

**Decolonising the ‘safe space’ as an African innovation: The Nhangas as quiet activism to improve women’s health and wellbeing**

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## **Decolonising the ‘safe space’ as an African innovation: The Nhangas as quiet activism to improve women’s health and wellbeing**

### **Abstract**

Contemporary power and decolonisation discourses reflect how Eurocentric and Western analysis has shaped our understandings of the world. Decolonisation efforts within Global Health and feminist studies (including what counts as valid forms of women’s organising) also requires a reclaiming of praxis developed within historically oppressed countries lost through erasures of knowledge-production. Our work contributes to these efforts through an analysis of a form of collective activism for women’s health and development in Zimbabwe: the Nhangas. This traditional cultural practice is anchored to intergenerational women only ‘safe spaces’, a praxis pre-dating second wave feminist theorising on such ideas. Currently, Nhangas are used by the Rozaria Memorial Trust across community, national and global advocacy spaces to promote women’s health. Using collaborative autoethnography, each author’s personal accounts of engagement in the Nhangas interrogate the processes that promote change in women’s lives. Our analysis suggests that the Nhangas fractures systemic, institutional and relational power through leveraging culture, emotions and narrative, in spaces where such dynamics are often overlooked. We conclude that the method offers a valuable form of collective organising: fully engaging with the complex relational, political, social and cultural environments that impact on health, through a quiet activism anchored to emotion, connection and re-imagining of culture to promote change at individual, community and global levels.

## Introduction

*“There are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women...there are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves.” (Audrey Lorde, Poetry is Not a Luxury, 1977/2018).*

The world is in transition. Our current political climate demands activism. The recent #Timesup movement in North American and European cities; the Chilean feminist Las Tesis (‘the rapist is you’) resistance anthem performed globally; the decolonising movements that originated in South African resistance efforts (Ramaru, 2017; Ndelu et. al, 2017) demonstrate activism shaping our language and praxis. Despite their different foci, these movements share a belief in the power of public health activism, defined by Laverack (2012) as the active engagement by movements or civil society that challenge existing social and political orders, which reify health related inequalities and social injustices.

In global health, activist efforts are entwined with decolonisation discourses. These ideas have re-focused our attention on longstanding colonial assumptions that privilege certain forms of speaking and praxis (Abimbola, 2019; Essof, 2014) and how this shapes what counts as evidence and ‘gold standard’ practice. Terminology such as ‘reverse innovation’ used to describe ideas moving from the Global South to influence the Global North (Zinsstag et al., 2019) effaces the fact that Global South actors have driven innovation for centuries (Montenegro, Bernales, & Gonzalez-Aguero, 2020; Renaud, 2018).

As such, global health activism demands reclaiming and elevating indigenous knowledge and praxis. This is particularly important in the space of women’s health, where the single narrative of suffering, oppression and marginalisation at the hand of states, patriarchy, and institutions of governance, overshadows successes. For example, Badri & Tripp’s (2017) edited volume highlights many unacknowledged contributions of African women’s activism to wider women’s movements, such as the UN convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, or the notion of ‘gender mainstreaming’ (Jain, 2005, cited in Badri and Tripp, 2017, p.10). Shereen Essof (2013), writing in the Zimbabwean context, attributes this erasure to how outsider scholarship has framed the contributions of grassroots feminist movements as ‘fragmented’ and ‘weak’, by approaching local praxis through technocratic conventions and frameworks. Instead, she calls for work to conceptualise women’s organising and its achievements in the context of everyday struggles for survival. The problem, she asserts, is a lack of paradigms that allow us to recognise quiet disruptions as meaningful to projects of social change.

Here, our paper makes its contribution. We analyse a historical form of collective engagement for women, reimagined for modern times: the Nhangas method. Drawn from traditional Shona practices, the Nhangas is an intergenerational safe space. We explore its value to health-related activism, suggesting that it offers a valuable form of organising able to engage with the realities of complex political, social and cultural environments where women's past, present and futures are negotiated.

### **The old is not yet dead: overcoming the erasure of Black and African praxis**

In Shona/Bantu culture, the Nhangas, which translates to "girls' room" is a traditional round hut for girls and young women at a homestead. For centuries, these sites have been safe spaces for intergenerational womentorship, sexual education, social intelligence and feminist organising. In their account of the Karanga indigenous religion of the Varembe people in Zimbabwe, Tabono Shoko (2016) describes the space as allocated to girls by the head of a household; a site for initiation of girls into adulthood, where girls discussed sexuality, marital conduct, as well as virtues of a 'moral' life, including kindness. Manyonganise & Muskea (2010) specifically name the Nhangas as a protected space and 'no go' zone for men, offering privacy and protection from those, including parents, who may pose risks to young women.

For six years, the Rozaria Memorial Trust (RMT), established by the first author, has run the Nhangas as a space for women's empowerment and activism, reclaiming it as a cultural innovation to shift harmful social norms, enhance empowering dialogue between girls and young women, and enable healing and counselling support (see Table 1). Nhangas discussions have been delivered at grassroots, national, regional and global policy spaces, funded by a range of global donors. RMT has delivered hundreds of sessions, sometimes up to 50 discussions a year. The objectives of the redesigned Nhangas are to enhance health knowledge and well-being for girls and young women; support older women to find pathways for closure on their own experiences and build bridges between women, girls, traditional leaders and policy makers to co-create women-friendly understandings and solutions (see Table 1 for details). Superficially, the Nhangas shares parallels with women-only consciousness raising groups that formed the backbone of second wave feminist praxis in North America and Europe in the 1960's. Lewis and colleagues (2015) provide a modern history of the safe space, noting its emergence as a private sphere response to the silencing of women's voices in public. Such spaces involved women sharing experiences of everyday sexism and bearing witness to tales of struggles and survival. These small-scale discussions often fed into large-scale public activism around issues such as domestic violence and workplace oppression.

Table 1. Key features of the Nhanga, past and present

| <i>Features &amp; functions of the Nhanga</i>                               | <i>Classical structure</i>   | <i>Contemporary structure</i>   |
|---|--|---|
| <i>Multifunctional socially empowering space for learning and mentoring</i> | <p>Nhanga is used as a bedroom, living room, study room and prayer room. Often described as a retreat to ‘find oneself’.</p> <p>Developed skills handed down through generations, including: hair plaiting, making beaded necklaces and adornments, knitting and other survival and livelihood related skills.</p>   | <p>Often described as a retreat to ‘find oneself’ it was is maintained as a site for sexuality education, life skills relating to managing relationships and dating, health and wellbeing.</p>  |
| <i>Inter-generational space for mentoring and skills transfer</i>           | <p>Nhanga is a space controlled by the African girls or unmarried women.</p> <p>Elder women like aunties, mothers and grandmothers would enter by invitation, or to intervene for safety.</p> <p>Young women were given classes on sexuality (largely focused on learning to please a husband), emphasising abstinence, and skills for marriage and life as a woman (Shoko, 2016).</p> | <p>Largely the same; current structure also includes invitation of specific targeted policy actors and powerful community leaders.</p>  |
| <i>A place for healing and enhancing mental health for girls and women</i>  | <p>Within the Nhanga, girls shared stories, played games, discussed proverbs and practiced rituals.</p> <p>The space was a supportive meeting ground for peers, elders and others willing and available to listen and offer advice.</p>  | <p>Largely the same; disclosures of painful personal life experiences often occur, and often girls/women reach out for assistance. As such, RMT has developed clear referral pathways for professional services, including health, counselling and legal support.</p> |

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <i>An empowering space for shifting norms and policies</i> | Maintained and upheld normative structures around womanhood (including oppressive gender norms around sexuality and marriage). | RMT's reimagining of the method has enabled young women to subvert traditional oppressive roles, question oppressive practices (such as child marriage) and drive change via inviting political and traditional policy makers into dialogues with young women on their own terms. |
|--|--|---|

The Nhangas pre-dates what we understand as the 'safe space' posited by second-wave feminism. In her essay *Poetry is not a luxury* (1977/2018), Audre Lorde suggests that roots of Black Women's power, strength and agency are deep and old, but erased through the privileging of white, mainstream perspectives on action and thought. Lorde's ideas about the relevance of emotions for quiet and loud forms of activism have suffered a similar fate within contemporary scholarship, where instead, James Jasper's scholarship is often presented as the origin of such thinking (see Jasper, 1998; 2011). Our work attempts to decolonise the safe space knowledge base, positioning the Nhangas, and safe spaces more broadly, as a tactic originating within African cultural histories.

Across Africa, the picture is similar. In Kenya, women's organising has pre-colonial roots. Regina Mwatha (2017) highlights specific examples of pre-colonial organising and women's self-help groups. For example, in Gikuyu women's *Ngwait* systems women helped each other with labour provision. The Kamba tribe's three level system of organisation and support included *Mwethya*, where women organised around specific short-term tasks to help each other (Mutiso, 1975, cited in Mwatha, 2017). Wangari Maathai's Greenbelt Movement similarly connects activism to motherhood and home (Maathai, 2010). Rural women's spaces began with managing nurseries and planting trees, expanding to critiques of national and international government structures, tracing women's personal and cultural histories, to resistance of oppressive political landscapes (Berger, 2014).

Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) studies highlight safe spaces at work within Black American women's struggles for survival in the 1960s and earlier. She identifies two discrete categories of action connecting to the safe space. *Struggles for group survival*, are actions that create black female spheres of influence within existing social structures, including acts of collective motherhood to secure survival for black children and families, and individual acts that preserve livelihoods (e.g., working for racist employers). Hill Collins suggests that this 'quiet', personal activism is a radical act in the

face of hatred and oppression. Second, *struggles for institutional transformation*, include organising that mirrors mainstream ‘direct’ forms of activism to challenge legal systems and practice (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 219).

Analysis of the Nhang method matters in light of such erasures, contributing to decolonising of health-related feminist praxis in African settings and re-imagining the safe space as a mechanism across a range of activist spaces, *beyond* the private realm. Furthermore, while RMT has delivered the approach since 2014, the method has not been formally evaluated. To pave the way for such investigations we explore the following research question: *What are the processes that contribute to the Nhang’s potential as a form of collective activism for improving women’s health?*

### **Conceptual framework: understanding multi-level activism through a multi-level framework**

In conversations in January and March 2019, we considered our own experiences within the Nhang as a space for activism. We developed a conceptual framework to enable analysis of activism that traverses typical boundaries of space and place, comprised of three interconnected processes: Agency, Power and Space.

***Women’s activism for our time: agency in the reality of constraint.*** In order to view the Nhang as activism, we needed to rethink the notion of agency, which sits at the core of its Western definitions. Sumi Madhok (2013) argues marginalised women’s agency is overlooked by over-emphasising the ability to ‘act freely’ – calling our attention to women’s decisions not to act, or small actions geared towards survival, as meaningful agentic action. Burgess and Campbell (2016) argue that women’s agency should be considered in the contexts of their immediate realities. Actions like the rejection of even seemingly emancipatory policy, such as the 2015 Ugandan Marriage and Divorce bill, emerges as quiet activism enabling current survival. These calls resonate strongly with the work of Black feminists from across the diaspora, notably Patricia Hill Collins (2000), and Sizani Ngubane (Radebe, 2019), who are united in recognising women’s action and agency as *always* constrained by a constellation of interacting oppressive forces. In our analysis we examine quiet organising in the Nhang, what enables it, and its contributions to wider change.

***How constraint happens and ends: power in space.*** To understand the operation of power in activism, we draw on John Gaventa’s *Power Cube* (2006), which sets out a multi-dimensional framework for conceptualising power across multiple domains; levels of participation (where people and power are located), spaces for participation (opportunities for power to be enacted); and forms of power (the types of power at work).

*Levels of participation* refer to the classic dimensions of civil society where social and political power are held: global, national and local arenas. *Spaces for participation* reflects the structuring power of differently composed spaces (Cornwall, 2002). For example, closed spaces are where entry is governed by rules and regulations. Invited spaces allow chosen actors to engage in shared projects of change. Claimed and created spaces, are those where less powerful agents independently organise and establish a space for action. Finally, Gaventa organises different types of power under three broad umbrellas. *Visible power* relates to observable decision making, resources, or political forms of power. *Hidden power* can influence decisions and actions made by others, including the structural power of traditional leaders and governments to set agendas. Finally, *invisible power*, sets the psychological and ideological boundaries of action; referring to discursive, cultural and symbolic power that shapes the possible in a given space.

***Understanding constraint: space, place and installation.*** In attempting to understand the contexts through which various forms of power constrain or enable action, we draw on Saadi Lahlou's installation theory (2017; 2018), which views action as inseparable from: geography (including the built environment); social norms; and individual psychology. An installation is defined as "all the components that produce ... a scene... the functional entity for an activity" (Lahlou, 2018, p. 4). This approach enables consideration of multiple pressures on human action; illuminating that choices available to individuals must be understood in context of socially and geographically structured realities. Installation theory acknowledges that power operates through the everyday, mundane organisation of space. In the context of our analysis, installation theory facilitates an intersectional approach to the constraints on women's action across physical and psychological space.

## **Methodology**

To document the Nhangas as a form of activism, we completed a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) (Chang, 2013; Chang, Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2016). As noted by Hernandez and colleagues (2017) CAE pushes us beyond the 'one-person narrative' of typical ethnographies. Furthermore, inclusion of multiple voices responds to the epistemic violence that permeates the global health field (Dotson 2011), that can occur when external experts speak uncritically on behalf of those from historically marginalised backgrounds. Lapadat (2017) argues CAE supports a much-needed shift towards collective agency and non-exploitative research practice. It reduces the barriers to entry for oft-excluded actors within academic spaces, which is particularly important in light of our aim to redress the imbalance of Black and African voices in analysing feminist praxis (Essof, 2014). To our knowledge, CAE has only been applied in a handful of spaces in Africa and global health, including studies on women's leadership in Africa (Ngunjiri, 2014), pedagogy and research in global health spaces (Finnegan et al., 2017).



All authors are women of Black African descent. Rochelle (RAB) is a Black Caribbean feminist, with more than 15 years' experience as a researcher and activist promoting the health of historically marginalised groups, including work with NG on projects relating to child marriage. Nyaradzayi (NG) and Farirai (FG) are Black Zimbabwean women, who were born and live in communities where they deploy Nhangas conversations. In addition to the challenges facing the erasure of black scholarship cited earlier, we also face a more pragmatic challenge. Activists are largely occupied with 'doing' the work; and face practical barriers in researching and writing. This hinders elevating key praxis developed in communities into academic discourses where they gain the ability to inform policy. CAE provides an opportunity to break this cycle, through early analysis of the contemporary Nhangas method, where researchers explore their own engagement to construct an interpretive narration as the root of analysis.

CAE is deployed along a continuum, emphasising different facets of ethnographic research: the process (graphy), culture (ethno), and the self (auto). We are distributed across this continuum, some more towards the self (RAB & FG), using evocative experiences to uncover how the methodology has changed them, and others (NG; FG) reflecting on process in relation to culture and its positive potential. We reflect on our experience of a different level of implementation; global policy spaces (RAB's participation during two UN meetings in 2019), regional (NG's coordination of and participation in over 100 national and regional policy meetings since 2014), and local grassroots (FG's facilitation and participation in rural community meetings since 2017) organising in Zimbabwe.

### ***Method***

An initial discussion meeting was held in March 2019 between RAB and NG on the Nhangas and the value of the CAE approach to analysing potential contributions to academic discourses on women's agency, health and wellbeing. During this initial meeting, RAB & NG devised the initial structure of the theoretical framework. RAB, NG and FG prepared individual reflective accounts of their participation in Nhangas, sharing initial drafts with RAB by email and WhatsApp. Three discussions were held via WhatsApp to clarify individual reflections in May 2019. Revised reflections were consolidated into a single document and interrogated through our multi-level conceptual framework by RAB. This analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis, moving back and forth between theoretical concepts described in our framework and narratives. The final collective account (presented below) was reviewed by all authors in January 2020. All authors provided comments and revisions, working to agree and finalise themes. Responses to reviewer queries were completed collectively, over email and live WhatsApp discussions in November 2020.

We identified a central theme: *Disruptions of expected installations of power*. This occurred through three mechanisms: emotion, narrative and culture. Each section begins with the author's reflection, followed by an analytical discussion on the theoretical concepts and processes. Presentation of findings are in line with styles used by others conducting CAE elsewhere (Hernandez et al., 2017; Young & McKibban, 2014).

## **Discussion**

### ***What can and can't be said in the halls of power: the Nhangas in global policy spaces.***

**RAB:** *My own experiences of oppression as a Black woman of Caribbean heritage have shaped my desire to change the world. This desire has found a happy home in the discipline of community health psychology – a field defined by its interest in the recognition of strength and enabling action held by historically marginalised groups (Campbell & Murray, 2004). As such, academia is a platform through which I leverage the forms of privilege I access to promote the collective experiences and narratives of those in search for justice with a wider audience; what Hern (2016) identifies as scholar activism.*

*To be invited to the UN, twice, in 2019, was a dream fulfilled. Each time, I participated in Nhangas events alongside more formal engagements in various UN proceedings. In February, I was invited to give a formal 'response from the floor' at a gender mainstreaming side event at the UN Centre for Economic Development in Africa, an official African Union Summit pre-event. Entry is regulated; lines weaving around the building while we confirm approvals signed by the right people, photos taken in the right building at the right time. Name placards, officials noting my time, the length of my comments, and documenting them for public record structured my engagement. During these events, no one speaks out of turn, displays their rage or consternation. My notes were full of emotions, but the speech that emerged was driven by facts. The enormity of the UN seemed to decide what I can and cannot say about women's mental health. The battle for what to say is not an easy one, but the activist quickly seems to lose.*

*In March, I attended the 63<sup>rd</sup> UN CSW proceedings. The event was held in the UN Plaza Hotel – (see photo Nhangas-Binti, Plaza One Hotel, Supplementary Material, Figure 1) across from the main UN offices, where dignitaries, academics, practitioners, and gender activists rubbed shoulders, in spaces structured by similar protocols.*

*When I arrive, the previous session is still underway. I am surprised to see dignitaries, including a former African First Lady, speaking with young women about the importance of self-care and love.*

*Amazed, I stand at the back, until a young woman smiles and beckons me forward to join the circle. I sit next to the head of the ministry of gender for a Southern African Country. In the Nhangas, position and rank are meaningless. You enter, remove your shoes, and sit on the floor – pillows are available for comfort, chairs if you have a condition that limits your ability to get onto the ground. To perform in this space requires leaving labels behind.*

*We laugh at funny stories of first periods. We cry at stories shared about abuse in forced marriage. We listen to stories from invited male comrades, who share how their exposure to violence has shaped them. We discuss the need to drive debates around mental health – in ways that extend beyond the parameters of my talk, touching on the intersections of violence, the intergenerational nature of its mental health consequences, and our need to address this within efforts to end poverty and gender injustice. We do this in a space enabled by the same cultures that, in their own ways, contribute to oppression, highlighting the simultaneous necessity and challenge of culture in our lives.*

*Suddenly I begin to speak of my own trauma, experiences and exposures to violence. Things that I have been told are not for academic spaces fall from my lips in the most uncontrollable ways. It is freeing, a truth at the helm of my commitment but I never imagined that I would make such declarations in an invited talk. As I looked around the room, I saw more was gained from this act than any lecture. Nods in agreement, a hand reaching out to squeeze mine. My stories, our stories. A shift in my own practice is solidified through a reminder that my work is always a personal and political act. In the body of a black woman these two things are never separated.*

***Success in this space: disrupting physical installations for meaningful engagement***

RAB's account highlights the Nhangas's ability to disrupt the power dynamics and hierarchies typically associated with global level policy spaces. How academic and global governance spaces demand certain forms of performativity in order to engage effectively emerges in this account, reflecting Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power (1989) and habitus at work; a form of invisible power (Gaventa 2006) that structures behaviour and actions.

Maria do Mar Perieria's recent ethnography on activism within higher education (2016) highlights how the typical performative demands of the academy hinder impact-related research and possibilities for activist engagement. RAB's contrasting accounts of her experiences at UN related meetings embodies this. Both accounts are anchored in a desire to use the academy as a place for activism and examine the limits imposed on the voices she hopes to represent.

The UN operates as a physical installation through which power works – its structures, systems, and practices define individuals who enter this physical space and only allows a version of activism that reifies these systems, practices and structures. The only voices heard are the ones that speak correctly, reinforcing particular discourses within the space. The UN is an invited space (Gaventa, 2006) where civil society members can contribute and connect to power and resources to enact change. However, the complexity and emotive power of the stories there are unlikely to be picked up or acted on, as there is little opportunity to disrupt the other performative dynamics of the system.

At the second event, the Nhangas create an opportunity to fracture these cyclical processes. It disrupts the physical installation through the shifting of the use of space – chairs are removed and replaced with pillows; people remove their shoes to sit on the floor, share stories and tears. Emotions, which have been argued as the foundations and fuel for activist engagement (Lorde, 2018; Jasper, 2011) are the currency of engagement in Nhangas, when the rupture begins to emerge in this alternative space. It disrupts a social psychological installation in the minds of those who hold positional power, shifting the foundations of identity that define who people are and how they act. Heads of state, academics, activists, all are physically positioned in ways that level the playing field, allowing stories of shared oppressions and disclosures of long-hidden truths.

### ***Bringing ‘home’ into politics- the Nhangas in a national space***

*NG: I am a daughter of Zimbabwe; a daughter of change. Born into a family made through child marriage, I am aware of the double-edged sword of culture. Our culture holds the essence of our ubuntu, weaving identity into our being but it is equally a space of gendered oppression. In its roots are seeds of feminine power that carry possibilities for renewal and transformation. It is this knowledge that led me to establish RMT in 2007 and to recreate Nhangas in 2014. Since then, I have participated in over 100 conversations led by our organisation, within various villages in my country, at national level addressing specific themes, and at regional and international convenings within intergovernmental and civil society spaces.*

*Hosting Nhangas in Africa has been a revolution, reclaiming culture to open dialogue with policy makers, break down barriers and influence conversations. At the first African Girls Summit on Ending Child Marriage, we hosted a special Nhangas in my capacity as African Union Goodwill Ambassador on Ending Child Marriage with the African Union Commission. In this instance, we also used the Siswati name Egumeni, including cultural artefacts from other countries, which endeared Africans from many countries occupying the space as they began to envision themselves back home in their communities.*

*We curated the space with mats and artefacts, insisting on the three basic practical principles common to the Nhangas' traditional structure. First, that the space was inter-generational, but that conversations were led by girls and young women centred on their own stories. Second, that all who enter the space remove their shoes and sit on the floor. Third, that you listen before sharing or commenting. These three acts immediately shifted the energy and power dynamics, turning the space into one of mutual respect.*

*The highlight was when the president of a southern African country and his team visited the Nhangas for dialogue, removing his shoes to sit on the floor and listen to the girls. There was genuine listening and reflection together, which shifted the attitudes of the other senior policy makers who were challenged to give quality time to girls and young women. The move from pity to empathy and affirmation was visceral; the girls were not just vulnerable in that space, but co-creators of solutions. The girls shared experiences of living with HIV, suicide attempts and forced child marriage. But they also shared successes; stories of returning to school and running community clubs or public service activities. The Nhangas deconstructed the single narrative around the African girl dominant in development discourse and revealed a new power of resourcefulness and creativity, which has often been shrouded in the narrative of misery. It was healing for the girls to simply be affirmed.*

*Over the years, RMT has repeated the Nhangas sessions at various events, such as the International AIDS Council, with Ministers of Health, and at the SADC People Summit. The feedback has been the same: the Nhangas restores dignity to young women as they lead and influence action grounded in their experience. It builds a tapestry of human connection between adults and girls. The latter cease to be a photo or statistic, instead assuming the full identity of the rights holder at the centre of development discourse.*

***Success in this space: power of culture to flatten hierarchies and disrupt a single narrative***

NG's account similarly highlights the ability of the Nhangas to disrupt an installation typically associated with civil society related activism. The stage is national rather than global, centred around debates and efforts to tackle drivers of poor health and wellbeing for vulnerable young women in the region. In Zimbabwe, reports around young women often appear bleak: 32% of young women aged 20-24 are married before 18 years of age. Among those aged 15-24, nearly 49% believed wife beating is justified (UNFPA, 2020). Rates of new HIV infections among women in this age group are more than double those of their male counterparts (UNAIDS, 2020).

The road to gender equality in Zimbabwe, like elsewhere, has been complex. In her history of the Zimbabwean feminist movement, Essof (2013) notes that struggles for women's rights were marked

by gendered cultural battles. Notwithstanding women's contributions to the liberation struggles of the 1960s and 70s, women's founded post-independence, marked by resistance from male leaders to changes in women's social roles. New state structures and policies promoted women's engagement through formal representation, labour laws for equal pay, and the sex disqualification act of 1980, allowed women to hold office. However, widespread rejection of these aims emerged when changes to traditional law were proposed. Essof recounts *Operation Clean-up* in 1983, where the government authorised raids that rounded up over 6,000 women and girls, charging them with prostitution.

Longstanding feminist debates have positioned culture as a hindrance to achieving change. In contrast, the Nhangas highlights the positive contributions of culture to possible activist organising, including its ability to fracture installations enshrined by traditional male ownership of political spaces. Women leverage symbolic power manifested through structures that are women-owned, which quietly claims a space to speak. A respected cultural praxis becomes the platform for women to claim respect, muting the other performative dimensions that bestow power to male political leaders. The result is the privileging of women in ways that are accepted by the same men who, in other contexts, may be oppressors. Those who are often the targets of interventions suddenly have the ability to instruct the technocrats who design them.

NG's account also highlights the power of spaces that attend to the knowledge of the body (Calafell, 2013). The Nhangas allows us to imagine possibilities for women's improvement not only through alternative narratives, but the performance of those narratives. This privileges the body as a way of knowing and knowledge, by truths told by those who have experienced and survived the realities that contribute to poor health outcomes for women. Re-writing a narrative of misery also carries opportunities for healing and recognition, highlighted by recent evidence on the mental health impacts of storytelling (Mannell et al., 2018). Furthermore, it confirms the political ability of narratives through articulating versions of events that are contrary to what is expected, as noted by Kros' (2017) work highlighting how narratives of families affected by the Marikana Massacre shaped truth and reconciliation events in South Africa.

***Bridging to and beyond a 'lost' generation: Nhangas in community space***

*FG: In reflecting on the importance of the Nhangas I am drawn to three things: relationships, ownership and voice. I am a member of the 'born free' generation; post-independence Zimbabwe is all I have known. I know that I am luckier than many young women around me, having had the benefit of my parents' success to shape my life and opportunities. My exposure to a myriad of cultures growing up taught me the beauty of the world's diversity, contrasted against the reality that many lack the privilege to fully enjoy their rights nor actualise their potential. This realisation is what*

*drives my activism and work with RMT and my mother: commitment to promoting changes that will ensure young women can be more than the circumstances of their birth. Our work creates spaces for change within the boundaries of what is possible in current and political moment. It particularly focuses on women from rural and poor backgrounds. Now, there is a growing divide between the older generation and the 'born frees', a generation who has lived in post-independence Zimbabwe. The Nhangas matters more than ever.*

*I have facilitated over 150 community Nhangas with young women like myself since 2018, around 30 in 2019-20 alone (mostly online, with 127 women connecting on WhatsApp). In our face-to-face work, we have seen the Nhangas bridge two generations. The girls would often complain that they feel unheard by the elders who deemed them as a 'lost generation', with some sharing that they didn't want to share details on the start of their periods with their family. The Nhangas has helped to reignite open and frank discussion and re-foster the dialogue between the two generations. Young girls begin to imagine new topics and ways of speaking to their elders and invite them into the Nhangas to talk about their feelings and challenges.*

*Working with young women and girls who are so full of energy despite life's difficulties, has been a profound experience for me and many older women who are the typical 'teachers'. This is a product of the honesty of the space; young women don't often hold back, sharing the pain and hurt they have been through, alongside their hopes and dreams for the future. This encourages others present to do the same. Elder generations were raised to believe that it is women's duty to carry their families and communities, even to their own detriment. Many older women carry emotional scars from practices like chirambo (sexual activity from uncles), and young women affirm the need to push for change. Following my arbitrary arrest and detention in 2019, young women in the Nhangas inspired me to be honest with myself when most of the world applauded me for 'staying strong'. One young woman, who now runs a Nhangas of her own, held my hand and wished me the same healing, which she had found in the Nhangas (See Supplementary Material Figure 3; Nhangas Hut).*

*There is virtually no access to local policy makers or traditional leadership. Under typical circumstances, the only interaction girls have with such power is when they are brought to traditional courts in search of justice, though their stories are narrated by a male or an older woman. The Nhangas provides a platform for these groups to engage on a level playing field. Initially, this seems unnatural; girls are unsure if they can speak up, keeping their eyes low, making themselves as small as possible. Men show their discomfort with the rules of the space; taking a backseat is unnatural. However, by the end of a session, the dynamics of each side change; girls hold their heads up, speak up, speak out. Men display empathy, nods of agreement.*

*The Nhangas also proved the impact the space can have on the girls individually. Many from local Nhangas are supported to attend national discussions by our organisation. For some the Nhangas also transcends physical space and time. I was once approached by a young girl while out in the community, she said "sisi farai, egai timbo pinda ka mu nhanga" (loosely translated to: can we step into the Nhangas for a moment). With time, it becomes a space that we draw on when we need to speak, to be and to feel heard. We take the Nhangas with us everywhere.*

### ***Success in this space: the Nhangas as a travelling idea***

FG's account also resonates with aforementioned themes highlighting the power of culture. What type of change is possible in the context of material deprivation, as is faced in rural Zimbabwe? In the regions where the Nhangas has been deployed, one issue raised is the traditional cultures around early marriage of girls. Economic grounds often sustain the practice, with girls presenting families with an immediate source of household income (Girls not Brides, 2020). Elsewhere on the continent, adherence to regressive gender norms have also been associated with structural realities. However, the cultural acceptability of the Nhangas as a space where young women can speak begins to establish acceptable receptive social environments for older women to speak about their experiences and maintain ownership in that process, even in the presence of those who typically hold more power (such as traditional leaders). The importance of receptive social environments has been well documented in social movement literature (Campbell et al., 2010). As noted in FG's account, this begins to shift the thinking and practices of female and male elders in these spaces.

FG's account also highlights the ability for the Nhangas to transcend its own physical installation – emerging as an emotional location for meaningful engagement. This feature is supported by work in other resource poor communities, such as Brazilian favelas, where the importance of imagined worlds are associated with successful projects of change (Jovchelovitch, 2012). Furthermore, FG highlights the importance of individual change to later collective empowerment (Hill Collins, 2000). The Nhangas establishes a new psychological installation for women who develop ideas of the self that translate beyond physical domain. The key disruption is of the power that a cultural installation holds over young women that typically contributes in feelings of exclusion and insignificance of their voices. The performance in the Nhangas forces those who typically hold power to listen first, and acknowledge what is heard, through action. This becomes a lived example of a new possibility. Women carry these small actions with them, promoting different behaviour in new spaces they encounter, which sometimes spills out into collective engagement, as seen in FG's account of a young woman leading her own Nhangas.

## **Conclusions**



Our paper highlights how the Nhangas mobilise safe spaces as sites for the promotion of health-related activism at multiple levels of civil society action. We suggest that the Nhangas can potentially be deployed across global, regional and local sites, disrupting power through leveraging positive aspects of African cultural praxis. However, we also acknowledge that our reflections on transferability are rooted in our positionalities as women with the ability to traverse various boundaries given our own access to forms of material and symbolic power, while the capacity of young rural women to attend national and global Nhangas events depend on access to other structural resources. However, this gap highlights another value of the Nhangas's operation, particularly at the national level. Brokerage of relationships between young rural women and powerful actors can provide access to material resources, but beyond this, powerful actors carry these ideas and experiences from the Nhangas to inform their future decision making. Future formal evaluations of the Nhangas's impact should explore these areas.

The Nhangas fractures installations upheld by symbolic and decision-making power, mediated by spatial dimensions. At the global level, cultural and emotional connections appear to mute the impact of positional power maintained by structures. At the national level, narratives and cultural performances of feminine power mute embedded cultural and gendered hierarchies to allow young women to contribute to decision making about their lives. At the local level, it fractures the symbolic and decision-making power held by elders and leaders using the internal cultural scripts to redistribute agency. Each time, power and possibilities are transformed in different ways that creates new activist opportunities relative to the space where it occurs.

Formal collaborations with more powerful actors are a main pillar of typical civil society mobilisation. Global policy makers are lobbied to care more about women's realities; national policy debates are pushed to develop and deliver more meaningful programming, community groups are pushed to change gender limiting norms that impact on women's health. Typical activism does not suggest that the route to achieving these ends involves the development of shared emotional connection across groups. Most existing evidence on the role of emotions focuses on its ability to foster a collective identity among activists and individuals (Brown & Pickerill, 2009).

Conversely, we identified the importance of emotions and acts of care in building bridges between groups that are often diametrically opposed in the Nhangas. Shared emotional experiences runs through the Nhangas at each level. Young and old women find ways to talk about shared truths, while male policy leaders hand power to young women so their voices are heard in empowering ways. In global spaces, power and position shifts to change what is 'sayable'. This appears to contribute to the development of emotional citizenry, a specific form of quiet activism described by Kye Askins (2016)

as bonds developed through talking, sharing and engagement towards shared action. While in their account the action is often within groups; in the Nhangas it occurs across groups of difference (young girls & older women; policy makers & young women) which has potential for new and radical forms of change.

Our claims are limited by the small sample of accounts; three women united by a positive experience of participation in the Nhangas. CAE as applied here does not enable us to speak for the many women who have participated in the Nhangas run by RMT over the past six years, limiting our contributions to decolonisation remaining at the level of the academy. However, we are drawn to the potential of methods like CAE to create a more equal platform for the voices of women participating in activist spaces, to be elevated within formal academic scholarship, on equal terms with academics, as we have done here. CAE's approach to analysis is sensitive to the ways power and parallel experiences of privilege and oppression shape thinking and analysis. If scholars seek to drive decolonising beyond the academy, CAE provides a potential route to elevating and equalising voices beyond typical qualitative methods where analysts often speak on the behalf of others. Structured evaluations of the Nhangas's impact on specific parameters of well-being, collective and individual agency, in the future should be based on a systematic and participatory assessment of the perspectives held by young women, and wider communities.

Despite these limitations, we have identified specific factors that suggest the Nhangas's importance to activism. In current times, where the world is full of antagonistic forms of collective activism and organising, love, care and quiet engagement based on the discovery of shared histories and truths could provide a healing tonic for us all. The Nhangas points us in a direction where this is possible.

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