In Conversation: "I see Information and Communication Technologies as weapons for good and for bad." Selina Mudavanhu speaks with *Maggie Mapondera*, Program & Communications Officer, Just Associates Southern Africa (JASS SNA)

Selina Mudavanhu (SM): Thank you so much Maggie for taking time out to do this conversation for *Feminist Africa*. I think a good place to start would be with you introducing yourself. What things would you want us to know about you?

Maggie Mapondera (MM): Well, firstly my name [laughs]. I am Maggie Hazvinei Mapondera. I am a feminist activist and writer and I work for a feminist movement building support organisation called JASS or Just Associates. I am passionate about writing and I am passionate about storytelling.

SM: What kinds of stories do you like telling?

MM: I have always understood my writing as a way of excavating or uncovering that which is silenced and that which is hidden, erased. Even when I was a kid, it was about stories about the women in my family. Whether it was my mother or my aunts or my grandmother, it was about these women who obviously were flawed and who were going through very difficult experiences but who were also very strong and powerful in different ways ... ways the world might not necessarily consider as powerful, but I think that's part of the story of how women navigate patriarchy, carve out survival in places or contexts where it's not always easy. I was always interested in telling those sorts of stories and making up fantastical stories, asking them questions. My family still will say now that I was a "talkative brat" [SM and MM laugh] who constantly asked and asked and asked until people had to shut me up by taking me to crèche a year early. I've always been curious, and I have always wanted to create spaces for women to speak. At Yale University where I did my undergraduate, I started convening little workshops and spaces with women; marginalised women in the community, a small urban community [in New Haven, Connecticut]. There were marginalised women: homeless women, women who were struggling with substance abuse, recovering drug addicts,

many of them living on the fringes whether out of choice or necessity or both. And so with a friend of mine, we opened circles where we would do writing exercises together as therapy and a way of accessing creativity and fostering a form of community and solidarity. I think that served to strengthen what had been in my mind already. I used to just write stories, but that experience made me realise the power of storytelling as a way to forge links between very different women from very different backgrounds because we could recognise a sense of commonality among our experiences or in what we had been through ... and there was power in that. And that's only become more real in some of the work that JASS is doing and that I'm getting to be a part of.

SM: Interesting! I share your passion for telling stories. I am happiest telling stories using digital tools. Although I like telling stories, I have discovered that due to several reasons, I have not found the time to create as many digital stories as I would have liked. Do you find time to sit and write?

MM: Well, JASS has sort of taken over my life [SM and MM laugh]. And it's a good thing because I think JASS has helped me to crystallise my politics. The women that I come into contact with every day, by phone, by email or face-to-face have helped me to shape my politics in ways that I wouldn't have been able to in a different space. For JASS the bulk of the work that I do is writing, whether it is writing for the JASS blog, editing web articles, supporting and facilitating communications and knowledge generation with women activists in the countries where we work, producing reports, proposals, you name it. It is writing all the time. So different muscles are being used continuously. And I read voraciously. When I do get the time, I do my own writing. I am working on fiction right now.

SM: No pressure ... I am looking forward to reading your book one day. [MM smiles and nods]. I have noticed over the past few years that increasingly activists in general are using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to enhance their activist endeavours. An example that immediately springs to mind is the ways activists in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region have made use of online spaces to organise. What are your thoughts on online organising?

MM: I think ICTs present huge opportunities for activists but they also pose several challenges. I like to think of ICTs as weapons for good and for bad. They've managed to open so many doors and shatter so many boundaries, especially for women and women activists, to give voice and disseminate

information in contexts where people are silenced. But there are limitations and pitfalls as with any strategy or tool.

SM: You introduce to the conversation a very interesting point … ICTs as being simultaneously "good" and "bad." Would you mind elaborating further what you mean by that?

MM: Sure. In feminist movement building for example, women's voices are central. It is about amplifying women's voices and it is about creating spaces and platforms so that women can speak out and be heard. It is about facilitating platforms for the issues that sit close and deep in women's hearts to be heard and I think ICTs are fantastic and powerful tools to achieve that. We have mobile phones and we can see how powerful those can be as a mobilising tool, as a tool for social activism and public accountability. With Ushahidi in Kenya, for example, thousands used the platform to log eyewitness reports of violence during the 2007/2008 Kenyan post-election crisis. It's also really great to see the impact of just being able to use ICTs, whether it is a woman in her 20s or a woman in her 60s, being able to use a computer, being able to type out an email or to send a text message on the cell phone or whatever. It's an empowering act, it's transgressive – an act that allows women to claim a certain sense of agency. I don't think this can ever be underestimated.

On the flip side, ICTs can come with risks and challenges. I was looking at statistics the other day, the percentage of people on the African continent that are using the internet isn't that high. Within that small percentage, how many are women? And within that percentage of women who are using ICTs, what does that demographic look like? How is access and use of ICTs defined by class, race, or whatever the case may be? And obviously, if you do choose to use ICTs to speak out against oppression in some shape or form, that voice isn't going into a vacuum. People are listening and those people might not always want to hear what you have to say, they might even want to stop you from saying it.

Having said that, I think movement building and this kind of work continually surprises me. Although women's access to ICTs is limited in some contexts across the continent, you can't go in with the assumption that if you travel to Lusaka, for example, people won't have access to iPhones. Because you'll go and sit in a workshop full of extremely linked-in young women, all of them tap-tapping on their BlackBerries and connecting with

people all around the world. I think that's huge, the idea that a woman in rural Zimbabwe can communicate with another woman halfway around the world and find resonances across language, across the tangible and intangible borders that separate us. That's a powerful, powerful thing [SM interrupts ... I agree]. It can be quite a scary thing too. But I think it's exciting in terms of organising and in terms of the reach that we can gain, and the kind of solidarity that we can build that completely surpasses anything that people might think we are capable of.

Back to the challenges ... I always think the internet is a corporate-driven space [SM agrees ... yes ... yes]. If you are using Facebook or Google or whatever it is, you need to be mindful that first and foremost, those exist in a neoliberal paradigm and they are corporate-driven. We can use them as resources, we can use them as tools, we can use them as weapons to fight patriarchy and various oppressions, but we need to use them with our vision clear and understand strategically how we can take advantage of them.

SM: Would you mind sharing some of the strategic ways JASS has taken advantage of ICTs in its work?

MM: At JASS we use ICTs in a variety of ways. Over the years we have done several trainings with community-based women activists from across the region, mainly from Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Some of this training is about sharing tools – so cellphones for mobilisation, Facebook, email, how to get and stay connected. Another layer of our work has been about politicising the understanding and usage of these tools, really grappling with what it means for a woman in a particular context to do activist work using an ICT tool or tools.

But we have always been mindful of the fact that some women won't have access all the time in Lilongwe where airtime is expensive as it is to make a call, let alone connecting to the internet service provider. So it's also about assessing your context and your resources, and finding ways to harness tools that work best and strengthen organising. Having said that, women activists are using mobile phones in Malawi to organise around the issue of accessing alternative ARVs [antiretroviral drugs], and have been doing so long before JASS started to support and bolster their work.

As an organisation we are also very big on safety and security. How do we make sure that we, as women, know how to protect ourselves if we do choose to use ICT tools? And so we share skills and tools that help to think about

this more deliberately, the Association for Progressive Communications [APC] is one of those really great resource organisations that does work on that. As women go around recording 60 interviews a day with positive women in their communities who are advocating for better ARVs in their local hospitals and are uploading those interviews online so that they can share with the world exactly what's happening on the ground, we talk about the potential dangers. And there's a political consideration in there too, a personal one about how we share stories, how we protect ourselves as activists when we choose to tell our stories.

SM: I do appreciate your point about safety and security, but I was just wondering... in authoritarian contexts, wouldn't online spaces be "safer" for activists compared to offline spaces? I do understand that the authorities can hack into networks and so on... what are your thoughts?

MM: I was just in Zimbabwe for the elections, and watching that unfold was interesting. Seeing how it was reported not just on the news (local, regional and international) but online spaces, the blogosphere, the infamous Baba Jukwa – I think the online space presents a real opportunity in such contexts. There are dangers there too, depending on how tightly wound the fist of control over access to online spaces is, but definitely there are opportunities. And the anonymity that you can get in such a space, the fluidity and relative "freedom," can be effective tools.

SM: Still on working in restricted contexts... from your experiences... has e-space made a difference to organising?

MM: Online spaces have definitely made a difference to activist organising not just in the southern African region. We see this in Honduras and Mexico, across our work in Mesoamerica for example, where we work with women human rights defenders who are using ICTs to connect, to share information and to protect themselves. Women human rights defenders or WHRDs have built a powerful and broad network that allows them to respond quickly, critically and effectively in situations where activists are at risk.

SM: I always hear friends telling me of the latest "apps" on their smartphones or the latest gadgets; evidence of the ever-changing world of ICTs...

MM: And it's exciting! Women are using Whatsapp [a cross-platform instant-messaging subscription service for smartphones with over 325 million users worldwide] and so on, finding more accessible ways to communicate and use technology for less cost.

It can be worrying to think about the depth and breadth of information we're exchanging online, and the security concerns that come with that. How does one protect themselves? You have cases like a young woman who was filmed having sex with her partner without her full consent, only to have a video posted online sans her permission and huge backlash against her because of it. I think there's something to be said about the commodification of women's bodies, and how that takes on different forms online and the marketing of sex and sexuality for profit – what does bodily autonomy mean in an online space? What does consent mean? Choice?

SM: Those are really important questions you are raising. It is always sad that some people find forwarding rape videos entertaining. A colleague of mine told me about a campaign in APC called, "I don't forward violence." I really think that this is a really good campaign. [SM pauses]. Going back to the issue of the ever-changing technologies... do you as JASS feel the pressure to be playing "catch-up" all the time with the technology?

MM: I think it has to be quite balanced because at the heart of JASS's organising agenda and strategy is the idea that movement building happens on the ground, it starts with people and it sits in women's hearts. While ICTs are very, very useful and powerful tools particularly in our context, there needs to be a connection to actual people living in communities for sustained movement building. I think the use of ICTs is made more powerful by grounding it in the needs and realities of the people who are building the movement.

Grassroots movement building is made more powerful when you have ICTs and various platforms in which to amplify the issues that are being expressed by people. At the same time I think ICTs are made more powerful when they are connected to the heart of what's going on in people's lives. We can see that clearly in cases like the Arab Spring, with millions of people mobilising on the street and the ways in which ICTs spread the word so to speak. But we have to acknowledge the years and years of deep, grounded organising that people had been doing at the community level. ICTs may have been a "spark" for revolution in some cases but there wouldn't be any revolution without a movement on the ground.

SM: Tja... it is not always easy to clearly say if it was ICTs that made a campaign successful or if there were other factors...

MM: I think there is room for different kinds of organising. There are so

many issues and there are so many levels on which we need to be tackling issues. It is understandable and I don't want this to come across as if I am discounting organising that happens predominately online because at the end of the day, it is all about issues that are sitting very much in women's bodies and women's hearts and women's minds. And the world is changing, so who knows what things will look like, even tomorrow.

SM: I agree. Even when a campaign mainly takes place online, it is not always easy to plot out the path that the campaign took to make it successful because many people in disparate locations might be involved in the campaign. Sometimes activists work together with other activists, but sometimes they organise separately. I remember that at one time on the GWS Africa listserve [a listserve, also known as a mailing list hosted by the African Gender Institute]; feminists were incensed by an organisation in the West that was collecting used undies for Africa as their contribution to "stop rape in Africa." The assumption was that rape was common in Africa because most women didn't have undies. Many activists wrote to the organisation, some wrote articles that were published on online news sites; there was a lot that happened. In addition to discussing what was problematic about the undies for Africa initiative, there was a discussion on the listener that was triggered by one activist who decided to "document" what had happened in the campaign. This attempt at documentation came under fire because it tried to plot a linear path in which a few people were recognised as having been key in protesting. One activist highlighted the dangers associated with a single story and the fact that there were multiple and concurrent organising that took place online in relation to undies for Africa.

While the above issue raises challenges associated with organising online, some donors still insist on organisations including in their reports the numbers of people that took part in a campaign as well as the numbers of people who were impacted. Has this been an issue for you?

MM: JASS works very hard to ensure buy-in from the communities with whom we work. That doesn't happen in a day, or even a month. In the case of Malawi, we have been working with a group of HIV-positive women activists for nearly five years, women leaders who hold an analysis of their lives, their context that's more nuanced than anything you'll find anywhere else. These women *know* what they need, they know the issues, they have distinctly feminist politics even if they might never call themselves "feminist." I think

it's important if you're going to do any sort of campaign, to work within the communities and support communities in giving voice to the issues they care deeply about.

The Malawian activist leaders are campaigning for better ARVs and healthcare. Prior to July this year, the majority of the country only had access to ARVs that contain a drug called Sustained, which comes with a lot of side effects – some painful, some visible and irreversible such as dystrophy. These side effects are affecting women's daily lives, their own vision of themselves, and many women experience stigma in their communities or the workplace due to forced disclosure because of the visible side effects and how they are interpreted. One chief denied positive women access to land and food, deeming them, "already dead" and therefore undeserving of the right to life. The access to alternative ART is an issue that starts with women's bodies and resonates with every area of their lives – it's not just about antiviral therapy, it's also about women having adequate food, access to land and other resources to lead healthy and fulfilling lives. So that's how the "Our Bodies, Our Lives" campaign for better ARVs was born.

I think there are lessons to draw from that for any sort of campaign effort, particularly in a context where there isn't extensive access to online organising, where online organising isn't really a factor at the local or even national level.

SM: Moving beyond the ways JASS has used ICTs… what is your general assessment in terms of how other NGOs (especially in southern Africa) are using ITs in their work… what is your general impression on use of ITs in women's organisations?

MM: I think people are excited and rightly so. The one thing we just have to remember is to have a critical analysis of the tools, why are we using them, why are we using this strategy, what does it mean for our political understanding of the work we do, is it safe and if not, what strategies can we use to be as secure as possible and still do the work? And also, if we are in the project of building movements, how can we use technology and communications to bolster that work?

SM: On one level, I do agree with you that there is so much excitement around the use of ITs for activism. I however, also think that the full potential of ICTs is yet to be explored by women's organisations and activists alike. When I look at Twitter for example, I only see a handful of organisations and activists using it.

Maybe it is just a case of Twitter not working for them… I don't know.

My other comment is that… most NGO-based projects in which ICTs are prioritised are linked to donor money. Given the reduction of donor funding towards women's organisations particularly in South Africa, I am a little concerned about the life of those projects in which activists make use of ITs. Having said that, I also think that there is a lot of organic use of Its by individuals. In South Africa for example, young people are using Mxit [a social-networking platform] and in most African countries people are using Facebook to connect with their friends and family.

MM: That's always the challenge, isn't it? How to think beyond donor funding. I would definitely agree with you, we haven't even begun to tap into the full potential of ICTs as women's organisations, as activists, as women and the reasons for that are complex and layered given the contexts in which we work and our needs. But I am hopeful and I guess all we can say is: "Watch this space to see where we go next…."