



UNITED: Stellenbosch University students Shelley Pryde and Lameez Davids protested against rape culture last year.

PICTURE: IAN LANDSBERG

Safe spaces are found when women can thrive

Education and friendship make us smarter, stronger and more canny

THE other day, I received an e-mail from a student who asked: "Prof, how do you survive, Prof?" Behind her question was the growing realisation of the numerous challenges that women in the church and academia, as well as in our broader society, face daily. And specifically how she as a young, talented theology student is to survive.

It was especially the hijacking, brutal rape and murder of fellow Stellenbosch student Hannah Cornelius in May this year that caused the student to write this e-mail. Many of us can say that this senseless act of violence made every female student (as well as lecturer) feel a bit more unsafe in a student town that is meant to be a safe space to learn and to live.

But it's not just this one terrible example of violence against women; it's also the ongoing experience of her community and her church looking down on her because of her gender, ignoring or negating her numerous gifts and talents – something that many women in the church and academia unfortunately understand all too well.

I must say that I had to think carefully how to answer this student.

The reason for this is that 27 years after I started my theological studies at Stellenbosch University (SU), I really had hoped we had made more progress. And on some levels we did. Today, more than a third of my colleagues are women – compared to 27 years ago, when we had no female lecturer at all.

Although we don't always shout it from the rooftops, women have made their mark in all spheres of society – something that should be celebrated on Women's Day (August 9), when we remember the courageous example of the more than 20 000 women of diverse race, culture and language who in 1956 marched to the Union buildings singing, "Wathini Abafazi, Wathini Imbokodo ("You strike a woman, you strike a rock"), in protest against the unfair and dehumanising pass laws.

However, in so many instances we haven't made much progress. At times I grow cynical when I hear that only 1 out of 20 (or even 35)

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instances of rape are reported. And that only 5% of these instances end in prosecution. It is shocking to think that 95% all rapists are walking free while their victims are trying their best to pick up the pieces of their lives. That is, if they are lucky enough to survive.

And it is not just the violence that gets to us; it is also the too many examples of women who are still excluded from decisions that have a marked impact on their lives. Or the many instances of women who are trivialised and/or demonised. Three years ago, American author Rebecca Solnit wrote in Harper's Magazine: "Generations of women have been told that they are delusional, confused, manipulative, malicious, conspiratorial, congenitally dishonest, often all at once."

So, coming back to my response to the student's question. I wrote to her that first, it helps to better equip yourself, to further your education, to learn new skills (also leadership skills). To grow stronger, smarter, more creative, and yes, also more canny. And second, one needs what African-American author and social activist "bell hooks" (real name Gloria Jean Watkins),

calls your "home place" – your safe space of close friends and family where you can recharge your batteries, do things that give you joy, where you can learn how better to handle the challenges in your life, as well as those who challenge you.

But as I am writing these words of advice, I know that nothing of what I say here will help change the rape culture as well as the culture of disdain in which so many women live. So how does one transform the culture of violence and disrespect in our towns and in our country? How do we make our streets and neighbourhoods and universities safe?

I continue to believe in the transformative potential of education. At the Faculty of Theology where I teach, I see how not only students themselves change, but also how they learn to become change agents who, in their communities all across South Africa and beyond, bring the message of gender equality, of an alternative understanding of masculinity that does not use sex and power as weapons, of respect and equality and justice. This process of education, though, ought to begin earlier. It is vital that we start having conversations regarding respect and human dignity with both our sons and our daughters in school – even primary schools.

So, in spite of the fact that myself and others sometimes grow weary and become discouraged, we continue with our efforts to make the world a better place. I know I am doing it for my 5-year-old daughter, for my stepdaughter who is also studying at SU, for the student who wrote the e-mail as well as for all my other students and colleagues who are struggling with me for gender justice and equality. And if there is one thing that Women's Day may teach us, it is this: we are walking the road with women from different times and places, a rich diversity of women that transcends borders of race, class and sexual orientation. And it is this knowledge that helps this prof to survive, after all.

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