

# YOUTH LAB FELLOWSHIP REPORT

*By Vanessa Chisakula-Zambia*

*Ndi Black Sapphire in one of the WoMind Sessions*



**“The Youth Lab gave me an opportunity to learn from other youth leaders across the world. I had moments to introspect on my own work and contribution to community, unlearn some behaviors and get mentored. All this put together has created a different leader in me”**

**- Vanessa Chisakula**

## THE BACKGROUND

2021 was an election year in Zambia; this had the previous government employing all draconian strategies to silence activists from critiquing it. The year saw the revamping of the repressive Public Order Act and introduction of the Cyber Law through the parliamentary bill. These laws ensured that activists, especially women do not enjoy their right to participate in social, political and economic processes in the country. Covid19 statutory instruments made it worse too as the government used this as a scapegoat. My project sought to address the lack of active women and girls' participation in governance and political issues by giving them creative skills to air out their views on governance, politics and inclusion.

## PERSONAL HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FELLOWSHIP



The whole fellowship stands as a highlight for my youth work, from the bi-weekly check-in's meetings which never felt like work, they bring a very fun and familiar comfort zone for one to grow and improve their youth work. Each mentor/ coach is picked with the participants in mind, the first sustainable leadership program we had with renowned coach Liz Ngozi exposed us to a professional yet very concerned individual who displayed our best interest at heart and walked us into a

story telling journey. I can confidently say this taught me how to sell myself and my vision. Then the sessions with Naro are what is needed for every work environment, a touch of self-care and a reminder that we need to be okay in order to rescue others.

## THE SOCIAL IMPACT

My most significant accomplishments of my activism work in 2021 include my nonresidential fellowship at the Center for International Private Enterprise, which involved content creation of the 10-part-poetry series on peace, unity and fairness inspired by 2021 Zambian general election which contributed to the number of young people who turned up to the august 12th polls. The Fellowship was held within Word Smash Poetry Movement a Social Movement which I am Country Coordinator for. The team work made possible all the plans for the fellowship. With skills gained from the Youth Lab and shared with my team, the CIPE Fellowship became a success and contributed to a sizeable number of First Time Voters hitting the booth. From the Youth Lab, Word Smash Poetry was inspired to pull off the inaugural SADC Human Rights Festival to shine a light on human rights defenders and all activists in the plight to use art as the tool of the positive message. This was from the lessons on how to build strong collaborations learnt from the Lab and shared with the team. In addition, being able to perform at the

High-Level Global Conference on Youth-Inclusive Peace Processes through a Lab connection was a moment of accomplishment. The invitation amplified the work we do as Word Smash Poetry at Global Level. This has led to the Word Smash Poetry Movement invitation to be part of the



I would say what allowed me to achieve such success is owed to how the Youth Lab is designed to act as a scaffold to the world of opportunities out there, being, to Being affiliated to a big organization like CIVICUS which is so dedicated to youth work comes with serious benefits towards you as a young person in terms of confidence and also a team to fall back on. This includes access to peer networks, mentors and amazing staff that

among everyone else ends up becoming family. And of course, the work and all the goals are made achievable by an unrestricted financial assistance which came as a surprise on how they were ready to trust young people's visions with financial endorsements, with a great donor relationship included.

## **WOMIND SESSIONS**

The WoMind session, through Word Smash Poetry regular sessions managed to raise the number of female participants in creative spaces. From regular 2 to 3 females in each session, the numbers have rose to give a 50/50 balance. This has even seen the impact being felt by the National Arts Council as well as other Poetry and Creative spaces in Zambia. This is one major success of the specialized sessions for women, building confidence and inspiring participation. This is a major impact in young women participation in governance and activist spaces in Zambia.

## **GIRLS ON TUESDAY**

The sessions galvanized youths to participate in elections and also to be part of political parties. Word Smash Poetry will be facilitating a session for Centre for Young Leaders in Africa after they saw the power of creativity in motivating young women to be part of politics; the sessions will begin in March running for 6 months in Zambia. The opportunity is presented through the power of networking and the impact of the Girls on Tuesday Sessions. Through the growth and experiences from other peers who are in the Lab and the various sessions, Word Smash was able to pull this off.

## **WOMEN IN POLITICS SYMPOSIUM**

Through Girls in Politics Symposium, opportunities opened for participation on the National Youth Day and various Civic spaces. Word Smash Poetry has been able to have recognition in these spaces which in the past were not possible. I am proud to lead a team of able members



who have learnt so much and put pressure on me to share information from the Youth Lab. With minimal resources, the Lab activities helped expand Word Smash presence in the symposium was one of the highlights attracting young women from UPND (now ruling party), PF (former ruling), Green Party, Narep, MMD and independent players. Civic society leaders applauded the event and I hope there will be partnership to make it an annual event.

### **FEMINIST AND ACTIVISTS TRAINING**

During the training sessions which were largely led by expertise from Word Smash Poetry team, synergies and networks were created with various activists working on Women's Rights, Feminism, LGBTIQ+ and civic society. The training was designed to be participatory so as to entrench deep skills and knowledge amongst participants to be the catalysts and advocates of the change they want to see. All was in relation to participation peacefully in the August election. The follow up activities led to voluntary support of women candidates (especially youths) in building solid campaigns. The approach remained non-partisan and apolitical in nature allowing every young person to freely enjoy their political freedoms.

### **CHALLENGES**

**My biggest challenge** throughout my journey was my health which slowed me down sometimes but I had the Word Smash Poetry Movement team to fall back on and then the Lab came with very realistic timelines and also flexible schedules which still created space for me to always catch up. The other challenges were on the rigidity of participants because every time you speak of women and their rights the two most present obstacles are religion and tradition. Though as a team we managed to handle these challenges, it is still prudent to look at continuous processes to give girls



and young women continuously engaged to develop a culture of participation. Institutions must not wait for key moments like elections to drive citizens to participation. Civic action must be a daily exercise. To any young person considering joining the Youth Lab or anything similar I want to say, ***“Yes, do it, do it now. Such programs boost confidence and also link you to valuable networks and enable you to help other young people.”***

**PICTURES:** *Selected from the Youth Lab Fellowship Library*