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Dancing with Malawian Women: stories for change

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When a woman has been living a life like that of 'rats on a treadmill' and is really tired and resigned; when she lives in a state of hopelessness, helplessness and despair, giving up is easy. When all her stored up images and interpretations are based on remembrances and feelings of sadness, self-doubt, distrusts, rejections, abuses and demeaning remarks such as, *"You are HIV positive, you don't deserve fertiliser coupons, you can't be allocated land because you are a walking corpse, you have killed many innocent people so you deserve to die, and your body is rotten,"* she experiences contradictions in her body.

It's easy to live outside one's body especially if it has been defined as other, different, lesser, and therefore not human. When she has been labelled and trademarked to the extent that she has embodied what other people say about her, her body is marked with pain. Every scar that puckers on her skin, every stretch mark and every wrinkle or scar tells a story of where she has been.

And then JASS comes along. It neither provides Antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) nor food; it has no prison for the abusers and it does not pretend to know everything. JASS creates a domain within which the

same woman living with HIV continually deepens her understanding of [power](#), sex and resources. It shares with this woman some feminist popular education tools that enable her to realize that she has the capacity to participate actively in the same world that humiliates her. She can be visible and can amplify her voice. With the right tools, especially those that explain how systems of power operate, a huge fundamental shift of mind occurs. She develops a different sense of what it means to be human. This woman, call her Judy, Asnat, Gertrude or Chikonde; starts to appreciate that she is a legitimate citizen, that it's possible for her life to have meaning. She stops embodying the labels and the trademarks imposed by society. She leaves them behind like a pile of citrus peel. She blossoms into her rightful name-[Tiwonge Gondwe](#).

The woman realises that 'the [master's house](#) is huge' but working with other women, she can shift it slightly or build an alternative one. She also knows her tools and energies are limited and hence her aim is not to 'boil an ocean' but rather to identify 'hot spots' that make strategic sense while building capabilities to evolve towards a formidable movement.

As the women get to know each other well, they work as a collective towards changing their world and shaping the future, even if in small ways such as demanding access to seeds. Even if the winds of disempowerment are blowing, they are no longer victims of

circumstances. With a very small movement or shift, at just the right time and place (for example going to the Malawi Ministry of Health to demand better Antiretroviral therapy), new energy is unleashed.

JASS FEMINIST POPULAR EDUCATION

Activating the knowledge and skills of Malawian activists, and sharing the tools to use in breakthrough thinking, strategy development, movement building, including creating room for women to dream and envision a better future is JASS' mission in Malawi. Working with its strategic partner Malawi Network of Religious Leaders living with HIV/AIDS ([MANERELA+](#)), more and more women are joining the better ARV [campaign](#). These are not the usual 'suspects', these are women working at community level, they are activists, volunteers and foot soldiers.

JASS' feminist [popular education](#) starts with her story. Deep, personal gripping life stories, stories that take each woman to her cellar where demeaning stories buried in a box are shared. Each woman shines a light into all the corners of her body and the story is aired. Each story is carved in some power dynamics – be it the power a chief wields, power wielded by tradition and religion and hence internalized, power of a security guard at a local clinic who won't let this woman go in to get her ARVs – power, power, power.

In sharing these stories, her body becomes a vehicle for learning to question different kinds of powers that society normally takes for granted and with this understanding, her possibilities are released, blockages are cleared and she is able to break free of limits. Her inner knowing and personal shifts reverberate

in the room and there is new energy. At this moment, there is some kind of relief as individually and collectively, the women cross a threshold; in their words, they cross many lines. They start getting empowered, advancing to another level of critical consciousness, and organizing. They become alive to the world around them.

WORKING WITH THE MALAWI JASS TEAM

It's against this background that last week, having taken a two year gap year, I joined the JASS team in Malawi. The diversity, resilience, innovation, creativity and sheer gumption of a prolific group of women activist singing, dancing, sharing jokes and the evening discussion where women go completely wild in a delicious way reminded me that I was home. Home with the women I have grown to respect, love and admire, women with whom I have had a history and a deep and rich connection.

The process was powerful. As facilitators we were there to 'not-be there', so as to ensure that the conversation was a free flow between the women activists. We were there to hold a process by 'not-holding it' completely. We did not want the open-endedness of the conversation to be bound by our presence. We were there to simply guide the process.

Words matter: In JASS words matter, we believe they have the power to change the world, nationally and within individuals. With more grounding, it was interesting to note how language among the women activists is changing and is influencing and defining who the activists are. Tiwonge explained the meaning of open and invited spaces in such a way that we

all understood the spaces to engage with and those to avoid.

Our space: Our meeting room was our space, and as always, was political; our site of connection and belonging. During the meeting, our room became a mirror that reflected the reality of the women's world; shading light on the problems they felt needed attention. The same room became utopia, where, on coloured cards, the women created the world they want to live in; their vision. One of the cards that moved me the most read, "I wish I could fish the way men do. Today when I ate fish in the dining, I wished I was the one who had provided it."

Master's house: Presentation of the Masters house was a major highlight. Once they understood the architecture of the house and its furniture, they kept referring to it. Some swore that they would get out and build an alternative one.

Health: *"Our bodies are our primary means of participating socially, economically, politically, spiritually and creatively in society. They are the beginning point of the practical application of rights; the place in which rights are exercised, and for women in particular, the place where rights are most often violated. Without knowledge of and control over our bodies, including our sexuality, women's rights can be neither fully exercised nor enjoyed."* (Feminist Africa, Issue 6, 2006).

A presentation on how the body works and the impact on ARVs on the same body were participatory, engaging, and highly appreciated. It left the women at a stage where they can teach biology and ARVs to first year medical students. They were

able to connect access to and adherence to ARVs to other rights issues and to the master's house. Above all, they understood that in order for them to really build a movement, they need to be healthy.

Rituals: In JASS, rituals are a profound tool for enabling women to break through perceived limitations and reclaim their own power. They are part of our [Heart-Mind-Body](#) package. So yes, we did our usual evening ritual where we sat in a circle and talked about stuff that made dogs bark because of shock! There was no teacher, no facilitator and no guru. We nourished ourselves with stories and forgot horrible experiences. The women were sexual and passionate; they luxuriated in their bodies. They delved deep into their relationships with men. They shared intimate stories regarding their bodies and were not embarrassed to talk about topics that reach deep into their bodies' experiences. We laughed, demonstrated, danced and cried. There were revealing discussions regarding sexuality. "How do lesbians have sex?" asks one woman. Another responds, "Who taught you to be a heterosexual. How do you have sex as a heterosexual, has anyone ever asked you?"

Ironically, unlike some of us educated and exposed women, the sisters in the room were not afraid to tell the truth about every aspect of their lives and their bodies. They laid themselves bare. They 'stripped' all the way down, and were left with nothing to hide. They let their 'naked' bodies unite with their 'naked' words and this simple act gave their bodies a voice. The result was interesting, funny, honest, and ultimately empowering.

Hard talk: One of the highlights of the workshop was a visit by a programme officer responsible for ARVS in the Malawi government. Initially, she addressed the women in a condescending manner. In response they unleashed their [power within!](#) They asked the most critical question that she had not anticipated and she stammered. It was hard talk. Gertrude who was sitting next to me whispered, *“We have to keep asking why, why, why as we were taught today.”* When asked why clinics were still giving out old stock of ARV that were condemned by World Health Organization (WHO), the government officer talked about the importance of utilising all the available ‘poisonous’ ARVs in ‘our stores’, before releasing new, improved and better ones. Judy asked, *“Would you give poisonous meat to your children knowing its poisonous just because you want it finished?”* Ms Government officer evaded the question. Helena whispered, *“Although this civil servant is a woman just like us and is better educated, she is stuck in the master’s house.”* My colleague Shereen and I looked at each other and smiled.

Heart, mind and body: JASS believes in addressing issues of the heart, mind and body bearing in mind that it’s important to work with a whole woman and not just selected parts. So here is an example of how JASS addressed issues of the heart and mind, so that the women could hold their energy in the centre of their bodies. *“Close your eyes. Let your breath soften, deepen. Breathe relaxation into each part of your body, starting with your toes, flowing all the way up to your throat, your face. When you feel quiet, open, bring your awareness to the inside of your body. Explore your inner region, the space inside your skins...”*

As already said, a fragmented body, produces a fragmented movement. So the struggle continues. Monitoring the real fulfilment of promised action, continued situation analysis, development of strategies to meet new situations, continuous feminist popular education and continued movement building and support remain important. With support from JASS and MANERELA+, women activists are building their movement. The movement is still young, but it has already started planting seeds of empowerment in a disempowering context.

About the Author:

[Hope Chigudu](#) is a strategic advisor and consultant for [JASS Southern Africa](#). She plays a huge role – on the ground and on the page – in shaping the power of JASS’ program in Malawi.