Special section editorial

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ABSTRACT

This editorial focuses on the potential of arts activist practices to raise awareness about gender-based violence (GBV) against women, which is one of the most pervasive human rights violations. It contextualises the discussion by the contributors to this special section of *Image & Text*, who attend to diverse instances of GBV: from everyday domestic violence, rape and sexual violence, feminicide, institutional misogyny within caste and army, to online abuse. GBV affects women across all socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, class, age, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, and/or sexuality. And yet there is an increasing global backlash against gender equality and an intensification of GBV, both of which are intimately connected to the rise of exclusionary politics and the widespread anti-gender and far-right rhetoric. This editorial outlines the relationship between violence against women and human rights, arguing for the urgent need to expose the systematic, structural heteropatriarchal conditions around GBV at a time when at least one in three women worldwide has experienced physical, sexual, or psychological abuse in their lives.

Keywords: gender-based violence, arts activism, feminist art, feminism, transnationalism, solidarity.

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September 2025 marks the 30th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, convened by the United Nations (UN) and considered the most significant of its conferences held between 1975 and 1995 (UN [sa]). The event culminated in the adoption by 189 governments of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, not only consolidating five decades of legal advances concerned with gender equality in law and in practice but also paving the way towards the advancement of women and achieving gender equality. This visionary agenda set out strategic areas of concern, including violence against women, with the UN Division for Women emphasising that:

> The fundamental transformation that took place in Beijing was the recognition of the need to shift the focus from women to the concept of gender, recognizing that the entire structure of society, and all relations between men and women within it, had to be re-evaluated (UN [sa]).

And yet, 30 years have passed since this landmark event. In 2025, when we are writing this editorial, there is an intensifying global backlash against gender equality and an increase in gender-based violence (GBV) (UN Women 2025). This backlash is intimately connected to the rise of exclusionary politics and the widespread anti-gender and far-right rhetoric as evidenced by, for example, Chopra *et al* (2024).

25 November marks the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women designated by the UN General Assembly through Resolution 54/134 from 7 February 2000.[1] The date is not coincidental and commemorates the brutal murder of the Mirabal sisters: Patria, Minerva, and María Teresa by members of the Dominican Republic's secret police. The sisters were active in the resistance movement against the regime implemented by the dictator Rafael Trujillo, one of the most violent in Latin America (UNESCO [sa]). This day also initiates the 16 Days of Activism Against GBV global campaign, launched in 1991 by activists at the inaugural Women's Global Leadership Institute held by the Centre for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University and running annually between 25 November and 10 December (Human Rights Day). The campaign foregrounds the relationship between violence against women and human rights (OHCHR 2025). Despite multiple global attempts to bring visibility to GBV, it remains, according to the UN (2024), 'one of the most prevalent and pervasive human rights violations in the world'. Quinones (2025) cites UN statistics revealing a harsh reality in which at least one in three women worldwide has experienced physical, sexual, or psychological abuse in their lives. These figures are underestimated as only approximately seven per cent of survivors file a formal report to authorities, whether police or medical services (Quinones 2025). The most extreme form of GBV – femicide – affected 140 women and girls every day in 2023, meaning that a murder by partners or family members occurred every ten minutes. Ending all forms of GBV is a key pillar of the World Bank Group (WBG) Gender strategy 2024-2030: Accelerate gender equality to end poverty on a liveable planet (WBG 2024).

This special section emerges from the panel *Exploring gender-based violence in feminist art*, organised by Maria Photiou at the 2024 Association for Art History (AAH) conference. It featured close readings of transnational art activist practices that highlighted the societal and political processes that perpetuate violence against women locally and globally. The section also expands on the discussions in Basia Sliwinska's (2025) recent edited volume *Contemporary transnational feminist activism and gender-based violence*, by attending to arts activist interventions and by raising consciousness and advocacy for women's right to a life free from violence. The contributions included here explore diverse instances of GBV – from everyday domestic violence, rape and sexual violence, feminicide, institutional misogyny within caste and army, to online abuse – and shed light on their transnational relevance. They reflect the dialogues and concerns we, as guest editors, have had over the past fifteen years of knowing each other, and our shared commitment to exploring the potentials of arts activism to nuance the lived experiences of GBV and develop a visual language attentive to their impact on women's lives. Arts activist practices generate advocacy strategies and communication methods where other forms of activism may fail or stutter. In doing so, art can facilitate dialogues and offer alternative ways to catalyse our own sense of responsibility and response-ability, which is navigated by the authors who contributed to this volume through the rich spectrum of visual media with which they engage.

With this special section, we wish to provide a platform that highlights arts activist interventions through transnational feminist perspectives. As Marsha Meskimmon (2020:4) argues, transnational feminisms are 'capable of facilitating large-scale coalition-building with and through careful attention to local, concrete conditions, replacing centre-periphery hierarchies … with multidimensional dialogues that take place across transnational feminist networks'. As evidenced by the practice of women artists, for example, Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Ana Mendieta, Jenny Holzer, Gabrielle Goliath, among many others, art can inspire change and bring about a more inclusive world – one where everyone is safe and equal. This requires a collective sense of responsibility and solidarity but also a recognition of the diversity of voices, experiences and positions at the heart of feminist politics and ethics.

The section opens with Maria Photiou's investigation into two installations that expose conflict-related GBV to international audiences. Examining Alketa Jhafa Mripa's 2015 *Thinking of you* and Patricia Cronin's 2015 *Shrine for girls*, both of whom used clothing as mementos to represent the missing women and women's experiences during conflict, Photiou argues for the role of arts activisms in raising social acknowledgement and recognition of the systematic silence of GBV experienced by women across global histories and cultures. Focusing on the visual and narrative connections between Arizona and Cyprus, Marilena Zackheos and Nicos Philippou speak to their creative collaboration *Arizona, CY* (2024), a project combining original photographs and poems. Their discussion is grounded in transnational feminism to reveal the interface of colonial legacies, migration, and economic inequalities and their role in silencing GBV. Their

creative project is an example of a powerful feminist arts activism sensitive to local oppressive systems of power while being mindful of transnational alliances and shared struggles. Transnational solidarities are also explored by Monica Merlin who attends to the work of three Asian artworks, namely, *Burning body, burning country* (1998, 1999 and 2024) by Arahmaiani (Indonesia), *Rewriting history* (2009-2012) by Phoebe Ching Ying Man (Hong Kong), and *Circumcision* (2014) by Sun Shaokun (People's Republic of China). Merlin focuses on specific aesthetic choices and strategies employed within these feminist interventions to address violence against women within Asia and beyond, and specifically to expose stories of rape and female genital mutilation. The author emphasises the potential of transnational solidarities built through these evocative artworks to act 'as sites of resistance and empowerment' (Merlin 2025). Karen von Veh considers women's migrant experiences of GBV through South African artist Diane Victor's 2024-2025 exhibition *Suie ed cendre* (*Soot and ashes*), which showed at the Lieu d'Art et Action Contemporaine in Dunkirk, France. In her contribution, Von Veh (2025) analyses the ways in which Victor's photovoice project makes visible the marginalised and suppressed lived experiences of displaced francophone women from Africa and Iran residing in Dunkirk, and, as such, articulates a 'voice for the voiceless'.

The most extreme form of GBV – feminicide – is investigated by Charlotta Sippel in her article tracing the multiple meanings of *bordado* (embroidery) practices within the feminist activism of two collectives in Mexico City, namely, Las Siemprevivas and Fuentes Rojas. The author argues that the embroidery circles facilitate shared mourning for the friends and families of murdered women and offer a critical space empowering survivors. By occupying public spaces, embroidery becomes, as Sippel (2025) points out, 'a feminist intervention that transforms public spaces into landscapes of resistance and remembrance'. Further unpacking the occupation of public spaces to project transnational feminist arts activisms, Giorgia Rizzioli explores the 2015 *Dalit Women Fight* projections in New York by the activist collective The Illuminator. Analysing the projections, Rizzioli argues for the powerful role of ambient activism in bringing attention to GBV and advocating for socio-political change to end caste-based sexual violence against Dalit women.

The final two contributions to this special section represent collaborative attempts to explore arts activism against GBV in the context of adjacency critical friendship. The first is addressed by Basia Sliwinska in dialogue with a Polish jewellery artist Dominika Kuźniar and her project *The body language – scars* (2023 – ongoing). Focused on domestic violence in Poland, the medium of jewellery enables a new visual language that speaks to the culture of silence and shame surrounding domestic abuse while encouraging women to speak out and against their experiences of GBV. Another strategy to forge solidarity is interrogated by Sophie Lingg whose contribution sheds light on the recent rapid rise in digital abuse on social media. GBV in the digital realm and online spaces is the key focus of the 2025 UN 16 Days of Activism campaign. Lingg examines the working conditions of five queer-feminist artists, namely, Anahita Neghabat,

Julischka Stengele, Natalie Assmann, Sophia Süßmilch, and Stefanie Sargnagel (all of whom are based in Austria and Germany), and their lived experiences of using the online platforms Instagram and Facebook. By adopting a caring approach to epistemology, she interrogates the different forms of discrimination affecting queer-feminist artists.

Contributors to this special section share a commitment to feminist advocacy against GBV to expose the systematic, structural heteropatriarchal conditions affecting women across all socioeconomic or educational backgrounds, class, age, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, and/or sexuality. Cynthia Enloe (2023:167) notes the importance of solidarity and 'feminist stamina' while fighting against patriarchy, and people who benefit from its associated masculinities: she argues that 'Feminist stamina can be sustained by sharing dilemmas … [I]n our efforts at solidarity, we need to learn about each other's gendered histories … economies … hopes and worries' (Enloe 2023:167). Our hope is that this section, while not comprehensive, contributes to inspiring further solidarity and awareness about the critical role of arts activism in creating transnational alliances to end all forms of violence against women.

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Notes

1. See https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/54/134.

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