

# careers & voices

# Strength in equality

**E**very year for the past 20 years, we have been celebrating Women's Day, and we expanded it to make August Women's Month.

Yet gender equality continues to elude us in our everyday relationships.

We have one of the highest rates of violence against women and children in the world. The brutality of incidents of violence against intimate partners and children is ever more shocking because they are killed by those who should be protecting them.

Is it not the time to reflect on what needs to change to make gender equality a reality in our society? The urgency of this question struck me while listening to an SAfm Forum@8 on August 5: Are women emasculating men?

Many of the comments suggested that women should respect their men more and protect them from their insecurity in a society where men feel vulnerable to disrespect. Educated, successful women came in for the most criticism for not affirming their men.

Should we not be questioning the assumptions we have about gender equality in a society that has not yet acknowledged the damage inflicted on the relationships between men and women by the legacy of inequity and inequality?

All of our cultures define manhood in terms that create a crisis for those men who are unable to live up to the model of a successful man: head of the family, provider and protector.

This definition creates a crisis of identity and roles in a society in which more than 70% of children are born to single mothers and are raised in female-headed households. How are the young men and women growing up in such households to model themselves in our male-dominated society?

Have we reflected enough on the pain of those men who are unable to meet the dominant criteria of success through no fault of their own?

The legacy of economic development that excluded the majority black population from education, training and upward mobility has denied the majority of young men and women the opportunity of being nurtured in homes where their fathers were present and were successful providers and protectors.

Have we given any thought to the heroic role of women in raising children in settings where men can't perform their expected roles? They have to play a dangerous diplomatic role of appearing weak so their men could feel strong, while at the same time ensuring that the family is kept together and provided for.

The continuing exclusion of so many men from opportunities to develop skills and engage in dignified work is perpetuating the cycle of poor, largely black men feeling inadequate, frustrated and angry.

The anger and frustration is often turned against those closest to them, leading to horrendous levels of domestic violence and abuse.

The sons of many of these men are continuing to be failed by the poor quality of education in South Africa, leaving them unemployed and hopeless. This sets off a vicious cycle of sons following their fathers in a life of being excluded, frustrated and angry.

We need to stop this vicious cycle. We need to tackle the root cause of the problematic

Women's Day provides a chance to redefine traditional notions of womanhood and manhood, writes **Mamphela Ramphela**

relationships between men and women. Gender equality thrives in a just society. For as long as injustices persist in our education and healthcare systems, in human settlements and job opportunities, healthy relationships between women and men will be difficult to achieve.

We also need to challenge the assumptions behind the dominant male model. Relationships of dominance create winners and losers, whereas complementary relationships create winners and winners.

The hierarchical relationships in many of our workplaces with the alpha male, white or black, create relationships of survival of the fittest. Men working under these conditions are stressed and their self-confidence is often undermined. Less hierarchy promotes healthier teams and winners all round.

Our approach to transforming exclusionary economic institutions has been unsuccessful. Black economic empowerment has not made our economic institutions more inclusive places promoting healthier relationships between those creating our wealth.

The allocation of small stakes to black people has benefited a few without changing the business model that generates inequality.

The temptation among the newly rich to show off material success has also created unhealthy competition between men. Keeping up with the Dlaminis becomes a tough daily trace.

Women partners become part of the display cabinet of successful men in this race for dominance. It is

not surprising that abuse of alcohol and drugs becomes a way of life to lower the stress level and escape from anxiety.

Any threat to the fragile ego tends to unleash a brutally violent response.

We need to rethink our expectations of the relationships between men and women in our society. We need to have conversations at home, at work and in our communities about the complementary roles men and women bring to society.

The woman in each of us is a nurturer, a connector and a thoughtful enabler of intergenerational relationships.

The men in our lives have to be confident as co-creators, parents and nurturers of future generations. Together, men and women need to model a new way of being without the need to compete or dominate.

Ubuntu can come alive only if we acknowledge our interconnectedness as human beings - men and women.

Imagine homes where ubuntu reigns, where mothers and fathers work seamlessly to model the complementary talents of the feminine and the masculine so their sons and daughters grow up as proud young citizens.

Imagine how confident and successful young people would become, knowing how supportive and proud their mothers and fathers were of them.

Imagine how successful our country could be if the best in men and women was nurtured and celebrated.

We owe it to ourselves, our men and women and our children and grandchildren, to make a break from the toxic definition of manhood and womanhood.

We need to celebrate the complementary talents of men and women, and thereby create a prosperous society united in its diversity.

Ramphela is an active citizen

Women's  
Month



**W**omen make up 51.3% of our population, yet 20 years after the dawn of democracy in South Africa, they are still seriously under-represented at the upper levels of society - including at our universities.

Only 18.5% of professors and 29.8% of associate professors in our country are women and only four of our 25 public universities have female vice-chancellors - that is just 16%.

At the risk of stating the obvious, why is this a problem?

Well, not only is it unfair, it is also an underutilisation of the total capabilities of humankind. The former is intolerable and the latter is something that we cannot afford in light of the need for accelerated human development everywhere.

In 2009, NGO the White House Project in the US said that the gravity of empowering women to take on leadership roles in institutions of higher education went beyond mere numbers. It said the "presence - or absence - of female academic leaders can have far-reaching influences not only on the institutions themselves, but ... on the

scope of research and knowledge that affects us all".

The challenges that we face at this point in the history of humankind - managing global warming and climate change, achieving greater socioeconomic equality, reducing armed conflict - are complex and demanding. We cannot afford to handicap ourselves by not using all our human resources to the fullest.

To be fair, since 1994, greater emphasis has been placed on equal opportunities for women in higher education in South Africa. There are now more female students, staff and managers at universities than before.

According to the Council on Higher Education, the number of South Africa's female students rose from 409 000 in 2006 to 543 000 in 2011.

But the number of male students also went up, with the ratio staying more or less the same.

And what about university staff

## Equality isn't just lip service

Russel Botman



and senior management?

We see the same thing. Yes, there are more women, but there are also more men, so the ratio again remains constant.

In this regard, universities seem to reflect the general trend elsewhere in our society.

According to the Commission for Employment Equity, women comprise 43% of the skilled workforce, 42% have professional qualifications, 30% are senior managers and 20% are top management. The trend is clear. The higher you go in the workplace, the fewer women you find. Universities should be setting an

example. Higher education is a very important site of contestation for the advancement of women - in various ways related to the different functions of higher education.

Firstly, the university has a pedagogical role, shaping young people at a crucial stage of their lives. They have to be guided to think critically and re-examine existing practices in relation to the position of women in society.

Secondly, the university has an important role to play in generating new knowledge. This, in turn, has an influence on government and public policy at various levels.

Lastly, universities are situated in society and should therefore engage with communities in more meaningful ways.

This is where higher education institutions should also exert an influence in terms of the status of women in society.

Improving the status of women in

South Africa was very important to the country's first president in the democratic era, the late Nelson Mandela.

He is credited with "opening ... the door to women's empowerment" after the 1994 elections.

In the first session of South Africa's new Parliament in 1994, Madiba said "freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression". He said women should be "empowered to intervene in all aspects of life as equals with any other member of society".

Sadly, 20 years down the line, we have not made enough progress in this regard. That is why we should invest in the empowerment of all children through education.

We should also carefully manage the process thereafter so that women's advancement is not left to chance, but is boosted at all levels.

This is an edited address the late Stellenbosch University rector and vice-chancellor Professor Russel Botman delivered at an International Women's Day conference in Scotland in March. Botman died in his sleep in June



**Our saviour,  
who art in  
red**

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