**WHEN ART MEETS ACTIVISM: BEING A YOUNG FEMINIST ARTIVIST**

**Amina Doherty**

* **Nigeria**



During a recent visit to Washington JASS’ newest Board member,[Amina Doherty](http://www.justassociates.org/en/bio/amina-doherty) sat down to talk with [Adelaide Mazwarira](http://www.justassociates.org/en/bio/adelaide-rutendo-mazwarira) about her new role at JASS, stepping down from her role as the founding Coordinator of FRIDA – the young women’s fund, on being a feminist ARTivist, hair, poetry and much more.

**1. You describe yourself as a feminist ARTivist, what does that mean? How does art feed into your activism?**

Growing up, I always hesitated calling myself an artist because I associated the term with someone who was trained or had professional experience in the arts. Similarly, I often thought I was not ‘enough’ of an activist even though I used every platform I had to speak out in support of women’s rights and gender equality. But as I’ve gotten older, I’ve come to embrace the terms *activist* and *artist*because my understanding of what they mean has expanded.

I first claimed the term ‘ARTivist’ a little over a year ago. The term—which combines of the words ‘activist’ and ‘artist’ — refers to an individual who uses their art (and I define art loosely to include all forms of creative expression) to “fight and struggle against injustice and oppression—by any medium necessary.” I have come to define myself as someone who believes in the **power of creative expression** for social change.

I think my art and my activism have always been one and the same. As an all-ways’ feminist—sometimes writer, self-taught painter, budding photographer with a growing interest in filmmaking, wannabe DJ, and cultural curator—I feel compelled to ask questions, share experiences, tell stories, and to do that in a way that challenges oppression at all levels.

In my art, I am particularly interested in exploring issues around identity and ‘belonging’ vis-à-vis race, gender, and sexuality, together with ideas of love, community, justice and freedom. I seek to document images, sounds, and stories that are often left out of mainstream narratives.

**2. When did you first utter the words, “I am a feminist!” What is the journey behind that?**

Probably at university—that was when I came to ‘name’ myself feminist, but I would say that I’ve pretty much always believed in feminist principles.

I remember returning to the Caribbean one summer after college wearing one of those ‘this is what a feminist looks like’ t-shirts and the stares that I would get as I walked around in public. My t-shirt was definitely a conversation starter! People would approach me on the street or in the grocery store and be like ‘what’s a feminist anyway’? or ‘what does that mean’? or ‘why you call yuhself dat?’ And while the responses weren’t always positive, it certainly helped me get much better about articulating my own feminism.

**3. Tell us about your work at FRIDA—why young women?**

I was one of the founding members of [FRIDA: The Young Feminist Fund](http://youngfeministfund.org/about-frida/staff/) and am currently supporting the fund as the outgoing coordinator. FRIDA is a young feminist-led grantmaking fund that seeks to advance meaningful participation and leadership of young feminists. FRIDA provides funding and other resources and support to activist groups and initiatives led by young women and transgender youth as part of the work of building movements and collective power for women’s rights and gender equality.

When the first group of FRIDA advisors met to talk about setting the Fund up, we talked about wanting to create an initiative that would contribute to women’s and social justice movements that are inclusive, fun, self-critical, and that focus on politics and values. We felt that our age and level of experience should not exclude us from participating in some of the very political conversations around funding, resource mobilisation, decision-making and so on. We wanted to create a space and platform for young feminists to engage with each other and mobilise resources for each other. We wanted to create something that was different, daring, and bold—and I think we have succeeded in setting up the foundation but that we must continue to build to ensure the Fund’s sustainability.

**4. As a founding member and general coordinator of FRIDA, what have you learned about leadership as a young woman?**

I’ve learned that leadership is in many ways about opportunity and access; it is about relationship building, and about recognizing that we each have a role to play in effecting social change and that as feminists this is always tied to achieving gender justice. As a young feminist, I have learned that leadership is something that is deeply personal and political. I am not a leader because I’ve attended a workshop or program that tells me that I am, or that I can be a leader, or whatever—I am a leader because I believe in myself and in what I can contribute to making my community better, to making the world better, to making the lives of others around me better.

If I look at my experience with FRIDA, I would say that I had an incredible experience and opportunity to build something hugely important with the support of feminists of all ages from around the world. I learned by ‘doing’ (even in the moments when I was least confident about my ability). I worked hard to develop the foundations of a meaningful institution and I felt it important to be able to share what I had learned and the experiences that helped shape my own leadership with other young feminists coming up. I remember reading the words of[Jacqueline Pitanguy](http://www.womensbuilding.org/twb/index.php/jacqueline-pitanguy) who once said in talking about transformative feminist leadership:

*I understand that leadership is related to the possibility of creating solid initiatives that last. You can go away, and the structures or whatever you have created remain, they are there.”*

That’s how I feel about FRIDA, and I am so proud to see other young women at the helm doing this really important work with much confidence and grace.

**5. The “Young Women Speak Out” video blog series you lead, tell us why ‘voice’ is important for young women?**

I started the “[Young Women Speak Out](http://followingherfootsteps.tumblr.com/Media)” video blog series because I believe it is hugely important for young women to have a platform to speak for themselves. I read a quote by one of my favourite authors [Arundhati Roy](http://www.progressive.org/intv0401.html)who once said – “There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”

I suppose I got tired of hearing stories about all these ‘voiceless’ young women that were ‘receiving’ empowerment by some program or the other and I had a problem with that—so I created a space where young women could talk for themselves about issues and ideas that mattered the most to them.

*Young Women Speak Out* is an opportunity for young feminists to share their views and experiences as they work to advance women’s rights and gender justice. The ‘speak outs’ are to me a form of consciousness-raising and seek to create space for women to listen to each other, express themselves and share some of the amazing projects they are working on. We talk about feminism, fashion, body image, sexuality, leadership, music, art, philanthropy, and more.

**6. Tell us about your new role at JASS? What does it mean to you & what is your vision?**

I am really excited to be JASS’ newest board member. I have followed JASS’ work right from the very beginning and love the way JASS has managed to produce cutting-edge resources and learning opportunities particularly for young feminists.

I am looking forward to supporting such an incredible team of activists, donors, and other board members to move forward with a collective vision that at its very heart is grounded in solidarity and transformative action. My vision is that JASS will continue to grow and strengthen as an institution in order to support the needs, strategies, and ideas of women around the world.

**7. Let’s talk hair; I am really fascinated by your hairstyles. How does style influence your feminism?**

I love that you asked about my hair! It’s also funny I am now reading a really great book called ‘The hairdresser of Harare’ by Zimbabwean author [Tendai Huchu](http://www.tendaihuchu.com/) and just finished Nigerian author [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](http://chimamanda.com/)’s latest novel ‘Americanah’ where she talks a lot about black women’s hair.

Hair is such a personal and political issue, particularly for me as a Black woman.  At the moment I am wearing a short-cropped natural style (that changes colour almost every week) but you name it and I’ve done it—permed, shaved, braided, coloured!

Even though I grew up in the Caribbean where locs and natural styles are everywhere I remember my mother’s concern that I would not get a job because of my hair. Of course, given the nature of work that I do, my hair has never been an issue, but I’ve known other young women (and men!) who have had job offers turned down because of their hair (or been told that they would have to cut it). Every time I hear a story like that it hurts, but I guess it doesn’t really surprise me. We live in a world where Black women’s bodies are contested spaces, where our fashion and style choices are heavily policed, where we are told what to wear, how to wear it, for whom to wear it, how much we should cover (or uncover), how much we should spend—how to ‘be’ everything but ourselves.

Black women’s bodies (and hair) are consistently [fetishized](http://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/marxism/modules/marxfetishism.html) as we saw with the whole [Miley Cyrus](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/aug/27/miley-cyrus-mtv-video-music-awards-criticism) debacle—it’s just [Sarah Baartman](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/14/books/review/Elkins.t.html) all over again in 2013.

But we aren’t being silent about it. Many young feminists are exploring the politics of Black women’s hair in alternative ways—on blogs, in newspapers, in music, in art. I think of incredible women like South African poet[Lebo Mashile](http://lebomashile.tumblr.com/) and young South African activist [Mazuba Haanyama](http://www.africanleadershipacademy.org/building-foundation/powerful-connections/guest-speakers/mazuba-haanyama) in her book ‘[untangling the knots.](http://thefeministwire.com/2013/04/untangling-the-knots-understanding-the-hair-politics-of-black-women-revisited/)’ Mazuba’s work focuses on young black middle class women located in a post-Apartheid context and explores the politics of hair as a lens into reading bodily performances, which negotiate political constructions of class, race, and gender. I also really love an excerpt from Lebo Mashile’s poem [‘Tomorrow’s Daughters’](http://www.lyrikline.org/de/gedichte/tomorrows-daughters-4117#.Ukv58hBBpPs) where she writes:

“I want to write a poem
About pretty black girls
Who don’t relax and lye their dreams away
Voices that curl
The straight edges of history
Hair thin slices of a movement
Turning the world kinky”

 **8. What do you love about young women’s activism? What is your biggest concern about it?**

Definitely the passion, dynamism, courage, and creativity! I love the willingness to try alternative strategies and ideas. I am truly inspired by some of the work out there.

In terms of concerns, and allow me to speak from my experience with funding and grantmaking, I would say that some of my concerns are tied to the growing ‘NGOization’—the convergence of organizations funded by the international community that are often lacking in local roots or knowledge—of  women’s rights and social justice work. I think there are many young women out there who believe that in order to get support (funding and otherwise), they have to set up an NGO or talk about their work using certain language. That’s why I think a fund like FRIDA is important because we want to encourage more honesty and creativity. We want young feminists to tell us (in their own words and on their own terms) what they would like to do and why those strategies and ideas are important. We want to support informal collectives, groups, and processes. We know that sometimes a poetry reading will be more effective in reaching other youth than a workshop will—we want the young women and trans\* youth that apply to us to tell us that.

Another concern I have is tied to the emerging narratives around supporting young women and girls (particularly by new actors). I wrote about this a little [last year](http://www.awid.org/News-Analysis/Friday-Files/The-Clinton-Global-Initiative-Learning-and-Reflections-from-AWID-and-FRIDA) responding to the way much of the discourse around “investing in young women and girls” is being framed. I came up with the term ‘Generation ROI’ (i.e. Generation Returns on Investments), to address what I feel is a focus of many new actors. I said then, and still believe that we must encourage increased support to young women and girls not simply because it is ‘smart economics,’ but because gender equality is a right. Similarly, it is important to continue to push beyond the ‘investing in women’ framing so that women’s needs and priorities are the primary drivers in the selection of strategies and interventions.

**9. Who do you look up to for inspiration?**

I am inspired by the women who dare to be different. There is so much pressure in society to look a certain way, dress a certain way, talk a certain way…even to organise a certain way. I am inspired by women who are confident enough to be the alternative, who cross the line, who speak back.

**10. This interview is for, “women crossing the line,” what does that mean to you?**

For me, the idea of ‘women crossing the line’ means women pushing forward and continuing to advance progressive women’s rights agenda’s in all corners of the world. Crossing the line means holding the line if we have to because we know that women’s rights are constantly under threat. It also means that for every step forward we take (as individuals, as organizations, as movements, and so on) that we ensure that none of our sisters are left behind; when we step forward we are ensuring that we are bringing others with us along the way. Crossing the line is a collective moving forward, it is a stampede; it is all women finding the strength to claim our power.