

## A FLOURISH State of Mind

*I remember Hope Chigudu warmly embracing me, whispering to me these words, “It is time to let go of everything even if it’s going to hurt others...so you can heal, be free and start thinking of yourself as a person.” These words are still my guiding principles today.*

*~ Florence Awuor, Flourish Retreat participant.*

AWDF’s inaugural Flourish Retreat was launched in February this year in what will turn out to be an incredibly empowering start to what was going to be a very difficult year.

Taking place at the beautiful Sogakope beach resort located in the Volta region of Ghana, the Flourish retreat is one strand of the AWDF Flourish Project aimed at strengthening feminist organising across Africa, a partner project of the NOVO Foundation’s Radical Hope Fund. Built deliberately around African healing philosophy and practices, the Flourish facilitators used a plethora of tools - art, chakras for emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing, breathing exercises, affirmations, dancing, aromatherapy, meditation, moon rituals, yoga, poetry and creative writing, individual and group reflection sessions, journaling, theatre and counselling sessions.

The [NoVo Foundation launched the Radical Hope](#) Fund in July 2017 with a global call for projects grounded in new partnerships, bold experimentation, and a deep commitment to social justice. The vision of Radical Hope is to create spaces for dreaming new possibilities, experimenting with new collaborations and developing new, creative strategies to overcome structural failures. AWDF’s Flourish Project was one of 19 initiatives selected to support this vision on the continent.

Using a transformational, feminist approach, the Flourish retreat created a dynamic healing space for 20 African feminists. These were women working on the frontlines of VAW prevention in the fields of sex work, women living with HIV, running rape crisis centres, healing and feminist movement building.

In an interview, Jessica Horn, Director of Programmes at AWDF, speaks about healing, the AWDF Flourish retreat and her vision for what the retreat could do within the African feminist movement. Jessica is a writer and political commentator, co-founder of [AIR](#). She curates open mics where people explore the concept of Revolutionary Love and also acted as a Flourish Facilitator at the inaugural Flourish Retreat.

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### **‘Who heals the healers?’ What does this mean to you?**

*I see activism as a form of collective healing. We are looking to both prevent and find lasting cures for the individual and collective wounds caused by patriarchal injustice and violence. Some activists do this by providing direct services- so the practical side of people’s needs for legal, medical, emotional, educational, economic and other support. Some people do this by working on challenging the systems that cause these inequalities and harm in the first place. And many work on both. Activism is healing work. And the questions is- if that is the case then who heals the healers? Who provides the same kinds of support and solidarity for activists? I think it’s important to say a deep thank you to the people who help sustain and make our lives better. We focus these days so much on celebrity, on corporate leadership, on mainstream political leadership. Yet who makes our lives liveable? Who nurtures hope? Activists do. Practitioners do.*

### **What does healing mean to you?**

*Healing is a process not a destination. Even in a clinical sense there is still a journey that your body goes through, and deep learning that can come in particular, in the process of healing from ailments that affect our capacity to do what we want or feel we should in the world. Healing is individual but it is also collective. We don’t live in this world alone- we live in relationship to others. And very often others are affected by our physical and emotional wounds. By our social and economic wounds. So an activist healing process necessarily entails finding practical and political remedies for individuals and collectives – our families, communities, the identity groups that we find home in.*

### **Is there enough healing in African feminist spaces?**

*I can’t speak for the everyone as there are such a plethora of African feminist spaces and so many different ways that people engage and use them. However, what is clear is that there is increasing momentum around the idea that feminist spaces need to be attentive to and build in questions of healing and collective care.*

### **What birthed the concept of the Flourish Retreat?**

*The Flourish Retreat is very much the daughter of [AIR](#) – an initiative of African feminist practitioners that came together to explore forms of practical solidarity for activists and also to rethink the terms of Western discourses of mental health and trauma in particular that frame so much of our practice in Africa. As we built AIR we started to imagine what a practical solidarity between practitioners would look like that attended to people’s emotional wellbeing and mental health- how we could defend the defenders emotionally. More broadly however,*

*discussions around needing a feminist retreat space have been active in the African Feminist Forum. Indeed, the question of self-care came out strongly in the 2008 Forum in Uganda, with some contentions around how we approach it as feminists. People have been dreaming about a retreat like Flourish for a long time...*

**Can you describe for us the different components that went into building the Flourish retreat?**

*Much of the Flourish retreat methodology was built on the insights from AIR and also from having held space for African activists over the years- in particular for activists stigmatized for being HIV+, queer and/or managing economic marginalization. We knew that the space had to include a number of elements. For one it had to be grounded in a clear African feminist conceptual framework that politicises questions of care and of healing. It had to include practices that offer physical movement and release, to invite people to tap into their creativity and creative expression, to think about spirit in a non-religious sense, to explore personal life journeys and needs. We wanted people to learn practical tools for hope and resilience. So for example we had sessions on aromatherapy and the use of massage by Beninise therapist Laurence Sessou as tools to engage and change different emotional states. We also developed a bespoke journal for the space, designed by Kenyan/Tanzanian feminist designer Lulu Kitololo. Our lead facilitator Hope Chigudu led us through a daily exploration of chakras or embodied energy centres, linking it to African knowledge. We also knew that we needed a trained professional to guide counselling sessions and also deal with any individual emotional and mental health crises that might arise. This is part of our duty of care. Ghanaian psychotherapist Laurita de Diego Brako provided this anchor. The physical space needed to be beautiful- and we needed a location that was far away from social interruptions. The Volta River on a full moon provided a perfect place for this journey!*

**During the Flourish Retreat, what changes did you see happen within the participants?**

*Many of us are used to activist spaces that are about the cerebral work. I think some participants were disarmed by the genuinely heart-felt, deeply honest loving approach of the facilitators, and quickly realized that this was a space where they could exhale, find friends, and focus inward. People were clearly at different stages of their healing journeys but I witnessed each person shift.*

### **What were your personal favourite moments of the Flourish Retreat?**

*The moment that made me laugh the most was during the first aromatherapy session. During the initial process our resident aromatherapist Laurence began by inviting us to smell essential oils one by one- without knowing what they were- and to just notice how they affected our bodies and emotions. Most people did not like the smell of patchouli. However, once we were told about its aphrodisiac properties everyone pounced on it- and literally used all two bottles of it in their personal aromatherapy blends. I had to laugh! It goes to show that we have to pay attention to eros, and to the role that desire plays in women's lives- and how often it is neglected.*

### **What was your vision for what a Flourish Retreat could do for the feminist movement? Was it achieved?**

*We couldn't expect to change the whole movement, but we can make a contribution to providing a moment of respite, reflection and regeneration for a group of frontline feminist activists. Each one goes back to their activist work and their personal lives with greater energy, a clearer perspective on struggles they are facing, and more tools to help navigate the world and thrive in it.*

### **What is a 'Flourish State of Mind'?**

*A Flourish state of mind is a mindset that focuses on centring in what is important in life and giving time and space for breath, for a connection to the earth and its wonders, for an understanding of the divine feminine in us, and to persistently believing and working for justice and a world that nourishes us- not just individually but also collectively.*

### **Lastly, in tense times like this, where our health and collective care is emphasized by the global COVID-19 pandemic, what are your thoughts about centring African feminist healing philosophies, theories and practices?**

*COVID19 is still an evolving pandemic and we have yet to see its full effects. As I answer this, the health effects have not yet been felt in a major way on the African continent- however the social and economic effects have. We see increased violence against women as a result of being locked down at home and aggressive policing to enforce curfews and policies on restricted movement. Many women's livelihoods are up in the air as most African women engage in the informal, unprotected economy where there is no compensation for loss of earnings as a result of lockdowns. In moments like these – and in the aftermath- there is likely to be strain on women's emotional health- and here African feminist healing practices*

are helpful as they are accessible, and help link into a sense of collective survival and resilience.

**Check out Jessica's [Thoughts on Radical Care](#) within the African feminist movement**

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The inaugural flourish retreat was facilitated by a formidable team of women. Hope Chigudu, feminist activist and consultant, as well as an organisational development expert and strategist is known for her work around [building organisations with a soul](#). Laurence Sessou is a neuromuscular therapist, [aromatherapist](#), artist-muse, founder of Azouwiwa and co-curator of The Temple of Her Skin. Laurita de Diego Brako Laurita is a Ghanaian psychologist and has worked around refugee rights issues and with a variety of different communities before developing her private practice in Ghana. Her work experience includes supporting women survivors of violence. Other facilitators included Jessica Horn, as mentioned above, and Akosua Hanson, Programmes Officer for Catalytic Initiatives at AWDF with an expertise in theatre and artistic activism.

Employing the healing capabilities of nature, scent, visual pleasure, location and just pure good vibe, The Flourish retreat was a relaxed but intense process of finding physical, emotional and spiritual balance and wellbeing. The participants went through deeply reflective sessions such as *'Finding Source'*, *'Listening to intuition'*, *'Finding one's inner truth'*, *'Connecting to the higher self'*, *'Finding one's grounding'*, in order to draw on inner strength and capabilities.

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### **Participant Reflections on the Flourish State of Mind**

**Azola Goqwana, a Flourish retreat participant who creates feminist content and training materials, says of her experience:**

*"At the Flourish Retreat I learned so much about the physical body. I learned how much I have not giving my body the physical nourishment it needs. Our yoga teacher at the retreat, Julie, put my body through paces with her routine. I realised that I had been selling myself short not going in all the way. I used to do stretches but as soon as my body hurt I would stop. My routine with my physical body is more intense now. More intentional. More focused. I am looking*

*forward to be more flexible and knowing that yoga is my choice routine to maintaining my wellness.*

*In the many reflective moments during the retreat, I got to speak to the different women about the trauma that I had experienced with my son being in hospital. There is so much value in being in a space of people that will not judge you for telling your story. I wish all womxn had safe spaces physical and otherwise where they can off load their burdens. At the Flourish retreat I was held in so many ways. I felt safe, loved and understood. Bliss!*

*I have been on my healing journey in ways that are intentional for the past three years or so. This means I did not enter the Flourish retreat space as a blank slate but I had been lacking consistency and grounding. The healing tools I have been using felt like they were an un-organised pantry of food stuffs where I was not necessarily mixing all the ingredients together to form a beautiful meal. Hope and the other healers in the room beautifully gave me the space to connect the dots so that I could form my own picture and have a beautiful flow. I realised that in so many ways I have been under utilising my sense in colour and smell. The tools are not so external but inside and in practice. In the end, I feel like I have come full circle.*

*I express my deepest gratitude to the African Women's Development Fund for imagining and putting in to practice such a beautiful, nurturing space. I am grateful to each and every one of the staff members for being thoughtful in creating allowing us the participants to reach further than the norm in all our senses. Today and for many days to come I will always remember the moments of tears, love, sisterhood and pure Bliss and enjoyment. I hope you continue with your work in this way as it gave me and many women there, affirmation that we are valid in the various work we do as community workers and healers so that we continue doing what we do.*

*Makwande! An expression in my language that means may we all expand.”*

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**Florence Otieno, a young activist working with Boxgirls Kenya, shares her experience finding Self during the retreat:**

*“The Flourish Retreat was a ‘courageous space’ a space that that helped me recognize my true identity, light the fire that was in me and truly see the powerful being that I was. During the retreat, my emotional and spiritual growth could be likened to a sprouting flower, a flower that was once stepped on, abandoned and left to dry, but with power she flourished in the midst of all its troubles.*

*The retreat, in a big way, changed me as a person and as a feminist in different beautiful ways. My current way of being is to be free from self-limitation and to be authentic to my soul, fully embracing my uniqueness. I currently feel stable and a little more grounded. I am more resourceful now. I have the urge to help and support my colleagues at my workspace. I am beginning to fully utilize my voice, and understand my power, the vibrancy and the will in me was awakened. And I am ready to exploiting new opportunities and experiences.*

On her reflections on happiness, healing and self-care, Florence shares some tools she took from the Flourish retreat:

- ❖ *“I am committed now to always having always deeper and intimate conversations with myself, reflecting on some of the things that un-ground me and finding new ways to work on them.*
- ❖ *I’ve learnt during the retreat that visions are important, and therefore there is need to discover mine, and come up with a strategic plan for my life with Realistic Actions and goals.*
- ❖ *Doing something unusual helps breaks inertia, and when this is done our will becomes so strong and inevitable that one can actually move mountains.*
- ❖ *Harnessing the power within me*
- ❖ *I would employ the use of my voice more powerfully now and engage my throat chakra better, to tell my story.*

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**Hawa Kagoya is the Programme Manager at the Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP).**

*“The retreat enabled me identify and accept my uniqueness, and appreciate that I am ‘normal’. I understood the importance of not taking on the perceptions others have of me, and making them my reality. I learnt the importance of defining myself and the importance of affirmation of self. What is different about me, is what makes me who I am. I do not have to be like everybody else. It is ok to different. Therein lies my power.*

*I learnt that all I need is present within me, and in abundance. Awareness of the Chakras was life-changing. I am more aware and in touch with myself and recognize what, when, where, why, whom; and what I feel, see, hear, taste, smell, and sense! I can more ably be present and active in the moment; center my thoughts, and focus.*

***Are there any new healing/self-care practices you have been using in your everyday life now that you learnt from Flourish?***

*The breathing techniques and paying attention to my surroundings by engaging all my senses is very helpful to me, and I am using them in my life now. It is relieving and very grounding to be able to focus, and to be able to reign my mind in! I constantly check in with myself and pay attention to what I feel, see, hear, taste, smell, and sense! This enables me to constantly identify what may not be right, and utilize my knowledge of the chakras to support myself. Meditation – is amazing! I cannot imagine not meditating now! Yoga! Who knew I could and would do yoga! Being intent – setting my intention for the day guides my actions throughout the day.*

***How has the Flourish State of Mind expressed itself in your personal, work and feminist activist life?***

*I recognize the importance of not only living, but thriving. I appreciate the importance of self-care and wellness. It is unhealthy to give what you do not have – so it is important to keep filling my cup so that as I give a bit of me to the universe, I have some of me, left for me! Intentionally ensuring my well-being and taking care of myself, is enabling me to thrive! I am more at peace with myself and this is enabling me ensure that what I am doing keeps me in a healthy state to serve others. During the Flourish Retreat I was asked how I feel about reaching out so much to others, and my response affirmed what I have had in mind and never quite grasped – “I have so much to give, even when I give so much, I still have so much left”. I am more peacefully reaching out, and healing – a core to my personal, work, and feminist activist life! I am thriving!*

***What reflections on happiness, healing and self-care did you gather while at the retreat?***

*Abundance! The power within, and the power with others! The importance to have, create, and nurture a support system! Realization that we can achieve all we should, if we stop and recognize that we have all that we need inside us! If we take care of ourselves, then we can heal ourselves and the universe, and create abundant happiness.*

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**Mpumi Mathabela is a black lesbian womxn, activist, feminist, art fanatic and technology enthusiast. She is the current coordinator of the One in Nine Campaign.**

*“The retreat gave me time and space to reflect, think and feel about a whole lot of things that had been happening over the past couple of years regarding work and life as an activist and a feminist. At one point, I was thinking of throwing in the towel and just bowing out of the feminist space because of the many overwhelming and painful experiences that were taking place in our spaces and that were really energy draining. It was in Ghana, at Sogakope that I began to finally calm my anxiety and it helped me slow down, gain some perspective and to see how important I am to myself and to the work that I love so much.*

*“Since the Flourish Retreat, I have just been attracting all things healing and beautiful! The space was so serene that it was hard to even panic about what I would do or how I would carry on what I learned at the retreat. I took so many lessons, positive vibes and energy from the space and have been integrating it into my life and the lives of those around me. I upgraded my spiritual corner with my photos from the Flourish altar, some shells I got from our visit at the beach, my energy stone, and the daily affirmation cards that we were given during the retreat. Every single person I met, I have taken with me. I have started my collection of essential oils following Laurence’s guide and using them for all kinds of things at home. I have also been doing a lot more reading on them and on Chakras, and have actually had conversations with my mom; sharing my notes from the retreat so she can read during the day when she is home.*

*“The Flourish State of Mind has expressed itself in very practical ways in my personal, work and feminist life. I have begun to choose myself in many ways and take care of my wellbeing, balancing my chakras one by one...it is a process, but one I am invested in. When I went back to work, the words that have been ringing in my head have been “how do I integrate what I have learned in my work space and in how I design the programmes for the organisation?”*

*“The little time that I spent at the retreat taught me lifetime lessons; I learned that happiness and self-care is also in small things and actions and that I don’t have to wait to have enough money, enough time, nor the right moment to take care of myself. I have been pushing myself for years, not resting, putting everything and everyone before myself and feeling guilty for even wanting to rest, wanting to let go. The retreat has confirmed to me that self-care is a political act and that I have to continue my journey of loving and discovering myself. It helped me think of ways to add what I learned into our work and to share with the team in order to strengthen the organisational culture of family and love.*

*“I learned that healing is a journey and I have to be patient and not be too hard on myself.”*

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**Natsnet Ghebrebrhan works with Raising Voices, in Kampala as the VAW Prevention Coordinator.**

*“It is a common practice, around the new year, for people to reflect, review and set resolutions become better human beings, learn new things, change bad habits, accomplish something in service of community etc. What better way to start a decade than attending a retreat? My participation in the Flourish Retreat put extra spark to my resolutions. It gave me the space to connect with myself at a deeper level; I learned new ways of self-care and healing. I got the tools I needed to continue working on myself.*

*“Breathing and physical exercises that boost energy have become part of my everyday life. Through the aromatherapy sessions, I was able to experience how smell connects or disconnects us with other senses. I felt enriched when introduced to variety of essential oils and their benefits. I think I discovered my path to healing.*

*“I appreciated the presence of a counselor in the space, who facilitated group process and did individual consultation. It was a good safety cushion, as working on inner self is not easy. It could draw out emotions, pains, fears and limiting beliefs into surface.*

*“The themes were wisely woven into the process infused with, love, beauty and fun. I enjoyed the moment when we were challenged to write and recite a monologue, claiming the new identity each of us were aspiring to build. It made me see the possibility of realizing my better self. It also reminded me of the creative energy stored with each of us.*

*“The Flourish retreat set a beautiful tone to shine and bloom. It enriched not only my being but also what I do. I will keep the fire burning to do my activism with love and kindness. As I plan and hold various spaces/processes, I will put extra attention to healing and creativity for other sisters. I count myself privileged and I am super grateful to have attended the Flourish Retreat at this moment in time. The work on self continues!”*