

# 1ST ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF ISISELE SENYATHI HUB FOR AFRICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY REPORT

28<sup>TH</sup>-30<sup>TH</sup>  
SEPTEMBER  
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CAPE PENINSULA UNIVERSITY  
OF TECHNOLOGY  
BELLVILLE CAMPUS



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# 1ST ANNUAL CONFERENCE ISELE SENYATHI AFRICAN WOMEN HUB: MOBILIZING AFRICAN WOMEN MEMORIES THROUGH COLLECTIVE AND COLLATING HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

CAPE PENINSULA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY CAMPUS, BELLVILLE  
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## 1. ESTABLISHING ISELE SENYATHI

### 1.1 Introduction

A First Annual Conference of Isisele Senyathi Women's Hub on African Women's History was organised and hosted at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology's (CPUT's) Bellville Campus in Cape Town by local non-profit organisation (NPO) Ilitha Labantu; CPUT; another local NPO, African Women's Independent Forum (AWIF); and the UN (United Nations) Women South Africa Multi Country Office (SAMCO) based in Pretoria.

Under the theme "Mobilising African women memories by collecting and collating historical knowledge", the conference was attended by government and civil society representatives, including veterans of the Struggle against apartheid in South Africa, as well as leading opinion-formers, media consultants and academics. The meeting celebrated the establishment of Isisele Senyathi with a programme of speeches and presentations and a public exhibition on the theme of African women's history.

The aim of Isisele Senyathi, which is a Xhosa idiom meaning a reservoir of knowledge or a mine of information, is to:

- Keep women's voices alive by revealing and sharing previously untold and unheard stories of the survival and resilience of women who have shaped the African experience;
- Make an intellectual contribution to the historiography of African women's struggles by generating knowledge and showcasing women's indigenous knowledge as an integral part of the continent's history and philosophy;
- Ensure that the role of African women as history makers and agents of change is accurately and equitably represented; and
- Bring together those interested in African women's history and how women's contributions to society on the continent should be fully recognised, valued and celebrated.

The plan is to hold conferences in support of the Isisele Senyathi project on a biannual basis.

Women's history is African history. Too often, though, this history has been omitted or partially represented, appearing only now and then in familiar profiles and at predictable high points in the calendar. But women, despite legal and cultural barriers, have been actively engaged in every phase of South Africa's history, whether, for example, as firebrands, intellectuals, or ordinary people going about their lives.

Throughout history, women have made a lasting global impact. Every year during March, when International Women's Day is held, and during August, when National Women's Day is held in South Africa, the past and present of women who have, and continue to, set a path for future generations is celebrated. There are so many women who have made history, broken records, and changed the lives of many, yet their stories get lost in time. In this context, the Isisele Senyathi project, which is the product of extensive collaboration among Ilitha Labantu, CPUT, AWIF and UN Women, builds on 33 years of work by Ilitha Labantu, which has, since its establishment with the goal of providing services to women and children affected by violence, served as a hub where ordinary women's stories are told; and sought to uplift the voices, faces and victories of women through tales of the leaders, visionaries and everyday change-makers who have made history and shaped contemporary society.



## 1.2 Opening address<sup>1</sup>

The Cape Peninsula University of Technology has pledged to support the Isisele Senyathi project and its efforts to chronicle the struggle stories of ordinary, resilient, indefatigable South African women, as well as those of the women leaders, visionaries and change-makers who have shaped contemporary society.

As a university of technology that seeks to cultivate knowledge as one of its core goals, CPUT places its support for this project within the context of the need to counter anti-truth, anti-intellectual and anti-science trends which are gaining traction at present; and the need to strengthen a weakening social contract in South Africa, which must constantly be renewed. In this regard, CPUT has led and continues to lead calls for greater social ownership of public institutions to address epistemic and cognitive injustice and exclusion; to contribute to the decolonisation of knowledge; and to promote knowledge democracy.

<sup>1</sup> This section is based on an address made by Professor Chris Nhlapo, Vice-Chancellor of Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT on 28-30 September 2022. It also includes contributions made by Ntutu Mtwana, Ilitha Labantu, as the moderator of the opening session.

Ilitha Labantu has opened doors, including in far-flung townships, to CPUT, enabling the university to have greater impact. For its part, the university has espoused an African philosophy, addressing the challenge of ineffability by encouraging its members, including academics and students, to “walk in someone else’s shoes”. Accordingly, CPUT students should be equipped with relational capability, which many may otherwise lack.

The aim of this conference is to keep women’s voices alive by sharing previously untold and unheard stories of survival and resilience among women who have shaped the African experience – their heard, felt and seen realities. To this end, the meeting brings together those interested in recognising, valuing and celebrating African women’s history and contributions to society. In this regard, there is a need to address the untruths and distortions that may have shaped how African women’s role in history has been represented – in particular so that the past and present can provide an accurate and equitably framed guide to the future.

The presentations at this conference should inspire historiographers, while the interactions that take place at the meeting should create meaning and facilitate the transfer of the baton of African women’s struggles to the next generation. Accordingly, these proceedings need to be captured for the benefit of historiographers and more generally for students and researchers, including at CPUT – so that the sense of social ownership among the people that make up the institution may be strengthened. The aim must be not only to archive women’s part in African history but to share it with others so that lessons may be learned.



### **1.3 Background to the establishment of Lisele Senyathi<sup>2</sup>**

Every woman has a story to tell: history begins in their stories. However, the situation has been that when this history has been written, it has not been written by the women themselves, but by others. Accordingly, there is a need to write women back into history; to improve the representation of women in history; and to counter the dangerous perception that women in the past have not done anything of great value or significance.

The impact of women’s history may seem abstract and a less pressing concern than the immediate struggles of working women, but to ignore the vital role that women have played in shaping South Africa would be an injustice. Each and every woman – mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers – has a story to tell. Strength and inspiration can be provided by those who came before, as well as by many of the women working today. They are part of the story – and a truly balanced and inclusive history recognises how important women have always been in South African society, as well as across the rest of the continent and globally.

<sup>2</sup>This section is based on an address made by Mandisa Monakali, President of Ilitha Labantu, at the launch of the Lisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

Ilitha Labantu encourages the discovery of women's stories and memories, including the challenges they faced and continue face, to produce a better understanding of their lives and to recognise their dignity and accomplishments in order to foster self-esteem among girls and respect among boys and young men. The wisdom of the elders should be deployed so that the children can learn. In this regard, the hub being established as part of the Isisele Senyathi project represents a tribute to the grandmothers who are often excluded from history. The elders who were makers of justice; providers of clarity; and makers of charity and peace, can still inspire history and the society.

The aim of Isisele Senyathi is to re-tell her-story (rather than history) and change the future, remembering and celebrating the contribution of women. The belief is that such history can offer strength and inspiration. In this respect and in order to produce justice, women need to be proud of their history.

In addition, as an organisation that seeks to address violence against women and children, Ilitha Labantu believes that healing the wounds of history will help communities to address their shared legacies of past trauma, transforming their pain into constructive action.

When women leave abusive situations, they are effectively saying that they are not going to be like their mothers, aunts and cousins who suffered in silence – they are pledging to change the narrative. This is why the stories of abuse also are needed. How did these individuals manage to escape? Such tales can teach others the path to freedom.

For the past 32 years since Ilitha Labantu was established in 1989, it has served as a hub for women's stories – so the information is already there. And these women have been talking for themselves – not with somebody talking on their behalf. In this regard, the goal is to open the door for grassroots women's voices, stories, experiences and knowledge to feed into academic research and efforts – with the women themselves, who may be tired of being over-researched, leading the process, instead of the academic researchers. In other words, the stories must be shaped by their protagonists, rather than by others with their own agendas who do not necessarily respect the lived realities of these protagonists. In this sense, the hub belongs to ordinary women, although students will be able to source information on particular topics from the hub and listen to the stories held there.

Women's stories may emerge in the form of memories, which are the architecture of lives and destinies. Given that there is no heritage without women, without lineage, this conference seeks to explore how such memories may be mobilised to shape the African historical record. There is a story that I have not previously told about one of the impacts of the policing of the 1950 Group Areas Act in the Western Cape, under which black, coloured and Indian residents used to have to carry passes allowing them to move around and stay in certain places. The police in Newlands in Cape Town came to my mother's residence just after her son had died and demanded to see my father's pass. My mother complained that no one had come when she had called about the death of her son and the police said: "You can bury your own child."

Such are the stories that are not told, but should be in order to create healing.

Once upon a time, people would sit around the fire or the primus stove and share their stories. Families would sit around the radio together at 6pm and listen to the community news. (Today the youth are busy with their cell phones, with earphones on, even when they are cooking.) The message was also communicated through song, which became a vehicle of the struggle. Isisele Senyathi should represent a new hearth around which the stories and wisdom of the mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters may be shared.

#### 1.4 Isisele Senyathi's role in promoting women's strength

It is important to affirm women's role not only in private spaces but also in public spaces, where the narrative of women's lives needs to be changed. There is a need to acknowledge the role of the women who fought and sacrificed during the Struggle but who have lacked a public platform where their contributions are acknowledged. In facilitating the remembrance of such women's stories through tales, poems and song, Isisele Senyathi is also preserving them as part of Africa's culture, creative arts and heritage. Acknowledging the role of past women, contemporary girls and young women can stand in full knowledge of where they come from with pride and confidence. The baton is passed and the truth of past women's contributions to history, which have been denied by others seeking to take credit for them, is realised. In this way the supreme empathy, understanding and nation-building capacity of women may also be realised.

The values of solidarity and inclusiveness should inform the kind of history being produced by Isisele Senyathi. In telling their stories, women can tend to seek to please others and pander to dominant ideas, undermining the integrity of their own realities – and of each other. For example, if a woman failed to participate in the 1956 Women's March against the pass laws in Pretoria, then others may attack her credibility. There is a false notion of some women as heroines, while the contribution of others, who may have been undertaking the everyday work of distributing pamphlets, is not acknowledged. In this way, South Africa as a nation has been built on a select number and kind of tales. So, now there is a need to share the previously hidden tales and learn lessons from these for future action.



#### 1.5 Keynote speech: One woman's journey through life<sup>4</sup>

The idea of illiteracy is often deployed to denigrate the understanding of those without much formal education. In fact, many of those who never went to school know a lot that others don't know. Working women don't need grand titles to achieve and take action effectively.

I have found that the lessons that are absorbed by people on their individual paths in life are often only properly grasped in moments of silence. I implement this understanding by turning off the radio or television to facilitate authentic introspection. I have further found that this thing called life defies being boxed into an academic definition. In this spirit, I offer this account of my personal journey as but one practical example for others to observe and learn from as they see fit. After all, people must take what works for them from their own experiences and those of others as they proceed through life.

<sup>4</sup> This section is based on a speech made by Baleka Mbete, former deputy president of South Africa, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022. It also includes a contribution made by Ntutu Mtwana, as the moderator of the opening session.

I am a three-legged pot. One leg is my own family's history of migrations across the African continent. A second is my long affiliation to the African National Congress (ANC). I was a young girl in KwaMashu township near Durban when I started to acquire political consciousness in response to prejudices that I experienced in my daily round and which I only later came to name as "sexism" and "racism". For example, one day I walked into a shop to buy a particularly beautiful item of clothing, but was told it was too expensive for me to buy. At the time I was baffled by the shopkeeper's presumption, but can now look back and say that his response was a manifestation of racism. Subsequently, most of my youth and later life was spent in struggle spaces whether inside or outside South Africa and in producing programmes in pursuit of a better life for South Africans.

My third leg comes as I look forward to my life after I retire from the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the ANC and take responsibility for my daily activities and choices: when I will be able to go and participate in a grandparent's activities at my grandchildren's schools and dispense wisdom and truths in response to my grandchildren's probing questions. This is a period which I anticipate as one of expanding possibilities in the domestic space.

I also relish the continued journey with my partner, my fellow traveller, who commentates on present realities, such as branch politics (and the failure of the branch leadership to issue either of us invitations to branch meetings – a trend that started at the behest of the ANC Youth League, which regards disparate voices as an inconvenience and holds elections in the absence of senior leaders). Other subjects include our support for South Africa's position at the United Nations (UN), as presented by South Africa's Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Naledi Pandor, in response to the war in the Ukraine. It has been argued by others that South Africa's position on this issue is partial; but there is no need to choose either of the sides in the conflict – the goal should be to enable them to talk to each other and stop fighting. There is no mother who likes war. So, women should believe in the correctness of the ANC position on this. In addition, it is important to acknowledge how the stance of the United States (US) and other western governments in relation to the war in Ukraine is driven by the imperatives of the military-industrial complex which are to manufacture and sell weapons – and to urge others to fight on their behalf rather than risk spilling the blood of their own troops.

Isisele Senyathi represents a major contribution to education in terms of planning and restructuring content as part of broader efforts to promote decolonisation. There is a clear need to reclaim African identities. For myself, I have been guided for the past 30 years by the spirit of my mother, who came from Limpopo and who died four years before my return from political exile to South Africa. She returns periodically to reassure me when I face confusion and need to make decisions in new ways. I have also received advice from a spiritual adviser who has been in contact with one of the many leaders among my ancestors. Against this background, I led a number of traditional health practitioners in an early morning, outdoor ceremony to commune with the spirit world on the occasion of the ANC's birthday in 2022. In fact, the founders of the 19th century formations that led to the establishment of the ANC were traditional leaders – indicating the importance of spirituality in shaping lives, although this perspective has been widely dismissed as "pagan" or "heathen".

By airing such stories and perspectives, Isisele Senyathi may foster restoration and reclamation of the depths of African heritage and culture in South Africa. For there is nothing wrong with the way the ancestors did things. It was only those who came with a mission to "civilize" Africans and who looked down on them who sought to inculcate them with this view. Accordingly, the call must be for the younger generation now to remember and return to their own histories and identities.



### **1.6 Keynote speech: Learning from the achievements of women<sup>5</sup>**

African women have done so much but their efforts have been largely forgotten. They have always been at the forefront of solving the continent's problems. They led militaries in the pre-colonial period and fought side by side with men in national liberation struggles after the continent was colonised and partitioned into separate states by the European powers. In the post-colonial period, they have provided leadership amid some of the worst economic, political and health crises of the 21st century. Yet women have not been recognised as equal partners with men in such efforts.

For centuries, African women have taken care of households, in particular, babies, children and the elderly. But in patriarchal African societies, this contribution is under-valued and women are generally treated as inferior and as less intelligent to men. Entrenched gender inequality in social structures and the exploitation of African women has been exacerbated by the legacy of Western imperialism, including the political and economic structural changes introduced by colonial powers and later imposed by international lending and development agencies. In this respect, the problems of women since independence may be viewed as a continuation of policies and forces established during the colonial era, notwithstanding their contributions to national liberation struggles and the subsequent rise of political rhetoric advocating equality for all. In fact, the new African states and social organisations may be seen as little more than Africanised replicas of their colonial predecessors; and women continue to be conditioned to take the back seat in every aspect of their lives.

Nevertheless, African women have made it to the top in every sector and every African country – and their achievements and stories need to be documented and celebrated accordingly. In Kenya, Wangari Maathai won a Nobel Prize for her work safeguarding the environment. In Zimbabwe, Oppah Muchingori became Minister of Defence; and Joice Mujuru was vice-president at one point. In South Africa, Baleka Mbete rose to the level of vice-president and Bathabile Dlamini to the post of minister of social development and president of the ANC Women's League. Thandi Modise became Minister of Defence and Military Veterans; and women have led the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (CONTRALESA). In Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf overcame the odds to become the first woman president of Liberia with the financial support of other women, which shows that women need to help each other in order to succeed. Joyce Banda became the president of Malawi. In 2022, Samia Suluhu Hassan was President of Tanzania and Sahle-Work Zewde was President of Ethiopia. In Zimbabwe, two women have started universities. Primrose Kurasha started a distance-learning university; and Hope Sadza started a women's university. The experiences of such women must be celebrated, documented and shared so that young people can be inspired by, and learn from, them.

<sup>5</sup> This section is based on a speech made by Sithembiso Nyoni, Minister of Women and Youth Affairs, Zimbabwe, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.



In recounting the history of African women, it can be forgotten that history is not just about the past; it is also about documenting the present so that those in the future can learn what their past was like. In this context, Zimbabwe's First Lady, Auxillia Mnangagwa, has made it her mission to raise the profile of undocumented and excluded communities across the country, bringing them into mainstream society. In my role as Zimbabwe's Minister of Women and Youth Affairs and formerly as minister of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) development, I have seen many disadvantaged individuals and groups escape poverty because of the work undertaken by SMEs.

Indeed, it has been reported that women and disadvantaged individuals have created more than 5 million full-time jobs under government-funded initiatives to promote entrepreneurship at the community level. The idea is that no one and no place should be left behind. In a similar vein, Zimbabwean women are breaking the professional glass ceiling, succeeded as pilots, engineers and soldiers, and leading companies that have gone global. The employment trends indicate that President Emmerson Mnangagwa's mantra of inclusiveness is producing results. However, as this work is implemented, it is important to document what women are doing at all levels, including at the grassroots.

The history of women's achievement also needs to be documented as an antidote to social ills such as drug and substance abuse among the youth, which can have a devastating impact on families, including daughters; and in an environment in which the youth are greatly influenced by social media, which fails to recount and share the stories of their own families, including where they came from and what they did.

In this context, it is important to celebrate even relatively small achievements – such as those instances where the baton has been successfully passed on by mothers to their daughters. For example, Joyce Banda's daughter has taken over running the non-profit organisation established by her mother; Ella Mangisa helps her mother, Mandisa Monakali, to run Ilitha Labantu in Cape Town; and in Zimbabwe, my daughter is running the organisation that I started. The idea is that the girls can learn from their mothers. If the woman is a good cook, they should cook with their daughter. If a good speaker, speak with the daughter. If a good dancer, dance with the daughter. If a good singer, sing and pass on this aspect of African women's heritage, this crucial way of expressing emotions.

In this context, the present meeting has been convened not only to look back, but also to enable African women to connect their pasts, present and future. In documenting the achievements of present and past generations of women, a paper trail is left for generations to come. In addition, these stories need to be taught at universities and at schools so that the girls and young women at these institutions are inspired, instead of left feeling lost and lonely.

On a practical level, adequate funding must be raised to support Isisele Senyathi; and the next conference should celebrate the initiative's own achievements by awarding those women whose history is now being written with the help of CPUT.



## 2. RECLAIMING COLLECTIVE MEMORIES: FROM A SILENT PAST TO A SPOKEN FUTURE

### 2.1 Living archive: Chief Ouma Katrina Sesau<sup>6</sup>

My language is dying out and I want to make sure that people know about my language and that this language is taught. The issue of cultural diversity is important. Nelson Mandela supported the right of the San indigenous people to land and to their own language. Although the Nama language was quite common at that time, only ten people could speak the San language called N|uu. Now they have died and, as the only one left, I have been designated a "living legend" by the South African Department of Arts and Culture. I am proud of my language, which is my great, great, great grandparents' language. It is a privilege to be able to teach this language to young and old, so that it does not die out as if it were unknown. This language cannot just die! Many do not know of this language and refuse to accept it as an authentic language – but the importance of this language will be known for as long as I am alive.

I am from the Kalahari. There is the green Kalahari and there is the brown Kalahari. The weather there can be scorching hot. Upington in the Northern Cape is the South African town closest to the Kalahari. At a young age, around 7 or 8, a farmer came and took me to be a maid on his farm. It was not an easy life. When there was no food, I lived on thick, cultured milk. When I was a child who needed to grow up, I had to scrub the floors instead.

At the age of 15, I was fetched away from this place by my father and taken to work at another farm where my mother worked. At this new place, I was fed food that was days' old. Even though it was sometimes rotten, I was so hungry I ate it anyway. But there came a day when I left the food that was given to me on the table because I decided that I was no longer going to eat such rotten food. The farmer's wife became angry with me at that. Sometimes I went to the main farmhouse looking for bread – and although my mother, who worked for the farmer's wife, would be embarrassed that we were hungry and had come for food, she would make sure that I had bread to take back with me. When I saw my mother, I would speak N|uu. However, when the farmer heard us speaking the language, he rebuked us harshly. In fact, he wanted the language to die. At that time the language was widely viewed as a bad, ugly language that should not be used. Due to the label that was attached to it, people were unwilling to use the language and it faded. Even my children are unable to speak the language.

<sup>6</sup> This section is based on an account of the life of Chief Ouma Katrina Sesau as told in her own words at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022. The report for this section represents an edited version of the translation of her words that was made at the meeting.

Life was very hard in those days. My clothes were made from large hessian flour bags. The bags were cut neatly into flared dresses; and I was very proud of my flared dress. When I was almost 16, I went home from the farm on leave for a month and, at that time, I had my first period. I used to work in the field every morning, but one

morning I felt very sick and my head was sore. So, I called for someone to go and tell my father that I was unable to go to work. Then I saw blood coming from me and I started crying; and my sister, who saw it too, said: "It seems like you have become a young woman now." So, then I went home and cleaned myself and my mother came and started shouting that I had become a young woman and that I had to be taken away for the rites of passage. I didn't want to go into the traditional reed house and said that my sister could come with a blanket to look after me. But my father adhered to the traditional ways, and I was taken to the grass house and stayed there for a month. While I was there, both my grandmothers came and took me through the teachings of how to be a young woman, about nature and about my culture. This was all part of the spiritual and ceremonial process of becoming a young woman. After a month had come to an end, there was a ceremony at home.

Beasts were slaughtered and there was dancing. A mixture of sheep's blood was thrown in the fire, put in the soup and daubed in stripes across the stomachs of the young men who danced. The local farmers came to watch as I danced in and out of the reed house. There were eight girls in my family and six of them went through this process.



## 2.2 Annie Silinga - anti-pass laws activist<sup>7</sup>

Annie Silinga was born in 1910 at Nqamakwe in the Butterworth district of the former Transkei in what is now the Eastern Cape. She had a basic school education there before marrying and then, in 1937, relocating to Cape Town where her husband was working. They lived a conventional family life together, raising three children. After the Second World War, the family relocated to Langa township. Then, in 1948, at the age of 38, Silinga joined the Langa Vigilance Association. In 1952 she joined the ANC. She was an active participant in the Defiance Campaign, which was launched that year in opposition to a number of unjust laws imposed by the apartheid regime. For example, she sat in waiting rooms designated as "coloured" zones under the Group Areas Act of 1950, meaning that only people of mixed African and European ancestry were permitted to wait there. When the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) was established in 1954, Annie Silinga was chosen to serve on its executive committee. After leading the women of the Western Cape in a major anti-pass law protest in 1954, she was imprisoned, along with her 6-month-old child, on charges of civil disobedience and defying pass requirements.

<sup>7</sup> This section is based on an account of the life of Annie Silinga (1910-1983) as told by Nomvume Ralarala, First Deputy President of the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

Despite being unable to read or write, Silinga emerged as a key figure in the women's anti-pass movement. As one of the women who helped to establish FEDSAW, she sat on the federation's executive committee alongside such Struggle figures as Helen Joseph from the Congress of Democrats; Lucy Mvubelo from the Garment Workers' Union of African Women; Dora Tamana; Ida Mntwana; Fatima Meer; and Josie Palmer. Silinga played an important role at FEDSAW's inaugural conference which produced the Women's Charter. At this meeting she declared: "I will never carry a pass. I will only carry one similar to Mrs Susan Strijdom's [the wife of then prime minister Hans Strijdom]. She is a woman and I am a woman too. There is no difference." Shortly after, in December 1956, Annie was arrested for treason and taken to Johannesburg. She was the only African woman from Cape Town among the accused on the Treason Trial, alongside individuals such as Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, as well as other women activists, including Helen Joseph and Frances Baard. She was imprisoned on charges of high treason. In December 1957, the state withdrew charges against 61 of the defendants on the Treason Trial, including Silinga. She was subsequently elected the president of the Cape Town branch of the ANC Women's League and was imprisoned again when the country was placed under a state of emergency, at which time police arrested thousands of opposition protesters and drove the opposition movement underground.

Annie Silinga lived her remaining years in Langa township where she died in 1984 before the pass laws were repealed. She persevered in opposing these laws even when her refusal to apply for a pass disqualified her from receiving a much-needed disability grant or state pension after she had a stroke that left her paralysed from the hip down. Indeed, she said that she was happy to have opposed the pass humiliation. Just before she died, she told a reporter: "I would like to live in a South Africa where women of all races may co-exist peacefully in employment and in housing. We must still make an effort to stand in unity." Silinga stayed true to her convictions, declining to carry a pass even to the day she died. At the request of her family, artist Sue Williamson created a piece to place at her grave at Langa cemetery which bears her battle cry: "I will never carry a pass." She died after a life dedicated to resistance. Many were inspired by her steadfast tenacity.



### **2.3 Alice Victoria Alexander Kinloch - human rights activist<sup>8</sup>**

Alice Victoria Alexander Kinloch was a human rights activist who knew what she believed and what she stood for. She was born in Cape Town in 1863 at St Monica's Maternity Hospital in Bo-Kaap. In 1885, she married Edmund Ndosa Kinloch at St Cyprian's Church in Kimberley. In 1895, she travelled to Britain where she co-founded the African Association in London. As a human rights activist, she spoke to large audiences on the ill-treatment of indigenous people in South Africa. In this regard, as an activist, she made sure that she created a platform to engage. In pursuing her mission, she did not tilt at windmills. In other words, she did not fight the British government but rather she fought for the issue at hand - which was the rights of indigenous people in South Africa. She was not deflected from her purpose, but stood her ground.

<sup>8</sup> This section is based on an account of the life of Alice Victoria Alexander Kinloch (1863-unknown) as told by Damaris Kewiet, University of the Western Cape, Community Engagement Unit, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

A number of lessons may be learned from the example of Alice Kinloch as an activist. Each of us has a role to play and a fight to fight. In this regard, it is important to choose one's field of struggle – which for me is the provision of healthcare on an equitable basis. Having chosen the field, every effort should be made in the struggle, with the focus firmly on the particular goals of the campaign rather than petty squabbles with individuals who may be obstructing the work at hand. In this regard, political consciousness means more than party politics and playing political games with people's lives.

True, effective activism entails putting one's hand to the plough and ploughing; staying true to one's beliefs; always bearing in mind that one is part of a broader struggle on behalf of the vulnerable and marginalised, even if standing alone; and being prepared to be disappointed by others and nevertheless always continuing with the work – that is, being present and relevant.



## 2.4 Laretta Ngcobo - author<sup>9</sup>

In her 2022 edited volume of selected writings by South African author Laretta Ngcobo, *Writing as the Practice of Freedom*, South African scholar Barbara Boswell describes Ngcobo as a significant literary talent; a freedom fighter; and a feminist voice. Laretta Ngcobo, who hails from rural South Africa, was a novelist, editor and children's book author whose work articulated her long-standing concern with economic, social and political justice. She was well known as a feminist writer during the early 1950s although her work was only published later, in the 1980s and 1990s. She was one of three pioneering black South African women writers, alongside Bessie Head and Miriam Tlali, who wrote novels in English from the vantage point of black women under apartheid. She was one also of the main speakers during the 1956 Women's March against the country's unjust pass laws. Her novels have been described as reflecting her own experiences struggling against the injustices of the apartheid system. She has been lauded for providing a much-needed voice for black South African rural women battling oppressive economic forces; patriarchal social customs; and racially discriminatory political policies, with passion and dignity.

Loretta Gladys Nozizwe Duyu Gwina was born the daughter of two teachers, Rosa nee Cele and Simon Gwina, in 1931 in rural Ixopo, where she grew up. She attended Inanda Seminary School near Durban, going on to become the first woman from her area to study at the University of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape. After university, she taught for two years, before going to work at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in Pretoria. Born during the apartheid era, she grew up experiencing racial discrimination and became politically active

<sup>9</sup> This section is based on an account of the life of Laretta Ngcobo (1931-2015) as told by Dr Vuyelwa Nhlapo, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Assupol Community Trust, at the launch of the *Isisele Senyathi* hub at CPUT in September 2022.

as a young woman, joining the banned Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). Her husband, Abednego Bhekabantu Ngcobo, was a founding member of the PAC, a radical group that broke away from the ANC in 1959 and organised the pass resistance that led to the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960. He was subsequently imprisoned for several years. Because of Ngcobo's political activities and her fight against the government's apartheid policies, Lauretta Ngcobo also became a target for the South African security forces and narrowly escaped arrest in 1963. She then fled with her children to Swaziland, staying in Tanzania and Zambia before emigrating to London.

In 1969, she found work as a teacher in London and, deciding to settle there, taught for 25 years in the city. She returned to South Africa in 1994 and lived in Durban, teaching for a while and then becoming a member of the KwaZulu-Natal legislature for 11 years before retiring in 2008. Her husband died in 1997. In 2006, Lauretta Ngcobo received a South African lifetime achievement literary award. In 2008, she was awarded the order of Ikhamanga for her work in literature and promoting gender equality. She was named an Ethekewini living legend in 2012 and received an honorary doctorate of technology in arts and design from Durban University of Technology (DUT) in 2014.

Her career as a published author started in exile in London. Alienated from the Struggle back home she explored her experiences as an activist in her first novel *Cross of Gold*, which was published in 1981 in England. She edited a 1987 anthology entitled *Let It Be Told: Essays by Black Women in Britain*; and in 1990 her second novel, *And They Didn't Die*, was published.

Lauretta Ngcobo's fiction was informed by the turbulent political situation in her native South Africa and her participation in the political and social movement to end the discriminatory policies of apartheid. In *Cross of Gold*, she touched on the role of black women in the struggle in South Africa. The novel opens with the shooting of a political activist, Sindisiwe Zidoke, who, surviving the shooting, is motivated to become a freedom fighter and tries to escape to Botswana with her young sons. Sindisiwe's actions, however, lead to her violent death at the hands of government security forces. The story then shifts to the story of her son Mandla who continues the fight against apartheid. Critics have traced the development of Ngcobo's portrayal of the female characters in her novels as indicating the novelist's own growing racial and feminist consciousness. In *Cross of Gold*, it has been argued, she killed off her female character, Sindisiwe, because she found it difficult to view African women as capable of effecting change. In this regard, her inability to sustain a female protagonist in the novel has been described by critics as accurately reflecting the privileged role of men in the Struggle at that time.

By the time of her second novel, Ngcobo was ready to fully explore the heroism of black rural women in the struggle against apartheid more fully; and to confront the conflicting economic political and cultural forces that shaped the South African black female experience during that era. In this regard, it has been said that the criticism that she received in relation to the first book led her to write a second in which the women would not only survive but would act as strong, powerful agents of history.

The result, *And They Didn't Die*, has become an African feminist classic alongside Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* published in 1979; Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* published in 1988; Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* published in 1974; and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* published in 1975. *And They Didn't Die* tells of a black rural community of women who, against the backdrop of the 1913 Land Act and subsequent oppression, care and fight for their children, the land and the cattle while their husbands work in the mines and cities. In her focus on the struggles and complexities faced by her female protagonist Jezile Majola, Ngcobo articulated the personal and public struggles of African women who opposed colonialism, apartheid and the restrictions of tradition.

The book has been described as particularly noteworthy for giving its main character an interiority and voice rarely previously seen in South African literature – a voice which highlighted the damaging overlapping effects of apartheid and customary law on the lives of African women confined to apartheid Bantustans. As Ngcobo said: “A woman is not only black but at the same time must also submit to her husband who, being oppressed, will find it necessary to oppress his women. Tradition reinforces this and elevates men above women. In our tradition we find customs against which resistance is in vain especially if one is an isolated individual of a restricted group.”

Commentators have noted the ways in which Ngcobo’s fiction addressed the many forms of economic disempowerment and cultural dislocation imposed on the black population, particularly black rural women, by industrialisation, colonialism, and the migrant labour and apartheid systems. In this context, it is noteworthy that Ngcobo expressed ambivalence about the feminism and freedom to which Western women aspired during this period even as they remained agents of racial oppression in South Africa and England. At the same time, she acknowledged that white women in South Africa won rights which benefitted African women after democratisation – as was born witness by the high number of seats occupied by women in Parliament – a third of the total – in 1994, which moved the country from 130th position in the global league for women’s representation at national government level to 10th.

In her writing, Ngcobo called attention to the many levels of oppression experience by black women. As she once noted: “I’m not referring to the structure of institutionalised power, but to the yoke of daily Injustice, to the bitterness of everyday living.” She highlighted black women’s oppression by both African men and white women: “Through our men, we feel the weight of the system as well as that of law and tradition; and another thing happens to us in respect of the white woman, it is through her that a variety of oppressions befall us.” In attempting to define her place in relation to Western and African traditions, Ngcobo admits that African women are caught up in a hybrid world of old and new, the African and the alien, locked in a constant struggle to integrate contradictions into a meaningful new whole.

Ngcobo was also a cultural activist determined to nurture the talent of other marginalised women writers in exile. In addition to editing *Let It Be Told in Britain*, she authored the 1994 children’s book *Fikile Learns to Like Other People* after her return from exile. She also edited an anthology entitled *Prodigal Daughters: Stories of South African Women in Exile*, which was published in 2012.

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In her life, Ngcobo broke free of the chains that bound her being both as a black woman in apartheid South Africa and as a black African, becoming one of the country's most prolific intellectuals and writers. She died on 3 November 2015, at the age of 84, in Johannesburg.





### **2.5 Fatima Meer - activist and author<sup>10</sup>**

Fatima Meer was a person small in physical stature, but big on commitment, courage, principles, steadfastness and a belief in non-racism and family values. She was born in 1929 of a white mother. However, she grew up in a polygamous family of six children, with two mothers – and subsequently argued in her writing that, although polygamy has been widely criticised, it provided her with additional maternal support – with her second mother being a great influence in her life. She started her political career at the age of 17 while still at high school. She was soon to work with Dr Yusuf Dadoo, Dr Monty Naicker and Dr Kesaveloo Goonam, who organised the passive resistance movement in South Africa and played leading roles in the South African Indian Congress. In 1949, when Fatima Meer was a young woman, there were major riots between the black community and the Indian community in Durban, with 142 people being killed and over a thousand people being injured. Throughout her life, Meer worked towards building relationships between racial groups in order to prevent another racial riot of such magnitude.

In 1950, Fatima Meer graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology and physiology from Natal University. In 1951, she married Ishmael, who was also an activist. The Meer family was highly politicised – both Fatima, her husband and the son Rashid were at one point or another held in detention without trial. In 1956, Ishmael was arrested on charges of treason, along with many other activists. He was released in 1958. Fatima Meer offered support for the detainees and their families throughout the Treason Trial, which only finally came to an end with the acquittal of the remaining defendants in 1961.

Fatima Meer campaigned to establish women's structures, including by launching the Black Women's Federation in Natal in 1973 with Winnie Mandela; Sally Motlana; Theresa Hendrikse; Kate Jonkers; Deborah Mabelitsa; F. Skhosana; and Ann Tomlinson. Subsequently, most of the members of the federation's executive body were arrested and taken to a prison in Johannesburg – an experience recorded by Meer in her Prison Diary. She was detained for 113 days without charge. Her diary of those days provides a clear insight into her determination to continue the Struggle, indicating what resistance really means. After her release from prison, she narrowly survived an assassination attempt at her home, only missing the gunman's bullets by a matter of seconds. In addition to her activism directed against the apartheid regime, Fatima Meer was a civic activist, supporting poor communities particularly in the areas of housing and education – building campaigning structures and

<sup>10</sup> This section is based on an account of the life of Fatima Meer (1928-2010) as told by Faldiela De Vries, Chairperson and co-founder, Manenberg People's Centre, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

organising local communities. She established an educational project which enrolled more than 3,000 black students in order to increase the pass rate of black people in matric subjects, in particular in mathematics and science. She helped to establish a centre teaching women garment-making and business-management skills.

During major flooding in Durban in the 1970s which affected 10,000 Indian families, she mobilised support to feed and house the victims of the natural disaster. She also challenged the municipality to win compensation for coloured families on Sparks Estate whose properties had been expropriated under the 1961 Group Areas Act. Much of this activism was undertaken while she was under strict banning orders imposed by the apartheid government, which led to her arrest and imprisonment on a number of occasions.

Fatima Meer was also a prolific author, writing more than 23 books between 1969 and 2017, including an authorised biography of Nelson Mandela, *Higher than Hope*. Her autobiography is called *Memories of Love*. She received many awards, including a posthumous award of the Order of Luthuli in Silver which is normally given by the country's president, as well as the South African Order of Merit for her service. She had three children with Ishmael, to whom she was married for 49 years before he died. She died in 2010 at the age of 81.

There is a present injustice of the kind that Fatima Meer herself would have fought, concerning the government's reluctance to ensure the timely payment of maintenance support to women struggling to raise children on their own. Many such women are waiting for up to two years to win their cases for maintenance through the courts – which constitutes economic abuse and oppression of these women and their children.



### **3. INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE: DOCUMENTATION AND TECHNOLOGY**

The digitisation of data offers important opportunities for safely storing data and ensuring that it may be readily accessed by future users – opportunities that should be deployed by Isisele Senyathi.

#### **3.1 Digital methodologies and knowledge, and collective memories in a time of digital transformation<sup>11</sup>**

It is important to consider digital transformation within the African context rather than adopting a Eurocentric, tool-driven approach. In this regard, it is necessary to focus on the human aspect of such transformation and its organisational aspect, acknowledging the crucial role of human agency in shaping institutions, rather than

<sup>11</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Prof Tembisa Ngqondi, Dean, Faculty of Informatics and Design, CPUT, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

adopting a device-centred stance. If you do not transform the user of the tool there is no transformation. Digital technologies exist because people exist – they cannot function without people. Accordingly, unless transformation starts with the users, the organisation will spend a vast amount of money acquiring new technologies that may prove to be of little use in terms of their social and productive value. In terms of archiving, people are the ones who produce and collect the data which will be transformed into knowledge; but unless there is understanding of how and why this data will be used, the process of digital archiving and processing will be inadequate for its intended purpose. It must be about more than collecting data for data's sake.

Accordingly, the concept of "digital dignity" should provide guidance for what is preserved and how the archiving takes place. In this regard a key question for testing whether particular data should be preserved may be: Is this information – this story, this recording, this footage, this photograph – something that one would want to be read, heard or seen in 10 or 50 years?

Each of the different available communications technologies that are available has its own functionality – and its strengths and weaknesses as a medium or tool. Data remains no more than an input up to the point at which it is processed and communicated. Once it has been sent out, it becomes an output, part of the sum of knowledge in the world that is available to diverse people. The consequences of such production may not be welcome. For example, an individual may publish a photograph of protesting students that they have taken on their Facebook page. A future potential employer may unearth the image and conclude that it betrays a lack of concern on the part of the author for the privacy rights of others – and a failure to understand the value of using data effectively.

Accordingly, it is important to observe the strictures on publishing data that contravenes other people's rights to privacy as outlined by South Africa's Protection of Private Information (POPI) Act. The issue of untrammelled access to social media data also relates to the trade in the big data sets held by the companies which own these media. Each individual should consider whether they would wish to see the data that they publish via these and other media becoming public – particularly given the wide range of interests among those to whom such data may be distributed and/or sold. Unless thought is given to the potential audience for a particular piece of data before it is processed and becomes an output, significant harm may be created for the creator and/or publisher of that data. In this context, it is important to store data in such a way that the access rights and security of the data's creator are protected.

In this context, Isisele Senyathi should ensure that the digital processes that it deploys to collect and store African women's memories and stories facilitate the deployment of such data to the benefit of women so that they can learn lessons and be motivated afresh in their struggles. In particular, it is important to ensure that any indigenous knowledge that is collected is recorded in an authentic way, in the original voices and languages, so that these also are preserved. There should also be space, for example, to go to the villages and ask the grandfathers how they mix the medicine for cows, which are struggling to give birth. The aim should be to take such knowledge and integrate it into studies that may produce, in this case, new forms of veterinary medication. The deployment of digital tools to archive indigenous knowledge and place it in context may also lead to cultural forms – including fabric patterns and styles of clothing – being protected as South African intellectual property – which in turn would produce new economic opportunities.

More broadly, digital transformation can promote African thought, culture, know-how and innovation regardless of place, making it visible globally. At the same time, the efforts to preserve origins using digital tools must entail creating safe interactive spaces, in which the digital mirrors the physical, so that the dignity of the participants and their identity as Africans is upheld as part of the preservation of indigenous knowledge.



### **3.2 The integration of indigenous knowledge systems for socio-economic development<sup>12</sup>**

Under apartheid, indigenous knowledge and its practitioners were marginalised, suppressed and subjected to ridicule in South Africa, distorting the socio-economic and cultural development of people of all ages across the country. Indigenous people were particularly severely disadvantaged. Partly in recognition of this history, the then minister of science and technology, Derek Hanekom, declared in 2004 that indigenous knowledge had always been and continued to be a primary factor in the survival and welfare of most South Africans. Integrating and celebrating African perspectives within South Africa's knowledge system is not only a matter of redressing the imbalances of the past in education but may help to create new research paradigms and mental maps, as well as enriching existing ones.

In this respect, a particular concern is that there are few records of the knowledge held by the oldest known inhabitants of South Africa, the Khoi and San people, except for a number of volumes held at the University of Cape Town (UCT). So, there is a clear opportunity here to archive information from these people, who were the first to fight against the colonisers, and to make this readily accessible to the next generation using digital systems.

Significant work has been undertaken suggesting that indigenous knowledge systems can be integrated into South Africa's basic education curriculum to produce wiser, better informed, ethical and critical citizens capable of continuous learning. Throughout childhood, people are equipped with knowledge, practical skills and values that will help them to realise their physical, intellectual, personal, emotional and social potential. Indigenous knowledge can be integrated into the process of teaching such life skills, as well as mathematical skills, through stories and songs that tell of earlier ways of life. Indeed, there is an economic opportunity here for the development of a South African media platform that can produce and disseminate indigenous knowledge while ensuring that ownership of the content and its distribution remains African. Such a platform would also facilitate the digital archiving of knowledge that may otherwise pass from living memory or be abandoned in mouldering books. However, it is crucial that the interests of the likely end-users of such materials and knowledge be considered as a first step to ensure the effective functioning of such an initiative in line with the principles of transformation.

<sup>12</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Sipokazi Nciza, Director, Kasi Labs, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

Kasi Labs was established to bridge the digital skills gap – that is, to equip the residents of local communities with the kinds of digital skills that are commonplace in the corporate world. The training takes place by translating computer language, including coding, into a language that is understood by the community – their mother tongue – thus bridging the language barrier. The principle being that it tends to be the language that is being used in teaching rather than any inadequate understanding on the part of pupils and students that is preventing learning from taking place. Kasi Labs’ target market is people of all ages, races and genders from previously disadvantaged communities.



### **3.3 Revitalising indigenous knowledge in climate science and policy<sup>13</sup>**

Indigenous people all over the world are usually the most vulnerable in communities, irrespective of their gender or country, or the continent on which they live. There are about 350 million indigenous people spread across the globe, meaning it is important to be conscious of their interests in addressing climate change issues and indicating the need to integrate understanding from indigenous knowledge systems into planned interventions and actions. Indigenous peoples have their own communities, their own histories and their own understandings of how to respond to the world around them – for example, in relation to how to protect themselves from insects; how to manage sickness and disease; how to produce crops; how to treat their water; and how to protect local water systems, including the rivers and forests. Which is not to say that western education and knowledge systems has not produced significant benefits, but rather that it has come at a great cost, in particular for developing countries. Accordingly, the goal should be to enjoy the best of all the different kinds of knowledge in an effort to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

In this context, it is important to emphasise the seriousness of the threat posed by climate change, which is existential. Humanity is at risk and may be eradicated from the surface of the Earth, unless the way in which people interact with their environment and how they use natural resources changes radically. Climate change entails rising temperatures; extreme weather events such as hurricanes and tsunamis; and erratic rainfall patterns and temperatures. People have died because of heatwaves in some parts of the world, and have frozen to death in others. At the same time, the new climactic conditions will produce drought and lead to more diseases, including epidemics and pandemics, as biological matter locked in the permafrost and ice of the Arctic and Antarctic is released into the environment. In the past decade, all kinds of viral diseases, including Ebola, have broken out across the world. As ecosystems are distorted, so human systems that depend on the local environment are destabilised, leading to new large-scale migration flows, which then have national and

<sup>13</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Prof Beatrice Opeolu, Faculty of Applied Sciences, CPUT, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

international socio-economic impacts. Deforestation has been one of the main drivers of climate change, as has been the continuous drive for growth in the economy as the mass of people try to become ever richer and seek to make their lives ever easier. For example, under capitalism, large-scale farming releases lots of greenhouse gases that warm up the air; and industrialisation exacerbates the situation. Meanwhile, the people who are most affected by the damaging impacts, whether water scarcity or natural disasters, are women, girls and children – the vulnerable in society.

In relation to agriculture, the factors and behaviours producing climate change may be mitigated through the deployment of indigenous neighbourhood knowledge – that is, through a return to basics. For example, tilling, planting and harvesting rice, yams and cassava in Nigeria used to be a communal affair, with everyone contributing to the effort rather than using tractors, or hiring external labour. Instead of mass production which uses harmful pesticides and other chemicals and can lead to over-farming, smallholders would tend to their plots, ensuring sustainable fertility. The result would be a reduction in pollution and a greater supply of nutritious, organically farmed foods.

Similarly, traditional practices could inform the post-harvest handling of crops. I remember my grandmother preserved her beans from weevils and beetles by dropping a few dried chillis into the bowl and covering it. Several months later, there would not be a single insect infestation. Local people also used a number of effective home remedies against colds and coughs.

A further benefit of traditional practices is that they can foster greater land conservation. For example, in my village there were sacred places on the rivers, usually at the source, where people were not permitted to go and fetch water. In addition, there were sacred forests where people were not allowed to cut trees, which had the effect of protecting the watershed.

So, there is a clear need to invest in research into the indigenous knowledge systems embedded in rural families and homes – asking the elders to pass on their knowledge before it is too late.

### **3.4 Documenting indigenous knowledge in the Western Cape<sup>14</sup>**

The national indigenous registration system is an initiative of the Department of Science and Innovation which aims to document, record and store indigenous knowledge for the benefit of all communities in South Africa. In particular, it seeks to record previously unrecorded indigenous knowledge in various media formats and promote indigenous knowledge at the community level. The initiative proposes both proactive and defensive protection of this knowledge. In practice, the system aims to collect grassroots community experiences in local languages and, as far as possible, recruits local people to research and document the indigenous knowledge in their own communities. For example, in a Khoisan community, the researcher should be somebody who resonates with that community, somebody who will be able to understand the people and their way of living, so that the knowledge is understood and recorded fully within its context without loss. In addition, knowledge holders are encouraged to speak in their own language so that the knowledge is captured precisely as it is presented.

The national registration system offers a platform for the documentation of unrecorded and oral forms of indigenous knowledge. In documenting the knowledge, a number of set questionnaires which have been tailored to address the particular form of indigenous knowledge – be it traditional medicine, midwifery or food – are deployed. A National Indigenous Knowledge Management System (NIKMAS) was developed for the initiative by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), which also trains all the researchers in the use of the various questionnaires. The NIKMAS network infrastructure has also created a legal framework for the outputs of the research and how these may inform development efforts undertaken at a number of different levels of government.

<sup>14</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Mbalenhle Dlamini, Coordinator, Western Cape Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) Documentation Centre: Applied Science Faculty, CPUT, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.



The project has worked with a number of communities. Tswana women in North West province have talked of how they use astronomy and meteorology – the stars, the sun and the weather – to describe women’s journey through pregnancy or menstruation. Khoi women have described their skills in herding and butchering livestock and distributing meat. The education offered to young Zulu maidens on the importance of being a Zulu woman and their role within the family has been described.

In implementing the initiative, women researchers have encountered resistance among some of the male knowledge holders who insist on being interviewed only by a male researcher. At the same time, there has been an effort, as part of the project, to encourage more women to write their own histories in their own languages. The initiative has also sought to create a safe space for women to engage in social and economic issues.



### **3.5 Claiming a space for women within the national heritage<sup>15</sup>**

The National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre is a repository similar to the one that is being envisaged for Isisele Senyathi. Based at the University of Fort Hare’s main campus in Alice, it collects, stores and preserves the national heritage of South Africa. For example, it preserves the only collection of artworks declared by Parliament to be a national treasure. Accordingly, the centre offers its support to Ilitha Labantu for this initiative, understanding as it does the importance of preserving and conserving the things that matter.

There is a need to embrace an “off key” positionality in order to promote women’s place and voices in Africa’s intellectual history. In general, women are not considered to be thinkers or intellectuals, and are excluded from this space at universities, even though history is replete with examples of women who have contributed to

<sup>15</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Dr Thozama April, Senior Curator, National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022. It also includes a contribution made by Nontsikelelo Sigege, Ilitha Labantu, as the moderator of this session.

the well-being of society. The phenomenon begs a number of questions, such as “What is it about the idea of intellectuals that excludes women?” and “Why are women never thought of as people who can contribute?” In this respect, Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci’s work pinpointing different categories of intellectuals may be of use. The categories described intellectuals who are organically produced by movements and activism, as well as thinkers who are intellectuals by virtue of the spaces they occupy in universities and other institutions of learning. Accordingly, an “off key” approach that allows for deviation from conventional academic norms may need to be adopted in order to ensure the collection and preservation of women’s collective and individual experiences and wisdom. The Isisele Senyathi initiative offers the opportunity for just such a repository, which would be accessible to this generation and generations to come.

The repository should include the stories of the female military and intellectual leaders who have made their mark battling colonial invasion and carving out a space for women in the public intellectual discourse. Women such as Emma Sandile who became the first Xhosa woman to produce literary works in English in the middle of the 19th century; and women such as the late Elizabeth Mafekeng, a trade unionist and stalwart of note. In this way, the lives and works of the women who are South Africa’s intellectual forebearers may finally be properly acknowledged.

The ownership of African women’s stories needs to be secured by and for African women, putting an end to exploitation of their narratives by intellectuals more interested in their own aggrandisement than in acknowledging the source of their ideas.



## 4. REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN – LIBERATING WOMEN’S HISTORY: THEORETICAL AND GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM

### 4.1 Keynote speech: Women’s activism<sup>16</sup>

In 2020, the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) focussed on inter-generationality and inclusivity as UN Women launched a programme called Generation Equality in an effort to further the demands made in

<sup>16</sup> This section is based on a keynote speech made by Bathabile Dlamini, former South African minister of social development and former president of the African National Congress (ANC) Women’s League, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.



the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. However, as someone who once became deputy secretary general of the ANC Women's League at the relatively young age of 31, my feeling is that much of the problem presently rests with the attitude of the younger generation of women who are often seeking to take over, rather than learn, from their older peers. Instead, young women should take the opportunity to learn from their elders, who will always seek to guide them well, including through tough love, once they have been elected to office. I hope that the national government offers support to the *Isisele Senyathi* programme so that it can be offered nationwide – in particular so that the many women who were raped during the apartheid era can talk of their abuse, which is a subject that many of them have not been able to raise with their own children. In this respect, it is important that the initiative is being led by a non-governmental organisation, *Ilitha Labantu*, rather than a political organisation, since this allows women of all affiliations to come forward and talk about their plight and how their families and consequently their communities have been destabilised by violence – and have thus been unable to play a foundational role in nation-building.

The younger generation have expressed a clear need for safe spaces in which women can talk about gender-based violence (GBV) – and have talked of the need for healing and self-forgiveness among older women so that they do not express their experiences of past violence in the form of more violence against their own children. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission offered the possibility of such reflection, but failed to provide the required space for healing. So, the baggage of the past persists and the full story of South Africa remains untold, with young people only picking up the odd story here and there. However, nation-building cannot take place unless there is a proper conversation about the need for authentic social cohesion, which must entail an honest reckoning with the past.

Women have played a crucial role in the Struggle, including through their participation in the PAC, the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). However, under a patriarchal society in which black women face the double oppression of racism and sexism, there has been significant resistance to their efforts to participate. For example, Charlotte Maxeke, was prevented from, first, attending, and then, speaking at the 1912 conference at which the ANC, then the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), was founded – and at which John Dube was elected president of the new organisation even though he was not present. So, she sat in the meeting as a rebel, even though she had made a significant contribution to the written demands that had been made by successive ANC deputations approaching the government of the day. The attempts at exclusion continued even subsequently. A co-founder and president of the Bantu Women's League, Maxeke was marginalised from 1918 in the leadership of the league's successor organisation, the ANC Women's League by ANC leaders who considered her a troublemaker. In a similar vein, the contribution of John Dube's first wife, Nokutela Dube, was and continues to be downplayed. In fact, she co-founded the *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper and the Natal Native Congress, which was a precursor to the SANNC, and raised funds to establish Ohlange High School. Perhaps her achievements have not been sufficiently acknowledged because she is seen as only one of John Dube's wives.

The failure to recognise the contributions of such women both at the time and subsequently indicates the importance of developing homegrown forms of African feminism. In fact, these women should be celebrated alongside Lillian Ngoyi, who, in 1956, became the first woman to be elected to the National Executive Committee of the ANC.

The contributions made by women in the Struggle have been characterised by passion, kindness and consideration – and it is important to value these characteristics. Accordingly, women should be proud of their emotional contributions – of their tears, their anger and their laughter – and should not allow themselves to be demeaned for showing their feelings as they perform their duties. In a similar spirit, African women should be empowered to take ownership of, and pride in, their experiences, contributions and stories, as is proposed by

Isisele Senyathi. At the same time, it should be noted that being an African feminist does not mean excluding men. Rather women should collaborate with men who can play an important role in promoting the importance of gender equality among their male peers.

It is important that initiatives such as Isisele Senyathi can tell the story of all women, without fear or favour. Women such as Winnie Madikizela Mandela who because she was a strong woman, was pilloried in the public discourse. The hub should also celebrate the resistance of traditional leaders across the continent to colonialism – for, knowing one’s African history is to know oneself.

The stories of women’s efforts in overcoming hardships – such as Charlotte Maxeke’s struggle for recognition in the early ANC – must be told, so that young women may learn from them and realise the importance of resilience and application in the face of the obstacles that continue to be placed in women’s paths. The role of Isisele Senyathi as a place for recording history is also important as a response to the ways in which history has long been the province of men who have ensured that their version of events is recorded and archived. For example, although Charlotte Maxeke was a visionary who addressed issues of non-racialism and advocated non-compliance in relation to pass laws long ago before the Defiance Campaign of 1952, her contribution to the Struggle was, until recently, quite overlooked.

Isisele Senyathi is also important as a space for fostering unity among women, providing a platform of action for their struggles. In this spirit, the hub should record the untold stories of those who fought in uMkhonto weSizwe (MK), many of whom were young women who were killed by the apartheid government and many others of whom left behind widows. The difficulties and trauma faced by these former combatants and their families must be made known, so that they also can take their place in the women’s movement, which will become stronger if it is united rather than divided.

#### **4.2 'Not all political prisoners are men'<sup>17</sup>**

In 1985, I and a number of other activists picketed a local school in Ashton in the Western Cape to prevent the pupils from taking their exams in solidarity with a nationwide strike of schools and pupils in protest at the injustices of apartheid. The police came to break up the picket, brandishing sticks and sjamboks and shouting: "Beat them up! Kill them!" I was subsequently arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison. During legal proceedings, when I was being held at the Supreme Court, I was raped by a policeman who came to bring me food in my cell.





### 4.3 Violent injustice<sup>18</sup>

I was arrested with another activist on terrorism charges when I was three months pregnant. We were blindfolded and in fear for our lives. I could hear the sound of rushing water nearby and thought we were going to be thrown into the river and drowned. But then word came through to the local police that their superiors in Cape Town wanted us alive. I was taken to Elsies River Police Station and then Pollsmoor prison where I was placed in solitary confinement.

I was very sick and there were complications with the pregnancy, and the superintendent of the prison did not want responsibility for my wellbeing and urged the Special Branch to take me. The plan had been that I would be taken to Groote Schuur Hospital where I would be guarded but then I went into labour and was rushed to hospital in Wynberg, where I gave birth before being held under house arrest.

In June 1991, my mother was at home in the yard hanging up the washing when she heard shots. Next thing, my nephew who had left earlier with my brother came into the house covered in blood and my brother's brains. My mother rushed to the scene of the shooting to find her son dead. The killing was later attributed to violence undertaken as part of contestation for control of the local taxi industry; but I must say that he was killed by individuals in the local ANC jealous of his mounting political success. However, the truth of my brother's death was not revealed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; the committee nominated by the ANC to investigate; or the justice system more broadly. But there is still a story to tell and it must be told.

#### **4.4 Revolutionary women: Liberating women's history – theoretical and grassroots activism from the Basotho perspective<sup>19</sup>**

Lesotho is a very small country ruled by kings who own the land and everything in it, including the women.

Accordingly, the intensity of women's marginalisation runs deep and goes back generations.

Moshoeshoe I, the founding father of Lesotho, believed in peace-building and peacekeeping. At the same time, he was a patriarch and a polygamist whose wives were his property and subordinate to his will – even including his first wife Queen MaMohato, who was supposed to be able to act as regent. In line with this patriarchal mindset, the historical record has made great play of the role and wisdom of Chief Mohlomi, who was Moshoeshoe's advisor, but barely recognises the importance of the contribution made by Makhetha Mantsopa, a prophetess who worked closely with Mohlomi – and whose visions of the future enabled Moshoeshoe to see things to come and prepare for their eventuality.

During a period of continual conflict, Moshoeshoe established the Basotho nation, which comprised many groups who were living in central and southern Africa at the time. Meanwhile, women's lives were quite constrained as they had to stay at home and care for their families, taking responsibility for ensuring that there was enough to go round even under conditions of poverty and during famine. Women, who were treated under customary arrangements as if they were minors, were not supposed to have any say in how many children they wanted to bear - this was the man's decision. In addition, there was a great trade in girls and young women, who were sold into marriage for a bride price or lobolo, which was often paid in the form of cattle, enabling many poor families to subsist. In this context, girls were not sent to school since education in people who were anyway going to be sold was deemed a worthless investment.

Meanwhile, Moshoeshoe leveraged the system of polygamy to his diplomatic advantage, using his wives as tools in forging agreements by commanding that they should go and sleep with those whom with whom he was treating.

The restriction of women's rights in Lesotho extended even beyond their husbands' deaths, at which point a woman with sons would become entirely dependent on her eldest son who inherited everything. In other words, the widow was treated as if she were now the elderly daughter of her son. In addition, women were not allowed to own land; at best, they could be granted some rights to use land. The economic discrimination against women has continued to this day – unmarried women can find it difficult to access loans; widows are robbed of property; and wives are ill-treated by their in-laws for years on end – and are supposed to bear it all without complaint for fear of shaming their own families. There are also high levels of sexual harassment.

In response, a number of women's groups have been founded to address issues of exploitation in marriage and to console women trapped in bad marriages; and women are increasingly expressing themselves culturally as they struggle for greater autonomy. Outstanding women who have made a significant contribution to society in modern Lesotho have included Sister Veronica Mapaseka Phafoli, the founder of Development for Peace Education, and organisation which has taught ordinary people in communities, schools and workplaces the principles of peace.

<sup>19</sup>This section is based on a presentation made by Mpho Lebesa at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.



#### 4.5 A military veteran's trauma<sup>20</sup>

The Isisele Senyathi initiative should consider the plight of liberation war veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) who have been abandoned with little in the way of medical care apart from repeat prescriptions for anti-depressants.

My story starts with how I was born in a blue bucket. My mother who came from a strict Catholic family had managed to hide the pregnancy for nine months, partly because she was a big woman and partly because she was away at boarding school. In fact, the elderly woman next door had warned my grandmother that there was something amiss with my mother but to no avail. Anyway, the day – 16 October 1962 – finally arrived – and when my mother's labour pains started and her waters broke, someone was sent outside into the rain to fetch a bucket. So, that is how I came into the world – into a blue bucket.

I was born and raised in Meadowlands Zone 4 in Soweto; and, as I grew up, I was inducted into a militant black consciousness. I soon made the decision to go into exile so that I could join the Struggle against apartheid from outside South Africa. However, when I tried to cross the border into Swaziland, I was caught and arrested.

Since, I was arrested on the other side of the border, I was imprisoned in Swaziland. (At that time, Swaziland had a two-faced approach to the South African regime, passing on information to the architects of apartheid about insurgent movements across the border, including, for example, on the movements of the ANC's Luthuli Detachment, which subsequently became synonymous with the armed Struggle against the government in Pretoria.)

In prison, I was conscientised by PAC members who were mobilising the youth there, educating them in the principles of black consciousness. On my release, because I was quite young, I was offered the opportunity to return to school in South Africa – but the prospect of going back to school in the crime-ridden, violent part of Soweto from which I came had no appeal for me. Rather, I wanted to go wherever the PAC would send me, and hold a gun.

<sup>20</sup>This section is based on a presentation made by Sbongile Promise Khumalo at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPU in September 2022.

I and a number of others were flown to Mozambique, where we stayed in a camp with Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) combatants who had been wounded in action in Zimbabwe. We then went to Tanzania. At that time, the PAC’s leadership was split by rivalry; and there was also considerable antipathy between the PAC and the ANC, each of which party had their main office in the camp diagonally opposite the other, within spying distance. Then, while I was in this place, I was raped. This spurred me to try and find my way to the ANC and learn more about this party about which I had heard so much and which was constantly criticised by the PAC.

At this point, however, I was flown to Libya as part of a group of 102 people, including seven women, for 18 months of military training. According to Islamic custom, the men were separated from the women. In addition, a condition of the training set by the Libyans was that we convert to Islam. After the training, the women were introduced to military nursing and worked in one of the biggest hospitals in the Libyan capital, Tripoli. Eventually, I was sent an air ticket to return to Dar es Salaam, where, I understood, the military camp was in a state chaos, with many of the combatants deserting.

At that time, my mind was filled with fear. I wanted to run away and join the ANC, but the nearest office was in Egypt. For want of a way out, I decided to kill myself by throwing myself off the deck of a recently docked ship.

However, local security officials grabbed me before I could fall and – since suicide or attempted suicide is a crime under Islamic law – I was arrested and taken to a women’s prison in the city. While I was there, I again tried to take my own life, stabbing myself repeatedly in the shower. However, my sobs alerted the other inmates and the next thing I knew, I woke up in hospital surrounded by psychiatrists and social workers: They quizzed me on my state of mind and I shared my problems with them, telling them that I did not want to return to Dar es Salaam – although I did not tell them that I had been raped.

So, the ANC came to my rescue. They sent their representative who was in Algiers and he told me that the leadership of MK in the Angolan capital, Luanda, were working on my case; and before I knew it, I was landing in Luanda and being mollycoddled by the ANC and its military wing. And I remain grateful to the ANC to this day.



#### 4.6 The forgotten fallen of the Struggle<sup>21</sup>

I became involved in politics in the early 1980s and was imprisoned and held in solitary confinement. But the contribution to the Struggle made by women in the Northern Cape, including in Kimberley, has been barely acknowledged. Many young women died in the struggle at the age of 12, just like Hector Pieterse, whose death is widely commemorated on 16 June every year on Youth Day – but they are not mentioned.

<sup>21</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Ntombi Ethel Flatela from the Northern Cape at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

My first-born son died in exile in Angola. But I was never told the story of how and where he died. I went to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission because I thought that the TRC would tell me the truth, but I never found it there.

So, to heal myself, I wrote a book about my experiences of organising against apartheid during the Struggle; and then I wrote a second one about the role played by students, including my son, in spearheading the Struggle, listing the names of all those involved. Subsequently, I have now been invited to Angola to visit the battle site that has been identified as the place where my son was killed. Unfortunately, unexploded bombs in the ground make it unsafe to exhume his body; but there will be a memorial service, and I and my family will be making a spiritual burial so that he can join the ancestors.

I cried for 30 years without being heard – but perhaps that is to be expected in a society in which those who ate the fruits of apartheid are now eating the fruits of freedom.

## **5. CONVERSATION WITH WOMEN WRITERS: WOMEN'S WRITING IN A REVOLUTIONARY AGE AND IN TODAY'S DIVERSE COMMUNITIES**

A key issue for discussion is the ways in which memories of violence and its afterlives can be mobilised to counter the public forgetting of the role of women in the liberation struggle – in particular, the role that may be played by grassroots activism in addressing the erasure of past violence from the memory and in creating new visions for future generations.<sup>22</sup>

Higher education institutions also have a role to play in such efforts, not only in relation to the content of women's history, but also in relation to their own treatment of women seeking to succeed academically. For example, men without child-rearing responsibilities can dedicate all their waking hours to working and succeeding as academics; while, women, who have more limited time, may be less able to take advantage of the academic opportunities on offer. In this regard, there should be greater flexibility in the conditions under which PhD bursaries and grants are provided, allowing women more time to complete the research and studies required to obtain such qualifications.

It is also important that senior women in academia adopt a position of mentorship towards the junior young women in their institutions, helping them to negotiate and overcome the same kind of obstacles and challenges that themselves faced when starting out.<sup>23</sup>

### **5.1 How may women's stories be written in such a way that they commemorate women's strength?**

I was in solitary confinement in a prison in Cape Town and going crazy, feeling sorry for myself<sup>24</sup>. So, I started compiling a play and daily poems in my head as part of an effort to pull myself together. One day, I heard some sounds outside – it was music from Maynardville. I thought, "Hooray, it's carnival time", and I compiled a poem about that. There was also a play that I wrote which was performed at the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Military veterans in South Africa have a mandate to document stories from the Struggle and have asked me to contribute a chapter on my own involvement as a young woman. However, I am unaware whether other women have been approached in this capacity.

22 This introduction to the session is based on comments made by Andiswa Mraji, Acting Manager, Strategic Initiatives and Projects, Faculty of Business and Management Sciences, CPUT, and Nonkosi Tyolwana, Director: Transformation and Social Cohesion and Acting Dean of Student Affairs, CPUT, as moderators of this session, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

23 See section 10.1 below, "Redressing past wrongs".

24 This paragraph is based on comments made by Professor Gertrude Fester, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town (UCT), at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.



My play *Igama?* emerged from conversations that I held with women about their lived experiences as part of the process of producing a research paper <sup>25</sup>. The challenge then was to reframe the collective memory of these women in the form of a play. The story of black women's lived experiences cannot be readily shaped as a linear one, it is a tale that may need to be told by going back and forth in time. In addition, the memories may only be arrived at by starting with the bodies of black women. All of which required a discussion as a collective with the performers of the play, so that it could represent what it means to be a black woman living in South Africa <sup>26</sup>. The stories that people tell themselves can strengthen or destroy them. So, for example, if South Africans keep telling themselves that they are the worst possible people and that terrible things have been done to them, then they will be unable to find strength. In relation to my own writing, I was able to tell the story of the Struggle in the 1970s and 1980s and the role of myself and my peers in this in *Our Generation*. This is a story that emerged from my personal experiences – so, I could pull it out of myself. At the same time, given that humans tend to forget, I still had to undertake research in order to check that the dates and the facts were correct. Having a record of my life during that period, I can now refer anyone who asks to my book. It tells of my time in detention, when I was tortured while pregnant, and of my gaolers who told me they would get rid of the baby, if I didn't talk.

However, it should be noted that it is one thing to tell one's own story and quite another to tell somebody else's. An author must be reasonably skilled to produce a biography, and must talk to other people and check the facts. When I produced a biography of Charlotte Maxeke, I was able to consult comprehensive research undertaken on her life that had been undertaken by Dr April Thozama, which included a detailed bibliography. Meanwhile,

I only found one living person who had actually met Charlotte Maxeke; and I went to Limpopo to meet and interview this old woman and her family. I was also assisted in the research for this book by a group of students. The lesson that may be learnt by Isisele Senyathi would be that the process of writing an authoritative biography should not be undertaken in a half-hearted way. Accordingly, instead of producing 50 stories that are quite incomplete, a more significant contribution would be to produce 20 detailed and properly researched stories.

<sup>25</sup> This paragraph is based on comments made by Slindile Mthembu, storyteller, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub.

<sup>26</sup> This paragraph and the next are based on comments made by Zubeida Jaffer, author and activist, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub

<sup>27</sup> This paragraph is based on comments made by Nonkosi Tyolwana as a moderator of this session. <sup>28</sup> This paragraph is based on comments made by Professor Gertrude Fester.

<sup>29</sup> This paragraph is based on comments made by Slindile Mthembu.

<sup>30</sup> This paragraph is based on comments made by Zubaida Jaffer.

<sup>31</sup> This paragraph is based on comments made by Professor Gertrude Fester.

<sup>32</sup> This section is based on comments made from the floor and by the panellists, as well as by Nonkosi Tyolwana, as a moderator of this session, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.



## **5.2 How can women's stories be disseminated so that they reach young girls and women from pre-school to university?**

A point of view has been produced by the media and more broadly that there are no strong women; that all women are vulnerable and weak. Uplifting stories of women's achievements rarely appear in the newspaper. So, how can such stories be disseminated widely so that they inform day-to-day life?<sup>27</sup>

A German publisher offered to publish my PhD thesis *South African Women's Apartheid and Post-apartheid Struggles: 1980 to 2014*, which included 200 interviews with women from the Western Cape.<sup>28</sup> However, instead of editing down the thesis, they published it as it was for about R2,000, which is unaffordable. Now, I am trying to rewrite it so that it can be produced and sold more cheaply. In terms of accessibility of the information, it is also important to consider making texts available in different forms, including as in the form of short or children's stories, as well as in the various South African languages. In relation to future worthwhile topics, there is a great book still to be written about the role of women in the United Democratic Front (UDF) – particularly in relation to how it was launched at the Rocklands community hall in Mitchell's Plain in 1983. People who had come from all over the country for the launch had to be fed and had to be accommodated. Furthermore, much of the work of preparing for the meeting and, subsequently, of organising area committees, fell to women. Indeed, the UDF was initially based in the offices of the United Women's Congress (UWCO) in Mowbray, Cape Town, and went on to use UWCO structures as the basis for its wider establishment.

As an unpublished woman playwright, I quickly realised the importance of documenting or archiving one's work in an accessible fashion.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, I encourage storytellers to create a visual interpretation of their work by producing film or by taking photographs that illustrate the main themes. This is particularly important as part of efforts to return the narratives that have emerged from communities to those communities and to screen or show the works there in ways that can produce an audience response. Meanwhile, digitisation of one's work can create a broader audience – and can also encourage such viewers to come and see the work in the flesh in the theatre.

The lack of popular support for creative work, whether in the form of books, plays or other performances, poses a great challenge.<sup>30</sup> There is a general unwillingness to buy tickets or books – even though children should grow up around books and the stories that they tell. It is also important to ensure that women retain ownership and control over their works so that they are preserved and are made available. Accordingly, I and my daughter have, for the past few years, been republishing much of my work, which covers more than 130 years of women's struggles in South Africa, from Charlotte Maxeke, to the efforts of anti-apartheid campaigner Ayesha Bibi "Asa" Dawood in the Boland area of the Western Cape, and more recently, my own activism. The imprint, Number10Publishers has now established an online outlet.

There is little point in complaining about the inaccuracy of other people's versions of history. Rather the goal must be to produce one's own accounts.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, I and a number of peers established a black women's writing collective in the late 1990s, which has led to the production of some significant work, including Barbara Boswell's *Grace: A Novel*. Subsequently, I have helped to establish a number of regular creative writing workshops in Cape Town, for example, at the Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation. In this context, the drive must be to tap into and support the female literary talent that is out there and to encourage more women to write and to take their writing seriously.

## **5.3 Discussion<sup>32</sup>**

Recent official ANC commemorations of the life and legacy of Nelson Mandela were also supposed to celebrate the historical contribution of Albertina Sisulu. However, the main focus of the men in all the activities, collaborations and commemorative products was on Mandela. More broadly, part of the problem is that although South Africa's Bill of Rights affirms gender equality, it fails to make special provision for actions to promote such equality – with the result that women are forced to depend on men for access to power in the present multi-party democratic system. In this respect, it is noteworthy that there are fears that policy provisions seeking to allocate one third of the value of government tenders to women entrepreneurs may be overturned.

Meanwhile, women themselves can perpetuate patriarchy. For example, when a woman stands for office, her capacity and suitability for the role are generally questioned as a matter of course – however, no such questions are normally asked of the men standing for office, who may receive widespread support, including from women, for their election.

Commercialisation and the concurrent fictionalisation of women’s stories can lead to the exploitation of women’s history. CPUT academics working in the field of intellectual property rights may respond to such challenges by promoting self-publishing and other strategies to ensure that ownership of the stories and the profits that may derive therefrom are protected.

A new generation of women who are interested in writing about women needs to be fostered, so that the dominant male-centred discourse which is promoted by the media can be challenged. Budgetary provision should be made to foster such a cadre. However, at present, the writing and drama societies at CPUT are underfunded and effectively defunct. In the absence of the support and skills-training provided by such societies, talented young women writers are liable to become discouraged. One answer would be for the institutions to engage women writers, journalists and storytellers from beyond the campus gates to come and help train these aspiring young writers. In addition, there should be an attempt to ensure that the images and text that are produced about the university and its history should represent the contributions made by women to the institution. In response, CPUT, which is a university of technology, has forged partnerships with proponents of indigenous culture and women’s empowerment to produce a culture that can foster women’s creativity. Pain and hurt across South Africa have made it a traumatised nation. In this context, the stories of the past need to be told so that a better understanding of the violence that is experienced across the country may be reached; and so that the nation can move forward with a vision of the future. In this respect, the country must not stay in the past, while the rest of the world, which is looking to the future and sees South Africa faltering, moves on. The veterans of the Struggle showed great resilience, fighting for rights that should already have been theirs and resisting forms of racial domination that demeaned them and their peers. They fought for self-determination, organising, writing and taking action for many years – not for financial gain but from a sense of duty to their society and pride in their country. Accordingly, and in recognition of the progress that has been made and the lessons that may be learned from the experiences and stories of the older generation, the mission now must be to map a way forward. The new times require new thinking and new responses, and young people must now lead the way.



## 6. AFRICAN WOMEN IN HISTORY – FROM PREHISTORY TO THE PRESENT: LIVING THE LEGACY

### 6.1 Democratising women’s contribution to African history<sup>33</sup>

My mother is Dr Nombuyiselo Hilda Mvulane. She was known as Comrade Nelly in exile in Zambia and then Tanzania, which is where I was born. She is now an epidemiologist in Gauteng province, although she has never

33 This section is based on a presentation made by Dr Tshepo Mvulane Moloi, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of Johannesburg, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

practised as a doctor in South Africa because of bureaucratic constraints. Since 1994, she has continuously refused invitations to join the government, arguing that those who went into exile did not do so in order to become government officials. As a trained medical practitioner, she believes that her duty is to give her services to medicine. She remains in the ANC but does not want to engage with any ANC comrades because she is upset at the path the party has taken.

She was born in 1953 and attended primary school in Alexandria Township before attending Inanda Seminary School, where she was a prefect from 1969 to 1970 alongside now former deputy president Baleka Mbete. In 1971, she went to Bethel Training college at Butterworth in the Eastern Cape; and then, from 1973 to 1979, she attended Baragwanath Nursing College in Soweto, which is when she became involved in politics. She was arrested and tortured by the Special Branch who wanted her to inform on her brother who was with the Black Consciousness movement. She refused to collaborate.

The details of her torture are for her to tell. But one of the reasons that I accepted this invitation to talk here today was to encourage my mother to put pen to paper and tell her story, which she has shied away from doing. In this regard, given the harm inflicted on many of the women in the Struggle, it is important to acknowledge how difficult it can be for them to relive their traumas through memory.

In relation to the historical accounts in the public domain, there has been a tendency to focus exclusively on the experiences of those in the ANC, including the ANC Women's League, rather than on the stories of those were not affiliated to the ANC, such as Lauretta Ngcobo, who was actually a member of the Inkatha Freedom Party. There are also issues around who is telling the tale. For example, the popularity of Zubaida Jaffer's biography of Charlotte Maxeke, which is written from the perspective of a contemporary journalist, can obscure the importance of the source material used by this author, as well as the contribution to the historical record that may be made from other points of view, including that of Maxeke's own family members such as her grand-nephew, Modidima Manyya, in his book *Lessons from Charlotte Makgomo Manyya-Maxeke*.

In addition, there are a number of factors that can shape whose stories tend to be told and whose are neglected. So, for example, the reticence in highlighting the historical roles of either John Langalibalele Dube's first wife, Nokutela, or his second wife, Angelina, may stem from a reluctance to discuss how disclosure of John Dube's sexual escapades led to Nokutela leaving him. However, there is little excuse for the more recent failure of South African scholars to correct this historiographical wrong.

Similarly, there was a widespread view that recognition of Winnie Mandela's achievements in the Struggle had been overshadowed by the singular focus placed on the role undertaken by her husband. In an effort to rectify this amnesia, her own account of her life, *491 Days: Prisoner Number 1323/69*, was published in 2013 with a foreword by her husband's friend and amanuensis, Ahmed Kathrada. The restoration of Winnie Mandela in the historical record was continued in a biography by Sisonke Msimang which was appropriately titled *The Resurrection of Winnie Mandela*.

The issue of race is also an important factor in shaping the historiography. There is a tendency to downplay the roles played by white and coloured women activists in the Struggle. For example, there is little commemoration of the life of Dulcie September, who was born and brought up in Athlone in Cape Town and rose to become the chief representative of the ANC in France before she was assassinated in Paris in 1988.

In fact, there is a long list of women who have literally written themselves into South African history and who are worthy of acclaim, including:

- Professor Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela who wrote *Dare We Hope?* and came to public attention because of her work and writing on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission;

- Ruth First, who was married to Struggle stalwart Joe Slovo and was an anti-apartheid activist and pan-African scholar of note before she was assassinated in exile in Mozambique;
- Zanele Sidzomo Baqwa, the Black Consciousness author of *The Colonial Debt*, which is a memoir of exile in Norway;
- Sisonke Msimang, daughter to former ANC president OR Tambo's speechwriter, Mavuso Msimang, who described her years as a child and young woman in exile in Zambia, Kenya and North America in *Always Another Country*;
- Koleka Putuma, a young woman who has been much awarded for her poetry;
- Antjie Krog who won renown for her novel on the TRC, *Country of my Skull*, and subsequently produced *A Change of Tongue* in 2003 and *Begging to Be Black* in 2009;
- Sowetan novelist Miriam Tlali whose first novel, *Muriel at the Metropolitan* (originally titled *Between Two Worlds*) was published in 1979;
- Barbara Boswell, who has written authoritative and insightful biographies of a number of South African novelists, such as Lauretta Ngcobo and Miriam Tlali; and
- Pumla Dineo Gqola who is an academic, writer, and gender activist, best known for her 2015 book *Rape: A South African Nightmare*.

Interestingly, the stories of many of the mothers of those in the Struggle have been written by their offspring. Aziz Pahad, Albie Sachs, Gillian Slovo, Helen Suzman, Desmond Tutu, and Ashwin Willemse have all written about their mothers – although Pallo Jordan has not written the story of his mother, Phyllis Ntantala-Jordan, who was a prominent women's right activist and author in her own right, as well as the wife of Pallo's father, AC Jordan, who was the first black professor at UCT.

In producing women's histories from the grassroots, the Isisele Senyathi initiative could usefully coordinate with the Centre for Women & Gender Studies at Nelson Mandela University (NMU) and the Khoi and San Centre at UCT.

## 6.2 An overview of the history of women's movements in South Africa<sup>34</sup>

In the early 1980s, I was teaching at the University of the North (now named the University of Limpopo), which was known as a "bush college" – in other words not a place where the education of the youth was taken that seriously. As someone who was around the same age as many of the members of the cohort whom I was teaching – I was 23-years-old at the time – I developed strong relationships with many of the students. This was a violent time in South Africa's history, just before a first State of Emergency was declared by the national government in 1985.

As part of the draconian measures imposed by the apartheid state, the South African military had established a base on the campus, standing around with guns and making the place feel like a war zone. Meanwhile, the students, many of whom adhered to a Black Consciousness philosophy, would resist come nightfall, painting the walls with slogans such as "Long Live Biko!" and "Long Live Tiro!"<sup>35</sup> The following day the administration would come and paint over the words. However, as the conflict mounted, it became more violent and then the military would send in the soldiers and they would extract students, some of whom were pregnant young women, from class and take them and whip them till they bled, before returning them to class. As a young white person who had grown up in a homogeneous white society and who was quite naive in many ways, my eyes were opened to the brutality of the apartheid state and I became an anti-apartheid activist who was also interested in women's issues. Subsequently, during the period of transition from apartheid to democracy, I became a member of the steering committee of the Women's National Coalition in the Western Cape. In addition, as an academic, I have studied the modern history of women's movements and organisations.

Women in South Africa have been involved in activism since the early 20th century. In 1913, in Bloemfontein, women mobilised against the pass system, which was already in place before apartheid. In 1929, they led riots

<sup>34</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Dr Amanda Gouws, Distinguished Professor of Political Science, Stellenbosch University, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Abram Onkgopotse Tiro was a Black Consciousness student activist who was expelled from the University of the North on political grounds in 1972 and was killed by a parcel bomb in Botswana in 1974.

against the establishment of municipal beer halls, which were depriving local women brewers of a source of livelihoods. They were instrumental in the opposition to the imposition of a poll tax on Indian people by the British colonial administration in Natal. In addition, they were quite active in trade unions – and it was on this basis that the women’s movement was later established.

In 1918, a Bantu Women’s League was formed by Charlotte Maxeke, although it took another 25 years for women to be allowed to join the ANC as members, at which point the ANC Women’s League was established in 1943. The ANC Women’s League, under the auspices of the Federation of South African Women was instrumental in organising a march of about 20,000 women to the Union Buildings on 9 March 1956, which event and date are now celebrated each year as National Women’s Day. Meanwhile, resistance to apartheid was increasingly being organised at the regional level, leading to the establishment of the Federation of Transvaal women, and the National Organisation of Women (NOW) and the United Women’s Congress in the Western Cape.

However, during the period of resistance, demands for women’s equality and rights were subordinated to the Struggle against apartheid, racism and racial capitalism. The idea was there would be two phases to the struggle: first, the goal was to end racism, and only then would there be a focus on ending sexism. The present notion of intersectionality – that is, the ways in which issues of race, class and sex can intersect in relation to the formation of an individual’s identity – did not shape the agenda for the Struggle.

Subsequently though, as the period of transition dawned, women wanted to ensure that their interests and demands shaped the nature of the emerging democracy. So, in 1991 the Women’s National Coalition, a broad-based movement that included women across party, race and ideological lines, was established. The coalition canvassed the views of more than 1 million women across the country on which demands they would like to see in a Women’s Charter that would inform the country’s new Constitution. The Charter was written and handed to then president Nelson Mandela in 1994. Most of the contents of that Charter were incorporated in the Constitution, which, although making little specific reference to women, established a set of universal rights. It was then for the government to forge the necessary legislation to ensure the realisation of those rights.

Accordingly, the leaders of the Women’s National Coalition, who were first and foremost feminists rather than nationalists, campaigned to ensure that a number of laws in support of women were established, including the Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1996 which legalised abortion; the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act of 1998; the Domestic Violence Act of 1998; and, later, the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act of 2007. The goal was to produce women-friendly laws with the larger aim of making gender equality a reality.

As part of these efforts, there were strong relationships between relevant members of Parliament and the women’s movement, which was crucial to ensure that the government knew, understood and was prepared to respond to the demands of women at the grassroots level – although, over the years, those relationships have disappeared. Leaders of the women’s movement, including those in the Women’s National Coalition as well as a number of women academics, were responsible for the design of a new national gender machinery which comprised multiple nodal points in the state, including: the Office on the Status of Women; the Women’s Empowerment Unit; and the Multi-Party Women’s Caucus, as well as the committee for that caucus which monitors the work of government departments in relation to the quality of life and the status of women. In addition, Chapter 9 of the Constitution obliged the state to establish a Commission for Gender Equality (CGE), as well as gender desks in all government departments. However, in 2009, there was a major shift in responsibility for women’s affairs with the establishment of a Ministry for Women, Youth and People with Disabilities, which was opposed by many feminists on the grounds that it created a silo for addressing women’s issues rather than fostering integration of efforts to address them across government.

The Women's National Coalition, which was a single-issue movement focussed on forging a Women's Charter and promoting its implementation, fractured after that work was completed although it remained for a while in a few provinces. Subsequently, no single, broad, umbrella-type of women's movement emerged, although there has been, for short periods, institutional engagement between local women's organisations and the state around the creation and implementation of legislation and the delivery of services. So, for example, the Alliance for Rural Democracy (ARD) led resistance against a Traditional Courts Bill; and the Shukumisa campaign led opposition to gender-based violence. When these kinds of campaigns disappear, the only main organisation for mobilisation that persists is the ANC Women's League.

More recently, a new generation of student activism has emerged. In 2015, a #RhodesMustFall movement emerged, under which students mobilised against what they called colonial institutional cultures from which they felt alienated. Then, women students mobilised against what they described as a culture of rape at universities, foregrounding issues of African feminism and intersectionality in their campaign, which at times, took the form of nude protests.<sup>36</sup> Students also drew on transnational activism, such as the #MeToo movement, indicating the ways in which ideas can circulate through social media, connecting activists across distance and increasing the power of transnational feminism. The issue of intersectionality has also become increasingly central to campaigning with the establishment of #TheTotalShutdown since 2018.

Notwithstanding such recent activism, there has been relatively little organisation in the form of a national movement against gender-based violence, which many feminist thinkers in the country consider puzzling given the great extent of sexual assault and rape against women and the high level of femicide in South Africa, which is five times the global average. Instead, the activism appears sporadic and short-lived, often in response to a particularly violent incident – which is a concern that student activists should consider.



### 6.3 Women's role in history and the battle for ideas<sup>37</sup>

Names in African culture are an important aspect of individual identities. They connect people to their families, culture and histories. But, from 1652, when Europeans settled in South Africa, those already living in the country became landless; and they lost their sense of themselves as Africans as this connection to the soil was severed. Land is where Africans plough; where they bury their dead; where they fight; and where they communicate with their ancestors. So, dispossession distorted African identities.

I am educated. I have a career. I grew up in a family which was part of the Congress movement in South Africa. I have been a leader in the ANC Youth League. So, when I am asked why I do not call myself by my husband's name,

<sup>36</sup> A 2020 volume, *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa*, by Naminata Diabate, explores this phenomenon.

<sup>37</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Nyameka Mgzuzulo, a young women's activist, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

I feel quite insulted. In fact, I consider it important for me to define myself in my own terms beyond my partner's credentials. In this spirit, I am inspired by Winnie Mandela's refusal to "bask" in her husband's shadow. In other words, it should be possible to be an independent woman while embracing marriage and family, and being a mother.

It seems clear that the history of women's political organisation and women's struggle for freedom from oppression, community rights and gender equality has been largely ignored by historians. Instead, the focus has been on men and on white political development, with the result that women's roles in and contributions to the liberation struggle have been distorted.

In this respect, there has been and continues to be a battle of ideas. In this battle, the priority for Black Consciousness-aligned leaders in the ANC Youth League under the presidency of Julius Malema was always to "swell the ranks". Similarly, the call for women today should be that they over-populate the meeting and conferences that they attend so that they can dominate in the battle of ideas when ideological issues are discussed.

At present, South Africa is ravaged by violence against women; joblessness; and great inequality in education. The South African Police Service (SAPS) opened 9,516 cases of rape between April and June in 2022. A total of 3,780 of the alleged rapes took place in the homes of the rapists or the victims. A total of 1,546 people were allegedly raped in public spaces such as streets, parks or beaches. The numbers indicate great dysfunction in the family unit, as well as the great threat posed to women, young and old, daring to go for a walk.

Over the same period, 855 women and 243 children were killed; and more than 11,000 cases of assault involving gender-based violence against girls and women were opened by the police. There were 1,670 cases of assault against children during this period. Freedom and democracy have not brought safety for women. I call my grandmother every night when she is at home to make sure she has locked the doors – and again in the morning to make sure she is safe.

At the same time, 63.5% of young people between the ages of 15 to 24 are unemployed – a statistic which goes some way to explaining why young women will persist in abusive relationships with men, who are generally, under patriarchy, the ones who are working, earning the higher salaries and controlling the resources.

Meanwhile, the education system offers only a few, limited opportunities for escaping the cycle of poverty and violence. Only half of those who start school reach grade 12; and only a third of those (that, is one sixth of the total) pass metric at a standard that will take them to university. In other words, the vast majority, including girls, are left with little option but to make a living as best they can on the streets – which can lead to them being trapped in some kind of relationship in order to survive. Even if women manage to overcome the obstacles of inadequate access to resources and quality education and find employment in a corporate world, they continue to face prejudice, often being paid much less than their due.

So, women are still not free despite the historical Struggle for freedom.

## 6.4 Discussion<sup>38</sup>

The production of history requires reference to the archives. At the same time, interviews enabling people to tell their own stories in their own way are crucial for the modern historian. In this regard, there has been a general refusal by members of the ruling ANC in South Africa to engage with political scientists, which may have the effect of skewing the historical record of the present era.

Identity politics among South African women may inhibit the establishment of the solidarity that is necessary to establish a nationwide movement against gender-based violence.

Although Eurocentric forms of feminism may be inappropriate as a framework for promoting gender equality in parts of African society, it is important to interrogate how this society can shape the roles of men and women in ways that may contribute to gender inequality. In addition, the larger systemic socio-economic factors that are reducing the role of the state and fostering poverty inequality must be explored as drivers of the present dysfunctionality among families and of violence against women in South Africa

Acknowledging and building on the key role played by the ANC Women's League in the struggle for gender equality, women activists should make greater use of the principle of non-sexism; the notion of equality under the law; and the universality of people's rights secured under the Constitution.

South Africans should be conscientised in the matriarchal, egalitarian principles that traditionally shape San and Nam societies, in which women are respected and lead marriage negotiations.

The remains of a number of Struggle veterans have not been returned home, which is a matter that the ANC archives, which coordinates on this issue with the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture, could do more to resolve.

The Isisele Senyathi initiative should not be elitist and should be decentralised to all the provinces so that the lives of the local heroes and "sheroes" of the underground struggle can be acknowledged.

## 7. CULTURE AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF AFRICAN WOMEN

### 7.1 Keynote speech: African women give birth to the world<sup>39</sup>

Many African people are, in fact, Eurocentric. In his book, *The Mis-Education of the Negro American*, historian Carter G. Woodson wrote of how black pupils were being culturally indoctrinated rather than taught at school. Martinican thinker Aimé Césaire said that the most potent weapon of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed in their hands, the idea being that when you control a person's mind, that person will do whatever you want them to do without being told. In this way, as Woodson noted, once the Negro has been indoctrinated, he or she will not need to be told which door is the back door, the Negro will find that door for her or himself because her or his mind is in the hands of the oppressor. The Negro will have been turned into a zombie.

I am wearing an Ankh, a symbol of ancient Egypt. Its shape describes that of the womb, which African tradition teaches is the first home of all humans. From women (the vagina is the gateway to life) we all come and to the womb of Mother Earth we all return. Women are the beginning and the end. This is what African tradition teaches – not the absurd notion that women were created from a man's rib, as the Bible says.

<sup>38</sup> This section is based on comments made from the floor and by the panellists and moderators of this session at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

<sup>39</sup> This section is based on a keynote speech made by Prof Siphwe Sesanti, *African Philosophy and African Renaissance Intellectual*, University of the Western Cape, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.



In the ancient Egyptian tradition, God is both male and female, and God is neither male nor female – and there is no contradiction here. The point being that it was recognised that there is a complementarity between women and men. In Memphis, in ancient Egypt (Kemet), the creator was referred to as a mother. Among the ancient Egyptian divinities, male and female complemented each other. In this respect, the feminist issue of equality between women and men is already addressed in the African tradition. In the ancient Egyptian pantheon, there was the god of the air, Shu, and the goddess of moisture, Tefnut; the god of the earth, Geb, and above him Nut, the goddess of the sky. The mythology states that the person who brought evil into the world was the male god Seth, who killed his brother Osiris and cut him into pieces in a fit of jealousy. It was then their sister, Isis, who went out and collected all the pieces and put them together. In recounting this African story of creation, Ki-Zebo says that it was symbolic that a woman brought together the pieces and draws an analogy with how, in Nigerian traditional thinking, the woman's womb is described as that which gathers together the sperm scattered by a man's penis. In this reading, the idea is that as men destroy the world through their egos, it is always women who must bring reconciliation.

So, the question then is: How did African men who come from a matriarchal culture become patriarchal? One answer is: Christianity. Priests came to Africa claiming that God was male – “Our father who art in heaven”; and that God created another male, his son, Jesus; and that men were created in the image of this male God. Then, these men, believing they were created in the image of God, saw themselves as gods who could do as they pleased. St Paul said that evil came into the world through women; that women give birth and have to endure the pain of childbirth because sin is in the womb and they are being punished by God. Given that the Bible says that the first woman, Eve, was created from a man, Adam, it is little wonder that men think that they can do as they please with the bodies of women.

Against this background, a number of the founders of the ANC were priests who were used to teaching from the pulpit; while women's role in the church was with the children, singing “hallelujah!” but otherwise keeping quiet and bowing and submitting. So, to this day, such leaders continue to adopt the view that they are the purveyors of truth – and that, as necessary, they must punish those who refuse to acknowledge this and fail to obey, out of a father's love for their children, regardless of the trauma that this produces.

## **7.2 A South African traditional leader's perspective<sup>40</sup>**

Under the Constitution, the National House of Traditional Leaders is charged with preserving culture and customs. However, South African women are products of patriarchy – that is, of a society that advocates for the power of men over the lives of women, even recruiting them in the name of culture and religion to that end. So, the question then becomes: How can African women who are conscious of the problem address it and break the glass ceiling? Women have chosen to go against the patriarchal grain in a number of ways. They have sought to write their own stories. They have promoted the principle of equality under the law. Female traditional leaders, such as Princess Emma Sandile, Queen Asantewaa of the Ashanti and Princess Mkabayi kaJama, have also contributed to the history of women's empowerment on the continent.

One of the most important ways that women can address issues of gender discrimination is through their roles as the guardians of the country's living heritage – in other words, as mothers of families who have a responsibility to shape the next generations.

<sup>40</sup> This section is based on an address made by Her Majesty Nkosikazi Nomandla Mhlauli at the launch of the *Isisele Senyathi* hub at CPUT in September 2022.

South Africa's National Development Plan 2030: Our future – make it work notes: "Our family life strengthens the women, men and children who live in it. The older share their wisdom with the young." The document further remarks that families may not necessarily assert the non-sexist values enshrined in the Constitution and that discrimination especially on the basis of gender often takes place within family structures. So, the lesson is that women can make a start in addressing gender discrimination in society by addressing it within their own families, which are the building blocks of the nation's culture.

This is already an issue that is being addressed in the families of traditional leaders. For example, my own appointment as a leader of the AmaHlubi took place when it was decided that the throne would not be held for the son after the previous chief's death – and that rather the mother, who was anyway responsible for the family's welfare, should ascend to the throne. In this way, I became the first woman to represent the AmaHlubi house at the provincial level; and then the first woman to represent the Eastern Cape at the level of the national traditional leadership. I was the second woman to be the deputy chairperson of the male-dominated National House of Traditional Leaders when I was elected unopposed to the position in 2017. I have subsequently acted as chair of the house and have supported the elected chair, Nkosi Siphohlele Mahlangu, who is quite young, as a mother would her son. It should be noted that the traditional houses have been obliged to establish gender committees as part of their mission to fight for women's issues and to ensure that communities benefit from their activities.



### 7.3 Activism for indigenous rights in Namibia<sup>41</sup>

My surname is Namises, which speaks of the Namib desert and the wind that blows across it. My name means "I love the world". Accordingly, I pay tribute to and bring greetings from my ancestors, without whom I would not be here. I also want to hail all the traditional leaders who are here, as well as all the other queens of Africa who came before.

Namibia is a dry, arid country of 2.3 million people about twice the size of Germany – the country which ruled under colonialism, robbing the people of their land. The Germans sought to exterminate the country's aboriginal Herero and Namaqua people in a genocidal onslaught from 1904 to 1908. Later the apartheid government declared Namibia to be a province of South Africa and tried to sow division with their racist policy of "apart hate".

<sup>41</sup> This section is based on an address made by Chief Visolele Rose Namises at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

<sup>42</sup> This section is based on an address made by Maasai activist Sarah Kenya Ngulupa at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

In some ways, the sense of loss – of land and culture – that was a product of colonialism and apartheid has persisted, with even those engaged in fighting for freedom sacrificing something of themselves in the Struggle. For many women, this history has raised important questions about their responsibilities to the communities from which they come, which were in existence before the liberation Struggle – and how their connections to those communities in terms of culture and consciousness may inform their present activism and benefit those communities.

One particular concern has been the issue of language, as many Namibians abandon their home languages with damaging cultural consequences. At present, there are 11 tribes and many sub-clans in Namibia, many of whom speak with clicks in the Khoekhoe language, which is also spoken by San and Nama people in South Africa. Some people are embarrassed to speak the clicks, although they should be seen as a source of solidarity across the region and indicate a close connection to the sounds of animals in nature.

There has also been engagement by women in the political sphere and criticism of the way in which loyalty to the party of liberation can hinder free expression of criticism of current policy-making and implementation, and can foster graft.

Namibian women, particularly those from indigenous matriarchal cultures, have suffered under patriarchal norms which seek to divide women from men and which seek to domesticate women and make them afraid to fight, even when there is an enemy that must be fought. In response, many women have adopted a defiant posture and have also sought a return to traditional ways – the idea being that women should be placed at the centre of cultural activities, fostering food security; protecting the children; sustaining the norms of village life; and re-introducing old methods of healing.

For example, instead of sending those who are suicidal or mentally disoriented to alienating mental hospitals, these people may be brought to the village where local women will massage them and sing them childhood songs, taking them back in their memories to a time when they felt they belonged – and, in this way, healing them.

A return to tradition also entails learning from one's ancestors and inheriting ancient indigenous wisdom which tells of the songs that should be sung to bring the rain; and the god who lives in the high heavens above the stars who sends the rain. In this way, the old beliefs about the sustaining power of water, whether in the sea or from the rain, are passed down; as well as the belief in the protection provided by the ancestors, whose engagement can be summoned through the beating of drums. For the truth is that much of this knowledge, including the practice of traditional medicine, which is already resident in the DNA of those who used to live in the villages, is just waiting to be re-awakened.

The return to the old ways will also produce greater food security and health. A healthy seasonal diet based on what may be cultivated from the land provides all the food one needs and fosters long life. So, the mission for the custodians of the heritage is to create the rituals; sing the songs; chant; beat the drums; and dance the messages, while wearing the jewellery that they themselves have made for their protection; while taking the medicines that they themselves have concocted to ward off illness; and while carrying the skins that they used to wear before they were forced to hide their beauty, and cover their bodies with the fabrics that the German colonialists made them wear.

#### 7.4 A pastoralist's tale<sup>42</sup>

I come from Namanga which is in Longido district along the border between Kenya and Tanzania. To come to this meeting, I boarded a bus from the border leaving at 8am and arriving in Dar es Salaam at 1am the following day. When I arrived there, my legs were swollen. However, I was eager to travel to South Africa for the first time: a Maasai lady on a plane to South Africa. In fact, my family – I have eight children and 12 grandchildren – were against me coming by plane, saying, "Will you come back?" But I told them that the planes that we are all used to see travelling overhead carry people: "So, why not me?" Now they are all praying for my safe return. In addition, the local businesswomen with whom I work are looking for healthy profits from the goods that I have brought to sell, so that they can strengthen their capital base.

Since I have arrived, I have enjoyed the little that I can taste and eat, although it is quite different from the food that I am used to eating at home. The language barrier has been more of a problem, although I have started learning English so that I can engage more effectively in cross-border trade – and over the past few years have learnt to read and write, and to speak Swahili. At the age of 50, I believe it is important to challenge oneself – and I also want to show the other older women in my pastoralist community that such things can be done.

Determination is important for success. I remember one time when local officials who considered me too radical wanted to prevent me from talking to a visiting government minister – they even paid me not to go to the meeting where she would be speaking. So, instead I followed the minister's car, and, ducking under a road block, rushed to meet her. The security officers wanted to shoo me away, but the minister asked me to tell her my problems. So, I described the obstacles facing women traders trying to sell their wares to tourists across the border. In response, the authorities were instructed to ensure that the traders were allowed to conduct their business properly and that they should be given a place to do so.

Since then, I have established an organisation comprising 1,600 Tanzanian and Kenyan businesswomen from the pastoralist community. The mixture of nationalities among the membership caused some official consternation, but I explained that, under the East African Community (EAC), such international collaboration was necessary; and that pastoralists, like their cattle, have no boundaries and have to go wherever they roam to conduct business. I emphasised that this way of life does not make pastoralists thieves or wrongdoers – and that all that was being sought was the latitude to be able to conduct business. The pastoralist women's organisation has now been registered and has its own bank account. Its existence is acknowledged by the government and it can be contacted via the WhatsApp group of the Tanzania Women Chamber of Commerce. As the organisation has developed, young women pastoralists have joined and are learning from their elders. In addition, it has reached an agreement with the government that its members be granted passports instead of temporary travel documents so that they can travel more widely to expand their trade.

Maasai men who are polygamous and may have as many as 10 wives each exert patriarchal control over their wives, who may be expected to wait for a year or even longer until their husband visits them. However, the future for pastoralist women is looking brighter following the election of a woman, President Samia Suluhu Hassan, to the highest office in the land; and also due to the support and training offered by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as the Pastoral Women's Council (PWC). Pastoralist women now have their own community banks in the village and may sleep on mattresses in good beds, instead of on the floor as tradition previously dictated.



## 8. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND HIV/AIDS: BEING IN THE SHADOW OF MEN

### 8.1 Keynote speech: HIV/Aids in South Africa<sup>43</sup>

HIV/Aids is too complex an issue to be addressed in a simplistic way – for example, only through the roll-out of antiretroviral drugs (ARVs). Rather a holistic, long-term approach is required, taking account of a range of issues including gender-based violence and trafficking of women, as well as human settlements policy.

South Africa has the highest proportion of people living with HIV/Aids in the world; and one of the highest rates of GBV. It is important to understand why the country has such high rates. Research shows that HIV/Aids, which is often identified as solely a health problem, is actually the result of multiple factors: 40% of which are socio-economic; 30% of which concern behaviour (including that of unfaithful husbands); 20% of which are clinical in nature; and 10% of which relate to the physical environment.

HIV/Aids first spread across South Africa in the early 1980s, during the apartheid era. At that time, as a disease that was seen as mainly affecting black people and homosexuals, it was not treated in a timely fashion. Subsequently, even as it was quite widespread in Malawi, Uganda and Tanzania by 1985, the prevalence of type-C HIV, which is commonly transmitted among heterosexuals, was quite limited in South Africa. However, it soon spread as a result of the living conditions established under the migrant labour system in the country. Many black men from rural areas were forced to live in men-only hostels in the towns and countries – and research has shown that there was a high level of sexual transmitted infections between these labourers and their mistresses and second wives in town. Another vector for transmission across the continent was the lorry drivers trucking their loads from one country to the next. So, by the 1990s, infections from the virus were multiplying rapidly before later plateauing.

At one point, 60 percent of the youth aged between 15 and 24 were dying from Aids – and this section of the population remains particularly vulnerable to the spread of HIV.

In a patriarchal society, transactional sex among the young people, and between young women and husbands and uncles represents a major vector for infection. Aside from the physical harm wrought by the widespread gender-based violence that is exacerbating the spread of the virus, there is an economic aspect. In a situation of poverty, young women have few options to earn the money needed to survive and may be forced into prostitution. They may also find themselves exploited by older, more powerful men occupying positions of trust in their own families and local communities.

<sup>43</sup> This section is based on an address made by Nomafrench Mbombo, Western Cape MEC for Health and Wellness, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that these same men who are hated for assaulting, raping and even mutilating children and women used to be sons loved by their mothers (most children in South Africa are paternal orphans). So, the men also must be engaged in the debate and offered the opportunity to tell their stories – so that their own responsibility for gender-based violence can be properly addressed.

## **8.2 Violence against women and HIV/Aids: A survivor's account<sup>44</sup>**

I fell pregnant at the age of 19. When I met my husband-to-be, my daughter was already four-years-old and her father had disappeared. At first the handsome new man in my life was so considerate. He did everything for my daughter; he did everything for me. He took me to restaurants I had never been; and I thought: "Wow, this is life!" He told me that he loved me and that, rather than dating me, he wanted to marry me. We were married at a Home Affairs office.

But then, things started to change, although I refused to believe it at first. All the signs were there – his lies about his sleeping out, his cheating. And then he became increasingly abusive. Meanwhile, I became pregnant again and gave birth to a second daughter, who I breastfed from birth. When the baby girl was a year old, she started getting sick. That was in 1999, before ARVs were widely publicly available. I went to the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital to have her tested for HIV. Two weeks later, after receiving results showing that she had HIV, I asked for a test for myself. I also was HIV-positive.

When I told my husband the results he said: "Don't worry baby, I'll look after you." But I didn't trust him. Anyway, I arranged an appointment with my GP and went along with my husband to see him. The doctor explained the dangers of HIV and how many women were contracting Aids; and the importance of taking ARVs. But my husband interrupted and said that he would not allow me to be prescribed with ARVs on his medical aid scheme – and that if the doctor prescribed them, he would cancel his medical aid. I negotiated and arranged that my baby daughter, at least, would receive treatment.

Then, the following year, my GP phoned me excitedly to let me know that now ARVs were freely available. From that time, my husband was continuously abusive – at one point, threatening me at the point of his gun, telling me that if I left him, he would kill the whole family. I knew that as a trigger-happy man, he was capable of it. So, I stayed to protect my daughters. Then, once he realised that I was not dying any time soon now that I taking ARVs, he took out a contract to have me killed so that he would be able to claim from a R1.3 million life insurance policy that he had taken out in my name.

I was supposed to be going to Paarl that day to facilitate a workshop when I was surrounded by eight men, swearing and calling me names. Then, I noticed the gun. So, I started praying, "God, let your will be done", and cried out that my kids were so young and that I didn't deserve to die. Then one of the gangsters asked me for my name – my maiden name – as the realisation dawned that he knew me from when we were pupils together at Langa High School. He remembered how I had helped him as part of a matriculant study group to achieve high marks in biology, geography and English. The others in the gang urged him to go ahead and kill me, but he refused. "I can't, God will punish me," he said. He then said that the gang should go and collect the balance owed on the contract to kill me.

Then, I set off to facilitate the workshop in Paarl, buying some new jeans on the way to replace the ones I had been wearing, which were now damp because I had wet myself from fear. However, after I arrived at the workshop, I lost control of myself and started screaming before collapsing unconscious. I think it was delayed shock. When I came to several hours later, the people at the workshop encouraged me to go to a women's shelter, but I refused. I decided that if my husband wanted to kill me, he would have to do it himself. Instead of hiring others, he would have to take his own gun and use it.

<sup>44</sup> This section is based on an address made by community activist Nandipha Madolo at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

When I returned home, I found my husband sitting in front of the television, switching news channels. I thought: "He is listening out for a report of my murder." So, I confronted him and said that if he wanted to kill, he would have to do it himself. He went into the hallway and I could see from a mirror there that he had taken his gun and stuck it in his belt. I thought he was going to kill me. But, in fact, he walked out and I didn't see him for four days. A week later, a letter arrived from Sanlam cancelling the life insurance policy that he had taken out on me.

My husband subsequently fell into a depression and started getting sick and cutting work. Sometime later, when I was feeling sad that I had unknowingly infected my own daughter by breastfeeding her, I asked my husband why he had not told me that he may have contracted HIV through his promiscuity. "Did you hate me so much that you could not tell me?" I asked. "Did you not think of your own child?" He couldn't answer; he couldn't even say "sorry". Another time I told him that I forgave him because, after all, I now had another beautiful daughter. Later he died.

Now, I have been on ARVs for 22 years and I am still going strong. I survived HIV; I survived GBV; and I have two grown-up girls, aged 24 and 35. And my daughters are proud of who they are. My 24-year-old, daughter recently told me: "You know what Mummy, I don't care. I'm beautiful, I know myself; and if I am with a man, I tell him, 'Listen here, I'm living with HIV and I love myself – you take it or leave it.'"



### 8.3 Patriarchy, women's leadership and the media<sup>45</sup>

Women are continuously required to adopt a supportive role. So, even during a war when their job is to fight, they are also expected to service the domestic and entertainment needs of their commanders; and they are violated. Then, during peace processes, women tend to be viewed as victims that need to be saved, while men adopt leadership roles in the settlements that are negotiated. Such roles may be viewed as products of the patriarchal power dynamics that undermine the position of women in society more generally, producing a narrative that persists in portraying them as weak and delicate.

The question then is: How to change this situation? How to transform the norms? How to produce different behaviour? One answer may be to start in the home. If there is one person that men respect over anyone else, it is their mother; and everything that plays out in society comes from the home. In the domestic context, women have the power to start shaping and socialising their sons so that they respect girls and women. In situations of great hardship, mothers may find the adoption of such a role daunting – but change starts at the individual level.

<sup>45</sup> This section is based on an address made by Molline Marume, Programme Specialist: Ending Violence Against Women and Women, Peace and Security, UN Women, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

Outside the family, there is a need for women increasingly to adopt leadership roles. In this respect, the tales of women as leaders in combat can provide an example for younger women also seeking to adopt proactive roles in their societies. Meanwhile, women's engagement in peace negotiations is crucial to foster more gender-responsive and community-friendly settlements. In general, leading women's organisations, such as the ANC Women's League, should channel their influence to promote the recruitment of women to leadership positions. The media, which has a tendency to glorify criminality, such as in soap operas in which glamorous gangsters evade justice, has a responsibility to address the issue of violence more responsibly, showing the actual harm that it produces, so that a better example is set for the youth.

#### **8.4 Violence against women as part of a broader reckoning with freedom<sup>46</sup>**

Violence against women and activism against such violence are phenomena that have come to be framed in international institutional arrangements in particular ways in recent years – such as through the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) of 1979; the UN's Sustainable Development Goals of 2015; a 2014 Framework of Cooperation Concerning the Prevention and Response to Conflict-related Sexual Violence in Africa agreed between the UN and the African Union; and the Protocol on Gender and Development issued by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in 2008.

However, the issue of violence against women, including domestic violence, has not only been a matter for discussion in recent years. The term femicide has been used for many years, gaining particular currency in the 1970s. The issue of violence, including violence against women, has also been a subject of political activism in South Africa from the 1900s, including during a 1913 women's anti-pass campaign and in the 1956 women's march. Against this background, the failure to include a right to a life without violence in the 1956 Freedom Charter represented a significant omission in terms of women's articulations of freedom at that time. Similarly, although the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA), which was agreed in 1991, explicitly seeks an end to conflict, the emphasis is on enjoining an end to political violence and no significant reference is made to the different forms of violence to which women are subject. More recently, #TheTotalShutdown movement has placed great emphasis on violence in the context of black womanhood.

Recent years have seen the issue of violence against women, including rape, presented increasingly as a stand-alone problem rather than within the context of violence in society more generally. However, this has not always been the case. A World Conference on Women held in 1985 in Nairobi to assess the achievements of a UN Decade for Women in relation to its themes of equality, peace and development, issued a demand in relation to violence against women as one of many. Subsequently, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action issued at the 1995 World Conference on Women addressed the issue of violence against women alongside issues of unpaid care work, housework and child care, indicating a larger pattern of sexist oppression. Reference was also made to the intersectionality of factors of race, gender and class in producing societal oppression.

In South Africa, a major challenge has been the ways in which the lived experiences of women in society have been displaced in official statistics; and the extent to which community-centred responses to the problems faced by women have been marginalised. For black women dreaming of freedom in South Africa, the problem of how to take forward the struggle is framed well by American author and social activist bell hooks in her essay, *The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity*, which placed violence against women within a broader context. bell hooks asked: "How do we create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization, but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualisation?" From the perspective of the oppositional worldview, one is aware of one's displacement and the presence of violence, but the question then is what to make of this knowledge.

The present framing of violence against women as gender-based violence makes a lot of sense given that although women and girls comprise the majority of those who survive such violence, young boys also can suffer

<sup>46</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Nomancotsho Pakade, Research Manager, Centre of the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV), at the launch of the *Isisele Senyathi* hub at CPUT in September 2022.





such violence. It is further important to acknowledge that violence against women cannot be attributed to a single factor – and that a major factor in the violence is unresolved trauma, as well as socio-economic factors – that the violence, in a way, represents a reckoning with freedom. In this respect, it is noteworthy that there is now policy and legislation aimed at fostering women’s empowerment, including economically.

In considering how best to address violence against women it is important that community responses and new legal measures are mindful of the additional discrimination experienced by migrants, trans and queer people and people with disabilities – by the people at the margins. For example, migrants experience bias in relation to particularly poor provision of shelter, and in the form of secondary victimisation at police stations.

### **8.5 Women must mobilise as a matter of urgency to address HIV/Aids<sup>47</sup>**

The international goal to end Aids by 2030 does not mean that AIDS will be ended by 2030. However, it does mean that from 1 January 2031, the focus and donor funding is likely to turn away from combatting Aids, with the consequence that many more people are likely to contract and die from the disease. And as funding is diverted to climate-change-related initiatives, the shadow cast by Aids over the lives of women in Southern Africa will lengthen.

At a recent meeting of national Aids council directors, that is at a meeting of the people who decide what should be done about Aids every year, the session on gender equality was entirely concerned with pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), which has been an effective medicine for preventing the spread of HIV. However, PrEP programmes are solely funded by donor money, which will probably move elsewhere from 2031 – meaning that the only gender-equality programme related to the disease in the region will disappear.

Meanwhile, the statistics indicate that in almost all southern African countries, but especially in Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, South Africa and Namibia, girls and young women aged between 15 to 24 are three times more likely to be infected with HIV than boys and young men of the same age. In addition, women now comprise the majority of those dying from AIDS in seven of the countries in the region. So, it is no longer only the face of infection but also that of death that belongs to girls and young women. Given the bleak prospects for future funding to remedy the situation from 2031, women’s groups and organisations need to mobilise as a matter of urgency to address the HIV/Aids epidemic in the region.



## **9. INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA, RACE AND HEALING**

This topic has three aspects.<sup>48</sup> The first is intergenerational trauma which is the unhealed physical, emotional, spiritual and mental wounds that have unconsciously been passed down to future generations. The second is race and racism which are social constructs that were deployed to produce an ideology of white superiority and a system of segregation – although the good news here is that as a man-made construct, racism can be unlearned just as it has been learnt. The third aspect is healing: every human being is wounded and need to be healed at the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual levels.

<sup>47</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Jacqueline Nzisabira, Regional HIV/Aids Policy Specialist, UN Women, at the launch of the *Isisele Senyathi* hub at CPUT in September 2022.

<sup>48</sup> This paragraph is based on some opening remarks made by Phuti Tsukudu, organisational development and management consultant, as moderator of the session, at the launch of the *Isisele Senyathi* hub at CPUT in September 2022.

### **9.1 Keynote speech: A legacy of physical, psychological and systemic violence<sup>49</sup>**

South Africa is burdened with a legacy of colonial conquest and apartheid oppression. The damaging impacts of this legacy persist, even though the statute books have been re-written since 1994 in line with the new democratic dispensation. Apartheid of the mind persists and there has been a failure to acknowledge that the society is in transition from a totalitarian one to a laissez-faire democracy.

South Africa prides itself on its Constitution, even as that Constitution is under threat. Meanwhile, most people stand outside the democracy, which is viewed as benefitting an elite only. For example, the number of new voters is barely rising, indicating growing alienation from the democratic system, particularly among young people who do not see themselves as deriving direct benefits from the present dispensation. In addition, and notwithstanding the emphasis placed on the concept of decolonisation in the public discourse, the education system in the country, which remains based on a western model, is failing to meet needs.

The family, which is a building block of society, has been undermined by the migrant labour system. Many of the present older generation grew up with a grandmother or a mother only, because the father was away working in the city or on the mines. At the same time, although South Africa is the second richest country on the continent in terms of natural resources after the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a large proportion of its population ranks alongside the poorest in Africa.

In addition, the violence perpetrated through the wars of conquest, colonial and otherwise, which have been undertaken in the region and through apartheid repression and oppression have left their marks on the people. Those who should be protecting their families have instead turned on them, creating a cycle of violence and abusive behaviour that has been and is being passed down through the generations. A father who has been oppressed at work comes home and kicks the dog who was yapping happily at his arrival and beats his wife if she does not bring him his tea quickly enough.

According to the statistics, South Africa is the most violent society in the world – at least among those societies which are not actually at war. In this regard, perhaps the definition of “war” is insufficient, for South Africans are in a state of war as the result of the racism – the othering on the basis of ethnicity – that has become endemic as a consequence of colonialism and apartheid. So, if somebody is quite dark, they may be classified as a “foreigner”. If that person speaks in another language, the response is: “This person is here to take our jobs, to take our women.” Despite the Constitution’s emphasis on dignity, the dehumanisation of South Africans over time has made them accustomed to using violence.

Many parents, including young parents, lift their hand without thinking when their child is naughty. Indeed, the use of corporal punishment against children is so entrenched that when the Constitutional Court ruled against it, many people asked: “But how then should we discipline our children?” So, another generation is raised through violence rather than through the example of love, and the cycle continues as violence, whether against women, children or the elderly, or among men, is seen as the answer – as the way of addressing difference and differences within society.

<sup>49</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Prof Saths Cooper, President, Pan-African Psychology Union (PAPU), at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.



Much of the violence in the society is self-directed, interpersonal, domestic. Recent police statistics revealed that a significant percentage of rapes take place within the home and surrounding environment. In this regard, the notion of “community”, to which reference is so often made, is a fiction. These are not the communities of old. Those have been deracinated and dispersed. In their place are areas in which people have little care for their neighbours, or even for their own family members.

The violence in South Africa takes a number of forms beyond the physical. There is epistemic violence which is enacted through the ways in which certain dominant languages and forms of knowledge are used to diminish particular individuals and groups. In addition, while the political power may reside with the black majority, black people remain in the minority in terms of economic and cultural power.

In this context, a major factor in the present socio-economic crisis facing the country is the youth bulge. Young people are disproportionately represented in the population. The median age in South Africa is 27.6 years. Only 16% of the total population are over 50. This represents a ticking demographic time bomb, particularly given the high rates of unemployment awaiting the present crop of university graduates and school pupils (many of whom anyway fail to matriculate from the country’s broken basic education system). Almost 75% of the mid-teens to mid-20s are out of school and out of work. Without a job, a young person’s psyche is easily fractured. They lose hope, they have no sense of purpose – and their powerlessness leaves them ill-equipped to address challenges and mediate problems in their social environments effectively, fostering rage and a recourse to violence instead.

The national statistics on poverty, hunger and lack of opportunity indicate a country in crisis. For many years, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has reported high rates of depression among South Africans, as well as high suicide rates, particularly among men. The devastating impacts of Covid-19 on education, health and the economy indicated just how vulnerable the country was to shocks. And subsequently, even as South Africans have struggled to recover and make ends meet once again, the government mimics the economic policies adopted in the Global North and raises interest rates instead of lowering them. The prevalence of violence is clearly predicated on such structural factors.

In this context, it is important to emphasise that violence is not innate, except in rare circumstances, such as when an individual is suffering from Klinefelter syndrome, which is a chromosomal abnormality. People are not born violent; they learn to be violent; they are taught violence by others. For example, protesting youth learnt violence from the brutality of apartheid-era police.

Meanwhile, there is an absence of positive role models, with young men instead finding inspiration in the example of local, apparently economically successful, drug dealers and gangsters, who use violence as a business tool. At the same time, the political consciousness fostered in the Struggle has dissipated.

In 1994, it was argued in relation to the youth violence of the period that there was a “lost generation” of youth – the products of black communities and families which had been distorted and damaged by the migrant labour system; oppressive apartheid-era interventions; and the absence of proper government support or services.

The argument was that there had been little significant socialisation of children and youth by adults in their families, among their peers, or in their communities; and that they were facing an uphill struggle to make a life for themselves in what was a quite hopeless situation. Now, having failed properly to address the trauma inflicted in the past, that trauma has been passed down; and that “lost generation” of 1994 has spawned successive wounded and lost generations as anger, frustration and a quest for a better life elude the majority of South Africans.

A human development report produced by the UN in 2020 described how empowered people can unleash real-world transformation by changing social norms. However, in South Africa's case, most people are not empowered; they do not feel whole. The country's cultural and linguistic diversity, which is celebrated as an integral and rich aspect of its identity, has, in fact, led to fracture. The challenges being faced are exacerbated by the cognitive dissonance experienced by the many individuals who do not like what they see in the mirror – and in the absence of any sense of self-worth are unable to value or respect those around them. This is the fundamental dissonance that needs to be addressed. Unless South African can change how they view themselves they will continue to pass down their trauma, disadvantaging their children. There is a Zulu saying: The tree is bent while it is still wet, but it should not be bent in the wrong direction. Only by ensuring that the children are tended properly, can the majority of South Africans rise and meet the challenges they face successfully.



## 9.2 Efforts to heal intergenerational trauma<sup>50</sup>

Canadian author MG Vassanji in his novel, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, wrote: "If more of us told our stories to each other ... we would be a far happier and less nervous people." People can suspect each other because they don't know what the other person is thinking. But once the other person has told their story, then understanding dawns and a relationship can begin.

This notion proved of particular pertinence to the Organisation of Rural Organisations for Progress (ORAP) in Zimbabwe when it was struggling to understand why so few young people seemed to be engaged in its work in farming communities. The local older people who were involved claimed that it was because "young people like fast things" and "are not interested in development". But these rationales seemed inadequate. So, in 2016, ORAP started hosting youth dialogues, facilitated by young people and providing food, music and dancing during the breaks. In this way the organisation learned the nature of their concerns in relation to rural development, which included a lack of control over outputs when they farmed family land; and a desire to raise money so that they could establish their own households and become more independent.

In a similar vein, ORAP noticed that no people with disabilities were coming to any of its large-scale public consultations, although 10% of the population of Zimbabwe lives with disabilities. So, it sat down with representatives of those living with disability, who explained that there was no point in just inviting them to meetings without making the necessary special transport arrangements and providing sign-language interpreters and other support as required at these events. A key lesson learned was that the best way to understand people and help meet their needs is to ask them their concerns and listen to their stories.

<sup>50</sup> This section is based on an address made by Mvuselelo Hunu, CEO, The Organization of Rural Organisations Association for Progress (ORAP), Zimbabwe, at the launch of the *Isisele Senyathi* hub at CPUT in September 2022.

ORAP's mission to eradicate all forms of poverty relates not only to the elimination of financial hardship but also to the need to address social, technological, cultural, educational, psychological, environmental and spiritual forms of poverty. In this regard, the organisation has found, from its conversations, that many people have only a hazy sense of their own identities and where they come from, and seem to be losing touch with their own languages.

There is a theory that trauma is passed down through the genes. In Zimbabwe, the legacy of violence which has fostered intergenerational trauma has taken a number of forms: colonisation; the battle for liberation; tribal conflicts; and economic violence inflicted through structural adjustment programmes and, more recently, hyperinflation. The impacts have included a breakdown in family life and society more generally, with symptoms including increasing substance abuse among the youth.

When ORAP researched the impacts, people talked of how the oppressed had become the oppressors and of a sense of tiredness at having to manage incessant difficulties in making a life. People also talked of a fragmented, divided society, and of feelings of isolation, even in a crowd. There were also reports of significant trauma.

The research also revealed a general desire for healing and for the establishment of systems that may once again unite people through a restoration of their common humanity. In this regard, Zimbabwe's National Peace and Reconciliation Commission, which was established in 2013 and entered into operation in 2018, has done little more than present the appearance of an effort to address past wrongs, issuing only a few relatively irrelevant reports.

By contrast, Rwanda has made significant efforts to come to terms with the country's 1994 genocide in which an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed. Many of those involved were tried and punished with severe sentences. In addition, many more were brought to justice under a gacaca community court system, which afforded alleged offenders the opportunity to admit to their crimes; offer restitution; and seek forgiveness. More than 1.2 million cases were tried in this way and a measure of peace was brought to communities. In addition, the government has gone to great efforts to commemorate those who died with memorials and sites detailing the history of the genocide in great detail. The extent of the healing produced by these efforts is open to question, but not the extent and integrity of the actions taken to ensure that the genocide and its impacts have been addressed and remain in the public memory.

In Zimbabwe, ORAP has developed a particular approach to try and foster greater understanding of intergenerational trauma and so start the process of healing. The first step is to encourage individuals to analyse themselves: What has been their role, including as leaders, in producing the current situation, and how can they transform these to support change for the better? ORAP also encourages people to come together en masse to share their stories and listen to those of others.

In general, it is important that members of families and communities start talking to each other more, whether around the fireplace or via their own WhatsApp groups. In this way, grandmothers can share their achievements and their experiences with the younger generation of women. These may include their feelings of loss about how they were forced to live their children behind in their quest for work. Such stories can reassure these youth that they have been loved and also strengthen their own resolve if they are faced with a similar dilemma. In addition, painful accounts of rape told by the older generation can alleviate feelings of isolation and guilt felt by young women who also have been assaulted.



Stories told by the older generation can also tell of indigenous practices which remain relevant. For example, there is significant value in the cultural practice under which women go and live with their mothers for the first three months after giving birth to their first child – what is now called the fourth trimester. Although this practice has been criticised as oppressive, it actually offers a crucial opportunity for first-time mothers to recover, as the women in their mothers' households do all the work, cooking, washing and even feeding them – allowing them to relax in bliss.

One of the male characters in the novel *Anxious People* by Swedish author Fredrik Backman talks of the need for people to be allowed to convince themselves that they are more than the mistakes that they have made, and that everyone is also defined by their choices still to come and by their tomorrows. Adopting this view, parents must address their own traumas as a matter of urgency, going for counselling as necessary, so that the impacts of these traumas are brought to an end and their children do not suffer. Parents must talk to their children and listen to them. If the children tell their parents that they should change their behaviour then they must not hide behind their authority as parents and refuse to listen.

Young people who are taking drugs and drinking, are not rebelling; they are not acting out. They are perpetrating violence in the only arena available to them – not on the streets, but upon their own bodies, their own selves. This violence is the product of parents who have not healed and who have passed on their hurt. So, the parents must address their personal issues and learn to forgive themselves. If they fail to do this, they will deny those who come after them the opportunity to live their lives fully.

### **9.3 Intergenerational mentoring<sup>51</sup>**

In addressing trauma, it is important to acknowledge that there is a great difference between forgiveness and healing. One of the problems with an apology is that it can have the impact of denying the anger experienced by the person who has been wronged. In this respect, it is a pity that there are not more men at this meeting – so that there is a possibility of confronting men with the pain and anger produced by their treatment of women, and, in this way, releasing the trauma.

Significant trauma is produced in the workplace for black people, who may be there in the name of equity and who may only be involved at a marginal level in decision-making even though they may be engaged in discussions. The problems for women in the workplace are particularly acute given the larger patriarchal context. Women are told to walk in a certain way and speak in a certain way. Men, however, are not constrained in this way – and, as a result, experience a greater sense of freedom in the world – a freedom that is alien to many women.

Against this background, there is a need to establish systems, including for mentorship, that can support staff who are at risk of marginalisation in their career paths. However, the issue of mentorship is complex. Adults hold so much knowledge that is not readily shared with the younger generation – knowledge which may be deployed in such a way that it bolsters their authority over young people. In this regard, although it is common for older women to take younger women under their wing, this relationship can also be exploitative and constricting – and may be undertaken in such a way that the younger woman is effectively prevented from taking the place of the older woman, who remains jealous of her own position.

So, there is a need to provide guidance to young women in more empowering ways. In this spirit, a programme called EmpowerHer has been established at CPUT which has recruited older women to engage with younger women in a bid to help them navigate their academic journeys. Going forward, the hope is that a similar initiative may be adopted in the political space, under which older women share their experiences with younger women so that certain situations may be avoided and old mistakes are not repeated.

<sup>51</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Lolwethu Luthuli, PhD student and Lecturer, Informatics and Design Faculty, CPUT, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.



In seeking to produce healing, it is necessary to foster understanding of the kinds of harm that everyone is capable of inflicting on others, often thoughtlessly. In this respect, everyone is responsible for ensuring that they do not harm others or violate their autonomy. Such harm may be inflicted through the ways in which a person talks, such as when joking. For example, a girl may be told in jest that they should not sit at the front as this would be considered forward, which then leads to them always taking a seat at the back throughout their life. When a mother loses her temper and speaks harshly to her children, that can have a significant impact on how those children view themselves and their place in the world.

In reflecting on one's own behaviour, a starting point is to admit the need for one's own healing; and that, in the absence of such healing, one's personal pain is inflicted on the people under one's care. One of the realisations that can emerge from the process of healing is how it has damaged one's own sense of self-worth. This damage may be made manifest in a number of ways. One of the ways in which the harm produced by racism is exhibited is in the greater respect that may be accorded to a passing white woman than to a black woman who walks by. Similarly, in relation to the harm wrought by patriarchy, women attending conferences and political meetings often select men to be the leaders due to a lack of confidence that they themselves can occupy such a position. Only through healing and the production of autonomy among women can the confidence to stand tall be acquired.

I always refer to my grandmother when I speak in public. She had many grandchildren, but none of them ever felt like they were not her favourite. She loved us equally. The lesson of this is that it is only through love that people can come to feel at peace with themselves – and thus able to produce a larger sense of peace within society.

#### **9.4 Discussion<sup>52</sup>**

There is a need for intergenerational dialogue to address the harm produced by intergenerational trauma. The drive to prevent children from being traumatised should inform adult behaviour in the home and at schools. Mothers have an obligation to protect their children from abusers, including fathers. Teachers have an obligation to care for children who may bring the trauma of domestic violence to their schools – and should not produce new trauma through the use of corporal punishment. Teachers must teach, not beat their pupils.

More broadly, teachers in the state education system need to place a greater emphasis on the interests of pupils rather than on their own interests. In addition, the provision of basic education must be more democratic, addressing the inequities in the system which privilege the education of wealthy and white pupils over those of their poor, black peers.

There is a saying: When a woman heals, she heals her mother and she heals her daughter, and they, in turn, heal all the women around them. And in this way the nation is healed. In this regard, the telling of women's stories from their own perspectives as proposed by Isisele Senyathi – including in relation to the kinds of oppressions they have suffered – may contribute to a larger process of healing.

It is time for the older generation of women leaders to admit that they have done their best and to pass on the baton. The key issues in the struggle for gender equality have been identified, but there is always a gap between knowing and responding effectively. However, young people have proposed a number of solutions to the issues at hand – and should now be empowered to act on their proposals.

In its efforts to produce healing, Ilitha Labantu quickly realised that those who have undergone trauma cannot be counselled on an empty stomach – and now produces cooked food for 500 or more people in need every day.

<sup>52</sup> This section is based on comments made from the floor and by Phuti Tsukudu as the moderator of this session at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.



## SESSION 10: EXPLORING FEMINISM IN THE CONTEXT OF PAN-AFRICANISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

### 10.1 Redressing past wrongs<sup>53</sup>

There is great woundedness across racial groups, which may be mitigated to an extent if there is greater understanding among these groups, which may have prejudiced views of each other. Such understanding – and consequently, healing and reconciliation – may be fostered by women sharing their stories of their lived experiences with each other. In this regard, the African tradition of telling tales around the campfire at night, which has produced many stories from the continent's indigenous cultures, may usefully be rekindled. In this spirit, after years of silence as someone who was raised to be seen and not heard in a patriarchal society, I offer this story of my own life.

Other people may view me as a white woman whose path to becoming a professor has been quite straightforward – but this is something of a misperception. I was born and raised in Cape Town in a place called Ruyterwacht, Epping, in 1962. The community, which largely comprised people categorised as “poor whites” by the apartheid government, was the subject of an anthropological work produced by a Finnish researcher, Annika Björnsdotter Teppo, entitled *The Making of a Good White: A Historical Ethnography of the Rehabilitation of Poor Whites in a Suburb of Cape Town*. The book describes how the local community, including myself and my family, were viewed as in need of rehabilitation by the government – and the efforts that were taken to implement this rehabilitation. The book describes how white identity in South Africa was socially constructed under apartheid – and in particular the low position occupied by “poor whites”, who were not regarded as a decent or socially acceptable group in relation to the dominant ideas of white identity at this time. In 1932, South African educationist Ernst Gideon Malherbe described the dominant conceptualisation of the “poor white” problem in the following terms: “Just as a sore or a boil upon a body is merely an unsightly symptom of an impure blood stream which courses through every part of the whole organism, so poor white-ism may be regarded as a symptom of a deeper underlying disease in our social organism.” The official prejudice towards the poor white inhabitants of Ruyterwacht was compounded by the presence of mixed-raced families and individuals there. Accordingly, the area was seen as a threat to Afrikanerdom and the ideology and practices of apartheid. The government responded to this perceived threat by encouraging the local residents to go to the Dutch Reformed Church, and participate in various Afrikaner activities and institutions. However, my family, who were quite uneducated, did not join in.

<sup>53</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Prof Driekie Hay-Swemmer, Executive Director, Office of the Vice Chancellor, CPUT, at the launch of the *Isele Senyathi* hub at CPUT in September 2022.



I was the youngest of five girls (my father, who wanted boys, was disappointed by the stream of girls). When little, I often fell ill and had to go to the doctor. But there was no family car, so I had to walk and then maybe get a bus or a train. I remember one day in particular when my mother took me to the doctor. I wanted to sit upstairs on the double-decker bus but my mother told me I was not allowed – the top floor was reserved for “non-Europeans”. I was 5-years-old at the time and desperate to sit on the top deck which seemed exciting to me. So, I kept asking why I was not allowed, and my mother tried to silence me by pinching me, before finally explaining that I couldn’t because I was white. So, I responded: “Then I don’t want to be white because I want to go and sit upstairs.” Similarly, I couldn’t understand why there were European and non-European beaches.

Later during my childhood in the late 1970s, my father worked as a farm supervisor in Grabouw and I became familiar with one of the workers there and I told him that I wanted to meet his children so that we could play together. But he replied simply: “They are not here.” And again, I didn’t understand. I wanted to know what the problem was and why his children were not with him. Meanwhile, at school, I asked uncomfortable questions about the history we were taught; and would go and find other history books in the library which my teacher would then tell me to put away. One time, I was required to deliver a speech in a school oratory competition under the topic: “Afrikaners: Where to from here?” I started my speech with the words, “Buthelezi, my brother” and I went on to talk about reconciliation. From then on, I was not allowed to participate in any further debating competitions.

So, I got into trouble at school and at home because I questioned everything; and I became quite discontented. It felt as if the lens through which I was seeing the world was quite different from those through which other people, even my own family, viewed things. And I felt that there were few people I could talk to about politics and societal matters.

After I matriculated, I won a bursary to become a teacher and went to study at Stellenbosch University. I remember the first day that I arrived at my residence with my stuff in plastic bags. My auntie had made me some clothes to go to class and I thought they were so beautiful. I was so proud of them. But then I saw all these other first-year girls from the wine estates of the Western Cape arriving, wearing the most beautiful dresses and unloading so many suitcases packed with even more clothes. It was a revelation to me as I realised that I was not part of this group, of this privileged layer of white society. So, it was at university in the early 1980s that I started to confront the reality of apartheid. Other students called me a “sell-out” for standing up for my black friends; and as a liberal student I soon found myself in the back of a police van.

Eventually, I graduated – although, since none of my family had been to university, they felt too awkward to attend the ceremony and celebrate with me. Then I married and bore three children. Meanwhile, I also embarked on a PhD. However, my husband was opposed to me pursuing an academic career, telling me that if I wanted to work, I should go and get a job in a supermarket. He banned me from writing or reading academic materials in the evenings; and for a few years I allowed myself to be dominated in this way before finally deciding that it was not right. Of course, the moment a woman says, “I’m walking away from this toxic relationship”, life can become quite hard. I had three children to raise on my own and was stigmatised as a divorced woman.

Then there was the challenge of pursuing an academic career in an institutional culture which remains quite male dominated. I have learnt the hard way that the notion that women have to work harder to get promoted is no myth – it’s fact. I have seen how the rules and the ways they are implemented discriminate against women seeking sabbaticals or study leave so that they can undertake PhDs. In my own experience, I have been required to attend development sessions while no such requirement has been imposed on my male peers. There are many discrepancies in the treatment of men and women in academia.

In reflecting on my own life and producing a narrative from it, I have been inspired by the theoretical framework developed by sociologist Margaret Archer who posits storytelling as a means of reaching an understanding about the structural and cultural conditions that shape individual ways of thinking over time.

The process has led me to try and write a book about the identities of women in higher education. Adopting an historical perspective, I am aware of how, under apartheid, the various higher education institutions served different race groups and that their levels of funding, institutional identities and curricula were shaped by this racist framework. Although, I was too insignificant as an individual to change that, I knew it was wrong – and in the spirit of confession and in a quest for healing, I apologise for the wrongs committed by my fellow Afrikaners, under apartheid, particularly in the sphere of higher education.

For my own part, I have tried to make a positive contribution, including by promoting greater understanding of women's lives through my research and by empowering the women whom I have supervised. Recently I learned that one of my students, a young black woman who had accessed a scholarship to go abroad with my help, had now become a professor. In a similar vein – and because of the straitened circumstance of my own graduation – I take great pleasure in graduation ceremonies, particularly those in which my own students are awarded.

I believe that women should be empowered, in part because of the way in empowerment lifted me from my constrained beginnings, equipping me with a wide understanding of the world. To this end, it is important that women mentor each other and stand by each other in academia which can be a hostile environment. And women should celebrate each other's successes instead of trying to diminish them out of jealousy – which, unfortunately, does happen. In this regard, I hope that my own achievements and legacy in helping other achieve their potential may set an example to other women pursuing a career in academia, inculcating the belief that it can be done.

## **10.2 Discussion<sup>54</sup>**

Black and coloured people in South Africa suffered indignity and oppression on a daily basis under apartheid. Girls and women desperate for the toilet would be fined and imprisoned for using blankets-only facilities. Girls and women in activist households would be humiliated and assaulted in the middle of the night by apartheid security officials raiding their homes. The trauma produced by such violence, humiliation and oppression was barely addressed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which glossed over much of the past pain, leaving the wounds open. So, there remains a need for greater acknowledgment of past wrongdoing and for the establishment of spaces where the trauma of the past can be articulated, in order to produce healing and a socio-cultural and psychological environment conducive to nation-building.

A more nuanced understanding of the nature of present and past privilege and oppression in South African society needs to be produced. White women can play their part by addressing among themselves their own (lack of) care for, and understanding of, the lives of the domestic workers who service their households, as part of a broader consciousness-raising process.

Historically, there was solidarity shown by white people, including some Afrikaners, in the Struggle against apartheid; and, subsequently, white people and white-led organisation have engaged in the work of transformation.

<sup>54</sup> This section is based on a plenary discussion among the participants at the launch of the *Isisele Senyathi* hub at CPUT in September 2022, at CPUT in September 2022.



There are present possibilities for solidarity among the different groups in society as black people seek to address their anger at the legacy of oppression and white people try to come to terms with their guilt in relation to the benefits that they continue to derive from this history of oppression.

However, it must be acknowledged that solidarity in pursuit of the transformation of South African society and economy cannot be produced through rhetoric alone. For example, little value may be attached to apologies from people who continue to enjoy the fruits of apartheid while failing to realise their own responsibility in addressing the structural inequities produced by the past, and the critical importance of authentic reconciliation and healing as part of broader nation-building.

Women played a crucial role in the Struggle both as combatants and in terms of mitigating the impacts of the psychological, mental, spiritual and emotional violence that were inflicted. Government should acknowledge this resilience and make greater efforts to engage and empower women as leaders in addressing the trauma of the past and the harm it continues to wreak on society. However, the reality is that instead of engaging and empowering women in this way, some national governments perpetuate, or fail to address, the mental, psychological and social violence that has been inflicted, particularly against those who are marginalised in society, including women. For example, women continue to experience mental trauma and psychological problems at work and in a range of institutions as a result of entrenched sexism.

Acts of apology from people in positions of authority and power can bring significant benefits in terms of promoting active, engaged citizens. For example, grandparents who are prepared to accept that they too can make mistakes and are prepared to apologise to their own grandchildren on this basis are sending out a message that respect, including for one's elders, is not automatic and should always be earned.



### 10.3 Learning feminism from a mother's strength<sup>55</sup>

Feminism as expressed in a contemporary African context can give rise to contestation and contradiction. When young African women describe themselves as feminists to their families, their parents may not approve and may accuse them of "forgetting their ways". In addition, there are different strains of feminism. For example, many women who have engaged in struggles to assert their autonomy may not explicitly identify themselves as feminists, but may be regarded as feminists by experience. In this respect, feminism has been critiqued by elder African voices as failing to acknowledge the history of women's contributions to progressive change.

<sup>55</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Nandi Msezane, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

In terms of ideology, the expression of feminism, even as articulated by leading, well-regarded feminists such as bell hooks and Audre Lord, indicates significant tensions. Both these writers envisage a feminist reality free of racism, sexism, classism and homophobia.

Bell hooks said, "feminism is a move to end sexism ... it does not imply that men were the enemy". This proposition may be viewed as problematic. In South Africa, there is a clarion call for men's engagement in much of the work undertaken to address gender-based violence in partnership with the state. However, the reality of the situation is that South Africa is the most dangerous country in the world for women – and that this danger is caused by men.

Bell hooks also said: "If any female feels she needs anything beyond herself to be legitimate and validate her existence, she's already giving her power away to be self-defining, her agency. I will not have my life narrowed down. I will not bow down to somebody else's whim or someone else's ignorance." The two quotes from bell hooks when placed side by side speak to the contradictions which exist in present articulations of feminism.

Pan-Africanism has been conceptualised as the dream of being African in Africa and is considered a uniting notion. In fact, the ideology was created in the Diaspora and is quite elitist. In addition, some of the ways in which the ideology is articulated in parts of the continent can lead to ethnic and tribal divisions.

Any telling of the story of one's life entails consideration of lineage. In my case, I have a grandmother who I never met because she died when my mother was 14. But this woman has always been a symbol to me of possibility and of being able to stand up for oneself, even at a time when that isn't the thing to do. She came from KwaZulu-Natal and was married twice. My first grandfather, my mother's biological father, was a school principal. They lived in a small town called Bergville and she had six children with him, my mother being the only girl. But, then, my grandfather decided to bring home a second wife; at which point, my grandmother's response was: "Well and good, you want a second wife, I am leaving." So, she left with her six children for Johannesburg where her mother, my great-grandmother, was working; and, with the support of her mother who was a domestic worker, she built a life for herself and her children there. Subsequently, she married again to a second husband who also died before I could know him. He took on her six children as if they were his own and they had another, seventh child, together.

My grandmother was not highly educated but she always wanted an education for her daughter. My mother had just started at a private high school when her mother and then her stepfather died. My mother always talks about that time when she came home to bury her mother, knowing she had to return to her boarding school. However, her grandmother, who was no longer working and was on pension, was unable to support this ambition and her uncle refused to pay for her education on the grounds that, as a girl, she was bound to become pregnant and get married.

Hearing of the problem, one of my mother's teachers from primary school, who was like an aunt to me when I was growing up, gave my mother a telephone directory so that she could make phone calls to find someone prepared to offer her a bursary for high school. Eventually, she tracked down a tea company that seemed to offer bursaries and went to the firm's head office in Johannesburg to see the boss. She sat there waiting to see him all day; and, as night fell, he apparently realised that she was not going away. So, he asked her what she wanted with him and she replied: "I need to go to school, I don't have parents and I need money to go to school" and then started crying because she had been kept waiting all day, and was fearful of being disappointed in her quest. The boss asked the name of her school, telling her that she would be able to go there, and gave her the money to go home. So, this tea company paid for my mother's education from high school until she completed her teaching degree.

So, these women – my grandmother and my mother – showed me what a feminist approach can make possible – although in neither case would they have described their actions as “feminist”. The women teachers who taught and supported my mother and who later became aunts to me also offer a feminist example in my life.

For myself, I am, in many ways an extension of my mother. For example, I remember preparing a full Sunday lunch for her to celebrate her return home after yet another operation in hospital. My mother hadn’t realised that I knew how to cook but I had learned by always watching her in the kitchen. At the same time, my mother has also always granted me the space to be myself, even if she has not always agreed with how this is expressed.

So, I have come to understand that the courage displayed by previous generations of women in their daily lives – breaking the mould of the subservient roles and behaviour that were expected of them – has laid the ground for the present struggle that is called “feminism”; and that this older generation of women continue to provide the necessary support as they seek to hand over the baton to the younger generation of women, many of whom, in the exuberance of youth, fail to acknowledge the work, sacrifices and contributions of this older generation which includes their mothers. In this respect, my feminism and the feminisms to come should not be seen as something new. They are always based on the foundations laid by those who went before.



#### **10.4 Empowering women under pan-African feminism<sup>56</sup>**

The struggles of xenophobia, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism and generational division continue; and these things are not just academic struggles, something that one reads about – they are felt and experienced every day. For example, I, as a visitor from Malawi, have been questioned about my status here and asked to produce my permit when seeking to access treatment at a local hospital. This, in a country which should know better given its history of pass laws and its Constitution which proclaims the rights of all people here to access services on an equal footing. So, I have been reminded of how the continent remains divided by borders that were imposed on it by colonialism – even as migration makes a mockery of these. For example, in my case, notwithstanding my present nationality, my mother was born in Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape, where I still have family although I have never met them.

So, this is one context in which I view pan-African feminism – that is, as a struggle to remind Africans that they are one – and should not be led astray by stories peddled by politicians that foreigners are “taking our jobs”, which have currency in many countries, including both South Africa and Malawi. Without diminishing the significant negative impacts of unemployment and failed land restitution efforts, political calls such as “let’s get our jobs back” (from people who don’t anyway have jobs) and “let’s get the land back” represent rhetoric produced by elites to distract populations from the actions that are continuously being undertaken

<sup>56</sup> This section is based on a presentation made by Sarai Chisala-Tempelhoff, Senior Legal Researcher and Founder of the Gender and Justice Unit, Malawi, African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP), at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

to undermine their agency and concentrate power away from them. The process is one of erasure in which not only the present but the past is co-opted and re-framed. In this context, there is great need for, and power in, a space and a place in which women's voices and stories can be cradled and held.

Young people can play a crucial role in promoting such a space, including through the various forms of social media that they use as a matter of course – and which, since the restrictions on physical interaction imposed under national Covid-19 lockdowns from 2020, have become increasingly important as modes of communication. So, the youth must be encouraged to take the messages being produced by initiatives such as Isisele Senyathi and translate them into new forms, including tweets, so that they can be disseminated quickly and widely. In this regard, the terrain for advancing women's rights may be seen to have shifted.

At the same time, the nature of the struggle itself remains quite similar – for the reality is that women continue to be imprisoned in so many ways. The bars are not always seen – but they are there – and feminism provides an intellectual framework for identifying them and realising how power is organised and wielded in society. In this regard, older and younger generations of women must not allow themselves to be distracted by discourses in support of restrictive norms around how women should behave and dress. Generational disagreements about the kinds of clothes that young women should wear take place within and can perpetuate a patriarchal framework designed to mislead and oppress all women.

Meanwhile, women across the continent are experiencing extreme forms of violence from men, which, far from being punished or even condemned, are often valorised. For example, in a recent case in Malawi in which a man killed his wife, bludgeoned his children to death with a hammer and then killed himself, there was widespread sympathy expressed online for the murderous violence. The original story claimed that the killing spree stemmed from a remark made by the wife, perhaps during a domestic argument, that the husband was not the father of their 3-year-old and 5-year-old children. Comments posted underneath the story said: "He needed to do it"; "She deserved it"; "Why would she lie to him in that way?"; "You have to understand, he was enraged"; and "If I was angry like that, who knows what I could do?" Meanwhile, men in Malawi are often more likely to get away with crimes of violence against women, than with theft or fraud – and they may even be celebrated online for their brutality.

In my own work as the founder and director of a non-profit organisation called the Gender Injustice Unit, I have sought to support victims of such violence in Malawi. The unit offers women who have survived violence access to safe-house services and provides legal support, including by accompanying them to court. It also provides transport money and connects the women to psycho-social services.

When I trained a lawyer, the main goal of many of my classmates was to escape poverty. The culture was one of male pride; and the law was seen as an exclusive practice, the proponents of which sought to fool and secure power over the public through their use of fancy words and bombastic formulations. After I graduated and was employed by a law firm, I spent much of my first year there repossessing homes from families who often only had a few outstanding monthly repayments left on their mortgages.

So, I quit and set my sights on the Human Rights Commission, where I was soon employed. However, even there, I found was still participating in this idea that lawyers know more and are somehow therefore better than others. So, I left and became part of a group trying to fight a new piece of proposed national legislation that would have the effect of criminalising women for living with HIV even though part of its original purpose had been to control the behaviour of predatory men spreading HIV among young women through transactional relationships. The activist group held a series of conversations with ministers over the offending

provisions – including section 43 which could be used to criminalise women for transmitting HIV. However, as the legislation headed closer to being approved, the arguments being made by the group were having no significant impact. So, it was decided that, instead of presenting expert testimony, the people whose lives were going to be the most affected by the new laws needed to testify to the political decision-makers.

As a result, discussions were held to empower the women who would be directly harmed by the new law, explaining its likely impacts, provision by provision and section by section, on their lives. Then these women appeared before the minister and made their own case, speaking truth to power. They said: “Honourable minister, although you care about this unborn baby in my womb, you should know that I care more. I don’t need a criminal law to tell me that I should take medication to ensure my child’s health and safety. I’m going to do that anyway because I care about my child. So criminalising HIV is not the way to make this a safer space for any of us.” And they sang and they danced; and the offending provision in the law was removed the same day.

So, that led me to legal empowerment as a guiding principle. In my present work, I explain to women how the law is going to have an impact in their lives, so that they can use the law for themselves – rather than me using it on their behalf. This is a practice informed by feminism and the imagination of what the legal system would resemble if women had played a leading part in making laws.

### 10.5 Discussion<sup>57</sup>

In the context of domestic violence that takes place on a daily basis, as husbands attack their wives and fathers rape their children, there may be great benefit in educating women about the protection that is available to them under the law and the actions that they can take to activate such protection and stop these men, as well as the kinds of help and support that are on offer to alleviate their plight. Such education and advocacy to empower women may be provided in coordination with grassroots organisations such as Ilitha Labantu.



## SESSION 11: CHALLENGES OF WRITING AFRICAN WOMEN’S HISTORIES AND REDRESSING THEIR ABSENCE FROM THE HISTORICAL RECORD

### 11.1 Born, never asked: The path to self-realisation and effectiveness<sup>58</sup>

Having been employed as the director of the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), which is based in Midrand, South Africa, for six years, I was told to quit the post 18 months before the end of my contract on the grounds that it was a political position and the new president of the parliament would want to appoint their own person. I contested the decision but no avail in an institution that is quite patriarchal. Having bought a house in the area and with

<sup>57</sup> This section is based on a plenary discussion among the participants at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

<sup>58</sup> This section is based on an address delivered by Martha Luleka, Executive Chairperson, Tanzania Investments Services Limited, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

children under my care who were studying, I was given one month to quit. In seeking to address this challenge to my life circumstances, my first move was to try and forgive those who had sought to obstruct my career path. I prayed every day, but authentic forgiveness would not come – my heart remained heavy.

The point of my prayer and attempt at forgiveness was that I believed that only by letting go of my frustration and anger would I once again be able to understand the present advantages of my situation and see my way forward. In a similar vein, South Africans who feel they are being unjustly treated should seek to build on past achievements and the potential of the present – which is clearly recognised by the many African migrants who come to the country in search of opportunity – rather than dwelling on unfulfilled aspirations.

Finally, in the third month of prayer after leaving PAP, I was able to forgive properly – at which point new opportunities arose. Returning to Tanzania at the age of 65, I was appointed to a public position by the then president of the country, John Magufuli, with a mandate to try and resolve challenges being faced in local government. At the time, I was five years over the official upper age limit for civil servants in Tanzania, but Magufuli made it clear that this was irrelevant. Regardless of my age, he wanted to make use of my skills to establish smooth working relationships within a sphere of governance that had become problematic. Subsequently, President Samia Suluhu Hassan appointed me to chair the board of the governing party's investment wing and to act as the chief executive officer (CEO) of her own foundation. So, I continue to make myself useful.

In my career, I have learnt the importance of using space and time as well as possible in order to be effective. Women, who must do three times the work of men if they are to succeed, need to be exemplary in terms of strength, hard work and willingness to help. Only in this way can women make their presence known and gain acknowledgment for their contribution. If women fail to deliver in this way, they will be taken for granted and treated as "just a woman, after all".

In seeking to empower themselves, women need to acknowledge the accident of their own births. They didn't choose their mothers or fathers – or the families into which they were born. In this regard they are victims of circumstances – and these circumstances may be less than fortunate. Accordingly, there is little point in blaming one's parents for what they may or may not have done – rather the drive should be for the girl or young woman to realise and define herself, and to live up to and deliver on her potential to make a positive difference in this world.

Accordingly, the participants of this conference should return to their homes and workplaces considering what action they can take in support of the Isisele Senyathi initiative – either directly or by creating similar initiatives in their own spaces. In this regard, it would be helpful if Ilitha Labantu produced and disseminated its model for establishing Isisele Senyathi, so that others may learn from this example.

There are a number of actions that may be taken to promote the effectiveness of such initiatives:

- New paradigms for promoting gender equality should be championed by a number of key individuals and voices, as has increasingly been the case in recent years. The role of such champions should be to raise the profile of the particular initiative and provide an identifiable point of reference for young people wanting to learn more and perhaps contribute;
- Followers and disciples, who may engage via social media or other means, must be fostered;
- Positive leaders are required to ensure that the initiative is authentically empowering. There can be no room for pull her down (PHD) syndrome;
- Those involved must address their work/life balance. They should talk about this with their partners and other family members so that feasible solutions can be produced and the tendency to work round the clock is addressed;
- Whatever the position of the individual in the initiative, they should seek to be heard rather than seen.



The aim is not to show off, but to communicate the message. The dress, the outfit may be forgotten, but the words should be remembered; and

- The initiative must be institutionalised and networked properly. It cannot rely on the power of personality if it is to be sustainable. It must be managed in a professional way.



### 11.2 Documenting women's political history<sup>59</sup>

In part, the absence of African women's voices in history is produced by the failure of African women to document their own stories – and a broader failure by Africans, including the continent's liberation movements, such as the ANC in South Africa and ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe, to document African history as it has been experienced by the people. Meanwhile, history continues to be written, and distorted, by the victors, who may be men articulating the interests of those who have oppressed women. So, a key aim must be to promote women, including in academia, the arts and other sectors of society, as the authority in telling women's stories, ensuring that they are not reduced to fit a patriarchal narrative under which men are always the ones who are celebrated as the leaders of revolutions and significant change in society.

In this regard, it is important to note that the absence of women's voices in society is, in general, a condition of the very patriarchy from which women activists seek to emancipate themselves. In 1949, French existentialist philosopher Simone Du Beauvoir penned a book, the title of which described women as *The Second Sex*. She argued that within patriarchy men are defined as the absolute, and women are defined only with reference to that absolute – for example, as an extension of that absolute, just as Eve was characterised in the Bible as an extension of that which had already been defined as human: Adam. Accordingly, language is used to erase women's autonomy – girls' names are feminine versions of boys' names; "heroines" are female versions of "heroes", who are the original protagonists of heroism. Similarly, in speaking of the main figures in the Struggle, the terms "guerrillas", "chiefs" and "revolutionaries" always seem to have a male connotation given the way that leadership has come to be defined as the province of men.

Recently the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) celebrated 78 years of existence; and the ANC-aligned South African Student Congress (SASCO) celebrated its 31st birthday. The official histories of the formation of both these youth organisations tend to emphasise the role of men, such as Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, as if there were no woman at those early conferences and meetings – when, in fact, women such as Albertina Sisulu, who was there at the birth of the ANCYL, played a significant role in the establishment of these bodies. Similarly, Charlotte Maxeke's role in the establishment of the ANC had been, until recently, airbrushed from a narrative that foregrounded only the role of men in this organisation's birth.

<sup>59</sup> This section is based on an address delivered by Nonceba Mhlaui, ANC Youth League convenor, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

Now, a new research project has been launched, interrogating the blanks in the history of SASCO's establishment and its subsequent mergers with other student formations. In part, the aim is to produce a reliable timeline. But the research has also sought to interview those who were there, so that their living testimony can inform the historical record before it is too late – and help to provide an accurate account of the thinking behind the organisation's establishment. In the absence of the understanding that such accounts may provide, militant young people may adopt harmful ideas and forms of activism, unaware that these are not supported by – and, in fact, may even contradict – the actual historical example.

In a similar vein, there is a need to collect the stories of women's activism and tell them correctly as part of the struggle against forgetting. The main heroes and heroines are commemorated in movies; but the contributions of everyday folk – the comrades on the ground in communities who helped change people's lives – are easily forgotten and erased from history. Given that many of these activists have been black women, it is important that African women's stories are recorded for posterity.



### 11.3 The struggle against unremembering<sup>60</sup>

The historiographical struggle in South Africa is not only about or against forgetting, it is also against what anti-apartheid activist Allan Boesak termed "unremembering" – the ways in which history has unremembered women, particularly African women.

I stand here today as a descendant of the Khoi, the San and the enslaved, and as an African woman. Historical narratives denied those such as I the right to exist, stripping them of their language, culture and identity; and imposing Western ways of thinking, doing and knowing. Working at Iziko Museums of South Africa, which is a space that carries the human remains of my ancestors, my identity has been challenged and criticised – in large part because of a history that has sought to de-Africanise me and many other people in South Africa, classifying us instead as "coloured", although our ancestral footprint is African. Working there, I have had to consider the ways in which racist institutions have sought to define and classify me; and the ways in which my own thinking also has been shaped by teachings based on a Eurocentric notion of what it is to be an African.

Growing up as a little girl, I and my peers were taught that the lighter one's complexion, the better – and we learnt to straighten our hair as a matter of course. Only later, as I realised that I had become an unwilling participant in other people's cultures and histories, did I start to rid myself of these Eurocentric notions that had constrained me. I cut off the hair that I had straightened with chemicals so that it could grow back as nature intended – and so that my mirror image reflected my true ancestral self.

<sup>60</sup> This section is based on an address delivered by Lynn Abrahams, Social History Curator, Iziko Museums of South Africa, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

African historiography and heritage, and the continent's archive and knowledge reproduction have been, and in many ways continue to be, shaped by a patriarchal, Eurocentric agency which is fundamentally racist. A dominant narrative has been produced which pays scant attention to the beauty and progress of the pre-colonial period and its artefacts, such as the medieval manuscripts of the University at Timbuktu and the remains of the medieval Kingdom of Mapungubwe. Indeed, when Mapungubwe was unearthed in 1936, the findings were hidden for fear that they would undermine the credibility of the colonisers' claim that they had come to save and "civilise" barbaric Africans. In fact, the colonisers' goal may better be characterised as an attempt to alienate African from their own cultures and traditions – even as the evident subsistence of African culture in objects and stories has prevented the completion of that destructive mission.

The colonisers brought slavery: the trade in human beings. Women were stripped of everything. They did not even own their own wombs. They would be raped and demeaned and then the rapist would decide the fate of the child. The slave lodge in Cape Town, which is now part of the local Iziko Museum, became a kind of brothel at night – but a brothel in which women had none of the autonomy or rights over their own bodies exercised by contemporary sex workers who can charge for their services.

Meanwhile, pre-colonial African history was categorised as pre-history – and in the absence of any understanding of, or care for, indigenous histories, cultures and socio-economic systems, the colonisers divided the land, establishing borders; building fences; and restricting access accordingly through a system of passes and permits.

In this context, contemporary xenophobia represents an expression of the colonial Balkanisation of Africa and a failure to identify the forces that actually created the divisions in the first place.

The colonisers also introduced classification according to race and racism. Mulatto slaves who were lighter in complexion were treated differently than Angolan slaves. Society was established on this basis; and history also was forged on this basis, along the colonial grain. All of which has produced the need for another kind of history, based on the oral accounts of those who were subjugated. In producing such a history, the lived experiences of the oppressed may be acknowledged and the intergenerational scars and wounds that continue to be borne may be healed.

A major obstacle to the creation of such history has been the way in which those living in Africa have internalised Western notions of knowledge production; Western value systems; and Western beliefs which are made manifest within society, including in the home. In the process, Africans have forgotten who they are; they have forgotten their humanity, which has always been their greatest gift to the world. Children have turned on their parents; and parents harm their children. The only answer is for Africans to free themselves from the tentacles of Eurocentricism and Westernism, and return to the indigenous source so that they can become who they are meant to be.

The colonial legacy is not only Eurocentric, it is patriarchal. White women and even fewer African women feature in texts from the 18th century – and when they do, they are generally misrepresented. For example, the young Khoi woman Krotoa, who was inducted in the household of Dutch colonist Jan van Riebeeck at the age of 11, has been portrayed as an uncultured, uncivilised individual with no history. Yet, it seems, she had the knack of learning multiple languages – so may be more accurately represented in the annals of history as a pioneering linguist. The achievements of Anna de Koningh, a freed slave who became the first African woman to own Groot Constantia, have also been generally ignored or distorted by the standard historical narrative.

Similarly, the patriarchal nature of the ANC's foundation and the historical record that emerged on this basis have marginalised the significant role played by women in the organisation's evolution and the broader history of liberation. The achievements of Nokutela Dube, who was the wife of John Dube, the ANC's first president have been overshadowed in the historical record by those of her husband.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the important political role of Madie Hall-Xuma, who was married to Alfred Xuma, another ANC president, has hardly been noted in South Africa, although, as an American, she is well remembered in the history of the Diaspora.

Meanwhile, the country's museums have played a significant part in perpetuating the epistemic violence against, and erasure of, African culture and history. Objects were looted from graves; things were brought into museum collections and classified in a limited, ethnographic way, depicting African cultures as static and backwards. Artefacts were removed from their social and cultural contexts and, stripped of their specific meaning and instead presented as samples from a single imagined homogenous "African" culture. For example, beadwork would be classified as examples of African "adornment", ignoring the significance of how the particular beads had been chosen and placed to deliver a message as part of the social history of the culture in which this work was produced. In an effort to restore dignity and authenticity to a number of such exhibits, Iziko invited San people from the Kalahari to its archives so that they could redefine objects that had been assigned particular meanings and functions by previous curators.

The struggle against unremembering is a continuous one. Those women who are engaged in it need continuously to reflect on whether and how they may nevertheless be promoting patriarchy. Scholars of Afro-centrism, such as myself, need continuously to reflect on the authenticity of their practice so that the perspectives, experience and values of Africans are presented in a way that does justice to those who came before.

Iziko produced a special mobile exhibition for this conference, which may be the first time that it has taken its materials and placed them on display in a public space among the communities it is supposed to serve. For the future, pressure to produce and promote a more democratic, authentic history of South Africa may be fostered through the enactment of greater solidarity between activists in the public sphere and individuals such as myself who, otherwise, are navigating quite lonely journeys in colonial institutions such as Iziko.



#### 11.4 Feminist unity comes through diversity<sup>62</sup>

Contemporary activists and thinkers have a tendency to present themselves as the standard-bearers of women's struggles, paying scant regard to the crucial roles played in the continent's liberation efforts by African warrior

<sup>61</sup> See above, section 3.4 on "Documenting indigenous knowledge in the Western Cape".

<sup>62</sup> This section is based on an address delivered by Precious Banda, Young Communist League of South Africa (YCLSA), at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.

queens and prominent 20th century activists, such as Charlotte Maxeke and Lillian Ngoyi. The contributions of such women should be acknowledged in defiance of a patriarchal version of history that seeks to erase the value and existence of women's contributions. To this end, their names should be engraved in the built environment, with buildings, airports, institutions, street and towns being named after them, as is already the case for men. In this way, the example of these women may always be presented to the current younger generation of women activists.

In this context, it is important also to acknowledge the importance of the ANC Women's League, which is the largest women's organisation in the Global South, and the Progressive Women's Movement of South Africa (PWMSA), which was forged across party lines, in mobilising African women. For example, the ANC Women's League, alongside senior women from a number of other African countries, including Malawi, Namibia and Tanzania, played a significant role in supporting the 2021 launch of a new movement bringing together young women from liberation and opposition parties across the continent. The engagement of these older women leaders indicated their deep concern about the direction of the gender machinery and gender struggles to which they had dedicated their lives. They were investing in the younger generation and in the process of transferring the baton, fostering among this cadre of new leaders a sense of their now-heightened responsibility for the future welfare of women.

The present conference has brought together women from various South African political formations, including the Democratic Alliance (DA), the Inkatha Freedom Party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the ANC in the struggle against patriarchy. It has shown that, notwithstanding the variety of political opinions in the room, women can unite in this struggle – and that, indeed, unity is found in diversity rather than in uniformity, as women establish consensus on a number of key issues. There is no expectation that individual women should abandon their political beliefs, which are, anyway, an important aspect of their identities.

However, such was not the case in the national mobilisation against gender-based violence, which culminated in a number of events under the banner #TheTotalShutdown on 1 August, 2022. Many activists were involved in organising the main march that was planned for that day, but there was an underlying stigmatisation of women who were from political formations – as if this were incompatible with participation in a civil-society movement. Then as the day of the march approached, there was an instruction from the organisers that those participating should not wear party regalia, which was met by a counter proposal proclaiming "one message, many voices". Under the counter-proposal, it was argued that women, who are raped in whatever they may be wearing at the time, should be allowed to march in clothes – whether those be the dresses they wear to church, the traditional outfit of a sangoma, or the T-shirt of their political party – in which they feel comfortable and which reflect their own lived experiences. In addition, ANC members participating in the mobilisation proposed that since it was their party that had won the popular vote, they should be the ones leading the march on the Union Buildings where the country's leaders, who are ANC deployees, govern. The result was that a number of different kinds of mobilisation and marches with various demands were held that day – although the core message being disseminated was the same.

Clearly, a number of mistakes were made as part of this mobilisation and there should be reflection on these so that they are not repeated and greater consensus can be mobilised next time. In particular, due consideration should be paid to ensure that women do not contribute to the displacement or othering of other women and the silencing of their voices. Everybody involved, particularly African women, must be able to feel that they are making a valid contribution and a significant difference in the fight for the recognition and the equality of women.

## SESSION 12: CLOSING

### 12.1 Change can come through collaboration among civil society, UN Women and the government<sup>63</sup>

A recent UN report noted that it could take almost 300 years to achieve gender equality at the current rate. However, for many activists it feels as if it may take a lot longer than that in a context in which there are so many troubles, such as climate change, inequality and violent extremism. Nevertheless, women in solidarity can achieve anything if they set their minds to it. When women's movements fully embrace their role; when the UN, in the form of UN women, plays the role that is expected of it; and when the government leads as governments should, then there can be great progress for women and humanity as a whole.

The campaigns of South African women, including the recent #TheTotalShutdown movement, have indicated the ways in which they can find strength in their diversity instead of allowing it to divide them; and how strength can be fostered through an intergenerational mission in which young women and men learn from the stories and struggles of older women, as well as of those who went before. In this regard, digital tools offer important opportunities for entrenching the legacy of women's engagement in the drive for gender equality and broadcasting it more widely – for example, through TED Talks and podcasts, or via YouTube.

From a strategic point of view and in an effort to achieve a significant impact, the women's movement would be well advised to select and address key crises, such as those presented by the high rates of HIV among young women in South Africa and southern Africa; and the present epidemic of violence against women and girls in the region. In fact, there are already a number of tried-and-tested ways for effectively addressing violence against women and girls; and the vectors for the transmission of HIV to young women. In both cases, the problem originates in social norms, which can be changed. UN Women knows how to work in this area, as does South African civil society. However, the women's movement; the UN; and the government will need to collaborate on these issues if they are to achieve the seismic change that is required.

UN Women is a relatively small, weak, under-financed component of the UN system and can be quite marginalised. In this respect, it faces similar challenges to those faced by women's movements, with which it has much in common. Accordingly, its modus operandi is to place itself at the service of local women and, acting in solidarity, to try and meet their needs as these are expressed by them.

Poverty has a woman's face; oppression has a woman's face; inequality has a woman's face. In the context of a shrinking space for feminism at the global level and a number of crises relating to climate change; economic volatility and inequity; and rising conservatism, women in civil society and the UN must come together strategically to leverage their power to maximum effect.

### 12.2 Concluding remarks<sup>64</sup>

Isisele Senyathi will be open to every woman on the continent wishing to tell their story; and digital platforms are being established to ensure such reporting.

A key aim of the hub is to enable expression of the emotions that shape women's lived experiences – the structure of feeling that the mere completion of questionnaires can never capture. At the same time, the women's accounts will be compared with the historical record as this is contained in the archives so that the accuracy of both may be better ascertained.

Meanwhile, the task of recording women's experiences can start at once with students leading the way on campus by creating spaces and establishing mechanisms for such reporting. The stories may not be that complex – for example, the tale may be as simple as a student reporting that they go to bed hungry. In this regard, one of the goals of the initiative is that an authentic record of women's lived experiences informs policy-making and interventions so that these address actual needs more effectively.

<sup>63</sup> This section is based on an address delivered by Aletta Miller, UN Women Representative in South Africa Multi Country Office, at the launch of the Isisele Senyathi hub at CPUT in September 2022.









Ilitha Labantu and the  
African Women's Independent Forum  
would like thank our sponsors  
UN Women's Multi-County Office, the  
Cape Peninsula University of Technology,  
our guest speakers and our delegates.

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## OUR CONTACT DETAILS:

### GUGULETHU MAIN OFFICE

**Address:** Ny 22 No 26a Guguletu

**Tel:** 021 633 2383 or 021 633 3048

**Email:** admin@ilithalabantu.org

### PHILIPPI MAGISTRATES COURT OFFICE

**Address:** Philippi Magistrates Court,  
Cwangco Cres, Philippi, Cape Town

**Tel:** 021 372 0901

**Email:** admin@ilithalabantu.org

### KHAYELITSHA SATELITE OFFICE

**Address:** Shop No 5 Isivivana Centre,  
8 Mzala Street

**Tel:** 021 361 0078

**Email:** Khayelitsha@ilithalabantu.org

Visit: [www.ilithalabantu.org.za](http://www.ilithalabantu.org.za)