

Activist burnout in times of NGO-ization: comparing feminist movements in Belgium and Romania

ALEXANDRA ANA

PhD., Université Libre de Bruxelles

Abstract

The NGO-ization of feminist movements, under conditions of financial dependence, profoundly transformed feminist activism, by bringing upfront the paid/unpaid and militant/professional divisions. By looking at the transformations of the contemporary feminist movements in Belgium and Romania, namely their professionalization, bureaucratization and precarization, this paper aims to understand how is NGO-ization related to activist burnout. It is argued that organizational and job insecurity became a concern among feminist activists as the fragmentation of funds exacerbated and the project-based work became commonplace.

Keywords: *NGOization; activist burnout; feminist movements; precarization; financial dependence; insecurity*

Summary

In this paper I explored how the last decades transformations of the feminist movements associated with NGO-ization, shaped the organizational and activist culture in such a way that it created new sources of pressure, amplifying the risk of burnout among activists. I have identified different sources of pressure in feminist organizations, related to the NGO-ization of social movements. First, the organizational and job insecurity, related to the volatility of funds, stemming from the fragmentation of subsidies available to movement organizations. Second, the multiplication of accountability mechanisms related to their bureaucratization, and which increases the amount of paperwork activists do, at the expense of political work and work with beneficiaries. Third, the polyvalence of tasks, stemming from project-based work and related to the professionalization of the feminist movement as well as to their financial dependence. Running after funds to alleviate insecurity and working to exhaustion between frustrating

paperwork, to justify how the money was used and political work for the cause, led feminist activists to burnout.

Introduction

The openings of the political opportunity structure (POS) occasioned by the UN world conferences on women and the creation of gender equality and women's rights agencies, supported the institutionalization of the feminist movements which started to pursue their aims, through lobby and advocacy in official politics, besides contentious actions (Lang, 1997; Alvarez, 1999; Bernal, 2000; Halley, 2006). The need for legitimacy to participate in formal politics drove feminist activists and organizations to professionalize (Alvarez, 1998), by using the feminist knowledge produced in collectives and NGOs in policymaking or acquiring expertise through university programs. The availability of funds (Della Porta and Diani 2006) and the accessibility of official political channels turned activists to invest full-time in militancy, becoming professional or career activists, employed in feminist organizations. Some argued that NGOs receive not only funds from donors and institutions, but also agendas that shape strategies, practices and discourses, diminishing the voices of feminist activists (Bernal and Grewal, 2014, p. 5; Grunberg 2000; see also Aksartova 2009). Financial dependence on donors led to the bureaucratization of feminist organizations and translated into the spread of new public management (NPM) practices (Kantola and Squires, 2012) within the civil society. More specifically the neoliberal bureaucratization of NGOs meant the adoption of norms, rules and practices stemming from the market in civil society organizations (Hibou 2015). This happened by responding to calls for tenders to access funds and through accountability requirements that bound donors and NGOs through financial dependence, in the name of transparency. The fragmentation of funds and multiplication of accountability mechanisms drew organizations in a funding race and to bureaucratic exhaustion, as activists become more involved more in paperwork than political or community work (Ana 2024). The availability of short-term fragmented funds and the financial dependence of NGOs vis-à-vis donors regulate a minimum guarantee, the possibility of organizational survival and job preservation, while at the same time increase instability through the uncertainty of winning projects and securing funds (Ibidem). Thus, feminist activists become increasingly concerned with organizational and individual insecurity.

While there are neoliberal specificities, governing through insecurity started from the eighteenth century as a liberal political and economic mode of governing, based on liberalism that "turns into a mechanism continually having to arbitrate between the freedom and security of individuals by reference to this notion of danger" (Foucault, 2008, 66). The mechanism of governmental precarization, as a liberal mode of governing through insecurity, is based on the public/private division and on the gender specific division of labor that produced and reproduced in turn the autonomy/dependence separation. Isabell Lorey (2015) argues that this contributed to the hierarchization, and distribution of precariousness based on structural

inequalities and discriminations, that created and marked the Others, being thus a heteronormative, gendered and racialized process. In neoliberalism, while retaining these hierarchizing mechanisms, governmental precarization does not solely repose on marking the Others but moves towards the middle of the society and normalizes and individualizes precarization as a process in which the precarious are isolated, often working on short-term jobs, in precarious conditions of employment (Lorey, 2015, 5-6, Lorey, 2006). The role of individual participation in the process of self-governing and self-creation reposes on self-responsibility mechanisms, individual risk management, under the mirage of the possibility of autonomy.

NGO-ization as a specific form of neoliberal governmentality derives from the formalized encounter between state, the market and civil society (Ana 2024). In the case of the feminist movements, NGO-ization is built on the decades-long transformations of the feminist movement, namely their institutionalization and professionalization, shaped by processes of neoliberal bureaucratization and governmental precarization as technologies of domination (Ibidem). The aim of this paper is to show how these decades transformations of the feminist movements shaped the organizational and activist culture in such a way that it puts additional pressure on activists, amplifying the risk of burnout among those engaged. The NGO-ization of feminist movements translated into a volatile and precarious sector characterized by project-based work that supports organizational and job insecurity, the multiplication of accountability mechanisms, and the polyvalence of tasks for professional activists. High commitment to the cause, the sense of responsibility but also the guilt for earning money out of a social cause, favour self-precarization and overwork that lay the ground for burnout. To show this, I draw on the NGO-ization theory and the activist burnout literature. They inform my analysis of how activist burnout is related to NGO-ization and associated processes of professionalization, bureaucratization and precarization. The paper is organized as follows. The next section explains the methodology. The third section addresses the feminist movements in Belgium and Romania, in relation to their institutionalization and NGO-ization. The fourth section examines the literature on activist burnout. The fifth section covers the empirical findings, and it comprises three subsections: governing through insecurity; martyrdom culture; questioning the ostrich policy about burnout.

Methodologies and methods

The data at the basis of this paper stems from a wider research project on the NGO-ization that I conducted for my PhD, between 2014 and 2019, at Scuola Normale Superiore. The results of my PhD are forthcoming as a monograph, “The NGO-ization of social movements in neoliberal times: Contemporary feminisms in Romania and Belgium”, at Palgrave. I adopted a cross-national comparative research strategy involving two different cases, namely francophone Belgium and Romania, with distinct political architectures, opportunity structures and historical development of feminist movements, but which are both affected by the process of NGO-ization. To study NGO-ization I drew on on feminist ethnography through in-depth interviewing and participant observation at selected events, complemented by documents analysis, such as organizations’ reports, video and audio material related to the activities of

movement organizations and groups. The research accounts for the feminist landscape after the 90s, but focuses more specifically on organizations active after the 2000s. In Romania, after the fall of the state-socialist regime in 1989, the first feminist organizations emerged. In Belgium, the 1990s marked the beginning of a new ‘wave’/period, marked by the institutionalization of main feminist claims (Dental, 2004, 64) and development of the feminist movement towards professionalization expertise. I focused on the meso-level, specifically on the feminist movement community embodied in different locations, spaces and organizational structures out of each I loosely distinguished between Street feminism, more informal groups and collectives and NGO-ized feminism, more formal and institutionally tied, nevertheless understood as imbricated in a spatial and locative web. To define the field boundaries in Belgium and Romania I combined a nominalist approach prior to starting the fieldwork in which I identified feminist organizations and groups according to predefined criteria, with a realist approach in which I relied on the on feminist activists’ perceptions of who is part of the field, of the feminist movement community. In Romania I conducted 44 interviews with feminist activists from NGOs, informal groups and two major networks as well as government employees working for gender equality bodies or politicians who addressed gender equality. In Belgium, I conducted 33 interviews with similar actors. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and almost three hours and were transcribed, coded and analysed using NVivo. Documents and notes from participant observation were organized, coded and analysed manually. The data was collected between 2015 and 2017. Annexes I and II provide further data about the interviewees and the selected organizations in the two countries.

The feminist movements in Belgium and Romania: a brief historical overview

Several historical works that trace the origins of the Belgian feminist movement and the emergence of a series of issues that run through the movement today (Boël et Duchène 1955; Gubin 1998; Gubin et Jacques 2018; Jacques 2009). The fight for women's education is documented as the first feminist issue politicized and addressed during the 1830s, contributing to the gradual opening of universities to women (Jacques 2009). However, the difficulty of access to a profession represented a ground for mobilization afterwards. The issue of women's right to vote arrived only later on the agenda of the feminist movements as their initial concerns revolved around civil and economic equality. Feminist activists initially attempted to bring women under a common front but ended up split along traditional political lines into secular and liberal feminism, Catholic feminism and socialist feminism. This division, called pillarization, reflects the organization of ideological and confessional pluralism (Bracke, Dupont and Paternotte 2017). Pillarization structured the development and the evolution of the feminist movements throughout the XXth century, characterized by an important presence of three big movement organizations associated with the three pillars. While reformed and transformed they lasted until today. Earning the right to vote in 1948, feminist activists mobilized during the 1960s and 1970s around economic demands and issues related to the gendered division of labour, but also around reproductive and sexual autonomy leading to the creation of family planning centres. During that period, several new collectives and

organizations were created with a focus on non-hierarchical organizing and street mobilizations. During the second half of the seventies, under the pressure of the International Women's Year, two advisory bodies were created to amend policies regarding women. A decade later the first women's policy agencies were created (Celis and Meier, 2007). At the end of the eighties and beginning of nineties, the intellectual feminist production developed and consolidated, with the emergence of research centres mostly without financing and independent feminist groups such as GRIF Groupe de Recherche et d'Information Féministe (Feminist Research and Information Group). After sustained efforts from NGOs, activists, and researcher, a master programme on gender studies was created in 2017. At the level of official politics, the federal women's policy agency was restructured, and the *Institut pour l'égalité des femmes et des hommes* (Institute for Equality of Women and Men) was created in 2002. During the 2000s Belgian feminism was institutionalized with different governmental structures and federal administrations for equality between men and women, with a reception and support centre for the activities of women's organisations and state subsidies for these organizations (Peemans-Poullet 2003). At the same time, feminist activists and scholars deplore the instrumentalization and watering down of feminist knowledge reflected in concepts such as "gender mainstreaming" and "equality of chances" that are used as alibies in neoliberal policies (Peemans-Poullet 2003; Bracke and Puig de la Bellacasa 2002).

New feminist foundations have consolidated over time, reflected in the emergence of different collectives and spaces that challenged the unitary feminist subject and demystified the universality of the experiences of white, heterosexual, middle-class women, mainstream throughout the XXth century (Ana and Aromatario forthcoming) and analysed the role of coloniality in reproducing social relations of domination and the contributions of feminists of Maghrebian origin in Belgium (Semah 2018). The increase in visibility of the intersection of different forms of oppression at both theoretical and practical levels opened the possibility for the multiplication of its voices and perspectives. However, the voices of racialized collectives, non-binary, non-heterosexual people, poor women and the working class remain marginalized (Ana and Aromatario forthcoming).

Similar to Belgium, the emergence of the feminist movements in Romania is related to the rise of bourgeois revolutions in Europe and creation of the modern states. The first women organizations emerged at the beginning of the XIXth century and made claims about emancipation through education and charity (Mureșianu, 1926; Mihailescu, 2002). Involved in national liberation movements, feminist activists later framed emancipation in terms of national interest (Mihailescu, 2002). At the beginning of the XXth century, with the support of the socialist movement and the international women's movement for universal suffrage feminist activists demanded juridical, political and economic rights (Mihailescu, 2002, 28). Class tensions upsurged among feminist organizations between a bourgeois framing of political claims and a more inclusive framing regarding the political rights of peasant and factory women workers (Mihailescu 2002). In 1928, women obtained the right to vote and to be elected in municipal and county councils, but the electoral law imposed discriminatory conditions

(Mihailescu 2006). They achieved the full right to vote in 1938, considered to be purely formal as the consolidation of fascisms throughout the 1930s and the authoritarian tendencies of King Carol II crushed the democratic forces. Throughout the thirties, women organized to stand against fascism, at national and international level. After the Second World War, the Union of Anti-fascist Romanian Women was created as a unique mass-organization gathering all organized and non-organized women around Partidul Comunist Roman's (PCR's) (The Romanian Communist Party's) programme (Mihailescu, 2006, 74) with the scope of building solidarity with all women despite religious, national or class differences, improve their rights and connect with antifascist women organizations in other democratic countries (Jinga, 2015, 66-67). At international level the different women organizations that succeeded until 1989, as women organization of the PCR, were affiliated to the WIDF and followed the resolutions and action plans of the international organization. During the seventies Consiliul National al Femeilor (CNF) (The National Council of Women) composed of all delegates elected at regional level, every four years started to lose decisional power and implemented decisions taken by the Central Committee of the Party, being reformed at the end of the decade (Jinga, 2015, 96-99). Jinga argues that during the 80s, when the demographic policies hardened and the number of illegal abortions increased, CNF was part of the control entities, together with doctors, prosecutors or the militia, but in 1989 at its last National Conference on Women there was disinterest as there was no stake anymore (Jinga, 2015, 139-140).

Both in Belgium and in Romania, feminist movements went through a process of NGO-ization that included the institutionalization, professionalization, bureaucratization and precarization of important parts of the movements. Institutionalization was related to the openings of the political opportunity structure (POS), brought by the World Conferences on Women (WCW), when states committed to create governmental bodies at national level for the implementation of gender equality policies. In Belgium, the process started in 1985, with the creation of a State Secretary for Environment and Social Emancipation, headed by Miet Smet, who also negotiated an Equal Opportunities portfolio (Celis and Meier, 2007, 65). After several changes and restructuring the *Institut pour l'égalité des femmes et des hommes* (Institute for Equality of Women and Men) was created in 2002 under the authority of the Minister of Equal Opportunities. After the disappearance of the National Council of Women (CNF) in Romania, brought by the fall of the state socialist regime, the next institution in charge of women's rights was created in 2004 - *Agenția Națională pentru Egalitatea de Șanse între Femei și Bărbați* (ANES) ('The National Agency for Equality between Women and Men'). However, the build-up of an infrastructure for women's rights and non-discrimination was considered a top-down and import process, labelled room-service feminism, out of the need to comply with the *Acquis Communautaire* prior to accession to the European Union (EU) (Miroiu 2004). Both in Belgium and Romania, women's agencies have been threatened to disappear along the years and it was feminist movement organizations who protested and fought to maintain these entities (Ana 2024). The creation of women's agencies marked the debut of a process of inclusion and marginalization (Meyer and Tarrow 1998) through which the state granted access and participation in policymaking to formal organizations who were able to provide professional expertise, while marginalizing inputs from dissident parts of the movements. Moreover, the

creation of gender studies programs supported the acquisition of expertise by NGO professionals, while at the same time gender studies academics sometimes also contributed with their knowledge to policymaking. While professionalization was supported in Belgium by the availability of structural funds, for feminist organizations who won accreditation, for example through popular education or as development NGOs, the restructuring of these financing mechanisms during the last decades, through fragmentation and reduced timespan, led organizations to respond more and more to call for tenders and adopt a project-based work mode of functioning. In Romania, after 1989 and throughout the EU pre-accession period professionalization was supported by the availability of international and European funds (Grunberg 2014; Grunberg 2000). Project-based work became the mode of functioning of feminist NGOs. Both in Belgium and in Romania, donor's accountability increased the bureaucratization of feminist organizations who's the budget of feminist NGOs is composed of a mosaic of volatile funding sources. Different than in Belgium, liberal feminism became mainstream in Romania, after the fall of state socialism (Ana 2023; Sandu 2021; Molocea 2015) and coupled with anti-communism, impeded the politicization of class and a critique of neoliberalism (Ana 2020). While other feminism developed in parallel, such as Roma feminism and queer and anarcho-feminism they remained more marginal until a process of bridge-building and a move towards a more intersectional politics of hope took place during the second half of 2010 (Ibidem).

Activist burnout: a brief review of the literature

Activist burnout has been defined as a condition in which the accumulated stress related to militant engagement, particularly long-term activism is debilitating, affecting the health of activists and contributing to their temporary or permanent political disengagement (Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, Rising 2019; Gorski, 2015; Chen and Gorski 2015; Maslach and Gomes 2006). Activist burnout has been discussed in relation to racial justice movements (Gorski and Erakat, 2019), animal rights activism (Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, Rising, 2018), women's rights activism (Barry and Dordevic 2007; Bernal 2006) or environmental activism (Driscoll 2019; Kovan and Dirxx, 2006), among others. Scholars have distinguished between three categories of causes for activist burnout (Gorski and Erakat, 2019; Gorski, Lopresti-Goodman, Rising, 2018): (1) internal, associated with high levels of commitment, including emotional and a sense of responsibility (Maslach & Gomes, 2006; Barry and Dordevic 2007); (2) external, concerning retaliation repercussions related to challenging power structures (including corporate, legislative) and structural injustices (Cox 2011; Barry and Dordevic 2007); (3) within-movement causes, referring to internal conflicts among activists, including social movement organizations' leaders (Gorski 2018; Shields 2008). It is critical to consider that burnout causes are not distributed equally within movements and that sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism experienced within movements affect disproportionately marginalized identity activists compared to more privileged fellows. For example, analysing burnout in antiracism movements Paul Gorski and Noura Erakat (2019) showed how the behaviours and attitudes of white racial justice activists led to burnout in racial justice activists of colour.

Activist burnout has been understood as opposed to activist sustainability (Cox 2011), with damaging effects on movements which are deprived of the knowledge and the experience of activists who burn out (Retting 2006). Thus, social movement scholars interrogated about the relationship between activist burnout and turnover or movement exit (Klandermans 2005; Fillieule and Broqua 2005). While some scholars are more straightforward in associating burnout with exit (McAdam 2005), others are more equivocal about their relationship (Downton & Wehr 1997).

In a study about activist burnout in US racial justice activists, Gorski (2018) found out that while the external causes of burnout, associated with retaliation, and the internal causes of burnout, linked to overwork out of a sense of responsibility and moral commitment stemming from an understanding of the structural oppressions, seemed to be “predictable burnout sources”, within-movement causes such as judgements and ego-clashes were described as main sources. Similarly, in Romania, within movement tensions arose among Roma feminists and white feminists, between mainstream liberal feminists and left-wing feminist activists (Vlad 2013). While conflicts among activists, the reproduction of oppressive behaviours or the martyrdom culture among activists have been studied as within movement causes of burnout, less attention has been paid to the way long-term processes of transformation of social movements, such as their NGO-ization and social movement’s organizational culture are related to activist burnout. To fill in this gap, in what follows, I explore how does burnout relate to the NGO-zation of feminist movements, under the conditions of financial dependence of organizations. How do the paid/unpaid or the professional/militant tensions play out in shaping activist burnout?

Compared to Belgium, where parts of the feminist movement are anchored in the tradition of civil society actors as entities who organize the interests in society and make contributions to policymaking (Meier and Paternotte, 2017), in Romania there is a lack of public legitimacy of NGOs and low public trust coupled with a weak civic participation (Grunberg 2008) explained by some in relation to the compulsory membership before 1989 that created an aversion to formal participation in organizations (Jaconson and Saxonberg 2013) and by others in relation to the unmasking of NGOs as front for other businesses or as tax dodgers during the first decade of post-socialism (Arpad 2008, 13). While there are differences in terms of public legitimacy of civil society actors, NGO-ization seems to work to evening out the organizational culture characterized by project-based work, insecurity, and martyrdom.

I. Governing through insecurity

Three processes related to NGO-ization increase the pressure on activists, ultimately affecting the likelihood of burnout in institutionalized feminist environments. These processes are professionalization, neoliberal bureaucratization and governmental precarization. The specificity of financial dependence in neoliberalism resides in the multiplication and fragmentation of subsidies. As such, project-based work, short-term contracts or the accumulation of several positions and contracts with different responsibilities, within the

organization characterize the work of professional militants, those who are employed in movement organizations. In this context the professionalization of the feminist movement was accompanied by versatility/ polyvalence that refers both to the multitude of skills and competencies that professional activists must constantly develop and to the multiplicity of responsibilities and positions held in the organization that sometimes translates into several different working contracts in the same organization (Ana 2024 forthcoming). Versatility can become a source of workload pressure and stress for activist who feel they work “on fifteen fronts, doing thirty jobs, with no backup or solidarity” (Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest; other interviewees express similar feelings: Camille – Garance, Brussels; Catherine – Garance, Brussels; Hilde – Université des femmes, Brussels; Françoise – LMSF, Brussels). At the same time, the multiplication of sources of funding and their fragmentation translated into the multiplication of the accountability mechanisms, increasing the bureaucratic burden (Catherine – Garance, Brussels ; Nadia – Vie féminine, Brussels ; Simone – Garance, Brussels ; Mona – Université des femmes, Brussels ; Zoe 2 – Front, Bucharest; Monica – ALEG, Sibiu ; Florina 2 – Filia, Bucharest), although activists find it reasonable to justify how they used the money they received (Study day – Professionalisation! Nouveaux défis en temps de crise, November 30, 2016, Sophia, Brussels). As the bureaucratic load increases, activists feel frustrated that instead of being on the field they fill in reports and responds to call for tenders, to bring new projects and money in the organization and justify what they received.

Insecurity, related to the survival of the organization and the security of jobs, became a central concern for feminist NGOs. Hoping to mitigate it by responding to call for tenders, organizations managed to briefly reduce insecurity while increasing it on the middle and long-terms. Precarization involves the governing of feminist professionals in NGOs through insecurity and is based on reproducing the distribution of precariousness in relations of inequality.

Activists in feminist NGOs, including those in leading positions, spend enormous time in between their activities with women, bureaucratic paperwork, and fundraising, to ensure the security of jobs for the employees. Fragmented funding, funding that fluctuates or diminishes translates into an unbalance between the amount of work employees can deliver and the resources at their disposal. Hilde recalls when she was a coordinator of Maison Plurielle in Charleroi that fights against domestic violence, holding multiple roles and trying to make ends meet:

When I was working there, there were a half-time administrative assistant, a half-time facilitator, a three fourths social worker to take care of the socio-professional insertion, a full-time psychologist and myself as full-time coordinator. We were given as a mission to do – be careful, information and awareness, the training of doctors, of police personnel, a little bit of everyone, social workers obviously, the reception and monitoring on the short and medium term of the victims - needless to say that this was

already a lot. And in addition to this awareness campaigns, so posters and so on. While we were not even five, with a small budget, we were not paid for our activities. So, it was not possible because in addition I spent my time trying to find ways to survive because the budget envelopes were too small and there is a game that is played at the level of the subsidizing rules so that you never receive all the money you are entitled to because they will tell you the justifying documents did not conform to the rules. (Hilde – Université des femmes, Brussels)

Organizational and job **insecurity** pressure organizational leaders and activists who risk burning out. Hilde explains how she was juggling between responding to call for tenders and writing reports for donors while being stressed not only about her salary at the end of the month, but about the salaries of other activists, employees of the organization, leading her to depression:

And you've barely finished applying for one funding package when you have to hand in the justification report for another funding and you're worried because you don't know how you're going to get paid next month. So you have no security, and the worst thing is that you're being asked to put other people in insecurity.

When you yourself have none.

And so I fell into depression and while I was having this breakdown and I was actually pregnant. (Hilde – Université des femmes, Brussels)

Feminist professionals, especially those in leadership positions, not only feel the pressure of insecurity for themselves and for the organization, but also for the people employed. To counter this uncertainty, they are in an almost never-ending endurance run to secure complementary funding to ensure salaries.

While Belgium has a tradition of financing structurally civil society organizations through different financing mechanisms, such as popular education or development that offered more long-term funding, during the last decade and a half, these mechanisms started to slowly disintegrate, diminishing the period for which they were awarded and replacing some categories through call for tenders, consolidating project-based work as a new mode of work within civil society organizations.

In Romania, in the absence of structural financing mechanisms and state subsidies, project-based work reposing on funds from international and European donors was a reality from the 1990s on. Project-based work, with its short-time logic increases the pressure for extra-work, exploitation and self-exploitation.

Clara, activist and employer of feminist organization ALEG, in Sibiu explains how the fact that many people employed on a project-basis accept to work beyond the limits of the contract

helps the organization to survive. She also acknowledges that it is not something sustainable on the long run:

We are very lucky that people are willing to work a lot over the contract, beyond the contract's time limits and beyond the norm in the contract, most of them. But this on the long-run is not ok and you cannot expect this from any new employee in a project – as if yes, they will work with us forever. After all, he or she has a firm responsibility for what's in the contract, and people are forced when the contract ends to find something else. And they continue to help us but in their spare time. Clara 1 – Aleg, Sibiu)

Project-based work increase pressure within organizations and favours turnover. This was the case of Centrul parteneriat pentru egalitate (CPE) (Center Partnership for Equality). CPE expanded, after winning multiple projects and grants when they hired many new people. When the projects ended, some employees were insecure about their job as they did not know if additional funds will be secured and if they will be able to continue to work in the organization (Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest). Eventually, most of the people remained, but they had their salaries diminished (Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest). This is similar to the situation in Belgium in some organizations which saw their funds diminishing, but wanted to keep most of the staff, which translated in a heavy workload for those employed, with fewer resources, fostering an “epidemic of burnout”:

I do not know how I realized there is this epidemic of burnout in the feminist milieu. It happened from the moment our subsidies began to decrease more and more [...] and suddenly we had to ask the employees to run more and more after subsidies. We have decreased the resources in the feminist milieu, but we do not want to reduce the staff because it is our responsibility as an employer to keep as many staff blah blah blah... But suddenly we will ask staff exist to work three times more. (Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels)

Similarly, during a workshop organized for a study day on professionalization in Brussels, a participant, activist in a Belgian feminist association talked about an increase in the frequency of burnouts within the feminist movement related to financial precarity and fundraising pressure:

I think of something particular that occurs in today's feminist movement. It shocks me even more because it is the feminist movement. This specific thing is the frequency of burnouts which is also linked to the fact that we are constantly looking for funding, so there is an enormous pressure on employees and maybe what we see as practice in the feminist movement is that no one takes care of each other. (Study day –

Professionnalisation ! Nouveaux défis en temps de crise, November 30, 2016, Sophia, Brussels)

Continuing the discussion, other feminist activists added to the enormous time spent on fundraising or the worries related to job insecurity, the versatility/polyvalence of the NGO work, as a serious source of stress. Contrary to some organizations that managed to offer stable employment and had low or no turnover, such as *Université des femmes*, during the study day, many feminist professionals, for example, from *La voix des femmes*, mentioned high turnover rates as related to the decrease in financial resources and the fragmentation of subsidies as a source of burnout of activists. Job polyvalence added to the workload pressure, the constant search for funds and the generalized job insecurity within the NGO environment. While organizations tried to find ways to offer decent employment conditions, they felt trapped because they depended financially on external donors and the fluctuating subsidies they offered. Employees and also the management of NGOs overwork to secure the survival of the organizations in conditions of fluctuating finances. Simone from *Garance*, a feminist self-defence organization, explains how the leader of the organization, while trying to offer correct working conditions, she exploits herself:

It's true *Garance* makes great efforts to hire people in a correct and non-precarious manner, but the problem is that we depend so much on external financing that it is sometimes completely impossible.

Corinne, the director, is employed on a part-time contract of 3/5 while she works two full time jobs. That's self-exploitation. So, I think that unfortunately it is not possible to do otherwise in the associative world. (Simone – *Garance*, Brussels)

Governmental precarization translates not only into governing through insecurity at the level of NGOs and their employees, but also at the level of their beneficiaries. Beyond the liberal ordering and distribution of precarity as the hierarchized difference in insecurity categorized and marked people in the society, between the worthy and non-worthy (Lorey 2015, 21-22). In neoliberalism, precarization is actualized, being normalized and individualized (Lorey 2015) as vulnerability is distributed differentially (Butler 2004). In neoliberalism, within NGOs, the relationship between professional activists or NGO employees and their beneficiaries, different categories of target women, appears less as a hierarchical relationship, on the model of old charity organizations. It is rather “a graded relationship in terms of a regulated threshold of being (still) governable” (Lorey, 2015, 11). Participants, both NGO employees and beneficiaries seem to invest in themselves professionally and precarity appears as manageable, governable. In Romania, where project-based work is intensified compared to Belgium, activists in NGOs reflected about gap between professionals and beneficiaries, but also between the realities on the ground and the social issues financed by donors. For example, for European donors, priority was given to the integration of vulnerable categories on the labour

market, aspect considered illusory by activists who stated ironically as if the labour market was an endless supply of decent jobs and the problem was people's lack of training:

You know the problem is that anything that works in neoliberalism, who do you exploit for it? If it works for you, it means that... something is happening, that you are exploiting a theme, that you are exploiting people directly, through their work, but in order for it to work for you it means that for someone not working [...]

I think that everything that this new wave of financing meant was extremely important [...] the moment you start to believe things like if we will train 500 women to become nannies, we helped them [...] I honestly believe that this is an absolutely systemic phenomenon [...] But for example, I open Facebook and I see this organization that has been an organization for equality with feminists for a long time and they have activities like this: we will meet to teach women to write their CV better and to perform better at the interview, I'm sweating and all these and many other projects that theoretically pursue a thing that for me is an illusion, namely the fact that we can do this for all women, as if the labor market would be an endless supply of decent jobs and decent in the social sense of the word [...]. (Claudia – Filia, Bucharest)

II. Martyrdom culture: how does the professional tension play out in burnout?

In Belgium and in Romania, within movement causes of burnout, related to conflicts among activists due to power relations and hierarchies were mentioned to cause a stressful environment and led certain activists to temporary or more permanent demobilization (Rosa Vie féminine, Brussels; Sandra – Garance, Brussels; Ema – Filia, Bucharest; Erin – Filia, Bucharest; Sabina – CPE, Bucharest). High commitment and a sense of responsibility together with the incapacity sometimes to solve specific problems and cases related to injustices suffered by people with whom feminist activists work, were also mentioned as factors that increased the levels of stress (Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest; Françoise – LMSF, Brussels; Camelia – Filia, Bucharest; Ema – Filia, Bucharest; Ellen – Isala, Brussels). But the internal, external and within movement factors affecting burnouts are interrelated. The high levels of commitment and devotion to the feminist cause are related to internal conflicts and power relations and the pressure stemming from financial dependency meaning scarce resources and funding fragmentation, job and organizational insecurity and heavy workload for bureaucratic activities. Two crucial factors favour exploitation and self-exploitation in NGO environment enhancing the risk of burnout. First, motivation and commitment to work for social justice serve to legitimize both self-government by activists through overwork and self-precarization through poorly paid work, and exploitation by the organizations they are working for. **Precarization** and self-precarization seem acceptable because of the **high commitment** to the cause and of the sense of **responsibility**. Second, peer pressure related to competition at work but also between the organization, shaped by the volatile finances of NGOs who compete for the same resources and the project based work compel professional activists to overwork, to

prove themselves as devoted and available to work for the cause, hoping to ensure the possibility to continue working for the organization, when projects end or when resources are diminished and for organizational managers to win projects and ensure the survival of the organization. High commitment to the cause and competition sets in a **martyrdom culture** (Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest) in NGO workers that seems to be shaped by the insecurities related to the labour conditions in the sector.

Both in Belgium and in Romania, feminist professionals in NGOs feel proud to do a job that is meaningful for them and considered to be part of their identity. But what makes the work of feminist activists, professionals in NGOs to be more a part of their identity than any other job? The structural sexist and racist oppressions suffered by those involved in the movement, including those who work in professional organizations, and which affect the daily reality of those subjugated and the collectivization of efforts to fight against these oppressions, create possibilities of self-creation and liberation from subjugation while working with others for collective emancipation. But commitment to individual and collective emancipation in conditions of financial dependence contributes to blur the boundaries between work and private life and feminist activists find it difficult to set limits. Many feminist professionals mention that feminist NGOs are not a healthy workplace since it is impossible for them to go home after work and leave the things that they work on behind, because the injustices that they witness for them and for others, affect their life and the life of others and question them permanently (Florina 1 - Filia, Bucharest; Hilde – Université des femmes, Brussels; Françoise – LMSF, Brussels; Mona – Université des femmes, Brussels; Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest).

I'm afraid to say some nonsense. But I want to tell you that sometimes I thought why I didn't do a secretary or a job, or another job super simple where I would not have been as involved as I am. It's true when there is something that goes wrong you are so involved that everything touches you. You're not like a dentist. You cannot tell yourself in the evening: I finished my workday and I go to sleep. There are things that follow you and that are chasing you all your life and sometimes it's hard because you think it would be easier to do something that does not affect you but at the same time, I'm so happy not having done otherwise, because that's what makes me now, every day when I arrive at work, I'm happy to be there. I am really happy. Because I tell myself that I'm doing a job but I'm doing something that I love, that I respect and what I'm doing now I would be proud at the end of my life to tell myself that I did all that and that I did not just look at society and tell myself that I do not agree with it - I'm really trying to change it. (Florina 2 – Filia, Bucharest)

Beyond what might be potentially understood and criticized as a hierarchized value of work, or a paternalistic attitude in an endeavour to help others, this is also a process of self-creation and self-help. The two are interrelated. What is collective emancipation and what are equitable relations within the movement and outside the movement, in an attempt of care of oneself

together with others in this shared subjugation and shared existential precariousness that is at the same time something that is common and that differentiates one from the others. Feminist activists constantly reflect about this issue of self-creation in relation to their work and the way this translates in their relationship with others, especially where there is a risk for hierarchical or paternalistic relationships but also about the possible ways to make equitable the work with others, for emancipation (Ema – Filia, Bucharest; Diana – Dysnomia, Bucharest; Victoria – Dysnomia, Bucharest; Claudia – Filia, Bucharest; Sandra – Garance, Brussels; Virginie - Vie féminine, Maison Mosaïque, Brussels).

When motivation to work for the feminist cause and a sense of responsibility related to heteropatriarchal oppression serves as a self-regulation mechanism for governmental precarization in neoliberal context, at least two things are at stake. First the devaluation and non-recognition of women's work, historically, politically and economically, relegated to the domestic sphere, to care and reproductive work that served to support the autonomy of the male breadwinner in the development of capitalism (Federici, 2004). Second, an ideal, romanticized vision of political engagement, *outside* the capitalist economy; a political work idealized as non-work, non-profit, which under neoliberalism becomes contradictory, almost impossible with the intensification of precarious work.

Scarce and fragmented financial resources that give rise to concerns about organizational and job insecurity for feminist professionals coupled with feminist political engagement as an ideal, as a non-work, as not political work, for the cause, for the sake of contributing to ameliorate women's lives and not as a profession, create tensions that play a crucial role in the dynamics of self-governing and self-creation within feminist organizations. Being engaged within the feminist movement, because one believes in the imperative of addressing heteropatriarchal oppression and earning money while doing it – transformation supported by professionalization, is often resented as a tension. Some feminist activists explain this tension as if one takes advantage of a social injustice by earning money while fighting against (Gabi – ACCEPT, Biblioteca Alternativa, Bucharest). At the same time some of them believe it is a great opportunity to be paid to fight for social justice (Nadia – Vie féminine, Brussels). The workload pressure in conditions of scarce financial resources and financial dependence is enhanced by the professional-militant tension: to fulfil the requirements of the job description and to do extra-work enhanced by competition amongst professionals and justified by the political engagement and commitment for social change. This tension contributes to burn-outs within the feminist movement.

The dynamic of **competition** and **martyrdom** among NGO workers, affected by the insecurities related to the labour conditions in the sector enhances the risk of burnout. Organizations and professional activists are asked to or try to do a lot with few resources. Sometimes employees seem to be indispensable to the organization, while at the same time they seem not to do enough (Ema – Filia, Bucharest; Erin – Filia, Bucharest; Monique - Sophia,

Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels): “for years now, we've been putting everyone into burnout, pushing them into depression or whatever, but it's an institutional logic to make people think that they can't cope, that they can't cope because they're not strong enough, that they've made the wrong choice, that they're not the right person for the job” (Monique – Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels). The limits between private life and work become more and more blurred and people work late, they receive phone calls from work late at night or are asked to do work during the weekends (Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels; Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest; Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest). During fieldwork in Belgium (2016 and 2017), several feminists, from different associations, such as Vie feminine or Garance, left their organizations because of burnout. Smaller organizations such as Garance seemed to be able to better secure support for those who took some time off because of burnout (Catherine – Garance, Brussels). However, the question of sustainability was raised as the organization adopted individualized response to burnout:

So for Marie I think we did everything we could to support her; we tried, I think it was Garance who sent her home and said take care of yourself, we'll manage the activities, workshops you will not do, we will share them. Yes, but that puts pressure on the others. You can do that once every five years, but not every three months for everyone. (Catherine – Garance, Brussels)

While some feminist organizations are mindful about the different possibilities and capacities of their employees, the limits are very fragile. Precarization and governing through insecurity in conditions of financial dependence and fluctuating funds translates into competition between organizations and professional activists. Pressure to overwork comes both from job insecurity and commitment to the cause that serve as an underlying implicit justification for self and for the others to work more than the contract.

Both in Belgium and in Romania, it seems difficult for those working in feminist organizations to draw **boundaries** regarding the amount of extra-work done and to express these difficulties within the organization, to ask for help or to discuss it collectively (Ema – Filia, Bucharest; Camille – Garance, Brussels; Sandra – Garance, Brussels; Catherine – Garance, Brussels; Corentine – Vie féminine, Feminime Yeah!, Brussels; Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels; Simone – Garance, Brussels). Peer pressure to over-work, beyond one's possibilities is deplored by activists:

And things where employees are pitted against each other and so you can have people who are themselves in a situation close to burnout or in burnout, but who will still integrate the collective message so much that they will continue to harass others. It's pretty crazy. It makes you lose all hope in humanity, to start pitting one against the other (Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels).

However, while insecurity and commitment to the cause pressured employees to overwork and caused a stressful situation, the causes of burnout interrelated with and exacerbated by dynamics of competition, power relations and hierarchical functioning. Sometimes there are underlying expectations from persons in leadership positions who over-work that all colleagues work to exhaustion (Simone – Garance, Brussels; Camille – Garance, Brussels; Ema – Filia, Bucharest). Organizational and job insecurities in conditions of fragmented and volatile funding pressure people to work more, to prove themselves, sometimes entailing competition dynamics (Sabina 2 – CPE, Bucharest; Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels). Ema from Filia recalled about one of her colleagues who “put all her energy in the work and waited for everyone to do that” and while she felt exhausted, she could not say “no” out of commitment and out of the pressure she resented (Ema – Filia, Bucharest). She further explains the pressure resented within the organization: “Lena has been pushing me a lot to produce, to read, to do, to do. I could not keep up, so I was very exhausted and drained, and I was trying to keep up, I was running all the time. And she had these expectations from everyone to work like this” (Ema – Filia, Bucharest). Similarly, Camille from Garance explained how she resented different rhythms and availabilities on the one hand from employees and on the other hand from volunteers, especially compared to those in leadership positions within the organization who gave a lot of their time and life to the organization (Camille – Garance, Brussels), an aspect raised by other colleagues as well (Simone – Garance, Brussels; Catherine – Garance, Brussels). Camille recalls that she resented from the beginning that the missions proposed were over-ambitious and they were related to constraints coming from popular education financing mechanism that subsidized their activities and this caused tensions between paid and non-paid stuff (Camille – Garance, Brussels). Beyond the heavy working pace to which one tries to adapt, the structure in place that adopts from the corporate culture does not encourage to express one’s limits regarding work rhythms that are too intense, while paradoxically this is exactly at the basis of self-defence practice, to be responsible and express your own limits (Camille – Garance, Brussels).

Sabina, from CPE recalls the pressure she resented for months and the extra work she did when many projects finished and employees received some evaluations questionnaires, being asked what salary they would accept to stay in the organization:

We had the evaluation discussion and were asked at the end what salary we would accept to stay. And I said a minimum hourly amount of 20 and a bit as I knew it was this period. Let's get over it and see afterwards [...]

And after three months, we stayed three months in this state of tension in which we didn't know if we were going to have a job, we worked like crazy because we had to finish the projects as they were SOPHRD and with SOPHRD projects you don't mess around. And when we finished the SOPHRD projects, the discussion of what to do next came up and I was somehow invited into the office and told that in the spirit of solidarity I would stay.

Sabina describes this as the martyrdom culture within the NGOs: the pressure to stay late at work and in the context of the projects coming to an end, with the fear and uncertainty of jobs in the organization (Sabina 2 - CPE, Bucharest). During this period, while most employees remained in the organization, one of her colleagues did not have her contract renewed.

The boundaries between volunteer work, professional paid work, unpaid work in NGOs are hazy. Financial dependence and the volatility and sometimes scarcity of financial resources coupled with the underlying expectations that work out of passion or belief and political engagement should break away from the monetary rewards enhance the blurriness between different forms of paid and unpaid work. Feminist professionals in organizations try to do a lot with few money, as Monica from ALEG, in Sibiu explains (Monica – ALEG, Sibiu). Other professionals working at ALEG evoke the pressure to constantly be creative and innovative in their work, to do all the necessary work with few resources and to be able to secure future funding (Clara 2 – ALEG, Sibiu). Additionally, for many feminists working in professionalized organizations, **volunteering** represents another **contradiction**. While recognizing that the volunteer work is indispensable to maintain the activities of the organizations (Clara 1 – Aleg, Sibiu ; Monica – Aleg, Sibiu; Ilinca – Filia, Bucharest; Florina 1 – Filia, Bucharest; Simone – Garance, Bruxelles; ST – Isala, Bruxelles), many do not find it fair (Camille – Garance, Bruxelles; Simone – Garance ; Ema – Filia – Bucharest). One employee and then volunteer from Garance explains that while differentiating between militants outside professionalized structures that do volunteer work and volunteers in professional organizations, she finds it unfair that she is paid as an employee while one of her colleagues doing the same work as a volunteer, is not paid (Simone – Garance, Brussels). To her it seems impossible to do otherwise than through volunteering and self-exploitation when depending on external scarce funding (Simone – Garance, Brussels).

This blurring of **boundaries** between **work** and **private life**, more specifically the spillover of work in other areas of one’s life is not specific just to the feminist movement or the NGO sector. It happens in autonomous collectives. It serves for self-precarization of other categories of people who do passionate work (Lorey, 2006; McRobbie, 2011). What is specific to NGO-ization is that **commitment** for individual and collective liberation from structural oppressions works to legitimate the blurring of boundaries not just between private life and work but between paid and unpaid work, legitimizing exploitation and self-exploitation, through underpayment and devaluation of work, among others.

III. Questioning the ostrich policy: Breaking the silence about burnouts

As insecurity and precarization affect the dynamics within organizations and the well-being of their feminist members and employees, activists find it extremely difficult to overtly discuss about the pressure to overwork, competition, and harassment in feminist NGOs and ultimately about burnout: “and when it comes to these recurring burnouts, it's more or less the same thing;

we can't talk about it, it's really like burying our heads in the sand” (Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels; Study day – Professionnalisation ! Nouveaux défis en temps de crise, November 30, 2016, Sophia, Brussels). In some cases, when they talked about it, activists were accused of destroying the solidarity (Sabine CPE; Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels).

One of the former employees of Vie féminine, Lisette Lombé decided to talk about the issue in a slam conference “La magie du burnout”, at the end of which she read several texts of former employees who experienced burnout; the slam conference was also the object of a book with the same title. Monique, who attended the conference explains how it seems paradoxical to her that a movement whose well-known slogan “the personal is political” encourages to speak out, in its institutionalized form it silences its members:

I listened to Lisette Lombé's poetry slam conference which made me think a lot because she read a lot of texts at the end of different employees of Vie feminine; I think that it marked her a lot. She thought that what she was experiencing at Vie féminine as burnout was a local issue, related to the people she was working directly with, and then realized that it was like that everywhere in Vie feminine and that there were burnouts everywhere.

But what shocks me more is the law of silence that is there.

We cannot really talk about it. As soon as we speak, we are accused of lack of sorority, and we are told...in fact the feminist movement said in the 70's the personal is political. We must break this law of silence that says that what happens behind the closed doors must stay there, this law what happens in family stays in family and suddenly we have no opportunity to talk about the violence that takes place in the institutionalized feminism. But I believe in more alternative environments there is also violence, but there is a tradition to talk about it and sometimes it gets to impossible dynamics, but this tradition is there and in the institutionalized environment we are not supposed to talk about it, we cannot say bad things about other organizations. (Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels)

Defining herself as an activist⁴⁴, doing slam poetry and collages, writing novels and poetry Lisette Lombé talked about her experience of activist burnout when she was working at Vie féminine in an interview given to Nicolas Crousse, published in *Le Soir*⁴⁵. She explains that what she lived while working in the organization was the antipodes of feminist practice:

⁴⁴ Lisette Lombé, femme d'intersections, Entretien Marie Baudet ; La Libre Belgique CULTURE, mercredi 16 décembre 2020 1316 mots, p. Cult_5, accessed November 14, 2023

⁴⁵ « Je suis une négresse ailée. Mes ailes me permettent de m'élever », Entretien Nicolas Crousse, *Le Soir* GENERALE, Week-end, samedi 5 décembre 2020 1613 mots, p. GENERALE42, accessed November 14, 2023

At the time, I was working at Vie féminine, in a militant environment, as a trainer in popular education, in a feminist environment. What I experienced was a real siphoning off of meaning. I was in a place that defended women's rights and I no longer felt totally respected as a worker. I had accumulated a kind of fatigue linked in particular to the time given to others... to the detriment of my own. That's what we call militant burn-out: you have great ideals, great causes, and in the end, you realise that you don't have much control over things.⁴⁶

In her book, “La magie du burnout”, Lisette Lombé describes the experience of acknowledging burnout personally and through medical diagnosis: “Your body has cried out to you to stop the abuse. Intransigently, radically. Now it's refusing your blind race and asking you to make amends for what you've done to it. Whether you like it or not, there will be a before and an after to this shock-diagnosis of burnout” (2018:20). She also avows the difficulty of naming it as such, talking about exhaustion rather than burnout, “as if this word is stuck in our stomachs, full of innumerable preconceived ideas, and can't quite reach our ears” (Lombé, 2018: 20).

As insecurity and precarization largely affect the dynamics within organizations and the well-being of their members and employees, feminist activists try to provide care and support within the movement and organizations. Breaking the silence about burnout and about associated issues of precarity and violence within the feminist movements, by naming the problems is a prerequisite to adequately address burnout and provide support. Rather than breaking the harmony within feminist movements, bringing discussions about burnout upfront seems to be a call for solidarity out of shared precariousness among people. Recognizing the ambivalence of techniques of governing, of neoliberal bureaucratization and governmental precarization, means not just revealing the domination mechanisms, in their external dimension of governing by others, and the internal forms of self-governing, from within the movement and as such breaking the ostrich policy, but also revealing the contradictions, the points of resistance, emancipation and liberation. In recognizing the shared existential precariousness, care within the movement seems to be the radical point of resistance and the common ground for liberation. While co-existing, care goes against workload pressure and precarization, hierarchies and power relations that enhance the risk of burnout. This makes it difficult to practice care in organizations, collectives and movements and “there were plenty of times when things went wrong because we had to invent ways of taking care of each other” (Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels).

While hearing more and more about burnout within the feminist movement, in different organizations, Monique from Sophia reflects about the fact that while hearing from a lot of friends and activists within the movement about burnout she felt “extremely well surrounded”

⁴⁶ Je suis une négresse ailée. Mes ailes me permettent de m'élever », Entretien Nicolas Crousse, Le Soir GENERALE, Week-end, samedi 5 décembre 2020 1613 mots, p. GENERALE42, accessed November 14, 2023

in her organization where the limits of work were always respected, employees were encouraged to count very well their working hours and there was a space to discuss when things did not work well:

There are always people for whom it does not work so well, but overall Sophia was extremely well surrounded, with the possibility to talk about it, with respect to all that.

It's not always easy, but suddenly I always felt very far from these problems [burnout].

Then we work part time. I have always heard at Sophia: count your hours well, recover your overtime, avoid overtime, be realistic about what you can do in order not to have everything to recover afterwards. You have been given a part time and suddenly if you cannot do an infinite work, it's normal and it does not matter but you have to be able to say it, to evaluate your work well.

So here we are very well supervised. (Monique - Sophia, Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels)

While the versatility of NGO work, the multiplication of accountability mechanisms and the job and organizational insecurity create a stressful environment and put pressure on activists in NGOs both to overwork, enhancing the risk of burnout, some organizations try to find time to take care for each other. When Sandra, from Garance took a break because she was in burnout, the team supported her, sent her home and shared her work among other employees of the organization (Catherine – Garance, Brussels). While acknowledging that the measures might put additional pressure on other employees as well, the organization launched a process of reflection about more viable ways of taking care of each other (Catherine – Garance, Brussels). In a more preventive manner and starting from the acknowledgement that the feminist struggle is a long term struggle, Le Monde Selon les Femmes (LMSF) created K-Fem as a space where feminist activists could meet, share and discuss among themselves, as a way to release pressure from work and to find ways to continue their struggle while caring about each other in a hostile environment:

What is important for us is to be attentive towards the outside and at the same time when we are unhappy and miserable, we created this space, the K-Fem to be able to speak, so this is it, to try to dream, to seek in the culture, to seek in the connection and contact with others. It is a utopia, feminism is still the utopia.

Often it is true that we must calm young people who say it is not possible, we must get there. But you know it's more than twenty centuries of patriarchal system, it is not in two generations, three generations that things change. It's hard to realize that anti-sexism, anti-racism are very long-term struggles. (Françoise – LMSF, Brussels)

Conclusions

NGO-ization as a form of neoliberal governmentality profoundly transformed feminist movements in such a way that insecurity became an important concern for organizations who embarked on the pathway of professionalization. The financial dependence on donors combined with the multiplication and fragmentation of subsidies cemented project-based work as a mode of functioning of organizations. The polyvalence required from professional activists in NGOs became a source of workload pressure and stress for feminists who slalom through different kinds of work, from political work in official settings to grassroots work in communities, advocacy and raising-awareness campaigns or fundraising and paperwork related to donor's accountability. As the bureaucratic load increased, through the multiplication of accountability demands but also of through fundraising activities, related to the fragmentation of subsidies, activists became frustrated with the amount of paperwork done at the expense of political and grassroots work. Running after funds to alleviate insecurity, organizational and individual, and working to exhaustion between bureaucratic and political work, feminist activists faced an enhanced risk of burning out. But the pressure of insecurity was complemented, first, by the exploitation and self-exploitation of activists legitimized through their commitment to the cause and their sense of responsibility and second, by competition among activists and organizations in conditions of volatile financial resources. These contributed to normalize precarization and a martyrdom culture within feminist NGOs, enhanced by the historical devaluation and non-recognition of women's work and a romanticized vision of political engagement, outside the capitalist economy, giving rise to the militant-professional tension. The workload pressure in conditions of scarce financial resources and financial dependence is enhanced by the professional-militant tension: to fulfil the requirements of the job description and to do extra-work enhanced by competition amongst professionals and justified by the political engagement and commitment for social change. This tension contributes to burn-outs within the feminist movement.

As insecurity and precarization affect the dynamics within organizations and the well-being of their feminist members and employees, activists find it difficult to overtly discuss about the pressure to overwork, competition, harassment, related to burnout in feminist NGOs. While a few activists broke the silence about burnouts and proposed care as a radical point of resistance and ground for liberation, it seems that care is not yet proposed as a collective antidote for activist burnout, but more as an individual one.

Bibliography

- Alvarez, S.E. (1998) 'Latin American Feminisms 'Go Global': Trends of the 1990s and Challenges for the New Millennium.' in Alvarez S. E., Dagnino E., and Escobar A. (eds.). *Cultures of Politics/ Politics of Cultures: Revisioning Latin American Social Movements* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press)
- Alvarez, S. E. (1999) 'Advocating feminism: the Latin American feminist NGO'boom', *International feminist journal of politics*, 1, 2
- Ana, A. (2020) 'Hope as Master Frame in Feminist Mobilization: Between Liberal NGO-ization and Radical-Intersectional Street Politics.' In Hellström A., Norocel Ov. C., and Bak Jørgensen M. (eds.), *Hope and Nostalgia at the Intersection between Welfare and Culture*, 185–202 (Amsterdam: Springer).
- Ana, A. (2023). Decolonizing Feminism: the NGO-ization Paradigm between the Global Circuits of Neoliberal Power and the Politics of Location. The Case of Romania. *Feminist Critique: East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies*.
- Ana A. (2024) The NGO-ization of social movements in neoliberal times: Contemporary feminisms in Romania and Belgium (Palgrave)
- Ana A. & Aromatario A. (forthcoming) Féminismes contemporains en Belgique : convergence des luttes et enjeux de coopération à l'heure d'un féminisme pluriversel (Les Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles)
- Arpad T. (2008) Europa civică. România civică. (Budapest : Európa HÁZ)
- Barry J. and Dordevic J. (2007) Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (Boulder: Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights)
- Bernal, V. (2000) 'Equality to Die For?: Women Guerrilla Fighters and Eritrea's Cultural Revolution' *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 23, 2
- Boël, M., & Duchène, C. (1955). *Le féminisme en Belgique, 1892-1914*. Editions du Conseil national des femmes belges.
- Bracke, S. & Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2002) 'Etudes féministes et politiques d'égalité des chances...quels rapports ?' in SOPHIA, *Etudes féministes en Belgique 1997-2000/Vrouwenstudies in België 1997-2000*, (Bruxelles : Sophia)
- Bracke, S., Dupont, W., & Paternotte, D. (2017). "No prophet is accepted in his own country": Catholic anti-gender activism in Belgium. *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*, 41.
- Celis, K. & Meier, P. (2007) 'State Feminism and Women's Movements in Belgium: Complex Patterns in a Multilevel System' In Outshoorn J. and Kantola J. (eds.) *Changing State Feminism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan)
- Chen, C. W., & Gorski, P. C. (2015). Burnout in social justice and human rights activists: Symptoms, causes and implications. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 7(3), 366-390.
- Cox, L. (2011). How do we keep going? Activist burnout and personal sustainability in social movements.
- Dental M. (2004) 'Notre féminisme vous appartient' in Halls-French L., Rome-Chastanet J. (eds.) *Féministes, féminismes : nouvelle donne, nouveaux défis* (Paris, Syllepse, Coll. Espaces Marx)

- Downton, J. and Wehr, P. (1997). *The persistent activist: how peace commitment develops and survives* (Boulder: Westview)
- Fillieule, Olivier and Broqua, Christophe (2005). "La défection dans deux organisations de lutte contre le sida". 189 – 228 in Olivier Fillieule (ed.), *Le désengagement militant* (Paris: Belin)
- Foucault, M., Davidson, A. I., & Burchell, G. (2008). *The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan)
- Gorski, P., Lopresti-Goodman S., & Rising D. (2019) "‘Nobody’s paying me to cry’: the causes of activist burnout in United States animal rights activists." *Social Movement Studies*, 18, 3
- Gorski, P. C. & Erakat N. (2019) 'Racism, whiteness, and burnout in antiracism movements: How white racial justice activists elevate burnout in racial justice activists of color in the United States.' *Ethnicities*, 0, 0
- Grunberg, L. R. (2000). ONG-izarea feminismului in Romania. Eșecul unui succes. *AnALize: Revista de studii feministe*, (07), 14-19
- Grunberg L. R. (2008). biONGrafie. AnA - istoria trăită a unui ONG de femei (Iași: Polirom)
- Grunberg, L. (2014). Lived Feminism (s) in Postcommunist Romania. in Bernal and Grewal (eds.) *Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminism, and Neoliberalism* (Durham, Duke University Press), 248-265.
- Gubin, E. (1998). Les femmes d’une guerre à l’autre Réalités et représentations 1918-1940. *Cahiers d’Histoire du Temps présent*, 4.
- Gubin, E., & Jacques, C. (Éds.). (2018). *Encyclopédie d’histoire des femmes : Belgique, XIXe-XXe siècles*. Racine.
- Halley, J. (2006) *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Hibou, B. (2015). *The bureaucratization of the world in the neoliberal era: An international and comparative perspective* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan)
- Jacques, C. (2009) 'Le féminisme en Belgique de la fin du 19e siècle aux années 1970' *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, 7
- Jinga M. (2015) *Gen si reprezentare in Romania comunista. 1944-1989* (Iasi, Polirom)
- Kantola J. & Squires J. (2012) 'From state feminism to market feminism?' in *International Political Science Review*, 33,
- Klandermans, Bert (2005). "Une psychologie sociale de l'exit". 95 – 110 in Olivier Fillieule (ed.), *Le désengagement militant* (Paris: Belin)
- Lang S. (1997) 'The NGOization of Feminism. Institutionalization and Institution Building within the German Women’s Movements', in Kaplan C., Scott W., Keates D. (eds.) *Transitions, Environments, Translations; Feminism in International Politics* (New York, Routledge)
- Lorey, I. (2015) *State of insecurity: Government of the precarious* (London, Verso Books)
- Lorey, I. (2006). Governmentality and self-precarization: On the normalization of cultural producers. *may fly*, 187.
- Maslach, C., & Gomes, M. E. (2006). Overcoming burnout. *Working for peace: A handbook of practical psychology and other tools*, 2, 43-49.
- McAdam, Doug (2005). "Pour dépasser l'analyse structurale de l'engagement militant". 49 – 74 in Olivier Fillieule (ed.), *Le désengagement militant* (Paris: Belin)

- Meier, P. & Paternotte, D. (2017) 'La professionnalisation des luttes pour égalité de genre: les enjeux' in Paternotte D. & Meier P. (eds.) *La professionnalisation des luttes pour l'égalité : Enjeux théoriques et politiques* (Louvain-la-Neuve, Academia/L'Harmattan)
- Meyer, D. S. & Tarrow, S. (1998) 'A movement society: Contentious politics for a new century' in Meyer D.S. and Tarrow S. (eds.) *The Social Movements Society: Contentious Politics for a New Century* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield)
- Mihăilescu, Ș. G. (2002) *Din istoria feminismului românesc: antologie de texte (1838-1929)* (Iasi, Polirom)
- Mihăilescu, Ș. G. (2006). *Din istoria feminismului românesc: studiu și antologie de texte (1929-1948)* (Iasi, Polirom)
- Miroiu, M. (2004) 'State Men, Market Women. The Effects of Left Conservatism on Gender Politics in Romanian Transition' *Feminismo/s*, 3
- Moloea A. (2015) '(Re)constructia feminismului românesc în cadrul mișcării de femei (1990-2000)' in Miroiu M. (ed.) *Mișcări feministe și ecologiste în România (1990-2014)* (Iasi, Polirom)
- Mureșianu, A. A. [1926] (2001) 'Cea dintâi însoțire femeiască a neamului nostru: «Societatea femeilor române din Buda» din anul 1815' *Carpați*, VI, 339, 8 septembrie, in Mihăilescu Ș., *Emanciparea femeii române. Antologie de texte. Vol. I, 1815-1918.* (București, Ecumenică)
- Peemans-Poullet, H. (2003), 'A l'heure des premiers bilans...', *Politique*, 30
- Rettig, Hilary (2006). *The lifelong activist: how to change the world without losing your way.* New York: Lantern
- Saxonberg S. & Jacobson K. (2013) 'Introduction: The Development of Social Movements in Central and Eastern Europe' in Saxonberg S. and Jacobson K. (eds.) *Beyond NGO-ization. The Development of Social Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (Farnham, Ashgate Publishing Limited) (2013)
- Semah, H. (2018) *Féminisme belge et colonialité. Le cas des féministes d'origine maghrébine.* Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres, Université catholique de Louvain, 2018. Prom. : AZZI, Assaad.
- Vlad, I. (2013) *Women's rights activism in Romania after 2000. Studies on the forms of organization, cooperation, action and influence*, Doctoral thesis, (București: Școala Națională de Studii Politice și Administrative (SNSPA))

Annex I. Organizations

Belgium	Organization/Group
Principal	Vie féminine Université des femmes Garance Cercle féministe de l'ULB Isala Le monde selon les femmes Abortion Rights Network Le Réseau pour l'Élimination des violences entre partenaires (REV)
Secondary	Femmes et santé La voix des femmes Sophia Fat Positivity CEFA the group around Reclaim the night march European Women's Lobby (EWL) Le collectif des femmes sans papiers
Romania	Organization/Group
Principal	Asociatia FRONT Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate, CPE Centrul de Dezvoltare Curriculara si Studii de Gen Filia Asociatia pentru Egalitate si Libertate de Gen, ALEG Dysnomia The feminist group of A-CASA collective Rupem tacerea despre violenta sexuala Reteaua pentru prevenirea si combaterea violentei impotriva femeilor, VIF
Secondary	E-Romnja Romanian Women's Lobby Centrul de Mediere si Securitate Comunitara (CMSC) Accept Biblioteca Alternativa Centrul Feminist Sofia Nădejde Feminist theatre group Giuvlipen

Annex II. Interviews

Belgium

Ref.	Association/Place	Duration	Date
------	-------------------	----------	------

Nicole	Adviser popular education, Ministry of Culture, Childhood and Popular Education, Brussels	49:38	15.01.2017
Carlie	Cercle féministe de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (CFULB), Brussels	69:54	01.12.2016
Kim	Cercle féministe de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (CFULB), Brussels	48:48	29.11.2016
Fabienne	Université des femmes, Brussels	56:11	08.12.2016
Caroline	Le Monde Selon les Femmes (LMSF) Isala, Brussels	44:22	25.02.2017
Corentine	Vie féminine Feminisme Yeah! Brussels	67:24	17.02.2017
Virginie	Vie féminine, Maison Mosaique, Brussels	73:25	17.11.2016
Monique	Sophia Fat Positivity Belgium, Brussels	90:46	03.04.2017
Nour	Garance, Brussels	82:15	27.03.2017
Sandra	Garance, Brussels	69:14	01.12.2016
Catherine	Garance, Brussels	53:43	22.03.2017
Nadia	Vie féminine, Brussels	71:01	22.02.2017
Simone	Garance, Brussels	64:23	20.03.2017
Anne	Garance, Brussels	72:02	30.11.2016
Danny	Cercle féministe de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (CFULB), Brussels	39:10	25.01.2017
Rosa	Cercle féministe de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (CFULB), Brussels	38:47	18.11.2016
Hilde	Université des femmes, Brussels	45:24	21.02.2017
Agnès	Cercle féministe de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (CFULB), Brussels	45:24	19.01.2017
Elena	Isala, Brussels	73:03	22.11.2016
Alice	Isala, Brussels	51:05	05.12.2016
Françoise	Le Monde Selon les Femmes (LMSF), Brussels	71:47	26.05.2017
Louise	Isala, Brussels	60:21	13.01.2017
Valérie	Ministry of Education, Social Promotion, Youth, Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities, Brussels	37:52	25.01.2017
Els	Vie féminine, Brussels	112:41	20.01.2017
Beatrice	Axelle, Vie féminine, Brussels	53:01	26.01.2017
Mona	Université des femmes, Brussels	58:29	20.01.2017
Nicole	Vie féminine, Brussels	66:04	06.11.2016
TM	Vie féminine, Brussels	54:00	11.01.2017
Erna	Université des femmes, Brussels	48:57	29.11.2016
Sara	Femmes Prévoyantes Socialistes (FPS) Brussels	48:49	07.06.2017
Nadine	Femmes et santé, Brussels	50:16	25.05.2017
Claire	CEFA (became Corps écrits in 2018), Louvain-la-Neuve	64:00	16.02.2017

Olivia Abortion Right, Brussels 36:37 24.01.2017

Romania

Ref.	Association/Place	Duration	Date
Anca	A-Casa, Cluj	63:41	05.07.2016
Florina 1	Filia, Bucharest	86:31	23.06.2015
Florina 2	Filia, Bucharest	84:58	26.01.2016
Bianca	Agentia Națională pentru Egalitatea de Șanse între femei și bărbați (ANES), Bucharest	62:41	19.02.2016
Cezara	Filia, Bucharest	67:44	27.01.2016
Claudia	Filia, Bucharest	163:37	25.06.2015
Ema	Filia, Skype	131:10	27.02.2016
Greta	Agentia Națională pentru Egalitatea de Șanse între femei și bărbați (ANES), Bucharest	30:55	03.02.2016
Alex	Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate (CPE), Bucharest	82:47	01.02.2016
Iris	A-Casa, les sisterhood Cluj	36:22	05.07.2016
Lidia	Dysnomia, Bucharest	53:54	08.07.2016
Nina	Front, Skype	62:47	22.06.2015
Silvia	Biblioteca Alternativa, Bucharest	68:26	26.06.2015
Clara 1	Asociația pentru liberate și egalitate de gen ALEG, Sibiu	57:12	12.02.2016
Clara 2	Asociația pentru liberate și egalitate de gen ALEG, Sibiu	57:08	21.06.2016
Sabina 2	Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate (CPE), Bucharest, Bucharest	107:23	04.02.2016
Sabina 1	Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate (CPE), Bucharest	65:40	23.06.2015
Gabi	ACCEPT Biblioteca Alternativa, Bucharest	98:41	26.06.2015
Luiza	Front, Bucharest	66:25	29.06.2016

Monica	Asociația pentru liberate și egalitate de gen ALEG, Sibiu	77:33	21.06.2016
Sorana	Dysnomia, Bucharest	34:38	01.07.2016
Victoria	Dysnomia, Cluj	34:56	05.07.2016
Mara	Front, Bucharest	141:39	28.06.2016
Zoe 2	Front, Bucharest	36:19	03.07.2016
Marina	Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate (CPE), Bucharest, Bucharest	32:19	29.06.2016
Zoe 1	Front, Bucharest	31:52	21.06.2015
Teodora	Front, Bucharest	71:37	01.07.2016
Tania 1	Front, Bucharest	82:28	21.06.2015
Tania 2	Front, Bucharest	60:23	07.07.2016
Teo	Aleg, Sibiu	43:02	21.06.2016
Raluca	Dysnomia, Bucharest	49:32	30.06.2016
Ilinca	Filia, Bucharest	94:55	01.02.2016
Emilia	Transcena, VIF, Bucharest	37:49	08.07.2016
Eliza	Filia, Bucharest	60:04	25.06.2015
Dana	Biblioteca Alternativa, Bucharest	43:54	22.06.2015
Laura	Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate (CPE), Bucharest, Bucharest	57:39	29.06.2016
Corina	A-Casa, Cluj	52:12	06.07.2016
Erin	Filia, Bucharest	57:05	29.06.2016
Camelia	Filia, Bucharest	68:35	06.02.2016
Ana 2	Front, Bucharest	60:46	28.06.2016
Ana 1	Front, Bucharest	41:20	28.06.2016
Diana 2	Dysnomia, Bucharest	77:08	03.06.2016
Diana 1	Dysnomia, Claca, Biblioteca Alternativa, Bucharest	111:39	25.06.2015
Greta	Centrul Parteneriat pentru Egalitate (CPE), Bucharest, Bucharest	52:08	03.02.2016