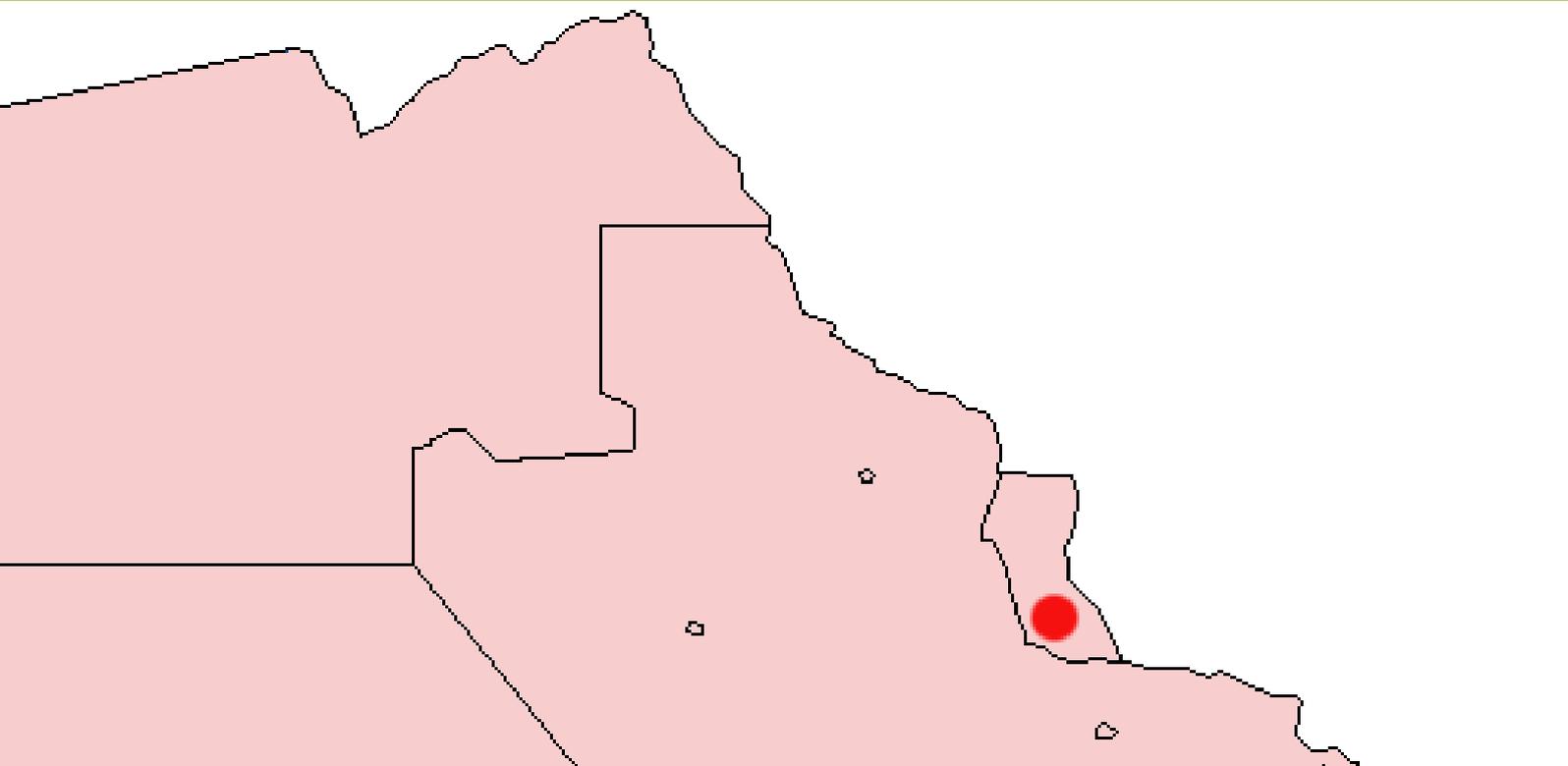


# TRANS POSE

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SITUATING GENDER  
DIVERSITY THROUGH LIVED  
EXPERIENCES IN  
FRANCISTOWN



# INTRODUCTION

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A cohort of young trans, gender non-conforming and lesbian individuals based in Francistown were engaged to better understand their lived experiences. This report provides an overview of the unique experiences in relation to belonging and becoming in a region that is underserved, under-resourced and far from the decision-making structures in government and civil society. The cohort engaged for purposes of this study came together to organize as a group, having previously engaged in several capacity strengthening and up skilling initiatives under Success Capital Organisation. Over the years of engagement, the cohort have observed and yearned to formalize themselves. This led to the creation of a group aimed at serving the interests of gender diverse youth in Botswana. FrancisTrans as an organized group is politically feminist and future thinking in challenging gender norms and safeguarding rights within the municipal and surrounding regions. Francistrans was established to empower the individual and supporting those who are hurt. Further working to strengthen visibility.

# CONTEXT

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Francistown is the second biggest city in the country that remains underserved due to limited capacity among LGBT led organisations based in the capital city. There is high prevalence of sexual and physical abuse, exasperated by poverty and exclusion in societal, cultural and policy engagements. Although there are pockets of inclusion in mainstream LGBT programming, there remain shortcomings in non-binary and gender non-conforming representat-

# CONTEXT...

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-tion and servicing. The Men who have sex with men (MSM) funding landscape within the HIV response reflects an overall neglect of gender diverse provisions in civil society interventions. This has reflected in representation in media and narratives. Where visibility and voice exists, it is anchored on those with institutional backing, resources and privilege. These leaves the prevalent public discourse to gender marker changes within strategic litigation work and select issues around mental health. Francistown remains a focus for purposes of the documenting of these experiences. This is intentional in increasing awareness and narratives outside of the capital city, Gaborone.

# APPROACH

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The report adopted a qualitative approach. This is aimed at ensuring the lived experiences are best reflected as the group conveys. The cohort engaged were members of FrancisTrans. Only one born male and the other six born female. Two identified as lesbian, two as transgender and two as gender non-conforming. The group was brought together initially in Gaborone, to deliberate on how to best capture experiences and ensure outcomes of the research would be meaningful. The group met again in Francistown in the first data collection exercise. This included a survey, focus group discussions and observations on daily engagements in society. The group met in Gaborone again, to contribute towards the International Conference on Population Development 25th anniversary conference, the Political Declaration on Universal Health Coverage and the Sustainable Dev-

# APPROACH...

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-elopment alternative or parallel reports for Botswana. The group further met in Maun to validate findings of the data collected. All these engagements situated experiences within different settings, development frameworks and human rights standards to encourage in depth insight. Throughout engagement, all participants were informed of the value of their contributions, with an option to withdraw participation or rescind their input at any point in during the project.

# EXPERIENCES

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## Overview

Francistown is not a safe or enabling environment for LGBTIQ+ individuals in general. Many are reminded that they do not belong in the world. Civil society efforts remain focused on Gaborone, leaving many queer individuals in other regions feeling neglected. This could reflect why society is perceived comparably more ignorant in Francistown than in Gaborone. There has been some awareness and change in perceptions over the recent years. This attributed to the increase in information on LGBTIQ+. Although allies would be considered an influence, they are perceived a threat to the community. There are many other threats that impede how individuals can freely express themselves, work, love or simply exist. These include the behaviors, practices and work of broader civil society. These experiences are reflective of a cohort of gender diverse and non-conforming individuals largely based in Francistown and its surrounding areas.

# EXPERIENCES...

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## Society

Gender norms and patriarchy continue to anchor perspectives against gender diverse individuals. Narratives perpetuated in society are on correcting the sexual orientation of lesbian women, which often more masculine women and transgender men are included. This reflects the high level of ignorance in the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity – even gender expression. This is not exclusive to the LGBTIQ+ community as subgroups also tend to assume negatively of gender diverse individuals. There is often assumption of confusion and phobia around understanding gender diverse individuals and their relationships. It is common to find a lesbian woman in a relationship with a transgender man, some characterized by ignorance, self-hate and habitual incorrect use of pronouns. Similarly in lesbian relationships, where affirmative use of pronouns is not congruent with gender identity. For instance: when the more masculine partner is referred to as 'daddy' or 'rre' in Setswana, loosely translated as 'man' despite the partner not identifying as transgender or as a man.

Society in Francistown is perceived as rude. There are persistent comments when one is in public where non-conforming individuals are often sexualized. Commentary includes inquiries on how community members have sex and that all LGBTIQ+ are homosexual. This reflects high levels of ignorance on gender diversity and expression. Discrimination is prevalent in any public or private space. This includes restaurants, homes and customary courts.

# EXPERIENCES...

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Having to move around for work, school, running errands or simply meeting friends can be mentally taxing. Particularly when one has to use public transport and might end up at the station to connect to another area of town. There are high risks of violence, hate speech and petty crime. These are not exclusive to sexual or gender diverse individuals, but also women. However, it is further exasperated when one is non-conforming in dress or expression.

The most notable societal space where discrimination is minimal is in tertiary. Particularly in Gaborone based tertiary institutions, where most Batswana students study. There is a contrast to high school experiences through, as there is no sense of belonging when you are gender diverse. This often adds to the difficulty of navigating peer pressure, societal expectations and pressure to excel in academics. Traditional classroom set ups are a challenge. Especially with teachers that do not want to be questioned. Syllabi is considered dated and narrow, especially around sex education. It is a component of Moral Education as a subject, which by design is viewed as problematic. Historically, there was a public outcry around issues of sexuality and had some aspects of diversity removed from the curricular. This has further impacted the increase in teenage pregnancies and instances of new STIs among young people. Furthermore, gender diverse students cannot excel given the limited parameters of becoming and belonging in their truth.

## Safety

Gender diverse or expressive individuals find it difficult to walk in public with their partners. Vulnerabilities are exposed when in public transport; where stigma is pervasive, invasive and prevalent. Instances of physical harassment occur randomly, particularly when one tries to either respond or retaliate to hate speech or discrimination. Some have been attacked whilst using public transport. They are normally targeted where they stop. This is not exclusive to Francistown, but Tati Siding, Kasane and Tonota as well.

# EXPERIENCES...

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In Kasane one was threatened with rape after rude advances were made by a man. Other instances have resulted in transgender individuals being undressed in public. Many experiences shared how the way they dress often incites commentary and inquiry. This is often met with curt responses from gender diverse individuals. Although never accepted, responses sometimes end further inquiry but not stigma or ill treatment.

Gender diverse individuals in Francistown are in constant fear. The fear of losing someone loved, being caught by police under any circumstance, ending up in a physical altercation or being discriminated against. Any space that has a lot of people brings fear. Allergic reactions, intolerant actions and sexual assault are also prominent fears of the community, with the worst being the inability to exercise agency. This is because in homes, schools and work environments, suppression is real. Even among peers, the inability to express oneself is often simple and trivial for many in society but for gender diverse individuals; the inability to have voice and be visible is defeating. This however has not stopped many from having dreams.

## Livelihood

Money is a critical aspect for gender diverse individuals to participate in society. Whether its securing livelihood in some way, engaging in social/recreational activities or securing basic gender affirming commodities. For others it is a necessity because it can allow them to escape from stress and depression; often turning to alcohol and smoking. When one is unemployed, relationships end up being a challenge because money is a factor. The ability to go to movies or on dates is determined by affordability. Thus, emotional connections cannot be built in instances where money is lacking. Many young gender diverse individuals have financial constraints.

# EXPERIENCES...

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Money is critical to survival. The lack of incentives in some jobs or business ideas make it difficult for one to have a dignified life. The lack of money often results in depression and at times, unlawful means of acquiring it. In some instances, this includes sex work or transactional sex. For others it provides a basis for confidence to navigate society and public life. It is an even more glaring need for those that have children or support their family. Where there are dependents, money is never enough.

Opportunities remain unequally skewed towards heterosexual individuals. Discrimination is very intangible and prevalent, because it is often difficult to document. Many encounters would not be considered objective, which is the inherent challenge of having to occupy space and safeguard gender diverse rights. The issues dealt with are difficult and expensive to prove because it is a war of elites, intellectual ideologists and those with privilege. Poverty is not seen because it cannot participate in public life or assert its existence within the country's inadequate human rights framework. The recent decriminalization of same sex intercourse brought hope but remains largely exclusive of gender diversity. This reflects the focus of many LGBTIQ+ led civil society organisations and their allies. Where public discourse and human rights narratives are explicit in advancing sexual orientation related rights. A gap remains in ensuring that gender diversity can be more prominent in human right issues. One of the glaring shortcomings is experiences in workplace environments.

Work experiences are normally at lower levels of structures. One experience of the government internship programme was tolerable. They found themselves in a good environment that respected privacy. However, this is not a guarantee in any workplace. Particularly for variant gender expression. It can be complex when your birth sex is known or you have not transitioned fully. Many gender diverse individuals are resilient. They work towards ensuring the job is done so as not to complicate social relations or other aspects of the workplace.

# EXPERIENCES...

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Wherever issues of sexuality would come up, as that is the overall norm; sensitization was an approach one individual adopted. Having to explain the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity was a norm. Others would have found this offensive, but there was an understanding of colleagues not having the knowledge and thus relations were cordial in this instance. This resulted in more openness and nurturing relationships with others outside the workplace and even being recommended to educate others in different departments.

Where there was general openness, many individuals felt comfortable. However, gender norms are prevalent in the workplace. Thus, gossip can be rife in the workplace if people do not know much about a gender diverse individual that they work with. More especially in a smaller town or remote village where social circles can conflate with work circles. In some instances, gender diverse individuals rationalized the verbal abuse they experience in the workplace by recognizing the cost of being unemployed. The only solution they found was to ignore and focus on their work. This creates a difficult work environment with no psychosocial support or end to the abuse.

## Health

Civil society practitioners and health officers have been hostile to community members. This could reflect why public health facilities are not safe for gender diverse individuals. They remain a challenge for one to present their issues comfortably and without restriction. There are fears of being judged, mistreated and ridiculed. This is based on previous unfavourable experiences where health professionals were perceived to not exercise confidentiality and/or care during consultation. One of the main reasons identified through sensitization workshops is because of a high level of ignorance.

# EXPERIENCES...

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The lack of knowledge is attributed to the key populations they serve. This alone reflects a neglect in gender diverse individuals and key populations within health systems are MSM and female sex workers. Being queer, trans or gender diverse is a challenge and this is perceived as not exclusive to Francistown.

Medical facilities need to be more mentally safe for gender diverse people to access them. From the outlay of where clients are received, the kind of care exercised by health practitioners and confidentiality in how lines are formed based on client needs to how one can inquire on services without an audience. These are critical in instances where STIs are of concern. Further adding a layer of stigma impeding access. Overall healthcare needs improvement in Francistown. From diagnosis to hearing the client's concerns. These two seem worlds apart at times given the sensitivity of disclosing one's gender diversity, no matter how physically or aesthetically obvious. Assumptions are the cornerstone of stigma and discrimination in health facilities. SRHR commodities for gender diverse individuals are a challenge. Dental dams are not widely available, similarly context specific framing and language in sex related education or information. Hormonal therapy and binders are not publically available and thus come at a cost that most gender diverse individuals cannot afford.

One individual's health needs reflects the extent to which comprehensive mental health is needed for the LGBTIQ+ community. As a gender non-conforming individual, hormonal and psychological therapy are needs. They access these for depression, anxiety, borderline personality disorder and bipolarism. The stress added to accessing health services is caused by inexperienced health practitioners. Inexperience in dealing with gender diversity, non-conventional mental health needs and simply not having many patients with diverse needs. They were put on multiple personality disorder treatment due to their gender dysphoria and the effects were painful. Safety from possible persecution and self-questioning are simple requirements that health facilities had failed in for a long time.

# EXPERIENCES...

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Civil society facilitated referral systems have helped increase access for sexual orientation and key population needs, but more needs to be done on the mental health front.

## Personal reflections

Family can often be toxic for gender diverse individuals. Particularly extended family who aren't close or often seen. Comments and stares can be hurtful. This is one of the worst experiences for one individual. A similar experience shared how he wore a suit despite being told to wear a dress in norm with culture. He was told he would wake the dead but remained adamant. Another shared being beaten on a street in Molepolole. This was because the assailants were interested in a perceived female partner to a gender diverse individual. For another, school was the worst; whether during breaks, lunch time or in class it was clear she was not welcome. Affiliation with other LGBTIQ+ individuals is perceived a risk, as one shared that most instances of stigma or discrimination are when they are in a group. One shared how a pastor tried separating her from her girlfriend. This caused commotion in church, whilst others in separate occasions have been threatened with being cleansed.

Completing education, getting married and moving into a place of residence independently are common aspirations. Even helping out family members and other support structures given the high levels of poverty and sacrifice many community members are surrounded by. Having children is one aspiration that was not common. This could be from other experiences being practical about their situation. Dreaming for some, is simply a waste of energy and time as financial stability is a need. The underlying premise of belonging and thriving in Botswana is a shared throughout. Some of the biggest needs for gender diverse individuals include safe spaces throughout the country.

# EXPERIENCES...

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- diverse individuals converge across economic and social class divides. These are a distinct reality despite the community being small and sexual partners conflating across the LBQT sub-groups.

## Culture

Culture remains one of the reasons behind intolerance. Although not always practiced or prevalent in modern Botswana, it is the cornerstone of norms and beliefs on gender norms and relationships. It is often used as a reason to discriminate gender diverse individuals. The LGBTIQ+ community cannot separate from cultural identity as some practices around family gatherings, weddings and funerals remain anchored in societal engagement. Others believe culture's rooting in patriarchy will always be a conflict with how one exercises their freedoms in society. One shared how her happiness is the most important thing in proximity to culture, thus only ever partaking in cultural practices that would compromise her wellbeing. There have been engagements with traditional leaders, but these have been restricted to knowledge sharing.

Language in its indigenous form does not do harm for gender diverse individuals. It is universal and inclusive for all ages and ethnic groups. Where variants exist due to colloquial, modern idioms or pop culture references, that is where harm can exist. Setswana and Kalanga as the two prominent languages spoken in Francistown and the Northern regions in Botswana, can be used negatively. This is where tone, ignorance and context can instigate harm. Language can also be used to help others understand differences and diversity. There might be some challenge to direct translations on LGBTIQ+ issues, but the essence of emotion, orientation, expression and diversity can be explained. This provides an opportunity for exploring how gender diverse narratives can be embedded within cultural framing and philosophy.

# EXPERIENCES...

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Civil society facilitated referral systems have helped increase access for sexual orientation and key population needs, but more needs to be done on the mental health front.

## Community

LGBTIQ+ individuals need to be empowered beyond their existing resilience and survival. Their diverse needs and aspirations need to be harnessed towards more affirmative and encouraging messaging. Gender diversity should be mainstream beyond binaries. Empowerment can take shape in something as simple as being allowed to change one's gender marker on their national identity card. This remains exclusive to those with resources or connections to navigate the high courts to secure the change they need. For others it is economic empowerment, or just to meet basic utility bills or even more basic: to access public service delivery. Other forms of enablement for economic participation include basic life skills to navigate the complexities of negotiations, selling and financial literacy. Similarly, go-girl, packers and other gender affirming products are often overlooked components of thriving. Particularly for those that would not 'pass' as women or men aesthetically.

Knowledge sharing within civil society is strengthening. Especially in equipping gender diverse individuals on safe sex, their rights and civic participation. It makes it easier for individuals to safeguard or assert their rights in most settings. This can be attributed to being in spaces that are affirmative and enabling of gender diverse learning and participation. The same cannot be reflected in formal education, inclusive of the more progressive tertiary learning environments. Personal politics remain the biggest compromise to the community, as competing interests and misunderstanding remain prevalent. Stigma exists within the LGBTIQ+ community where gender -

# EXPERIENCES...

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- diverse individuals converge across economic and social class divides. These are a distinct reality despite the community being small and sexual partners conflating across the LBQT sub-groups.

## Village Surroundings

Surrounding villages are hotbeds of discrimination and ignorance. Makaleng is one of the areas where acceptance is low. Experiences include how people are looked at, treated and gossiped about negatively. This makes it difficult to be a part of the community. Tati is a greater Francistown area that is deeply traditional. The only solution is to exit if one is resident there. In Marapong, there is little visibility of LGBTIQ+ individuals. This is similar to many other villages across Botswana. There is a persistent demeaning of one's existence especially because when one has grown in a certain village, there will always be a connection to it. Thus, the triggers of injustice are a challenge to deal with when there or in a different place. This is because harm and trauma can last one's lifetime. The challenge of misogyny and patriarchy anchor gender norms and harmful traditional practices. It absolves community leaders from accountability even within the LGBTIQ+ community. Some of the challenges gender diverse individuals experience cannot be resolved by linear solutions as there are wider structural impediments.

Smaller villages make it more difficult to seek protection or recourse. This is because communities are small, thus many people know each other, and stigma can be easily spread. Marapong is characterized by this, along with Tati Siding. Although the latter is considered calm and tolerant, it is premised on the historical co-existence in the area rather than explicit inclusion of LGBTIQ+ visibility or individuals. Tutume which is further out of Francistown is inherently cultural. LGBTIQ+ people are a topic of discussion in public modes of transport.

# EXPERIENCES...

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Narratives reflect morality and religion against LGBTQ+. The silence on variant forms of abuse is a problem for gender diverse individuals in villages. Like many views around the country, the legal system is a burden for survivors. Perceived to be filled with corruption and ignorance. The fatigue of teaching or sensitizing people on gender diversity further impacts on access for legal remedy. There also is not clear outcome of instances where survivors were able to secure legal remedy without having to explain who they are as individuals.

# CONCLUSION

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The LGBTQ+ community remains resilient and growing in visibility. The same can be observed particularly for gender diverse and non-confirming individuals throughout the country. Francistown and its surrounding villages continue to be a hotbed for intolerance, stigma, discrimination and variant forms of violence. These are anchored on religious and cultural undertones to gender norms, societal perception and ignorance. Many opportunities exist in shifting narratives and public discourse away from sexual orientation and ridicule of gender diversity. However, this is with risk of complicating advancements made in pockets of acceptance and passive enablement. Particularly in public spaces, workplace environments and with family; the increase in visibility will come with scrutiny, confusion and malice. There is a need to be more proactive in safeguarding affirmative messaging and representation in advocacy.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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- 1) Strengthening of organizing and related skills to ensure cohesive ways of working towards gender diverse affirmative impact,
- 2) Engaging media in sharing more affirmative stories on gender diverse individuals,
- 3) Create more indigenous language content representative of gender diversity and non-conforming interests and,
- 4) Investigate gender diverse affirmative service delivery needs with best practice solutions for advocacy purposes.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FrancisTrans Collective  
January 2020

FrancisTrans is an independent, trans, non-conforming and queer led group focusing on community visibility, voice and agency. Established mid-2018 to shift power within the movement to rural communities.

*Feminist Future Forward.*