

In Conversation: Stories of Survival

Yaliwe Clarke, African Gender Institute, talks to *Pauline Fransisca Dempers*, Director and founder of Breaking the Wall of Silence, an organization based in Namibia which addresses the experiences of surviving armed conflict in Namibia

Yaliwe Clarke: Ok let me start by first of all thanking you for this interview, again. We will spend some time talking about your life experiences. So let's start with an open question – when did you start doing this work?

Pauline Dempers: I started working on atrocities committed by the liberation movement South West Africa People's Organisation, (SWAPO), immediately after our release from the SWAPO dungeons way back in 1989, shortly when I came back to Namibia from exile. My work on human rights began in my student years... I got involved in student politics because I realised that we were oppressed by the white people. I must thank my dad and my mum who made me realise that we were oppressed, that we were different in colour and the white people were the ones that were oppressing us. While involved in student politics I started working around peace and human rights because I felt that we were not at peace as Namibians, as natives of the country.

YC: Yes...could you tell me a little bit more about your time in the liberation movement, how you got involved and what you did?

PD: Ya, I was a political activist in SWAPO and was involved in youth work and politics, and there was a time when political tensions reached a peak, I should say when most of the leaders were arrested. The youth became more vibrant, dealing with the politics of the day and you know that had also made the youth unpopular with the political leadership. But the political leadership could not give direction as most of them were arrested, some in house arrest or confinement. The few that were not affected failed to offer us leadership (perhaps out of fear of imprisonment) and could not lead the internal SWAPO wing as they should have done. When the youth started working on mobilising and motivating the masses, the internal national leadership received this with

mixed feelings and started accusing the youth of working for the enemy.

YC: Hmm... and what did you yourself do as a young woman, what did you actually do when you were of the youth liberation movement

PD: You know we had this mobilisation work that we would do, and I would go from house to house explaining to people what the struggle is all about, why we should be united as black Namibians, why we had to oppose the current government, the South African Apartheid government, and so on. That was our approach to mobilizing.

YC: And then you faced some tension and pressure from the leaders within SWAPO, tell me about that.

PD: Yes, like I said, maybe they feared for their lives as the South African Apartheid regime was becoming more aggressive and ya, they did not want us to be more visible and active in mobilising people and organizing public rallies. This situation affected many people – especially the youth from the South left the country in big numbers to join the external wing of the liberation movement, SWAPO in early 70's and 80's. I left the country in 1983 in a group with 8 men (I was the only woman in the group) – thinking that maybe we could contribute better towards the liberation struggle and that our commitment would be appreciated. That was the thinking. Ya.

We entered into exile via Botswana and came into Zambia...then we proceeded to Angola by plane and we were received by other comrades and were taken to a transit camp. Transit camp in Luanda (the capital city of Angola) was where people went when they were waiting to be assigned or posted to different camps within Angola and abroad...for example, for studies, military training, to the battle field or rear bases/camps of SWAPO.

I can remember I was put in a tent where three women were, when we arrived at the camp that evening. They were Evelyn Bikeur, Sara !Khabes and Anna Petersen. I knew Anna Petersen from home, we are from the same village Gibeon. The women started talking to me in English, I hardly could express myself in English, and realising that they were speaking the same language as I was, I responded in Nama (my mother tongue). These women were not excited to see me, I was wondering why? Actually Anna asked me with whom I came and why I came. I was very surprised and angry. I asked her why she was so hostile, Anna did not respond and went back to her bed. My unpleasant experience in exile later made me understood why these women were not excited about us joining the external wing of the liberation movement. We spent two weeks at the transit camp and proceeded with a military convoy to

Lubango. The convoy was huge, loaded with some artillery, armoured vehicles, food, civilian people from home (referred to as new arrivals) and soldiers.

YC: And yourself, were you part of the military wing of SWAPO?

PD: You know, I never thought that I would not have a choice about how I want to contribute to the struggle. Entering Angola was almost like entering the war zone. I was not asked if I wanted to join the military wing of SWAPO or how I would like to contribute to the liberation struggle. When we arrived in Lubango, in the southern part of Angola, that is when we were given forms to sign, we were just told to sign, we were not even given the chance to read, and that is how we became part of the military wing of the liberation movement. So there was nothing like a choice. It was up to the leadership to see whether they will send us to school or send us to the front or wherever they felt like, or keep us in the rear bases.

YC: And were there many women enrolled in the military combat wing?

PD: Yes, we were told that everybody needs to be combat ready and you need to know when the enemy is attacking, what to do. So everybody was trained, men and women. Ya, of course, one thing that I could say of SWAPO is that both men and women were trained in military, although their roles were different. It was not easy for women to take positions in decision making structures. Women were involved for a number of reasons. As much as women were trained equally with men in almost all the fields, men had the advantage to take up leadership positions e.g. commanders, commissioners, military council and so on. Women would perform in the fields they were trained in but were rarely promoted to leadership positions in the army. They ended up mostly at the rear bases; women who were assigned to go to the battlefield could only work in the fields they were trained in, and in addition they served as girlfriends for the Chiefs. When you are a girlfriend to the Chief or the Commander or any high ranking male official, the chances were good that you would eat well, or would be sent for further education and taken out from the military wing.

YC: And yourself, were you involved in the training? What were your roles in that, the training and the actual roles you took on in Lubango and afterward within the military wing of SWAPO?

PD: I would not say I really was allocated a role in the military. The training that I got was that I was trained on how to handle a weapon and to be combat ready.

YC: What did that include?

PD: That included theory and practice of military training. I never enjoyed being in the military but did not have a choice. During the training we would be taught how to handle a gun; how to manoeuvre; how to camouflage not to be seen by enemy; to know the types of weapons SWAPO is using (where the weapons are made and by whom); political science; and we were given political education around African politics and liberation wars in Africa; the great leaders of Africa; how oppression started in Africa (slave trade) and how oppression started in Namibia; Eastern Europe Ideology and so on.

YC: Would you be willing to talk about the violence you experienced during your time in exile, especially as a woman? And maybe relate it to the work you are doing now?

PD: Violence was something one could not avoid experiencing. From my personal experience as a individual and as a woman I would say that the military in itself is a violent act. It limits the choices that people can make; it infringes on people's rights and limits the rights of the people. In the military you follow orders and do not ask questions. I think in my understanding, it contradicted the values and principles of the liberation struggle in a way. I understand that it was a way of putting pressure and responding to the enemy who oppressed us. But did it produce the results we wanted and did it produce democratic leadership in the end? That is debatable and I stand to be corrected, because at the end we had to negotiate for our liberation and did not gain our independence through the barrel of the gun as we were made to believe would happen.

As a woman, I experienced violence in so many ways. I must say I was more fortunate than many other women during the military training. I had people that I knew from home who would assist me with the basics i.e. bathing soap, Vaseline, toothpaste etc. Some women did not have this. They were abused by the commanders, chiefs, ordinary soldiers and had to do sexual favours for them in order to have the basics. Even to have food that was supplied to other camps (which was not available in the military camp) one was forced to do sexual favours. This is how difficult and humiliating it was in the training.

Me, I was called out at parades and insulted because I had refused to do sexual favours for the commanders; I refused to listen to a soldier that called me (and I knew why I was called, therefore refused to listen). I was invited to the huts of the commanders, actually commanded to go and clean their huts, and while I was busy cleaning the commander would come and demand to have sex in exchange for food. I refused and that is maybe one of the reasons

why I spent a year in the training, while others would proceed for further training after six months. I was listed to go to Cuba for further education but when final list came I was not part of that list. Maybe for the same reason.

Yes, there was violence. And people disappeared.

When the situation got tense, almost everyday people were disappearing. While in training, I sat down with my fiancé to discuss the future, which in fact was not in our hands. Seeing that people disappeared, and out of fear that we ourselves would be “disappeared” (because we felt that people from our region were a target, since they were the ones disappearing), we decided to have a child. Our thinking was that perhaps I could escape the disappearances if I was pregnant, or that one day this child could live to tell the story of what happened to the parents. We wanted to name this child “Survival” (whether a boy or girl). I was then placed in the maternity camp and my fiancé proceeded to the advance training to Tobias Hainyeko Military Training Centre.

I gave birth to a girl, Survival, and as a single woman I was faced with more upheaval. One thing that I must mention is that when you are a single woman, you were regarded as a lesser human being, a careless person, a prostitute and so on. I do not know where the rule was written but single women were not given any supplies that women may need. Married women had the advantage of getting clothing from the logistics (storage) as a standard procedure, but single women would get clothing only once in a while. Single women were not getting pots, dishes, forks, knives etcetera. Because there were no men to cook for. I had to go around the camps to steal these things to be able to have them. This was humiliating but I did not have a choice. In most cases I had to go around in the camps to beg for supplies that were available to some people in the camps.

After giving birth I was placed in a camp, and I later learned that it was a camp apparently meant for people who were suspected of being enemy agents. These camps did not get regular food, or clothing supplies. So the begging and stealing continued.

YC: How old were you then?

PD: Twenty two years. I gave birth to Survival on the 8th December 1984. I did not get nutrients as I should have during my pregnancy, and Survival was underweight at birth. This was the most difficult time - I felt so alone, but had to be strong for my child.

YC: Her name was Survival?

PD: Ya, she is the one who called me just now. Life became monotonous and

boring, so I thought I could do something to keep myself busy, apart from looking after my baby. I went to the office know as Marxist Youth Centre (MYC) and ask if they could grant me permission to go to the Education Centre and at least do some reading. The Commander told me that I was selfish and must give chances to others who did not have a chance in Namibia. I was shocked and disappointed as I was not educated at all, and only had secondary school education. I went back to my camp. I was called to the same office (MYC) and was told that I would work in the fields with immediate effect. I did not refuse and in fact did not have a choice but to obey the orders from the commander. However the work kept me busy all day, I would take Survival to the kindergarten on my way to work and collect her afterwards. This kept me from unnecessary drinking (something I did because of boredom). It was also a blessing in disguise as I could get fruits and vegetables to feed Survival and myself.

One day on my way to the fields, I met some villagers, who were selling. I wanted a tin of milk from them and asked if they could come back in the afternoon. While I was negotiating with the villagers, a man came by and offered to buy the milk for me. I told him that I did not have money to give to him and would exchange clothes with the villagers for the milk. He said he did not want payment and that I could have the milk. I thanked him and promised that I would give him money once I sold my clothes. This man came back in the afternoon, I offered him food and we sat and chatted. As it was getting late I asked to be excused to cook for Survival and prepare her for her bed. The man did not leave but said it was ok. It was really getting late and I wanted to sleep. He said he could not go back to his camp since it was far, then I offered him my place to sleep and explained I would sleep over at my friend's place. The man was furious, and started talking about the "favour" he did for me, buying the milk, and said that he wanted a sexual favour in return. I refused and went with my baby to my friends and stayed overnight there.

The next morning I was summoned to the office (MYC). When I entered the man was sitting there with the commander, and I was asked to tell the commander about the incident. I told the commander how everything started. The commander told me that it was a cultural practice of exchange and that I should not play with the feelings of the soldiers. I explained to him that it was not my culture and that I will not be able to do that. I left the office feeling scared and vulnerable.

These are just some of the violations that I have experienced while in exile

during the liberation struggle. I had never thought I would be discriminated against because I was a woman, a single woman, coming from a different region and speaking a different language.

YC: So it was an official expectation with the military hierarchy that women would give sexual pleasure on demand?

PD: Ya. Even in training, you know as we did not receive any supplies of cosmetics or soap. Girls would go out and come back with soap and this girl would get pregnant. She would not even know the father. Most of the time we only knew the soldiers through combat names. So you end up with “Bazooka’s” child, you end up with “Artillery’s” child or with “AK47”. It was terrible. It was really terrible. Even in the training, soldiers would come in the afternoon, the last parade before we go to sleep. They would hang around there while the parade is on and they would call you after the parade – there is a certain word in Oshivambo called “*heikadona*” – “hey you, come here” – and I would never stop.

YC: So what happened when you stood firm and you didn’t give in to those demands for sexual favours? What were the consequences for your stay there? You were there for six years.

Pauline: I can say that I stood firm, because I believed that the supplies that are provided by the peace loving countries were for us all. On the other hand the advantage of knowing people from home who came before me, in other camps I had also helped me to stand firm. I would not want to say that the women who succumbed to the demands for sexual favours did not stand firm; they were forced by soldiers and commanders abusing their power and they did not have a choice, in most cases.

In the end, what I can say is that I never had the opportunity, to meaningfully, as I would have wanted to contribute to the liberation struggle. And I never had the opportunity to be sent for studies. I spent three years in the SWAPO camps, and another three years in the SWAPO dungeons.

YC: And you were in the dungeons for what?

PD: I was accused of being an enemy agent. I was taken to the information centre. I was asked about my enemy activities. I said I don’t know. I am not an enemy agent and if you have doubts you could ask people at home or know me from home. I was stripped naked. When they first said undress, I thought it was a joke or to scare me. I took off the red jacket I had on top. I removed the sandals/shoes. They told me to remove all my clothes and I stood there. I did not have a bra on. I was there standing like this [gesture] standing and

they started beating me with sticks and said “We are serious, take off your clothes”, until I remained in my panty.

I was tied by my legs, my hands were tied behind me. I was blindfolded with a cloth in my mouth and I was beaten by five men with sticks all over my body and you know, the beating did not stop. I did not give in to say I was an enemy agent. And I was taken back to the room where I was kept/detained. Coming to the room, two ladies were waiting for me with boiled water, they dumped a cloth in the water and put on the fresh wounds on my body. I screamed and was told to shut up. This method was called “*tumba*” in Oshivambo language, it was apparently to prevent marks on your body or make marks on your body fewer.

It continued, the same routine continued until one day I was now taken to a different room. And when I entered there, this room was full of broken sticks full of blood, human hair, you could smell blood, you could tell that something terrible had been going on in this room. From what I have seen and experienced, it is possible that people even died there. I was tied again and the beating continued. They tried to hang me upside down, but I could not stand, and I fell from the poles, I think I fell three times from there.

Later on they asked me to dig a hole there, that was now my own grave. And they buried me with my face down, put sand on me and I collapsed. I mean, I don't know what happened after that and I found myself sitting flat in the sand and there was nobody then in the room. And I sat there for a while, I was so confused. Then they came again with a bundle of sticks saying that this is your combat food. They started beating and beating and beating, it went on until I said “Yes, I am an enemy agent”.

They took me to the front office, I was still naked and what happened actually was that I started menstruating and I was taken back and I had to change the panty - I did not have a second one. I had these girls that were sleeping with me in that room, maybe guarding me, who gave me pads which I put on, but I did not have a panty. So I had to walk like this [gesture] to keep this thing. When I came in the office the torture started again, I tried to explain that I am on my menses, I am menstruating. Then they did not believe me and they forced me to undress and there I was naked again in front of these five men. And they started beating me, this time they did not tie me, and saying “This time do I want to bewitch them?” standing naked with the pad, aaaah...

YC: And this was your experience for some time, in and out of torture?

PD: In and out and even when I said I was an enemy agent, I did not have a clue what it meant. And when they brought me and said I now had to narrate my statement that they wrote. I said “But Comrades, please, I am not an agent, I don’t know what you want”. And they were very angry and I was actually pushed off the chair I was sitting on and they stepped on me and beat me. I said again “Yes, I am an enemy agent” and I had to think, I had to think very hard what to say.

YC: Pauline, you went through a lot in those six years and I know the work that you are doing now is around what you experienced and what others experienced in Lubango and other camps. Tell me about the link what you experienced in Lubango, the violence, the accusations, the torture and the work you are doing now.

PD: The work that I do now is the result of the violence and atrocities that were committed by SWAPO against its own people during the liberation struggle in exile. People were violated and are still violated because they are denied the right to know, they are not given to chance to prove their innocence, there is no commission of enquiry in this matter. People disappeared and are not accounted for even now. Again people and families of the missing persons are denied the right to know the whereabouts of their loved ones. No one should be disappeared and families and Namibia has the right to know what happened to them. These unsolved disappearances are continued violations that we experience as the survivors and families of the missing persons.

The purpose of my work is to ensure that this history does not repeat itself in Namibia and that we will have a peaceful country. It is to deter the recurrence of such evil crimes. Also to teach Namibians that violence is a crime and to torture people is wrong.

It is also to document the testimonies of the survivors and families of the missing persons and by so doing contribute to the true history of the Namibian people. To build on the values and principles as they were once set out for the liberation of this country.

I always say that the work I do now – driving *Breaking the Wall of Silence* – is a child of SWAPO. They gave birth to *Breaking the Wall of Silence*. Had I not experienced that violation and torture and humiliation I don’t think that we would have the organisation *Breaking the Wall of Silence* today. It is directly linked with that.

YC: Tell me more about that.

PD: What we are doing is recognizing that people went missing, as I said.

People went missing. Even when we were released, people did not come home. And what we are asking is what happened, where are these people, if they are alive, what happened? If they are dead, where are the graves? That is what we are asking. The other thing to account for is why were we violated in such a way, why was our trust betrayed? Why were we denied the opportunity to contribute towards the struggle as we wanted to contribute. Why were we imprisoned? Why people died, why were these people killed? You know, finding answers to these questions - this is the core business of my work that I do.

Ya, and this has a direct link to that violence that took place some years back. What we do is to document these stories of the survivors. We tell what happened and also try to bring that missing puzzle piece of our history to the fore. Because it is never talked about and it's suppressed and if we don't tell as survivors what we have experienced then no-one will know.

YC: Based on all these experiences of violence and your work to change society, I am interested in your notion of peace. What is peace to you?

PD: Peace for me, to start with, is the inner peace that I need within myself. Peace is generated by the things that I believe in , the things that I am fighting for, and this includes the urge of wanting to know what happened to these people, wanting to know why I was violated in such a way. If I could have these answers from SWAPO; if SWAPO could look at the impact that this had on us as individuals, then I will have deep peace .

I would also want to know about the whereabouts of the missing persons. When SWAPO would be able to look at the impact that the disappearances, detention and torture have on survivors and families of the missing persons, and address issues accordingly and jointly with us then I will refer to that as a peaceful resolution or transformation of the conflict. When we can jointly look at the mental and physical wellbeing of those who were and are tortured and find suitable remedies than that would be peace.

We are like outcasts in our own country, the only country we belong to. It is like we are different from the rest of the people and if this could be solved without being transferred to the next generation. If we could pave a way for the generation that comes after us, that would mean a lot to me and that would bring a peace of mind to me because I will know from the work that I do I would have contributed in a small way to make a difference is someone's life.

I am still trying to find out the purpose of a military which I don't

understand and if I had that power and the opportunity to say we don't need a military I would. That is how I also got involved in the small arms programme where I am trying to take out weapons from family homes. These small arms fuel domestic violence, more women are killed with these weapons. And to me, these weapons are meant to kill, why do you have a deadly thing in your house?

If I could achieve a new way of understanding the dangers of “domestic arms”, by maybe changing laws, that would contribute to peace. Because we are now advocating for the amendment of the Fire Arms Act that gives permission to anybody above eighteen to carry a gun. So I am trying to contribute to reduce violence as much as I can especially at the community level. And that is how I am living – to make peace in my own inner heart by fighting for peace in other places and homes.

YC: Thank you for sharing these stories, Pauline.

PD: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to tell my stories and write about them.

