

The Struggle Continues...

Short stories of ordinary African women acting for change and peace amidst challenging circumstances

By Dorothy Attema

Zimbabwe

“Conclude the Talks – We are Starving Campaign”

The story of Netsai Mushonga

On the 15th of September 2008, Zimbabweans from all walks of life gathered at the Rainbow Towers to witness the signing the Global Political Agreement between the leaders of the three main political parties. The agreement was expected to deliver Zimbabwe from the political and humanitarian crisis to recovery, reconstruction and peace. Six weeks later the three political parties had not agreed on the structure of the inclusive government and women were becoming impatient.

Over the past ten years Zimbabwe had been going through an accelerating political and socio-economic crisis. All stakeholders concurred that Zimbabwe was in a deep political and humanitarian crisis. The crisis was characterised by a collapse or dysfunction of major state service institutions including health, the police and judiciary, education, and social welfare. The country had literally run out of food and shops were empty, hospitals were shut down and women, ever so innovative, were still bearing the brunt of the crisis. A huge factor in this crisis was the gross abuse of human rights through massive targeted violence at perceived members of ‘opposition’ parties.

It is against this background that Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ) called women civic leaders to strategize on nonviolence civic protest in the face of the crisis. Netsai Mushonga and Margaret Mavhudzi of Women Peacemakers Programme attended the meeting to give technical support on how to organize a successful nonviolence action. They held a series of three meetings; the first meeting was attended by 16 women, the next by 23 and the last by 32 women on a Sunday afternoon. The meeting looked at what was the immediate major crisis facing all women around the table, and it was food shortages. “We are hungry,” someone shouted. “No, we are actually starving,” another shouted as the meeting room became emotionally charged with 32 women responding in echoes, “we are starving!!”

That is how it was decided that the theme of protest should be focused on food shortage. All the women agreed they needed to act now on the trend of never ending discussions, while the situation in the country grew worse. They needed to demand that the SADC¹ heads of state, who were holding a meeting on the 27th of October 2008 in Harare, definitively find a way forward in getting the political leaders to form a transitional government. They planned to protest and camp outside the SADC, demanding that the talks be concluded by the morning of the 28th of October 2008, leading to the installation of a new government in place.

All the women agreed that the theme of their protest would be, “**Conclude the Talks – We are Starving.**” This theme was immediately translated into the two major local languages in Zimbabwe, ‘Shona and Ndebele,’ and advertised in the independent newspapers.

The process of mobilizations went like wildfire; Harare was literally abuzz. Every woman had to be informed and all this had to happen overnight for many of the women groups. The instructions that were sent around stated that all the women should wear black, to symbolize the suffering, and white for peace and hope. They were to carrying empty plates and pots to symbolize their hunger. The message as passed on to politicians and key stakeholders too. The protest would be held on the morning of 28th October at the hotel where the SADC heads of state were meeting. The women also developed a communiqué and sent it out to the three main political parties.

At 6am on the 28th of October 2008 the first two women arrive dressed in black and white and carrying empty plates and pots. The overzealous police were immediately alerted and they built a cordon around the hotel. This did not deter the determined women; they soon converged around the hotel in the hundreds, though they were denied access to the hotel grounds and had to gather 200 meters away. They began to shout “**Conclude the Talks – We are Starving**” as they knocked the empty utensils together making noise, as if beating on drums. The police were in a panic, as they saw and heard about the number of women on the way, coming to join in the protest, so they began disbursing the protesters and arrested 42 women. Netsai Mushonga was one of those arrested; some of the women were arrested as they arrived to distribute the publicity materials. Immediately as the arrests took place, the other women called the

¹ Southern African Development Community / Communauté de Développement de l’Afrique Australe

directors of Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ), informing them about the attack on the protesters and the arrests. The WCoZ staff started calling members, informing them on what was happening and asking for assistance in picking up any woman dressed in black and white, because they had become the target of the police. Every member who had a car or could hire a car did so and they all drove to the location of the protest and picked up the women, hiding them in WCoZ offices. In no time, the offices of WCoZ turned into a shelter for the women, as they ran away from the brutality of the police. While waiting for what was to come next, the women started to sing songs of encouragement, they danced and gave each other messages of hope; it was a very powerful moment of not losing hope and focusing on a better tomorrow for them and their children.

At the police station women started to pray for the police, then they broke out into cheerful songs of hope for a better tomorrow. The police started looking worried, maybe their conscious was eating at them about how they had mishandled and arrested the women, who were of varying ages from 17 years to 70 years. The police were heard saying they did not condemn what the women had done, and they whispered that they hoped the women would turn out in even larger numbers for the demonstration and congregate quickly, before they could be stopped. At 2pm the women were given food and they shared it with the police. They were finally released at 7pm of the same day; they found a team of Women's Coalition leaders and staff members waiting for them outside the police station with warm plates of food and drinks.

Netsai was the last to be released, as one of the ring leaders, and everyone celebrated her release. When she was released she drove herself home, and her family was overjoyed that she did not have to sleep in a police cell. The following morning all civic societies were congratulating the women for standing up to the leaders of political parties and SADC heads of state. The protest march was a success, about 1000 women turned up for the protest and the message had reached home.

A coalition government was put in place under a General agreement. In the 'Global Political Agreement,' under which the coalition government was formed, the key focus was on the reconstruction of the economy, health sector, the legal systems, and the rebuilding of schools. The agreement also covers issues of transitional peace building, changing the electoral process, and the re-writing of the Zimbabwean constitution.

"The struggle still continues and the women still have a big role to play", says Netsai, "We have to hold the leaders accountable. Everywhere in Zimbabwe there is a movement of ordinary women trying to understand what the 'Global Political Agreement' is, so that they can lobby and advocate for politicians to do what they were mandated. WCoZ believes the healing has not happened, but the framework and the process to get there is in place under this agreement. WCoZ's next strategy, which they have started on by holding meetings and workshops, is to assist the women to come and be recognised as stakeholders, a constituency and an important voice in the running of the affairs of their country, as they lobbying for the 'Global Political Agreement' to be implemented."

Cameroon
Giving the Women the right tools for their struggle for Peace and Justice
The story of Caroline Yankep

In April of 2009 IFOR's WPP Africa Regional Desk held a three day consultation in Nairobi for 32 women coming from the greater horn of Africa and Central Africa. These women had all received TOT²'s workshop in Gender Sensitive Active Nonviolence and were now attending a three day workshop on sharing best practices, challenges and build a network of women peacemakers, where they can draw strength and encouragement from each other as they continue to face big challenges in their fight for justice and peace.

One such encouraging story was from Caroline Yankep from Cameroon. Right after the TOT training she learned that the Cameroonian government was at an advanced stage in the process of changing the constitution. She was shocked, not only that she did not know about it but rather the fact that the citizens were not consulted. She immediately felt an obligation to do something about it, especially because she had just received tools on how to conduct nonviolent actions against injustices. In her organization she worked with youths, so she decided to work with the same group for her action. She solicited funding, and with additional seed funding from IFOR's WPP Africa Regional Desk she made some campaign materials (posters) and started conducting workshops for the youths, to make them aware of their rights. The posters were challenging the youths and everyone else to fight for their rights, to be given an opportunity to give input on the constitution. The youths put up posters everywhere. And she started conducting workshops to educate the youths about their rights. Apart from just using the posters, she also utilized the

² Training of trainers

radio, since many people in her country have access to the radio. Though the input by the citizen into the constitution was minimal, people have not accepted the proposed constitution and they have refused to allow the government to close that chapter, hence the discussion about the constitution is still going on, especially by the youths who are 60% of the population.

Kenya
Post-election violence and women leading to the formation of the coalition government
The story of Mary Mujomba

When violence broke out in Kenya³, the whole world was shocked and the Kenyans could not believe it was happening. There were all sorts of rumors going around within the country via text messages about the tribal killings going on. There was panic and fears in the air, everywhere in the media were images of the escalation of violence in all the major towns of Kenya. Meanwhile, the international community had stepped in to help, and Koffi Anan was in the country to mediate negotiations between the two main parties in search for an agreeable way forward. Just the fact that the two warring parties had agreed to sit down and negotiate, caused the violence to lessen, though the tension was still high.

It is in this backdrop that we meet Mary Mujomba, an ordinary woman who was seven months pregnant and on complete bed rest, since her pregnancy was a difficult one. She was following everything that was going on through TV, text messages and telephone calls. On one such occasion, she received a text message from a friend informing people that the talks had collapsed. This brought fear to Mary, like many other Kenyans, because it meant that the violence would escalate again and there was no telling what could happen. The memories of what happened in Rwanda and fear of Kenya going the same way was undeniable.

This friend had requested that whosoever could, should turn up outside the Serena Hotel meeting room where the proceedings were going on and demand that the politicians do not leave the room before reaching a compromise. Mary felt she had the responsibility and the ability to do something to stop the talks from collapsing, and this was her opportunity. Fifty women turned up and camped outside the door of the meeting room. Mary was the only pregnant woman. She made herself as comfortable as was humanly possible under the circumstances right next to the door. When the politicians wanted to come out of the meeting room they couldn't, because they needed to jump over her and they couldn't bring themselves to doing that, because she was 'very pregnant'. So the talks had to continue while the women remained at the door for 3 days and nights. They stayed at the vigil in shifts; some would be there in the day and go to sleep at night, while the ones who rested in the day would stay at the vigil during the night. What motivated Mary to take such a health risk, she who has never been involved in protests before and she who has never been an activist before, was the fact that for her the success of the talks was a matter of life and death. She could not imagine giving birth to her child in a war/conflict and chaotic Kenya, just because of some politicians failing to take up their responsibilities. Through such efforts by ordinary women like Mary Mujomba, which most of the times are not documented anywhere; women in Africa continue to fight for change, justice and peace in their own countries through very difficult circumstances.

One year into the formation of a coalition government and the end of violence in Kenya, thousands of people, mostly women and children, are still displaced and living in camps, and their plight has been forgotten. The coalition government leaders continue to wrangling over power, while the country remains strongly ethnically divided and ordinary people going about their businesses are being murdered everywhere by thugs (cults/militia groups with a dangerous tribal mentality of bigotry).

The situation in Kenya has become evidently more dangerous, following the release seven months ago of a report with the findings of 'The Waki commission of inquiry into the post election violence in Kenya'. The report named high ranking people in the government and businessmen who supported the violence by recruiting and paying jobless youths to do the killings. The report said that, unlike the pre-election violence, which was mainly between candidates and their supporters, the post-election violence had a distinct ethnic dimension. Seven months after the release of this report the government has not shown any commitment to bringing the people mentioned to justice. Instead, they have only continued to wrangle over power which has been perceived by Kenyans, especially the aggrieved tribes, as an attempt to evade justice, therefore causing the tribes to establish militias for protection and to bring justice for themselves.

³ January 2008

The results of impunity are being felt everywhere in the country through increased levels of lawlessness and corruption. The tribal sects/cults/militias are beyond the government's control and are growing and increasing, since they continue to recruit many jobless youths. This therefore makes the role of women like Mary Mujomba very crucial in Kenya, as they continue to proactively, each in their own way, fight for peace and justice.

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