JENNI WILLIAMS' VOICE

"I was born in Gwanda in Matabeleland, a province in Zimbabwe on 1st April 1962; one of seven children, all of varying shades. My mother, Violet, was one of three children born to Irish man and a Matabele woman of Rozvi extraction. My grandfather, Raymond, had fled the Troubles in Ireland and had become a wealthy miner in southern Matabeleland. He met my grandmother, who renamed Janet, when she was asked to nurse him after he had become ill from a breathing condition caused by the mining environment. It was only upon his death that his family back in Ireland found out that he had a black wife and a family in Africa.

As my grandfather had died long before I was born, my grandmother ruled as the matriarch of the family and our lives revolved around school holidays in the rural areas. Some of my earliest memories are of sitting in the shade, chatting with Gogo (grandmother) in Sindebele, her tribal language. Gogo could hardly speak English and so it fell to us to learn our tribal language so that we could converse and learn from her.

My grandmother had the challenge of raising children of mixed race in colonial, racist Rhodesia. It was a peculiar lesson for her to learn that because my grandfather was wealthy, money allowed her children acceptance in a world that marginalized black people. And so to allow her children to progress in this world that judged by colour, she stayed behind the scenes, allowing Raymond to dominate as the parent, as white seemed to be right. My mother's formative years were therefore spent under the influence of a liberal male who allowed her to do things a more traditionally raised Matabele girl would never have been allowed to do.

She however also had to learn bitter lessons as a single mother raising seven children. Despite being treated as a second-class, firstly because of her colour and secondly because she was a woman, my mother found a way around this discrimination and instilled in us, her children, a culture of dignity, self-worth and respect. Despite being extremely poor, she also lavished us with love, which made us forgetful of our poverty.

As I was lighter and a cherished daughter, my mother found a sponsor to get us enrolled into 'white' schools. We may not have had food but she would get us educated for a better tomorrow. As she was darker- skinned however, she could never attend functions or meetings at the school, even though it was a Catholic-run school.

As I grew up in this family, I often found myself confused about my own identity. As one observed, the white race seemed to have everything, the temptation to mimic them so one could have everything was a big temptation. I found myself 'ironing' my hair straight, never wanting to get caught in the rain or else the telltale kinky and frizz would be evident and people would know about my black blood. The world I saw as a teenager said that if you wanted to do well you had to be white to be RIGHT.

When, my hair all dry and straight, I would hear the depth of racist comments from white Rhodesians, I would feel even more isolated. Up to this day, I still have an active racist radar but these days, I do not remain silent and am more certain about the space I occupy in life.

As a young adult in the newly independent Zimbabwe, I thought we could forget the colour issue and embraced life with excitement. At this time I met and fell in love with a white guy, he told me he did not care about my mixed blood and wanted to marry me. His parents arrived from out of the country to attend our wedding ceremony but when faced with the reality of my family all the colours of the rainbow, they walked out on the ceremony and spent the next year quoting to my husband all forms of racist 'facts' about black throw-back children. Our young marriage could not take the strain, despite the blue-eyed daughter we produced, and the marriage failed.

I remember a visit to Gogo with my three- year old daughter Natalie, and showing off that she could speak iSindebele so well. Gogo told me not to encourage her to speak the tribal language because it would get her nowhere. I argued that she had to know her roots but was silenced when Gogo said she was proud of her 'white' great grandchildren, 'she will do better for me as a 'white' child'. Years later when I would take my sons to see her, she would dance with them in her arms and show off how fair they were.

But the Zimbabwe I looked forward to with such promise would once again bring the issue of colour into my life. In 2002, I was retained to represent the Commercial Farmers Union(CFU) and help them to communicate their point of view in the incredible panorama of the violent land seizures. Whilst it is a widely held view that the Mugabe regime conducted this land reform to correct historical imbalances, black farmers have also had their land taken. It is a difficult issue and

hard to explain – two wrongs never make a right. But I had occasion one day to visit a farm to try to ascertain the condition of an infirm 83 year old woman barricaded in by 'war veterans'. As we arrived on the farm, myself and a friend were set upon by war veterans. To him they ranted and raved about the 'chimurenga' war in Shona but to me they threatened to remove the white skin off my body. We managed to plead for our lives and left unable to help the lady and too traumatised to talk about the experience.

My work with the farmers unleashed the activist in me and together with Sheba Dube, I formed Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA). Zimbabwe had fast become a violent society and promises of social justice long forgotten. We formed WOZA as a movement to show a peaceful way women of all colours and class could restore dignity for the people of Zimbabwe.

In response, I have been arrested over 33 times, mostly during peaceful protests. As a women human rights defender in Zimbabwe today, I continue to face discrimination as a woman and as a person of lighter skin. Last year I spent nine weeks in prison after being denied bail. My stay in prison and police cells has contained many challenges because of the colour of my skin. Firstly, I am easy to spot in the crowd of darker skinned members of WOZA. Secondly, in Zimbabwe, Independence may have come but democracy has not yet arrived - the perception that white-skinned people are the trouble- makers is very pronounced in all forms of propaganda. So I am normally one of the first to be arrested and very often the first to be beaten in protests.

It would be remiss of me if I failed to mention that I am an African woman. In Africa, women are regarded as second class citizens and women like me who 'don't know their place' are also a target. Several police officers took my husband aside as he would come to bring me food in jail, they would offer to buy him a drink and offer him brotherly advise – 'buy a sjambok and use it to keep her in her place'. Luckily for me, he never did take their advice! A few weeks ago as we conducted a peaceful protest outside the Ministry of Education in Harare demanding affordable school fees, the riot police sang – 'what kind of men are these who let their women make noise in the streets', as they beat us with their baton sticks.

I am normally amongst scores of women arrested and police officers who take me at white face value lambast me with all forms of racist abuse. All the hatred of 'western imperialists' are brought down upon my kinky hair covered head. My only method of coping is to look people straight in the eye and tell them that 'I am a human rights defender fighting for social justice and when we get it they will also benefit.'

I have also found myself the butt of derision because I am of mixed race, not purely black and not purely white, so despised by both. Or as a friend likes to call me, a hybrid.

As I have found my place as a women human rights defender, this has helped me arrive as an individual – faced with bigger challenges of fighting for dignity and equality, I am now able to cope with a daily life where from one moment to the next, my skin is too white to be right or my blood too black to be beautiful. I can cope because this experience gives me the advantage of being both. I can love all equally. I was in prison last year when I received the news that Barack Obama had become president of the United States.

Despite the intolerable conditions and my prison uniform, I felt a more important member of the human race. That event boosted my belief that we can win the war against intolerance and I see signs of victory every day – Yes WE CAN.

I thank you".

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