

# Solidarity



The Rural Women's Assembly (RWA), convened for a three-day Summer School on "Solidarity: Enacted and Embodied" from 23-25 February, 2025. The gathering brought together participants from nine countries across Southern Africa including South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi, Namibia, Tanzania, eSwatini, and Lesotho.



This summer school represented an important milestone in the ongoing collaboration between RWA, the Global Health Solidarity Project (GHSP), and the EthicsLab at the University of Cape Town, exploring different narratives and practices of solidarity in the Rural Women's Assembly and beyond.

This school forms part of the broader initiative "Moving Beyond the Solidarity Rhetoric in Global Health" that seeks to enrich our understanding conceptually of solidarity. The project importantly aims to facilitate that multiple experiences from different contexts are registered. The initiative has already convened workshops across multiple regions: two in West Africa, one in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and the wider Pacific, and another in Costa Rica. An additional workshop in the Himalayan region is scheduled for later this year.

The summer school combined personal storytelling, case studies, guest lectures, and collective analysis to document and reflect on the various accounts of solidarity practiced within the assembly. A key objective of the workshop was to facilitate a grounded up approach of solidarity in which priority was given

to women's lived experience of solidarity and how it is practiced in and within RWA participants homes, family, communities and country chapters. The participants, who are deeply tied and connected to the land in the context of Southern Africa shared first hand the challenges and opportunities in which practices of solidarity emerge.

Participants moved from many personal encounters with solidarity to selected organisational case studies and theoretical reflections, using a participatory methodology that allowed country chapters to share solidarity actions they had undertaken while incorporating reading materials to enrich discussions.

This newsletter will be followed by a synthesis. RWA participants are keen to share and develop their case studies further. Throughout the three days it was palpable that a key feature of the social and political life of RWA was solidarity .



**[Download the programme here](#)**

# 3

Days

# 9

Southern African  
countries

# 30

Participants

Over  

# 22

Hours

## Snapshot of the Context

- Lack of safe and clean cooking energy sources, affecting rural women disproportionately
- Only 50% of the region has access to electricity with rural areas still off the grid
- Lack of safe and reliable drinkable water sources remains a serious challenge
- Hunger and food crisis continue to plague the region
- Severe impacts of climate change are felt through floods and drought and the recent cyclones - Ida and El Nino, had dire consequences.
- Over 50% of the region has limited access to reliable and affordable universal health coverage with women predominately carrying the burden of care

[Tanzania](#)

[Malawi](#)

[Zambia](#)

[Zimbabwe](#)

[Namibia](#)

[Mozambique](#)

[eSwatini](#)

[Lesotho](#)

[South Africa](#)

Click on a country  
for a short  
biography of  
participants.

## Facilitators & Speakers:

- [Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge](#)
- [Suzall Timm](#)
- [Jaamia Galant](#)
- [Caesar Atuire](#)
- [Jantina de Vries](#)
- [Lauren Paremoer](#)
- [Barbara Prainsack](#)
- [Heidi Matisonn](#)
- [Ashish Giri](#)
- [Donna Andrews](#)

## HerStories of Solidarity

The school began with women sharing personal accounts of solidarity experiences. Participants described how family members, neighbors, and fellow RWA members provided support during difficult times - like when community members helped with school fees, stood against mistreatment from in-laws, or protected women facing gender-based violence.

Many accounts connected to broader political struggles, including hiding liberation fighters during independence movements or supporting families of political detainees. Workplace solidarity emerged as another important theme, with examples of workers standing together against unfair treatment. Through these testimonies, participants



identified solidarity as encompassing practices of standing with other women both in material and emotional ways; as support, sacrifice, sharing, unity and collective political action against a wrong. This sparked deeper discussions about whether solidarity requires both feeling and action to be meaningful.



**Listen to**  
**“Solidarity Forever”**

— PP —  
*So, my grandmother said the true act of solidarity is not when we have everything in excess, but when we have something to share, even if it's a little, it's about sharing what we have that make the act of solidarity. At that moment, that action totally changed my vision for my view of solidarity.*

—Silvia, Mozambique — DD —

## Solidarity as Resistance

Caesar's presentation connected traditional African concepts of solidarity to modern challenges. Drawing from his childhood in northern Ghana, he explained solidarity as "one" - a concept embodied in his community's identity through collective action.

He illustrated solidarity through the metaphor of a traditional African broom: individual straws

that become unbreakable when bound together. When you put them together and form a group, you can use it to sweep and even sweep things that are heavy.

Atuire emphasised that solidarity combines resistance against threats with empowerment through collective action. He critiqued how political systems have diminished community





agency, particularly regarding healthcare access.

His Global Health Solidarity project aims to move "beyond the rhetoric of solidarity" toward practical, actionable

implementation. Caesar emphasised learning from grassroots practices like the Rural Women's Assembly's concrete solidarity actions.



**Listen to Caesar explain the broom metaphor**

## Solidarity amongst strangers



In her presentation on the Palestinian solidarity movement in South Africa, Jaamia Galant connected her experiences from anti-apartheid activism to current Palestinian solidarity work. She described how participation in boycotts during apartheid taught her that solidarity transcends self-interest, involving action for causes beyond one's immediate benefit.

Post-October 2023, the movement has experienced both challenges and growth, with younger activists bringing intersectional perspectives that connect Palestinian rights to other social justice issues.

In discussions, she emphasised that effective solidarity acknowledges differences while standing together for common goals, and that being engaged in struggle, even imperfectly, is better than disengagement.

Jaamia emphasised the challenge of building "solidarity among strangers" from diverse backgrounds. She highlighted the importance of framing the Palestinian struggle accurately as an anti-colonial movement centered on land rights and human dignity, rather than as a religious conflict.



***Be somewhere. Be somewhere in the struggle. I'm not happy if you're sitting at home and doing nothing...***

-Jaamia Galant



## Solidarity based on shared experiences

The 2012-2013 Farm Workers Strike in South Africa's Western Cape exemplifies effective solidarity organising. Mercia Andrews and Denia Jansen shared that, beginning in De Doorns with workers blocking the N1 highway between Cape

Town and Johannesburg, the protest against low wages (R69 daily) quickly spread to 26 towns across the region.

Organisers strategically timed the strike during harvest season, giving workers leverage as vineyard

harvests couldn't be delayed without causing significant financial damage to farm owners.

The three-month strike resulted in a 52% wage increase to R105 daily and improved labor rights

awareness. A key aspect of solidarity was as a result of meaningful consultation with communities, family support for strikers, and consistent engagement between unions and communities but also communication about the needs and support that was needed to those who were in solidarity with the farmer workers and their struggle and demands.



## Solidarity shaped by politics and activism

Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge shared her experiences as an activist, Quaker, and former Deputy Minister of Defense and Health in South Africa. She reflected on how the concept of solidarity shaped her journey in politics and activism.

She emphasised that solidarity is more visible when it's absent, and that it's essential to distinguish between women's practical needs and strategic gender demands. As a new parliamentarian in 1994, she helped establish a Women's Caucus that worked across party

lines and collaborated with civil society organisations to ensure gender-sensitive legislation.

Nozizwe described their intervention in the Films and Publications Act debate, preventing unregulated opening of the sex industry.

She also shared how women MPs marched alongside civil society against gender-based violence in 1996, despite criticism from male colleagues.

She highlighted challenges to women's solidarity, including

instances where "penis solidarity" led men to close ranks against women's concerns, sometimes with women's complicity. This happened in cases involving an MP's abuse of his girlfriend and the rape of activist Nomboniso Gasa on Robben Island.

Despite her disappointment with South Africa's current trajectory, Nozizwe maintained her optimism, emphasising that "power is in all of us" and that together, people can effect meaningful change.



***...that's why we need to continue to unite and talk among ourselves, because one thing we must realise is that power is in all of us. If you look at yourself as an individual, you think you can't change anything but together, even starting with this room already, we are the force. We can influence the vote.***

-Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge







**Watch a medley of songs to welcome Nozizwe**

## Solidarity as transformative

Lauren Paremoer explored what "solidarity is not" by examining pharmaceutical companies' actions during the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa. She argued that corporate "donations" of antiretrovirals weren't genuine solidarity but rather strategic business moves prompted by activist pressure.

These donations served corporate interests - protecting market share, disposing of near-expiry products, gaining tax write-offs, and creating consumer dependencies. Large foundations like Gates and aid programs like PEPFAR negotiate medicine discounts that make real differences but lack true solidarity's relational aspect.

### **healthcare solutions and fosters knowledge transfer for local production.**

When discussing organised versus organic solidarity, Lauren noted how during the farm workers' strike, rural communities effectively coordinated action across regions with activists supporting when requested. She emphasised that solidarity develops through doing - "through joining one raises your consciousness" - as even strangers work together when identifying with a common struggle.

Lauren concluded that solidarity differs from charity as it is transformative and can change institutions, while charity often maintains existing power structures.

**True solidarity respects people's agency to determine their own**



***[That donation] doesn't count as solidarity...One reason is the donation was made because the companies were publicly shamed by the activists. They were embarrassed, and so it didn't come out of a place of recognition of a common humanity.***

- Lauren Paremoer



## Solidarity starts with doing

After Barbara and Lauren's presentations on solidarity during the second day, there was a rich session of questions and comments from the participants.

Mercia pointed out what she saw as a tension between academic frameworks and lived experience. She questioned the hierarchical presentation of solidarity concepts, suggesting a circular relationship might be more appropriate. She also highlighted the continuum between justice and solidarity rather than a hierarchy, noting that "I act in solidarity because I want justice."

Alice raised a practical concern about her organisation sometimes jumping into solidarity actions without understanding the full context, asking for clarity on how their current practices align with the definitions of solidarity presented.



Nora commented on foundations that present themselves as offering solidarity when they actually have other motives, emphasising "it is our responsibility as Rural Women and social movement to be able to define what do we mean by solidarity."

suggest the women's actions weren't solidarity. Barbara clarified that her frameworks were meant for "analytical clarity" to help distinguish solidarity from other forms of support, not to judge or categorise the women's work.



Zakithi asked Barbara to clarify what she meant by solidarity being at "eye-level," wondering if solidarity might actually begin with charity.

Other questions touched on whether solidarity counts if it's not reciprocated, the relationship between corporate actions and true solidarity, and differences between caring and solidarity.

Donna asked both speakers to clarify whether they were suggesting that the Rural Women's Assembly's actions weren't solidarity, emphasising that their presentations seemed to affirm that RWA's work embodied true solidarity, unlike corporate actions.

In their responses, both Barbara and Lauren affirmed that they weren't trying to impose definitions or

Lauren noted that "everyone in the room, if you see solidarity, you will say, 'Oh, that's it,'" suggesting their collective understanding was already aligned even if putting it into words was challenging.

Barbara emphasised that solidarity starts with doing, and "the doing shapes knowing," affirming that the practices discussed by the Rural Women's Assembly were "absolutely symmetrical and supportive."

The session highlighted the tension between academic frameworks and lived experiences of solidarity, with participants working to integrate theoretical perspectives with their practical knowledge of solidarity in action.



# Solidarity Embodied

Each country chapter was asked to prepare three case studies of solidarity actions they had undertaken. These presentations provided rich, detailed accounts of solidarity actions across various contexts



## Namibian Rural Women's Assembly

Elizabeth and Roline presented three case studies:

1. **GBV Campaign:** (make a link to presentation)

In November 2020, the Namibian RWA held a GBV campaign in the Karas region following a tragic incident. The RWA members visited both families involved in a dramatic incident and loss of life, providing emotional support and material assistance from resources they pooled from within their country membership.

2. **Rainy Season Traditional Practices:** The case study described how women in Etope village helped an elderly woman with weeding her field during the rainy season. This revived a traditional practice of collective assistance that had diminished over time. Labour and resource pooling was shown as a practice of rural solidarity among women in RWA.

3. **Grandmother is a Mother to All:** When a 95-year-old woman died in Ompundja village, leaving behind unemployed children and grandchildren, 15 rural women came together to support the bereaved family, raising funds for funeral expenses and providing food.

Discussion points included:

- The relationship between sympathy and solidarity
- Cultural practices of community support
- The significance of tokens of appreciation in solidarity actions
- Whether solidarity is an ongoing commitment or can be a one-time action

## Lesotho Rural Women's Assembly

Mamalefetsane and Khahliso presented two case studies:

1. **Food Insecurity and Seed Sovereignty:**

Described how RWA Lesotho responded to the problematic government farming input subsidy program (FISP) by promoting indigenous seeds through a seed audit, exhibitions, and as an alternative advocacy with policymakers.

2. **Gender-Based Violence Response:** Outlined how RWA Lesotho built a women's network to address the high rates of gender-based violence in the country, creating "healing circles" and collaborating with other stakeholders.

Discussion focused on:

- The distinction between collaboration and solidarity
- The relationship between advocacy campaigns and solidarity actions
- How to measure the impact of solidarity







### Zimbabwean Rural Women's Assembly

Thandiwe and Emilia shared three solidarity cases which highlighted the effectiveness of solidarity economies and collective actions:

- 1. Drought Response Initiative:** When severe drought affected the Matabeleland region in 2022, RWA members from eastern provinces mobilised, providing drought-resistant seed varieties and emergency food supplies to affected communities.
- 2. Women's Legal Rights Workshop:** Following incidents of widows being dispossessed of their land, the Zimbabwean RWA conducted a series of community legal education sessions, connecting rural women with pro-bono lawyers and supporting affected women through court processes.
- 3. Community Savings Groups:** RWA members established village savings and loan associations where women pooled resources to fund small business initiatives, agricultural inputs, and emergency needs, creating financial solidarity among women with limited access to formal banking.

Discussion points included:

- Balancing immediate humanitarian needs with advocacy for systemic change
- The intersection of climate resilience and women's economic security
- Strategies for sustaining solidarity across different socioeconomic conditions
- The importance of intergenerational solidarity knowledge transfer in rural women's movements

### Zambia Rural Women's Assembly

Mary and Docus presented their response to Cyclone Freddy:

#### 1. Solidarity with Malawi after Cyclone Freddy:

RWA Zambia members travelled to affected areas in Malawi, bringing seeds and offering emotional support to communities devastated by the cyclone. They witnessed firsthand the destruction caused by flooding and mudslides. The solidarity account showcased in detail the extent and depth of solidarity required to show-up beyond and across borders. The co-ordination, risks, skills and self-awareness detailed was invaluable. A seemingly small seed, pooled by Zambian rural women has so much power and show of ever lasting solidarity.

Discussion highlighted:

- The emotional impact of witnessing suffering and showing solidarity
- The physical and material dimensions of solidarity actions
- The distinction between gifts, humanitarian aid, and solidarity

### South Africa Rural Women's Assembly

Nora and Denia presented their COVID-19 response case:

- 1. COVID-19 Solidarity:** Described how RWA South Africa responded to the pandemic by providing food parcels with a "feminist approach" (including seeds and sanitary products), conducting online training sessions on making soap and masks, and creating a solidarity fund with other women's organisations.

Key discussion points included:

- The distinction between charity and political and economic solidarity
- How consulting with communities on their needs transforms assistance and charity into solidarity
- The integration of urban and rural responses to crisis







### Mozambican Rural Women's Assembly

Flaida and Sylvia presented three case studies:

1. **Natural Disaster Response:** After cyclones devastated coastal communities in 2019, RWA members from unaffected regions mobilised to provide food, clothing, and agricultural inputs to help affected families rebuild their livelihoods.
2. **Land Grabbing Resistance:** When a foreign corporation attempted to acquire community farmland for a mining project, women organised regular protests, engaged media coverage, and partnered with legal NGOs to successfully prevent displacement of local farmers.
3. **COVID-19 Community Support:** During pandemic lockdowns, RWA members established a rotating fund to support vulnerable households with essential supplies and created community gardens to address food insecurity.

Discussion points included:

- The importance of creating solidarity networks beyond immediate communities
- Balancing immediate relief with long-term rebuilding efforts
- Strategies for maintaining solidarity during prolonged struggles
- The role of knowledge-sharing in strengthening rural women's resilience

### Malawi Rural Women's Assembly

Alice and Emily delegation presented two cases:

1. **Reclaiming a Woman's Land:** Described how RWA members helped a widow reclaim her land after being dispossessed by her stepchildren following her husband's death. This involved engaging traditional authorities and community mobilisation. Solidarity action also relied on raising awareness and making each other see what is not right about an action.
2. **Cyclone Freddy Response:** RWA Malawi used their membership fees to provide support to communities affected by both flooding and drought, distributing maize, goats, kitchen utensils, and sweet potato seeds.

Key discussion points included:

- How land rights advocacy connects to solidarity
- The role of traditional authorities in enabling or hindering solidarity
- The significance of using member contributions for solidarity actions







### Tanzania Rural Women's Assembly

Catherine and Judith presented three cases:

1. **Anna's Seed Sharing Initiative:** A member inspired by the RWA meeting in Johannesburg organised 22 households in her community to share indigenous seeds after floods destroyed local agriculture.
2. **Response to GBV:** An RWA GBV champion named Maria stood up for an 8-year-old girl who had been violated, despite facing threats and attempts at bribery to silence her.
3. **Response to Disaster:** RWA Tanzania members provided support to communities affected by landslides, including food, psychological support, and connections to government resources.

Discussion focused on:

- The role of shame and public exposure in addressing injustice
- The emotional dimension of solidarity
- The distinction between case management and solidarity

### eSwatini Rural Women's Assembly

Zakithi and Cebile presented three case studies:

1. **Political Crisis Response:** During political unrest in 2021, RWA members created safe houses for women and children displaced by violence, organising community kitchens and trauma counselling services.
2. **Collective Land Acquisition:** When traditional authorities allocated insufficient land to women farmers, RWA members pooled resources to purchase a communal plot, establishing a cooperative farm managed by women from multiple communities.
3. **Indigenous Food Festival:** To combat nutrition challenges and preserve cultural knowledge, eSwatini RWA organised an annual indigenous food festival where elders taught younger women traditional food preparation methods and medicinal uses of local plants.

Discussion points included:

- The role of women's solidarity in contexts of political instability
- Navigating traditional authority structures while advocating for women's rights
- Food sovereignty as a foundation for community resilience and underpinned by solidarity economy.
- Building solidarity that respects diverse cultural practices while addressing common challenges



## Solidarity in the Himalayas



Ashish Giri, research manager at the GHSP, presented research on solidarity practices in Himalayan communities. His first encounter with solidarity was through community-based wedding preparations where families reciprocally support each other.

He shared three case studies across the Indian Himalayas: communal house construction, death rituals, and a successful campaign to ban hunting and meat consumption.

He focused particularly on the hunting ban case, where a Buddhist minority group led by women successfully ended the practice despite cultural resistance.

The solidarity action was motivated by Buddhist beliefs in reincarnation (animals could be reborn family members), karma, identification with animal suffering, and human responsibility toward vulnerable beings. Though economically challenging, participants viewed these costs as worthwhile sacrifices that brought spiritual benefits and community cohesion.

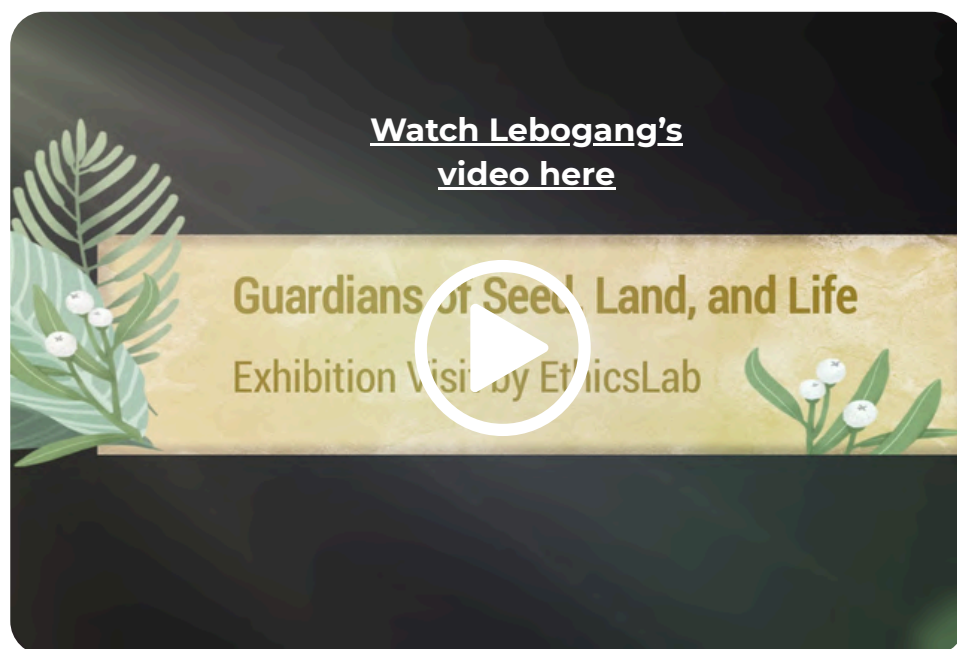
During the Q&A session, participants asked about:

- The relationship between women's leadership and solidarity
- Historical context and traditional practices
- How communities balance solidarity with traditional beliefs
- Whether such solidarity practices develop mainly because of isolation

The presentation sparked discussions about how traditional cultural practices can serve as forms of solidarity and how communities collectively address challenges through shared values and beliefs.

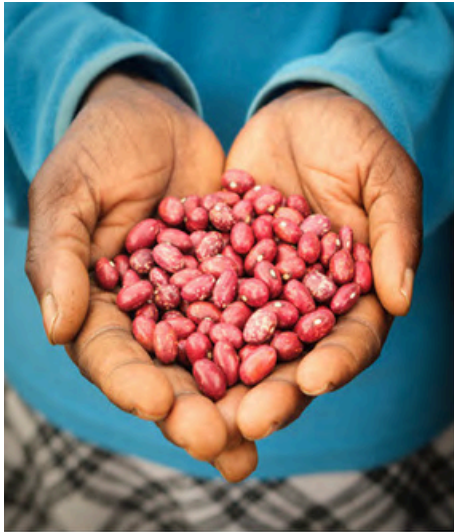
## Seeds of Solidarity

Jantina shared a short video created by Lebogang Montewa, a member of the EthicsLab team, showcasing how the Rural Women's Assembly's seed exhibition at the castle in Cape Town inspired further connection. The video demonstrated how Lebogang took seeds from the exhibition, grew them at home, and then gifted the resulting plants to team members, illustrating how the exhibition sparked ongoing relationships and how seeds literally and figuratively travel, creating new connections beyond the original event.





## Solidarity in action



Suzall Timm presented on behalf of Donna Andrews and herself, an overview of the seed research and exhibition project at the request of the RWA, who wanted to document the seeds preserved by their members across different countries. The project was extensive, involving around 427 participants across seven countries.

While the research used a case study methodology, it wasn't a rigid, step-by-step process. Rather, it was iterative and reflexive, with country-level researchers (CPIs) constantly moving between their own experiences, the seed guardians' experiences, and their observations of seed banks. This approach allowed for deep qualitative insights despite working with large numbers of participants.

Four key dimensions of the findings that emerged through the seed project:

### **Solidarity amongst women**

The research process helped identify "seed guardians" in communities, creating connections between women and establishing a "seed gifting economy" based on reciprocity. Women weren't just sharing seeds but built autonomy, self-sufficiency, and knowledge, strengthening women's agency in the process.

### **Solidarity between generations**

Many seed guardians possessed heirloom seeds passed down from grandmothers, creating intergenerational bonds and knowledge transfer. This continuation of seed knowledge represented solidarity across time as well as seed solidarity economy.

### **Solidarity with seeds**

The practice of seed guardianship represented a cornerstone of maintaining biodiversity. Unlike transnational corporations' approaches, the women's seed-saving practices were aligned with local climates and farming conditions. Women stood with local seeds against TNCs and men, often hiding seeds, protecting seed knowledge and subverting monocropping practices.

### **Solidarity with the ecosystem**

The seed work revealed broader relational networks connecting women to each other, to past and future generations, and to their environments.

The research emphasised that knowing and doing were interconnected in the seed work - practices weren't separate from the women but embodied by them as part of everyday life. The relational aspects of the project created connections across multiple dimensions: relationships with each other, with ancestors, with future generations, and with the environment. Seed saving, sharing and the practices of seed guardianship are tangible and visible narratives of solidarity enactments.

When asked about the case study methodology, Suzall affirmed its value for RWA and encouraged members to continue documenting their stories: "The case studies is where your power lies... don't forget what other stories there are." She urged RWA to put their stories into writing, noting that their experiences often contained theoretical insights "more than 10 times richer than the so-called expert texts."

The presentation highlighted how the seed exhibition project wasn't just documentation but an embodiment of solidarity in action between women, across generations, with seeds, and with broader ecosystems.



***...Don't forget to share other stories. I want RWA to become really strong. We need to document RWA's experiences of solidarity. This is your challenge...***

- Suzall Timm



## Solidarity Reflections



The closing session of the "Solidarity: Enacted & Embodied" workshop featured reflections from participants and facilitators about their key takeaways from the three-day gathering.

Participants expressed that thinking and sharing about solidarity practices in RWA was really useful and important. Making visible the difference and raising critical questions about solidarity and charity was important, how solidarity involves intentional action aimed at structural change rather than temporary relief.

Several women emphasised the importance of carrying this knowledge back to their communities and continuing to document their solidarity work to deepen their understanding and practice and recognise the significance of the solidarity they enact.

Donna emphasised that the women of RWA are practitioners of solidarity through their daily

actions and that any school on solidarity should centre their experiences. She noted that solidarity is not something that can be taught through textbooks but must be understood through practice, reflection and doing, but we can learn and strengthen ideas and concepts by doing this work together and ensuring many voices that are often not heard get centred.

Contributors (Jantina, Suzall, and Lauren) acknowledged the emotional impact of hearing the women's solidarity narratives and work, and recognised that the case studies presented by RWA members contained rich theoretical insights. They emphasised that RWA's power lies in these stories and encouraged members to document their experiences more systematically.

The session concluded with participants forming a circle to symbolise their solidarity chain, with Donna reminding them that knowledge is produced in many ways and that their task is to find

forms that give expression to their work in ways that remain useful and accessible to them in their daily struggles.

KICKING AT DOORS POWER  
TIME REMEMBERING  
SHARE RESOURCES RESISTANCE  
LAND COMMITMENT COURAGE  
SOLIDARITY  
STRATEGIZING WOMEN  
SEED RESILIENCE LOVE  
RESPONSIBILITY KNOWLEDGE  
CARE ACCOUNTABILITY INSIDE OUT  
JOY EMBODIMENT ORGANISING  
UNITY COLLECTIVE AGENCY  
ACTION LEAVING NO  
TRANSFORMATIVE ONE BEHIND  
STRUGGLE COMMUNICATION