We must speak about our sexuality freely. Women die because they are embarrassed to name their body parts at hospitals. And we can only end rape if we can name our private parts confidently because in the court room one is expected to describe the act using this kind of language. The failure to do so may stand between women and justice.”

-Rudo Chudogu, Katswe

Katswe Sistahood and JASS Southern Africa have joined forces to help young women and girls in Zimbabwe use popular performance art to challenge taboos surrounding sex, sexuality, and women’s bodies, while also organizing for support, protection, and change in a context of corruption and violence against women and girls.

In Zimbabwe, speaking out about sex, reproductive health, sexism, violence, and LGBT issues is risky business—especially for young women and girls. The Mugabe government is notoriously repressive—using threats, surveillance, detention, and violence to silence voices that challenge its authority. Political leaders manipulate African tradition to justify high levels of violence against women.

In this context, young women are afraid to speak out about their basic needs and dreams, or demand respect, safety and equal rights. While so many are eager to get involved in educating the next generation of Zimbabweans, their silence and sense of powerlessness undermines their potential, and contributes to high rates of HIV/AIDS, sexual exploitation, and more.

Katswe Sistahood uses theater, music and film to raise awareness and educate mostly girls and young women about HIV, sexual and reproductive rights, contraception, rape, teen pregnancy, and LGBT issues. JASS (Just Associates) has been working closely with Katswe to help train these young activist leaders, build support circles, and transform them into powerful community-based change agents. To date, Katswe has mobilized more than 2,000 young Zimbabwean women into small mutual support circles to help in navigating healthcare services, legal protection, and the inevitable backlash from conservative families and communities.

- Nearly 7 in 10 Zimbabwean women and girls will experience some form of gender-based violence.
- More than 60% of murder cases in Zimbabwe are linked to domestic violence.
- It is estimated that 75% of women have been raped by their husbands but were too afraid to report it to the police.
- Women make up 62% of the 1.2 million people living with HIV and AIDS, which is the leading cause of death among children under the age of 5.
Such a hostile climate requires **creative**, **careful**, and sometimes **covert** approaches for raising important but contentious issues, such as sex education and gender-based violence, in public spaces. It requires young women and girls to be bold but strategic about their activism and community education efforts, and work together to ensure their safety.

**JASS’ Heart—Mind—Body (H—M—B)** strategy was specifically designed to put women’s wellbeing at the center of human rights organizing, especially in contexts fraught with violence and inequality. JASS trains and equips young political facilitators to gently open up public discussions about their bodies, health, and well-being—which is seldom encouraged within their homes of communities. The process helps women heal and gain confidence and builds mutual understanding and solidarity among participants—regardless of their differences—which provides a sense of support and fosters the kind of collective action needed to change attitudes and policies to benefit women and girls.

> There’s no doubt that being here in one place, with all the difference and diversity we inhabit, is no small thing. It’s radical. It’s rebellion. It’s in this catalytic space that sparks awaken—resonances sound as we share our knowledge, and real change ignites.”
> -Maggie Hazvinei Mapondera, JASS Southern Africa

Katswe utilizes the H—M—B approach in creating safe spaces called Pachoto—a Shona word for fireside story-telling—where women in low-income housing and informal settlements can gather to share stories, find their voice and organize circles of mutual support and self-defense. Just being able to speak openly before a small group of understanding peers can be **liberating**, **validating**, and **empowering** for many Zimbabwean women, but—when infused with useful information and strategy—it leads to much more. Through publications, plays, and short films that recast these stories, Katswe is able to **inspire** and **educate** hundreds of other others, provoking and deepening important public discussions about critical social issues.

Katswe integrated H—M—B strategies into producing its adaptation of the Vagina Monologues annually, which is often performed at one of the largest theatres in Harare. The monologues include careful narration of women’s experiences, music, song, and dance, and have helped hundreds of young women gain confidence about their own lives, empower themselves, and support others. Katswe hopes to take this production on the road and develop its first full-length documentary in the coming year to build a critical mass of young women and girls that can break the silence around women’s bodies, sexual health, and violence against women in Zimbabwe, once and for all.

“One day Katswe took me to one of their pachotos. I saw a diverse group of women; women from both urban and rural Zimbabwe, educated and uneducated, young women who were not ashamed to identify themselves as sex workers, and women of different sexual orientations. I marveled at how the women respected each other’s beliefs, and how they took turns to tell their life experiences and share stories of resilience and success. When I shared my story about the problems I was having with my brother, I realized that it wasn’t right for my brother to abuse me and to claim that I had no right to work, and that I should just stay in the home wasting away. Through my involvement with Katswe, I found strength and courage to register at the Women’s University in Africa where I’m doing my degree in Gender Studies.”
- Hellen Matsvisi, Katswe activist at JASS’ Feminist Movement Builders’ School