



Elinor Sisulu on politics, activism

IN SEARCH OF A NEW PARADIGM:

Elinor Sisulu says the world needs new ideologies and methods on how to deal with issues of oppression and equality in the fight for social justice. -www.zimbabweinpictures.com



I am an embarrassing thirty minutes late for my interview with Elinor Sisulu by the time I arrive at her Lynwood home. Her two dogs greet me in the driveway and I do the typical black thing of staying in my car until I'm sure that the owner has done enough to keep them away from me. She assures me she has and even more embarrassed, I step out of my car to greet her. One of the dogs also does its typical thing of smelling people and with one eye on it, and the other trying to assure those around me that I'm calm (a lie that is clearly visible to them), I greet Elinor.

The last time Elinor and I met was at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in May this year for the screening a Zimbabwean documentary on the complexities of national healing, *The Axe and the Tree*. As we do often, our meetings are occasions to reflect on events and happenings around us. Of course, I find myself doing most of the listening as Elinor – a well-read woman – puts things into perspective. She is a fierce intellectual hiding under her warm and sweet disposition towards people.

I give her a bouquet of flowers I bought for her on my way (perhaps that accounts for part of the thirty minutes I lost) and she receives them with such grace and thanks. There is something powerful about her presence that makes you want to honour her – and women like her – but once that thought crosses your mind, you realise that you'll never be able to do enough to honour them. These are women who have given, and continue to give, themselves so selflessly to the cause of seeking social justice, defying all odds and allowing nothing to stop them in their tracks.

It is a painful violence within, that feeling of knowing that you'll never be able to do enough to show gratitude and respect to such women. Not that they need it – they absolutely do not because they are not motivated by self interest to do what they do but rather very genuine concerns for humanity and the fight against oppression. But something still needs to be done and it is of no use to want to do that ev-

ery August (Women's Month in South Africa), November and December (Month of activism against gender-based violence).

Elinor ushers me into her house and I'm immediately struck by its sheer cleanliness, decorations and well-kept furniture; everything seems to be in its place, not a centimetre off. We are going to be using the living room for this interview and she shows me the way. It's a spacious and very comfortable room with the view of a swimming pool and the lush green garden area.

Before I press the red button on my

goals and would be living our lives. But we go ahead with struggles, even for the very basic freedoms which are promised to us."

The absence of basic freedoms in most of Africa has resulted in the exodus of hordes of her children to the West for a significant period of time now. Obviously, this is something that has also hampered the development of the continent we discuss but Elinor asks a very profound question that startles me: why is Africa so unkind to her children?

It's a question that cannot be an-

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video camera we step into that reflective mode as we always do, almost unwittingly. Julius Malema dominates. Then the spat between media icons Ferial Haffajee, Editor of one of South Africa's leading Sunday newspapers *City Press* and Eric Miyeni filmmaker and former columnist at *The Sowetan*. The two personally know her so I try to understand where she is locating herself in the debate that has ensued. But certain things are clear, you can't call someone a snake and in the same breath invoke metaphors of apartheid violence especially during women's month.

That aside, who is Elinor Sisulu?

"I usually describe myself as a Zimbabwean-born South African writer. But my main identity is that I'm a mother, I have four boys. I'm also a feminist and an activist," she says. And adds: "I wish I wasn't an activist. It's not a good thing to be. When you're an activist it means you're struggling for social justice and really, one would have hoped that by now we would have reached those

swered in this interview certainly but it demands deep and intense reflection of the contributions made by people like Kwame Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral, Steve Biko, Anton Lembede Sol Plaatje and the like.

"All these great African heroes had love for the continent and a desire to shake off the shackles of colonialism. We've not been able to gain a truly independent Africa but not just as a result of colonialism but also because of venal regimes that have oppressed their very own. There is also that combination of a global political system which has used its hegemony to extract resources from Africa and the rest of the world basically. But combined with all of that is leadership in the third world which has been very opportunistic and predatory," she says.

She also adds: "I'm deeply concerned about the politics of liberation movements in Southern Africa. In many ways, they have let us down very badly because of this anti-imperialist discourse which I really consider a pseudo anti-imperialism because none of them [liberation movements]

are actually following an anti-imperialist project. All those who shout about it [anti-imperialism] do it for opportunistic means. A true anti-imperialist project would mean internal strengthening of people, of the county in an effort to address poverty and the national well-being of citizens."

She goes on to talk about the challenges of socialism and the failures of capitalism, stressing the need for a new paradigm to address issues of poverty but also highlighting that whatever shape that new paradigm takes, it ought to have a founding philosophy that demands "responsible and accountable leadership because no matter how wonderful your ideology is, if the leadership is not accountable then it will fail."

There is no mistaking that Elinor is a powerful woman. She has also been married into a powerful family via Max Sisulu, son to South Africa struggle icons Walter and Albertina Sisulu. The latter played an instrumental role in the 20,000 women march in Pretoria protesting against oppressive pass laws. The legacy of Women's Day, celebrated in South Africa on August 9 is founded on this historic event. Of course, MaSisulu passed on recently. I ask Elinor what lessons she learnt from her mother-in-law.

"I've learnt to be courageous. I've also learnt to respect people because Mama was no respecter of persons as the Bible says. The other lesson was the lesson of organisation. When you look at the story of the 20,000 women march, you'll appreciate what those women did with no cell phones, twitter or facebook. Pretoria was extremely hostile at that time in the 1950s so it took enormous courage for those women to do what they did. I've always been struck by the amount of discipline and self sacrifice that it took for the women to pull off the march the way they did," she says.

There are also various women who are learning from Elinor Sisulu and she realises that. She also realises that a lot of women are still subjected to open attacks. The political space is no different. "There was a huge cost to be a member of the ANC back in the day and it just seems as if we don't prioritise political discourse anymore, perhaps because the enemy was much clearer then," says Elinor.

There is also a huge cost to being an activist. Elinor has suffered vitriolic attacks from the ZANU PF regime in Zimbabwe with the Spewer-in-Chief being former information minister, Jonathan Moyo. But she says it's all part of the work, at least that kind of attention from such regimes tells her she is doing something. And she is.

The last word belongs to her but is for all the women out there; "Don't allow yourself to be pushed around."

By Levi Kabwato, Media & Communications Officer in the regional office.

In celebration of Women's Month, Zimbabwe Briefing is running a series of features on Women who have shaped and continue to shape the struggle for democracy and women's rights in the SADC region. We would like to hear your story so tell us via email - media@crisiszimbabwe.org

Zimbabweans Have Embraced the Dawn of a New Zimbabwe

Coordinator's Note



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This last week, over a long public holiday, I have had the opportunity to travel the length and breadth of Zimbabwe covering such diverse cities and towns such as Beitbridge, Masvingo, Chivhu, Harare, Kadooma, Kwekwe, Gweru, Bulawayo and Victoria Falls and what I observed from meeting and breaking break with people from all walks of life and from diverse political backgrounds is that Zimbabweans have embraced the dawn of a new era characterized by a totally different political culture. Current hardline utterances by some elements within political parties traditionally association with violence as an instrument of political persuasion are rather misleading because the mood on the ground, from my observation, is that the vast majority of Zimbabweans are peace-loving folk who area not prepared to engage in senseless violence to advance a political cause.

It then occurred to me that the problem with us is not that of a

mindset or attitude, for it was clear that there is no affinity for violence among the people, but the real challenge is that the vast majority of Zimbabweans who are for peace and for harmonious political discourse in a multi-party context are silent. We are not speaking out enough in the name of peace or in exposing and condemning violent conduct. Scores of people have privately given me feedback that they absolutely agree that we need to banish the political culture of political violence, the culture that every single election should be characterized by extreme violence and bloodshed.

The doctrine of political violence is thoroughly discredited and has no followers among ordinary Zimbabweans as far as I can tell, but the challenge is that the few, died-hard merchants of political violence and purveyors of disunity among our people are very vocal – giving the false impression that they are in the majority and command a large following. This small clique selfishly has soiled the

name of the veterans of our national liberation by invoking the liberation struggle when they engage is their cheap, dirty politics and in violence. This same group incites violence, uses hate speech to promote divisions and perpetuate polarization in order to benefit politically and economically from the chaos. For most of them, a perusal of their own records will easily disclose that they have bogus war credentials that they peddle in order to squeeze economic gain out of the public.

This group is fully aware that the restoration of the rule of law, prevalence of peace, accountability and order will mean the end of their nefarious activities and certain economic and political ruin, and therefore they continue, through abuse of state resources, to mislead Zimbabweans that violent conduct is inherent in them and that violence is a necessary means to achieve political ends.

All we need to ensure that the dawn of a new Zimbabwe that is now upon us will give

way to the rising, shining sun of peace and harmony, is to stand up for peace and to speak out for peace. The discourse of peace in our lifetime should necessarily transcend political identities. It is important that, even when the merchant of violence is a comrade in your particular political party, you nevertheless condemn violence in the strongest terms possible. In fact, the strongest condemnation of violent political conduct should be reserved to members of your own political party. It is worthwhile here to restate that the three evils in politics, namely, violence, propaganda and corruption, have no place in a new Zimbabwe. It condemning these three evils, the matter of political identity does not arise.

As Zimbabweans, it is high time we consider adopting the slogan made famous by Dr. Kenneth Kaunda – “One people, One Nation!” And one might add, All for Peace! Political leaders should stop politicking and look to those things that bind us together as one people in genuine peace and

tranquility in order to guarantee stability and sustainable development.

I am sure that, in our quest to achieve true peace in our lifetime, our neighbors in SADC will stand with us in solidarity as we push to restore Zimbabwe to its former glory politically and economically. We need to make Zimbabwe a success story all round, and for that to be possible there is need to cast aside petty, artificial differences blown out of all proportion by political parasites who wish to benefit at the expense of the entire nation. The sleeping giant, that the people of Zimbabwe are, must now arise and speak out for peace and drown the shrill voice of division that threatens to take our country to the brink and beyond.

This new Zimbabwe will be made a reality by none but ourselves!

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Mothers are a rare jewel

I recently gave birth to a bouncing baby girl and I must admit that my life has never been the same since. However, this got me thinking of the importance of mothers and how much they are underrated. Often we do not seem to realize just how much work mothers put in so as to have us become who we are today. The amount of time that mothers invest in making our lives what they are today can never be easily fathomed and appreciated enough. Just take a few seconds to reflect on when was the last time you appreciated the mother in your life and the many sacrifices she makes or made to have you become the person that we see today. This being a month to honor women, I just thought it prudent to reflect on the role of mothers and hopefully that will drive us to express our gratitude to the mothers in our lives!

When a child is born, a mother is also birthed into this world – for she will care for this precious little one until death! It does not matter the socio-economic or even political status, a mother is a mother. Some might be so scared and the new role of mother intimidates them but that mothering and nurturing instinct melts away all fears and before you know it, she goes full throttle to raising her child. Some of us look at our mothers today and we acknowledge that despite the fact the woman we call mother is not of the same status we have now, she made us into who we are. However, we need

to acknowledge her efforts and thank her for braving all those sleepless nights (and still remained sane) and also sacrificing her very needs in order to ensure that we become the “superstars “that we are today. Take a moment and thank her this very moment.

Some of us have not managed to carry through a pregnancy for nine months, but we overlook the fact that this in itself does not nullify our role as mother. We do have children be it in our own families, those of friends, neighbors and the list goes on to whom we share the role of motherhood. Back in the day, motherhood was a communal issue and I do remember even the woman from next door playing an active role in ensuring that I behaved appropriately or else she would discipline me as her own.

Of course this may be different today as some of us adopt children and so on but my point is that we are mothers in one way or the other. This one is especially for us that may not necessarily be mothers by the birthing process, but you still are a mother. Take a moment to celebrate the life that you have nurtured and can look at today and be proud you did the right thing; you make a wonderful mother, thank you!

Lastly, to the wondrous women we call grandmothers. Oh, these are a miracle! Recently, I sat with my two mothers (mother-in-law and maternal mother) and I just could not avoid being grateful

for the years of wisdom that are evident in these women’s words, actions and very lives. They know so much and yet act so humble about the years of experience. They even smile at you for your naivety. Grandmothers make the world a better place to be. They are amazing and I’m sure that even though you may not always agree with your grandmothers under the auspices of “generational gap”, you do understand that today they talk about the multi-generational interaction and thus there is still hope in the world somewhere! Grandmothers, we take this moment to salute you for your selflessness and commend your excellent support.

It does not hurt to be a woman. It may be challenging under the patriarchal banner we operate in, but it is good being a woman and above all, a mother! As we celebrate woman’s month this August, take a moment and acknowledge the mothers you know and be creative about it. This world would not be what it is today if it was not for you mother. We celebrate you, every second, minute and hour. Thank you for the great work you do mother!

By Grace Chirenje-Nachipo, an activist.

UPCOMING ACTIVITIES:

- > SADC Summit; Luanda, Angola (14-19 August)
- > Civil Society Press Briefing: Luanda, Angola (15 August)