



In Conversation

The personal remains political:
Elaine Salo speaks with Rhoda Kadalie

Rhoda Kadalie is a former Human Rights Commissioner and currently the Executive Director of Impumelelo Innovations and Awards Trust, a South African organisation that identifies and rewards projects that alleviate poverty in partnership with public sector enterprises. Rhoda was a visible, courageous and critical presence at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) during the turbulent 1980s, when the university had a strong anti-apartheid profile. Elaine Salo spoke to her about women's activism and the beginnings of women's studies at UWC during those watershed years.

Elaine Salo: Rhoda, what first planted the seeds of feminism in your consciousness?

Rhoda Kadalie: For sixteen years, I was the only daughter in a big family with seven brothers. I think that my father valued me as much, if not more than my brothers because I was the only girl. Ours was not a patriarchal family – my father treated me with complete respect. Consequently, once I was at school and university, I did not tolerate any form of discrimination.

ES: Tell me about your early years, growing up.

RK: We lived in District Six first. We then moved to Mowbray but later, with the Group Areas Act of 1951 [which declared Mowbray, along with other suburbs, for “Whites Only”], we were evicted from there. While we were living in Mowbray, I remember two incidents that made racism real to me. I had white friends with whom I used to play with in the area. A Minister in the apartheid government passed one day and saw us playing with white children, and he wanted to know who we were. I suspect he had a lot to do with my family's forced removal from Mowbray. I also remember walking home with a little white girl whose name was Paddy. I remember saying “Goodbye, Paddy” to her one afternoon as her mother watched us. Her mother promptly said, “That's Miss Paddy to you.” Another incident that I recall was the day the children's play park near our house suddenly had a “Whites Only” sign put up, and I could not play there any longer. I asked my mother why, and I remember the pain in her face as she explained to me why I could not play there.

Racism is rooted deep in our psychology in South Africa. We moved to Athlone [the area set aside for people classified “Coloured” under the Group Areas Act]. I began high school at Harold Cressy High School and encountered teachers such as Helen Keys, who was a member of the Teachers League of South Africa. They worshipped my grandfather, Clements Kadalie. Helen Keys taught me all about my grandfather.

ES: Your father did not tell you that your grandfather was the famous black trade unionist?

RK: My father did not talk to us about my grandfather because he did not like his own father. My grandfather can be described as the Allan Boesak of the 1920s. While he was this important labour activist, he was also something of a womaniser.

ES: Tell me about your mother.

RK: My mother was what I would call the complete feminist. She had to cope with so many sons, and had to compete with God and the church for my father’s attention, so she became a fighter for her own rights very early on in her marriage. She taught my brothers that they were also expected to perform domestic chores and to be independent. There were no gender stereotypic gender roles in our family when I was growing up. My mother made it clear that she wasn’t willing to be anyone’s slave. She worked as well. She and my father asserted their rights and responsibilities as equal parents. My mother was one of thirteen siblings, and I think that she learned to assert herself because she came from an impoverished matrifocal household. This is typical of a culture of poverty.

ES: How did you relate to your mother being such an assertive woman?

RK: As a young girl, I wanted a more conventional mother. I thought that my mother was too assertive – I wanted a more subservient mother, just like my friends’ mothers. Her assertiveness is one of the qualities I have inherited from her, and that I value as part of my own character. When I became a woman and had a relationship with a man, I understood where my mother’s assertiveness and sometimes her animosity towards men came from.

Once I was in my own relationship, I learned how gender roles become sharply and clearly defined. I married an unconventional man. My ex-husband, who is German, and I were very determined to remain in South Africa and resist a system that said that our relationship was illegal.¹ I remember us saying “This is something we must fight consciously. We won’t leave the country like so many of our friends.” Race was never an issue for us. Race was not our issue, but their issue. We were constantly stared at, we couldn’t be anonymous. But we didn’t



shy away from the race issue. His parents opposed our relationship. I found that I was comfortable with him alone, without his family. We could also confront the race issue regarding our relationship because we were located within a highly politicised, safe community at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in the 1980s. We had Afrikaner colleagues at UWC who also challenged the racist system. Their friendships also facilitated inter-race relations at the university. Pushing the race boundaries was part of being the challenge of being at UWC. ES: What does your daughter Julia think about your activist role?

RK: I think that Julia respects and admires those qualities of my character that make me an activist for women's human rights. She learned to think critically about us, our family identity, and my role as a single mother very early on in her life. She resented the fact that single parents were always seen as something negative or incomplete by her teachers and at the schools she attended. She would talk to me about how many of her friends who came from two-parent families displayed pathological behaviour. She said that the school system should begin talking about two-parent families being negative!

ES: Do you think that political activists developed a consciousness about women's rights in the liberation struggle?

RK: I was politicised during the time of the South African Students' Organisation (SASO)² and its ideology of Black Consciousness (BC). This was before the era of the United Democratic Front (UDF).³ According to BC, gender was not the primary issue. Even in the 1980s, when the UDF came into being, women's liberation was seen as divisive of national liberation.

This belief was also dominant within the ANC. Yet at the same time, some women in the liberation movement were raising issues about women's rights. Within the ANC, they were fighting against sexual harassment in the ANC Quattro camps. A report was written about this issue, but wasn't released. At the Malibongwe conference and a series of other women's conferences during the 1980s, women's reproductive rights were placed on the agenda. Then a whisper campaign began about the need to raise women's issues.

I was part of the group who met with the ANC women in Harare in the early 1990s. There I learned that women in exile had written reports about sexual harassment, but that the ANC leadership stopped the release of these reports because they were embarrassed. There was a rise of feminist consciousness within the ANC. Yet even at CODESA,⁴ a woman like Frene Ginwala didn't want the right to abortion enshrined in a new Constitution. But feminists believe that women have a right to bodily integrity.



There was a tendency within the ANC Women's League not to talk about feminist issues explicitly. When I raised these issues at the Harare meeting, I was called "that little revolutionary". What the older ANC women in exile found was that the younger women who were politicised in 1976 were talking a different language. These older women were terrified of the radical language of the younger women. The former came from a Christian Nationalist movement and used old-style Communist rhetoric.

ES: What is your opinion of womanism as a black version of feminism?

RK: I think that womanism was a reaction to the radical feminism of women like Andrea Dworkin. Sexuality and rights to women's bodily integrity are now central to radical feminism in post-apartheid South Africa. Womanism has its roots in those African-American women who could not gang up against their own men. I witnessed this talk in the US and I was put off by it.

I wondered how we could be defending "our men" at a place like UWC, where women were being sexually harassed and beaten across the breasts if they did not take part in class boycotts. The male students would say that women had no right to complain – they should consider it a privilege to suffer for the struggle. They said that women's rights should be sacrificed in the name of a unified struggle. I and some of my women colleagues at UWC were outraged by this, and said so. We were promptly labelled bourgeois Western feminists by some of our male comrades. Being labelled in this manner did not stop me from complaining about the harassment that women were subjected to on campus and in the residences, as well as the number of rapes that were occurring. The rector of the campus at the time said that rape was endemic to our society, and that the university administration could not call in the apartheid police for rape, only for murder. I asked why were they distinguishing between crimes of gender and other crimes? Why privilege murder over rape? They were both serious crimes.

The struggle for women's rights to be recognised as human rights was devalued all the time in the name of the anti-apartheid struggle. In the UDF, the argument was "We can't let the enemy know that some of us are committing gender-based crimes of violence." This was similar to those who were pushing the womanist position in the US, using the issue of racial solidarity – "we can't let the white man know".

This works against women in the same way that the argument works against black people. It weakens our movements. The strength of the anti-apartheid movement was that it opposed the violation of black people's human



rights. When I was in the Human Rights Commission during the Mandela presidency, I argued that the potential contradictions and the difference between cultural specificities and human rights should become a key area of our work. What should the Human Rights Commission's position be if aspects of customary law harmed women's human rights? Is customary law intrinsically free from human rights violations? These were issues that my students raised in my classes when we first began teaching gender to undergraduates.

ES: How did you come to learn of these cases of gender-based violence on campus?

RK: I sat on the student tribunal where these cases were heard. Some of the male students would defend their acts of rape by arguing, "Oh she comes from my home village. Now that she is here at university, she has become so uppity, that's why I beat her up."

However, some of the women were also complicit in condoning these acts of violence. They would brag about being beaten up, saying that this was proof that "he owns me, he loves me". The message that was going out placed women in a double bind: violence against women meant men's ownership of them. These men were effectively saying, "We beat those we value and treasure." This also explains why some women found this interpersonal violence acceptable. This is why people tolerate gender-based violence.

Also, many of these women experienced gender equality for the first time when they came to university. After examinations, when the results were posted on the noticeboards, some of the women who achieved the highest marks would erase their results. They did not want the fact that they were often better students than the men to become public.

We used the undergraduate classroom to raise gender awareness amongst our students. So, for example, students would engage with the nature-nurture debate on gender issues by asking whether all men are born rapists. (*Laughter.*) Similarly, we asked whether Lorena Bobbitt's act of cutting off a man's penis was equal to men's rape of women. When the UDF was founded (and most of our students were members), it raised all sorts of race and gender contradictions for them, which we discussed openly in class.

ES: Do you think that this gender awareness is present in our current government?

RK: I was shocked at the patriarchal attitudes among some of the ANC male leaders in the 1990s. This is still present in government today. The government pays lip service to gender ideology, but when women become powerful in



government, there is a tension between the expectation that they will be beholden to the male leaders who put them there, and using their power to uplift the more marginal groups in society. What we see is that these women leaders use the power they have in government to enhance their own individual positions at the cost of the weak, poor women and the marginalised in our society. Women in the Cabinet won't put gender interests above party interests. Elsewhere in the world you see women in politics being able to stand together and push a gender agenda across parties. For example, in the Scandinavian countries, women senators form cross-party alliances. Similarly, in Botswana, you find a cross-party women's caucus.

The irony about South Africa is that in 1995 we had a cross-party women's caucus, but it fractured within months of being formed. It dissolved around a number of issues. One of those was the *Sarafina* HIV/AIDS musical debacle.⁵ The Joint Standing Committee on the Improvement of Quality of Life and Status of Women under the leadership of Pregs Govender felt castigated by the ANC because it dared to question the state on armaments versus HIV/AIDS expenditure. Many women did not dare hold ANC party members accountable for spending money on arms instead of HIV/AIDS prevention, and for budgetary underspending. Once again, women were expected to place political party interests above that of women's interests across the political spectrum. In Sweden, a fund called the Women's Development Fund is dedicated to strengthening women's leadership in parliament. That is what we should have here.

ES: You were central to developing a gender-sensitive governance policy at the University of the Western Cape. Can you tell me more about that process?

RK: We were the first university campus in South Africa to develop a sexual harassment policy. At UWC, I was part of a group of women who identified women's rights as human rights on campus. We examined the social position on women on campus closely – we wanted equal rights for women, so we set out to develop an anti-rape and sexual harassment policy, we won maternity and paternity benefits for academics, and a gendered housing subsidy policy that provided academic women with the same resources with which to obtain housing as their male colleagues.

I was able to push for these issues because I was nominated to a number of governing committees at UWC, as well as the senate. I was able to obtain an intimate working knowledge of how the university was governed, about the networks and the people who sat on these committees. So I was able to work



with colleagues on these bodies, and lobby for improving the status of women on campus. On the academic front, we also pushed for the promotion of women in the academic hierarchy. At the time, I think there was a single white woman professor on campus.

After we raised these issues, many opportunities opened up for women to improve their academic qualifications, or to take time off and do research, write and publish at universities abroad, such as in the US and in the Netherlands. For instance, I remember being invited to bring five black women academics to a conference in Utrecht to present papers. I selected five women scholars who were academics and activists at the time – Yvonne Mokgoro, Desiree Lewis and Desiree Daniels from the University of the Western Cape and Nazeema Mohamed from the UDF youth movement. We read each other's drafts and edited them in preparation for the conference. Desiree Daniels' paper focused on women in the labour movement, Desiree Lewis wrote about black women in South African literature, Yvonne Mokgoro wrote about gender and the law in South Africa, while my own paper dealt with the issue of sexual harassment and rape on the university campus. Our papers were very well received at the conference. I remember Rene Rimkins, one of the discussants, remarking about the fact that we insisted that sexual violence be looked at in relation to poverty. In Holland, they explained sexual violence in terms of psychoanalysis. At the conference we married the two positions and thought creatively about how sexual violence could be analysed through the dual lenses of psychoanalysis and socio-economic factors. The conference proceedings were published in a volume edited by Rene Rimkins.

While there, we also encountered South Africans, such as Thelma Ravel, who had originally gone to Holland as exiles, but who now chose to stay there. ES: That was in the early 1990s. Why does it seem as though we've lost our momentum on these projects at university campuses like UWC, such as supporting women's professional career tracks in the academy, raising gender consciousness around rape and gender-based violence, and critically reviewing gender and race in the academy?

RK: This is part of the problem of locating projects such as these in the person of one or two individuals. When they leave, sometimes the momentum has to be rebuilt. I knew UWC intimately; I sat on all the university governing committees; I was the only black woman to have a seat on the university senate at the time. I knew all the members and could use my networks to lobby for issues such as improving the conditions of employment for academic women. Some



of the white women who took over the Women and Gender Studies programme after me were professional academics and did not come from an activist background. They were newcomers to politics. Many of them had no resonance with grassroots peoples' issues.

There were a few white women who were intimately engaged at the activist level in the university community and outside – Karen Chubb, Miki Flockeman, Viv Bozalek, to name a few. They quietly did the hard work of raising awareness about the injustice of rape and sexual harassment on campus.

The university rector at the time was reluctant to provide support for a campaign against rape. He said that the university could not afford the bad publicity if we had a public anti-rape campaign. He said that already the university was being seen in the media as lowering academic standards (because of its open admissions policy and anti-apartheid stance). The anti-rape campaign was seen as being too closely associated with white liberalism, so the politicisation of the personal, ethical issues fell by the wayside.

After I left to become a Human Rights Commissioner, other women at UWC fought to institutionalise and professionalise these gender projects (such as the Gender Equity Unit and the Women and Gender Studies programme) through the university structures. Women like Shirley Walters and Naseema Badsha recommended establishing the Gender Policy Action Committee (GPAC), which would consist of senior women academics who would have oversight of the gender projects. They applied successfully to Senate for the recognition of the GPAC. However, the GPAC appointed my successor, who had no activist background, no institutional vision for nurturing and supporting gender awareness; she did not understand the intimate link between activism out there and the professional work in the academy.

So things begun unravelling. There was no understanding of how and why women and gender studies should be linked to the activism of the Gender Equity Unit (GEU), or that activism informs the nature of the academic programme. That is why we ran the Women and Gender Studies Winter School – to offer programmes to women outside the academy such as NGO workers and women in the various professions. That's why I taught gender courses at the Workers College. This break between activism and the academic programme, together with the racial divide between the directors of the WGS and the GEU led to a complete split between the two entities. When I was Director of the GEU and the Women and Gender Studies programme, I remember the funding group from SIDA (Swedish International Development Agency) finding my



ability to challenge the sexism at UWC quite daring. But that is what's required – we need to see the possibilities for activism at tertiary institutions. It shouldn't only be about professional and career advancement.

One of the gains of our activism at UWC was that gender awareness was mainstreamed. So, for example, gender became part of courses in Sociology and Anthropology taught by women like yourself and Diana Gibson; and in languages and literature spearheaded by Miki Flockemann, Desiree Lewis, and Christelle Stander; in adult education programmes where Professor Shirley Walters drove it; it was part of the coursework in the Economics faculty, with work done by women like Cheryl Hendrick; Sandy Liebenberg was doing gender work in the Community Law Centre; Anne Marie Wolpe took it up in the Education Policy Unit; and Desiree Daniels in labour studies. In order to drive a gender-awareness programme in tertiary institutions, you need women working across all faculties.

ES: Yet in South Africa, race still continues to divide women in the academy doing women and gender studies work. There's this continued stereotype of white women writing, black women fighting. The issues of representation and voice continue to bedevil us. Where do we go from here?

RK: We now need truth-telling for women and about women working on university campuses in order to get beyond this divide. This subterranean battle leads to division. We need truthful acknowledgement of these divides. When I was at UWC, there was always the issue of white women having very little in common with the black women students they taught. Black women resented that. We cleaned up the university campus so that career-minded women academics can now say "I am a Professor at the University of the Western Cape" with pride. Some of them are opportunists who even take false credit for the cutting-edge policies that many of us academic activists fought for and won. Yet these achievements were the work of those rare women who quietly got on with the job and fought for these policies. We need a truth-telling on these issues so we can get beyond the racial divide and the professional academic-activist divide.

ES: Rhoda, thank you for reminding us again of the passion and the spirit that inspired women like you to fight for gender equality at tertiary institutions so that women like myself could benefit from it. We cannot take these struggles for granted. It is clear that in many ways we need to relearn the lessons from the women's rights activists of the 1980s, so that we can not only protect the gains that have been so hard fought and won, but face the existing challenges



(such as rape, the threat of HIV/AIDS and sexual harassment) that face new generations of women students at universities around the country. Thank you very much for sharing your experiences with us.

Footnotes

- 1 Under apartheid, sexual relationships and marriages between whites and blacks were forbidden.
- 2 The anti-apartheid South African students' movement founded in the 1970s by Steve Biko on the principles of Black Consciousness.
- 3 A mass-based coalition of various anti-apartheid organisations with a variety of political affiliations.
- 4 The coalition of South African political organisations that negotiated the transition from apartheid to a democratic state.
- 5 Millions of rand were controversially spent on staging a musical that supposedly offered AIDS education.



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