

The 50th anniversary of the 1956 Women's March: a personal recollection

Elinor Sisulu



“Now that you have tampered with the women, you have struck a rock.”

Fifty years ago, this was the rallying cry for 20 000 South African women protesting the apartheid regime's imposition of hated laws requiring black women to carry passes in urban areas. On that extraordinary day, 20 000 women from all over South Africa watched their chosen representatives Lilian Ngoyi, Rahima Moosa, Helen Joseph and Sophie Williams deposit thousands of petitions to the Minister of Native Affairs at the Union Building, the seat of the apartheid government. For a full thirty minutes, 20 000 women stood in silence in the forecourt of the building, before addressing the then South African prime minister J. G. Strijdom in song: “Strijdom, you have tampered with the women, you have struck a rock!” They then dispersed with quiet dignity, conscious that they had made history. The image of the event was burned into the consciousness of millions of women and men. It inspired future generations of women to celebrate 9 August every year as South African Women's Day.

Fifty years later, on 9 August 2006, thousands of South African women gathered in Pretoria to recreate that historic march from Strijdom Square in central Pretoria (to be fittingly renamed Lilian Ngoyi Square after the legendary leader) to the Union Building, now the seat of the democratically elected African National Congress government. I was privileged to be one of those women. Sandwiched between the Limpopo government delegation, a Palestinian solidarity group and a contingent of young professional women from an investment company, I could not help marvelling at the contrast between the two marches, and feeling profoundly moved.

The 1956 march was a serious affair in which the marchers walked with grim determination, many of them having literally risked life and limb to get to Pretoria. My mother-in-law, Albertina Sisulu, recounts how she started her day at 2am distributing train tickets to women who were leaving from Phefeni station in Soweto. Many women paid their own way, some even selling their furniture to raise funds for the journey. I recalled with pride and deep affection

Ruth Mompati's account of how in the planning stages, some male leaders in the ANC had resisted the idea of the march, arguing that the women did not have the capacity to embark on such a huge undertaking. Walter Sisulu, then ANC Secretary-General, stepped in and said with confidence that the women would succeed. It is not easy for generations who have not lived under apartheid to have a sense of what a dangerous and forbidding place Pretoria was for black people at the time; the courage it took to gather at the citadel of apartheid was truly astounding.

Those walking in the footsteps of those brave women did so with a sense of joy that many of their dreams and aspirations had come to fruition. South Africa is a world leader when it comes to representation of women at the highest levels of government. Today, women make up a third of the country's parliamentarians, and 43% of President Thabo Mbeki's cabinet, holding key government posts such as Foreign Affairs and Minerals and Mining. The deputy-president, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, is a woman, as are more than 50% of the country's ambassadors, 44% of provincial premiers, 33% of Cabinet members, and more than 25% of local councillors. In 1997, the governing African National Congress (ANC) resolved that 33% of its electoral candidates would be women. Today, with women constituting 55% of the national electorate, the ANC is pressing for 50% female representation in local government elections later this year. South Africa's new Constitution itself guarantees the equality of women before the law. Most importantly, the dreaded pass laws have been relegated to the distant past; the daughters of the 1956 veterans can move freely across the length and breadth of the country, have the legal right to live anywhere they like, and enjoy freedom of speech unrivalled on the African continent.

In the week preceding 9 August, I received a call from the South African Revenue Services (SARS). I reacted the way most normal people would on hearing from the tax office – I was shaking in my boots. Trepidation turned to amused surprise when I was invited to speak at the SARS Women's Day celebrations to be held on 8 August. It turned out to be a memorable and educational experience. Sitting in the huge marquee set up for the event, I could not think of any other country where hundreds of tax officials and workers would dedicate time to watching a large-screen documentary on the historic march. The audience dissolved into laughter at the image of the feisty veteran Frances Baard proclaiming: "We had to protest the pass laws. After all, what is a pass? It can't sweep the floors. It can't clean the house. It can't go out to work and support the family. It is just a piece of rubbish!" They sat in awe as tribute was paid to



the leader of the march, the legendary Lilian Ngoyi, with one of the veterans commenting: “That woman had no fear, she was afraid of no-one.”

In my address, I was able to comment on SARS’ comprehensive set of strategies to facilitate the career progression of women in the organisation, especially at executive and senior management levels. Overall representation of women in SARS stands at 65%. Strictly speaking, we should be talking about the “tax woman” rather than the “tax man”! I added a cautionary note, however: the considerable achievements of equality before the law and greater representation of women in government, civil society and the corporate world cannot overshadow the realities of disturbing levels of violence against women, the impact of the HIV/Aids pandemic on women’s lives, and the grinding poverty which continues to characterise and circumscribe the lives of the majority of women in South Africa.

The placards displayed at the commemorative march gave an idea of the struggles in which women are still engaged – struggles for treatment for Aids sufferers, the battles against violence (especially rape) and poverty. But nothing could dampen the celebratory mood, and the festive atmosphere persisted as we entered the grounds of the Union Building. Women relaxed on rugs or deck chairs, opened food baskets, and enjoyed the music of the singer Nothembi, wearing colourful Ndebele garb.

Unfortunately my enjoyment of the event was abruptly brought to an end by the realisation that the Vice-President of Zimbabwe, Joyce Mujuru, was one of the guests of honour. I was profoundly distressed that this woman, a central figure in a government that has refused to take responsibility for or address the untold damage and destruction of Operation Murambatsvina, should be rubbing shoulders with some of the great veterans of the 1956 march. Throughout this horrifying government blitz, euphemistically referred to by its proponents as “Operation Clean Up”, this woman showed no concern or mercy for the plight of over 700 000 people, mostly women, who lost their homes and businesses. She did not even protest the bulldozing of an orphanage in Hatcliffe settlement on the outskirts of Harare. She has done nothing to prevent the ongoing harassment of women vendors in the informal sector, and the ongoing destruction of homes by the police and army unity. She has supported the denial of basic freedoms to women throughout her political career, and has vehemently and publicly opposed the principle of women’s equality to men. Her presence as a guest of honour at the 9 August celebration stands as an affront not only to all those women who lost their homes (and in some



cases, their lives) as a result of Operation Murambatsvina; it is an affront to the memory of those brave veterans of the 1956 march – a march that would have been illegal and subject to brutal repression had it been attempted in present-day Zimbabwe. Regardless of their gender, leaders whose actions have caused untold harm and suffering to the poorest and most vulnerable women in their countries should be held accountable, not feted as guests of honour.

I left the celebration in disgust and decided to console myself by paying tribute to the courageous women of Zimbabwe who struggle daily for the basic freedoms that South African women enjoy as a matter of course. To those who saw fit to invite Joyce Mujuru to South Africa as an honoured “sister”, spare a thought for award-winning human rights lawyer, Beatrice Mtetwa, a petite yet powerful dynamo who fearlessly continued to defend human rights activities and victims and survivors of state-sanctioned violence even after she herself was assaulted by police. Spare a thought for Trudi Stevensen, the MDC member of parliament who, in the parliamentary debate on Operation Murambatsvina, poured scorn on claims by her ruling party counterparts that the purpose of the blitz was to restore dignity to the people. In a fiery speech, she passionately outlined the extreme suffering inflicted on the people of her constituency caused by the destruction of their homes and businesses.

Spare a thought for the countless women displaced by the operation, desperately trying to eke out a living in remote rural areas in Zimbabwe, or as illegal immigrants in neighbouring countries. Finally, spare a thought for Sheba Dube, a great Zimbabwean heroine who died tragically in February this year. Sheba was one of the few women with the courage to speak out about the rape that she experienced at the hands of Zimbabwe government soldiers during the Gukurahundi campaign of torture and murder in the 1980s. Sheba overcame this trauma by throwing herself into a life of community activism. At the time of her death, she was running a support programme for orphans through the Providence Orphan’s Project. Sheba is a heroine in the mould of the great women who led the 1956 march. Wherever you are, my sister Sheba, you are the wind beneath our wings. It is women like you whom we should be honouring at this momentous moment in the history of the struggle for women’s rights in Africa. *Igama lamakhosikazi, malibongwe.*



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