In Conversation: In conversation with *Blessol Gathoni* of the Utata Collective in Kenya. Interviewed by Hakima Abbas, November 2012

HA: You started off doing studies in computer science in Kenya. What drew you to organising work and the development of your political consciousness?
BG: I studied Information Communication Technology (ICT) to earn a living. I managed to secure a job as an ICT specialist in a corporate company but was fired after the company read articles I had posted on the internet about being queer. I began getting involved with formal/structural social justice activism and organising in response to the personal injustices that I experienced and those of other lesbian women where I grew up and lived.

For the past five years, I have been involved in organising around issues of class and economic oppression within my community and trying to make links to broader struggles in Kenya. I have participated and facilitated human rights, sexual and gender diversity advocacy trainings and spaces. I come from the struggles at the grassroots and that is where I focus my work. I am concerned with acquiring an in-depth understanding of the extent to which class determines the capacity one has to exercise one's freedoms and sexualities.

My personal experiences of what it means to be African, woman, queer and being brought up in an economically marginalised community in Kenya defines and informs much of my thinking. However, the political definitions and concepts came to reinforce my actions much later with the learning and critical consciousness I was exposed to through my activism. Since then, I have been able to define my politics around the understanding and deconstructing of the multiple levels of oppression we have to endure from owning these identities in the structures and societies that continue to uphold white supremacy, patriarchy, sexism, heterosexuality and classism.

My understanding of the intersectionality of social, cultural, political and economic oppressions, across the issues of minority groups, such as LGBTIQ persons, women, sex workers, children, persons living with disabilities,

influences the discourses in my work. For instance, the latest initiative that I have been involved in was born out of an alliance with a comrade from Disability Focus Africa during the Fahamu Pan-African Fellowship Programme. The project on disabilities and sexualities was initially aimed at identifying and mapping the issues of persons with disabilities that identified as LGBTIQ in Kenya for advocacy and action. The project is ongoing and is now focused more broadly on sexualities in relation to PWDs.

HA: How do you feel your African Queer Feminist politics have informed your tech-activism?

BG: These politics have informed what I want to be involved in, when it comes to technology, particularly Information Technology. It has also informed how much technology I use in my offline activism since I have mostly worked in economically oppressed communities where technology is not a huge contributor to organising.

My politics have also shaped the spaces I choose to publish my work in or to contribute to. These are mostly social justice networks and medias that provide platforms to deconstruct the westernisation and commodification of our queer struggles. I am active in various mediums, contributing to discussions, articles, conversations, blogs and listserves using my African Queer Feminist politics.

HA: In 2011, you developed the Watetezi-haki platform with Alan Muhaari (currently at UHAI), could you tell me about the origins of the platform, its purpose and where you are with it now?

BG: The Watetezi-haki platform was started during a Movement Building Boot Camp (MBBC) organised by Fahamu and UHAI with a group of LGBTIQ grassroots activists from Eastern Africa. Many violations that happen in the "streets" against sex workers and LGBTIQ persons go undocumented and unreported. Most activists have to work on word-of-mouth information to respond to and assess situations, which hasn't always been reliable nor has it enabled rapid response.

After a session during the MBBC on tech in activism lead by Infonet, we felt that Ushahidi, the open-source web platform that allows people all over the world to create their own platforms to suit their community needs, would provide us with the space, both online and offline, to report, map and create an alerting system for efficiency in our activism and reporting.

With Watetezi-haki, activists would be able to know what measures to

take after an incident or what help to deploy once an attack occurs. The platform is currently set up and we are looking for funding to facilitate and run the process of domesticating and entrenching it as a security tool amongst LGBTIQ and sex-worker communities in Kenya.

HA: What do you see as the impact and prospects for using technology in Queer African feminist organising and action?

BG: Technology is a huge asset to bringing like-minded activists together, unite concepts, ideologies and struggles or even create spaces to air critical African Queer feminist perspectives. On the other hand, I believe technology privileges structured, NGO-ised, middle-class forms of activism and leaves out a big chunk of grassroots ideologies, concepts, ideas and people since most grassroots activists in Africa have little or no access to technology. One of the biggest challenges is connecting online and offline activism. A lot of offline activism is groundwork that needs tools, information, connections, funding and support that is mostly accessible online.

HA: How could the challenges of access be overcome for strengthened use of technology in grassroots Queer African feminist organising?

BG: Grassroots forms of organising, concepts, inventions, ideas, need to be included in future development and use of technology. This could be done by advancing the use of mobile phone technology as a means of activism, because it is often more accessible to people than other forms of technology. This includes, for example, examining how to use mobile phones for community organising and resource mobilisation. Or by facilitating innovative grassroots approaches that use technology, for example the recent development of a mapping manual in Kibera (http://www.mapkibera.org/blog/2010/01/12/some-notes-on-map-kibera-mapping/) that could be used in identifying risk areas for queer community organising. And most importantly, we need to develop and utilise technology with the purpose of advancing security in our communities, creating efficient response systems and maximising on upcoming innovations.

HA: If people would like to know more about Watetezi-haki and/or contribute to the initiative, how can they do so?

BG: For more on Watetezi-haki visit: https://watetezihaki.crowdmap.com/. Or email us on: watetezi2011@gmail.com