

## Personal Reflection

# Them and Us

**Lynne Myfanwey Jones**

*This personal reflection addresses the author's experience while working in the most northern and poorest province of Mozambique. It draws on an ethnographic assessment, conducted over three months in the area. Mothers were interviewed on how they raise their children and what are their main concerns. The stories illustrate the enormous difficulties they face in both meeting their basic needs and the hardships of life as a woman in this area. The reflection also explores the questions raised by a common model of practice in both humanitarian and development settings in which paid professional aid workers depend upon the use of poorly paid local staff and large numbers of unpaid local volunteers to carry out their interventions. The practical and ethical consequences of this model of intervention are discussed.*

**Keyword:** nongovernmental organization policies

### **Ibo, Cabo Delgado Mozambique, 2013**

(1)

The young man who is running the bar in one of the guest houses has a girlfriend. She has a baby and is pregnant with another. She is 16 now, but she got pregnant at 13 and dropped out of school. She only speaks Kimwane and is unable to read or write. She studied four years in school, but the teachers only cared if she could copy correctly and never bothered to find out if she understood what she was copying. She and her baby still live with her mother in a small house made of coral and mud on the edge of the town, as her boyfriend has not yet built her the house he promised. Nor has he married her and given her the TV, promised along with the house, when she first agreed to have sex with him. He has told her he

wants to look for work in Pemba and she can come and live with him when he finds it. If they do marry, the girl believes the boy has the right to beat her if she does not do as he wishes. Her mother has taught her the rules of marriage: to wash clothes, sweep, collect water and firewood, cook, wash up and be available to her husband whenever he wants her. Her biggest fear is that he will abandon her for a younger girl when she is in her twenties, with five or six children, just as her father abandoned her mother.

Her mother is 35 and has 10 children by three different men, the youngest is 3 years old. The mother and daughters survive by growing maize and cassava on a very small plot of land on the island, and by fishing from the shore using the bed nets given out by the health centre. These are meant to protect children from malaria, but the women stretch the net between them as they walk, fully dressed, through waist-high water at low tide. A younger daughter follows with a basket on her head. Every so often they stretch the net flat to see what has been caught. It is just a few tiny fish, which they throw in the basket. If they are lucky, they may eat twice a day, but sometimes they go two days without eating.

Her younger sister is 12 and also goes to the school on the edge of the square. She wears a white blouse with short sleeves and a navy skirt. The shirt is already tight over her young breasts. She has not noticed. She wants to be an electrician. She saw a woman electrician for the first time when they brought electricity to Ibo a few months ago. The woman wore a hard hat and overalls and climbed a pole and was beautiful. The men treated her like a man. The girl would love to be like that, so she studies hard. She does not want babies like her sister.

The trouble is that her teacher keeps coming up to her after class, talking to her and asking her if she would *like to love him*. He has followed her home twice, asking her to have sex. She says *no* and runs away, but the other girls say she is stupid. He will fail her in her exams.

**(2)**

I know all this because we are travelling around Cabo Delgado, the northern most and poorest province of Mozambique, asking women how they raise their children, and what are their main concerns.

—*What is to be done?* I ask Nicolo, my translator, how we can help the lovely group of unformed school girls who have been telling me about their lives and complaining of the constant sexual harassment they suffer from school teachers.

—*Nothing*, he replies, *the teacher goes to the family and says 'Don't report me! I will marry your daughter and pay.' The family is poor, so they prefer that solution.*

—*And then the daughter has a baby and the teacher abandons her and moves on?*

—*That's about it. . .*

—*So the girls go to school to lift themselves out of poverty, but because they are harassed, they drop out and remain illiterate, which keeps them poor, and which means they and their daughters will continue to be harassed and illiterate, and round and round it goes.*

We are drinking at the bar at Miti Mwini, an eco-guest house constructed entirely out of local materials from the ruins of an old mansion. There are no schoolgirls here, only the new invaders: intrepid tourists pleased with themselves for having got this far off the map and nongovernmental organization (NGO) staff like ourselves. The lady from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), is full of praise for her local partner NGO for burning those mosquito nets when local people used them for fishing: *Mosquito nets are too fine. They scoop up everything! It's brutal to burn them, but it is the only way to get local people to understand.*

The WWF helps run the national park. Beyond the mangrove swamps whales and dolphins dance in azure seas, although who knows for how long. Natural gas has been discovered 15 miles from the Quirimbas, and Mozambique has access to more potential oil wealth than Saudi Arabia. Development is coming. It's only a matter of time before the bar is full of oil men, and all the mansions on Rua de Republika are restored and replastered.

—*There will soon be art galleries selling local crafts and chichi little restaurants doing perfect fish in coconut sauce; small boutiques will sell designer beach bags.* I tell Nicolo.

—*Don't worry it will all very tasteful, all contributing to the local economy, by employing local people as guards, cooks, cleaners and maids. So maybe my school girls will get nice jobs like that. It's a step up from subsistence fishing with mosquito nets.* Nicolo shakes his head and smiles. He is getting used to me.

**(3)**

We cross to Querambo at 5 am to catch the tide. Roberto, the local education facilitator comes with us, bringing a heavy sack of beans to celebrate the opening of the pre-school. Two men from the village come to greet the boat and take the heavy sack, then the very pregnant volunteer, pre-school teacher joins us, carrying an infant on her back. The men hand her the sack, which she places on her head, uncomplaining, and we all walk up to the village on sandy paths between the dunes and mangroves. The tide is retreating leaving bare mud, and scuttling fiddler crabs.

—*What are you photographing?* Nicolo asks. I show him my picture of three strapping men walking ahead, followed by the pregnant teacher with the infant on her back and the bean sack on her head.

—*Does anything about this picture bother you?* I ask. Nicolo grins and looked at me knowingly. And note I don't take the sack myself. It is hot, I don't know how to carry large sacks of beans on my head, and I don't want

to cause a scene when I am a guest. These are my excuses.

The village houses are constructed of coral, mud and thatch around a wide open rectangular space. Each has a bamboo fenced compound. In some, men sprawl sleeping in the deep shade of the roof, while women pound cassava and children play everywhere. If you are less than 10 years old, this life can be idyllic. There is fish, coconuts and rice, innumerable playmates, very few dangers and you are surrounded by a community of families and neighbours to watch over you.

Then I visit an 18-year-old, single mother of two who thinks she might be going blind and whose baby has intermittent diarrhoea. She sits on a torn mat in her compound in the shade of a straw roof, breast feeding one child while the other played with a coconut shell banging it down on the sand. She looks far too thin. There is a neat cane fence, but no dried corn, no pots or pans. She explains that she got married before she menstruated. She has no idea how one gets pregnant. The two babies came, but her husband drank and beat her badly, so she divorced him. Now she is alone with no one to help her, and miserable because of that. Asking mothers what problems they face worries Francisco, one of my colleagues.

*—If you ask this question you will create expectations.*

*—But I cannot not ask them. We cannot just arrive with a programme to assist early child development without asking first how they do it and what their own priorities are.*

*—I understand, but asking them will mean we are going to address those problems.*

*—So we have to fully explain ourselves, what we can and cannot do. Doesn't driving into the village in a large white vehicle create expectations from the start?*

We have a similar argument about 'refreshments'.

*—You cannot give them a drink!* Francisco expostulates when I ask the price of a bottle of Fanta

*—But we will be interviewing or having group discussions for at least two hours and they will be thirsty, I will be thirsty, how can we not offer them a drink?*

*—You will mess up every other meeting we have in same community. Every time we meet with someone they will expect a drink!*

*—So when you do a training you don't provide refreshments?*

*—If the training lasts more than six hours.*

*—So yet again we waltz in and ask people to give us their time, explain their lives and give nothing in return. They are the providers here and we are the beneficiaries. We need this knowledge. It is not the same as if you go in and hold a meeting about how to organise a home garden, or look after cows, then you are doing something for them.*

*—This difference won't be clear to the villagers. They will see us meeting and giving drinks and assume next time we come we will give drinks to them for whatever reason we meet.*

*—So we can explain why we give drinks at one meeting, but not at another.*

*—They won't understand and it will damage our relations with the villagers, it will make it harder to work because we will create these expectations.*

*—That's a bit patronising, don't you think? The villagers are too stupid to understand the difference between different kinds of meetings, and so demanding that if we give some a bottle of juice because they were kind enough to talk to us for two hours, everyone will want one.*

*—They will, I promise you! Don't you think you should learn how we do things first before you criticise and try to change us?*

Fair point. I back down. It is Francisco's country. I admire him. He is from the South and has to live away from his own family to do this job. He works long hours and has been with the agency for a number of years. When he comes to the first group meeting, he relents. Perhaps it is listening to a group of older women castigate their lazy men folk for stealing their kaplanas to fund their drinking habits, or hearing the young teen-aged girls say they would rather have a boyfriend than go to school. It is a matter of survival. A good boyfriend pays for soap

and underwear, and the hospital if you are sick. After a day of listening to these discussions, Francisco allows me to buy refreshments.

The young mother on Querambo takes the offered refreshment and immediately gives it to her three-year-old. We return to the head man's compound. He sits us both down in the shade, thanking us courteously for coming to learn from his community, and hands Nicolo and I fresh coconuts, opened for us to drink the juice.

**(4)**

The more I do this work the more I feel plagued by a sense of us and them. Us being the professionals, both local and internationals, who have jobs. Them being the beneficiaries, the subsistence farmers, on whose behalf we are working, but whom we are so wary to consult. We sit in our offices in Pemba, design programmes and budgets, write grant proposals and reports, and then sally forth in our four wheel drives to the villages scattered through the forest that stretches in every direction, to do trainings and supervise. Sometimes, we may be the only car that passes in a 24-hour period. Health centres are often 25 kilometres away from the villages, but we don't give lifts unless it is a medical emergency. After all, we are not a bus service.

There is someone between us and them. These are the local coordinators and facilitators, all graduates in health, education and agriculture who live in the villages, speak the local languages and run the programmes on the ground. Their work depends completely on another group, without whom the whole enterprise would collapse: the 'community activists' and 'volunteers' who are supposed to actually implement those plans we write in our offices.

Take the pre-school programme. In each small village there is a newly built pre-school with cane walls and thatched roofs, swings and climbing frames outside. In some, delightful infants in smocks sing songs,

play games and learn their alphabet, but many are empty. The facilitators lament, the volunteer teachers are all subsistence farmers, they explain, who work every day with hand held hoes in the hot sun to feed their families. How can the facilitators insist they put this work aside and run the pre-school for free? The programme will not work without incentives, but none are provided, so many of the pre-schools are unused. I try discussing this issue when we are brainstorming on how to respond to a 'call' from the World Bank. They will be dishing out large sums of money for nutrition programmes. The government will get the money and be looking for partners to do the work. My agency is in with a chance. I am invited to the discussion, to consider a psychosocial component for the project. Twenty of us crowd into a small meeting room. We have a technical expert visiting from Geneva, and our senior health adviser has flown up especially from Maputo to present the ministry view. The plan appears to involve at least four levels of paid government bureaucrats, but the actual job of getting mothers in the community to have a better understanding of nutrition and child development, better fed babies and better interactions, ultimately depends on an NGO partner, hopefully us, training volunteer community activists to train mothers.

*—These would be the same community activists we train to run pre-schools or to do health education, and who already work approximately eight hours a week for nothing, walking all over their communities, giving up time from their subsistence farms, without a bicycle to ride or a T-shirt to say who they are?*

The health advisor nods.

*—Where will they find the time for this additional work?*

Silence.

*—Why can't they be paid for it?*

*—How would the pay be sustained? We would create an expectation. . .*

*—So here we are again. Well paid, well suited government bureaucrats, and NGO staff living happy*

*lives on beaches (me) will drive into some of the poorest communities in the world and ask subsistence farmers to volunteer to improve the lives of their neighbours for nothing. And if they say: please can I be paid? We reply 'Well, even if we could find a short term salary from some donor, there is no guarantee that we could sustain it. So you would get something at the start but it might not continue and that would – apparently – be worse than not getting anything at all. And what we are really trying to create here is a Republic of Virtue, where we are paid good salaries and given big cars to come and train you to work for nothing at all.*

I know I am being over emotional. This outburst is met with another silence.

—*Well we could ask the community to think how they could compensate the volunteers, someone says. People did use to volunteer all the time, under Socialism.*

—*Great! The cooperative Communist dream, except the government here gave up on socialism a while back and you may have noticed, right now they are all into private enterprise, individual profit and making money from natural gas off the Quirimbas. If they want village cooperatives again, perhaps they should come and join them and model free cooperative labour themselves.*

—*Look says our senior adviser, The Ministry of Health says "don't pay volunteers!"*

—*Yes and many NGOs simply lie and say they don't, but then they do and then people won't work with us, Michael interjects. He is the local health coordinator, a doctor who shares some of my concerns.*

—*Well I am on the side of the liars. Except I think all the NGOs should get together and confront the government on the exploitation of the poorest*

*members of their community. Volunteering happens when you have enough and you want to share and give back, not when you have nothing and are struggling to survive. And can someone tell me why a professional job like pre-school teaching should be done as voluntary favour? So the school is closed when the infants arrive, because the teacher is unpaid and has to pick mangos that day. I don't think we should be applying for funding that locks us into exploiting people in this way.*

—*But if you do give them money they will just drink it! If we give them anything it should be something they need and is worthwhile, someone else chips in.*

—*Absolutely. The feckless and ignorant poor, what can we do with them? Certainly we cannot risk giving them cash!*

I know it is time I shut up. I do, and the discussion progresses as if I had not spoken. If there is one golden rule for most NGOs, it is run after the money or die.

*Dr Lynne Jones OBE, FRCpsych. PhD is a consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist with Cornwall Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, an honorary consultant at the South London and Maudsley Trust and a visiting scientist, François-Xavier Bagnoud Centre for Health and Human Rights, Harvard University, USA*

*email: lynnemyfanwy@gmail.com*

*This is an extract from Outside the Asylum: on Staying Sane in Insane places, A memoir by Lynne Jones (in preparation)*