



# *diaries*

*of African feminists*





## introduction

These are a collection of brief stories of seven African feminists who are living and working in Uganda. Our paths crossed in Sagakope Resort Ghana, early February 2020. We went there to attend the Flourish Retreat organized by African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), which brought around 20 activists from many parts of the continent. The weeklong retreat enriched our knowledge and skills for self-care; we opened up and shared deeply and formed a bond of sisterhood.

After the retreat, we kept the connection and continued to check in with each other individually and as a group. Through continuous virtual

check in as a support mechanism, we met via skype on 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2020 and shared our experience on how we are handling the COVID-19 situation. We had a deep and rich conversation where we challenged ourselves to write and share our stories, with the hope they may be of help to other sisters.

We took time to pour out our authentic experiences into words. We hope our stories will allow you to see our struggles and make you feel okay as we are all together in it; our courage to face the struggles could inspire you to do so. We highlighted some technics that helped us, that may be of use for you as well.

Enjoy the reading!  
April 2020





# COVID-19 has greatly changed the world! - Life as we know it has changed, and I'm changing with it

By Hawa Kagoya

**M**any cannot tell what day it is because the activities that defined the day have changed. Waking up to go to a workplace (office, shop, market, garden); prepare for someone going to work away from home or take children to school defined the day of the week. With the lockdown, a lot has changed, many are unable to work at home, or away from home because they cannot access the required tools; their workspaces are closed, or they have no transport. Many have taken leave from work during this period, others are working from home, and unfortunately, others have lost their jobs.

I have not lost track of the days, but what defined those days has changed! and I am doing my best to redefine what I have always known and done to stay afloat. I do not wake up at 5.30am to prepare my daughters for school, drop them off and proceed to the office, however, I still wake up early - at 6.00am and take a 45 minutes' walk, and the girls join me for 15 minutes. We later stretch and do some breathing exercises - to the 4 years old it is about laughing and making funny faces through the breathing; but the 6 years old is focused through it all. This is helping us maintain a routine and should school and office work resume, waking up early will not be a struggle. It is also a good time to bond, the girls wake up super excited to hold my hands as we walk within the compound, and they tell me about their dreams, and what they want to do after the walk.

"Mummy, we are bored!" chorus the girls! Unlike school where there are teachers to entertain and teach the girls, I now have to do it through the day, every day! It is exhausting! but I am endeavoring to enjoy it, we write, draw, paint, play ball, sing and dance, watch cartoon, read books, practice writing, and basic home management skills. Of course, I am struggling with keeping them indoors all the time - even when I know that social-distancing is very important. Living in a space where you share the compound

with other families, it is very hard to practice social-distancing unless you give up on setting foot outside the house, and I have found that very challenging, especially with young ones.

I am very anxious most of the time because at least there is still ample space to practice a good measure of distancing, but what about our sisters that live in much smaller and very populous settings - where you actually need to step out of the house so as to enjoy some fresh air, and stretch, and function - cook, use the toilet and bathroom because there is no space indoors to do any of that! What happens should COVID-19 break out in that setting? This leaves me distraught!

"You are working again!"; "you are always working!"; "not again! do you have to take another call?" my daughters disappointedly cry out because I have to do office work from home. It is challenging because my own mind is taking a while to adjust to this fact. Secondly, besides office work, I am also doing the housework - cooking, cleaning, feeding, bathing, and teaching! At the end of the day, when everyone is asleep, I simply zone out! I switch off everything, sit in a comfortable chair and take a cup of tea - cinnamon, turmeric, black pepper, ginger, rosemary; and relax, let my mind wander, and check in with my body - how it feels, and appreciate it for taking me through the day.

"Would you be working today and at this time, if there was no COVID-19?" my partner asks. "No, I wouldn't, but I have to because many women and children are going through more pain than they should because they are not as empowered as others, and the support mechanisms have broken down because of COVID-19 so we have to support them in any way we can".

Let us do all we can to stay afloat through this period, and support others in every way we can to stay afloat too!

# Lockdown: managing self-care

By Hope Chigudu

I arrived in Kampala on the 29<sup>th</sup> Feb 2020, from where I was supposed to travel to London and then return to Harare. I got my visa alright but never made it to the UK because of COVID-19. Like the proverbial frog that is put in water that is slowly boiling and does not jump out until it's too late, I postponed my return to Harare till the borders closed.

So, I am still in Kampala; it is been hard, sometimes brittle, but I have intentionally remained engaged with my well-being practices. The body and I are very alive, intent, and earnest. Sometimes we disagree, but then find tracks that seem to take us somewhere, lose the plot, and get inspired once more. I keep telling the body that we have to work together because I am on a journey and I have been provided with a vehicle in which to take this journey. It is my body. It is equipped with everything I need. One of the challenges on this journey is to keep my vehicle nourished, happy and in good repair. The vehicle is not something I have—it is something that I am. The body is the journey. It is where I begin. It is my connection to the physical world, my foundation, the home of my dance.

This is how I service my vehicle:

I am part of a supportive community and this has helped, for example,

- I have had calls from sisters asking if I need this and that. On two occasions, a sister cooked and brought me food. Another sent me wine and millet flour from Mukono (which is an hour away from Kampala). Two delivered baskets of fruits, one with a melon so huge that I needed an axe to cut it.

- Some call to just check in and find out how I am.
- Today, Easter Sunday, a sister ordered lunch for me and it was brought where I stay. I ate till I looked like a pregnant cow.
- Since I was not expecting to stay for this long, some are calling and asking if I need money or other resources.

At another level, self-care means I simply show up and give myself the space to tap into the wisdom of my body and my soul. The knowledge of the mind is only based on the past, so the mind can often play tricks on me. But there is nothing that the soul doesn't know, and the body is the barometer to the soul. Whatever the case, the journey to health and wellbeing starts with my self-care and only I can define and shape it

My self-care routine took kit

- Walking which provides the opportunity to feel the world that I interact with; its texture, smells, colours, and sounds around me. I feel the hardness of the earth, and I also feel its firmness, with its trees, grasses, hills and I feel how it supports me. This is grounding.
- Unconditionally loving, accepting and embracing all parts of me, I really try.
- Keeping a gratitude jug; every day, I write what I am grateful for
- Tapping into and listening to the wisdom of my soul
- Sometimes it's ok if the only thing I do is breathe.



- Chopra 21 days abundance meditation and journaling
- Claiming my name — Hope— Every name has a story and Hope is my story of how self-care keeps me hopeful and is my ultimate mental health power tool.
- I am also part of a group, (Sangha) that meets online on a weekly basis to learn together and support one another
- Feeding my brain with fresh foods because I know that emotionally, it is working overtime and requires additional fuel to sustain it.

In conclusion, some days are hard, and others are easier. In all I know my body is the only vehicle that I have. I am here, am solid, and am alive. I will continue doing whatever I can in order to flourish.



# My Pumpkin Leaves

Juliet Anne Were

**H**ere in Uganda, this season @COVID-19 unleashed its wrath in the Women's Month and my birth month (March). I had also just started my much-awaited annual leave and was full of excitement to nourish my body and connect to my loved ones whom I had not interfaced with for quite some time. Although we had noticed signs that it was a matter of time, it was challenging to take it in.

In the first phase of the Lock down, all the children returned home from school. My family constitutes of 6 persons (adolescents, youth and adults). After listening to all the directives on TV, we decided to sit as a family and design our own response plan on how we will manage. A duty roster was designed and each of us allocated tasks. We have respected this as a guide and as a result there has been order and peace in managing household chores. But my body thereafter went into rebellion. I felt a lot of pain, I had headache, backache and could not even do any exercises. My energy level was too low. I gave myself permission to scream whenever I felt like. I needed to release the tension in me. One night one of my sons ran to my room and asked; "Mummy, what is it?"

This season has been awash and overloaded with all sorts of information on Television, Radio, WhatsApp groups, etc. Some have been factual; others are horrendous and instil a lot of fear. I decided to block any form of negativity. I delete all messages on COVID-19 sent on the WhatsApp groups I belong to. I made it clear that if one needs to give me a positive message, it should be through a telephone call or I should be alerted then I can open. I have continued to position a message of positivity and hope. On Television, I decided to look for channels with movies and football and this has enabled me to keep my sanity.

I have resumed my daily exercises that include morning walks, stretches, jumping and once in a while we have aerobics in the evening as a family in our small compound.

This has been a source of energy and rejuvenation.

And my small kitchen garden has been a wonder. With the pumpkin leaves full of life and health, I have been able to have some greens as part of my daily meal. Every morning after my morning exercise, I pick some leaves, prepare them well and instruct the person in charge of the kitchen on that day. At a time when we cannot find fresh greens, the Pumpkin leaves have been a source of additional nutrients. We have also learnt to prepare it in different ways.

On a daily basis, we converge and reflect on the scriptures of God and pray. This has lifted and strengthened us spiritually. We also check in on how each one of us is feeling, what is happening to our friends and how we can support others in need. We check on the people who have been supporting us, the young men and women (drivers, saloon, housekeeping, neighbours, friends).

As part of community, I know that giving and being compassionate is important in times of crisis. I have joined fundraisers (Cadre 19 group, W4UG and others) and we have raised money to support the provision of food and other requirements to those who are challenged.



# Manifestation of COVID-19 challenge: lessons learnt

By Lilian Mworeko



**Y**ou do not have to be a believer to agree with me that sometimes a supernatural power somewhere prepares us unknowingly. Towards the end of 2019, when I received an invitation to participate in an African Feminist Retreat in February 2020 in Ghana hosted by African Women Development Fund (AWDF) 'coded' Flourish Retreat, I hesitated as the programme didn't sound interesting, but later I confirmed trusting the process. The rest is history, the retreat was preparing for hard times and I am able to manage the COVID-19 challenge using the skills gained from the retreat.

When COVID-19 started hitting hard countries like China, Italy, and when the lock down started happening in countries like USA, my organisation was the first in Uganda to announce virtual operations – I fronted the principle of self-care from the retreat. It was hard of course to convince the team but later they understood that our health was in our hands and that we could only continue caring for others if we cared about our own health. Shortly after closure and announcement of virtual operations, the President of Uganda announced a total shut down.

## Lessons learnt:

1) One of the survival skills that I have implored is: taking one day at a time and acknowledging that each

day is different:

- 2) Practicing rituals is very helpful and for us some of the rituals that we practice together are:
  - a. Prayer: get me right here, this is speaking to your creator, thinking and meditating together as a family have been key.
  - b. Each one of us is talented in a way, search yourself and discover your talent. During this period practice it. I have been able to discover that I can write and I am using this period to practice my writing and I hope to improve and be a writer. Who knows may be that is where the after COVID-19 challenge will lead me; one of my friends for example is showing that she is good at cooking and baking, could she be destined for starting up a restaurant?
- 3) It is periods like this that a network of friends is important. I have made use of my small support group of two people – one in USA and another in South Africa and they were a critical support even as I prepared for the lock-down. Before the lock-down, I was very well and readily stocked with what I needed because my friends encouraged me to do so!!! One of the 'Ninjas' kept on telling me, prepare and stock enough dry food, it may not be today but believe me it is going to happen – so when it happened, I was really prepared with stock at the normal prices.
- 4) Be prepared for anything for this we never expected it but it came. We are not sure how long it will take but for sure the world is not going to remain the same. There is going to be a new world may be of less travel, virtual working, less people in employment, and if it is you to be laid off, what are you prepared to do in order to survive? Be ready and prepared to fit in the new world.
- 5) However busy your job may be, spare time to give your family quality time, making your home beautiful and lovely – imagine if you haven't done that and you have to spend 14 days, a month and who knows, a year locked there without travel and movement?



# A Compassionate Note to Myself and to My Sister Out There

Dora K. Musinguzi

In the last couple of weeks, I have had moments I have felt scared and apprehensive. Completely unsure of how to bring it all together - from leading my team at work, to mothering my household and to keeping my personal sanity. There are lots of questions, lots of worries, lots of hysteria and panic. Is this the virus that will end our days? This is an unprecedented time in our modern world. The difficult words - Social distancing and isolation are now the buzz words that are heard everywhere I turn. We closed our physical offices very fast, but did we have tools to enable us work from home? It was end of quarter and we had much to accomplish. So many reports to write, so much to count. Things got left behind.

My inbox / desktop / catch up list so long to behold!

But here I was - locked up with family - may be now is the time to catch up on all lost warm moments- focussing rightly on FAMILY. Picking up on every fine detail we all missed from each other.

Before I knew it -there was an outcry of women and our communities suffering violence country over and we had to do something - we had to put out emergency responses, that's why we



exist. So my team and I invested nights awake writing, planning and birthing new ideas.

But how were we to deliver on our promise, supporting communities in a lock down? Are we not going to be mocked for this bravery?

Quite, honestly, I have been feeling sense of **PRESSURE** building up in me as the clock ticked.

Am I going to get on top of things?

Will people think badly of me because I haven't got back to them yet?

Will our organisation thrive, will we meet our goals? how do the 33 of us remain focused on our goals? How do we efficiently work from home?

Our communities, the women trapped in their homes- what will they say when this is over? Will they feel abandoned and un-helped?

So for a couple of days, I was dragging my feet, basically making up my mind in ADVANCE that this was going to be tough, that people were going to be annoyed at me and that I may not be on top of things.

This WAS NOT a helpful state of mind; I don't have to tell you!

Well, over the days - I have taken time to be quiet and I have been thinking, breathing and thinking again.

I have sat alone and I have done some journaling. I found that I needed to be more compassionate to myself.

When has it EVER been useful to me to be able to walk around feeling anxious, scared, overwhelmed or like the freaking sky is about to fall in If I don't personally hold it aloft?

NEVER?

Okay then!

I chose to build an emotional state of mind that I needed to carry me through these days. This cloud, will pass, we do not know when and how - but when it does, how do I want to look back on

these days?

And This what I believe - that a sister out there has been in my place.

My heart has gone back to draw on the wellness and healing sessions I have been privileged to be a part of - one in Ghana just at the start of February this year and one in Kampala just at a start of 2019. Immense gifts from the sisterhood in my Country and continent.

Here I learnt that my wellness, my state of body, heart, mind, soul and spirit matters just as everything I love and care about. My work, my many roles and the hats that I wear.

I learnt that I am a garden that needs tendering, watering and nurturing.

I was reminded that I have energy centres within myself and that I can draw upon the universe to hold me; I have- I am sufficient, I see, I feel, I hear, I love, I speak. I looked at the abundance of this moment - the gift to be alive and to be present in the now - I was grateful.

Without the pressure factors changing a bit - I started to write to myself and remind myself how I need to look back to these days and CONGRATULATE myself for having not allowed to extend the wallowing! But instead took time to look within, build my inner self and affirm me. In the last couple of days, I feel that I am regaining control.

For sure I cannot lie that it will all be fine, the pain and devastation is clearly here, may be shall make some losses- but be as it were, I have left that to God - the controller of the universe to be fully in charge. I will do my part, the part that I can fully deliver.

For me and for my dear sister out there - let's look within, speak words of love to self and pick ourselves up each day as it comes.

# Intentions to re-ground myself through the lockdown period

By Natsnet Ghebrebrhan

I considered myself calm and grounded. I have been working on my inner self and set up self-care toolbox. My belief about myself and skills came to a real test, as I struggled to manage myself through the lockdown. I was disappointed, at times, that I lost my center and failed to use the skills. Then I would remind myself the kind of start I had.

Way before Uganda confirmed the first case, I received a text message from someone who had returned from travel and was feeling unwell. The text mentioned the MOH team had already taken a sample to test for COVID-19, the results were expected after 24 hrs. The message also advised me to self-isolate as I was one of the person's contacts. Shock swept my feet off the ground!!!! I started to list the people I contacted and places I visited within that week. The idea of passing it to others made me more anxious. The next day the result came out negative. I was relieved and thanked God that it was all false alarm. But I was not able to bounce back out of the shock. I learned it is a process. While I was trying to cope with it, for a couple of weeks, the lockdown came into full force.

I continued to grapple with my myself, my emotions and my work in containment of my apartment. At some point, I looked in the bathroom mirror exhaustion was visible in my face. I didn't like what I saw; it was a wakeup call. I had to get my act together, and trace back to my center. I pulled some items from the toolbox and tried new things as well. Below are tips that helped me.

- Minding the operating system: I noticed the thread of my thoughts, especially when it comes to family

members and friends. My love and care for them was manifesting as.....what if..... setting negative scenarios. Then I decided to shift my operating system from fear-based to faith-based. I infused that decision into the daily practices of prayer and meditation. That all (my family, friends, myself and the whole humanity) are safe, healthy, happy and living the moment with ease, became my mantra. Every time the bad thoughts re-emerge, I repeat the mantra and bring myself back to faith.

- Getting Active: It is all about body mind connection. The ways I keep myself active include simple and gentle yoga stretches in the morning to soothe my body, walking within the apartment or outside. Walk in the compound offers me a bonus of fresh air and warm sunshine. As I enjoy the package, I go beyond the daily target I set. I find myself organizing and cleaning the apartment, checking the plants as a way of moving the body and clearing the clutter in the mind.

- Nourishing the body: I cook and eat food that I love, mainly spicy food. I restock and take fresh fruits and vegetables as a way of building immunity. I know hydration is a big deal but my weakest link. I am trying to reach 8 glasses per day. When it feels a bit tough, I reach out for chocolates, my comfort snack. I am not worried about counting calories for now.

- Navigating through work: I am thankful for the caring and flexible colleagues I have. We remain committed to be there for the partners and communities. We also acknowledged the emotional toll, so we adjusted the expectation of productivity. This gave me space to attend to the emerging emotions. When I don't accomplish what I planned for a day, I feel ok trusting that I am in a better shape to pick it the next day.

- Managing screen time: at the beginning I was on screens (laptop, TV and phone) for long hours. I had to do that for work, for social connection and staying informed. But sometimes they turn into source of anxiety. I try to limit my screen time, for work and connect with people, and I am limiting and filtering out the social media and the news channels that feed anxiety.

As the days goes by, I am experiencing shift and feeling better. But it is not a linear process, there are days when all feels heavy and back to square one. Then I would reach to one or two of the above technics. I know this too will pass; my prayer is it passes soon.





# Coronavirus:

## How to ensure your well-being survives self-isolation

By Chipo Bangira

"I know you are alone but just know that you are not alone. We are here for you". My mother's words have become a daily affirmation during this Covid 19 crisis that has robbed us of many lives and brought the whole world to a halt.

The increasing cases of Gender Based Violence being shared on various media platforms remind me of the women who have to face their abusive partners 24/7 with nowhere to escape. I am reminded of the young people like me who are working in foreign lands with no certainty about what tomorrow holds. My friend Grace, a volunteer teacher from rural Uganda in Arua who is a differently abled young woman, how is she coping during this time? Lockdowns are not equal, they are gendered and one has to be armed with tools and strategies on how to survive.

True Covid19 has disrupted our way of life. It has led us back to the core of living which is Ubuntu. As an African Feminist I am reminded of the criticality of individuals and collectives coming up with a plan premised on feminists' principles and Ubuntu for us to thrive in this difficult moment.

How do we hold the space for others as we also thrive to flourish in this moment? How do we leverage our privileges to be there for one another in various ways? How can we decolonize self-care and wellbeing and ensure that we provide accessible inclusive core practices that build community as much as they offer immediate individual support?

Ubuntu reminds us of the interconnectedness of all life that means love, peace, happiness and optimism. It is an African ideology of Oneness. I am reminded of the stories shared by African Feminists such as Everjoice J. Win and Lilian Mworeko on how African women organized themselves amid the AIDS epidemic to offer emotional grounding and collective support on how to eat well and live well. Can we learn from the women's movements on some of the impactful self-care and collective-care tools strategies that we can use?

Here are some of the ways that have enabled me to keep sane during this period

1. Being Still! This has helped me to stop and breathe every time I feel overwhelmed by emotions. I ask

myself empowering questions such as what is this teaching me, where is it hurting and how do I solve it?

2. Being grounded! One key reading that has helped me in grounding is Anodea Judith's Psychology and the Chakra System as a Path to the Self. Unblock those chakras and live your full potential.
3. Developing a Self-care Plan. I have a pictorial plan that is in my bedroom which has days, times and the rituals or routines to do. My rituals include journaling, meditation, laughing for 30mins twice a day, dancing and catching up with my neighbour in the evening. Again, it is good to draw lessons from our mothers and grandmothers on some of the rituals they used to practice as individuals or collectives. Be creative as you can and understand that self-care and collective care is a fluid concept. It means and looks different from one person to the other.
4. Decluttering my mind, environment and relationships. I have stopped following certain people on social media because of the toxic content they post as part of decluttering.
5. Tapping into my support system. This comprises of my relatives, friends and workmates. Tuning to a community for a support is a critical ingredient in Mental Health. Develop meaningful intentional networks who can provide community care. Self-care alone cannot solve systematic issues.
6. Networking and building friendships. During times of isolation, one needs to be connected to people for morale support, knowledge creation and sharing or just to have fun. I recently joined a cooking WhatsApp group that has ignited my passion for cooking. I have rediscovered myself in the process of networking.

No one knows exactly how to respond to the crisis but one thing that we can all do is being there for ourselves and for each other. Ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu nk'abantu!



# In conclusions

If you are feeling overwhelmed and anxious it is quite normal reaction to this kind of situation. It is ok not to be ok these days. No one was prepared and trained for a crisis of this magnitude. This is a difficult but also exciting time for tumultuous changes and limitless possibilities. Here are some few things you could remember:

- You have the power within you to manage and take charge in helping and caring for yourself.

- Use the time to do searching, visioning and communicating
- We are in this together, reach out to your support when you feel overwhelmed.

In this current drama we are now part of the audience, members of the cast, authors of drama and powers responsible for our healing. we are co-creators of the evolutionary future. We are in a journey. What you have read is part of our journey.



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AFRICAN FEMINISTS**

