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Chapter 10

Solidarity is a doing word

We the women of the YPJ, the women's self-defence militias, salute all the women fighters of Latin America. We want these women to know that we are not just taking up a military struggle against ISIS but that also one of the main goals of our struggle is to create a new society where women are free. We want to express our support for the right of all women to free, safe, and legal abortion. As Kurdish women, we are closely following your struggle. Not one more woman dead due to a back-alley abortion! ;Jin Jian Azadi! – Women, life and freedom! – YPJ, Women's Protection Units

‘حرية سلام و عدالة و الثورة خيار الشعب (Freedom, peace, justice . . . the revolution is the choice of the people) – Sudanese Revolution Chant

We climb the mountain in our ways, towards the same summit. As we continue in our respective ways to resist the Hong Kong Police Force, the summit of our imagining may well emerge the form of a new, anti-carceral collective – Jun Pang

SOLIDARITY IS A DOING WORD

Solidarity has always been at the heart of feminist practice. Ideas of 'global sisterhood' rose to prominence in the late twentieth century, its advocates called for the need to view women's liberation across borders and continents. Although this relied on the flawed concept of a 'universal patriarchy', it opened up space to consider the power of refusing to remain divided by something as arbitrary as geographical location. What has always underpinned radical feminist movements is the global nature of their demands and their ability to understand the interlocking nature of structures of oppression. Perhaps one of the most galvanising instances of international solidarity in recent history was inspired by the arrest and detainment of the black political revolutionary Angela Davis, falsely charged in connection with the murder of Judge Harold Haley in 1970. Feminist groups from across the world called for her release through letters, statements and acts of solidarity. These groups included: The National Union of Mexican Women, The Angolan Women's Committee, Somali women in Mogadishu, The Egyptian Women's Committee and Guyana's Women's Progressive Organisation. In this instance, the feminist collectives that practiced transformational politics understood what was lost when movements isolated themselves and made demands only within the boundaries of nation states.

Solidarity breaks down the concept of the nation or the idea that the world and the many countries it contains are not linked by present and historical networks of exploitation, colonial rule and military alliances. The work of knowing what is happening in the complex puzzle that is the world, means acknowledging the struggles that occur parallel and adjacent to our own. Often, the demands feminists make in their respective countries are the same. In Ireland, STRIKE4REPEAL, a grassroots feminist coalition that called for women to wear black and go on strike if the Irish government continued to delay a referendum were

inspired by the Black Protests that took place in Poland on 3 October 2016. Movements have always been attuned to one another, and in a climate where fascists are gaining ground because of strong links across the globe, it is crucial that feminists across the world do the same.

Solidarity is hard to define. In the simplest terms, it can range from: working across difference, standing together in the face of shared oppression and standing alongside those with whom you do not share a common experience of the world. It's a slippery concept, it moves about, it unites and divides the movements we are part of. A feminist definition might understand solidarity as a strategic coalition of individuals who are invested in a collective vision for the future. At the core of solidarity is mutual aid: the idea that we give our platforms, resources, legitimacy, voices, skills to one another to try and defeat oppressive conditions. We give and we take from one another, we become accomplices and saboteurs and disrupters on each other's behalf. Solidarity has multiple dimensions: the symbolic, the practical, the aesthetic. Symbolically, it is represented in the protest image or the song or the poem or the speaker that tries to direct energy and attention away from themselves and onto someone or something else. Practically, it means sharing strategies – seeing how tactics that were successful in one context, might work in another. Aesthetically, the beauty that arises from instances of solidarity evokes emotive responses that make us feel like it is possible to change the world as we know it.

In 2019, the Mwasi Collectif, a radical French Afro-feminist collective organised the Nyansapo Festival, a festival of European black feminist thinkers, scholars and activists who came together to consolidate their links, share thoughts, feelings, ideas and tactics through a planned series of workshops, training and panel events. Actions like these demonstrate the necessity

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of working across borders and recognising a common ground from which to launch campaigns and demands.

What solidarity offers to feminist movements at the most basic level is more bodies to do the work. The work of raising awareness, of building consciousness, of petitioning, striking, blocking roads, bridges, towns, the work of shutting down hostile governments. More people engaged in struggle means the practical work of resistance might be achieved with new speed, new vigour or at the very least, a renewed energy. Solidarity refuses a narrow worldview and invites us to link our visions for the future to one another. It is also an affective experience: often it means bearing witness to the violence that takes place across the world and marking it where you are. In London 2019, members of the Sudanese Diaspora marked the violence and bloodshed of the ongoing revolution with vigils, including political readings, poetry and songs outside the European Commission. Solidarity can also be a site of healing, of naming your own complicity and refusing to remain silent.

There's no local without a global. There is no better answer to combat a fractured society obsessed with individualism than a politics that connects the dots. When we show solidarity to one another, we are demonstrating that we recognise that politics happens everywhere, at every level, in every region of the world. We break open the idea that feminism has a continental origin point; to recognise each other in struggle is to say, I see you, I understand that you have agency and because I cannot stand alongside you, I wish to bolster you from where I am. Solidarity, in an internationalist context, requires an emergent political practice. This means the ability to remain flexible in our responses and solutions; to listen to those on the ground and to redistribute resources.

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When Carola Rackete, a German ship captain of the migrant NGO rescue ship Sea-Watch 3, rescued 43 migrants off the coast of Libya and defied Italian authorities to bring them into the Mediterranean Island of Lampedusa, she defied state orders and risked arrest to do so. Recognising that human life is more precious than the bureaucratic systems of power that are premised on its extinction is solidarity in action. Similarly, groups like Women on Waves, a Dutch non-profit organisation that sails boats to the coast of countries with the most restrictive abortion restrictions, picks up women and navigates them to international waters to provide free abortion pills and abortion support demonstrate that solidarity is an active, courageous principle. ‘The fact that women need to leave the state sovereignty to retain their own sovereignty – it makes clear states are deliberately stopping women from accessing their human right to health,’¹ Leticia Zenevich told the Huffington Post. Anna Campbell, a 26-year-old woman from Bristol, was among seven British people who died volunteering for the YPJ, a group fighting ISIS based in Rojava in March 2018. She died after Turkish missiles struck her position, as she helped to evacuate citizens in Afrin. Solidarity requires us to risk something (our lives, citizenship, freedom) in order to support others; to put our theoretical principles to the test.

No bounds

Neha Shah, an anti-racist organiser tells me that her understanding of solidarity is informed by the knowledge that oppressive projects know no bounds and so, neither must our resistance:

¹ www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/women-on-waves-abortion-boat_n_590b8338e4bod5d9049a857c (last accessed 07/2019).

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Solidarity has to come from understanding, and understanding comes from listening to those who are in a position to know what they're talking about. The toxic effects of the colonial control of Palestinian land disproportionately harm women. Feminist solidarity in the Palestinian context has to start with listening to Palestinian women – for instance, with joining their call to organise against Donald Trump's so-called 'Deal of the Century' that seeks to disappear the Palestinian people and dismantle their collective rights, or heeding their call to campaign for boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel.

For her, solidarity requires us to think beyond the nation:

There's a simple reason to think transnationally as feminists – if we don't, we give up one of our greatest strengths. The struggle for freedom is too difficult to embark on alone, and we share that struggle with women all over the world. Furthermore, feminism has to be transnational because patriarchy is transnational; we can't understand and resist the oppression of women as a group if we allow our analysis to stop at borders.

Solidarity can also help us think about the future. Elif Gun, active in the Kurdish women's movement, tells me that imagining a liberated future is closely linked to our ability to recognise each other in struggle:

A feminist future in my perspective is a struggle, because I honestly believe that without struggle and resistance life is not as beautiful, and I take this from Sakine Cansiz, one of the great minds behind the Kurdish women's movement. Without

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armed women, without women resisting always and continuously against the system, a feminist future is quite impossible, and a feminist future for me is only something we can achieve through active and collective resistance.

Looking outwards challenges the idea that politics revolves around the West and the people who live in it. While the power dynamics that underpin the organisation of the world often remain firmly in place because of the complicity of governments, something we must sit with and turn over in our heads, transnational solidarity offers us something. It offers us the ability to imagine that the world could be organised in a different way: it denaturalises the existence of borders, nations and states. To work in the spirit of common interest and mutual aid models the kind of world feminists are striving for: one that recognises that we would like to live as a collective rather than as individuals siphoned off into units. Call these units what you like: countries, continents, hemispheres or families. When we consider that nation states as we know them are relatively new inventions, we are reminded that our histories have always involved one another. Solidarity is a doing word – it offers us no blueprint or blindly optimistic visions for the future. It does not require us to always like each other or to erase the harm that might occur in our interpersonal interactions.

If solidarity can help us to find comfort in one another, it can also turn us into each other's worst nightmares. There are countless examples of the way that practices of solidarity have reduced the geopolitics of entire regions and continents for easy consumption. When Boko Haram kidnapped 276 girls from a secondary school in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria in 2014, NGOs and public figures were quick to insert themselves into the narrative in an act of solidarity. 'Bring Back Our Girls' was

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the liberal slogan that travelled across the world, in hashtags and photo campaigns, with everyone from Michelle Obama to the Pope taking part. This act was intended as a signifier of the global concern for the girls' welfare, but everything from the nature of the campaign, to the wording of the infamous slogan revealed a reproduction of Western hegemony. 'Bring back our Girls': that *our* betrayed an understanding of the complexities of the situation at hand.

As of 2019, there are still girls that have yet to be freed. Perhaps the most pertinent question is, what happens to feminist solidarity beyond the symbolic slogan? It starts with recognising how gender is utilised by terrorist organisations for shock value. Undoing the symbol of the vulnerable girl and instead examining what keeps her vulnerable, what locks her in poverty, what makes her an easy target for terror might be solidarity in action. Understanding the complex set of relations that cause a political crisis before we proclaim ownership of its victims goes some way in refusing to reduce acts of solidarity to a mere 'coming together against evil' or 'standing together in the face of hate.'

In 1982, Hazel Carby argued, 'of white feminists we must ask, what exactly do you mean when you say "we"?' When practiced haphazardly, solidarity throws up the ugliest parts of our feminist movements: exposing the racial and class dominations that plague us. The women's marches that took place in the UK and US in 2018 were prime examples of why solidarity alone cannot bolster our movements unless it is underpinned by a serious and earnest engagement with the different conditions we are forced to live under. The marches were littered with biologically essentialist rhetoric, racist deification of black feminist figures, a lack of intersectional analysis and incoherence on the rights of sex workers. Mainstream responses to political crisis often ignore and actively silence dissenting voices for the sake of

the urgency of the political moment. Those on the outskirts of womanhood and the boundaries of flaccid, liberal politics have always been cast as the disrupters of political harmony. They introduce mess where an otherwise simple narrative might have been triumphant; they complicate that which should be easy. But feminism does not promise us easy answers. It promises us the hard work of seeing each other for all we are: including our faults, oversights and the ways we fail one another. In mainstream feminism, whiteness is central to that failure. When these oversights are addressed, solidarity is impeded by defensiveness and a refusal to recognise that women can be perpetrators of structural violence too. The terminology we use can also be a shield for other kinds of solidarities, obscuring for example, how 'women of colour' may enact anti-black coalitions that increase proximity to whiteness and reinforce hierarchies of being.

Womanhood, the central pillar under which we gather to make our demands, is not real. It is only a vantage point that we use strategically to lessen the brutality we experience. Lessening that brutality requires us not to be so preoccupied with harming one another that we forget who our enemies are. Once free, we might be free to hate each other, to deride solidarity, to argue that it does not work. But as long as we live under the conditions that we do, solidarity is one of the most important political tools we can use to maximise our success and make demands that cut across the structural barriers that seek to individualise our experiences. Individuals are right to be sceptical of the clumsy mobilisation of solidarity and attuned to its many failings. Perhaps a hopeful pessimism is our best chance – we organise across difference not because it solves our problems, but because the visions we seek to enact must be able to account for everyone. We are too involved in one another's lives, for better or worse. Chandra Mohanty argued 'the practice of sol-

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idarity foregrounds communities of people who have *chosen* to work and fight together.' She cites Jodi Dean, who argues that 'reflective solidarity' is crafted by an interaction involving three persons: 'I ask you to stand by me over me and against a third.'² Solidarity is a belief in one another that should be extended and rescinded accordingly. At the very least, it helps sharpen our focus on that *third*, who threatens our attempts to build a feminist future.

² Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicising Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).