



*Strategic Thinking:
The Politics of Heart-Mind-Body*

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Why heart-mind-body and why now?

Self-care and wellbeing have made a welcome comeback in feminist politics. They have been around for decades, but drifted out of focus and out of favor around the early 1990s as the dominant trends in women's rights work took other turns. In some respects, the focus on policy and legal rights advocacy, important as that has been and continues to be for fighting inequality and advancing women's rights, also came along with an unhelpful disconnect and hierarchy between needs and rights.

Women's needs and wellbeing were deemed merely "practical" as opposed to "strategic," which dealt with the root causes and **structures** of discrimination. In some corners, self-care was even considered elitist and indulgent. Many women in JASS and beyond have resisted this distinction, knowing that needs such as food, water and housing, can and have been among the most catalytic mobilisers for social movements and strategies aimed at seriously challenging power.

The return of wellbeing and self-care – driven by many factors including persistent burn out and growing risks and backlash faced by women activists – is most welcome, but often still sits as a separate space or methodology, and not fully integrated into our political strategies or shaped as a political strategy in itself. As a result, we risk once again depoliticising self-care and losing its potential as a vehicle for strengthening new forms of leadership and organising movements.

I would argue that in Zimbabwe – given the context -- we have no choice but to make Heart-Mind-Body both a process and a strategy, a vehicle for retooling and re-energising women and movements in new ways.

Here are some thoughts about how to continue and build the political potential of this strategy for further discussion, testing and learning.

Starting from the context, starting with women's lives

Like many JASS strategies, context, moment and women's lives are a critical starting point. In Zimbabwe, the more recent socio-economic and political crisis / war has shredded the social fabric, destroyed the economy and weakened the political systems driving many Zimbabwean feminists and leaders away. Women's movements are fragmented and weakened by bitter and violent partisan politics, by distrust and fear that repression and dictatorship breed, and by continued insecurity. Donor politics (intentionally or unintentionally) have only made the situation worse contributing to turf wars and supporting the disconnect of urban-based advocates from women's organising in rural and urban communities in burial societies, savings clubs, etc.

How to go about feminist movement-building given the obstacles?

In the conceptualisation of HMB, the idea was, in order to renew and strengthen women's movements and leaders, we would have to:

- a) leave organisational identities and politics out, and focus on bringing together individuals in the first phase
- b) assume that common ground / safe space, the need, that might enable women to reconnect and draw women together is trauma, burn out, and the experience (pain) of the last many years;

- c) create a space for the personal but make it over time explicitly political, deconstructing history through women's lives and bodies but weaving a contextual and historical analysis for future strategising from these personal reflections..

This process as it played out last week, in Harare, has created openings and new energy for more conversation and connection following on from this approach.

Where to go moving onward from here so that HMB really does evolve into a collective organising process?

Using the terms heart – mind – and – body can be a useful way of also shaping the action strategy. Ensuring that the strategy itself defends women's bodies, the agendas reflect and channel women's passions, values and anger (heart) and tap into their minds through wise political choices shaped by a careful evaluation of power, interests and information.

There are several steps and options we might consider in order to turn women's personal renewal and reflection into an organising mode and through that identify a common agenda and begin to build a network for future action.

Here are some elements to think about:

- build on the current process to develop a simple methodology to be replicated in many different spaces with different women – encouraging women to create their own circles of reflection, wellness and political memory that can function independently; this would require equipping facilitators and providing minimal support for their work and documentation;
- bring together some of these circles/groups in larger clusters (2-3 groups together to link circles) and start to move the process (analysis and strategising) forward while keeping wellbeing firmly rooted in the process. The aim of the next moment would be to link personal realities to the political context today – keeping the analysis away from organisational politics, but facilitating a process of assessing power and risks and interests, and looking for common ground among women (continue to keep organisational politics out).
- There can be a simple system for reporting between the clusters. Sharing short highlights that stress what issues/agendas women share and how they can protect each other.
- The focus of the developing action strategy can then be shaped around two pillars – a) sustaining networks for influence and protection; and b) sharing information and strategic voice weighing in on critical issues:
 - a) For building women's networks – personal ties and trust developed through the circles and sustained by SMS, virtual and face-to-face connection and then, turning these into protective webs – involves workshops for political analysis and risk assessment and the basics on the rights and options of women activists combined with processes to create safety measures. At this point organizational alliances are critical and need to be negotiated so that the vibrancy of the networks is not lost.
 - b) Establishing mechanisms on how to communicate and when eg - could link to international actors; a team to handle communications when possible and strategic.