RE-VALUING REVOLUTION:
WOMEN’S RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN SWAZILAND AND POTENTIALS
FOR TRANSFORMATIVE NON-VIOLENCE

by

Julie Xuan Ouellet

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Masters of Arts
Graduate Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Julie Xuan Ouellet 2012
RE-VALUING REVOLUTION:
WOMEN’S RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN SWAZILAND AND POTENTIALS FOR
TRANSFORMATIVE NON-VIOLENCE
Master of Arts in Adult Education and Community Development 2012
Julie Xuan Ouellet
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

Abstract

The patriarchal systems, stories, and powers that govern our world have made women extremely vulnerable to the threat of physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual violence. Despite efforts of millions of people working to end this attack, personal violation is a daily reality for many women and one that I believe will not change until efforts to end violence against women begin to address the very roots of dominant culture. This research will explore the personal experiences of five women’s rights activists in Swaziland who are engaged in a transformative practice to end violence against women. Through in depth open-ended interviews, I look at the ways each activist’s life journey reflects her changing understanding of formative values. Following this, I consider ways in which this personal development has led each woman to a deeply transformative, rather than simply a reactive, response to violence against women.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I was sixteen I sat on the shores of Luanda at sunset and felt the Earth gently turn. In that instant I fell in love with my Creator. God, thank you for moving me with the very same consistency, care, and purpose that you move every element in our universe, big and small.

To the women who are the heart of this thesis: Hlobsile, Dee, Gigi, Cebile, Dudu. Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences with me with so much love, emotion, and openness. And thank you to Xolile, Busi, and Christine for all of the faxing, form-filling, emailing, referring, advising, and scheduling that went into making those interviews happen.

My Supervisor, Dr. Angela Miles thank you for your incredible patience, for challenging and supporting my ideas from their inception to the birth of this thesis, and for helping me meet all of my (often unreasonable) self-imposed deadlines. Dr. Njoki Wane, I have been inspired and calmed by every one of our conversations. I am so grateful to have worked with you closely this year; your support has been an anchor. Dr. Anne Goodman, thank you for your open door, for your unique insight into non-violence, and your consistent willingness to help. Dr. Kimberly Stratton, the encouragement, dedication, and friendship you have shown me throughout my academic career have been truly invaluable. Each of you has paved the way for this study and others like it and for that I am profoundly grateful.

Mom, Dad, and Kyla. Nothing can compare to being in the presence of people who have known and loved you your entire life. What an incredible privilege it has been to be part of our little wandering family. Your laughter, your pain, and your resilience are in everything I do that I am proud of.
My Rolston Family, your warmth and encouragement have grounded me when I needed it the most. Thank you for always giving me a place to rest, to play, to think, to dream, to work, and to laugh.

To my grandfather, Papie. By example, you taught me that curiosity, non-attachment, and innocence are ingredients for a happy and healthy soul. Thank you for your interest in my work, your cuddles, your questions, and your unwavering acceptance of who I am.

Thank you to my mother Fofo Mdluli, and my sister Lomkhosi. For opening a loving home to me over the last five years, for driving me across the country for interviews, for guiding me, and for always believing in me.

My sincere gratitude to Mandeep, Devi, Gibson, Morna, Vrinda, and Jadie for everything from words of motivation, to welcome distractions, to deadline reminders. Thank you for listening, for editing, for understanding, for pushing, and for forcing me to take breaks.

Imara Ajani. Where do I begin? Thank you for covering the walls of our apartment with blank paper, for listening to the first 80% of this every day for the last year, for constantly reminding me of my gifts, for working beside me all of those late nights, and for never letting me neglect the important non-thesis related things in life. Thank you for witnessing the tears, for talking down the fears, and for celebrating the breakthroughs. Above everything, thank you for always trusting and nurturing that little voice in my gut and for teaching me how to do the same.
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND HISTORIES OF POWER</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Violence Against Women: An Overview</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Political and Legal Considerations</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Culture</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Christianity</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Potentials for Transformative Learning</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: PERSPECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Patriarchy and Systems of Violence</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Feminist, Womanist, Activist</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Qualitative Research and a Critical Paradigm</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 My Position as a Researcher</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Methods</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Profiles of Interviewees</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: SURVIVING PATRIARCHY, UNLEARNING VIOLENT VALUES</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 On Beauty</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 On Purity</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 On Love</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 On Strength</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: PRACTICING TRANSFORMATIVE NON-VIOLENCE</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Re-thinking Religion</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Taking Personal Authority</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Working with the Powerful</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND HISTORIES OF POWER

Injustice doesn’t just lead to material deprivation; it leads to spiritual deprivation, hopelessness and futility in imagining something different...To overlook this is to overlook the spiritual strength which subordinated groups and individuals have displayed when they have persisted with visions of transformation in the face of tremendous obstacles. (Fernandes, 2003, p. 117)

1.1 Introduction

Women’s rights activists are faced with the daily challenge of addressing a gendered violence that is so expansive and so profound that it has outlived generations of women. The depth of spiritual resilience required to power a movement this essential to the survival of humanity is too often overlooked. It is forgotten because women’s lives continue to be entrenched in dominant patriarchal structures that -- reform as they might -- do not sufficiently represent or uphold the efforts of millions of people working to end Violence Against Women (VAW). As a women’s rights advocate, I work to improve laws, march for more equitable rights, and design programmatic tools to advance gender justice. But as a woman, I pray for a more complete freedom for my gender; one that is whole, healing, and values the intuitive, instinctive, and authentic knowledges of all of us. A freedom that I believe will only come when efforts to end violence against women begin to address the very roots of dominant culture.

This research will explore the personal experiences of five women’s rights activists in Swaziland who are engaged in a transformative practice to end violence against women. Through in depth open-ended interviews, I look at the ways each woman’s life journey reflects her changing understanding of formative values. Following this, I consider ways in which this personal development has led each activist to a transformative, rather than simply a reactive, response to violence against women. My interest in this research has been greatly influenced by the stories I have listened to and shared with VAW survivors, my work as a women’s rights activist in Swaziland, and the writings of a number of African women who have identified the need for greater understandings of how gendered violence is being
addressed in creative, critical, transformative ways (McFadden 2007, Tamale and Oloka-Onyango 1995).

1.2 Violence Against Women: An Overview

When a woman grows up in a male dominant society, violence isn’t something that sneaks into her body one night when she leaves her door unlocked. It is an ideology and a social practice that moulds her, one that she is relentlessly squeezed and squished and educated into. So by the time a man pounds himself into the pelvis, or ribs, or spirit of a woman she has already been steadily and often invisibly violated. Some researchers have explored this gendered oppression through analyses that distinguish between acts of violence and acts of violation (Garfield, 2005) but in this thesis I use these terms interchangeably. A broad definition of violence is not restricted to physical and sexual injury; it includes the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual manipulation of oneself or another. In this sense, where there is violence there is always violation, and where there is violation there is always violence.

In Swaziland, one in three girls have been found to be victims of physical or sexual abuse before the age of eighteen (UNICEF, 2007), a statistic that doubles amongst the 20-something demographic of women. Canada is among the many countries that have published similar national prevalence rates. But in neither country can these statistics begin to illustrate the relentless intrusions to a woman’s soul that occur both independently of, and alongside, the physical and sexual abuse she might endure throughout her lifetime. Edmund O’Sullivan (2002) explains this beautifully in the following passage.

When we think of home, the idea of safe boundaries comes to mind. Ideally, our home is a place where nurturance, succorance, and affirmations are expected, it is not a special location but rather a region of nearness with boundaries that give us security and trust. We can say; then, that our house is our home. We can also say that our body is our home. Violence is, within this context, a process that violates those boundaries of trust and security. Rape is violent not only because it is a physical violation but, more so, because it is a violation of those boundaries of self that give us a trust and security in life. It is a deep invasion of the spirit, and violations of the spirit do great damage. (p. 176)
Women consistently experience assaults to their boundaries, not just at the hands of partners, family members, and strangers, but by the dominant socio-political systems in which they live (Garfield, 2005; Steinman, 1992). Gloria Steinman (1992; 1983), bell hooks (2000; 2002; 2000), and Audre Lorde (1976; 1982; 1993) are among many well-known feminists who have explored the profound instances of self-loss women withstand as a consequence to this reality. The act of pulling an individual away from the person she was born to be by way of systems that confine her agency and autonomy is violence and must be understood as such.

Women’s experiences of violence refer to what they think, feel, and do when cultural and social conditions and practices threaten, jeopardize, and compromise their sense of personhood. But their experiences of violence also refer to what is done, by whom, and for what purpose when cultural and social arrangement place constraints on their needs, interests, and aspirations as human beings. (Garfield, 2005, p. 13)

To neglect this deeper definition is to neglect all of the influences and manifestations of women’s gendered oppression and to rely solely on what Gail Garfield (2005) calls a “government sponsored discourse on violence” (p.10). An understanding of, and approach to, VAW that is funder-driven, not woman driven. This is a one-size-fits-all, easily measured, solution-based discourse (Garfield, 2005) that “not only distorts all women’s experiences but also marginalizes the meaning of violence in their lives” (p. 10). If we truly hope to understand the breadth of women’s experiences of violence, we must first begin to critically and consciously unpack the stories that sustain them.

1.3 Political and Legal Considerations

Some people talk about “the corridors of power”. I like the image of a forest, where trees compete with each other to reach the life-giving, strength-supplying sunshine. This light is the source of power, and being able to access it denotes a powerful position. When the forest canopy becomes dense and closes up, it is impossible for some of the lower trees to develop fully, because, although there is protection for them, the light is excluded and the competition for nutrients too fierce. Only those who are able to reach the light can be strong, solid and attain their true potential. (Fourie, 2002, p. 117)
Colonialism has been one of the most destructive processes in human history, and one that has been detrimental to the freedom and safety of women in African countries. Swaziland began to form as an organized independent nation in 1750 under the leadership of Ngwane III. To this day, its demographic has consisted almost exclusively of Xhosa and Zulu ethnicities (Encyclopedia of Nations, n.d.). At the turn into the 20th century, Swaziland was colonized after having been occupied by white settlers since 1840 (High Commission of Swaziland, n.d.). The British relinquished direct control of the country in 1903 but they continued to rule Swaziland as a colony for the next 60 years (Nation’s Encyclopedia n.d.). On September 6th 1968, Swaziland regained its independence and shortly thereafter, King Sobhuza I, decided to do away with the imposed British system of governance that he felt was unsuited to the culture and customs of the Swazi people. Instead, Tinkhunda, traditional governance, was nationally enacted in 1979 (The African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, 2006). Under Tinkhunda, it is illegal for anyone to form a political party or oppose the monarchy.

The current King, Mswati III, inherited the thrown in 1986 when he was just eighteen years old. He reintroduced a civil law constitution in 2005 that currently operates alongside Swaziland’s customary system of legislation Swazi Law and Culture (The African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, 2006). Both of Swaziland’s legal systems have been harmful to women because both are hierarchical models increasingly dominated by men. Although the re-establishment of customary law is an important initiative, its formation into a national legislative system involved lengthy discussions and agreements between colonial rulers and male elders which inevitably had a negative impact on the status of women (Nhlapo, 1991).

Colonial administration either misunderstood the nature of African Institutions or held a view of African society which saw women as rightless entities under the authority of men. Whatever their different motivations, these forces between them promoted, in the name of tradition, the emergence of rigid rules of ‘customary law’ in place of custom. (p. 113)

Today Swazi Law and Culture dictates that a woman is unable to inherit property, receive bank loans, or register property in her name (Brown, n.d.). Because these laws are not written
down they are easily changed, re-interpreted, and adjusted for the benefit of those who have the authority to enact them.

Women had hoped that the new civil constitution would grant them more political agency. But having been adapted from the old South African colonial constitution, it is highly flawed and includes unclear laws regarding rape, the legal age of marriage, the custody of children, and domestic abuse (Brown, n.d.). Women’s rights activists have been pressuring the King to enact a Children’s Bill and Sexual Offenses and Domestic Violence Bill that they feel will help fill some of these harmful gaps. The bills have come under much political scrutiny and have yet to be enacted despite being actively debated and continuously edited since their inception six years ago (The African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, 2006). This political history has stifled women’s freedom to an unprecedented extent. Those who do choose to take legal action where any form of abuse to their personhood is concerned have been left to negotiate between two oppressive systems of patriarchal jurisprudence and leadership.

1.4 Culture

By legally naming African male elders as the proprietors of national, community, and familial resources, colonizers and post-colonial legislation has sanctioned the unbalanced level of control men have within the cultural sphere in many post-colonial African countries (Nhlapo, 1991). This power imbalance has enabled the manipulation of values, customs, and practices to become harmful or more harmful to women (Fernandes, 2003), including those that were initially intended to protect and support them (Kolawole, 1997, Nhlapo, 1991). Kolawole (1997) for example, has analyzed several West African proverbs whose interpretations have been entirely distorted over time from being empowering to discriminatory.

Some of the values that form the core of many African worldviews including the emphasis on respect for the elderly, the importance of having male heirs, and the insistence of women marrying, have been tweaked or restricted in ways that sustain male superiority (Nhlapo,
Thandabantu Nhlapo (1991) explains that “in the context of a subsistence economy, the very rules that appeared designed for the subjugation of women often operated to ensure their security” (p.119). Marriage and large families were not structures that initially sought to confine and control women; rather, they were necessary to a woman’s livelihood. But today women, and especially urban women, have other means of sustenance and protection. Pressure to marry and reproduce is no longer centered around a woman’s security, instead it is primarily concerned with man’s comfort, status, and the continuation of his lineage (Nhlapo, 1991).

This change in society’s perception of women has also influenced Swaziland’s customs and celebrations. Traditionally, girls were grouped in bands of age-mates that formed supportive sisterhoods through their adolescence that promoted the sanctity of chastity and solidarity in working together (Swaziland National Trust Commission n.d.). In many ways this was an important system of education, empowerment, and protection for girls. Umhlanga was an eight-day celebration that marked the coming of age of the eldest groups members. While it is a long-held custom for men and women of marriageable age to meet at the ceremony, the lens through which this event is seen today is becoming progressively objectifying. This, coupled with poverty and increased publicity, has left participating women more vulnerable to the advances and requests of male suitors.

### 1.5 Christianity

A woman is in religion as a client.

“Customer, come buy from me,
Long time no see. Se daadaa
Awon omo nko il nko?”
(How are you? How are the children? How is the home?)
(Oduyoye, 1995, p. 109)

Like most colonized countries, Swaziland adopted a foreign religion under its occupation by the British and Afrikaans. Today, ninety-nine percent of Swazis practice Christianity, often in combination with Indigenous religions. But dominant colonial understandings of the Bible reflected a dualism that was not part of the pre-colonial Indigenous worldview (Tobler,
Male-female, masculine-feminine, human-other, dirty-pure, physical-spiritual were some of the dichotomies introduced to Christianity by ancient Western philosophies (Tobler, 2002). Dualities like these have led to the subordination of one value or characteristic to another (Tobler, 2002). Philo of Alexandria was one of the most influential early theologians who merged Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christianity, his work relegated women to the world of physical pleasure and seduction, elevating man to the realm of reason. In his analysis of Genesis he says:

Woman becomes for him (Adam) the beginning of blameworthy life…this desire begat likewise bodily pleasure, that pleasure which is in the beginning of wrongs and violation of the law, the pleasure for the snake of which men bring on themselves the life of mortality and wretchedness in lieu of immortality and bliss. (Boyarin, 1995, pp. 78-79)

Power-laden and intention-driven interpretations of Christianity have contributed to numerous acts of oppression and violence on the African continent from homophobia to slavery to domestic violence; a painful reality that has led some to reject the contemporary practice of ‘western’ religions in African nations. But labeling Christianity as a European religion is a “historical and spiritual distortion…of Christ, who was manifested as a Jew living in Palestine” (Fernandes, 2003, p.107). The territorialization of Christianity as western can contribute to the same harmful colonialist agenda it is attempting to deconstruct because it risks delegitimizing the spiritual communion millions of non-westerners experience through Christ as well as downplaying the ways many non-western followers are radically transforming harmful Biblical interpretations.

While it is well established that religion has been engaged as a tool of domination by powerful groups, the very same can be said of systems like education, healthcare, and legislation. The ways oppressors have manipulated institutions including Christianity to shield them from implications of their ambition should not contest the validity of those religions’ spiritual teachings (Fernandes, 2003). If anything, “Jesus’ teachings are the essence of a radical mystical revolutionary aimed at decolonizing the divine from all forms of hierarchy, control, and injustice” (Fernandes, 2003, p.107). The privatization of Christianity by systems of power is hindering religion’s potential in movements for non-
violence, making it just as important for women to reclaim autonomy within this sphere.

1.6 Potentials for Transformative Learning

If we hope to create communities where women not only survive but truly thrive, there needs to be “fundamental changes in values, attitudes, and behaviours” (Goodman, 2002, p.187) within the deepest levels of human, social, cultural and political consciousness. There needs to be a transformation of oppressive systems of dominance that perpetuate the fierce hate of girls and women.

Edmund O’Sullivan has put forward a framework for what he calls Integral Transformative Learning (O’Sullivan, 2002) that aligns with movements of holistic sustainable peace on global, local, and personal levels (Goodman, 2002). Goodman and O’Sullivan are clear that this process of transformative non-violence does not reject radical movements of resistance or conflict but sees them as stages in the process towards peace. Paramount to both concepts is that in order to create significant lasting change, transformation needs to involve the critical conscious reflection of each individual on her place in the world (O’Sullivan, 2002; Miles, 2002; Goodman, 2002). This is what allows women to recognize moments where “we can no longer interpret our experience in terms of our old assumptions so we search for new codes by which novel and new perceptions can be made coherent” (O’Sullivan, p. 4). It is through this personal process of critical reflection that “radical restructuring of dominant culture” (p.3) begins to take place. What this means is that a woman’s self-development, the understanding she has of who she is, and her collective activist activities are inextricably linked (Miles, 2002).

In The Project and Vision of Transformative Education, O’Sullivan (2002) writes, “creativity occurs within a cognitive system when old habitual modes of interpretation become dysfunctional, demanding a shifting ground or viewpoint” (p.4). When it comes women’s experiences of violence, this point of dysfunction was reached long ago. But I believe my research shows that women fighting for their freedom from violence, not just in public spaces but also around kitchen tables, between sheets, and under God, are finding ways to address the very roots of their oppression through radically transformed perspectives.
CHAPTER TWO

PERSPECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The next time you see someone, don’t presume she is there at that very moment. (Zawadi, 2007, p. 31)

2.1 Patriarchy and Systems of Violence

Patriarchy, the system of dominance that organizes our world through a privileged male lens, systematically influences women to act against their own interests. (Tal, 2011, p. 29). In this way, women are made into “objects rather than subjects of their own experience” (Green, 2000, p. 17). A girl’s ongoing interaction with patriarchy means that she is taught at an early age how to constantly adjust herself in ways that make others feel comfortable; in ways that make their transgressions acceptable (Green, 2000; Garfield, 2005; Oduyoye, 1995; O’Sullivain, 2002). Either unconsciously or as a means of survival, she adopts dominant perceptions of self and society, often accommodating her victimization, her own self-abuse, or her participation in the perpetuation of violence (Tal, 2011; Green 2000). The intrusive appropriation of a woman’s mind, body, and beliefs in patriarchy invalidates and infringes upon the natural physical, spiritual, and emotional margins every individual requires to live a healthy and autonomous life.

Violence against women is therefore not only direct, the kind we see scarring a girl’s body. It is also structural, the kind imposed by dominant systems like law and economics; and cultural, the kind that is delicately woven into the fabric of our religiosity, behavior, and morality (Goodman, 2001). These mechanisms through which dominant forces of power control individuals and environments are tightly and inseparably intertwined. Each folds into the other, each deeply destructive. The manifestations of this intricate braid of domination will of course vary depending on its context, making specificity essential to any understanding of patriarchy. Women’s experiences with patriarchy will shift not only from society to society but also from family to family and woman to woman (Green, 2000), an important consideration for this thesis. Too many researchers have been guilty of making broad generalizations on what constitutes violence, patriarchy, and violations of women’s
human rights especially within the African continent without understanding specific practices, politics, views, or beliefs (Green, 2000, Oduyoye, 1995).

Valid, frustration over these generalizations has been misdirected toward the concept of ‘universality’, leading some feminists to reject the potential for solidarity among women and the legitimacy of universal women’s human rights (Tamale and Oloko-Onyango, 1995). But, as we have seen before, the dualistic nature of this type of thinking is patriarchal and Eurocentric in itself (Belenky, Clinchy, Glodberger, Tarule, 2002; Miles, 2002). Specificity and universality, the local and the global, the personal and the collective, are mutually inclusive phenomena.

Instigators of patriarchy have different priorities and mechanisms of power within different contexts (Green, 2000) that have been influenced by differences in ideology and power. But the damage resulting from this oppression surpasses local boundaries. For example, Swaziland’s history of colonization and its current economic position within the global marketplace mean that women in Swaziland face local economic and racialized systems of oppression that are intertwined with international projects of neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism, white supremacy, and capitalism (Tamale and Oloko-Onyango, 1995). It is unproductive to talk about specificity exclusively when in reality this specificity is so highly affected by universality and vise versa.

When it comes to patriarchy and violence against women, activists have a tendency to either scapegoat culture or avoid it because of the complexities and sensitivities that surround it (Tamale and Oloka-Onyango, 1995); neither approach is constructive because both lead to othered and overly simplistic views of women’s experiences. We must begin to accept that violence can seep into all arenas necessary to a woman’s development including culture. Denying this delegitimizes the demands of African women who are labeled ‘westernized’ when they advocate for the transformation of those patriarchal practices that are safeguarded by cultural identity (Fernandes, 2007).
Recently, when some African women have begun to question the limitations of their biological role, men have ready answers: African women are precious, say the African men, they know their place and keep it. Should an African woman disagree with this assessment, she becomes an imitator of Western women, a model in which Africa has no interest. (Oduyoye, p. 82)

To consider whether and to what extent patriarchy existed in Swaziland prior to the imposition of colonialism and globalization, would be valuable but would require a thesis in itself. For the purposes of this research it is sufficient to recognize the prominent role that patriarchal views currently play in shaping the ways Southern African women understand their sense of self through informal and formal pedagogical development (Green, 2002; Oduyoye, 1995). The contemporary patriarchal lens that governs most societies including those in Southern Africa has muted women’s voices from the national, communal, and familial interpretations of stories, practices, and doctrine that make a woman who she is and make a society what it is (Green, 2002; Oduyoye 1995; Kolawole, 1997). Direct, structural and cultural violence against women will never end as long as women’s authentic opinions, intuitions, and knowledges are thought irrelevant to society’s social and moral tapestry. As Oduyoye (1995) has put it in her reflection on a Ghanaian game from her childhood, “the meaning of full humanity cannot be written by one sector of humanity without listening to the voices, the hurts, and the delights of all the Fatimas” (p.82).

2.2 Feminist, Womanist, Activist

I never intended to write a feminist thesis. Not because I do not identify as a feminist – I do. But because, within social justice circles, I have seen feminist rhetoric too easily become a substitute for the raw, uncensored, terrifying life experiences most women embody but are unable to package into neatly contained vocabulary. This research is about women and it is informed by many women’s voices including those that are feminist identified, as well as those that have wrongly been made to feel under-qualified to participate in feminism, and those that have been hurt and betrayed by it, all of which will be discussed in this section. The underlying thread in all of these experiences, theories, and perspectives is that non-violence/ gender activism/ feminism is simultaneously an individual and collective project of deep personal growth and one of deep social transformation.
At its most simple definition, feminism seeks to liberate women from patriarchy’s abuse by giving them “the tools necessary to critique the messages they are getting” (Pough as cited in Peoples, 2008, p.30). Feminism seeks to give women the validity and space they require to write their stories. To do this, it is important that feminism encompasses the varying realities that exist within and in response to many different female experiences of oppression. Gender can never be considered separately from racial and class-based privileges, oppressions and identities. Black, African, Indigenous, Transnational, and Integral Feminists, to name a few, have all emphasized the importance of a tripartite struggle of class, race, and gender within all feminist movements (Miles, 2002; Tamale and Oloka-Onyango, 1995).

The importance of specific and varying women’s movements is not just about contextualizing a struggle; it is also about contextualizing liberation. Hip-hop feminism for example, surfaced as a distinct movement because women who were influenced by hip-hop saw a need to root feminist consciousness within the formative principles, art, and philosophy of that culture rather than to reject it as altogether discriminatory, which was the position of some Black Feminists (Peoples, 2008). Highly cognizant of the fact that an understanding of self is the first step to creating real transformative social change, hip-hop feminism stresses the importance of “self-empowerment that precedes political activism” (Peoples, 2008, p.30). It grounds both self-development and feminist activism within the most relevant, influential, and empowering arena for this particular female experience.

Similarly, Africana Womanism developed out of the need some African and Black women saw for a movement rooted in Indigenous African values (Hudson-Weems, 2004). Africana Womanism’s family-centered and community-centered approach and its view that unity with Black men is essential to ending race, sex, and class based violence, are important values that I agree with and ones that offered a lens to this research. Though it may share much with Black Feminism, African Feminism, and Indigenous Feminism (Hudson-Weems, 2004), Africana Womanism is not feminism. Hudson-Weems explains her insistence on this in terms of the significance many African cultures attribute to the process of naming. There is a big difference between being given a name and naming oneself, “definitions belong to the
definer—not the defined” (Morrison in Hudson-Weems, p.1). Hudson-Weems, like “many African women resist[s] subscribing to feminism as a rejection of the imperialistic attempt to force them to accept a foreign ism that fits the needs of the majority” (Kolawole, 1997, p. 20).

Alongside the importance of a contextual, value-rooted, reflective struggle, solidarity and collective action amongst women is crucial to ending violence. As I have discussed, the violence faced by Swazi women (and all women) is sustained through global systems of oppression (Tamale and Oloka-Onyango, 1995), making camaraderie fundamental to the struggle for freedom from violence. A well-grounded understanding of deep difference is essential to building this type of unity, a unity that is multi-centered rather than fractured or separatist (Miles, 1996). In *Integrative Feminisms*, Miles (1996) explains how gender activists are challenging the dualistic nature of patriarchy by refusing to choose between what are thought to be opposing ideologies.

Integrative feminists attempted to develop new ways of working…they resisted false choices between structurelessness or hierarchy, personal self-transformation or political action, sectarianism or liberalism, reformism or revolution, cultural or political focus (p. 27).

Based on the practices of feminist activists globally, Miles’ (2001) research has also shown the importance of *Integrative Transformative Learning*. This is activism that “incorporates progressive personal change and progressive social change as mutually constitutive of each other and focuses on both” (P. 23). She grounds her understanding of transformative learning in the work of Edmund O’Sullivan who I discussed in the previous chapter.

Spirituality and spiritual ethics can be especially useful in creating a transformational framework that disengages from violence without denying difference and that strives towards an interconnected peace on personal, local, and global arenas amongst all women (Fernandes, 2003). From most spiritual perspectives, “the practice of non-violence demands that activists struggle against all forms of injustice and hierarchy without reproducing a conflict-oriented model of the world” (p. 72). With this in mind, the ways in which we identify as activists and how those identities might differ from those of other activists, do not
limit the responsibilities each of us has in challenging all forms of hierarchy and dominance including racism, sexism, classism, and so on. Subscribing to ethical spiritualized activism means that women’s many identities, values, and injuries can and should be respected and validated without triggering the fear of a broken or fractured sisterhood among different groups of women.

2.3 Qualitative Research and a Critical Paradigm

This exploration is grounded in qualitative research using a critical gendered race paradigm. Unlike positivist research that attempts to measure a phenomenon within a controlled environment and from a neutral standpoint, qualitative methodology embraces research that is conducted within the natural environment and considers the subjective perspectives of researchers. Research can never be wholly objective because the position of the researcher will always influence the lens through which the study is analyzed. But by maintaining a critical understanding of one’s position and perspective, the researcher can more clearly distinguish her subjective views from her analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). While a quantitative methodology attempts to measure phenomena that have already been named, qualitative research allows room for the emergence of findings that have not even been considered.

A critical ontology understands that oppression is socially constructed through existing power dynamics of race, gender, economy, ethnicity, ability, etc., and sees knowledge as something that can contribute to liberation from these oppressions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). For researchers this can involve fostering new understandings of gender and race in anti-oppressive ways (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

2.4 My Position as a Researcher

Because each of us sees the world through our own lens, research is always subjective to some degree (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). This point is especially important to this thesis because of the extensive catalogue of racist, imperialist, and unethical studies that have been
conducted on the continent by non-Africans (Chilisa, 2012). It is very important that, as a white Canadian, I am aware of these colonial and continuing relations of oppression and privilege and this history of complicit research. I have been concerned to avoid any such exploitative relations throughout this study.

The lens through which I see the world is predominantly informed by my experiences as a *Third Cultured Kid* (TCK). This is a term coined by psychologists for children who have lived in many different countries and have hence adapted to and absorbed multiple worldviews (Pollock and Van Reken, 2009). I was born in Bangkok and grew up in apartheid and post-apartheid Johannesburg, as well as in six other cities across Africa, Asia, and Europe. Despite being influenced by very different religious, racial, and gender dynamics, TCKs and Adult TCKs (ATCK) have been found to share uniquely independent cultural lenses which incorporate an amalgam of many different world cultures. This has its advantages and challenges; the implications of which are expanded on more fully in the work of David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reven (2009).

Finally, my perspective has been shaped by my own direct and indirect encounters with gender-based violence – the most brutal of which occurred in Canada. Because violence in adulthood is so often intertwined with our experiences in girlhood, I have focused my professional women’s rights career in Southern Africa and not in my ‘passport country’, Canada. My choice to explore VAW in Southern Africa is quite simply due to the fact that this is the region where I feel most personally connected to my development as a woman and have the most experience in my work as a woman’s rights activist.

**2.5 Methods**

Seven women volunteered to participate in this study after being invited by an open letter that was circulated through some women’s-focused organizations in Swaziland. Having worked in the field of violence against women in Swaziland, I directed these letters towards organizations and activists whose work I recognized as being particularly innovative. In addition to this open letter of invitation I used snowball sampling whereby potential
participants were referred to me through word of mouth. With their consent, I followed up via phone and email. Criteria for inclusion were as follows: each participant self-identified as a woman’s rights activist; was a national of a Sub-Saharan African country; worked in the field of women’s rights in Swaziland either professionally or as a volunteer for a minimum of one year; and was comfortable expressing herself fluently in English. I unfortunately did not have the financial resources or timeline available to me to hire a professional translator. Because two of the interviews were restricted by the participants’ availability, I was not able to gain a deep understanding of the stories or experiences of these women and therefore chose to focus the research on the remaining five participants, Dudu, Dee, Hlobsile, Gigi, and Cebile. All of the women identified as either Black or Colored. Of these five participants, the identities of two have been disguised as per their request. Pseudonyms have been used and other details have been changed to protect them. In all cases, I have intentionally excluded last names and any information that easily identifies the organizations with which participants are affiliated.

I used in-depth semi-structured interviews that followed feminist interviewing guidelines. Each interview was digitally recorded and lasted approximately 1.5 hours. The main aim of this research is to illuminate the ways the women respondents’ personal and professional life experience have led to deep changes in their values which underlie their engagement in transformative movement for non-violence. I followed an interview guide that included some of the following broad, open-ended questions.

Can you tell me about what led you to be a women’s rights activist?

Can you talk to me a bit about your family and what you were like when you enjoyed doing when you were a young girl?

What do you hope to achieve through your activism?

Can you tell me about a specific scenario in which you have had to intervene in violence against women or girls?
Using that example or a different one, can you describe how this situation of violence impacted the community?

Each interview was transcribed and emailed to the relevant participant for her feedback before it was used in this thesis. All of the women were aware that their decision to retract their own contributions or part of those contributions at any time would have been respected. None of the participants requested any changes or retractions.

2.6 Profiles of Interviewees

Dudu: Dudu decided to pursue a full-time career in women’s rights after having worked in the government for the majority of her adult life. Currently, she manages a non-profit organization where she has been planning and implementing gender-focused programs for the past nine years. Dudu also owns a small business that she uses to financially empower women who have been marginalized, outcast, or otherwise neglected. A practicing Christian, she is especially active in the deconstruction of patriarchy and violence in churches. She is married and is the mother of three adult sons.

Hlobsile: Motivated by her very political family, Hlobsile has been an activist since she was a child and began focusing her efforts on women’s rights when she entered the work force. She started her career as a counselor for female victims of domestic and sexual violence but has also worked in community outreach, violence education, and HIV/AIDS. In addition to her full-time job, Hlobsile’s degree in theology has led her to work as a gender consultant in churches of all denominations. She is the mother of two young children.

Dee: Dee gave up her dream to be a doctor when she found herself struggling to survive in a brutally violent 12-year-long marriage. But that experience, she says, opened her eyes to her true calling which she believes is to work with young girls to prevent and address sexual violence in their communities. She is a counselor, a facilitator, an education specialist, and the mother of a five-year-old son.
Cebile: Cebile is in senior management of a grassroots anti-violence organization. Locally, she is known for being one of the youngest women to reach such a high level in her career. Inspired by the resilience of her grandmother and mother, Cebile began identifying as a feminist at a young age. She believes that fighting for women’s rights is her destiny and hopes to continue her journey by pursuing her PhD in the next few years.

Gigi: Gigi is a family lawyer. She started her own private practice after leaving a decade-long abusive marriage. One of her passions has been disseminating important information about distinctions between civil and customary law to women in rural Swaziland. In addition to her law practice, Gigi has helped establish care-points across the country where she works to empower young girls, many of whom are orphaned or live in child-headed households.
CHAPTER THREE

SURVIVING PATRIARCHY AND UNLEARNING VIOLENT VALUES

Today I am so glad that I am a girl
Because yesterday my mother told me to write my story
No matter that I will write her in unflattering truths
No matter that in Jamaica in 1972 she had to choose her safety over mine
Write, my daughter, and the world righted itself
And I wish every mother
Whose daughter survived the burial of these unspoken things
Would give her permission to say what happened
To write down how she survived the terror
Of being that small girl in a world that so deeply favors men
I wish every woman had the pen, the clear view,
And the support she needs to scream
What happened to me was not my fault
What happened to me was not my fault!
(Chin, 2009)

Values are integral to an individual’s self-development. They form the connective tissue between a woman and her world, a lens through which she begins to qualify beliefs and experiences: clean versus dirty, good versus evil, natural versus unnatural (Hofstede, G. and Hofstede, J. 2005) Her understandings of respect, equality, freedom, honesty, will impact choices she makes regarding her career, her faith, her relationships, her desires, and so on. Values become the filters through which women understand the world as well as the filters through which they embody their being in it (Nhlapo, 1991). So what happens when these values are highly patriarchal and intolerant to critical female reflection and interpretation?

What I found through the stories of Dee, Hlobsile, Dudu, Cebile, and Gigi was that patriarchal values 1. denied women the privilege of self-knowledge making them more vulnerable to violence, and 2. shuffled them into positions, even within their activist projects, that ultimately served a patriarchal agenda. Their journeys to transformative non-violence ultimately involved a very deep and personal critical questioning of the oppressive roots of these formative teachings. This chapter will explore the women’s
changing understandings of beauty, purity, strength, and love, all involving cultural and religious expectations and requirements that are central to their self-development.

3.1 On Beauty

A narrative exists in the west that claims the following: in ‘Africa’ fuller-figured women are revered for their beauty because a round body is symbolic of plentiful food and wealth. But this is one of the many generalized and racist contemporary myths promoted in the west about generic African culture. I will resist going into this point at length but to appease those who disagree with me, let me say this. The value of beauty is not defined by food or wealth. In parts of the world where some of the most dire food shortages exist, women still feel immense pressure to be thin. We also know that beauty is never static, dominant European perceptions of feminine desirability alone have gone from corseted to curvy to stick-skinny. Although culture and beauty are closely connected (Martin, J.N.; Nakayama, T. 2010), beauty will still shift within class and group. Women in rural areas are valued for different physical attributes than those who live in cities (Steinman, 1992). In fact, the only analysis of mainstream beauty that can be somewhat generalized is that it is usually synonymous with youth and weakness (Steinman, 1992). Women who appear to be older represent authority and a loss of vulnerability, which makes them unattractive by most sexist social standards. It is understandable then, why the most trying periods of self-loss for women occur when they undergo changes that symbolize a movement towards adulthood (Garfield, 1999; hooks, 2002). Bell hooks talks about this as a time when we mourn the loss of our daddies’ approval. For women who have learned (usually from their parents relationships) that men love little girls but hate grown women, any departure from childhood innocence feels full of sin and rejection (hooks, 2002). As they enter adulthood they are faced with the urgent challenge of securing their sense of self or they risk being “subsumed by men’s thoughts, practices, and behaviors in ways contrary to their own needs, interests, and aspirations” (Garfield, 2005, p. 115). Like many women around the world, Hlobsile struggled as she began to develop out of girlhood and into a place that lay beyond the reaches of paternal approval.
When I gained weight after my second child I went into a deep depression. I’d have comments like “ahh, you’ve become an elephant!” Imagine how big an elephant is! “Ha! Why are you making yourself look so old?” I literally drifted into depression because of those comments about my weight. And it impacted my relationship with my husband. I thought, no I think he’s cheating and I don’t blame him, who would want me? Who would sit and look at this tub of fat? And I would sit and cry and cry. It was torture. I’ve sat through it and I know how painful it is. I had to be put on medication.

Her perception of self was dependent on an unsustainable youthful exterior so when her body changed drastically with age and childbirth she felt like she lost herself. This was a deeply traumatizing time for Hlobsile. According to Margaret Farley (2006), a Catholic nun who is best known for her controversial feminist framework on just sexual ethics, women have two means of surviving this level of wounding societal rejection. The first is to surrender to the imposed view of self, the second is to overpower it (Farley, 2006). In other words, Hlobsile could give into society’s abuse about her weight which might have led her deeper into a number of illnesses or self-abusing behaviors, or she could radically reject society’s perception and opt to idealize larger body-types. She chose the second.

I said if I’m living in a society that has a certain standard for women’s sizes then I don’t care about anything else within a society that doesn’t accept me because of my size. My cousins say I over do it with my daughter but I was scared out of my skin when she started grade one in a primary school. I know how horrible kids can be so I would tell her “you have a beautiful big belly, you are the most beautiful fat girl who has ever walked on the face of the earth”.

And it is not just her daughter she worries about. As her son grows older, Hlobsile has noticed the way his perceptions of beauty are aligning with those of society and even impacting the way he sees his mother’s body.

My son wrote once “my mum is thin and tall” in his school composition! I was so shocked! I said “my angel, which mum are you talking about?” and he said, “mum it’s just an exercise.” I said, “no, if you’re asked to write about your mum, write about your mum.” So we sat and had a long talk about how you really can’t exchange mummies. I talked about how happy I was with the way I looked and we rewrote the exercise together.
The conversation she had with her son was an important one but I wondered what impact idealizing a larger body type would have on her children in the long run. Does she risk imparting the reverse standard of beauty within her home? If her daughter loses weight will she feel rejected by her family? Will she mistrust slimmer women? In the 80s American feminists strongly rejected the feminine clothing that they felt sexualized and objectified them (Steinman, 1992). Sporting an androgynous look was a badge of honor, membership into a club of conscious, critical women. But as we know, this alienated those women who were most comfortable in their high heels and dresses- African women owned some of the strongest voices against western representations of sexless feminism. At the end of the day we need to be just as cautious of movements, ideologies, and value systems that exist exclusively in reaction to patriarchy as we do of those that patriarchy itself creates. They both risk manifesting as violence whether intentional or not.

Throughout this chapter, I will look at more examples of how women have reacted to oppressive gender specific judgments and expectations by glorifying or ‘re-claiming’ what is seen as that value’s opposite. What is important here is that while strongly rejecting the dominant standard seems more admirable, neither of the responses Hlobsile had at her disposal encouraged critical reflection of the beauty-value itself. Both would have led Hlobsile away from an authentic understanding of beauty because both are knee-jerk responses to surviving patriarchy. She is adjusting herself to oppression rather than examining a way of interrupting patriarchy’s very foundation. Gestalt therapists call these types of reactive shifts in behavior, creative adjustments. Consciousness, behavior, speech, and flesh can all chameleonize to survive in this threatening landscape. But when those changes are sustained or fixed, as they can be when confined to a system as rigid as patriarchy, they suppress the awareness we have of who we are (Mann, 2010).

Hlobsile told me that an alternative she did not believe in was to avoid discussions on beauty altogether. By ignoring beauty, some families believe they are protecting their girl-children from its abuse. In reality, this approach often serves the reverse purpose. Patriarchy deems confident self-loving women as vain and narcissistic, which has led to an appreciation for what it has so innocently rolled up into a love of ‘modesty’. There is
something about ‘not knowing’ one is beautiful that makes a woman motherly, reliable, self-sacrificing, and hence a suitable partner. Hlobsile went on to explain the dangers of this. Girls who are taught not to value their own beauty will never be protected from violence if boys are simultaneously conditioned to seek self-deprecating partners because of the facility with which low-confidence women are manipulated.

When a child who has never been told she is beautiful meets a boy when she’s 12 years old who tells her she’s beautiful, she immediately falls. Who wouldn’t? You’ve never heard that before. This guy says “oh you have a nice body” and it’s the first time she’s heard it. She thinks, this is the person for me. She goes into a sexual relationship, whether it’s a man 20 years older than her. And we know the dangers of intergenerational relationships, there’s no way you can dominate or be an equal to a man who is years older than you. You can’t call the shots or make decisions, so violence becomes almost inevitable in those situations. (Hlobsile)

Demonstrating a link between parents who withhold compliments and girls who find themselves in violent relationships might seem like a stretch but when women are made to feel that their beauty lies in the perception of their male partners they are more likely to seek and stay in relationships that are abusive as a means of salvaging an appearance that they believe would otherwise disappear. At its best, this is abusive objectification; the “failure to apprehend and respect the person in her or his whole reality”(Farley, 2006, p. 121) by reducing her worth to physical beauty. Hlobsile agrees.

It’s an injustice to create an illusion to somebody that they’re something that they’re really not. I think it’s injustice to human nature because you’re relegating someone from the natural position where she was placed out to somewhere else for someone else’s own selfish needs.

Gigi felt that one source of this objectification and devaluing of women’s bodies is in a departure away from extended family value systems. Traditionally, Swazi families put a great emphasis on appreciating their daughters’ appearances. Grandmothers had the responsibility of stripping their young granddaughters naked on a daily basis to praise each and every part of their little bodies. Colonialism and Christianity dismissed customs like these that they saw not only as inappropriate but also likely as confidence-building and hence threatening to white settlers. Colonialism also fractured family structures when
it condemned polygamy and multi-mothered households. Traditionally girl-children of each homestead would live with their grandmothers for most of their young childhoods. *Gogo* was the primary educator and beauty was a core part of the curriculum. Multiple-mothers meant that children were exposed to many female role-models and examples of beauty, womanhood, aging, and so on. Gigi explained that as households in Swaziland have dispersed and polygamous families have spread throughout urban areas, children have less access to the breadth of values grandmothers’ and multiple-mothers provided.

Now if you’ve got so and so living in an urban area, its no longer a house on rural land, or it’s a house just close to rural land, they hardly go and see granny. Maybe on the weekend go and deliver food and say hi hi, but the children are probably in urban schools and don’t want to stay with granny. You must remember that there was that sitting around fire-places and talking and passing on stories. That all drops along the way, it falls along the way, and it’s devaluing the educations girls once received.

Without romanticizing pre-colonialism or polygamy as empowering for women, it is clear that a movement away from traditional education and family structures has played a role in the way beauty is now being taught and understood. While some women are hoping to revive traditional systems of education for girls, the challenge is finding a place for ritual in a modern and rapidly changing society. Now more than ever, girls’ perceptions of themselves are at the mercy of a variety of pan-African and Euro-American influences that were more easily avoided in the past. In order to respond to these influences, women will need to find ways of integrating Indigenous education into contemporary society in a safe and anti-oppressive way.

Outside influences are also heavily impacting the ways that men view women’s bodies. *Umhlanga*, for example, a yearly coming of age celebration for Swazi girls, has been a topic of debate for feminists because of the traditional attire worn by girls that exposes their breasts and buttocks. Dudu for one believes that it has become a “parade of naked ladies” that has completely lost its original significance. Gigi told me that this shift in the way women’s bodies are seen in Swaziland is a direct result of western media.
Those types of perspectives are what’s changing the perspectives within Swaziland because you have access to it on social networks. Men were viewing it as just our traditional Reed Dance but then suddenly they read this and say “woop- bum and tit!” Now suddenly they might see it as porn when before this was our pride! Anything wonderfully good can be turned bad, anything wonderfully bad can be turned good.

The girls participating in Umhlanga are still appreciated for their beauty but the lens through which they are viewed is increasingly morphing into a globalized mish-mash of patriarchal dominance. This is resulting in a male-controlled tug of war between beauty that is sanctified and beauty that is sexualized.

3.2 On Purity

When a value is laden with a dichotomy as profound as the sacred-sexual, careful attention must be given to both sides. Sanctifying a woman’s beauty also has its dangers, the most obvious of which is evident in an analysis of purity. Rigidly valuing chastity and abstinence is one way patriarchy has controlled women everywhere by distancing them from their knowledge of self (Farley, 2006). I stress the word rigid because I am not at all disapproving of abstinence or an ethic that emphasizes the sanctity of a woman’s body, I think both can be empowering to girls and women if messaged in ways that simultaneously celebrate sexuality. It is the act of codifying a woman as either pure or sexual that is controlling and abusive. Dee is a survivor of severe physical violence suffered in a twelve-year long relationship with the first man she ever slept with. Having grown up with a strict message of abstinence, Dee’s trauma did not stem so much from the physical abuse she suffered as it did from feeling that she was no longer pure. She had given her purity to a man who almost killed her and she could not get it back.

As a girl I was taught to abstain, that you don’t have to sleep with a man before marriage. But you know when you’re young sometimes you want to experience things and you say ‘no, I want to try it and see what’s going to happen.’ Then I found myself with a man who was physically abusive. The only person who I had first in my life. I thought, this is the end of my life, I should end my life or I should just pack my bags and go some place where I don’t know but outside of Swaziland. If it calls for me to be a refugee I’ll be a refugee because people need
to be somebody’s wife and now all that is gone. How am I going to adjust? How am I going to explain to people? Let alone the community where I came from? I grew up as a girl where I was Christian, disciplined, I could sing at church, I could sing at school, everyone would say we wish you the best in your future, to have the best man. I thought, if I don’t die something should happen to me.

Recreating a past self, one that existed pre-sex, pre-abuse, pre-divorce meant regaining acceptance and worth but was ultimately an impossible goal. In her mind, the only alternatives to this were dirty, damaged, ruined. And when she played with the idea of living out the image of ‘worthless’, ‘sullied’ Dee, she became suicidal. Dee oscillated between two imposed definitions of herself, purity and ruin, feeling the immense pressure to belong to one category or the other. Both responses were a means for her to suppress the violence that had occurred and the guilt she felt for being ‘impure’. This is the “what if I remember the painful past and I can’t get out of it” syndrome that Steinman (1992) talks about in her book Revolution from Within. But the fear of facing and integrating our trauma limits our capacity to be who we really are. Mann (2010) explains this in terms of figure and ground. Each individual’s culture, upbringing, past experiences, and so on offer the ‘ground’ or the backdrop for how he or she interprets the ‘figure’ she is presented with in the present.

The figure emerges from an undifferentiated background of experience out of which focused needs and interests surface. In a healthy process of figure formation these needs and interests will emerge with clarity and sharpness, stimulating energy. It will be a fluid process that will be updated in response to changing situations. When the process of figure formation becomes rigid or habitual, relating to a past experience rather than the here and now…the person does not integrate the new experience. (p. 13)

As long as Dee functioned from a place where she was burying her trauma, she would unconsciously always be interacting with the world from that place of fear, hurt, and anger. In order to understand who she was, Dee needed to go through the difficult process of integrating the painful past into her current reality. She was only able to do this after years of intense counseling. When I asked her if she still felt ashamed by the abuse she had suffered she laughed and said:
No, now my eyes are open. Before I thought I had betrayed the church because I gave myself to someone who wasn’t even a Christian. But now I realize that we make mistakes and that brings us to where we are today. I wish that other women’s eyes could be open like this. I have the inner desire to help other women wherever I go.

A re-understanding of the notion of purity and her relationship not only allowed Dee to heal but it also opened her eyes to her life’s purpose. As a counselor for sexual-abuse survivors, Dee recognizes the same symptoms of debilitating shame and self-loss in the girls and women with whom she works.

I remember at one point I went to a committee meeting and all the girls who were survivors of abuse said, “I’m not a girl”, all the women said, “I’m not a woman.” I don’t know who I am. It’s one big big big challenge you face after abuse. And I’m just thinking if they’re doing this virginity test, some of the girls have lost their virginity through abuse, how are they going to consider themselves now? Am I a girl? Am I a woman?

While Dee still strongly believes in a Christian ethic and in abstinence, she is aware like never before how rigid patriarchal perceptions of purity can cause trauma that contributes to high levels of prostitution, suicide, and HIV/AIDS amongst survivors of sexual and physical violence.

In Swaziland, like in many parts of the world, abstinence before marriage is encouraged with both sexes, which has led some to argue that the requirement of purity does not carry misogynistic intent. But interpreting any message out of context is unrealistic when examining its impact on a woman’s development in dominant culture. The pressure girls and women feel to conform to systems of patriarchy on a variety of levels has meant that their identities become inextricably intertwined with imposed perceptions of who they are. Purity, more than any other value, has become intricately and impossibly intertwined with women’s perceptions of self. Women are never given the space to form distinctions between self and the act of sex that their male counterparts have available to them. This has made it impossible for a woman to embrace celibacy as empowering without experiencing a deep level of guilt, shame, and inevitably a denial of self when she is sexually violated, coerced, or abused.
And yes, there are of course plenty of women around the world who have uncompromisingly valued abstinence in their youth, have not experienced sexual abuse, and have found themselves in seemingly healthy lifetime relationships. But what we must be cautious of is the far too common demonization of female sexual pleasure that lies just beneath the surface of most purity myths, a discourse that deeply injures both sexually active and abstinent women. Hlobsile believes that teaching women sexual pleasure is one of the “keys to preventing violence against women”. Because when a woman gets married and believes that she has no alternative but to consent to regular submissive unenjoyable sex with her partner, she becomes a victim of a very damaging and discreet form of violence that she might not even be aware of.

A woman will go into a relationship, she’ll be in a relationship for 10 years and will have never enjoyed sex. So that woman is almost raped every day, unknowingly. Because she honestly believes that her role is to take the asset there and have someone else use it at his own discretion. Women are taught that it’s a chore they need to do and that the pleasure is for somebody else. And to me that says you don’t know who you are. You haven’t realized yet how much power, energy, intimacy, pleasure, you have inside you. (Hlobsile)

In reaction to these controlling perceptions of sex, Gigi told me that some young women are trying to take power back into their hands by rejecting abstinence and embracing frequent sex with multiple partners. The term for this in Swaziland is bed-mating.

Women are starting to beat the system, after years maybe of seeing mothers abused, there is a rise that’s taking a very different perspective on the whole sexual sacred thing. I’ve heard people call each other bed-mates. Because if I want to have a sexual experience tonight- I might have ten bedmates. It’s a no obligation, no string attached arrangement. It’s a way for this woman to feel like she doesn’t need to get married to have a sexual experience. (Gigi)

Gigi expressed that some women saw this as empowering or liberating but that, to her, the practice of bed-mating was ultimately just another manifestation of patriarchal oppression. If we were to remove the pressure patriarchy puts on women to stay pure, bed-mating wouldn’t be seen as empowering, it would just be understood as the authentic
self-actualization of women who enjoy the pleasure they receive from frequent sex with
different people. But bed-mating isn’t happening in a vacuum. Women feel powerful
engaging in regular non-committed intercourse because it is the only way they feel they
can gain authority over their sexual-selves (Farley, 2006). As hooks described her own
experience with the intersection of feminism and sexual liberation, “feminist demand for
sexual agency made us feel that we were engaged in a revolutionary struggle when we
boldly satisfied our sexual lust” (hooks, 2002, p. 67). Bed-mating is its own quasi-
revolution, a call to action for women who are tired of the slut/saint dichotomy. But
sexual revolutions like these occurring periodically across the globe do not challenge
male models of power, instead they attempt to claim them. They make us believe that our
participation in apathetic, non-committal, and unemotional sex will make us an equal
partner. Women soon find out that this can never be true as long as patriarchy reins, and
that in reality, their revolution is dangerously contributing to a detached, devalued
understanding of sex rather than radically transforming it.

While women are being increasingly vocal about the pressure they feel to fit into sexual
identities that have not been created for or by them, not enough is being done to
accommodate those cries for change. The collective frustration amongst young women is
what Gigi feels is forcing them to catapult even further away from their knowledge of
self.

Women are saying, this isn’t working, listen to us. It can work if we do A, B, and
C but no one’s listening. So we start forming our own systems that work for us. Is
it not so? The more something isn’t working for you, the more you feel the ropes
around you. And the more you feel the ropes around you, the more you’ll exert
energy to break those ropes and the further you’ll land from the situation. Do you
see what I mean?.. You mutate in your own way away from that system. But all
mutating away from a system that I believe has been so rigid.

Alongside strong support for abstinence, the women I interviewed expressed that there
was a need for purity to be unhinged from the burden an act of sex has on her identity. On
a grand scale the disassociation of a woman’s sexual encounters from her moral, spiritual,
and emotional fiber could have far reaching implications on violence against women.
3.3 On Love

Perhaps it is easier to be critical of patriarchal concepts of purity and beauty than it is to be critical of love. The former involve a certain level of ego that we tend to assume is absent in the latter. We think that making-love is the ethical and equitable version of sex; loving homes are creative, supportive, and safe; communities based on a love-ethic are thought to be just and peaceful. Hooks (2002), goes as far as to argue that injustice and love cannot exist simultaneously. Abusive relationships are therefore always loveless ones. But to agree with this is to invalidate a woman’s claim that she stays in an abusive relationship because of love- love for her partner, love for her children, love for her extended family, or for his. The truth is that we are more than capable of loving foolishly, defensively, misguided, angrily, and unwisely (Farley, 2006), and that more often than not deep, strong, sacrificial love rules over harmful relationships. Where we have gone wrong is in how we express that love. We have gone wrong with the verb to love. Because we were not born knowing how to love, and unfortunately neither were our parents, teachers, pastors, or partners (Farley, 2006).

Like many little girls, Gigi was taught that women express their love through their natural inclination to be nurturers. Growing up, she believed it was a woman’s job to single-handedly create loving families. The expression of her love lay in her ability to correctly care for her husband and children. Because we know that men love and seek love as much as women do (hooks, 2002), we also know that the perception of women being the sole instigators of love in male-female relationships has been purposefully designed. Gigi’s shift to conform to these misogyny-laden lessons created the foundation for her future partnerships with men.

My grandmother would say, you compliment somebody else’s life. God wouldn’t bring you into a person’s life unless you were meant to help them. Someone comes from a troubled background, yours is to show them what love is, teach them what love is, heal them. That was my perspective on life, thank you Granny (laughing). It doesn’t put you in the places you need to be emotionally at times. But I was in this abusive relationship for 13 years, and I battled against myself to
come to a place that made divorce all right. I kept feeling like I needed to do more or that I hadn’t done more. And I felt like I was the party that wasn’t contributing to this relationship the way I was supposed to. You know, you can say, “I’m an emancipated woman” but deep down inside some of these things are engrained in you- maybe not by your family, but by your community, through your whole system.

As a child and young woman Gigi never knew that she had the autonomy or authority to interpret, question, or experiment with how to love, when to love, or who to love. The feeling of love was always followed by the act of loving and in a male-female relationship she learned this act to be one of service, forgiveness, and healing. When her husband became abusive she associated the violence with not having done a good enough job at pleasing him, with not having loved well enough. Gigi identified with the act of love so strongly that the way her husband received that love became a direct reflection of her self-worth. The same applies to most women who invest unimaginable levels of energy in loving abusive partners without considering their partners’ emotional capacity to receive and reciprocate that love. While we might not be able to control our feeling of love, we always have a choice in the act of loving and being true to who we are can mean choosing “not to let some loves flow into action” (Farley, 2006, p. 205).

Gigi’s marriage was extremely violent but she began to understand that it wasn’t an isolated incident of abuse. Rather it was a reflection of the deeply patriarchal values she had been taught when she was growing up that confined her to value a certain kind of love relationship. Developing beyond this experience involved two important steps. The first was to take responsibility for choosing to give her love to a partner who was not capable of offering her mutual love (hooks, 2002). The second was to re-learn a definition of love that was inclusive of self-love and self-care. Her divorce liberated her from more than just an abusive marriage. It gave her the space she needed to re-evaluate who she was as a unique and autonomous individual. She described the drastic change in lifestyle that came with her separation.

I was jumping on kombies where before I was driving in Mercedes Benz’s. But it was the best time of my life! Because I realized that I’d actually gotten attached to props in my marriage and had forgotten who I was. And that opportunity gave me
a chance to do that. You put yourself in a situation where you have a chance to revalue your life and re-positon your values. Manifest the power within, and then you don’t try to have power without. You don’t need props you see, to give you acceptance. You don’t need acceptance because you’re aware of the value of you. And if you’re not accepted its fine because this is who you are so that you can do what you need to do in your life. I’ve reached a place where I don’t blame my ex-husband. I feel I was in a situation that I had power over and I could have moved away from it. And we have to see this in this way, to maintain power over any situation. I mean power, inside power, the power that gives us self-esteem, that allows us to move along on a day-to-day basis in a positive way.

As Gigi put it, this was “a highly spiritual process”. For women who have spent a significant portion of their lives aligning with the expectations of others, this might be the first time they have the independence to find and to develop a clearer sense of self and purpose. This time of individuality and reflection led Gigi to an authentic, subjective understanding of love. In her current healthy and mutually loving partnership she told me that she “plays by the very same principles- unconditional love”. But she no longer sees bumps in her relationship as an indication of her self-worth.

No matter what the situation, I don’t personalize your reaction or absorb it because I’ve learned to view your reaction as something that comes from your side of life. You’ve come on a journey that I don’t understand.

Cebile agreed that the first step needed for a woman to develop a healthy loving relationship, not only with herself and her chosen partner, but with her world, was to have the time and space to re-learn this value periodically throughout her life. Because like beauty and purity, our relationship with love is constantly evolving as we grow (Farley, 2006). Love is socially constructed, and therefore it must be relearned and re-examined critically throughout our lives. In Communion, hooks states that “women who learn to love represent the greatest threat to the patriarchal status quo” (hooks, 2002, p.89). Love can be foolish but it can also be revolutionary as long as we are willing to refine the ways we love in full awareness of ourselves, our partners, and our environments (2006, p. 200). For Cebile, meditation, self-reflection, and prayer, are fundamental practices for women who are re-learning love, especially activists who face unimaginable levels of violence on a daily basis. As simple as it might seem, women need to have the privilege of time and
space to come to an authentic understanding of themselves and their values in ways that resist patriarchy.

It takes a lot of meditation, a lot of prayer, believing in yourself and who you are and choosing to be positive, even when faced with the most difficult circumstances. And when you come to a place of inner peace, forgiving yourself, loving yourself, that’s when you can start to share love, to talk about non-violence openly with others, because you’re coming from a personal place of growth. I really think it’s important to come to that place, as women, as women advocating for women’s rights, advocating for children’s rights and social justice. And that’s what I’ve learned firsthand even in the last few months, it really does work. We need to start a love revolution! (Cebile)

3.4 On Strength

Cebile learned the power of self-reflection and new understandings of love and peace when she was forced to untangle the messages she had learned about another value -- strength. Like many of us, Cebile was familiar with the image of strength that is accepted by dominant culture -- aggressive and full of the word power. Physical strength means lifting heavy weights and emotional strength implies assertiveness, stability, and of course, dry-eyes. So, a woman’s strength submerged in patriarchy is often labeled as one of a handful of things: hysteria, depression, submission, escapism, stupidity, feminism. But each person, man or woman, has distinct ways of being strong. Sometimes that means weeping and sometimes that means fighting, and sometimes it means weeping one day and fighting the next. By naming only one of these instincts as strong, patriarchy limits the ability of women and men to authentically and fluidly interact with their environments in ways that are appropriate to them.

Although she says that she was lucky to have never experienced abuse, Cebile did come close. When she was seven or eight years old, a man enticed her into his home and locked the door refusing to let her leave. Cebile told me that in that moment she remembered what her mother, who was also a women’s rights activist, had taught her about inappropriate touching.
She was so emphatic about touching, she used to say ‘if *anybody* touches you, you uncle, your dad, you tell me!’ I don’t know where the courage came from. Honestly I was a little child Julie, and I just remember shouting ‘if you don’t open this door now I’m going tell my mom and my dad and they’re going to come and kill you!’ And he was busy saying ‘NO! They’re not going to do anything to me! If you tell them, I’ll kill them!’ And I just kept saying, ‘No, you can’t do anything to my dad!’ and I just kept saying, ‘my mom, my mom will come and kill you! And she’ll find me if you don’t let me out *now!*’ And the next thing he’s saying, ‘oh no Cebile, I’m just playing with you, come on I’m just playing’, and he let me go. And I went outside and I was just shaking, I was so so scared.

Cebile learned to ‘raise an alarm’ at any risk of violence and it saved her. But as I showed in situations described earlier, that response became static. Cebile’s self-described ‘militant’ approach became her tactic to confronting all injustice at all times and as she grew older that response was deemed increasingly unfeminine and inappropriate. In university, Cebile faced more inequality and with it, more rejection. Her peers thought she was always “making things (her) business” and were afraid that she would “turn them into feminists”.

Like Cebile, most women felt pressured to demonstrate a conventionally powerful front in professional settings and in their activist work. Even within the women’s rights sector, careers largely depend on masculine understandings of resilience and success. Hlobsile referred to this as “dressing up in power”, something she feels a lot of high-level career women take on as a survival tactic for gaining legitimacy in the work place.

You know we have very powerful women in decision making positions who when you visit them in their home they’re totally different people. So it becomes confusing, do we dress up in this power when we go to work or is that who we really are and who we believe we should be?

Hlobsile, Gigi, Cebile, Dee and Dudu all thought that women who equate their strength with professional status or financial gain are not truly empowered but simply conforming to a hegemonic and oppressive system that values power and material wealth over everything else. To them, financial empowerment and education could contribute to a woman’s personal power and knowledge of social justice issues, but did not necessarily
indicate that she was living in alignment with that standpoint. What was important to them was a strong sense of self and a cohesion of one’s values and one’s actions.

Cebile had to come to terms with this contradiction in her own life when she realized that the representation of strength she demonstrated in her work was in direct conflict with who she really was. Ultimately, she said she became aware that her aggressive approach to activism was causing violence against women in its own way. At that point she made a decision that she didn’t want her relationship with the world to be one based on injustice and that in her words, she “deserved peace”.

It’s not to say that we shouldn’t make people realize that what they’re doing is wrong. We should, and I do that unapologetically. I’ll stand my ground and stand for the justice I’m promoting but the approach I’m using doesn’t have to come from a place of anger, or a place of all knowing without respecting the circumstance that people are in. So I’ve learned to come from a place of calm. I think there’s a lot more strength in it. I’ve realized that anger is very disabling. You’re not allowed to think creatively, you’re just in a space of turmoil, you’re fighting, fighting, fighting, all the time. It’s one battle after another and it’s still violence! So for me, for me, I’ve found more strength in coming from this place.

The most important part about Cebile’s realization was that strength did not have to look like one thing or another; it did not have to be militant or soft, aggressive or lenient. Instead of identifying herself with one approach or another, she began to explore her own understandings of strength and in doing so she was able to interact with each situation she encountered from what she calls “a place of calm”.

That is not to say that working from a place of tranquility produces a more authentic manifestation of strength for everyone. Dee believed that a woman’s real strength lay in her belief that she can achieve her dreams and Hlobi thought strength was the ability to stand up for yourself even when everyone else is against you. There is a common denominator here. A strong woman was identified by all as being someone who does not neglect her sense of self or authentic values in the face of violence or injustice.
You must stand firm on your beliefs. It shouldn’t be situational. Freedom allows you to do that, it just breaks down all the boundaries you may have, all the fences. Whether it’s the economy, whatever, but freedom allows you to be yourself without any hindrances, it allows you to exercise your mind. And if you believe in your inner strength, you can excel in whatever you’re doing. And imagine those free souls, if they’re exercising their minds to the utmost level. I mean every nation, community, or even household, can get the best out of life. (Dudu)

Dudu said she did not strive for strength or power at all but for authority because authority implied that a woman would be accountable for her actions -- for the way she used her strength. Her word ‘authority’ is an important one. As she explained, there is no doubt that community is a fundamental basis for identity, especially in Southern African societies. But communities are made up of individuals and when some individuals in a community are given more authority than others, those communities cannot be free. Cebile said it best when she explained:

There’s synergies between the individual and the collective, you need to work on both simultaneously. People who come into something thinking they have all the answers you break that synergy.

Patriarchal values had distanced these women from themselves, forcing them to conform to male-centered perspectives and influencing their relationships with violence. Bringing a non-patriarchal lens to their critical unlearning and relearning of formative values helped them gain a better sense of who they were and this inevitably had powerful transformative consequences. This process helped them disengage from a narrative that was dictating their lives and to create new narratives based on a more authentic sense of self. The next chapter will explore some of the ways this personal value-based transformation was so fundamental to the development of non-violence on a larger scale.
CHAPTER FOUR
PRACTICING TRANSFORMATIVE NON-VIOLENCE

Managing the power of choice, with all its creative and spiritual implications, is the essence of the human experience. All spiritual teachings are directed toward inspiring us to recognize that the power to make choices is the dynamic that converts our spirits into matter, our words into flesh. Choice is the process of creation itself. (Myss, p. 132)

The personal transformation women experienced through the critical shift in their consciousness around beauty, purity, love and strength led them to approach their activism from a much deeper and more authentic level. Instead of simply reacting to instances of injustice, they were working pro-actively from a place of genuine self-actualization and self-reflection. In doing so they found ways to build their activism around values that were profoundly connected to the experiences, beliefs, and principles that were so important to both their comrades and adversaries. This chapter will look at how grounding their activist practices in critical non-patriarchal values is allowing these women to engage in transformative approaches to non-violence on familial, community, national scales.

4.1 Re-interpreting Religion

Each of the women I interviewed, all self-identifying as Christian, acknowledged religion as a prevailing source of education, and one which contributed to domineering patriarchal and colonial value-systems. The use of spiritual manipulation to maintain power over suppressed groups is nothing new. As I discussed in the first chapter, Christianity’s history of violence against women and its participation in other projects of persecution on the continent is very real and very deep and horrifically traumatic; a history and a reality that was referenced by all participants. Despite their imperfect relationships with Christianity, and perhaps because of them, the women I interviewed were adamant that transformative non-violence had an important place in religion and vise versa. Like Leela Fernades (2003), they believed that Jesus’ teachings were radically anti-hierarchical and promoted decolonization and non-violence. They also believed that it was their
responsibility not only as activists but also as Christians, to participate in radical critical reinterpretation of current politicized, unethical, and unjust understandings of Christianity.

For a long time we believed it was the church, it was religion that was stating that the men and women are not of equal status. But it doesn’t say that. It talks about sex, but it talks about men and women being equal. There is the story about the woman by the well who no one wants to touch because she has multiple concurrent partners. They see her as unclean. But Jesus embraces her, he changed the understanding of women as impure. So there’s so much that has to be unlearned, that’s been perpetuated directly or indirectly by religion, and some of these things have not been thoroughly looked at because if you look at some of what’s been perpetuated, some of the beliefs that have been perpetuated through the church, they were misconstrued or misinterpreted and you know each of what is said in the Bible or what is said in religion, it can translate into so many issues, it depends on how one looks at it. (Dudu)

The potential of a feminist anti-oppressive re-interpretation of the dominant understanding of Christian values should not be underestimated. Dudu designs workshops for church leaders aimed at reestablishing a non-violence ethic based on Jesus’s teachings. She believes strongly in this work but says that much more needs to be done. In particular, she sees a need for increased representation of women in positions of Christian leadership. Most of the workshops she leads with churches are male-dominant. On the other hand, she says this has given her a unique opportunity to work with a hard-to-reach demographic.

You’ll find that usually the people who attend workshops on violence, or those involved in the gender programs, are women themselves. There is a gaping absence of men, and yet we were trying to change the stereotypes and the ways men behaved. So working with the church we are able to change the tables around. We are having men run these gender activities; we involve them as much as we can. We are talking to the perpetrators themselves and we are letting them run the workshops themselves. I think it’s time that men start taking the discourse seriously. It’s time that they become the pioneers.

Hlobsile is involved in the same type of work but instead of focusing on church leaders, she holds circles with groups of Christian women of different denominations. I asked her for an example of how she would transform a violence-laden scriptural interpretation.
There’s a verse that women usually use, they say that a woman must submit to their husbands, it’s one of the most popular verses that people use to dismiss violence. But, if you read the verse that comes directly before this it says, “men, love your wives as Christ has loved the church.” Then I go into the whole analysis of how Jesus loved the church and the sacrifices He made for it. If you have someone who loves you like that, no one needs to remind you to submit. So I always say, no one can tell you to submit because that’s a God-given ability. It is something you do naturally if you are loved that deeply.

Hlobsile also works with church-going men and believes that one of the most worthwhile conversations she has with them is on power. In the same way that patriarchy abusively emphasizes a woman’s beauty and submission, it abusively values a man’s authority and control (Steinmen, 1993). Transforming the religious lessons men learn about power can change the values they learn around their familial roles.

Men will say “the Bible says, your husband is your king”. But I say, at the same time, God warns you about the disadvantages of being a king. He says that a king will take your wealth, a king will take daughters for his wife, a king will take your fattest cows. So I tell men, why do you want to be the king in your house when God is telling you how much trouble a king can be? There are also lots of examples in the Bible about the dangers of power and about the powerful being overthrown. Jesus never wanted to be powerful, so I say, if you want to be like Jesus, take the lower seat.

While feminist academics and theologians have been working to move religion away from harmful androgy nous and sexist religious views not many have researched the practical potential religion could have in transformative non-violence. This is surprising considering Jesus Christ along with other historical and contemporary spiritual leaders including Gandhi, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Siddhartha, and Martin Luther King Jr., speak to the potential for transformative non-violence. But because of women’s traumatic histories with religious messaging, many feminists believe that the progressive possibilities of spirituality can only be released outside of established religions. This can distract from a far more revolutionary undertaking -- unequivocally demanding that all religions become accountable to a spiritualized anti-oppressive ethic. The women I spoke with fully acknowledged the church’s systemic flaws but also recognized its unique
capacity to encourage deep and spiritual soul-to-soul connections amongst individuals. Connections that they believed were instrumental in sharing messages of non-violence.

Religion and spirituality are constantly evolving and I think the more you let yourself open up to that the better. I’m Anglican, and every single day over the Easter weekend, the churches were so packed. The cars were parked on the roads and everything. And fine, there are also a lot of messages about prosperity and the whole thing about it being patriarchal and stuff like that but when you look at the concepts and precepts within the spirituality of the church—those are things that people can relate to. If we can come from that spiritual approach, not just in the church but everywhere, it speaks to people. (Cebile)

African Indigenous spirituality and philosophies like *Ubuntu* have had a huge influence on Christianity and other religions on the continent. The movement to decolonize Christianity and align it with African worldviews is essential in these women’s quest for religious autonomy and carries with it an exciting potential to transform violence against women. Rejecting dualisms that have been imposed on Christianity by the west, and integrating *Ubuntu* principles including the connectedness of mind and body, a spiritual responsibility and union with the earth, and the importance of relationships and ancestry (Jakobson, p. 42) will naturally impact the politicized, hierarchical interpretations of Christian values if given the room and authority to do so.

We find ourselves as something superior within the universe when we should be equated with nature as far as I’m concerned. We find ourselves sitting in a pyramidal sort of situation above everything else in the universe. It’s become such an “I” world. And there’s no ways on earth any relationship— I don’t care if it’s a business relationship, a marital relationship, a civil relationship— there’s no way it can thrive with this very single-minded perspective on life. (Gigi)

The spiritual motivations and perspectives guiding individual women’s rights activists like Gigi often go unacknowledged but they have been crucial to collective anti-violence movements (Fernades, 2003). For example, the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner Leymah Gbowee who is well-known for her leadership in ending Liberia’s civil war has said that she was literally compelled by God’s voice to gather what became a coalition of over 3,000 Christian and Muslim women peace-makers (Disney, 2008), but this is rarely referenced as an integral element to her activism. Gigi believes that through intimate
conversations with God, each woman can gain clarity as to her spiritual purpose within a greater movement. In order for this to happen, churches and families must promote and validate these one-on-one relationships.

It’s got to be a one-on-one relationship. You can’t have a collective relationship with God. I can’t have a collective relationship with you. I can have a fantastic relationship with you and with B, C, D, E, but the relationship will never be in the exact parameters of my relationship with you because the levels at which our souls meet is totally different. Believe in the power that gave you creation, and you will learn that you have a purpose away from you husband, away from your child, away from your church. We spend too much time focusing on other people. Focus on your journey as a person and make sure that journey is right. Things are much easier that way, and I’m talking from personal experience.

This level of personal autonomy in one’s relationship with God grants oppressed individuals more agency over their religious experiences and interpretations. In this way, every woman I spoke to felt confident that slowly church leaders and all Christian followers could change their perspectives to exclusively reflect authentic Christian values of non-violence. It is completely possible, as Cebile explained, for mainstream religious institutions to have a far-reaching effect on societies’ relationship with violence if they are open to a collective spiritual revitalization that embraces radical change.

4.2 Taking Personal Authority

Re-interpreting religious teachings is not easy by any means, but Biblical scripture and the authority it commands can offer women’s voices validity that is otherwise difficult to secure. So how do women gain agency over their values in other influential social spheres? What I found was that putting ones’ transformed values into action often boiled down to making choices from “a place where one can feel, and act, with more autonomy” (Agot, 2008, p. 289). In this sense, choice is not representative of a ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘empowering’ or ‘disempowering’ result. Rather, it is a process that is fluid, flexible, subjective and aligned with one’s full presence and awareness (Mann, 2002).
In international and community development circles, individual choice is often viewed as an indicator of women’s empowerment (Agot, 2008). For instance, project evaluations attempt to measure the number of women who choose to start small businesses or choose to compete for professional leadership roles. But these are not really indicative of a woman’s emancipation from oppression. They are more often symbolic of her survival within, and adaptation to, a neo-colonialist, capitalist, imperialist world where income generation and economic productivity are demonstrative of worth and success. The oppressed struggle to subsist within hegemonic frameworks and, as we saw in the last chapter, survival often means suppressing one’s right to choose by either conforming to, or radically rejecting, expectations imposed by dominant society (Green, 2000). Dudu explained this to me in the following way.

We are becoming less and less dependent on our own minds. You know we feel that something is holding us down. You can’t think, you can’t express yourself. And this thing has an effect even on your everyday life. This helplessness. And it’s like you cannot think for yourself. And I’m wondering if this will not even go further to our children. You were saying if an individual, a girl, chooses this that and the other...you know I don’t know if they are free enough in their minds to even express how they feel, to express how they think.

Gigi supported this idea saying, “We’ve become cyborgs my darling. Whether we like it or not. The feelings, the emotions have been put into this tiny box.” Gigi and Dudu stressed that this was happening with both women and men at all levels of society as a result of racism, sexism, and classism. And that it was greatly affecting the capacity of all humans to live as autonomous self-determining individuals. Basically, it is becoming more and more difficult for people to imagine anything beyond patriarchal, hierarchal paradigms. Dudu pointed to the fact that women have the power to vote, but that for some reason they still are not choosing to vote for female leaders. Formal rights, liberties, and equalities can be granted to women but as long as their minds are appropriated by the powerful, they can never be holistically free.

A human being is a complicated animal. Because if you’re not free in one aspect in your life, it doesn’t make you any more free in another level where you might
think you’re free. If you have your head in the freezer and your feet in the fire you cannot say that the overall temperature is ok.

This sense of psychological repression was most strongly felt in discussions on culture. All the women I spoke to identified with Swazi culture, some more strongly than others, but each spoke about her desire for more autonomy within the cultural sphere.

Culture has been associated with a particular institution, when you talk of culture you’re now talking of the King. And in my opinion culture is for everybody, it’s for the society, the country, and everyone is a custodian of culture, not just one group of people. If we can take that out of our mind then it can evolve. Because I feel sometimes that our culture has been held at ransom. It cannot evolve because certain people believe this is their culture. And there is no stencil, there is no copyright on culture, everyone is entitled to experience, to live their culture. (Dudu)

Kolawole (1997), has referenced the work of artists and womanists including Zulu Sofol and Nina Mba who have explored the ways some African values and myths were manipulated to vindicate sexist violence. Because culture and politics are so tightly interwoven, a lack of cultural autonomy results in an overall absence of female political autonomy and vice versa. Some participants felt that the cultural monopoly of the Swazi monarch was psychologically preventing women from having any agency in both the public and private spheres. One of the fears arising from this belief was that the current political environment was limiting the natural formation and evolution of both culture and politics. Jenkins has written about how a culture-freeze has impacted western societies.

Historically, our culture evolved through a collective process of collaboration and elaboration. Folktales, legends, myths, and ballads were built up over time as people added elements that made them more meaningful to their own contexts. The Industrial Revolution resulted in the privatization of culture and the emergence of a concept of intellectual property that assumes that cultural value originates from the original contributions of individual authors. In practice, of course, any act of cultural creation builds on what has come before, borrowing genre conventions and cultural archetypes if nothing else. (Jenkins, 2002, p. 7)
When culture is privatized by the powerful it is only capable of producing metanarratives that represent this group (Storey, 1993). By default and perhaps by intention, this mutes less dominant voices and manipulates messages that would otherwise be empowering. Hlobsile told me that the only way women could participate in real transformative change on a broad socio-political level was for them to decide how to interact with their culture and have the confidence to represent that stance in their actions.

Culture is as dynamic as our society is and if we are at this level in our life, in our development, then this is something we will embrace. If culture says you must crawl on your knees we’re not going to do it if we’re now wearing high heels and expensive suits. So I think for us we can embrace culture in the way that best suits us. I like to believe that we define culture, culture doesn’t define who we are or what we do.

I wondered if these personal changes in understandings of cultural values would risk a devaluing of culture altogether. This concerned me because these women are seeking to be leaders in cultural re-interpretation and representation, not the instigators of its demise. Indeed the women I spoke to were just as cautious and concerned about this possibility, “you musn’t throw the baby out with the bathwater”, Dudu told me, “it’s not to say that the institution is altogether bad. What we need to do is take that lifelong journey, that pursuit for perfection”. These women were making empowering choices about their cultural beliefs and practices without diminishing the significance of tradition or the important role men played within this sphere. For example: Hlobsile told me about a practice in which a new bride meets with all of her uncles prior to getting married. During this meeting “they take a calabash dish and they crash it and they say now you have no more dish in this family, you have no more portion, you are no longer a child of this house; the reason a lot of women are staying in violent relationships and afraid to go home or move out is because of this message”. Hlobsile’s family of very political and outspoken women decided to keep this practice but change its significance.

My uncles sit there and they say, “you’re going to get married, but you still belong to this family, you’re still a child of this family, and by no means should you stay there if you start feeling uncomfortable. You can always come back home.” In my family you know that if anything goes wrong, know that you can
always come back. So it’s very unlikely that you find yourself in a situation where you’re afraid to come back home. The meeting was done in exactly the same way, only the message that you’re told is different. I think the practice is something that should be held onto but honestly the message should change.

From my conversations it was clear that an emphasis on the power of individual choice is sometimes presumed to weaken a woman’s identity as a community member and her responsibility to the greater whole. African women who might identify more as members of a collective than as stand-alone citizens have sometimes been alienated by individualistic Western discourses (Eagle, 1998). With this in mind, it is all the more important for a community to represent the perspectives of all of its constituents and not just of the privileged (Nhlapo, 1991). The women I spoke to reflected the feelings of Nhlapo who argues that “a woman’s personhood is lost in a group much more than a man’s is subsumed under the so-called community principle” (Nhlapo, 1991, p. 120). There was a high level of frustration about this in all of my interviews, especially when it came to the women’s professional work with violence. Dee had recently investigated a case of child abuse in which a Chief had attempted to marry an underage girl. Several women filed anonymous reports and the girl was moved to a safe-house but this response did not change the values that were being represented and upheld by the community leader.

Most people are against what this man is doing. These people know what’s wrong, it was them who raised the alarm, and said the Chief is going to marry a school-going child. They don’t want such things to happen in their community. But he’s a Chief. You know our law (Swazi Law and Culture) is not written down, so this man said this girl is above 16, she can be married, and he won the case. We tried challenging it many times but nothing happened.

It was important that women gain a strong sense of their individual values even if that meant going against the official community stance. Dudu explained that community was valuable but that transformation really emanates from the choices of a single person.

The human spirit can go to untold heights, it starts with the individual. There is value in community, in group strength, but if there’s no individual, you cannot just grab it from the air, it has to start from the
individual. Culture shouldn’t be imposed, the same way religion shouldn’t be imposed. There should be an element of choice. The individual choice. And the community, the group, its ok, but even that shouldn’t be imposed. You must chose your friends, chose your partner, and choose your community if you need to.

The power to choose allowed women to exercise a level of autonomy as long as they had the confidence and will to make decisions on behalf of who they are and not what others expected of them. Hlobsile told me that this was especially challenging within the family sphere. Being part of her community was important to her but she felt that to be truly empowered “you need to be able to identify what you believe in and stand for what you believe in.” Although it is sometimes difficult, she exercises her right to choose even if it goes against what her community believes is right. She reiterated an example of when she had to do this at a large family party.

A cousin of mine was saying “please grab that car from that child, I don’t like girls playing with cars. You know I read somewhere that these gay guys used to play with dolls”. And you know I froze. I froze, Julie. I’ve bit the bullet and I’ve felt the sting. It’s a much harsher sting in the family than it is outside. For me, I have a son and a daughter, if I buy something for my son I buy one for my daughter. They decide whether they want to play with it. I buy my girl a racing car; I buy my boy a racing car. I buy my daughter a doll, I buy my son a doll. Give them a chance to explore what they want in life. You can’t fear the possibilities of change.

No matter how long-range the outcomes might be, learning to access the power of choice was seen as an emancipatory piece of a woman’s self-development that could have far-reaching effects on violence. But the process is not easy. For women who have learned to adjust to the demands of their environments in order to be accepted, following through on a personal decision can be a huge risk. One that many are not willing to take for fear of abandonment, banishment, or rejection. All of the women I spoke to stressed that it takes time, introspection, and confidence to choose, but above all, a wholehearted acceptance of the possibility of failure.

I think it’s in how we evolve. The things we choose in life. The beauty in life is that everyday we’re presented with opportunities to do all sorts of things. You can
think, no, no, no, I don’t want to come across as a failure. You know. But you’re not a failure. Our knowledge is limited as human beings. There’s no one person who knows everything. (Cebile)

Although frightening at times, exercising individual choice and being ok with making mistakes allowed women to experiment with living autonomously within different societal spheres. In Gestalt therapy, making mistakes is an important part of learning to live authentically in full awareness, “such learning might include taking what appears to be wrong turnings or blind alleys but this is all part of the process” (Mann, 2010). A process that could transcend the self and create larger societal changes.

Once you’ve got that stability, you’ve got your feet planted firmly in the ground because you know who you are. Once you have your feet on the ground you have a good self-esteem. Once you have a better self-esteem you can approach the work from a different perspective.

4.3 Working with the Powerful

After Dudu left a high level position in government to work in nonviolence she was shocked to find the very same level of corruption and confinement within the nonprofit sector.

When I was working for the government it felt like I was just wiggling within a very confined space and I tried to criticize but I was always labeled “Aye, this one, you shouldn’t”. And I was always saying “Why can’t we just try?”. So I finally said no, let me go work for an NGO. I thought I was going to find some freedom there. But I really had a rude shock when I started working for non-profit organizations. I found out that they are no less different than the society. They’re a true reflection, a mirror image of the society we live in. And I tried to go against what I thought was wrong, but I still felt this tight blanket. It dawned on me that there was nothing we were really achieving by doing what we were doing.

Having worked for nonprofit organizations for several years myself, it did not surprise me that all of the women felt this way to some degree. Women’s rights work is often glorified with images of tireless hardworking women engaged in a constant battle for liberation from the powers that be. In reality it looks very different. The level of
inequality and dependency that exists between an organization and its funder/government can leave activists feeling dirty and under-valued, and morally violated. As Hlobsile, Dudu, and Dee told me, inter-office hierarchies can be just as dysfunctional as those they face elsewhere.

At one point there was a case that was reported to me of girls being abused by their stepmother. But at some point the case did not um, how should I say it, it didn’t go through because of the channels that we have to go through in the organization, the protocol. It has to go to this person, then that person, before there was any action. And eventually the stepmother got to a point where she chased the girls out of the house. It is so sad. I tried to follow up but now there isn’t really anything I can do. I think they’re staying someplace far away with their grandmother. (Dee)

Like Dee, Hlobsile told me that she often felt pressured to conform to her organization’s system and that she was continuously shot down when she tried to direct questions or complaints to her supervisors.

I feel swallowed into a system that doesn’t have any space for me to be who I am. I feel underutilized; I have so much more energy that what’s being used in the work I’m doing now. You go into a meeting and listen to a director who speaks form agenda one to agenda ten and no one says anything. There’s nobody interrogating, asking a question, no one questioning whether something’s right or wrong. At the second meeting I went to I was recording minutes and I said, “there is something terribly not right in this institution”. And they said “ok, what’s not right” and I said “are you sure this is an organization consisting of 50 people?” and they all looked at me like I was crazy until somebody pulled me on the side after the meeting and said “you don’t want to do that”.

Operating within a space that claims to be socially just and ethical but that functions on such a profound level of hierarchy can be spiritually traumatizing, and for several of the interviewees it was. But as they reassessed their own values and gained a better understanding of self, the activists began to relate to systems of power in an altogether different way. Rather than creatively adjusting their values to fit into those systems, they were creatively adjusting their work so that it did not betray their value-systems.
Gigi is a family lawyer who admitted to having little faith in the current legal system when it comes to women’s rights. Needless to say, this creates some conflict in what is expected of her in professional spheres. But Gigi told me that she refuses to be confined to a system that she feels isn’t working.

I can blame the institution, but we are responsible for bringing this work right back. Right back. Right back to the birth of a human being and what he is exposed to. We need to work creatively to re-inject our society with basic values because they no longer exist.

She went on to give me an example of one of the ways she does this. Gigi explained that because Swaziland has no such thing as no-fault divorce, women who wish to leave violent marriages must report the abuse- a process that is not only re-traumatizing but often hazardous due to the unclear legislation that exists around marital violence. Uncomfortable with the tumultuous and vengeful divorce proceedings she had witnessed in which women were often less educated and less informed than their husbands, Gigi decided to approach her practice in a radically different way that did not force her to compromise her personal values.

What does the legal system do? It ends up exacerbating the problem. It’s an adversarial system. There’s got to be some kind of flexibility within it. You can never move ahead of the situation, but at least try to stay abreast of what the effects are within society. And there’s a way of doing it, I do it all the time in my work. I bring the parties together and I say “no my friend, Swaziland is too small, let’s find a way to resolve this so you can continue on”. That doesn’t mean you don’t go your separate ways. It just means that there is a clear understanding that our business with each other is complete, and it’s time to move on. So we can work creatively with the system. We’re doing it because we have no choice. You know we are exposed to so much chaos in our lives and it doesn’t have to be that way.

Dee is also finding ways around her frustrations with systems of power. When I asked her to talk to me about the aspect of her work that she felt was most impactful she told me it was debates she was leading with young girls. Dee had noticed that one of the reasons so few cases of abuse were being reported was because of a belief that what happens within a family should not be spoken about outside the home. She realized that this teaching was
being misused by perpetrators to prevent girls from reporting violence. When issues like these come up, Dee encourages the girls she works with to participate in supervised debates which offer a critical space for them to gain balanced and flexible perspectives on what certain values or lessons mean and how they can best be practiced in a safe way.

One group of girls would say “it is good to have secrets”. The other group said no, that it isn’t good to have secrets in the family. The girls who said “you need to keep secrets” said that if you tell a teacher something, like that you’re pregnant, you’ll find them at tea break talking about you. So it’s better to keep secrets. But the other side said that one day you’ll need those people who you were keeping secrets from; that you’ll need them to support you and understand you so you shouldn’t keep secrets from them. So for me it showed that they really understand the issues and that these are things they’re facing on a daily basis. I learned so much from listening to them; they were really able to articulate what the issue was.

Cebile believes that a development in the way we comprehend acts of love can be a point of mutual growth for women and men. She told me about the challenges she faced when working with male politicians who had the authority to either reject or push forward the new bill that would criminalize sexual abuse and domestic violence. No matter what she tried, the bill would hit a brick wall in parliament. After years of marching, arguing, sensitizing, and workshoping to no real avail, she decided to invite a core group of political decision makers out for lunch. Without the pressure of a professional setting, the men felt free to confess that they were worried about how the new bill would impact their relationships with women. There were varying perspectives around what constituted an act of love and what was an act of violence. Once the men communicated the ways in which they understood love and Cebile did the same, they found a mutual point of understanding that transformed the way in which they were able to work together.

The whole dynamic changed. And they were honestly open, and we helped them to build their argument from a place they felt comfortable so that they could say, ‘no, this is the reality of marital rape, this is the reality of stalking, and this is what stalking means. It doesn’t mean a man can’t tell a woman he loves her, it’s actually something very serious and dangerous.’ And it was actually beautiful to watch the debate, those men were just brilliant.
Both sides were missing a part of the picture that was preventing Cebile’s activism from moving forward, but at the root lay a simple misunderstanding that was easily surfaced and resolved through a conversation in which the perspectives, values, and ideals of both parties were communicated and respected. When she followed her intuition and made an unorthodox and unpopular decision to speak to these politicians informally, Cebile made a powerful breakthrough. At the next parliamentarian hearing, the men passionately defended the new bill. This was a hugely moving victory. Not only because the bill was passed but also because a major patriarchal shackle was shattered in the preceding dialogue.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Dee, Hlobsile, Cebile, Dudu, and Gigi all struggled with perceptions of self and society that were built on rigid unsustainable male-dominant ideals and values. But they found that reacting to situations with a rigid rejection of those perspectives was often just another manifestation of their conformity to patriarchy. Bed-mating and Cebile’s ‘militant’ approach to activism are examples of the ways women resisted to patriarchy in partial ways that led them further away from self-acceptance and self-actualization. Instead, a critical re-interpretation of cultural, religious, and political practices provoked authentic understandings of self and allowed them to live and work from a place of greater autonomy and authenticity. This has in turn helped them challenge dominant culture rather than simply react to its symptoms. The significance of this critical relearning is in line with Edmund O’Sullivan’s theory of Integral Transformative Learning discussed in the first chapter.

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep structural shift in basic premises of thought, feeling, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations, our relationships with other humans and with the natural world, our understandings of relations of power in the interlocking structures of class, race, and gender, our body-awareness, our vision of alternative approaches to living and our sense of the possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy. (O’Sullivan, n.d.)

An interrogation of formative values was triggered either by transitions into adulthood or by traumatic experiences. A woman’s development can be traumatic in and of itself because the process evolves her out of absolute childhood values and forces her to explore womanhood within patriarchal society (Garfield, 2005). Establishing an authentic
understanding of one’s self and one’s values made the women more aware of the causes and pillars of violence against women. Spiritual practices, which included mediation, prayer, and an integration of traumatic experiences, were important throughout this development. While the process was long and challenging, they believed that committing to ongoing reflection and self-development was allowing them to unveil the intrinsic confidence, intuition, and assurance they needed to resist violation on emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and physical levels, and to actualize their true purpose.

Because violence is so engrained within political, cultural, community, and religious institutions of power, it was important to them that they engage in transformative non-violence at the root of all of these social spheres rather than just on the surface level. Re-interpreting scripture, making radical choices around how they practiced and embodied culture, and finding ways to massage the boundaries of professional practices, were all crucial to their activism. Linking these activities was the importance of maintaining that sense of self and strong personal ethic. Rather than manipulating their thoughts, actions, ideas to work within restrictive and oppressive systems, the women were all finding ways to transform the system in ways that adapted to their values. We saw this in Gigi’s incorporation of traditional values in her civil law practice; in the debates Dee leads with girls that help them explore society’s influences and pressures; and in Hlobsile and Dudu’s innovative analyses of Biblical scripture. One of the most moving triumphs came from Cebile’s very honest conversation with politicians on the topic of love and violence, a gesture that led the men to a passionate appeal for improved laws on sexual and domestic abuse. All of these activities were driven by, and grounded in, deeply transformed perspectives that rejected patriarchy’s dualisms, it’s perceptions of power, it’s objectification and its hierarchies.

Hlobsile, Dee, Dudu, Gigi, and Cebile did not always agree with each other’s standpoints, approaches, or opinions. Every woman on this planet is unique and it is that gift of difference that allows women to create dynamic and creative activist practices. But rooting their activism in strong, authentic, unwavering beliefs enabled them to unpack and transform the cultural, religious, and political practices they felt were harmful rather
than simply disengaging from them. In doing so they were able to confront all ranks of power on a human level that respects and acknowledges deep difference and deep spiritual connection between human beings.

Women’s rights activists around the world have expressed their frustrations with the dominant systems and ideologies that seem to consistently limit, devalue, and sabotage their anti-violence work. Dee, Cebile, Dudu, Gigi, and Hlobsile clearly experienced the depth of these hindrances. But their stories demonstrate that by embarking on a reflective personal journey to an authentic understanding of self, women can challenge and transform dominant culture on all levels. Their stories are a call for women to engage in a deep-seeded revolution for non-violence, for healing, for peace, and for change, that begins with a reclamation of self and ripples out to every sphere of cultural, religious, and political life. It is time that we demand nothing less than a radical re-learning, re-valuing, re-narrating, and re-mythicizing of the social fabric that exists to feed, protect, teach, and represent our spirits.
References


[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGk3-OJX7KE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGk3-OJX7KE)


