



quarter of a century for democratic South Africa. As a

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ARE WE A NATION OF MOANERS?

When I tweet about social justice, I am lucky if I get more than 100 likes and half a dozen retweets and engagements. Yet when my tweets condemn corruption and bad governance, I get loads of likes and a fair amount of retweets and engagements. Does this make us a world of moaners, or that disinterested in social justice? More importantly, does this mean we do more complaining than fixing the various forms of darkness that beset our precious democracy?

I found myself pondering these questions during a rare moment of having high tea at Inanda Club, Sandton, with one of the leaders of the 1956 iconic women's march, Aunt Sophie Williams-De Bruyn, and my daughter, Wenzile Madonsela.

It was through their unparalleled leadership of a 20 000-strong crowd of women of all racial categories, classes and geographic diversity that today we celebrate August 9 as Women's Day. It is among their many legacies.

My musings were triggered by an exchange between Aunt Sophie, as everyone affectionately calls the quintessentially wise and graceful Ms Williams-De Bruyn, and Wenzile. Wenzile is, in her own right, one of the emerging leaders who are still licking the wounds they incurred during the #FeesMustFall student uprising, conducted in the pursuit of free tertiary education for all who cannot afford it. Their struggle also tackled the casualisation of labour, and related injustices, at the lowest levels of state employment, including universities.

While the occasion was about spending time with Aunt Sophie, Wenzile and I could not miss the opportunity to ask her questions for a women's leadership book we have been working on for "more years than the Lord has sheep".

When it was Wenzile's turn to ask questions, her first was: "What were your dreams for South Africa when you and your peers made the sacrifices you made for the struggle, and have those dreams been realised?"

Aunt Sophie's swift answer was: "Yes and no."

Her chosen example to illustrate what had been achieved was unexpected, yet supremely instructive.

"One of the achievements of our struggle is a president who takes women seriously. Today we have a state that is prepared to engage with women."

She went on to explain that when the 20 000 women approached the Union Buildings in Pretoria in 1956, then prime minister JG Strijdom, who was in the building, chose to leave and assign a junior bureaucrat to receive the petitions the women had come to deliver. She said this was in stark contrast to a recent march by women under the hashtag #TotalShutDown. President Cyril Ramaphosa's



To achieve a peaceful, free and just society for all, each of us has to play our part and not be complacent, writes **Thuli Madonsela**

response to the #TotalShutDown march was to leave a meeting he was attending and go to the Union Buildings to receive the petition and engage with the women.

Aunt Sophie went on to mention a ground-breaking Constitution, which seeks not only to protect universally accepted fundamental human rights - including socioeconomic rights - and freedom, but which also seeks to ensure equal enjoyment of the same by all.

She also mentioned the many laws that recognise women's rights while seeking to promote gender and other forms of equality.

On what has not been realised, Aunt Sophie had a lot to say. Key among the disappointments she lamented was the gap between the promise and reality. She pointed out the rise in violence against women and the increase in the viciousness of such violence, which today frequently involves femicide.

She also lamented the fact that although women have high-level positions today, the level of respect women leaders commanded during her time seems to have been lost. She attributed some of that to women often being placed in positions of power for nefarious purposes, without such power being yielded to them.

Wenzile's next question was: "If you were age 21 today, what would you do differently from today's young people?"

The answer was again instructive. Mam' Sophie's answer focused on self-discipline, self-dependency, collaboration and innovation. On self-discipline, she mentioned that when Strijdom refused to meet the women, they sprung into song, chanting: "Wathint' abafazi wathint' imbokodo."

They then dispersed in an orderly manner without kicking a single stone, burning anything or taking things from informal traders who happened to be on the streets. She said this was essential in keeping the public narrative on the women's demands as opposed to their conduct.

On self-dependency and collaboration, Aunt Sophie explained that the entire march was innovatively and collaboratively funded by the women themselves. Some crocheted and sold baby clothes; others made and sold dresses; while some baked and sold scones.

She painted a verbal picture of human solidarity across race, class, political formations and other barriers that are increasingly dividing South African women today.

She recalled how they helped each other, with Helen Joseph providing transport and a meeting venue for Lilian Ngoyi and others, among other things. She reminded us that the Federation of SA Women was a federation of various formations, some apolitical - such as women's church groups and social clubs (stokvels) - and others

political, which then were constituted in terms of racial identity, in line with the laws of the time.

For example, she represented the Coloured People's Congress, while Joseph came from the Congress of Democrats; Rahima Moosa, from the Transvaal Indian Congress; and Ngoyi, from the African National Congress, whose members at the time comprised only black people who had been classified by law as Africans.

At some stage, Aunt Sophie remarked: "Today you have more tools and better [ones] ... including the digital age. The sky is the limit." But she conceded that today's struggle is more complex, saying: "Our struggle was against an enemy we knew. It was a struggle of a united people. Today the enemy is not easy to distinguish."

As she said that, I considered the many charlatans who presented themselves as friends of the people and painted whistle-blowers and law enforcement agencies as agencies of white monopoly capital or foreign enemies, in their attempts to deflect attention from their counter-revolutionary and corrupt use of public power and their plain theft of resources meant to improve the quality of life of the people.

I have been reflecting on that conversation and on the importance of finding common ground regarding what the main struggle is today. During my quiet conversation with Helen Suzman's daughter shortly after I presented her mother's Memorial Lecture on November 21, she advised that Suzman once said that if ever there was something that would derail democracy, it was poverty.

Is this new? No. As we approached the year 2000, the UN had come to the conclusion that ending extreme poverty and inequality was essential for a more stable and peaceful world. This resulted in Millennium Development Goals, which have since been expanded and extended to be Sustainable Development Goals.

Interestingly, 70 years ago, Eleanor Roosevelt and her colleagues, who drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, came to the same conclusion: that human rights for all - characterised by the equal enjoyment of fairness and justice for all - was essential for peace.

I am part of the team driving the Mosa Plan for Social Justice (Social Justice M-Plan), and we believe that as long as there is injustice somewhere, there cannot be sustainable peace anywhere. Accordingly, if we want peace, we all need to step up and play our part in defending and advancing human rights and freedoms for all. At the core of that quest is social justice. It is also about defending democracy by making it work for all, with no one left behind.

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