

"Learn and then take others on your way with you."

Kave Bulambo in conversation with Mathilde ter Heijne

Kave Bulambo is the founder of My Career Path, a Berlin-based organization focused on leadership and career development for women, with chapters and collaborations around the world. The organization aims to equip women and girls with the skills and knowledge they need to earn a sustainable income and build secure, independent lives.

This conversation was recorded in Berlin on April 26, 2019, as part of the artistic project Assembling Past and Present, which was later expanded for Mathilde ter Heijne's exhibition Women to Go: The Personal and Impersonal in Presentation and Representation at the Grassi Museum in Leipzig.

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Mathilde ter Heijne: Kave, how did you become interested in peace work and non-violent activism?

Kave Bulambo: I was born in a very peaceful country. For the first 17 years of my life, I lived in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo [see footnote 1]. Towards the end of my seventeenth year of life the civil war¹ broke out and we had to flee the country. For the first time, I had experienced and seen violence but I couldn't completely understand it at the time, as in 2002 we arrived in South Africa as refugees. I still was at a young age but at the same time already thinking about what was happening to me during that time of my life. And as I grew older I came to learn about the history of South Africa, and the former president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, and his journey towards the freedom, of the African liberation of the people in South Africa and that really inspired me to look at how peaceful movements can bring about change in life.

Mathilde: When and how did you decide to become active? In what fields have you seen the urgency to act?

Kave: I can recall May 2008. I experienced a very violent situation in South Africa, where refugees and migrants were being attacked for who they were. When I saw the horrific images on TV: cries of women and children being forcibly removed from their homes because they were not South Africans, I felt compelled to do something to help. That's when I formed an organization called "Women across Borders"[see footnote 2] with the initial intent to just help the refugees but also to provide a space where women of different backgrounds will come together and make a difference in society, especially South African society. In 2014, I applied for a scholarship to pursue a master's degree in public management. At that time of my life, I was looking to learn or

find a program to bridge the gap between socio-economic empowerment of refugees or women and bringing the human right acts into it and I was looking for a program that would give me the knowledge and resources to establish that or to implement them into the "Women across Borders" project. That's how I came across the program by the University of Potsdam, applied for it, and got it. Basically, the whole point of me wanting to pursue a master's degree in public management was to see myself as an influential person in public policymaking and making policies that are good for women and therefore good for the people and for society. I hope I am getting there.

Mathilde: How do you work currently? Can you describe your approach to transforming society?

Kave: "Women across Borders" is still running and it's all run on a voluntary basis. The whole idea is to really show that irrespective of where I am, where we are, or how many resources we have, it does not matter, we can still make a difference. And anybody can get involved and take it on and change the lives of women. I don't believe I necessarily have to be in a certain place to make a difference. With the way the world is running at the moment, things are shifting, information is moving fast, people are moving. As an activist, you find yourself, that your work is also shifting. Where you are is where you have to start and make a difference there.

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Mathilde: Do you see a difference between your activist work in South Africa and Germany? What do you think needs to happen in terms of feminist work across racial, ethnic, class divides and national borders to build solidarity, to really have an understanding of how to contribute to a necessary change in this age of neoliberalism and profit-oriented planning?

Kave: Every context is different. Within the context of South Africa, we focus a lot on skills development and advocacy. Simply because the violence against women is very high there. Also, the level of intervention for the wellbeing of women is not as high or as effective as it should be. So, we focus on training and equipping women with knowledge, the skills that they could use to go and ask for their rights. That is training on advocacy skills, women-empowering workshops, marches, panel events, discussions. We work on anything that we can possibly use to get women together and ask for the change we want to see. In Berlin,^[3] the context is different. Although the violence against or the rights of women is not at the level where I think it should be, it is ok, in comparison to where I come from, in South Africa. We still need the central discussion of where

women generally are at the moment and what women here can do to enhance the life of women there and how we can work together for the greater cause. For instance, we have organized two events on world refugee day in Berlin, and tried to bring women together to tell stories of women in South Africa. We made a draft of an initiative that we could run, bringing women in South Africa closer to women here.

Mathilde: They might be already more connected than we think in some strange invisible way. If we see ourselves as partners in a bigger struggle, we could make those connections work in favor of making communities of strong women stand in solidarity. Is this realistic? Or do you think a lot of Europeans have lives that are too comfortable and that they are still not aware of their own privileges?

Kave: Assembling (my) Past and (the) Future, relating to the title of your project, has been really something that I was thinking about lately a lot. In the light of where I come from, I speak here as an activist, simply because there was a war in my country. I have had the transition from Congo to South Africa and now to Berlin. These journeys I have had from the past up until now have shaped me into a person who is constantly conscious about what happens around me and what I can do about that to change it for the better. What comes to my mind is the power of women, especially refugee women, who are taking their children with them, hoping that they are taking them to a better life. This is what my mother did with me. That strong image of hope and will has really shaped me and I think it is one aspect of me that has allowed me not to keep quiet about anything. I always look at the future, bring my children or my younger siblings into the picture and think about what world I want to see for them. How I can make it better.

Mathilde: How do you proceed in your daily work and which aims are you working on? From your perspective, what spheres do you see, where the engagement of women can transform society?

Kave: For me, in the middle of this assembling the past and the future, comes the idea of creating the space that could empower, and of how our future generation can take it up to think about where they are going, what skills we should give them, what knowledge, what resources we need to give them to make sure that the future will be a better one for them.

That's why I am so excited about women in parliament or youth in parliament, or also feminist men in parliament for that matter because I think this is something really important if you want to see a better world for the next generation. When we talk about women in parliament we can look at it in different ways -from the economic part, from the sociological part, from health care, and from any sector of society - and basically what we want to do here is to create a space where actually women can come in and also have an influence.

When they don't know, they can come in and learn. This is the whole point of empowering women. Because even studies have shown that a community that really takes care of empowering

women has greater results than a community that doesn't do that. Parliaments that have 50% of women in their house are much more productive than those who don't. Companies that include women in the process of decision-making have much greater results or returns than those that don't. So really, we do have a pool of people in our society who are women and unless we include them, we are not going to have a maximum impact on what we want to see. It has started in many ways but we still have to do a lot of work on that.

Mathilde: What vision do you pursue with your activist work?

Kave: Being an activist or founder of an organization that empowers refugee women and marginalized people in general, my goal is to create this platform where people can come in and learn so they can teach others. So, learn and take others with you. Learn, and do something. Learn and try to make a better society for our next generation. Once you've got the knowledge you use that to give advocacy and teach others who are not there yet. So even if we can change only one or two lives at a time, at least we start somewhere. We helped around 300 people in South Africa. So that's great, but our resources are limited.

1. The civil war in the Republic of Congo was a military conflict between the presidential candidates' Pascal Lissouba and Denis Sassou-Nguesso in the Republic of Congo, which lasted from June 1997 to December 1999 and ended with the invasion of Angolan forces and the installation of Sassou-Nguesso as ruler. In the Congo, the war is widely known as the 5th of June War.

2. Women Across Borders started in 2008 as a response to the xenophobic attacks targeted towards refugees and foreign nationals in South Africa in May of that year. 62 people lost their lives in those attacks, and many women and children were internally displaced.
<https://womenacrossborders.com>