

“We Are Not Just Data Sources!” The Pursuit of Epistemic Justice

Mpumelelo Zamokuhle Zulu speaks with Katleho Mahlobo and Jessie Jabulisile Mdlalose from Newcastle Proudful Legends, and Katlego Chibamba from the Positive Vibes Trust. What follows is a compilation of two discussions, held in English and isiZulu. Mpumelelo Zamokuhle Zulu’s English translations from isiZulu appear in brackets.

My conversations with Jabulisile, Katleho and Katlego about the experiences of grassroots LGBTI+ activism and knowledge creation are heartfelt and eye-opening. We trace the intimacies between activism and methodologies used to create knowledge at the grassroots community level. The decolonial-queer theoretical standpoint requires interrogating and challenging normative assumptions, questioning stable categorisations and subverting hierarchies rooted in colonial cis-heteropatriarchal influences (Pereira 2019; Detamore 2016). Through these conversations, we queer and decolonise dominant epistemologies while reflecting on the unique ways queer knowledge is created in the global South. We explore the emancipatory potential of storytelling, uncovering resilience, trauma, queer joy and the complexities of the mundane. This engagement becomes a vantage point for exploring epistemic violence, examining the intimacies of queering imagined separations between “communities” and “researchers” and interrogating how the unequal power dynamics between funders and recipient organisations influence knowledge creation. As a testament to Nnaemeka’s (2004) theorising of African-centred social change activism through negotiations and no ego, we also shed light on the nuances of advocacy for gender and sexually diverse individuals in contexts of traditional leadership, funding disparities, the criminalisation of same-sex relationships and unfavourable political climates.

Mpumelelo Zamokuhle Zulu (MZZ): Thank you so much for taking the time to have this conversation with me. Let me tell you briefly about myself: I am a social scientist and a scholar-activist. I am pursuing an interdisciplinary master of social sciences at the University of Cape Town, specialising in psychology and African feminist studies. My research focuses mainly on the nexus of gender, sexuality, sex, *isintu* or, more broadly, “African cultures” and violence. Can you tell me a little about yourself and the work that you do?

Jessie Jabulisile Mdlalose (JJM): My name is Jessie Jabulisile Mdlalose. I am a dedicated human rights activist and the director of an organisation called Newcastle Prideful Legends – NNPL for short. As an activist, I am committed to advocating for justice, equality and dignity for all people. My journey into this work began with a deep sense of empathy and a refusal to accept injustice *nje* (just because), as a norm, as other people do. For the LGBTI+ community, injustice is a norm – as if being homophobic is normal. I decided to challenge these norms through grassroots organising and direct action. I strive to amplify the voices of those who have been silenced so that I can push for meaningful change.

Katleho Mahlobo (KM): uKatleho Mahlobo is my name. I’m a proud transman dedicated to advocating in the social justice space. How I became a human rights activist was influenced by how I came to understand myself. It wasn’t an easy journey, and it took being able to access knowledge, education and programmes such as workshops and dialogues that taught our community about the lived experiences of the LGBTI+. Then I entered spaces that try to create a world where we all can live equally without discrimination or hate simply because of who we are and who we are attracted to. I felt a strong sense of purpose and when I joined Newcastle Prideful Legends in 2020 – having been recruited by uJessie – was a great opportunity to bring about the change that I wish to see. We’re not doing this work only for us and the people living in the now. It’s also for our children that are growing up in this world. *Esibakhulisayo kungabi yinto yokuthi bakhula kulezwe esakhula kulo thina sakhula kunenzondo, kunabantu abangakuthandi kunabantu* (the children we are raising shouldn’t grow up in the world we grew up in, full of hatred, bigots and others) who make you feel unsafe and unsupported. I think *enye into eyangifaka kukhulu futhi ekuthini ngibe ne* (another thing that drove me towards and gave me) drive to advocate for LGBTI+ people is that

there are misconceptions and misinformation about them. Such inaccurate information perpetuates problems at the grassroots where people are as rigid and ignorant as they want to be because *umuntu angayenza noma yini noma yisiphi isikhathi* (people can do whatever they want, whenever they want). I think this is what we should try and change because at a time when we want to have substance in this world, *asikwazi ukuthi singavuma ukuthi siyi facilitate leyo nto* (we cannot allow ourselves to foster this attitude).

Katlego Chibamba (KC): Where do I begin? I am Katlego Chibamba.

I am an activist.

I am a lover of human beings.

I am a lover of justice.

I am a lover of community and collective living.

I have the privilege of serving as the global programme officer at Positive Vibes Trust for a project called Free To Be Me.¹ The programme is in its final year of implementation.

My journey into this movement-building work began through grassroots activism and community organising, not long after I had come out to my family as a gay man back in 2010. Following this coming out, I relocated to Rustenburg, a city in the North West province in South Africa. This new chance to live in a new place would give me the opportunity to find my authentic expression and to live openly and proudly as a gay man. Unfortunately for me, there were no organisations around where I could learn more about this until I decided to start hosting dialogue sessions with my friends and colleagues. Soon, this led me to register what became the first LGBTQI+ organisation in Rustenburg. Gays and Lesbians of Rustenburg (GLOR), as I called this organisation, was doing predominantly advocacy and campaigns, community mobilisation, promotion of health and well-being as well as social justice work.

Around the same time, I was studying for an LLB degree at the University of South Africa. I noticed a gap in knowledge about LGBTI+, which led me to establish a student group called GLOUSA – Gays and Lesbians of the University of South Africa, the first such organisation in this institution. Since I was a part of the institution, I became increasingly aware

of how knowledge was created and was somewhat unhappy with the practice of going to communities to acquire data but never going back to help address some of the emerging or known challenges. Researchers are almost always the winners, as they earn degrees and win awards for their work.

The knowledge created was often about us by them rather than ours with them. It is our voices and stories that are being heard and documented, even though we receive neither acknowledgement for nor benefit from the potential changes to which our stories might contribute. I am a big fan of the phrase “Nothing About Us Without Us,” and that was what drove me to start these organisations. My recognition of how knowledge was created led me to seek out institutions such as Positive Vibes and Gala that centre community voices and lift experiences. Through these experiences, I learned a lot and I took that knowledge back into the work that I was doing through GLOR and GLOUSA, and that has helped my personal and career advancement to where I am today, serving the global development sector.

How do your organisations conceptualise queer knowledge and its creation?

MZZ to KC: Can you tell me a little more about this idea of “knowledge from the community” and how you relate to it? Does your work – either previous or current – also touch on this?

KC: At Positive Vibes Trust, knowledge creation is embedded in everything that we do. We use methodologies such as “Looking In Looking Out” (LILO), which are products of Positive Vibes Trust. These are participatory learning processes that help individuals and communities explore identities, build self-acceptance and develop advocacy skills rather than just extract information from communities. We facilitate processes whereby knowledge emerges through dialogue, reflection and shared experiences. The “accompaniment approach” at Positive Vibes means that we work alongside communities as they generate insights and document their own realities.

At Positive Vibes, I’d say knowledge creation is inherently political and transformative. It entails community members gathering in a safe space to share stories, document lived experiences and collectively analyse the social

forces that shape their lives. It involves recognising diverse ways of knowing, not just academic or technical, but knowledge embodied in cultural and spiritual practices. For us, knowledge creation happens through participatory workshops that we often run across various countries. It involves community dialogues and, in some instances, art-based methods and collaborative research in which community members are researchers rather than subjects of research. It's about challenging who is seen as the knowledge producer and validating forms of knowledge that have been historically marginalised.

MZZ to KM and JJM: What you said [about Newcastle Prideful Legends] is very powerful because I'm getting a sense *yokuthi lento eniyenzayo* (that what you do), as much as it's work, is also deeply personal *kini* (for you). Can you tell me more about Newcastle Prideful Legends? What does the organisation do and how does it relate to knowledge creation?

JJM: iNewcastle Prideful Legends, abbreviated as NNPL. *Ngendlela engingayibeka ngayo ukuthi* (the best way I can explain it is), NNPL is a dynamic LGBTI+ human rights organisation. Of course, it's based in Newcastle in South Africa ... It is dedicated to promoting the safety and well-being of LGBTI+ individuals. We do that by combating homophobia, hate crimes, discrimination and so on. We adopt a comprehensive approach to advocate for the rights of LGBTI+ people and foster understanding, acceptance and inclusion of families and the broader community, because we also believe *ukuthi* (that) we are advocating for not only LGBTI+ people but the community. We create knowledge and gather information through, for instance, lived experience. There are experiences of people *asikhuma* communities *okuwukuthi* we advocate for *ngoba* (we are in communities with and we advocate for because), if we advocate for LGBTI+ and we are addressing hate crimes, we can collect real-life stories that might otherwise go unheard. Because there are people experiencing hate crimes in our communities and because we are part of the grassroots of the community, we can get information about such occurrences and use it to create awareness about the problems faced by the LGBTI+ community. These narratives, in a way, *zigcina ziba* essential *eziba ngama* data points (end up being essential and become data points) for understanding the impact of discrimination and the needs of marginalised communities. When I say marginalised communities *engqondweni yami ukufaka ukuthi* (the thought that comes to mind is that)

LGBTI+ people are not the only marginalised people; we also have *abantu aba* disable (differently abled people) in the communities. So, we stand for them also because they are marginalised. That's why we say that as much as iNNPL advocates for LGBTI+ people, it also advocates with the communities. We do that through community education and awareness, whereby NNPL fosters understanding by, for example, talking to schools, women's and men's forums, workplaces and communities about LGBTI+ issues. The dissemination of that information helps to shift public perception and *ngandlela thize* (in some way) to dismantle harmful stereotypes. How we do that [in NNPL], *ngoba sisho ukuthi* (since we ask), "How do we collaborate?"—I would say partnership, for one thing. Recently, we have been working with amaJuba College and other activists. By so doing, we share the same ideas to further expand the knowledge base through our presence in the communities, because talking about tertiary institutions means going there and obtaining a platform to talk to the students. That way, we disseminate information, you know, and the knowledge that we generate and share as activists, Mahlobo and I, leads to greater awareness. This is without saying much about legal progress because we've been picketing at some of the events. That legal progress means something to us because it's on the ground, and it also means something for cultural shift. I don't know if I've said too much, but I think I will leave it there for now.

MZZ: You can never say too much. There's never too much; if you would like to add something, Katlego, you can. I'm here to learn from you, so the more you bring, the more we can learn – not just me but even the readers too.

KM: What I would like to add is that whilst we are focusing on the passing of information from stakeholder to stakeholder, we also recognise that we are going through these lived experiences. We are aware that many times it becomes traumatic, so we also offer psychosocial support in conjunction with our partners, such as LifeLine and our social workers from DSD.² It also helps, whilst we are still trying to build a world where we are all inclusive and loving of one another, that we try to work through unhealed past experiences. As we are going through this journey, we are trying to dismantle *lezi zinto ezenzekela* (the things that happened) in the past and to change now to a better narrative in the future. It is also very important for us not only to gather the data that is needed to erase a lot of these things that perpetuate gender-based

violence, hate crimes, discrimination and homophobia towards LGBTI+ people, we also know that there is some psychosocial support that we need to provide for these individuals to help them continue to live full lives after the trauma that they might have endured.

What methodologies and strategies are used to create queer knowledge in global South contexts?

MZZ to KC: You mentioned participation and collaboration. I'm familiar with Participatory Action Research methodologies, and something that I'm really interested in finding out from you is, once this knowledge is generated collaboratively:

- Where does it go?
- What do you do with it?
- Who does the knowledge belong to?

KC: The knowledge created through our processes is collectively owned by us and the communities we work with. We collectively determine what we do with the knowledge. Usually, it informs community-led advocacy and strategies and campaigns that shape organisational programming and contribute to movement building. Oftentimes, it's the work that we do through LILOs; we take people through person-centred workshops that become transformative for them ... People are offered an alternative perspective, and [they can] think differently around the same issues that they have been facing. We support communities in packaging knowledge and in [adopting] accessible formats such as visual materials, digital stories and community reports that can be shared widely.

Sometimes knowledge remains within the community for internal reflection and growth, but at other times, with proper consent, we help communities share their insights with policymakers, funders, or other broader audiences to influence the social change that we want to see.

MZZ: Amazing. You mentioned LILO, Looking In Looking Out. What is this Looking In Looking Out?

- Is it a methodology?
- Is it an approach?
- Is it a philosophy?

KC: Back in 2010, our current executive director had the task of creating workshops ... Communities were saying, “Look, we are done, and we want to be able to have a deeper understanding about our sexuality, about our gender diversity”. As you know, there’ve been quite a number of sensitisation workshops, but in principle those just teach people about the terminologies, how to navigate around people in the LGBT or other marginalised communities. It doesn’t really take people through a deeper personal journey towards their own understanding of their gender and sexual identity.

The LILOs are one of the personal methodologies that we’ve created at Positive Vibes. We have about 20 of those methodologies; they are person-led, person-centred and facilitated in a way that helps people go through a journey of their own life, how they came to realise who they are ... and how they are perceived. We have four different parts where we look backwards at where we came from, and then forward to where exactly it is that we are going with our lives. One of the first methodologies to have been established was the LILO identity, which is executed as a three-day workshop that takes people through their own journey ... Firstly, language: how language can be political and ... how language can also be dangerous in many ways. Their understanding of the language [is an important consideration]: what do you understand bisexuality to be? How did you become bisexual, and what is your story with it? And then we take people through writing about or reflecting on their own life from the time they were born, and in between they see and draw the trend for themselves as to what their journey really has entailed ... up to the time that some of them may have come out, how that has been. Has it always been a positive story? Has it always been a negative story? And what that opportunity does, is you look at it, and it gives you a reflection of where life could be going. You know, there may have been moments when one experienced very deep challenges, but also some ... positive sides. What that exercise does is help us centre our circle of influence.

You are able to ... see those who have been the really supportive people in your life, who have enabled your voice and supported your journey of

learning and becoming. Who are some of the people who haven't been very supportive and have been distracting in the ways that you know? And in [doing] that, you can cast them aside and focus more on the people that you know bring life to you, encourage you to be a better person, and are much more interested in helping you grow. And then it goes much deeper, with a look into relationships that we have, not just with our intimate partners, but with our families and friends, and what kind of people we are. It helps us look at some theories, such as the Johari Window:

- What we think about ourselves?
- How people look at us?
- What are the opportunities?
- What are some of the challenges?

So, basically LILO is a personalised approach that takes people through their own journeys but is facilitated through various processes.

MZZ to JJM and KM: *Uyazi into efika engqondweni njengoba benikhuluma ukuthi, indawo ne ndawo ziyahluka* (what came to mind as you were speaking was that places/communities differ). I am sure even in Newcastle, there are urban areas, townships and many rural areas. There are also younger people – the youth – people who are older, Zulu people, among others. Do all these things influence your work, because looking at your processes, you are not only interested in creating knowledge but there is a strong emphasis on dissemination. So, *ngifuna ukwazi ukuthi izinto ezifana ne ndawo en'kuyo, abantu akhona iya* (I want to know how things like location and the demographics of people in attendance) affect the way you create and disseminate knowledge.

JJM: *Indlela engiyibona ngayo* (the way I see it), where and how it is done would relate to cultural norms. The conversation with society is important in our knowledge creation, which focuses on and maybe even challenges deeply rooted prejudices. For geographical location, we can compare rural and urban areas: the latter may have more resources for activism and the former may require localised grassroots knowledge sharing. The communities' needs and priorities depend on what issues are most pressing there, for instance, healthcare access, mental health, and maybe protection from violence. It is

important to check where you are, who you are going to bring that information to, and the way you're going to do it, *mhlambe ne* (and maybe the) language and communication style. The knowledge and how you share it must be culturally sensitive, based on literacy, language and access to technological resources. For instance, in a rural area *asikwazi ukuphatha ama* (we cannot bring) slides and do our presentation. We clearly cannot disseminate information if we come with that mindset because storytelling *yethu* (our storytelling) will not be that effective. It's very important because we can be limited *ukuza ne* mindset *yokuthi sizokhuluma nge* advocacy *endarweni enamakhosi* (if we go to an area under traditional leadership with the mindset that we will talk about advocacy). For instance, uMahlobo identifies as transgender and uses he/him pronouns while I use she/her, so *uma siya endarweni eye* rural area *sifuna ukuyo* sensitise *amakhosi* (so when we go to rural areas to sensitise traditional leaders), there is no way I am going to go there *bese ngifuna ukugqoka ibhulukwe* in that area *yase emakhosini* (and insist that I want to wear trousers in that area led by traditional leaders). *Mina ngoba* I identify as he, *kufanele ngizitshale ukuthi kufanele ngigqoke isiketi ngoba ngiya enkosini njengamanje* (even though I identify as he, I need to wear a skirt because I am going to the monarchy). You must use strategies whether you like it or not. *uMhlobo uwuMhlobo*, *u* believe and *uyile nto ayiyo* are *yiyo* (Mahlobo is Mahlobo, he believes and is what he is) – there's nothing you can change about that – but *ukuze ungene kumuntu ume* penetrate (you are trying to get through to someone). *Angisho ukuthi kuzoba njalo* but uMhlobo might be forced *ukuthi ahambisane nami agqoke isiketi ngoba manje sifuna okuyokhuluma naleya nkosi ukuse idedele induna zendawo ukuthi* they give us *islot uma kuba nomcimbi yenkosi* to come and sensitise *obaba no mama* (I am not saying it will be like that, but uMahlobo might be forced to wear a skirt like me because we want to speak to the king/chief to instruct the local traditional leaders – induna – to give us a slot during the king's/chief's ceremonies so we can sensitise the people in attendance). *Ukuze ubanikeze inhlonipho before bakuxosha ungakafiki* (we show them respect so we can gain access). You'd rather be there and look presentable – for them – so they can at least give you an ear. This is important because understanding the context ensures that knowledge is relevant, impactful and accessible. It allows us – as

activists – to tailor education, advocacy and resources to the specific needs of that environment.

KM: *Ucinisile* (you are right), because even in the context *ayibeka ngayo uJabu* in that *ukuze umuntu umuzuze ngicabanga ukuthi* (that Jabu is articulating, to win someone over), we must conform even as we want to extend the scope of the information. This also applies with religious leaders. In one instance where we came across religious leaders, we felt *ukuthi kulo mihandazo akusesi wumihandazo nje sekuzwuthandazo* (that what they were saying was no longer just a prayer, but words intended to) condemn me as a person. *Manje* (now), for you to change their mindset, you [need] to know [how to] use the same Bible, contextualise it, and help them to understand *ukuthi le esiniyikiphala bazalwane ayikhombisi uthando ingathi singabuya silifunde futhi le Bible* (that the words they were sharing, as Christians, do not show the love that calls us to come together to read the Bible) in the [way] it is supposed to be used. So now Zamokuhle, you find yourself in a space where you might have promised yourself you would never set foot in church because of experiences that you might have had. Now you are working within a human rights organisation, where you need to work interfaith to change the narrative that is already going on within the religious space. The only way to change that is to be within that uncomfortable space and then drive the narrative from the inside rather than from the outside where you [would not be able] to monitor and evaluate what direction this is taking. Believe me, as uncomfortable as it is, it works because *uthi awufuni wena ukuba sendaweni sase sontweni or endaweni enamakhohwa ngoba iqiniso lithi umuntu usuke aya esontweni ngoba usuke azi ukuthi umphefumulo wakhe umuholela kanjani nokuthi* (you may say you don't want to be in a religious space or around religious people, but the truth is that people turn to religion because their souls feel drawn to it and perhaps this is where they find healing). What we now need to do is change their approach to marginalised groups, so that the scripture is not used to bring harm to the rest of the world. This also applies to the political space where *umuntu uzokutshela nge organisation yakhe* (someone approaches you to tell you about their organisation) – for instance, the DA³ or EFF⁴ – and how they drive the mission within the political space, not understanding that *nami ngiza nokwami nawe uza nokwakho* (I come with my

own and they have theirs), and we all need to find common ground. So that we now actually have a sense of equality and inclusion in South Africa.

MZZ: Yho, I am learning so much and it's interesting because the knowledge you create and the work that you do is not coming from outside the community – if I understand correctly. You are saying that you are part of the community, and you will make the changes, and you will collect and disseminate the stories while you are inside the community, and you navigate these different spaces as a part of the community. What is the most interesting thing that you found as you were collecting these narratives? Please don't expose any personal information, but just in general, is there something interesting or that you were not expecting?

KM: Well, I think my most interesting was a workshop we had with a fraternity *nomfundisi* (that had a pastor) – *sizothi wumfundisi* Mdletshe (let's call him Pastor Mdletshe). *uMfundisi Mdletshe sasine sure ukuthi uzosikhipha ngama celemba the way bebadinwe ngakhona mekezwa nge* (we were sure that Pastor Mdletshe would take us out with machetes because of how angry he was to hear about the) topic of discussion. We had introduced the workshop as an event about contextualised Bible studies but then re-introduced it under the concept of understanding the LGBTI+ communities. *Uma ezwa ngendaba ka LGBTI+ community, hayi wadinwa into eningayazi* (when he heard LGBTI+ community, he was furious), but by the end of that workshop, Zamo, you won't believe we got hugs and kisses. He even told me, "*Uyindodana yami ngemphele wena nalaba engaba xosha layikhaya ngizobalanda*" (You are really my son. I will even ask the members I chased away to come back). That was the most humbling moment we had experienced *in sino Jabu* (with Jabu). I feel that every moment when we have had *abazali* (parents) openly declare that "*Bengahlulela umntanami ngoba bengingazi nge gender and sexuality manje ngiyabona ukuthi bengizonda umntanami, ngimuzondela into engekho*" (I used to judge my child because I did not know about gender and sexuality, but now I see that I hated my own child over nothing). *Ayikho into ejabulisa umphefumulo wethu ngangaloko* (nothing fulfils our souls more than that) because when we see that we are making a change – no matter how small it may be – there is change.

JJM: I will just take a similar scenario when we were in a space with religious leaders who push this narrative that homosexuality is a sin, but after all the work we did – which was hard – there were tears and exchange of words. However, one thing that happened that day absolutely amazed me and made me ponder how we do our work to achieve an impact. There's nothing that beats knowing that you've stood in front of people for three hours, talking to them, educating them and getting information from them, because the way I see it is [there's give and take] every time when we work – we learn from the participants. One thing that really struck me was when one of the religious leaders who is very influential and is also in the LGBTI+ community stood up and said, "For 30 minutes we're going to have a meeting with the LGBTI+ community." She said this when the religious leaders were also in the main hall and asked the LGBTI+ people to meet her in a certain room because there was something that we needed to discuss. To my surprise, I had about five religious leaders in the room, and I was confused – asking myself, "Didn't they get the memo or something?" She also noticed that there were religious leaders amongst us, so she reiterated, "I asked for LGBTI+ individuals only for this meeting; not that I'm discriminating, but there is something that we need to discuss as an LGBTI+ community. This is outside of the workshop; it's something else based on what I do as an activist." When those pastors responded, "We are also LGBTI+ people," I'd never been so surprised in my life, and everybody was in disbelief. The pastors confessed, "After everything that you guys taught us, we now admit that the reason why we hated the LGBTI+ people was because we are them, but they could do things that we couldn't do, and we hated them because they openly accepted who they are. Today, we have to say enough is enough; we are preachers of the Word and we've been pushing the narrative that homosexuality is a sin, but now we know that we have been lying to ourselves – as preachers – and we are not going back to our churches and spreading lies." They said, "We are coming out right now in front of you, and we are so sorry for discriminating." That was amazing for me, and till today when we meet with them, they are so kind, and they are accepting – of who they are – before they accept us. So, for me that was a breakthrough.

MZZ: What! Yho! I did not see ... [speechlessly in shock]

KM: These are stories of change, and no matter how small the change is –

JJM: *Kuqala kancane kancane* (it starts small).

KM: As much as we may think there is no progress, there are narratives that are being changed, minds are being changed, perspectives are being changed. We just need to appreciate that change happens at different intervals.

What challenges do grassroots organisations experience when creating knowledge about gender and sexual diversity in Africa? How do they thrive despite the challenges?

MZZ to KM and JJM: You touched on something really interesting, you know, Katleho, you mentioned trauma, and I'm sure when you are retelling the stories and doing this work, collecting this data, these narratives and lived experiences – it might not be the easiest thing. I'm just wondering, what are some of the challenges that you might be facing in the process, and how do you navigate them?

KM: I want to say it's not easy. You know, organisations carry people's lived experiences very well, but it's so heavy because we all have stories to tell. The biggest thing is that while you're listening to all these lived experiences, you yourself have a story to tell. I have been triggered, I don't know how many times, and I still get triggered *namanje* (to date). I've felt that at times it's important that we as activists also seek therapy because we go through things in the movement and *ekhaya* (at home), or a traumatic experience that might have happened.

Our organisations live on grant funding and in moments when you can't supply the help that you know you would have been able to offer had you had the means, it also hurts. We would have felt a lot better knowing that we are changing some scenarios at home. We are actually changing some journeys that people are undertaking in their lives because [of] the magnitude of our work and the life-changing experiences that we come across. We have all met people in the first session of whatever workshop or dialogue [who] show all homophobic traits, *akhulume uzwe ngathi* (and they speak till you're emotional) in the middle of the session. But you can't yield to emotions because you need to change the mind of this person, and in the process, you find that there is a story behind this person's homophobia. *Usa'* experience

into *yokuthi* this person *mhlambe ekhaya kukhona okwenzeka, kwakune* sexual assault (the homophobic person also might have had traumatic experiences such as sexual assault). I'm telling you it becomes intense, and there comes a point when we also find ourselves needing the counselling that we offer to *abantu esisuke sibasiza* (the people we are helping). Yeah, so I think as far as trauma and reliving *ezinye zale zinto* (some of these things), Zamokuhle, it happens all the time. I don't want to say it is something that you can switch off today and back on tomorrow. It's constantly there, yet the community needs you to be their pillar of strength. I think that is the greatest burden that we as activists carry: trying to make the change that everybody wants to see without having to show our community that we are carrying a lot.

JJM: I love what you just said, Mr Mahlobo. To reiterate, for me, the key words are discrimination and stigma because now there's always going to be challenges when we face resistance from communities, maybe [from] all the people who hold prejudiced views against LGBTI+ people. We do have discrimination and stigma on our shoulders. Another major issue that Mahlobo touched on, which is true, [is that] as an organisation and activists, we face security and safety risks because *abantu* (of people). There will be threats, harassment, or violence against activists by people who were participants in some advocacy efforts and who then turn around and attack us. We also face resistance from big people, like gatekeepers. I am talking about religious leaders and law enforcement, for instance. You find that just because you are working as an activist, there are discriminatory beliefs against you, restrictive laws and a lack of legal recognition. Because when you report a case at the police station, for example, [when] we do referrals and linkages and we bring a person who is being abused, maybe physically or sexually, we confront secondary victimisation. So, those people [service providers] would think that because it's an LGBTI+ issue that it is okay for the victim to be further victimised. Those are the challenges.

We have limited resources ... If an individual who is not LGBTI+ was raped, the case would be handled well, but with an LGBTI+ person, then there's a lot of mental and emotional strain. Being an activist and being an organisation for human rights, there are internal conflicts, even among us and within the community. We face such challenges, and sometimes we want representation and visibility because there's exclusion maybe, of certain

identities within the LGBTI+ spectrum *njengabantu aba* (like people who are) non-binary and intersex individuals. So, in advocacy, there's a lack of representation.

Despite all these challenges that Mahlobo and I mentioned, we persist. We're still going to have strategic partnerships and community-driven approaches. We're going to help in overcoming variance and creating meaningful impact. We will never stop; we will face these challenges. We're just going to tell ourselves from what we've learned and everything that we went [through ... with] limited resources, mental strain, whatever it is that we mentioned, we shall have that resilience and move on.

MZZ: Iyho ... wow! I can feel the emotions as *nikhuluma* (you speak). It's the passion, but it's also the heaviness of the work ... Both of you spoke about lack of resources, financing, funding, and I'm wondering how this affects your work. Particularly when it comes to collecting narratives, does it affect what type of data or stories or the knowledge you create? Does the funding also come with, "We want you to do this particular work"? Or is it the organisation that controls or says what the community needs?

JJM: [Laughing] Yho, yho, yho – that topic! I didn't want to talk about it, but I'd say funding becomes a challenge. Funders have their own priorities. They come with a specific criterion; for instance, currently we have an issue with USAID and PEPFAR. Those are the funds for HIV/AIDS literacy and how people are dealing with HIV, and whether they are adhering to their medication. Funders can say, "This is what we want you to do", whereas we may have a broader focus. This limits us because we must use such funds for HIV/AIDS and treatment literacy. That affects the organisation if it cannot [address HIV/AIDS], but at NNPL, we have a broad spectrum of things that we want to do. Our strategy is wide; of course, it includes HIV and AIDs. But now, let's say we have employed four or five people who are going to be in the field. Imagine those people having to do only HIV/AIDS work because that's what we have money for. What about GBV? We don't have funds that can help us go and do GBV projects. On the ground, as Mahlobo has mentioned, we find ways to collaborate with other stakeholders and do GBV awareness campaigns. That way we are a collective because now we must find ways ... There's also political influence, which is very clear right now with Trump and

his shenanigans. That political influence also hinders us as NGOs and NPOs because, remember, we are a non-profit organisation ... But these political influences also hinder us from reaching more people. So, sometimes we have limits, I must say, because there is no accessibility. We need to know who gets to participate where, how we can find that person who's going to help us ... How are we going to pay that person, because they're going to need money from us to do the work, you see? So, it's rather difficult ... we may sound as if we are emotional, but we not only have a vision and a mission; we also have a passion for what we do. Our passion pushes us because without it, I'm telling you, we would have given up a long time ago.

KM: That is absolutely correct, when uJabu mentions that without passion, we would have given up a long time ago. I think it is so even when there are these challenges of funding. I'm grateful to other organisations that currently have funding from other countries and can outsource and support smaller organisations around our area to help them continue with the work. *Kancane* (in a small way), it really does help and offload *ezinye zezinto esibekana nazo* (other challenges we are facing) because it is quite true that many of these things have a lot of political influence. Such political influence really does affect the work that needs to be handed over or done on the ground, and *sisafuna ama* (we are still looking for) processes to change and move things into a brighter light. *Siyodinga Zamokuhle ukuthi nalabo bantu esithi sicela usizo kubona, kobekhona indlela yokuthi siyabonga* and *iyive ibuhlungu Zamo into yokuthi* as much as *uwaziwa vele ukuthi vele ukuthi* (Zamokuhle, we also need to show gratitude to the people we requested help from, and it hurts when you are known to) work with community engagement, you deal with *abantu* (people), but *futhi ungakwazi ukubapha noma ubanana ekuhlaleni kwenu* (you can't even offer them a banana in your meeting). After they have spent two hours in a workshop, *awukwazi nokubapha ubanana ubabonga nje ngokuthi ngiyabonga namanzi* (you can't even offer them a banana; you just show gratitude by saying "thank you" and offering them drinking water). Yes, we understand that *abantu bafuna ulwazi lokuthi kuyenzakalani* (people want knowledge about what is happening), *ukuthi umuntu o trans kusuke kunjani emzimbeni* (what being trans means in relation to the physical body), *usuke acabangani engqondweni* (as well as psychologically). *Yonke leyo nto leyo uyacabanga ukuthi umuntu uze ne diligence yokwazi lelo kwazi but manje*

uzophinda abuye yini ngelinye ilanga uma nomcele ukuthi eze azofunda olunge ukwazi because it's not just trans people; *kukhona abantu aba intersex, ama lesbian, ama gay*, in fact the whole queer spectrum *bayadinga ukwaziwa* (we understand that the people come diligent and hungry for this knowledge; however, the question is, will they come back when we invite them for future workshops because it's not just trans people; there are intersex, lesbian, gay, in fact, we need to raise awareness about the whole queer spectrum). But *angeke abuye uma ngimuncisha ubanana lokuthi a ngcolise umlomo nokuthi amathe abuye emlonyeni* (they won't come back if we can't give them at least a banana to nibble on). You understand Zamokuhle *ukuthi sisuke singamema intsha kuphela ngoba simema nabantu abadala ogogo bexhukuzela beze* (we don't only invite young people; we also invite the elderly who come limping) to the venues that we rent to run these workshops and intervention programmes and provide these educational tools *ukuze umuntu uma ephuma akwazi uku disseminator emphakathini wakhe la ehlala khona* (so people can acquire knowledge and go and disseminate it in the communities they live in). *Uma siso focus ebantwini abatsha siyeka abantu abadala yilapho esizishaya khona ngoba kahle kahle kumele sicele ebantwini abadala bese siza nabo ngoba angeke kulunge uma siyigcina kithi ama young adult and the youth* (we would be doing society a disservice if we focused on the youth and excluded the elderly; we need to start with the elderly before [we get to the] young adults and youth like us). *Ngiyabonga* (Thank you).

MZZ to KC: As you were speaking, I just kept thinking about a quote I read. I think it was by Carol [Hanisch], and it said, "The personal is political." That is what has been ringing in my mind this whole time, and I'm wondering, in the current state of the world, there seems to be growing conservatism and, with that, a privileging of this rigid, positivist approach to science that is unemotional, impersonal and looking for "facts". I'm wondering, since you are doing this type of work that is explicitly transformative, political and person-centred, what challenges do you face? Particularly within the African context.

KC: We face multiple challenges, and they are not just centred around Africa because we also work in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, as well as Latin America. We face multiple challenges in this work, such as safety and security – which are paramount concerns. We have the criminalisation of same-sex

relationships in many African contexts. This means that knowledge creation processes must be carefully designed to protect the participants [with whom] we work.

There are also bigger challenges of navigating dominant narratives that position gender and sexuality as un-African or merely as victimising. So, our work involves creating spaces where people can articulate complex identities and experiences beyond the limiting frameworks that we are often given to work with.

Additionally, I happen to have had direct experience with [one of the challenges] because I used to work as a funder or a philanthropy development practitioner. Funding structures often privilege certain types of knowledge over others, with pressure to produce quick quantifiable results rather than support the slow, deep work of community-led knowledge creation.

MZZ: Mmmh, I've always been curious about this ... Would you say that funding for creating knowledge, which is essential to the work, also influences the type of work or the type of knowledge that is generated? Particularly, I am thinking about how a lot of organisations in the global South depend on donations and funding from big organisations in the global North.

KC: Certainly! In multiple ways, remember, funding is about power because that's where resources are. So, power dynamics and priorities take precedence. Funders often set the agenda for what knowledge is considered valuable and which questions to explore, and this can result in research that aligns with their own interests rather than community priorities. Organisations such as ours, Positive Vibes, must then navigate these dynamics carefully to ensure that community needs are not sidelined in favour of donor-driven objectives. Many funders, for example, prefer quantitative approaches that produce measurable outcomes and quick results. This can discourage deep and time-intensive participatory methods that are often most appropriate for community-led knowledge creation. So, the pressure to demonstrate impact within short funding cycles limits exploration of complex and nuanced realities. We know very well that to change people's ideas and thoughts about what and how they've been made to believe for years is not something that will take 12 months or five years. It's a continuous process that can be observed over a period of time, yet oftentimes, funders give us limited

periods of time to complete it. Another element that I want to bring into this, is that of colonial power structures. As already mentioned, international funding often flows from the global North to the global South, reinforcing colonial power dynamics where northern institutions determine what knowledge about African communities is considered legitimate. This can marginalise indigenous knowledge systems and locally developed methodologies. I'm sure working in the field of research yourself as an academic, you come across this quite often.

One of the big challenges is sustainability, because if you're given money to do this piece of work for this period of time, there is no guarantee that after you do this work, there will be sustainable measures put in place. Because a lot of the work is project-based, which really is limiting as opposed to general funding that isn't specific to a particular project. Organisations working with gender and sexually diverse communities often develop creative strategies to balance the funders' requirements with community priorities. This might include building relationships with funders who understand participatory approaches, negotiating for flexible funding structures or completing funding projects within community-driven initiatives.

MZZ: Hmm ... [intrigued]

KC: You know another point that I'm just thinking about is visibility bias. Funding often determines which knowledge gets amplified and circulated. Research that aligns with the donor's narratives may receive wider distribution than community-generated knowledge that challenges dominant frameworks. So, the key challenge becomes finding ways to leverage available funding while maintaining integrity in community-centred knowledge creation processes. This, in principle, requires transparent communication with both funders and communities. It depends on the willingness of communities [to generate knowledge] and especially funders to provide funding opportunities that would not compromise ethical commitments to community ownership.

MZZ: Where do you see knowledge creation or research from the global South in the next 5 to 10 years, looking at the current global political context with the funding cuts – particularly for work on gender and sexual diversity? What can we do?

KC: Look, one thing I'm really not so bothered about is funding that has stopped because it's funding that also had an agenda. I don't think we've lost much, if it's the kind of funding that we've constantly – for many years – been saying doesn't serve our communities. The mere fact that it has been taken away shouldn't bother us, shouldn't frustrate us to a point where we feel we cannot do anything without it, because that very idea [of our perceived helplessness] is the reason why they thought they could use means such as their funding to control how narratives are shaped.

I see several exciting developments on the horizon. First, I anticipate growing recognition of African scholars, activists and community researchers who are developing innovative, contextually grounded approaches to knowledge creation around gender and sexuality.

I also see increasing collaborations on the continent with networks of community researchers sharing methodologies and findings across borders, building a rich body of Africa-centred knowledge on gender and sexual diversity. I mean, the rise of digital technologies will also contribute to creating new possibilities for documentation and knowledge sharing, although we must remain vigilant about digital security and accessibility. Especially in our context, oftentimes we are seen as the late bloomers, because the world is already at an advanced AI stage, while we are still struggling with access to technology in some of our rural settings. But the idea is, we must be able to balance the two and see really how they are able to contribute to our communities, particularly in the rural areas. Most importantly, I believe we'll see more funding and institutional support for knowledge-creation processes in which gender and sexually diverse communities across Africa are not just participants but conceptual leaders shaping research agendas and methodologies. This shift will produce knowledge that more accurately reflects the complex realities of our communities and more effectively serves the movements for justice and liberation across the continent. And I believe that a conversation such as this will definitely not be taken lightly by an academic such as you, but that you will go back and challenge your fellow scholars to start looking at communities in a much more mutually beneficial way, as opposed to just a one-sided benefit approach.

MZZ: Sounds queer! Sounds very queer! It's the resisting, the subverting, the inventing, the negotiating ... all of it sounds so queer.

Critically reflecting on academics and research institutions from the perspective of grassroots organisations and activists, is the knowledge we create queer?

MZZ to KC: I'd like to take this conversation back into the personal. As you know, I'm an upcoming academic at the University of Cape Town, and it's really interestingly placed when we're looking at colonial legacies and apartheid. I want to know where you place us in this conversation because, so far, we've been speaking about the funders and the communities, but this is not a binary. Academics, scholars and students also play a role in knowledge production. What do you think about their place? What advice would you give or what things would you make us aware of that we might be blind to?

KC: When you speak of yourselves, [and] I'll set this around academics in general, because my voice predominantly comes from that of community members.

MZZ: Yes.

KC: I'm not an academic, so my feelings depend entirely on how research is to be conducted. When academics approach communities with respect, centre community priorities, share power throughout the entire research process and ensure benefits flow back to communities, such research can be valuable and contribute to important social change. Unfortunately, we still see too much extractive research, where communities are treated as data sources rather than knowledge partners. This perpetuates harmful power dynamics and produces knowledge that serves academic careers more than community needs. Personally, I believe the most valuable academic research happens through genuine partnerships with communities and organisations, where researchers are willing to be uncomfortable, challenge their own assumptions and share control over research questions, methods and analysis, as well as dissemination. So, if there is any advice, to be honest, it is to centre communities in your work – we are not just data sources. We are knowledge creators; we are partners in this. Our stories contribute to this idea that can

advance you, which is not a problem when we are dealing with an academic, but at the same time, it shouldn't just be a selfish way of advancing yourself with a master's degree or a PhD or an honours degree. It should be that the same community from which you've extracted the knowledge is also experiencing the change and the benefits.

MZZ: "We are not your data sources!" I've taken that in good faith.

MZZ to KM and JJM: Out of interest, I am curious to know how you feel about people from universities and big research institutions who come and do research on gender and sexually diverse people – or as you said, LGBTI+ people in communities.

KM: For me, yes, the research is being done but I feel that *indlela eba collect ngakhona i data* (the way they collect data) is not doing justice. Sometimes certain narratives are not written about because they "might be taken another way," but some of that information is what we need on the ground to help people navigate the challenges they come across. I mean, there are institutions and universities that conduct research on gender and sexuality, but *akusizi* (it doesn't help): of what use is [research] if it remains in your file and collects dust? While it is gathering dust, it is not being disseminated to the community where it is needed.

How can we deal with that? We can formulate relationships between researchers and human rights organisations that would enable us to assist the university in going back to the community with those findings and spreading the word. We should educate [our communities] and make intervention plans because *kuyadingeka ngemphelela ukuthi* (it is imperative that) once we have done the research and collected that data, it shouldn't be used just for office purposes. Because when we collect the data, we often don't realise that it is needed back in the community to help them update some of their ways of working.

JJM: To add to what you are saying, I'm not discriminating against any research that is being done by academics, I think they really must do the work. However, *lento ingibuyisela kule nto ebengikhuluma kuyo ye funding* (this is taking me back to my previous point on funding). On the ground, we have constraints of funding, and I think for them [academics], it's even worse because they rely on external [funds], and they cannot do community-led

research because they would have to be present in the study area. They don't do that, and even if they do, they're going to rely on surveys and interviews that are online and whatnot. They don't get to the ground. *Ama academic mina ngibona ngathi* they are disconnected from lived realities, *bane theory ne knowledge*, (I think academics are disconnected from lived realities; yes, they may have the theory and knowledge) but they're disconnected from the day-to-day reality of community life. They may not fully understand the level of experience of gender and sexuality for diverse people, such as personal impact, stigma, discrimination or violence. Their research is based on academic standards or theory that doesn't necessarily align with the life experiences of those they study. They overlook complexity or the small differences between identities in real-life contexts. *Bane over-reliance on theory ngendlela abayifunda ngayo* cause *sebabona i survey from usban-bani abangamazazi* (they are over reliant on theory in the ways they work, hence you will find them using a theory they recently read about that is created by somebody they don't know); they take that context and think they can come up with something. It is good enough, but it disconnects from lived experiences.

If they would come to our workshops, they would get even more information. As I said before, *ukuthi nathi uma siyosebenza siyafuna* from *ama* participants, *izinto esisuke singazazi* sometimes *njengama* traditional things that are happening and academics *abawazi ama* traditional objectives *nezindlela abantu* – like religious leaders – *abayithatha ngayo i* sexuality (we also learn from participants when we work, particularly about things we didn't know before, like traditional things that are happening. And academics don't know traditional objectives and different ways people – like religious leaders – understand sexuality). The time constraints of academic [work] also impose limits because, for example, they'll be given a task to do from now until May, when they could have a longer engagement if they came to these workshops and got even more information. So, I'm not against it, but their work is short term and after they're done, they start another thing. If they were to work in a larger institution, they could approach knowledge creation from the bottom up, *basebenzisa ama* (and employ) methodologies that emphasise the insights and wisdom of the local communities. My concern is, can they go to the communities because, as we are an advocate organisation, we deal with these

things on a day-to-day basis? Even in colleges, whenever we go to those academic areas, we learn new things *ngalabo bantwana* (from those young people) and from their ways of thinking about gender and sexuality. So, if academics were to come to the community, *babuye bane* (they would return with that) meaningful benefit that got them involved in the first place. This is not just in the short term but also in the longer term because another important thing is adaptability – things change. *Indlela u* “gender and sexuality” *wayenziwa nayo ngo* (the way people approached “gender and sexuality” in) 1920 is different from now, so we need to adapt, and we need to make use of technology sometimes.

As I previously mentioned, in rural areas, I can’t go with gadgets; *kufanele ngifike ngikhulume isiZulu bangizwe abantu abadala ukuthi ngikhuluma ngani* (I need to speak in isiZulu so the older people can also understand what I am talking about) because not everybody is technologically inclined. Technology and methods like surveys work where people have access, but in many cases, I fear they still have a long way to go.

MZZ: If there was one piece of advice or something you would like to say to academics, what would it be?

JJM: *Mina ngicela ukusho, angazi noma ngiyithukuthela yini, ningixolele* (I would like to go first. I think I might be getting upset now, please forgive me). *Ama academic, abenze I Community-Based Participatory Research ikhona lento ngiyayazi* (academics should use Community-Based Participatory Research methods; yes, I’ve heard about it). They need to actively involve the community members in all the stages of their research, from defining the study to data collection and analysis. They should ensure that the knowledge generated is relevant and grounded in local experience. Surveys do not give an accurate reflection of reality because they may portray some people as homophobic, whereas if you talked to them, you would understand where they are coming from. So, instead of extracting information from communities, academics must co-create knowledge because doing so empowers community members to help shape solutions to their problems.

Mahlobo and I work very closely as director and deputy, and we have developed a system that enables us to do monitoring and evaluation within our workshops. This helps us know what people leave the workshop knowing,

but also to get solutions from them. We just need to ask the right questions because they have answers within them.

Academics also need to respect privacy and confidentiality. I like that you previously mentioned that we should not reveal sensitive information because that shows respect for confidentiality. Another thing is that academics should respect local norms and traditions. As I mentioned, uMahlobo would even go so far as *ukugqoka isiketi ukuhlonipha amakhosi* (to wear a skirt to respect traditional leadership) when we go to speak with them because it won't hurt us to compromise for a day to leave a message that will be impactful and bring about change. Of course, it won't be comfortable, but it takes being uncomfortable to bring about change. Hence, I say even the research institutions and academics should create methodologies that respect local norms as well as social, cultural and political contexts. This will help build trust with the communities, which is key to building long-term relationships and reliability with the participants. It takes trust to engage in meaningful knowledge creation because people want to know if you are invested in their community beyond the research.

Lastly, there should be a two-way dialogue, and the research should also benefit the community. For instance, *uma umama eza ku workshop, uhamba sika e* understand *ukuthi umntwana wakhe uma ethi uyi* transgender *njengo Mahlobo kusho ukuthini* and *usuyakwazi ukuyi handle umama* (mothers who come to the workshop would leave it knowing what it means if their children say they are transgender like uMahlobo, and such mothers are better able to handle it). *Ngiyabonga* (Thank you).

KM: I agree and uJabu has said a mouthful. *uCinisile* (I agree with your point) about the co-creation of the knowledge that we are actually trying to gather; it's very important. *Mhlambe ukube kungaba nendlela yokuthi* (maybe if there was a way for) academics to engage with human rights organisations and find ways to actually work with them, this would help them to enter the communities that the organisations advocate for. Thank you.

KC to MZZ: Zamokuhle, I think there's one thing that I wanted to speak to, which I don't think we necessarily went into much, it concerns the differences and similarities between how we, as community activists, create knowledge versus how people in universities do it. I think this is an important aspect that

I would like to just bring out before the conclusion of our conversation, so that we can clarify that a bit.

I think there are similarities, but also differences. For example, university researchers value rigour, ethics and systematic approaches to knowledge creation, which draw on many methodologies that originated in academic contexts, particularly Participatory Action Research, as you mentioned earlier.

MZZ: Mm hmm ... [intrigued]

KC: However, our approaches differ in several key ways. Our primary accountability is to communities rather than to academic institutions. So, our metrics of success centre on whether knowledge serves community needs and advances social justice, not publications or academic prestige or degrees or the kinds of positions that people will get.

As I've said, we also challenge academic conventions regarding "Who counts as an expert?" Centring lived experiences as a valid and valuable form of expertise, rather than just mainstreaming a false separation between knowledge creation and activism, we explicitly recognise knowledge production as political work that should contribute to social transformation.

I think that's an important aspect out there and, in principle, to poke a little at the academics and in the way that you do things – if you really have created your own little Mecca there as academics, then it would be fair that you stay there and create and get the knowledge from where you are. But don't just use us as subjects to advance yourselves and not recognise us as the experts – because we are experts of our lives. Thank you.

MZZ: On that, you brought a thought to my mind. What do you want to say about the separation between academics and the community? Who is this community? And why are academics not a part of the community? This is something we need to interrogate more. When did uZamokuhle move from being a boy from the township to being this person who sits in this ivory tower? What happens through that separation and juxtaposition? Can we talk about that?

KC: So, let's problematise the binary. I find it important to challenge the oversimplified division between community and academia because this binary

often erases the complex realities of who we are. Many community activists are also scholars like you. Many academics themselves are members of gender and sexually diverse communities.

I see these categories as fluid and interconnected rather than as opposing forces. You asked me to dive a little more into defining what community is and what my understanding of an academic is. When I speak of community, I think we're referring to people with lived experiences as gender and sexually diverse individuals in African contexts. So, people whose daily lives are directly affected by issues being researched, but communities are not monolithic in the way that you would often describe them, as academics. There exist diverse perspectives, priorities and positions of privilege; some community members have formal education, others don't. Some are publicly visible activists, others remain private.

Our approach recognises this very complexity that I'm talking about, concerning the idea of community. Similarly, academics represent diverse positions and practices. Some academic researchers approach communities extractively, while others have developed deep, ethical, collaborative approaches. The institution of academia, with its particular reward system, methodology, methodological transition and gatekeeping practices, can create barriers even when individuals who are researchers have good intentions.

There is also another element regarding power and positionality. What matters most isn't whether someone is labelled as a community member or an academic, but rather their positionality and how they engage with power. Oftentimes, in the work that I do, we ask:

- Who defines the research questions?
- Who controls the methods?
- Who interprets the findings?
- Who benefits from the knowledge created?

These questions help us to navigate the complex terrain beyond just simple categorisation.

This is where I find – in conclusion – the bridging of the divide. In the work that I do, our most successful knowledge creation happens when we

transcend these divisions. We've often collaborated with academic researchers who bring valuable methodological expertise while respecting community leadership, and we've supported community members in accessing academic spaces to challenge exclusionary practices from within. The goal isn't maintaining separation but transforming how knowledge is created and valued across different spaces. This framing of knowledge acknowledges the legitimate concerns about power and exploitation in research relationships, avoiding essentialist categories that might limit possibilities for collaboration and hopefully transformation.

MZZ: Wow! That was a lot. I am speechless. Thank you so much.

KC: To have you be speechless, Mr Zulu, is an honour, because you are one of the people I know very well to never run out of words or things to say, to never run out of problematising things. Giving me the opportunity to speak on this platform has allowed me to make you speechless. I'm still shocked.

MZZ: Yeah, I don't have any words except "thank you." I think the readers and I have a lot of reflecting and introspecting to do. I think you called us out and called us in as academics – as knowledge creators – as we like to call ourselves, to really start to interrogate and transform. To re-imagine the ways in which we can engage with ourselves and the people we do research with – the experts in their own lives – as you said. So, I don't have anything further to add, thank you.

KC: Thank you, Mr Zulu. Thank you once again, and I'm hoping to have you share with me where the end results of this conversation will be so that I can engage with it. In principle, share these outputs with the community that I work with. I think I've respectfully been able to address some of the differences that exist. I think that this is an opportunity for us to start doing things correctly. It is good that in the very discussion that we're having, we have been able to share this knowledge, but also inform our community that we've had this conversation and to share it as widely as we possibly can. So, there is hope that the bridging of the divide will happen in our lifetime.

MZZ: Definitely, definitely. This will be publicly available on the *Feminist Africa* website and anyone who has access to the internet, whether on their mobile phones or at the internet cafe, can read it.

KC: We'd appreciate that indeed.

MZZ to KM and JJM: *Ngiyabonga* (Thank you). You gave me a lot to think about, take with me and educate others. As we are having this conversation, I'm also learning and I'm going to let others know this is how we can do research differently. I don't have any other questions, and I wanted to ask if maybe you had questions for me.

KM: *Into engayibuza ukuthi* (another thing I ask myself is), yes, I understand you're focused on the topic of knowledge creation, but then I want to understand why it is important for you to conduct these interviews. As we were saying earlier, yes, we have interviews like this but not many have access to this information. While it's important *ukuthi sibe nama interviews kanje* (to have interviews like this), I think it's important that we know how it is going to be beneficial to everyone, including you and the project itself, for this information *ukuthi iphume futhi iba sebenzele abantu* (to be out there and accessible to the people).

MZZ: That is a great question. I will start with the reason why I specifically chose knowledge creation. I chose to focus on this subject because I am currently studying towards a postgraduate [degree]. However, even while studying, I often question why we, academics, often look at things from a single perspective. This probing might also have been influenced by the fact that I'm a student who is also an activist. So, I thought, "*Hayi maarn!* (No, man!) There's a disconnect here." I don't have the words for it yet, but sometimes I feel like we are missing the mark somehow – as academics and as people who are still studying. I then thought if I could go to people who have the information, I could learn and bring that information to other academics, to say, "This is where we're going wrong, this is where we're missing the mark, and also, we are not the only ones who contribute to knowledge creation." Someone once told me that we academics in the university have a toxic sense of grandiosity, which made me even more critical of the institution. I also think we academics have many blind spots because of this separation from the community, and as someone who's inside the institution, I also can't see my own blind spots. Hence, I started this conversation as a way of learning and hopefully as a way of sharing the knowledge.

You also asked how this is going to help others. Firstly, I will share the link with you – if the publication accepts this piece – to add to your own dissemination. Secondly, I have a feeling that this knowledge will be helpful for organisations that are thinking about knowledge creation. I’m also hoping that this will reach funders and other researchers, inspiring them to ask themselves, “What can we do better?” That was my reason for doing this.

JJM: Wow.

KM: Thank you, Zamokuhle. The reason why I asked is to understand your passion, as you know the passion behind our mission and vision for the organisation and activism. So, I think I am speaking for myself and uJabu when I say thank you so much for giving us the opportunity to share some of the knowledge that we were able to offer in helping you, our community and our continent. Thank you so much for this opportunity; it was amazing.

MZZ: No, I should be thanking you for sharing your expertise.

JJM: Zamokuhle, can I ask a personal question?

MZZ: Of course, feel free.

JJM: Are you still a youth or *sokwandle* (have you now passed that age)?

MZZ: Yes, I’m still a youth.

JJM: Well then, in closing, *ngingasho ke ukuthi* (I can now say) whether it’s continental or globally accessible, this knowledge is going to increase and influence more youth breathing innovation – like yours. I think it will fuel the transformation we spoke about, of making knowledge a tool for development and a vehicle for social change and global influence. So, I’m really proud of what you did. Thank you, bro, I love what you did. Thank you so much.

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Notes

1. <https://hivos.org/free-to-be-me/>
2. Department of Social Development
3. Democratic Alliance
4. Economic Freedom Fighters

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