



Woman leader won't solve all ills

THE political landscape is in its greatest turmoil since our transition to democracy. The #GuptaLeaks have shown citizens to what extent the current leadership has failed the country and its constitutional values.



Louise du Toit

Female leadership doesn't necessarily equate with prioritising female issues. We should insist that all our leaders represent all of us

Health care, education and housing have never received the urgent government attention needed to lift the lives of millions to minimally decent standards.

In the process, the first generation of born-frees have little hope of a better future. Also, the gap between rich and poor has further increased, public and personal trust has eroded, and political instability is ruining the economy, adversely affecting everyone except for a small inner circle rapidly growing spectacularly wealthy. Most South Africans would agree that increasingly immoral leadership is one of the main reasons for our current predicament.

With a clear sense that President Jacob Zuma needs replacing by year-end, the public debate on female leadership has reared its head again. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma's candidacy is supported by Zuma and the ANC Women's League, ostensibly on principled (feminist) grounds: "it is time" for a female president – whatever that might mean.

Neither Zuma nor the Women's League has anything like a convincing history of feminist practice. "Feminism" here should be understood very broadly as an outlook that takes into active account the systematic exclusion of women and women's interests from the political sphere. Arguably this stance underlies support for female leadership, whether in the form of quotas in political parties or a female president.

What else could justify the notion that a woman rather than a man should lead? Generally, gender is rightly seen as largely irrelevant to whether a person has the virtues that make them a good leader. Yet, the assumption which links female leadership almost automatically with feminist politics is dubious.

On one level it makes some sense to think that individual women generally

have a better (lived) understanding of the marginalisation of women as a group, category or class, from male-dominated politics and concentrations of power. Women are generally placed in social positions and locations from where the marginalisation and trivialisation of the most burning issues facing women are most visible and even sometimes glaringly unjust. Most obvious: for more than 20 years of democratic freedoms and with one of the strongest constitutional protections in the world, South African women have had no reprieve from a consistent onslaught on their sexual and bodily integrity.

The very high levels of sexual violence against especially women and girls effectively robs us of many of our most basic human rights – safety, bodily integrity, freedom from violence, freedom of movement, speech and association. Sexual violence usually harmfully affects women's and girls' lives over an extended period, if they survive. Somehow this desperate situation has not received sustained and committed government attention.

The leadership has not managed to condemn in the strongest possible terms



Jacob Zuma with Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma. Generally, gender is largely irrelevant to whether a person has the virtues that make them a good leader, says the writer.

the behaviours of millions of South African men of all races and creeds who cause this destruction, nor has it been able to galvanise institutions to fight the problem with political will and commitment, to give local women the sense that our government takes our side in the struggle for our basic human dignity.

These tragic facts and great injustice, is what makes sense of, and ultimately justifies, the call for specifically female leadership. When female leadership instead of gender-free moral, meritorious and virtuous leadership is prioritised on principled grounds, I propose the only reason could be the expectation that the specific woman has a feminist consciousness (and) the expectation that she will understand that her leadership position has been given to her by the women and girls of this country, with the rightful expectation that she will do everything in her power to address the gender-specific injustices in our society. She will have to find out from them what those injustices entail; how best to address them and to ensure that male-dominated power struggles do not derail her feminist commitments to her constituency.

Some may argue that not all female leaders are feminist, or need to be. I agree, but then they should obtain leadership positions in a fair and open competition with male leadership. Second, some may say I put an unfair burden on female leadership and that male leadership should also represent women's interests. Again, I restrict the specifically feminist burden to women who get positions meant to ensure women's representation in politics.

As for feminist male leadership: since I defined feminism as a stance regarding women's marginalisation, it is a perspective men may obtain through listening to women and their experiences and concerns. Not all women are feminists and some men are. We should thus problematise assumptions in local politics that equate female leadership with feminism, and insist all our leaders represent all of us, in particular, those who live the most precarious of lives. Good leaders are ultimately shaped and maintained by good followers.

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