

WOMXN'S DAY SHOULD HELP REDEFINE EXCELLENCE AND SUCCESS AT UNIVERSITIES

Monica du Toit

South Africans' commemoration of Womxn's* Day has thankfully evolved from a superficial gift and events day to one where we reflect and take stock of progress after decades of racial and gender inequality.

Working as a white womxn at an institution of higher learning, this significant reflection evokes conflicting thoughts. My career in higher education has been both a liberating experience and one that developed my skills in ways I cannot imagine could have been better for a young woman at the time. I am most thankful for the mentoring and respect I received from senior men and the important role many colleagues have played in challenging some deeply ingrained ideas about inferiority and my imagined limitations as a womxn.

However, I am still saddened by the way our institutions and the global higher education community continue to celebrate excellence and success as an inherently male characteristic in ways that undermine the ambitions and dreams of womxn, especially black colleagues who are also burdened with the whiteness of this imagined excellence.

Before I continue my critique, I have to acknowledge that since I am heading up the very office tasked to support transformation at such an institution, namely Stellenbosch University (SU), I could be accused of hypocrisy and even failure to implement the very changes I advocate for. Thus, I consider this reflection an attempt to hold colleagues and myself both accountable and to invite staff and students to share their perspectives too because ultimately we can only change when there is a collective buy-in.

Let me start by pointing out that in 2016 SU has few public symbols or buildings that celebrate the historic participation and contributions of womxn from different walks of life. To the contrary, the only name that comes to mind (except for women's residences) is the "Vroueverenigingsaal" (Women's Society Hall) in the Neelsie student centre that seems to celebrate a particular notion of white Afrikaans Women's society with very little context of what the purpose and connection of this society was to the university. Maybe there is a great story behind the name and my assumptions are incorrect, but we have to be mindful of how visual symbols can both perpetuate and challenge stereotypes.

My good experiences at SU also raised my expectations that it would equally bother men that in almost 100 years of this institution's existence womxn leaders remained the exception and not the rule. Prof Elize Botha, who served as our first female Chancellor (1998-2007), represents one story of a woman who truly challenged the norms of her time. However, we are yet to see a woman elected as the Chair of Council, Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Chair of the Institutional Forum, Residential Head of male residences or as the President of the Convocation.

The frustration is not just the lack of extensive representation at managerial levels but also that it is expected of womxn to rectify this situation. I am also acutely aware of other colleagues – those with disabilities, and many others who represent racial, cultural, religious, class and gender nonconforming identities – who are even less likely to be perceived as competent candidates for elected leadership positions when competing with men.

We cannot simply dismiss progress or deny those womxn and men who fought for equality at SU the recognition they deserve. We have witnessed the appointments of womxn vice-rectors, deans and senior directors as well as the university's first female registrar. Many stepped up, received support from men, and confronted what I imagined to be inner fears of being the "token figure". By doing so, they encouraged more womxn to follow.

Many people, including professional support staff and students, have in the past and in recent times changed SU for the better. As a university community, we should consider a yearly list to recognise womxn for contributing to the success of this institution.

Representation and visual elements are not the only examples of how we can continue to enable an institutional culture for success. Without intending to a system can by design problematize womxn who take maternity leave, expect womxn to fulfil certain catering and note taking functions in comparison to

men, expect womxn to fix rape culture, perpetuate unequal funding streams to womxn's sport, be uncritical of bathroom facilities that ignore the increasing number of womxn users and create extreme discomfort for trans students and staff.

Womxn's Day is an opportunity for men and womxn, especially in higher learning, to track progress and resist dismissing inequalities that persist despite significant changes. When men remain absent or tap out of conversations about these inequalities, the potential impact and validation for those who raise the issues are lost. We also have to ensure that intersectional identities and genders are fully represented and have the agency to participate in these discussions. White heterosexual women need to be careful of monopolizing platforms and assume they fully understand the experiences of all womxn.

On 9 August 2016 it will be 60 years since 20 000 women showed up at the Union Building singing "Wathint' Abafazi, Wathint' Imbokodo" (you strike the women, you strike the rock) to protest against the restrictive pass laws. They fought for a just and democratic South Africa that would liberate and benefit men too. In many ways, the true liberation of all South Africans is still incomplete and we have to resist either romanticizing single events or belittle the achievements just because oppression still happens.

I find the philosophy of South African's first black woman graduate in 1902, Charlotte Mame Mxheke (1874-1939) very relevant for what Womxn's Day at an institution of higher learning should focus on. She said "When you rise bring someone with you". I would be so proud to be part of an institution that visually celebrates womxn like Charlotte Mxheke and for students and staff to embrace this philosophy as relevant to our institutional culture and educational ethos in 2016. It reminds our staff and students that your success is only excellent and worth celebrating if you enable the success of another. This is only possible if you can see, appreciate and understand the barriers that are invisible to you but life-altering for those facing it every day.

**For those who question the term womxn, it is used instead of women to state that womxn are not a sub-division of men and it represents intersectional identities such as trans or queer individuals.*

- **Monica du Toit is the manager of the Transformation Office at Stellenbosch University.**