

Bridging the Divide between Lesbians and Feminists

A JASS conversation with Patience Mandishona and Martha Tholanah

Organizing in Zimbabwe has been challenging, even dangerous, for some years. As the country's economic crisis has deepened – with measurable inflation reaching 79,600,000,000% monthly and 98% daily in November 2008 – activists have had to pit themselves against repressive laws and actions such as Operation Murambatsvina, a wave of brutal urban clearance, beginning in 2005 and repeated since, that has affected an estimated 2.4 million Zimbabweans. This context frames the impressive efforts of [Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe \(GALZ\)](#) to organize and represent lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex people (LGBTI).

[Patience Mandishona](#) works at GALZ on gender. She has participated in [JASS Southern Africa](#) since the first institute launched feminist movement-building in the region in 2007, and now contributes as JASS' regional communications associate. JASS Regional Coordinator [Martha Tholanah](#)'s long-time support for LGBTI activism has puzzled other women's rights advocates. "Are you a lesbian now?" she's been asked, as if there could be no other reason for her solidarity. In discussion with [Annie Holmes](#), JASS Knowledge Coordinator, and with input from Martha, Patience reflects on her experience of JASS' strategy to build the power of women's numbers across so-called divides.



JASS Southern Africans and Cross-Regional march against homophobia at the 2008 International AIDS Conference in Mexico City. Martha Tholanah is second from the left in the front row, Patience Mandishona is second from the right.

Annie Holmes: To start the conversation, Patience, please introduce yourself, your organization, and how you got involved there.

Patience Mandishona: I work for the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe, as the programs officer for gender. I started volunteering in 2002 as I was actively involved with GALZ issues and the organization, while earning my living in a telecommunications organization. Then I became a permanent employee in 2006.

At GALZ, I work currently for the gender program which focuses on issues of sexual and reproductive health and the LBT [lesbian, bisexual, transgender] rights of women within the organization – overall, we look at issues of empowerment, leadership and lobbying. Before 2003, GALZ did not have a department to deal specifically with women’s issues, but worked with women in the women’s movement and LGBTI [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex] movements. **Now, we do workshops with the Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe, trying to integrate LBT within their mandate and to get them involved in our activities too**, such as discussions on sexual and reproductive health and our activism through sport, especially with our soccer teams. This has been our strategy over about the past three years, although we attended meetings with them before that.

Annie: For those unfamiliar with Zimbabwe, can you explain the climate for doing the work you do?

Patience: Zimbabwe has faced its worst moments. There was a massive collapse in the economy with food shortages over the past years. Zimbabwe recorded the highest inflation rate and health and education institutions totally collapsed. Then, through all these hardships, the country was made to suffer what they termed ‘Operation Murambatsvina’ – a clean-up campaign that left many people homeless. Repressive laws such as AIPPA (The Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act) and POSA (Public Order and Security Act) did not help the situation. Meanwhile, Zimbabwean women have suffered gender-based violence and hate crimes, with most cases going unreported and undocumented. Sexual violence has been used as a political weapon, especially during the last elections where the abuse of women intensified. As a lesbian woman in Harare, you face double stigma, in terms of discrimination on the basis of your sex and also on the basis of your orientation.

So, LGBTI organizing hasn’t been easy, especially considering the state president’s open homophobia. But we’ve dealt with it by making sure we had a presence at most meetings and events, so that people get comfortable with having us around. For instance, at meetings of the women’s movement there would be gaps, with no one raising or discussing LGBTI issues. But because of our presence, some of the organizations have started to talk about LGBTI issues and how they should be discussed as human rights issues. Other organizations still use the excuse of the president’s statement about pigs and

dogs¹ not to work with us. There's still a lot to be done, but we have a presence in the women's movement and the HIV/AIDS movement.

Annie: You've spoken before about antagonisms and suspicions (for example, on the part of the Coalition of African Lesbians), based on bad experiences in the past. What were some of your own experiences with feminism and women's rights before JASS?

Patience: Basically, there is a gap in terms of adopting feminist principles especially within the LBT/WSW [women who have sex with women] movement. Tensions exist because where it seems like the broader feminist movement is not willing to take up the issues of LBT women – it's so hard for the women to penetrate such spaces.

In terms of feminism itself, the argument amongst the LBT/WSW focuses on trans diversities. The argument has been, how do you incorporate the different trans identities, trans women, trans men, post and pre-operative, and the gender non-conformers within the feminist movement? Once an F2M (female to male) transgendered person is post-operative, can they still identify as a feminist and will the other feminists be willing to take up their issues? Within feminist organizing, which group will be included and who measures whether one issue is more important than another? Understanding the specific issues that affect different groups makes this conversation more complex. Feminists, women's rights advocates and LBT activists must then figure out who may participate in certain spaces, if they identify as a feminist and where exactly they fit in. I cannot say the problem lies with one group rather than another but certainly 'labels' cause divisions. I think greater participation of the LBT community within feminist spaces will be of great significance and it will help clear up many of these confusions and challenges.

Martha Tholanah: From another angle, I think it's important to point out how GALZ has started to make inroads into the broader Zimbabwe civil society movement and with some implementers within government.

For example, for the first (and only so far) National AIDS Conference in Zimbabwe, I submitted an abstract on the health program at GALZ, which was rejected at first, but when we probed, trying to find reasons for the rejection, the organizers made a compromise, accepting it as a poster presentation. This was on display throughout the duration of the conference.

The other example that comes to mind was testing the mechanisms when there was an ARV [antiretroviral drugs] crisis in 2005 and we solicited donations from South Africa. All letters seeking permission from regulatory authorities (Medicines Control Authority, Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, and Ministry of Health and Child Welfare) were written on GALZ letterhead, and there were no hitches at all. ARVs for GALZ members were

¹ "Homosexuals are worse than pigs and dogs," President Robert Mugabe opined, at the opening of the 1997 Zimbabwe International Book Fair in Harare. See, for example: http://www.kubatana.net/html/archive/sexual/040523ips.asp?sector=SEXUAL&year=2004&range_start=1
The president reiterated these views in 2008, as detailed here: <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/powell41.13819.html>

delivered within a week of starting the process.

Annie: How did JASS first approach you, Patience? What did you expect/dread/hope for?

Patience: I responded to a call for participation in the movement building training in Johannesburg in 2007 and learned that I had been selected. I then attended the first training and have been actively involved ever since. I went expecting to learn more about movement building and also to gain a deeper understanding about feminism. Up until then, I had done my own research about feminism and feminist principles but had not really been exposed to learning and appreciating the deeper understandings of feminism and how it manifests. Coming from a working environment within a women's movement where homophobia was almost the order of the day, **I dreaded not being accepted and feeling isolated because of my sexuality. I feared that if I spoke out, I might not be taken seriously or that the issues that I stood for would not or never be taken on board.** I hoped to get a space to really be able to explain to women within the women's movement that LBT issues are women's rights issues and are also human rights issues.

Annie: Thinking about your experience in JASS, is it different from other women's movement work?

Patience: Definitely. Ever since I first got involved, I have felt that **JASS has always opened up space for inclusivity.** JASS has never discriminated on any bases whatsoever and all the participants respect diversity. The space, workshops, training and planning are driven by the participant themselves which in turn gives that sense of ownership. For example, I felt that way when we made digital stories during the Communication Workshop. I was able to express myself and I felt I owned the process – plus the stories were a great creative tool to use for advocacy.

JASS' approach is different from most women's movement organizing in the sense that it is not what we call a 'drive-by' – an organization arriving for one quick interaction and then disappearing forever – but rather engages deeply in issues, not losing focus of the main goal over time. Most women's organizing (especially in my region) will follow what is the current trend, follow where the money is and work around that. For example when there was money for HIV, all work was centred around that, ignoring other reproductive health issues such as cervical cancer. Now there is the big buzz on (for example) cancer and male circumcision. Although it is important work, the danger is not seeing the impact of some issues and neglecting other essential areas, when the funders switch the focus of concentration.

In terms of LGBT organizing, the focus is mostly still on human rights and obtaining these rights. It hasn't gone deeper into other issues like feminism even though they are incorporated it within their advocacy strategies. For example, the Coalition of African Lesbians' (CAL) work should involve a feminist approach to everything. However, organizing as CAL, we have not really gone deeper into the politics of feminism and sexuality issues. In my head, I ask questions like, "How does feminism manifest within

same sex relationships? Could questions of power be handled any differently, compared to heterosexual relationships which are the main focus with feminism?"

Annie: With your strategy of a constant presence at women's and HIV/AIDS workshops and gatherings, you are already doing a lot of alliance-building as GALZ. Has JASS added any other elements/ insights/ tools? Have you been able to integrate JASS approaches, tools, networks into your GALZ work and women's rights work in Zimbabwe?

Patience: GALZ has definitely been doing a lot of alliance-building, locally and especially regionally. We have been actively involved in regional initiatives with Shorer (an organisation affiliated to the Norwegian government that has been supporting LGBTI initiatives in Southern Africa) and we are also a part of a working group with the UNDP and OSISA to increase the visibility of WSW within Southern Africa. Locally, we have created good working relations with some of the members of the Zimbabwe Women's Coalition, as I mentioned, and have been working towards getting them actively involved in our work as well. JASS has definitely added a lot to this work. **Popular education has been a very important tool that we have begun to use within GALZ. We had never looked at introducing our members to feminism, women's leadership or the politics and understanding of power. But now we are definitely incorporating power and sexuality in most of what we talk and write about.** Within the women's rights work in Zimbabwe, we have now engaged with different organizations and have recently participated in a leadership training course and are a part of a group of young feminists who are starting a few initiatives within Zimbabwe. These are just some of the ways that JASS is influencing the work that I do within GALZ.

Annie: How do you feel as a lesbian in a mixed feminist grouping? What are the benefits for you? For JASS? Any gaps, silences, challenges?

Patience: At first it was a challenge for me because I was not confident enough to talk, even about general issues affecting all women, without thinking that people would judge me. I guess it took me time to adjust to the fact that the space was open for people of diverse identities. Now, I find that I am very comfortable, and being in mixed feminist groups has helped me gain a deeper understanding of the challenges people face in terms of accepting LBT issues. All of this has opened up space for me to express myself.

For JASS, I think my participation has been a benefit in making a link with LBT organising and integrating that within the JASS work, plus integrating JASS within LBT organising in the region. This benefits JASS in terms of bridging the gap between feminists and LBT activists. It is important for feminists to integrate WSW issues because there needs to be the realisation that all issues that affect heterosexual women also affect WSW/LBT women. Despite a different sexual orientation, we are women too.

Some of the gaps would be in information dissemination. It would be ideal to share information with others especially in the LBT movement and feminist groups and even JASS. **One issue that would be important to investigate in depth as feminist groups**

is that of 'hate crimes.' It seems that only women in the LBT community and a few other women's groups are advocating on this, even though it's an issue of great importance.

A major challenge is getting some feminists to support LBT issues. From my experience at the African Feminist Forum in 2008, it was clear that some feminists highlight that they have freedom of choice and it is their choice to support LBT issues or not. I guess that is still the major challenge within mixed feminist groupings. For example some of the major challenges were in terms of the feminist charter of principles and how it can be interpreted to suits one's needs.

Annie: Any comments or experiences, in terms of JASS' efforts to bridge often-separate movements?

Well, it is a vital strategy at times to separate agendas, to avoid the risk of taking on too many issues and then losing focus. Then you can look at the other issues without losing track of your main agenda. Here, JASS has really been effective, because the main objective has been increasing the voice and visibility of women's organising power. Looking at the broader objective and the issues involved then paves way for interactions and alliances with different organisations and associations doing different work in different regions. It would be more effective I guess to increase the constant sharing of information about what is happening in the LBT movement in the other regions.

Annie: How could JASS better integrate and spotlight sexuality and LGBTI organizing in the work?

Patience: JASS could maybe collaborate with other LBT organisations within Southern Africa where there have been several recent campaigns, meeting and conferences on the issues of visibility of LBT/WSW and trans-diverse groups within different movements, especially the women's movement. **Having a broader, specifically JASS presence would be valuable, giving input and support on ways to incorporate LBT/WSW issues within the women's movement.**