

Gender activism at Mandela's University

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In 2014, women made up 58.3% of the total student enrolment in public higher education institutions (DHET 2014). Nelson Mandela University showed a similar trend where women constituted more than 52% of the student population since 2016. As Jacobs (1996, 167) noted in an early study on *Gender Inequality in Higher Education*, women do well in accessing higher education institutions (HEI). Women's experiences in HEIs are, however, extremely different from those of their male counterparts. In distancing this work from the binary nature of his study, I wish to state that current research has shown a more complicated correlation between diverse social identities and university experience (Bennett 2005; Clowes Ngabaza, Shefer, Strebel, 2018).

My current preoccupation is how the participation of women in HEIs, particularly Nelson Mandela University, has not translated to a significant change in professoriate demographics or increased representation of women in positions of power (Zulu 2017, 196). Since the 2008 Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education, there are still less than six women Vice Chancellors in the 23 public universities in South Africa (De la Rey 2018). In 2017, Nelson Mandela University made history by appointing black women in the three highest positions of leadership at a university. These appointments should signify progress in the advancement of gender equity and portray the image that it is now a powerful position to be a woman. However, the pervasive gender violations at Nelson Mandela University (and elsewhere) reveal a disjuncture between the representation of gender equity and on-the-ground experiences of vulnerable bodies. Various forms of harassment (sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention and gender harassment) are experienced and reported, mostly by women and a growing number of men in sexual minority groups. This has created a hostile climate for women on campus by reproducing traditional gender hierarchies. Put differently, gendered violations remind us that although much has been done to advance gender rights and opportunities, the social status of 'the feminine' remains unchanged (Crossley 2017, 30). The pervasiveness of gendered violations necessitates a much bigger question of whether Nelson Mandela University campuses are really equitable for women?

Arguably, this was a key question in the 2015/16 #MustFall movements. Students were united in the rejection of the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum and the demand for fee-free education, but student masses were fragmented along cleavages of gender and sexuality. Misalignments occurred when activists communicated the naturalisation of male dominance, misogyny and gender-based violence in HEIs. However, these campaigns, such as the #RapeMustFall and #PatriarchyMustFall, received little focus, engaged in a ‘by-the-way’ fashion instead of problems on their own (Du Preez, Simmonds and Chetty 2017, 98). The plight of intersectional feminists of #MustFall has been to bring gender on the same analytical plain as social class inequalities and race rather than variations thereof (Risman 2004, 431).

Gender activism and transformation has come under scrutiny at Nelson Mandela University following student protests around gendered violations and male dominance. In the following section, I aim to show how activism at Nelson Mandela University has always been a) gendered and b) specific to time and place. Central to interrogating activism in the context of Nelson Mandela University is theorising the legacy of Nelson Mandela in ways that demystify his roles in perpetuating gender equality, notwithstanding his efforts to advance gender-equitable ideas.

Mandela, women and gender

Nelson Mandela did a lot for women empowerment. Within the African National Congress (ANC) he advocated for gender quotas, particularly during the 1991 ANC conference (Seidman 1999). In his presidency, the representation of women in parliament increased from 2.7% during apartheid to 27% after 1994. Under his leadership, women and children received free health care, free contraceptives and access to abortion services (Naidoo 2014). Mandela continued these endeavours after 1999, with his wife, Graça Machel.

Mandela understood inequality

The first consideration is how gender concerns became part of national debates. Nelson Mandela is often lauded for understanding gender inequality and aligning with feminist ideals. As Seidman (1999, 296) proposes, part of Nelson Mandela’s willingness to hear gender matters was to link South Africa to the broader global discourse around gender inequality, which was rising. Feminist ideologies were often carried by returning exiles who had visited European and American countries. In the CODESA talks, feminist intellectuals, such as Thenjiwe

Mtiniso and Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, were critical in articulating the gendered nature of citizenship and the need for strong mass movements, like the Women's National Coalition.

Autobiographies of the stalwart reveal that the sensitivity of Nelson Mandela to the plight of women (and later gender matters) began at an early age, while he was still in rural Eastern Cape, but to the knowledge of the researcher, there was no intentional effort of transformation until 1991 where he argued for gender quotas. His appointment of Dr Frene Ginwala, as his advisor on gender matters, and later the Speaker of parliament brings into question the depth of his understanding of representation and real transformation. At the 1985 Nairobi Women's Conference, Dr Ginwala stated, "It would be suicide... for women in the antiapartheid movement to discuss gender inequalities. To do so might undermine the struggle for racial justice by creating division and rancor." (as cited in Sieman 1999, 287).

Dr Ginwala's words are evidence of how women can be loyal to their party (and leadership) to a point of dismissing the vision that they were intended to uphold. This has been repeated with President Cyril Ramaposa's appointment of Minister Bathabile Dlamini to the Women's Ministry in 2018.

The second consideration is the reliance of anti-apartheid movements on foreign donors. Intuitively, stories on black South African women receive a more sympathetic ear from donor agency personnel who themselves were influenced by the emerging feminist discourse. Therefore, there was a need for considering gender implications of all projects, interpreted to imply a need for women to participate in political organisations. I do not disregard the agency of black South African women through these considerations but seek to complicate how Nelson Mandela came to a place of knowing.

In the final consideration, I propose that Nelson Mandela's consciousness was increased by the ungended enslavement and oppression of black subjects by western civilisation. As Curry avers, "Enslaved Blacks were denied manhood and womanhood; they were defined as beasts of burden whose bodies were used at the discretion of whites" (Curry 2017, 158). Guided by this argument, I suggest that Nelson Mandela, and all black people, were feminised relative to whiteness because white civil society placed black people outside of the normative male-female binary. It follows then that all black men have the capability to understand gendered oppression on some level.

Alternative masculinity

Holland, Rabelo, Gustafson, Seabrook and Cortina (2016, 19) report that men who engage in feminist activism deviate from traditional masculine expectations. This is only partially true of Nelson Mandela who is presented as an egalitarian masculinity. Nelson Mandela was perceived to represent a 'new' masculinity that was different from the violent and authoritarian masculinity exhibited by white male politicians during apartheid. Unterhalter (2000) goes as far as describing it as heroic (cited in Morrell, Jewkes and Lindegger 2012, 17). It was publicly nonpatriarchal, advocating for men to cook and look after children (a statement Mandela made as President while visiting his home town). Relatedly, this heroic masculinity was different from the traditional, African masculinity of Bantustan leaders. In the struggle towards positive and equal gender relations, it serves feminist activism to have vivid examples of alternative masculinities. I must caution, however, that to have Nelson Mandela at the helm of gender movements implies, at least in part, a fragmentation of masculinity as a social category. It unceneters masculinity in the discussion on gender as a social structure and places an emphasis on individual men or varieties of masculinity. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 832) aver that men who are not physically abusive or violent are also complicit in maintaining masculine hegemony, including Nelson Mandela.

Mandela: gender activist?

Scholarship on Nelson Mandela's legacy is retrospective in nature and centres on how he was an activist rather than what activism is. To outline the underpinnings of activism is beyond the scope of this work, but I have briefly proposed that Nelson Mandela cannot be offered as the saviour of women. He is presumed to be a neutral, colour-blind and agendered carrier of justice that, while flawed in deeply consequential ways, should remain our primary reference point when seeking to end any inequality. As Nxumalo (2018) argues, "the legacy of Nelson Mandela is overburdened". Gender matters must contend with all the other social matters limiting thereby the potential of focused solutions and real transformation.

If Nelson Mandela University is to address male dominance, gender-based violence and its profound love for patriarchy, the sensibility of this institution cannot be staged responses as incidents arise. Between massive eruptions of protest, which are necessary, the broad gender

equality movement must sustain itself within the borders of the academy. Adopting Verta Taylor's (1989, 762) term of abeyance structures - spaces that retain challenging groups by offering alternative structures that channel the energy of a movement into another form of legitimate and acceptable activism - the broader mission of this university should be to link one upsurge of activism to another. The movement is absorbed into the abeyance structure to promote the survival of the activist network, sustain a repertoire of goals and tactics, and promote a collective identity that offers participants a sense of mission and moral purpose. Thus, a movement in abeyance becomes a cadre of activists who create or find a niche for themselves. Such groups may have little impact in their own time and may contribute, however unwillingly, to the maintenance of the status quo. However, by providing a legitimating base to challenge the status quo, such groups can be sources of protest and change.

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