

## In Conversation

As a woman [in politics], you have to work twice as hard as the average man:  
Zukiswa Mqolomba speaks to Awino Okech

Zukiswa Mqolomba is the immediate former president of the Students Representative Council (SRC) at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The SRC at UCT is 101 years old. SRC leadership has been predominantly white and male, with very few women presidents: only ten women in total, and only three of them black. Now aged 22, Zukiswa has several years of experience in student political activism. She was the 2007 recipient of the Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence in student leadership. She is currently an honours student of labour law in the sociology department. She speaks to Awino Okech about student politics; her experiences and lessons learnt from being at the helm of an institution that is seen by many as grooming future national leadership at South African universities.

**Awino Okech:** Let us begin with your personal history. Where did you grow up?

**Zukiswa Mqolomba:** I grew up in King Williams Town, a small town in the Eastern Cape. I went to an all-girls' school, which has partly influenced the person that I am. Because I went to an all-girls' school, I don't feel as if I can't compete with men. My relationship with men isn't one of inferiority. I know that I am capable; we competed academically, socially through debating, and sometimes in sport. I know that I can engage with them at an equal level, unlike in coeducational schools where relationships are defined along romantic lines and not necessarily along competition on an equal footing. So, this gave me an advantage.

My mom is a single parent; my dad passed away when I was seven. I was raised by strong women. My grandmother was a single parent. So my notion of leadership is of female leadership because I have seen it work well; the provider, the mother, the nurturer, and the carer. Those are my influences.

AO: Tell me a little bit about your history. You say you have been active in student politics. How did that come about?

ZM: I began at Baxter Hall as head student. I was then introduced to the student parliament, and this was my entry point into student leadership at UCT. I was then appointed deputy chairperson of the student parliament. I joined the South African Students' Congress (Sasco)<sup>1</sup> in 2006. There, I was exposed to political education through meetings where you begin to understand the role of political formations within a national context, provincial, and even an institutional context. It is also an opportunity to engage with other comrades, figuring out what your role will be within the framework.

AO: Let's talk about the SRC and how it operates.

ZM: Most SRCs operate on the party-based system, meaning you vote for the party, which then deploys an individual. So, Sasco, African National Congress Youth League (Ancyl) and the Pan African Students' Movement of Azania (Pasma) are the political formations in the other institutions and they deploy cadres to the SRC. But at UCT you vote for the individual. However, there is room for political parties to operate.

AO: When you speak about political parties you mean... ?

ZM: ANC (African National Congress), DA (Democratic Alliance) and the other youth leagues of national political parties. I am a Sasco deployee. I am also an Ancyl member and a member of International Youth Leadership Africa. Luckily, I was deployed by Sasco onto the SRC. I have been in student governance for the last three years. So I moved from being a head student, sub-warden, deputy chairperson of student parliament, and deputy chair of the Humanities Student Council. I have been heavily involved in student governance here and also outside. So deploying me onto the SRC was an obvious choice because I had proven myself. At UCT, it is not really a big deal to be a woman president.

The honest truth however, is that when you engage with SRCs in other institutions, people doubt your capacity and ability to reason [as a woman]. You are seen to be too emotional and cannot participate in informal political processes such as the caucuses. The honest truth is that women are often deployed but only to be the faces; they don't participate in the informal decision-making processes. They give the good governance speech, but often they are the deputy chairperson, deputy treasurer or deputy something, if they are not doing administration or some other project-based portfolio. They are never given positions where they can lead and provide political direction – because people don't believe in them.

It is also a traditional thing [for] our men (Zulu and Xhosa) and the church, because the church does say a man is the head of the family. So they enforce the notion that men are supposed to lead and that women can't somehow, that a woman's place is in the kitchen or raising the kids. So the notion of inferiority/superiority exists. As a woman, you have to work twice as hard as the average man. You know when you go to congresses [that] men will say the most stupid things, but people will laugh and clap hands [anyway]. If it were a woman, it would be so embarrassing for her.

AO: Things like?

ZM: Silly comments . . . like you may be having a serious discussion on a political matter and they will be making jokes about it. It isn't something that is valuable in terms of enriching the discussion, but because it comes from a man, somehow it is excusable. The moment a woman makes a mess-up, immediately they will say this woman needs political education or they need to go through some women empowerment programmes. [This happens sometimes] in the Ancy and Sasco, where there is recognition that women were oppressed, [and that] it was triple oppression (woman, black and poor). In terms of their transformation programmes, women form part and parcel of those processes, but it is very conceptual and theoretical. People like to speak it and preach it but they do not necessarily want to honour it in terms of practice.

For example, the quota system: we had to fight for the quota system. Often you go to a congress<sup>2</sup> and the minimum requirement is that women should form 30% of the delegation. The men stick to the minimum, because for them, the minimum serves as the maximum ceiling. When we went to a South Africa Union of Students congress in Bloemfontein, it was indicated that out of the six delegates sent, three had to be women. Some institutions couldn't be bothered – they just brought men. Yet, the programme was very clear that you had to have three women in the delegation or there would be penalties.

Women are not taken seriously. Often they are part of people's social programmes. You go to congress and women are used to lobby other comrades. They are not part of the lobby groups or caucuses. It is only women who have proven themselves and have to have served over longer periods who have access to these structures, as opposed to men who are able to access decision-making processes rather easily.

AO: Do you see yourself as an SRC president or a woman SRC president, or do you see yourself as a youth leader? Is your gender important to what you bring to your leadership?

ZM: [laughs] I am a president. Whether I am male or female is not irrelevant because you are aware that you are seen from a deficit approach; you have to prove yourself. Sometimes you can be in a meeting with forty-year-old men discussing a labour issue on campus and you are leading the process. They will be very shocked because you are a woman and there will be resistance at first until you open your mouth and indicate that you have an understanding of the issues and this is the proposed way forward. Then you are taken seriously. So you are aware and hence have to compensate for their lack of belief in you, and prove yourself. I am a president and that's the most important thing. I am a president in context, leading leaders in a team. I am not a token representative. I was speaking to [former deputy health minister] Ms. Madlala-Routledge and she was saying to me that I have opened up opportunities for other women by doing it "well". So, often you are aware of the legacy that you are inheriting, and that which you have to leave behind.

AO: Let's shift to the campaign process. What was your experience? What were the highlights and the challenges?

ZM: I had a good support system, support from my organisation (Sasco) because they wanted a seat on the SRC; so it was in their and my interests to win the election. You have to do your homework about the Higher Education Act, you need to know what the Department [of Education] is trying to achieve, what are the issues on campus, previous SRC decisions, and come up with creative ways of tackling issues on campus. SRC work is extremely challenging, it is not like being a prefect. You have to engage the vice-chancellor as if you are equals. You have to develop principled arguments, be an intellectual, and be well read, because people won't take kindly to strikes and protests. It is cute, it's what students do but it doesn't change the mindset in relation to particular issues. Unless you convince the decision-makers that this is good not only for the students but also for UCT, chances are that you are going to fail dismally. Our objectives may be the same but one has to figure out what is the best strategy at any given time. Do you have strikes? Do you lobby already-established institutional powerhouses? Do you mobilise the masses on a particular issue, what is the best tactic for now? People have agendas and you have to be aware of them. There are opportunities for you to compromise your values. You know, I am Christian and often I struggle.

AO: Tell me more about that.

ZM: Well, for example critiquing, embarrassing or shunning the vice-chancellor. Somehow his office has been disempowered. My personal opinion

is that he was managed; he rubber-stamped decisions already made in other forums. Also his personality, as an academic he is an intellectual, but he is a soft, gentle man. He is not loud or aggressive, he isn't dictatorial and I think sometimes he plays too much of a diplomat. There are people who will assert their political decisions and if you are not conscious of the political terrain within which you are working then you are going to lose. However, I would never critique the individual. You need to deal with the issue. So if you are going to critique [the vice chancellor] you must critique the institution, its culture and its climate. You can't embarrass the man because that is not going to change anything.

AO: Do you think there is a tendency to do that? To deviate to personality rather than issue-based politics? Is it a masculine approach to leadership?

ZM: I am not sure if it is a masculine tendency or if it is comrades in general. The culture of political formations is to be militant, and you deal with the individual for some strange reason. It is not what the organisations stand for but it is the current practice, maybe because they learn it from high-level politicians. Often, people lose sight of the issue at hand and buy into power play. For me, it is not a tactic that I want to employ.

AO: How do you manage that, when you are working in an environment that endorses this as a legitimate approach to strategy-building?

ZM: I have been clear that those are not strategies that I will employ. It is not wise; it compromises my person so I am not going to do it. Then, I am seen as not being a politician, because I am taking the principled route while the average politician is seen as doing everything possible to achieve the objective. So even if the objectives are noble we will differ on the best strategy. I am too principled for my own good and I get in trouble.

I am very outspoken and when I think something is wrong, it is wrong and I am not going to change. Another example was when we had the Zimbabwe protest march to Parliament and got national coverage. It was not something that was highly supported by comrades because it was seen as standing up against a national position. Our focus was on human rights and the undermining of the democracy in Zimbabwe. We were not supporting the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) or Zanu-PF. We were supporting transformation of Zimbabwe generally. People were uneasy but I strongly believed in it. I was not going to back down because it was unpopular within the organisation. So you do get shunned and are seen as not being politically wised-up for standing up against the national position. Often they want you

to toe the party line, yet sometimes you can't. You have to go with what is right. It is not easy and one has to weigh the cost and benefit, one has to consult and come up with an amicable position.

AO: I hear you speak a lot about cadres and militancy within current political leadership models. I am aware that a lot of political parties in South Africa were structured in this way, due to the history of political organising in the country, but does this need revision? When I hear "cadres", I see little tin soldiers marching to the official command without missing a beat. How much dialogue exists within such a structure?

ZM: [Much laughter] I believe in the principle of being a disciplined member of the movement. You need to march the same, but with internal platforms for disagreement. Decisions must be made by consensus. The problem arises when internal dialogue is suppressed. This leads to frustration. Decisions should be influenced by the membership.

Obviously, there should be an alignment of your goals and those of the party in terms of what you want to achieve at various levels of the society, but tactics are important. It is people who govern who in turn exploit their positions in organisations for their own individual interests. I can't afford to be compromised, so if dialogue is suppressed, I will go for conviction. But if the space for dialogue exists, then I do not mind not having my way.

It is also important that it is not token dialogue. Because sometimes decisions have already been taken by high level authorities... but a false notion of dialogue and consensus building is created

AO: Earlier on you indicated that here at UCT, it is not a particularly big thing to have a woman SRC president, while in other universities this would be [a big thing]. What would you attribute this to?

ZM: The focus at UCT is on efficiency, on getting the work done, but in other universities the focus is on forging political alliances for future reference. UCT also claims to be a liberal institution where there is a platform for everyone.

In other SRCs, having a female secretary-general is the biggest [issue]. This is because the president and the secretary-general are the key decision makers in the organisation. Some comrades go as far as saying that a female will never lead them. It is shocking, in this day and age where women leadership is being preached as part of the transformation agenda, yet women are still seen as lacking something. There is a deficit approach to women's leadership, that they do not have what it takes.

The world of politics is very rough. It's dominating, it's very military as well, and women are not necessarily seen to have those characteristics, [nor as] being assertive and [capable of] making the not-so-"principled" decisions that men can. I think women are led by conscience. They are more humanitarian in their approach. That would explain why women are not seen as fitting [into this dominant model of leadership]. Yet, when a woman is assertive and strong in voicing her opinions, she is sidelined and it is said she is trying to be a man.

AO: Isn't that interesting though, that within institutions where leadership is being moulded towards future national positions, women are shunned?

ZM: It comes down to the theory and practice debate. The movement is very clear on women's emancipation – give women a chance because they can, don't look at women from a deficit approach. It is very clear, but practice is different. People are trying to further their own individual interests, and if policies do not fall in [line with] this, they do not comply with them. It is about the practice: what do men speak about when they go to clubs to decide on women leadership, are women taken seriously at those forums? Are the women present at those caucuses because that is where decisions are made, at the informal gatherings? Are women a part of those processes or are they just a part of their social programmes? It is not the movement, but individuals within the movement trying to preserve power, hence compromising the gender position.

AO: Are there strong women leaders in the other institutions?

ZM: Not many. At a conference, we would be, like, five or eighteen out of a hundred.

AO: Are there women lobby groups during the student congresses? Do you lead some sort of lobby group to ensure more women hold decision-making positions within the various SRCs?

ZM: At the Bloemfontein congress, we had a women's caucus. We got into trouble because comrades questioned how the caucus could exist outside of the current structure. Men were aggressive, saying we were out of order, and yet there are caucuses everywhere. People caucus across provinces, build personal alliances and network, but as soon as women get together, "Aha! Who do they think they are?" The problem also is that women, as I mentioned earlier, are hardly presidents or secretary-generals, yet these are the people invited to these congresses. There are women leaders but they are deputising. Hence they will never be a part of high-level forums, because they are not occupying key decision-making positions, but the administrative and service positions.

AO: I am interested in the connection between most African governments', and, in this instance the South African government's national rhetoric about "youth are the leaders of tomorrow" – and how that gap is bridged in practice. Has there been an interest from current women in government in you and your work?

ZM: There are a range of networking opportunities: conferences, congresses, symposiums, colloquiums, but it is also done directly through the AncyL and Sasco. Political formations are the way to go because they are conscious of the political struggle. At UCT, for example, we think the struggle is over and there is no need for comradeship. Yet, there is still so much on the transformation agenda. You can't achieve transformation in fourteen years. Being part of these structures makes you understand that you live in a political terrain. People have interests as individuals and as groups. People want to achieve hegemony over sectors that have access to capital. You can do it as individuals or as groups, so whether people are aware of it or not, there are interest groups everywhere.

AO: Any future political ambitions?

ZM: Not now. I have learnt and observed a lot. I now need to develop the theoretical and conceptual understanding of organisational systems. I love governance. I think it is important to run a good administration. Efficacy and efficiency are important. The plan is to go to the private sector and learn the skills of running an organisation well. Not from a profit motive, but from a service delivery motive that gives incentive to workers. I want to be involved in community work through the private sector, to channel social investment capital to the community. Then, doing the labour law work, representing the interests of the workers. I want to have a family, develop relationships and a support network. Maybe at a later stage venture into diplomatic work and international relations.

## Endnotes

- 1 SASCO has traditionally been politically allied to the African National Congress.
- 2 These are annual student congresses that bring SRCs together from universities all over South Africa.