

In Conversation: “And they are fierce!”

Jane Bennett speaks with *Shereen Essof*, current director of JASS (Just Associates, Southern Africa).

Jb: Shereen, hey! It’s so good to see you, and thanks for having this conversation for Feminist Africa. I’m going to need to write an “introduction” about you and your work (both laugh) but for now if you were asked to introduce yourself, where would you start?

Shereen: That’s always a hard one for me! I’m a feminist activist and my name is Shereen, and I guess part of my life’s work is really using a feminist analysis to effect structural change in challenging all oppressive forces, of which patriarchy is central. Capitalism, neo-liberalism, nationalism, militarism ... they all impact on women’s lives in this region where I’m based. I try to harness a feminist approach to both the content and format of my work, and aspire towards work that centres process, allows for collaboration, challenges power, and creates new relationships, knowledges, and possibilities. More recently I have been quite deliberate to surround myself with beauty.

Jb: I think of you – I know you’ve been working very much through the Directorship of JASS in the past couple of years in Southern Africa (**Shereen:** yes) – and I know you have political connections with a number of countries, but I think of you as Zimbabwean; I think of you as coming out of a very particular struggle against a masked neo-colonialism (**Shereen** nods); how much do you think of yourself as Zimbabwean?

Shereen: (laughs) You know I think my roots go very deep in terms of what it meant to live, what it meant to grow up within the women’s movement in Zimbabwe at a particular historical time. And I think it was certainly during that time – the decade of the 90’s – that I developed a certain kind of feminist consciousness – and language – to name what it was that I had experienced and felt at the level of my body without up until that time really having a language to name it. I think that Zimbabwe was also the place where as a young person I met women who would be the – who would be key in terms of my journey – who would be in my life, even today as the guides

and the wise ones. Today, I can trace my political life back through the voices and through the work of certain women I met then and I can trace my own political understanding of what it means to build a feminist movement back to that period. So I think Zimbabwe is also a place that holds me and that has fed me, politically, and in other ways.

But the last number of years has challenged how it is that I think of myself in relation to Zimbabwe – and I’m not going to go into the long story now – but it comes out of my thinking about the meaning of national boundaries and simultaneously about what it means to be dispossessed of a heritage because of your lack of “formal” citizenship status. So there’s that. I think that Zimbabwe has also become over the last number of years – I don’t want to say “a different place” because at one level it is the same – but many things have changed: socio-economically and politically we are in a different moment, with slightly different challenges that demand different political strategies, the players are different, and I don’t see myself as being as located in this moment in the same way as I perhaps was in the past. That has been important in terms of my shifting relationship to Zimbabwe. And the last thing I want to say which contextualizes me a little bit is that I think women’s struggles in Zimbabwe are not necessarily particular to Zimbabwe only – I think there are structural forces operating across the region, which are manifesting in different ways, there are some very dangerous forces at play. If you are someone who uses the kind of analysis I do – we do – you can see that these manifestations are by no means unique to one country context – and to challenge them demands thinking of yourself beyond any kind of nationalized history and thinking of yourself in a strange way without certain sorts of roots.

Jb: That’s interesting and I think I recognize much of what you are saying – can I ask you then, what you think it might mean to “be young” amidst some of these forces – and I know you’ll explain more about these as we go along – you’re talking about the need to move “beyond” a context, in order to manage the size and nature of the political challenges feminism needs to take on. Of course, if one is young, what one knows best maybe has to be one’s own context. How do you work both with the need to get to grips – differently – with a context (your own context) and with the need to transcend it without crudity. Without arrogance.

Shereen: With difficulty! I think I'm going to separate out the two things you are asking me to think about, Jane; the first is what I think it might mean being young in this context and then, the second being how do you work with that.

There's a part of me that sometimes goes backwards and forwards on this because.... let me start with my understanding of patriarchy: I think that patriarchy has always been incredibly smart and it morphs in ways that are sometimes completely unexpected. Because of that there's a part of me that thinks that every historical moment presents a particular version of things that impact on women and women's lives in oppressive ways. Our struggles have been dedicated to challenging and transforming patriarchy, but the moment you chip away and effect some kind of positive change, the system morphs and you are faced with a different configuration of forces and manifestations of discrimination. I guess I say that because every moment presents a similar yet slightly different set of issues because the configuration of forces that we are needing to deal with are morphing, shifting and changing in relation to the successes and gains of the last few decades that women activists (however they may name themselves) have achieved. That's the first thing (laughs).

So what is it that I see as characterizing this particular moment? I think we are seeing a form of backlash to those thirty years. We're seeing an intensification of violence on a number of levels. But I also think we are seeing the effects of what I could call "hidden forces" that have the power to influence State policy, national agendas but are elusive, camouflaged. And I think that those forces - like certain religious fundamentalisms, multi nationals, cartels - are shaping the landscape and influencing government positions on many things including rights, reproductive rights, sex and sexuality. And these forces are or have consolidated and do strike me as differently configured from the last two decades - so what does that mean for us here?

When you have "nationalism and tradition" intersecting with conservative agendas as taken on by our States, you have a dangerous equation. It is in this context that young women and men are living and dealing with.

Certainly, in contexts like Zimbabwe and Zambia, conservatism, religious fundamentalisms, policing of bodies, reinforcing gender roles is all virulent; alive, strong; gaining currency and momentum. How you counter this and the violence that comes with it is really difficult, potentially dangerous yet absolutely crucial.

Jb: One of the things about which I've been very thoughtful lately, partly in relation to the project undertaken by the AGI which worked with young women (who all had a certain amount of privilege) who were telling stories of exactly how they were encountering and dealing with this notion of "virulence" you describe, is the shape of the "sexual and reproductive health and rights" issues emerging around us. Despite all kinds of work around access to reproductive health in the past 25 years, and despite the fact that we can now sometimes openly talk about lesbian and transpeople's rights, the concerns of young women involve daily questions of health, reproductive health. Not sexual health!

Shereen: Reproductive health! Yes!

Jb: You are seeing it too?

Shereen: Absolutely. Absolutely. And you see, Jane, for me, this names the intense crazy of what it means to work with young people in this particular moment. When you have a President who says "I will rule this country by the Ten Commandments" and this approach filters down into schools, into families, through the media, all of the gains around access to reproductive health options, services get severely limited or mediated by the moral values of those providing services. Let alone sexual rights which get wiped out. Like that! (Snaps fingers) Because the predominant messaging right now, what is part of the moral fabric and what is valued is in fact very conservative.

Jb: And it's conservative around things as ordinary as menstruation, talking openly about menstruation, ensuring girls have easy access to information and to different ways of caring for themselves

Shereen: Yes, menstruation – how teachers or people more generally speak about it or don't. How hard it is to counter the idea that having a period isn't something to be ashamed of; and contraception the most embarrassing thing to talk about. It's getting harder to access contraception – often service providers use their moral lenses when they provide services and young people shy away as a result. If I am a young women and want to move out of my family home, if I want to just go and live with a friend, in some contexts that is unthinkable. There is dwindling support for the idea that as a young women, my independence is possible.

Jb: Or, if I'm twenty-one, and a young woman, and I don't think I want to get married....

Shereen: Precisely, precisely. So that re-assertion of patriarchal control is alive

– whether it’s coming through the father, the uncle, the older brother, the entire family and community system,

Jb: It’s so interesting to me how powerful the failure of the discourse of “gender equality” has been – you may disagree – that discourse of the 1990’s certainly had its own fights and there were some very courageous people associated with it and created traction for concepts like “equality” and “balance” and “access to-.” But in the face of what we need to negotiate now, that discourse seems remarkably thin as a tool.

Shereen: (Pauses) I think, I think something happened with that too, Jane, because in its historical moment, demands for “gender equality” constituted a very powerful discourse. And it was powerful because it retained a politics, a political analysis.

Jb: (interrupts): The politics? Do you mean a feminist analysis of patriarchy, of neo-colonialism?

Shereen: (nods) Yes, exactly; when the political principles generated by that analysis – which allowed one to get at the structural elements of inequality, power – became separated from the project of designing policies for “gender equality” and implementing them in a depoliticised way. To take it one step further, when the feminist analysis was turned into “gender mainstreaming,” that’s when the discourse becomes thin and hollow. And that’s when the site of struggle changed. Because then it was about fighting for “gender equality,” not about what it means to fight for quite fundamental issues like structural oppression and sexism, racism, homophobia.

The capitalist patriarchal system works on dividing us, keeping us separate. This goes back to the question about what it means to work with young women in this fight, right now. We’ve already spoken about how patriarchy is fully operative. It is fully operative in the drive towards maintaining hierarchies, insisting on separation and categorization, and then using that to create hierarchies of influence and power – sometimes even deployed in the furtherance of the cause of gender equality. And in our region there are hierarchies within women’s organizing. Even the language is problematic and loaded – if we think about the category of “young women”, and where that category often seems “to fit”, within the and I am ashamed to say it, but the hierarchy of feminist organizing, the “young women” are often right at the bottom. And they are subject to being “acceptable” to “older” women, to being policed by them, consciously or unconsciously. Within this paradigm a

so-called “young woman” will only be able to carry influence if she is accepted by the hierarchies of more powerful women in the organizing momentum. She has to be “mentored” ushered into the realm of gender organising and then of course on issues of sexuality and reproductive choice you have to toe the line and often the line is a conservative one. So if the voice of the matriarchs is pro-life how do young women intersect with that? How do you even begin? It raises huge questions about how you work, and support young women, in a context which is stacked, in that kind of way. And stacked not only within the women’s organizations, but of course within society more broadly. And it’s also about unpacking and peeling away all of the layers which make actual political dialogue with young women so difficult – It’s all those layers around the meaning of age, the meaning of the body, the meaning of choice.

Jb: Around sexuality.

Shereen: Yes. In order to build a constituency that can cohere, to harness collective power, given the forces that are stacked up against us in this moment, irrespective of what the dynamics of the more mainstream spaces are, for us, means addressing those layers.

Jb: (interrupts) and also have a language...

Shereen: Yes, exactly.

Jb: And when you think about building that constituency, I guess you also have to take on the board the way neo-capitalism has created a very efficient constituency of “young” people, especially of women-people, who have already been organized within the marketization of “femininity”. In both resource-rich and resource-poor environments, desire for certain forms of being “powerful” as a woman gets channelled through not only the material world of commodities, but also through certain languages about the body and about sexuality. And this constituency is very mobile, and very inter-communicative within and across different contexts. And that raises questions about what it means to organize with young women, not simply in the context of matriarchs and mentors, but within the context of peers. When the “young woman you ought to be” is part of what surrounds you not simply as a “student,” or a “young activist” or a “daughter” but also as a “friend” or a “lover,” then the challenge of discovering a voice which can challenge those expectations is monumental. And it’s not one in which older women activists can necessarily be either helpful or respectful of what you may choose to do.

Shereen: Yes. Yes. And what it feels like for me, as an organizer, is that you

are constantly working with contradictions, and negotiating contradictions – it can be the admiration for a particular pair of shoes that a young woman has (**Jb:** (laughs) I relate!) and her simultaneous recognition that her body is beyond her current control when it comes to consumer capitalism and more immediately, that she has no control when it comes to what she will be able to do in terms of living her sexual and reproductive life freely. Both of us – her and me – we will be working in and with those contradictions as we seek to organize each other to be able to connect meaningfully, and to reach out to others.

Jb: Yes. And that makes me wonder about another concept which I've been encountering a lot recently, although it's not a new concept. I have a lot of colleagues thinking about "neoliberal femininity," the circulation of versions of femininity which offer, under current political and economic climates, a discourse on "choice" to women (especially women in their late teens and early twenties). And this "choice" is manufactured and utterly ungrounded in what is actually possible – you know, the "choice" to both work for wages and manage a domestic space, with kids, efficiently and alone. Or the "choice" to use contraception while in reality, only certain forms of contraception are available or even usable within the context of a heterosexual relationship. And there's an argument that the complexities of "choice" for young women we might want to work with are those which come from their embeddedness into neoliberal versions of their agency.

But I am not 100% convinced. My own sense is that the "choicelessness" facing so many young women is not the "choicelessness" of eras in which we were fighting as Southern African feminists for changed legal status or for access to property, and it's also not the "choicelessness" of fake empowerment. It's a "choicelessness" which arises in the context of simply trying to negotiate endless contradictions about the link between gender and "being human," and trying to get to grips with a world in which critical information about the economy, or about genuine access to power, is hidden from almost everyone. Hidden from the 99% (laughs).

Shereen: (laughs) Yes and where because of that we try to change ourselves to "fit" into the world. Which leaves you floundering and directionless. You can't see your choices because your world is being manufactured for you. Its alienation, and you are slowly drained of dreams, possibilities, agency. Instead of changing the world "to fit" women. But Jane, the thing about trying

to work in this moment – is that we cannot create contexts (in the shape of trainings, or movement-building sessions, or just organizational homes and cultures) in which people are going to be left at risk. Left hanging in some way, unsupported. Precisely because of the context. Because becoming aware of alternatives, of choices, finding ways to build community and work together on the issues we need to be working together on to realise change, and beginning to understand how the forces of oppression may be working, and starting to challenge – this can mean a very strong backlash. So if young women are creating conversation with one another about how to understand their contexts politically, and how to change those contexts, how to keep open and allow for the widest range of choices in a women’s life, how do you ensure that no one young woman gets thrown out of her house for participating, or gets attacked by even her “friends” who have not been part of that conversation. How do you really really create movements and solidarity without impossible risk?

Jb: But no civil-based political movement has ever been built without the recognition of risk to its members – so what are you saying here?

Shereen: I’m saying that the issue of security needs to be part and parcel of strategy. What are the mechanisms for ensuring security which must get built alongside the growth of organising and solidarity and consensus about action and alongside the formation of new political consciousness. And I think in Zimbabwe, that is exactly what has been the approach to young women’s organizing.

But – I have a problem calling it “young women’s” organizing! Inclusivity, mentorship, space and power. I think whether you are 12 or whether you are 19 or whether you are 26 or 49 or 83, it’s the same struggle actually. It’s the same struggle. Yes, we may experience certain things differently given our positioning in terms of chronological age but we experience things “differently” on a whole range of axes and yet, it is still the same struggle. Often in situations where women of different generations work side-by-side, the interaction between generations is weak. I think we need to move away from the dichotomy of “young versus old” and start talking about the specific needs and contributions of every generation. But I am not happy about the language of “young women” as a separate constituency because I think its usage just reinforces splits. “Young” isn’t always about age. There are people who mentor me who are younger than me and I look up to them. Ageism and

generational divides hinge around access to resources and decision-making, it's a language that comes from somewhere and serves particular interests. Donors support "young women's organizing"...

Jb: (interrupts) Not "middle-aged women" (both laugh!) And of course, so do churches, so do athletic teams – the "young women's" this or that has always been attached to versions of organizing which assume that "the young" are – as you said earlier – to be mentored as "new" versions of those with greater standing or power in the context – "the elders", the adults. So what is your approach – turn the thing on its head? Deconstruct the categorization and refuse to use it? Radicalize its meaning? Fight for space for people who are 12, 15, 18, 27 to say: "We are not 'young'; we're IT!" So that the political analysis flows from "IT"?

Shereen: That's it, exactly. But going back to the question I raised about security, I think you can't engage in movement building right now without really designing, upfront, the safety and security which accompanies that. Because in Zimbabwe, for instance, the legal prohibitions against "loitering" have always been used against younger women, and while it is possible for any woman to be threatened by that prohibition, we know that the focus of the surveillance is being trained on women identified as "young." And it is critical to think consciously about one's own safety and security – not as a self-indulgence, but as a political responsibility.

I have been thinking a lot about the work that we will be doing next year in Zimbabwe, with elections coming up, in a context in which the bulk of politically-driven violence is still not formally recognized in any way – and most definitely, if you are going to be doing political work in Zimbabwe, if I am going to be doing political work in Zimbabwe, if anybody is going to be undertaking that political work, the lawyers need to be organized, the emergency protocols, the safety protocols have to be in place. We've just set up an Urgent Action Support Fund in Zimbabwe, so that there is a pot of money which sits there, for GALZ, so that if things get crazy, at least some resources are immediately available.

And then there are complexities which reach even beneath the predictable zones in which we know activists will be vulnerable. A colleague of mine was working with a community of women who began talking, among themselves and for the first time, about corruption, and information did not "stay in the room" – it can't – and the situation unravelled as policemen started

to get suspicious of the work, and what it meant to have certain kinds of information entailed fear and huge anxiety. And it's not knowing, in contexts of surveillance and repression, what conversations are going to trigger what, and there can be no easy assumptions about "dialogue" and its connection to movement-building. And you have to be smart. Really smart.

Jb: And maybe that takes us back to another earlier point: the difference between ideas about building "gender equality" and ideas generated through a feminist analysis about the way power might work. It's really only the latter that gives you an adequate starting point in terms of its recognition that patriarchy and its friends (**Shereen:** all its friends! (laughs)) have dedicated interests of their own. You can't build a movement unless there is some version of consensus about what interests need to be challenged, and why.

Shereen: Yes, name the patriarchal powers be they visible, hidden or invisible powers at work in our contexts that need to be challenged. Alongside this Jane, there is a layer of young women who are...who get it, who are on their own journeys in terms of who they are as young women, and who others are in their communities, and they get it – and they are fierce. They are critical and fierce about their feminist analysis of power, the things that they will stand up for, and about what that means. And they are there on the frontline. They are there.

And to go back to that narrative of the three decades there were many things that were achieved. But the context changed and with it our strategies have to change. Conventional NGOs are being challenged. I am not sure that gender equality and gender and development strategies so prevalent in the 1990s are going to take us where we need to be in terms of social justice. I am not sure that the organisational form of an NGO (with everything it comes with) is the most appropriate vehicle to effect change given our contexts and the challenges they are presenting.

I mean, the last time I was in Zimbabwe, Katswe held a performance of the Vagina Monologues, and they filled out the Seven Arts, 800 seats! They are using popular culture and theatre arts as a means to feminist popular education. Can I share something amazing – a piece entitled Street-walking, hair-flipping, hips-swaying, head down-leave me alone resistance? ... "This is an ode to all women who have ever walked down a street and were bugged, harassed, approached, hurt, snickered at, kidnapped, abused by the remarks and actions of men unwanted. This is the violence we want to end – amongst

many others. Having to police our bodies daily has left invisible scars upon our souls. This is also a response to all my man friends who say, in response to my complaints about being harassed incessantly by unwanted men “Why do you girls complain, I’d love all the attention, tell the truth, you secretly love it right?” The answer is “No”. Not today, tomorrow or yesterday. I am not flattered or enticed. And, no, it is not always fun walking in my shoes. So, no, this cannot be a joke. In fact, I am angry. Angry at the silent and outspoken forms of oppression and violence that women survive daily. This is only one story amongst many.”

That’s not nothing! The analysis. The articulation. The coming to voice, is not nothing. Its power and resistance. Katswe is a group that operates as a movement of young women, most are volunteers who are working to enable other young women to mobilize, organize and articulate and claim their needs and aspirations with regards sexual and reproductive. Choice. This kind of work, precarious as it may be, this is the work that is taking the feminist movement building forward. And it’s being inspired by “young women” (laughs) and by many other women, many on the edges of social or political visibility. And it’s a really exciting moment. I’m not saying it’s an easy moment and I’m not predicting directions. But I feel really lucky – and privileged – to be living my life with this as my “work” right now. Because it’s also living my life.