist and queer organizers in

particular. Like many others, Darya and her family were eventually forced into exile.

Now based in Germany, she continues her work from afar. The Belarusian activist community, though scattered across borders, remains connected. But life in exile comes with its own challenges, from immigration issues to the absence of stable funding. “The memory of 2020 is like therapy,” she says. “Even if the present is dark, remembering that we once moved together across political and ideological lines helps keep something alive.” She recalls the extraordinary sense of unity in the streets, when there were openly homophobic and nationalist groups marching alongside queer activists. Rainbow flags flying beside opposition banners in what Darya calls a “holiday for all.” That fleeting unity may not have lasted, but some progress continues—exile-based democratic forces are now discussing anti-discrimination laws for a future Belarus.

In the meantime, hope lives on in quieter forms: community gatherings, private acts of care, and the certainty that even short-term victories leave a legacy. “Together we are more powerful than fear,” she says, echoing the slogan from her own 2018 activist campaign against homophobia. It’s a reminder that sharing our doubts, fears, and longings with others can become a source of strength that drives collective action.

“The memory of hope is a powerful source of hope for the future,” she says. “It’s a fire you can remember. And one day, Belarus may still get its happy ending.”





# FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE POLITICAL

## ANA | BRAZIL

Of all the challenges and victories in Brazil's recent feminist history, for Ana there's one moment that encapsulates the fight—and the hope—that drives it. It was around 2017, during the rise of Jair Bolsonaro and the deepening of anti-gender discourse, when the story of a young girl who survived severe sexual violence sparked a wave of national grief and outrage. Though legally entitled to an abortion, her access was threatened by the religious and conservative forces determined to block it. This was not an isolated case but part of a larger storm, as several high-profile incidents—each exposing different forms of violence and impunity—all surfaced at once and forced a reckoning with systemic failure.

Across Brazil, women came together—to not only defend this one young girl's rights but also demand justice for all. The hashtag #MeuPrimeiroAssédio (#MyFirstHarassment) spread quickly, as survivors began sharing their stories—many for the first time. Public figures, artists, and influencers joined in. The taboo around sexual violence began to crack open and along with it, the long-standing silence around reproductive rights as well.

This wave of storytelling resonated far beyond the news cycle. Eventually, the momentum created enough pressure to remove a proposed anti-abortion bill from the legislative agenda and helped pave the way for legal reforms—most notably, a 2018 law strengthening protections against sexual harassment.

For Ana, the moment underscored something essential: when personal stories are shared with empathy, they can do more than raise awareness—they can shift public consciousness and transform systems. It's never about just one survivor or one case—but about disrupting isolation and building collective understanding.

And yet, hope in Brazil is rarely straightforward. In recent years, feminist activists have had to navigate a contradictory landscape. On the one hand, progressive reforms—like expanded protections against domestic violence—have moved forward. On the other, sexual and reproductive rights face constant legal and cultural attacks. The state of play remains ambiguous: a left-leaning president alongside a congress still hostile to gender justice; a progressive supreme court with a judiciary shaped by recent conservative appointments.

Faced with these tensions, Ana and her peers have turned to legal strategies—not just to win cases but to contest narratives as well. Through judicial activism, they file constitutional challenges, push for international mechanisms, and submit amicus briefs with broad feminist coalitions. “What matters just as much,” she notes, “is how the issue is understood and communicated.” It's not just about legal arguments, it's about showing that these rights are about dignity, health, and equality—and not ideology.

Campaigns like “[Criança Não é Mãe](#)” (“A Child Is Not a Mother”) are crafted precisely to build unli-

kely alliances. By focusing on girls under 14—who make up the majority of victims of sexual violence in Brazil—these campaigns are designed to appeal even to those who might otherwise oppose abortion rights. “We were able to mobilize even the sectors that defend ‘the family,’ since that bill was against children’s rights,” Ana explains, referring to Bill [PL 1904/2024](#) which equated legal abortion with the crime of murder, even in cases of rape. Ana and other activists kept making the point that imposing motherhood on girls is violence. Their approach is about meeting people where they are—building bridges through shared values without compromising on core rights.

Ana’s legal work is part of some broader regional momentum, in which feminist litigators share strategies—invoking the Inter-American system, referencing rulings from Colombia or Mexico, and aligning narratives across borders. And still, some of the most powerful changes begin not in the courtroom but in the public square—or with a hashtag. “We’re not always organized,” she admits. “Sometimes it starts with a spark. A story that cuts through. That’s when everyone comes together.”

That spark—rooted in empathy and shaped by strategy—is what keeps Ana hopeful. Even in difficult times, feminist movements in Brazil have found ways to keep moving, drawing strength from collective action and refusing to stay silent.



# SOLIDARITY THAT STAYS

## FERIDE | TÜRKIYE

In an increasingly authoritarian climate, it's not easy to speak of hope. Feminist organizing in Turkey today faces serious obstacles: state surveillance, self-censorship, and targeted online attacks from government-aligned groups have made public advocacy harder than ever. Even social media, once a tool for amplifying feminist voices, has become a hostile space that is increasingly dominated by anti-feminist narratives.

During all this downward slide for feminist causes, one admittedly short-lived moment nonetheless stands out.

When the government announced its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021, it sparked one of the largest feminist mobilizations in recent memory. Even though the legal challenges to the withdrawal ultimately failed in the courts, the public response revealed something powerful.

To protest and reverse the decision, women's organizations—with a wide variety of priorities and tactics—came together to an unprecedented extent. Many civil society actors who did not have a history of working together found common ground: bar associations, independent institutions, other civil society organizations, and opposition political parties joined with the feminist voices in the courtrooms and the streets.

The process also fostered lasting positive forces: solidarity, connection, and a shared foundation for the future. Many activists now see this moment as proof that women's and other groups can unite across differences—and that when they do, their voices become much harder to ignore. The networks, relationships, and shared experiences built during the protests remain, even as the repression continues. In 2024, the government's declaration of a "Family Year" reframed feminist advocacy as an attack on traditional values, shrinking the space for feminist action even further. And yet, women's groups have continued their work with undiminished enthusiasm and increased support.

Türkiye may have lost the Istanbul Convention, but it's clear that solidarity among those committed not only to women's rights but also human rights in general, as well as the principles of democracy, has increased in the process.

While the Istanbul Convention protests may not have been successful in reversing the state's decision to withdraw, they show that determined collective action, even when it doesn't result in a victory, can create hope for the future and leave behind a fertile foundation of experience and determination for what comes next.

# TURNING PAIN INTO ACTION, FEAR INTO COURAGE

## MY VOICE, MY CHOICE | THE EU

In 2022, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States sent shockwaves around the world. For one group of organizers in Europe, it sparked a clear call to action: how can we prevent similar rollbacks of reproductive rights on our continent? That question became the starting point for My Voice, My Choice, a grassroots-led European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) that calls for the creation of an EU-level abortion access fund—a mechanism that member states can opt into, modelled after programmes like EU-funded cancer screenings. Their goal is to make abortion care safe and accessible for all.

Launching this campaign was not simple. One of the European Commission's supporting competences is the protection and improvement of public health. Despite abortion's status as an integral part of healthcare, however, the European Commission has long argued that it is not within their competencies. Another difficulty was the registration of an ECI, which requires the involvement of organizers from 7 different countries. An initiative is only successful if it both collects 1 million verified signatures in total and reaches the national signature thresholds in 7 different EU member countries. When signature collection began in April 2024, signatures were gathered quickly in

some countries thanks to strong networks and prior organizing experience. Elsewhere, limited infrastructure and fragmented civil society made mobilization much more difficult. Despite these hurdles, the campaign gained momentum rapidly. In just 6 weeks, the initiative gained more than 500,000 signatures, the fastest ECI in history to do so.

The organizers' strategy was to reach far and wide, working with a network of volunteers who amplified the message through direct outreach, viral social media content, sharing the initiative, and contacting influencers, as well as spreading the message about the initiative through traditional media. Influencers across Europe, from Greece to Hungary to Germany, helped amplify the message. Some TikToks took off organically and international figures—from Hollywood actors like Mark Ruffalo and Ramy Youssef to Italian model Giorgia Soleri and Croatian singer Severina—lent their voices to the campaign. Even before the start of the signature collection phase, support for the campaign appeared on the Oscars red carpet.

This decentralized approach worked. The campaign ultimately collected over 1.2 million signatures, exceeding the required national thresholds in 20 countries. The message stayed rooted in shared values like bodily autonomy and access to care, but how it was communicated depended on the local context. Materials were translated, stories tailored to a specific country's context, and outreach strategies adjusted to fit each country. As one organizer explains, "Europe is not a united space. You can't campaign the same way everywhere, but the values remain the same and that's why people join." Now in its signature verification phase, the initiative will be submitted to the European Commission in September 2025. Following submission, the European Parliament will hold a hearing on the proposed abortion fund, and the European Com-

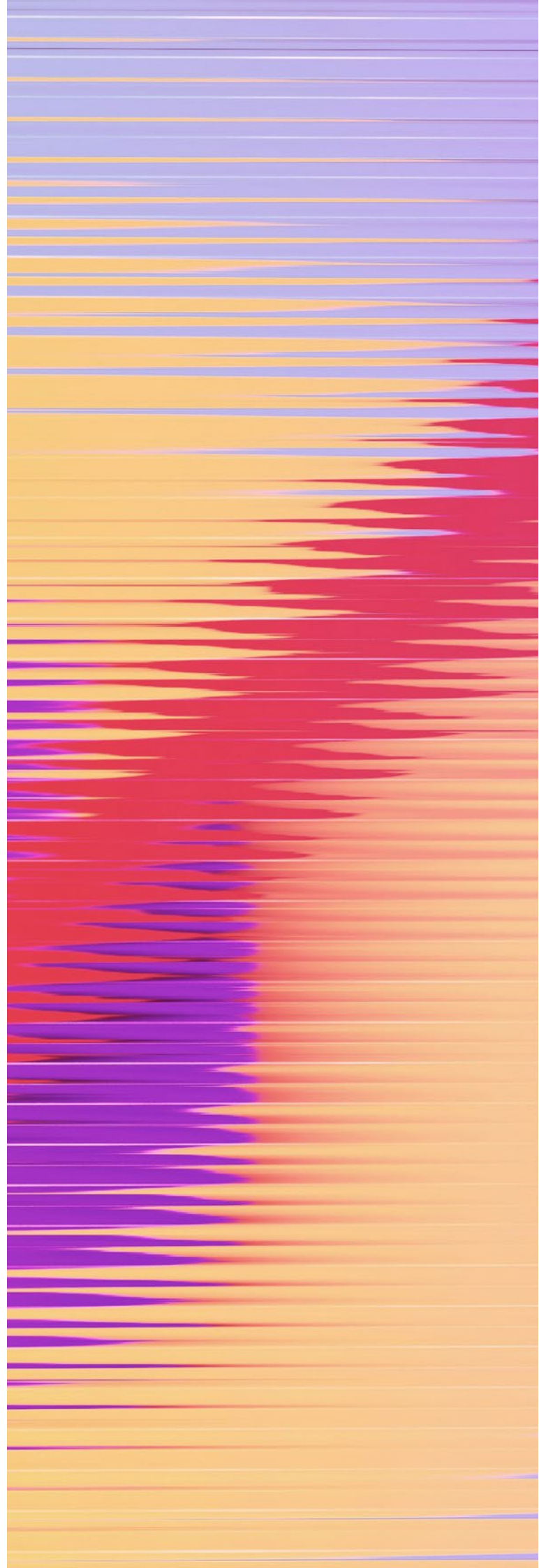
mission will officially reply to the initiative. While the legal outcome is still pending, the campaign has already shown what's possible: people across borders can come together around a shared cause, build momentum from the ground up, and force institutions to pay attention.

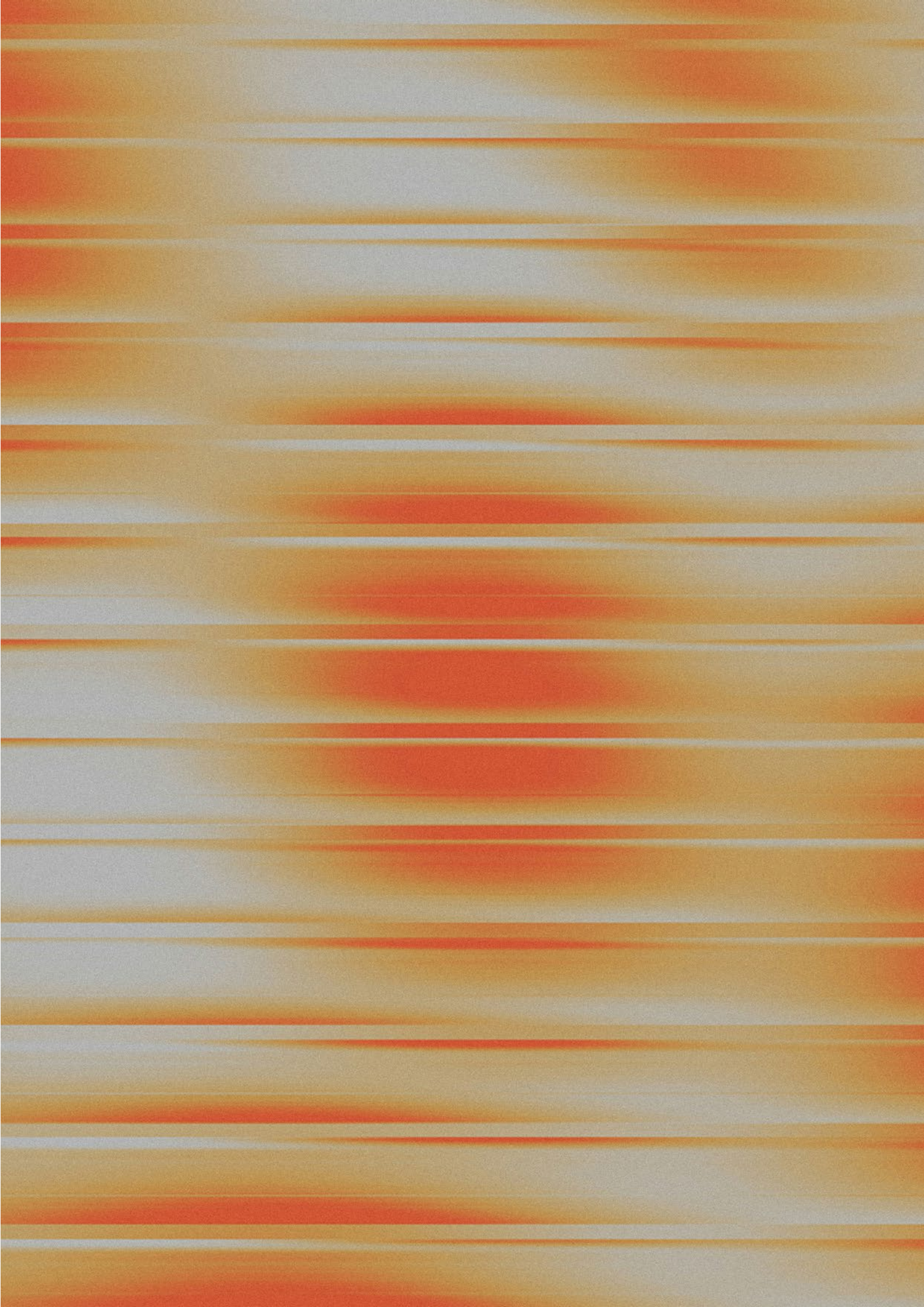
The campaign underscores another crucial point: abortion is not the polarizing issue some anti-choice narratives claim it is. In fact, polling and public discourse show broad support for sexual and reproductive health rights across the EU. By drawing on existing research and country-level data, the campaign grounded its advocacy in real public sentiment and lived realities.

For the organizers, this effort wasn't just about one legislative goal. It was about coming together across borders, breaking out of silos, and acting fast when the moment demands it. In a political climate where setbacks are always possible, My Voice, My Choice has shown what's still within reach when values lead the way, and people act.

**“THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PEOPLE ACROSS EUROPE UNITE FOR JUSTICE. WE TURNED PAIN INTO ACTION, FEAR INTO COURAGE, AND SILENCE INTO 1.2 MILLION VOICES DEMANDING REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS.”**

— Nika Kovač,  
campaign coordinator, My Voice, My Choice





# HUMOR AS RESISTANCE

## ZHANAR | KAZAKHSTAN

2025 has seen some of the harshest conditions yet for feminist and queer activism in Kazakhstan—and for Feminita, a queer feminist initiative, the pressure is relentless. Physical threats, disinformation campaigns, and targeted arrests have become part of their daily lives. In March, Zhanar and her colleague were placed under administrative arrest, a move from the state which she describes as an intentional strategy to prevent them from leading International Women’s Day protests. And yet, Feminita persists. Humour has become one of their most powerful tools—not to minimize the seriousness of repression but challenge it in unexpected ways instead. Through memes, satire, and jokes, they expose the contradictions and insecurities of those in power. Laughing at patriarchy has become both a survival strategy and a political act. In authoritarian systems, where satire is increasingly criminalized and power cannot tolerate mockery, humour itself turns into resistance. Even deeply personal threats, like stalking, have been reframed through satire—shifting the power dynamic and reclaiming control.

One of Feminita’s most striking acts of narrative reversal is the Lesbian Kurultai. The kurultai, a historical gathering of male Turkic leaders, is a dee-

ply patriarchal event. Reclaiming it as a lesbian-led space flips tradition on its head—an act that is both radically subversive and boldly symbolic.

Alongside humour, community support plays a vital role in sustaining Feminita’s work under pressure. When Feminita was fined for operating without formal registration—a status they were denied for seven years—donations poured in from within the community. A small hotel in Almaty continues to host their events, even in the face of coordinated threats and state-orchestrated power cuts. To displace Feminita, the government has gone so far as to offer their venues triple the usual rent, and yet some continue to stand their ground.

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan faces broader societal instability marked by rising economic frustration, heavy taxation, and fears of another mass protest like 2022’s “Bloody January,” when deadly force was used against civilians. In this increasingly repressive context, hope is found in what endures: the resilience of the LGBTQI+ community, acts of local solidarity, and the emergence of new queer-led initiatives. Zhanar sees growing activism in cities like Astana and across the wider region as proof that independent LGBTQI+ organizing is not just surviving but adapting and expanding as well. “LBTQ women are at the forefront of everything that is happening,” she says.

For now, the work continues and so does the laughter.

# CONCLUSION

Across all the stories in this collection, whether rooted in courtroom battles, grassroots mobilization, digital resistance, or everyday acts of care, a few common threads emerge.

First: storytelling is a powerful force—for advocacy, for survival, and for resistance. From Ireland to Brazil, sharing lived realities, especially when rooted in empathy, has done more than raise awareness. It has shifted public opinion, broken taboos, and sparked collective action. Sharing our stories is a way to resist, connect, and change minds and systems.

Second: building broad alliances is key. Time and again, successful movements drew strength not only from within feminist circles but also by forging coalitions that crossed sectors, ideologies, and generations—engaging trade unions, legal professionals, medical professionals, journalists, and all the people who show up in person and online. Even seemingly unlikely allies helped shape shared narratives and amplify collective demands.

Third: adaptability is essential. Successful movements didn't stick to one script—they responded to setbacks with new strategies. When courts failed, they turned to the streets. When public debate turned toxic, they focused on quiet conversations and deep listening. When online spaces became hostile, they built care-based communities offline. Every context called for its own creative and courageous response,

and this flexibility is what kept the work going, even as conditions worsened.

Fourth: solidarity sustains us. In every story, collective strength emerged as a lifeline across borders, movements, and identities. Whether through transnational campaigns, resource sharing, or simply the knowledge that others are fighting similar battles elsewhere, solidarity offers more than moral support. It's a strategic resource, a protective force, and a source of renewed energy when hope feels distant.

These stories do not present a one-size-fits-all strategy, but they do offer useful lessons. For those working in similarly repressive or uncertain environments, this collection provides both practical insight and emotional sustenance: ways to build trust, hold space for grief and anger, and continue acting with purpose even when outcomes are unclear.

Above all, these stories reaffirm the fact that hope is not naive. It is a political act. It is what makes solidarity possible and resistance sustainable. The courage, care, and creativity of the feminist human rights defenders featured here remind us that we are not alone—and that across borders, across campaigns, we are stronger together.

We would like this collection to be not only a record but also an invitation—to listen deeply, act boldly, and continue imagining a more just and joyful future.



