

Our struggle continues ... Our freedom is not yet won!

Women in South Africa have made great strides since 9 August 1956, when 20 000 women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest against the dreaded pass laws being extended to them. The proportion of women in Parliament, in universities, and in the public and private sector has increased significantly, and women make up more than 50% of students in higher education. There is greater awareness in society, and particularly among women themselves, of the fundamental human rights of women, as enshrined in the Equality Clause, Section 8 in the Constitution of South Africa, which states:

No person shall be unfairly discriminated against, directly or indirectly, and, without derogating from the generality of this provision, on one or more of the following grounds, in particular: race, gender, sex, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture or language.

Those thousands of women clad in green and black dresses and blouses - the colours of the ANC, Indian woman dressed in brightly coloured saris, Xhosa women in ochre robes and magnificent headscarves, pregnant women and women with babies on their backs converged on the amphitheatre of the Union Buildings. They stood in complete silence as their leaders went into the building and left hundreds of thousands of signatures on petition forms at the office of the Prime Minister. They showed us the strength in unity and gave us the voice to demand justice, fairness, respect and to challenge any form of social oppression against us. In honouring and saluting their courage, resilience and oneness in standing up to oppressive practices, we need to continue to challenge all forms of discrimination and oppression in the workplace, home and in our broader society.

Overt discrimination and oppression in the workplace is easier to challenge but it is the covert forms that are more difficult to contest. There is a glass ceiling that obstructs women from reaching the highest levels in organisations as there is an unwarranted perception that men make better leaders. Stereotypes about women abound, often among women themselves that we ought to be nurturing, gentle, quiet, ladylike and attractively attired. Often, if not sexually objectified, we are cast into a mothering mould. Yet, we are in essence, amazing complex human beings who can simultaneously be beautiful, kind, nurturing, strong, powerful and intelligent individuals. As women, we need to rise up and claim our professional status as intellectual leaders capable of crushing any form of material or psychological oppression by men or by other women.

Regardless of our differences of race, class, sexual orientation or ethnicity, we need to rise up in unison and stop the violence against women. According to the SAPS statistics in September 2015, 147 women were raped every day in our country. Women wearing miniskirts have been beaten

up by taxi drivers. Violence against women, most often by intimate partners, is spiraling out of control. In recent months, we have seen beautiful intelligent young women violently killed and their bodies burnt. We have seen lesbians killed and young female babies and old grandmothers raped. This is not the society envisaged by the women who fought for their freedom in 1956, or the men and women who have given up their lives for our democracy. These are not the values that are enshrined in our Constitution.

For 30 minutes on that auspicious day in 1956, woman stood silently in the winter sun, awaiting the return of their leaders from inside the Union Buildings, and then they burst into harmonious singing of Nkosi sikelel' I Afrika and Morena Boloka. They began a new song that day as they dispersed from the amphitheatre that continues to echo loudly in our hearts and minds today:

Wathint' abafazi, wayinthint' imbolodo uzokufa - Now you have touched the women you have struck a rock, you have dislodged a boulder, you will be crushed.

In celebrating National Women's Day on 9 August 2017, we need to unite as a nation - women and their fathers, husbands, lovers, sons and friends to stop this scourge of oppression and violence against women. We need to be treated as equals in the workplace, we yearn to walk the streets feeling safe and free to wear whatever we choose to, we want to board a taxi without fear of being assaulted or raped, and we desire to be loved without anxiety of physical harm. It is only when we are able to achieve this, will we be able to say that WE ARE FREE!

Happy Women's Day!

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