

Gender violence and gender discrimination still normalised

Ubanesia Adams-Jack

Sixty years ago 20 000 women, in a show of unity and defiance, marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest the pass laws and other forms of discrimination imposed by the then Apartheid government. They expressed their anger over the denial of freedom and women's rights, and also called for justice and equality. Through their bravery, these women helped to shape South Africa's future and to lay the foundations of a democratic society.

Although the sacrifices made in 1956 and in the ensuing decades have indeed borne fruit, gender violence and gender discrimination are still normalised injustices in South Africa today. In many respects, women are still being treated as second-class citizens and issues that directly affect them are often downplayed or rejected.

For example, this year our higher education institutions have been challenged to talk about rape culture and their response to it. With the hosting of the recent International AIDS conference in Durban we have heard more about the scourge of the 'blessers', often older men who prey on young women. The irony is that their 'blessings' sometimes actually curse the lives of our young women when some of them transmit HIV.

We also know about the Mayor of the uThukela District Municipality in Kwazulu-Natal who, in the face of public outcry, continued to defend virginity testing and maiden bursaries. I am sure that we have heard, at least once, of the psychological abuse that some women suffer at the hands of colleagues or superiors. These are just some of the issues that are a sad part of the backdrop to what is supposed to be our celebration of National Women's Day on 9 August.

In such circumstances, celebrating seems unwarranted. I wonder whether there is more to say beyond what we have said before and, and whether, if we say something new, will it make a difference? I have thought it better to raise a few questions. Shall we continue to count the numbers of women in all spheres of government and other institutions and hope for a brighter future for all South Africa women?

While we may not see the kind of representation that feminists would be proud of, the answer would still be yes. Yes, because we need to ensure that women are represented. We need to have women role models who can continue to provide support for a simple message, which is that women can and do belong in government spaces and other important institutions so that they can be better placed to break down persistent stereotypes and barriers of discrimination.

There are a few more questions that we need to reflect on: how can we best use the research that provides evidence of the undignified state of many women and children due to rape, domestic violence and poverty to facilitate change? When will we join hands to pour scorn on the behaviour of 'blessers'?

Addressing this issue, our Deputy President, Cyril Ramaphosa, demonstrated positive political leadership when he asked older men to leave younger women alone. Are there other men and women who are willing to do this as well? These are just some of the

questions that can help us to plot our way forward to ensure the dignity of women are restored.

In the meantime, there are various reasons why we should celebrate Women's Day. We should celebrate to remember how South African women resisted the injustices and pass laws of the Apartheid regime. We should celebrate to remember the model of courage that these women left for us. We should celebrate to honour and show respect for their contribution to the fight for our freedom. We should celebrate so that we do not forget that women can make a difference and that they do it their way.

This Women's Day is yet another call to action for South African women. Our commemoration brings the call to act to create better gender relations and to put an end to violence and discrimination. It reminds us of our responsibility to ensure that our young women can enjoy the freedom that others sacrificed their lives for. However, the question is: do we have the courage to move beyond our divisions in order to achieve this?

**Dr Ubanesia Adams-Jack is a lecturer in the Department of Political Science at Stellenbosch University. Her research interest is the implementation of gender equality promotion.*