



JASS

Strengthening & sustaining
women's organizing power

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JASS Feminist Movement Building International AIDS Conference, Mexico 2008



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August 3-8, 2008
Mexico City, Mexico



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Summary



Women and young girls are affected most by HIV and AIDS in South Africa. We need to go back and mobilize more women that are working in HIV/AIDS organizations so that we can get their voice, so that those women and the work that they do are not managed by men but its actually the voice of young women, the women doing it for themselves and not the men doing it on behalf of the women. JASS Southern Africa aims to mobilize young women and women within the HIV/AIDS movement.

-Azola Goqwana, South Africa

The International AIDS Conference in Mexico City, August 3-8, 2008 provided an important opportunity for JASS activists to understand, face-to-face, the politics and actors dominating global decision-making on HIV/AIDS and to make their voices heard at this important international gathering. The JASS delegation was comprised of seven Southern African activists, five Mesoamerican activists – including two journalists from JASS' strategic partner, Feminist International Radio Endeavor (FIRE) based in Costa Rica – and three members of the JASS cross-regional team. The action-packed time in Mexico included important speaking events by two Africans on panels at the official conference, a popular JASS workshop featuring the Africans' digital stories, presentations and participation in many small workshops and various meetings.

The setting

Every two years, the International AIDS Conference brings leading scientific and medical experts together with the policymakers, development organizations and transnational corporations involved in this multi-billion dollar endeavor, often referred to as "the AIDS Industry." The 17th conference (but the first held in Latin America) drew 24,000 participants under the banner of *Universal Action Now*, including NGO service-providers and social movement activists. Organizations ranged from the big internationals

such as CARE and World Vision, to front-line activists such as the Treatment Access Campaign and the powerful gay rights group Act-Up. Much like at UN conferences, the activists gathered in a parallel process in an adjacent space called the "Global Village," housed in a noisy, chaotic warehouse in the middle of a horse race track. This space was packed with booths ranging from L'oreal Stylists Against AIDS drawing a long line of customers waiting for a hip "do," to an indigenous peoples transgender group, to a youth forum, to pharmaceutical representatives mixing with activists.

The global village was very upsetting for me, it felt like a spectacle. It was so hard not to be taken seriously. The UN photography glamorized poverty and had that feeling of spectacle, celebrity, fun, superficial. It trivialized the issues. I felt so uncomfortable.

-Adriana Palacios, Nicaragua

Highlights

During the **orientation session** before the conference began, JASS-Southern Africa and JASS-Mesoamerica met face-to-face for the first time. With the cross-regional team, they shared the analysis of the political forces at work in the conference, set objectives, and chose important events to attend from the conference program, and exchanged moving personal and political stories. The discussions concluded that:

- the conference was dominated by the same actors who dominate the global AIDS agenda, mainly government organizations, foundations, corporations, and pharmaceutical companies;
- the most influential activist groups to date have been the gay rights organizations, focused mainly on gay men's issues.
- decisions are made from a predominantly male, Global North, technical and corporate perspective, while women's voices and priorities have been marginalized;
- the unusual number of events focusing on gender issues came as a pleasant surprise, as did the focus on the links between violence – both in conflict situations and in the home – and the high prevalence rate among women.

The delegation strategized on how to make their collective voice heard to bring HIV-positive women's issues to the forefront of the global agenda. While sharing common perspectives, the JASS group represented a diversity interests that enriched the collective learning: LGBT questions, new treatment, the latest research, micro-finance and livelihoods, and macro-economic policy and public health.



For women, building a different society requires transgressing existing norms – resisting, pushing the envelope, crossing the line – both in private and public spheres, to overcome discrimination. “Women crossing the line” is a political understanding and strategy for ‘transformation’ from the inner and personal realms through to the regional and global.

Warming up for the conference, JASS participated in the first International **March Against Stigma, Discrimination, and Homophobia**, ending in the Zocalo or central square, wearing JASS’ popular “Caution! Women Crossing the Line” t-shirts. JASS also joined in the International Women’s March and attended the rally and concert that followed.



JASS hosted a session on Sunday, August 3, in the Women’s Networking Zone of the Global Village, presenting a series of **digital stories** created in JASS’ Southern Africa communications workshop in May. Concerned that the noise and lack of separate space would undermine the process and message, the women began the presentation by singing African feminist songs, which attracted a surprisingly big crowd. The screening was followed by an active and lively discussion involving many different perspectives. Among the many voices, a transgender Latina woman felt very empowered by the presentation, and was moved to comment, “I can feel the power with these women. I want to sit here and listen to them all day.” Two African men in the audience committed themselves to working with their sisters to right the wrongs of oppression that they heard. When one male participant asked when the women were coming to Malawi, the group cheered when the response was: “November!”

The experience was empowering for me. It was my first time facilitating at an international AIDS conference. I am more than ready now to attend the rest of the conference and engage critically on issues relating to women, especially in Africa.
-Sindi Blose, South Africa

Patience Mandishona, from Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ), spoke on a panel entitled “Women's Rights Equal Women's Lives: **Violence Against Women and HIV.**” A powerful and moving speaker, Patience broke open issues of the criminalization of same-sex relationships, the relation between increased hate crimes against lesbian women and vulnerability to HIV transmission, and the general invisibility of women's issues on political agendas. Alongside Patience, sex workers' rights activists Anna Louise Crago and Bafana Khumalo from Sonke Gender Justice spoke passionately about the violence against sex workers; the urgent need to decriminalize sex work in order to protect the workers from violence and high rates of HIV transmission; and the importance of involving men in a meaningful way to end gender-based violence.



One of the most important moments of the conference for me was to see Patience up there, talking in front of all those people, so confident, having her voice heard.
-Azola Goqwana, South Africa

We have lesbian women being attacked, raped, beaten up, and murdered because of their sexuality. There are no policies at all that protect these women within our country. Mainly, this is fueled by the criminalization of same sex relationships.
-Patience Mandishona, Zimbabwe



Martha Tholanah spoke in numerous workshops and in a press conference as well as a high level panel, “**Political Crises, Sexual Violence and HIV.**” A member of the International Community of Women Living with HIV/ AIDS (ICW) and the Network of Zimbabwean Positive Women (NZPW+), Martha is also from Zimbabwe, a veteran HIV activist and feminist, who was invited as an official delegate by the International AIDS Society. Addressing the impact of the ongoing crisis in Zimbabwe on women, Martha spoke passionately about politically

motivated gender-based violence, homophobia and particularly rape of lesbian women, the impact of violence on women's access to HIV treatment, and the vulnerability of women's sexual and reproductive health in the face of political turmoil. Her words resonated loudly throughout the conference as her presentation was quoted in the final plenary, and her presence on the panel incited comments and responses from many delegates.

The challenges, that seem to escalate with each election phase, have included physical, sexual, and emotional abuse – and created barriers to access to basic services. Political crises and the resultant conflicts have left many women and girls vulnerable, as they have been subjected to sexual violence. Women have been punished with rape for supporting a political party other than the one favoured by the attacker. These issues have devastating effects on women's sexual and reproductive health, including a very high risk of HIV infection.
-Martha Tholanah, Zimbabwe

Martha shared the stage with Paula Donovan (co-director of AIDS Free World), who moved the audience to silence and shock with her provocative description of the horrific violence occurring against women in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the inability of the international community to respond.

In this conference, our priority has to be to let our voices be heard. They are not going to talk about women's issues, we need to take the spaces, take the microphones and say these things, they are not going to do it. They never talk about women's issues.

-Andrea Alvarado, Costa Rica



Feminist International Radio Endeavor (FIRE) **broadcast** a one-hour program from the conference, interviewing four of the Southern Africans. An animated conversation took place about feminism and the meaning for each woman of "crossing the line." The interviews were streamed to the FIRE website <http://www.radiofeminista.org/agosto08/notas/audios.htm>

Malena de Montis and Adriana Palacios from Nicaragua led a discussion with their African counterparts about navigating the complex world of **microfinance** to get resources to enable women to feed their families. With growing economic inequality and insecurity worldwide, basic survival remains one of the biggest challenges to women's health, for HIV-positive women in particular. Economic strategies such as microfinance have the combined impact of supporting women and thereby creating time to organize and take political action. With Helena Hofbauer, the Mexican budget advocate and feminist who coordinates the International Budget Partnership, the group explored ways to integrate budget advocacy training into the movement-building initiative, to enable women to track and influence public money for healthcare, treatment, prevention, and income generation.

We had the rapporteur session today to wrap up the conference. Points from my presentation were quoted! One Shona Catholic nun shocked me when she complained and wondered who was revealing the violence against women in Zimbabwe in an international forum like this one. This shows we still have a lot of work to do, particularly crossing the line as women.

-Martha Tholanah, Zimbabwe



A highlight of the conference for many delegates was the one-on-one discussion with **Stephen Lewis**, Co-Director of AIDS Free World and founder of the Stephen Lewis Foundation, which supported JASS' participation in the conference. He sat down and spoke with the JASS delegation about their experiences at the conference and their goals as movement builders, feminists, and HIV activists.

"In Latin America, as in Africa, HIV is a heterosexual infection. Nicaragua is the first country in Latin America where infection among adolescent women is higher than men. We live in societies with widespread ignorance and inadequate sexual education, where policies are tied to the church. Politics, religion and economics are fundamentalist. The HIV/AIDS epidemic among young women is a direct result of these fundamentalisms that we feminists have been fighting against for ten years."
-Ana María Pizarro, Nicaragua

JASS hosted a four hour **cross-regional dialogue** between African, Mesoamerican, European and North American women, designed as an open conversation about the context, political aims and possible ways to organize women's collective power. The event was broadcast live by FIRE, with virtual participation from feminists in Costa Rica.

The delegation blogged daily about their experiences and opinions on the events they participated in during the conference. The blog announced their actions and promoted virtual discussions on the various issues they were facing.

Reflections

Overall, the experience of the JASS delegation at the International AIDS Conference was eye opening and empowering. While the conference was full of glaring and uncomfortable political contradictions, it was instructive and inspiring, affirming the need for women to put words into action in order to get resources into women's hands to fight HIV/AIDS and the unequal power dynamics that perpetuate it. JASS left further convinced that women must continue to build and direct the power of their numbers and cross the line to improve women's rights and communities.

We couldn't help but feel that the gains of painful, past struggles for a voice at the table had been co-opted and manipulated to legitimize the continued dominance of corporate, international aid and non-profit interests in the scramble for money that fails to reach or respond to those who need it most in the fight against AIDS – women. All this, and we still feel hopeful. -Lisa VeneKlasen, JASS E.D.



Delegates

Southern Africa

1. **Miriam Banda** (Zambia) Network of Zambian People Living with HIV/AIDS (NZP+)
2. **Sindi Blose** (South Africa) Treatment Action Campaign
3. **Azola Anele Goqwana** (South Africa) JASS Program Associate for Southern Africa
4. **Patience Mandishona** (Zimbabwe) Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ)
5. **Martha Tholanah Mensah-King** (Zimbabwe) Network of Zimbabwean Positive Women (NZPW+)
6. **Mercy Mwandunga** (Zambia) Community Youth Mobilization (CYM)
7. **Ireen Vasco Cossa** (Mozambique) Kindlimuka PLWA Association;

Mesoamérica

1. **Malena de Montis** (Nicaragua) Fondo de Desarrollo para la Mujer (FODEM) and Movimiento Autonomo de Mujeres (MAM)
2. **Adriana Palacios** (Nicaragua) Fondo de Desarrollo para la Mujer (FODEM)
3. **Katerina Anfossi** (Costa Rica) Feminist International Radio Endeavour (RIF/FIRE)
4. **Andrea Alvarado** Feminist International Radio Endeavour (RIF/FIRE)
5. **Laura Baumeister** (Nicaragua/México)

JASS Cross-regional

1. **Lisa Veneklasen** (DC)
2. **Alejandra Bergemann** (DC/México)
3. **Ana Luisa Ahern** (DC/Honduras)

Sessions & Meetings Attended

| <u>Title of session & Convener</u> | <u>Presentation / other info</u> | <u>Date</u> |
|---|--|-------------|
| March on stigma and discrimination | March ending in a rally on the Zocalo | August 2 |
| Presenting AIDS Accountability International's Country Rating Scorecard: A tool for increasing accountability and leadership in the response to the AIDS epidemic Mr. Rodrigo Garay | Satellite Meeting: Martha Tholanah to input to the discussion, " <i>How will the scorecard serve PLHIV?</i> " Skills building room 5 | August 3 |
| Women's networking zone Presentation of digital stories JASS Southern Africa | Women Crossing the Line: Building HIV+ feminist movements in Southern Africa and beyond" | August 3 |
| From Promises to Actions: Women, Funding and HIV/AIDS | Skills Building | August 4 |
| HIV Prevention for women and girls: changing gender norms Yolanda Simon, Carmen Zorrilla | Oral Abstract | August 4 |
| "I am sexy too" Trust for Indigenous Culture and health Kenya | Global Village Main Stage | August 4 |
| No simple solutions: investing in HIV Prevention Research for Women and girls Stephen Lewis, Julia Kim, Elizabeth Mataka, Matilda Mogale, Hilda Esquivel | Women and girls are urgently need a range of prevention technologies and approaches to protect themselves throughout the life cycle and as life situations change. Using an interactive "talk show" format, this session brings together dynamic voices, including high-level government representatives, grassroots leaders working on the frontlines of community-based research, and policy-makers. | August 4 |
| Where is the Global | Session in the Women's Networking Zone | August 5 |

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| Women's AIDS Movement Ana Maria Pizarro, Thoko Budaza, Sophie Dilmitis | discussion on the intersection between the AIDS movement and the feminist movement in a global context. | |
| JASS Cross-Regional Dialogue | "Women, HIV/AIDS and movement-building" | August 5 |
| The invisibility of WSW in the HIV/AIDS movement and women's movement | Hot topic corner- Global village | August 5 |
| Treatment Literacy within the Circle of care (SAFAIDS) | Toolkit Launch | August 5 |
| HIV Collaborative Fund and T-MAP (Treatment Monitoring and Advocacy Project), both projects of the International Treatment Preparedness Coalition (ITPC) David Barr | Round-table discussion: Martha Tholanah presented on her experience of working as part of the 3-member research team on the Zimbabwe chapter of Missing the Target, and the impact the research has had on advocates and implementers in HIV & AIDS in Zimbabwe. Also presented on my role as an active member of the Southern African Treatment Access Movement (SATAMo), implementing ITPC projects, and the impact at regional level. People from other regions also shared how they are working with the regional treatment access movements. Global Village | August 5 |
| Civil Society: Sharing Knowledge and Producing Valid Data to Fight AIDS. Alessandra Nilo & Chris Collins | Panel discussion: Presented on my experience of working as part of the 3-member research team on the Zimbabwe chapter of Missing the Target, and the impact the research has had on advocates and implementers in HIV & AIDS in Zimbabwe. Session Room 1 | August 5 |
| Where is the Global Women's AIDS Movement Ana Maria Pizarro, | Session in the Women's Networking Zone discussion on the intersection between the AIDS movement and the feminist movement in a global context. | August 5 |

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| Thoko Budaza, Sophie Dilmitis | | |
| International Women's March | March ending in a rally on the Zocalo | August 5 |
| Caring for carers: A right based Approach to supporting and Managing Home based care | Skills Building | August 6 |
| In the AIDS response, where is the Leadership for women's rights? | Symposium | August 6 |
| Women's Rights Equal Women's Lives: Violence Against Women and HIV Zonibel Woods, Claudia Garcia Moreno, Patience Mandishona, Ebony Johnson, Ana Louise Crago, Bafana Khumalo, Charlotte Watts | Patience Mandishona talked about violence against women in Southern Africa and issues of WSW in Zimbabwe | August 6 |
| The AIDS Care Economy and the Burden on Women Bisi Adelye-Fayemi, Marilyn Waring, Aissatou Diakhate, Olagoke Akintola, Sharonann Lynch, Sophia Kisting, Dianne Stewart | | August 6 |
| Gender & HIV: Emerging issues | | August 6 |
| Sex Workers Fashion Show | Global Village Main Stage | August 6 |
| Addressing Gender inequalities in Prevention | Skills Building | August 6 |

