

Daring to Disturb the Sounds of Silence: Tackling Gender-Based Violence in Universities

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Remembering 9 August 1956

I do not take for granted, this rare honour and opportunity to say a few words on occasion of the TUT Women's Day event. Nor can we afford to trivialise, in any shape or form, the deed that was done by the approximately 20'000 women, when they, on 9 August 1956, marched on the tower of Apartheid power - the Union Buildings.

Led by pioneering trade unionists and anti-Apartheid campaigners Lilian Masediba Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa and Sophie de Bruin (the only surviving one amongst them), the women were fearless, unstoppable and disciplined. Carrying placards with messages such as: "Passes mean destitute children" and "With passes, we are slaves" the women stood tall at the entrance of the Union Buildings. They sang militant songs and shouted revolutionary slogans. Once they had delivered their petition, at the instruction of Lilian Ngoyi, the women "stood in complete silence for a full half-hour"². That silence was only broken when Lilian Ngoyi's voice echoed from the walls of the Union Buildings as she cried out: "iA...frika!. The atmosphere seemed electrified by the power of her voice and the crowd responded: "Mayibuye"³".

What a pity that the actual speech delivered by Ngoyi on top of the Meintjieskop on 9 August 1956 has been lost⁴! In an essay profiling Ngoyi in Drum Magazine, Mphahlele described Lilian Ngoyi as a "brilliant orator"⁵. Indeed, anyone who can persuade a crowd of 20 thousand angry women to be silent for 30 minutes must necessarily possess a rare combination of charisma and gravitas.

I find it instructive that, as well as the usual militant songs, revolutionary slogans and powerful speeches, the 9th of August 1956 marchers included silence in their repertoire of strategies and tactics.

Defining Silence

The phrase, "troubling silence" or "disturbing silence" has a double meaning and I am deliberately using it, both to suggest that *silence is troubling and disturbing* and that *silence needs to be troubled and disturbed*. In the brief discussion broached below, we focus more on the *troubling silence* of the women who marched on the Union Building on 9 August 1956.

¹ Text of Speech Delivered TUT Women's Day Conference: Organised by the TUT Women's Leadership Forum on the 3rd of August 2022, Pretoria Campus. Unedited Draft: **All references and quotations of sections of this text should be properly acknowledged as the work of Tinyiko Maluleke.**

² Martha Evans, *Speeches that Shaped South Africa*, p.16

³ Martha Evans, *Speeches that Shaped South Africa*, p.16

⁴ Martha Evans, *Speeches that Shaped South Africa*, p. 15

⁵ Eskia Mphahlele, "Guts and Granite. Masterpiece in bronze", *Drum Magazine*, 1956.

Towards the end of the essay, we shall touch on the need to actively *trouble* and skilfully *read* the silences and the silencing of women.

But first, we briefly consider the *troubling silence* of the women marchers of 9 August 1956.

Troubling Silence

Silence – even *troubling silence* - is a rather odd weapon to use against a foe who is notorious for the inability to listen. The Apartheid government believed they alone had the God given right to speak and to be listened to.

They did not listen to the international community. They would certainly not listen to ‘lowly’ African women. All the more reason for the women to loudly invoke their right to be heard, in loud anger and in noisy protest, right? Wrong!

The protesting women elected to use a mixture of struggle songs, riveting words and articulate silence. When used strategically and purposefully, silence can be as effective and more troubling than noise.

The Apartheid regime was notorious for silencing dissent and ruthlessly eliminating opponents. But on 9 August 1956, the women wrested, if only momentarily, from that government, the power of silencing them in two significant ways.

Firstly, by travelling from all corners of the country, against all odds, exacerbated by much state sabotage, assembling at the foot of Meitjieskop and marching on the Union Buildings. Secondly, by turning the silencing tool of the Apartheid government against the same government, the marching women, fashioned and crafted their own silence, in their own way and in their own names. They used their silence to trouble and to disturb the Apartheid government.

There is a difference between being silenced and choosing silence, especially when the latter is done by the frequently silenced. When used as an instrument of protest, *troubling silence* does not equate to absence of either communication or meaning. It constitutes a powerful message, especially when mediated through a defiant presence combined with immaculate discipline.

For now, the crucial thing is always to distinguish between *self-imposed* and strategic silence⁶ on the one hand, and the silence that is *externally imposed*, on pain of death, on the other. The former is what we characterise as *troubling silence* while the latter is the silence that needs to be troubled, disturbed and disrupted. There are, of course, other forms of silences. There is the cultivated silence of wisdom, designed to avoid being victimised, maimed or killed. There is also the silence of humility exercised by those who wisely choose to listen ahead of talking

But I am getting ahead of myself.

⁶ See Robin Petersen, “The AICs and the TRC: Resistance Redefined”, in James Cochrane, John de Gruchy and Stephen Martin (eds). *Facing the Truth. South African Faith Communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1999, 118-121.

A Summons, Not an Invitation

When a man is invited to talk at a women's event, another form of silence should be included as an option – the silence of humility. For when a man is invited to address an exclusively women's audience, that man is not really being invited to come and make a speech – certainly not a long speech. Nor should the man in question come laden with a bag full of commendations, and recommendations.

In fact, I would suggest that when a man is invited to an occasion such as this, such an invitation is not really invitation at all. It is at best a summons, and at worst a subpoena.

It is a summons to come and account for the countless misdemeanours of men against women. It is a subpoena to come and face the charges pressed by women against all men for their litany of crimes against women.

The Woman in the Lift

When a strange man enters a lift and finds a woman already in it, she may be polite and greet him back, in spite of the clear and present danger the man presents to her, potentially and actually. She may choose to pretend to be too busy on her phone to notice him. Alternatively, she may just look the other way, endure the occasion and look forward to the moment when she will step out of the lift.

But if she could, the woman would ask the man, if he is one of the men who batter women. Or does he control women by frequently threatening to beat them up, she would have liked to ask. 'Do you rape women? Or do you merely benefit from the sick dividends that accrue to men because of what Pumla Gqola calls "the female fear factory"⁷ – a 'factory' created by men at the expense of women? Do you kill women?'. She might have asked the man what makes him and other men commit these horrendous crimes. 'How do you get yourself ready and able to rape? Do you practise ahead of time? Where and how did you learn about it? Is there a secret thrill you get from beating women?'

But no, the woman in the lift with a male stranger is likely to keep her silence – it is safer for her that way. And just before she steps out of the lift, the visibly relieved woman is likely to grin while saying: "Have a nice day sir". It does not mean she has no questions. It does not mean she has no anger. It does not mean she has no fear of men, known and unknown.

Whenever a man is invited to address women, the uncomfortable questions of the woman in the lift lurk, often in thick and deafening silence. But the woman in the lift is wise enough to know how to navigate the deadly violences of men, so that she may live to see another day⁸.

In such confined and vulnerable spaces as lifts; in such desperate places as the shop floor; and in such dangerous places as their own homes; women are wise enough to keep their

⁷ Pumla Dineo Gqola, *Rape. A South African Nightmare*. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2015, p.78

⁸ James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

“hidden transcripts” to themselves while deploying only the socially acceptable “public transcripts”⁹.

This is where many conscientisation, awareness-building and advocacy initiatives get it wrong. Many such initiatives assume that women are silent because they either do not know or they do not fully understand the nature of their oppression and disadvantage. In fact, victimised women often understand their own plight and the dangers that lurk far more than the mobilisers, activists and conscientisers who parachute in and out of their communities.

The Woman Who Feared Me

Many years ago as an associate professor on the Pietermaritzburg Campus of UKZN, I went to the local cinema to watch a film in the town of Pietermaritzburg. It was dark already when the film ended. Walking through the corridors towards the parking lot behind the shopping mall, I noticed a woman in front of me.

She looked nervously at me over her shoulders. I walked faster hoping to assure her that I meant no harm. The faster I walked towards her, the faster she walked away from me. Eventually, the woman took off her high heel shoes and broke into a sprint. And, half-walking and half-running, I shouted: “Please don’t run away, I am a professor, I mean no harm”. The more I shouted the faster she ran away from me. My ego was bruised. But for all the woman knew, her life was probably in danger.

Though I personally meant no harm she did the right thing to distrust, fear and run away from me. Do you think the woman beaters, rapists and killers come with labels written on their foreheads¹⁰?

Women Have Reason to Fear Men

Tshegofatso Pule would have been a 30-year-old mother of a two-year-old child this year. But her death and that of her unborn child were plotted and commanded by her boyfriend, Ntuthuko Ntokozo Shoba in June 2020. A week or so ago, Shoba was sentenced for life.

Karabo Mokoena would be 26 years old in 2022. But the boyfriend she loved, whom she thought loved her too, one Sandile Mantsoe, killed her, put her body in a refuse bag and dumped the body in the forest near Bramely in Johannesburg. Mantsoe was sentenced for 32 years.

On the 7th of September 2019, 19-year-old Canadian tennis player Bianca Andreescu made history. She broke the hearts of the fans of Serena Williams, when she beat Williams to win her first grand slam - the US Open title. On that very day and at that very time, South Africa was burying 19-year-old Uyinene Mrwetyana a UCT student who was raped and killed by Luyanda Botha, a post office worker inside a post office. I know this because on that day I was flipping TV channels, watching the funeral proceedings for a few minutes, and watching

⁹ James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

¹⁰ Tinyiko Maluleke, “Of Failed Men and Wounded Killers. Broadening the Quest for Liberating Masculinities”, *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa*. Vol 24, No.1, July 2018, 33-78.

the tennis match for the next few minutes. Both 19 year olds, Andreescu and Mrwetyana had so much promise. But the opportunity for Mrwetyana to fulfil her promise was snatched away from her, together with her life. Luyanda Botha received three life sentences.

In early February 2013 Anene Booysen was raped, murdered and disembowelled by Johannes Kana, a few streets from her own home, in Bredasdorp outside Cape Town. Nearly two weeks later, on Valentine's Day, in the same February 2013, Reeva Steenkamp was shot dead by her boyfriend Oscar Pistorius.

In 2014 Rachel Tshabalala was killed by her radio DJ boyfriend Donald Sebolai of Jozi Fm. In 2016, Nosipho Mandloleni was shambokked to death by her former boyfriend, who was also an ANCYL leader, Patrick Wisani.

In 2018 Noluvo Swelindawo was dragged out of her home at night by a group of men. They killed her in cold blood, simply because she was a lesbian¹¹.

On the 28th of July 2022, eight women were raped, allegedly by illegal miners.

These crimes of men against women¹² may not be explained away by the fact that GBV is a global problem. They cannot be explained by reference to a few good men who do not engage in such acts. What good have the few good men done for the South African women against whom war is being waged? These South African crimes of men against women cannot be explained in terms of race, ethnicity or class. The women killers and rapists are white, black, rich, poor, 'civilised' and uncivilised. Consider this, the one thing South Africans have in common is not the flag, the constitution or the national anthem. What South Africans have in common is gender based violence.

More than One kind of Violence

And yet we must take care not to focus solely on the pool of the blood of women who are raped and murdered at an alarming rate, in our damned country. The truth is that the GBV of the gory and bloody kind, is not the only form of violence against women. Inasmuch as Joan Armatrading¹³ sang, in her 1990 hit song, "more than one kind of love", we must hasten to add that, while all violence is violence, there is more than one kind of violence – and different phases in the deadly spiral of violence.

There is the violence *before* the violence, there is the violence *during* the violence and there is violence *after* the violence. The violence before the violence may either be verbal, psychological or mildly physical. It is the violence that sets the tone and clears the way for the blatant and bloody violence. And there is violence that occurs during the bloody phase of actual violence. And yet, long after the blood and the gore have dried up, long after the sound

¹¹ Tinyiko Maluleke, "Price We Pay for Toxic Masculinity", *Sunday Independent*, 1 July, 2018. <https://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/dispatch/price-we-pay-for-toxic-masculinities-15771392>

¹² Tinyiko Maluleke, "Why men will continue to be trash", *Sunday Independent*, 4 June 2017. <https://www.iol.co.za/news/opinion/why-men-will-continue-to-be-trash-9536303>

¹³ Joan Armatrading, "More than one kind of love", Album: *Hearts and Flowers*, London: A&M Records, 1990.

of breaking bones and cracking skulls, long after the screams that pierce the night, the violence and the trauma continues, in the minds and in the lives of victims, witnesses and those who care. This then is the violence after the violence.

Part of the problem with the framing of gender based violence is that we only begin to track it at ambulance, police-station, or funeral stages. And many of our strategies are geared to deal with the problem at that level, hence our over-emphasis on police action. Nor is gender based violence time or space bound: There is GBV in the squatter camps that are floating in sewage dongas in Slovo Park, Boipatong, Ivory Park near Tembisa and Bram Fischer in Soweto. There is GBV in the seemingly serene gated communities of Kyalami, Mooifonten and Steyn City. There is GBV in the the home, there is GBV in on the shop floor, there is GBV in the trains, taxis and buses. And yes, there is GBV in the university.

Which is why I am pleased with the topic of this women's day event, which locates the problem squarely within the four walls of the University. I like the matter-of-factness of the theme. The framing of the topic leaves no room for doubt about the fact and the reality of gender biases in the university. These are a reality. But the theme does something else, it invites the delegates to think together about the how and the why we need to navigate gender biases in the university.

The Problem with the Notion of Biases

It is the latter dimension of the topic – the idea of ‘navigating gender biases in the university’ - that bothers me somewhat. While a lot of work has been done over the years in order to rescue the words ‘bias’ and ‘prejudice’ from the narrowness and individualism of their original and/or popular meanings, these words continues to carry a lot of unhelpful baggage.

Bias, like its cousin prejudice, tends to be viewed as individual, personal traits and (irrational) personal preferences. The seat of biases and prejudices is the heart or character of the individual concerned. And so, to deal with biases, psychologists design programmes to help surface the individual biases and in that way present a mirror before each individual so that they may begin the journey of changing their attitudes. Many of the proposed remedies are dependent on the willingness and ability of the individual to change.

In terms of this approach, the gender biases found in the university are mainly to be located in the psychological and personality tendencies of individuals within the university. Armed with such a diagnosis of the problem, the solution most likely to be pursued is to expose as many staff members to anti-bias training as possible. Soon enough, it will be hoped, a critical mass of bias-less individuals will emerge.

In my view, this approach does not hold out much promise.

Because this diagnosis of the problem is superficial, the remedies proposed to deal with it are likely to be ineffectual. There will indeed be staff members with despicable gender biases: not trusting women, treating women as suspect, blocking women's progress, requiring women to do twice or thrice the job that men do, sexually harassing women etc. And such colleagues have to be confronted. But such ‘confrontations’ must be institutionalised. Merely to seek to navigate gender biases in the university at the level of the individual, is to adopt a rather minimalist approach which is not likely to take us far.

I Speak of Violence

My sense is that the key problem in the university is not merely one of “gender biases” within individuals. The most intractable gender biases are those that have been institutionalised, in departmental, faculty, university traditions and institutional cultures.

It is therefore not merely the individuals who need to be taken for anti-bias training, but it is the departments, the traditions, the cultures, the processes and the policies as well. It seems to me therefore that the question is not how to navigate these institutionalised discriminatory practices but how to dismantle them and replace them with new structures, cultures, processes and policies which will lead us to universities that treat men and women justly and equally.

Whereas the theme of this colloquium speaks of bias as well as why and how to navigate it, I speak of violence and why we need to overcome it. I am talking about the violence before the violence; the violence that lurks in dictatorial departmental meetings, the violence often enabled by the necessarily unequal power relations between students and lecturers, supervisors and students. This is not mere bias it is violence, albeit the violence before the brazen violence.

I speak of the violence that is often embedded in some research practices and methodologies. Such methodologies include the non-transparent and unequal relationships between researchers and their so-called informants as well as the exploitative relationships between researchers and the communities that constitute the ‘field work’ or contain the data to be mined by the researchers. Included in many such violent research practices are layers of bioprospecting that usually takes knowledges away from the communities among whom ‘field work is done’, without proper acknowledgement, let alone copyright accruals for the communities affected.

In these days of big data and the digitisation thereof, the problem of violent research may be growing, not diminishing. I am also speaking of the violence between mentors and mentees, especially male mentors and female mentees; the violence between supervisors and students, especially male supervisors and female students as well as the violence between male ‘superiors’ and their female ‘subordinates’. These unequal and usually exploitative power relations are not merely about gender biases to be navigated. They are violences that need to be called out and to be overcome.

I speak of the violence of pedagogy, in terms of which Paul Freire¹⁴’s ‘banking method’ keeps reinventing itself, even in these days of hybrid and online teaching. Many of today’s violent pedagogies come at students, like wolves in sheepskins, deceptively re-Christened as “curriculum transformation”. But the basic idea remains that of students as receptacles and not critical thinkers and co-creators of knowledge. These are not biases to be navigated. They are violences to be called out and to be overcome.

I speak the violence of structures and offices built for males, so that aspirant women leaders either have to become male or die trying – and die they do, inside those suffocating patriarchal structures. I speak of buildings, offices and communal spaces, designed for male rule. I speak of policies that perpetrate and create the atmosphere in which “the female

¹⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum, 1970.

fear factory” thrives. These are not biases to be navigated. They are violences to be called out and to be overcome.

Though numbers don’t lie as they say, I am not merely speaking of the numbers of women staff, women lecturers, women cleaners, and women professors. I speak of the violence behind, within and beyond these numbers.

In 2019, a group of South African women academics (and a few men) put together a volume of essays¹⁵ in and through which they practiced what they called, “epistemic disobedience”¹⁶. Their essays speak of the tragedy of being black and female in the South African academy. In the end, they concluded, rather sadly, that, “the academy was not made for blacks (or women). It is also our contention that the ‘culture’ of the academy does not belong to us either”¹⁷.

The issues broached in this book, include the intellectual and emotional toxicity”induced by racism, harrasment, discrimination and white privilege within the academy¹⁸”, “thinking while black¹⁹”, being “black and foreign²⁰”, among many others²¹. The contributors call for epistemic disobedience is an important one because knowledge production is both gendered and racialised.

Disturbing the Sounds of Silence

To conclude, let me return to my hermeneutic of silence. This time I wish to focuss on the silence that needs to be troubled and interrupted.

In order to confront the violence – not the euphemised idea of “gender biases” – we will need to learn to *read* and to *understand* both the *silencing* and the *silences* of women and the LGBTI communities in the academy. The fact that women are the majority in society and in many universities does not translate into power or inclusion for women, not culturally and definitely not academically. So this this reality needs to be read in an astute and nuanced way²². Though women are present in the university, they are *absented* from it in more ways than one. Theirs is a presence that shows up in forms of *absenting* that results in the seeming absence in knowledge production, absence in institutional cultures, absence in the policy formulation and implementation and absence in the higher echelons of the academy, amongst

¹⁵ Grace Khunou, Edith Dinong Phaswana, Khatijah Khoza-Shangase and Canham (eds) *Black Academic Voices. The South African Experience*, Pretoria, HSRC Press, 2019.

¹⁶ Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, Malden: Blackwell, 2009.

¹⁷ Grace Khunous et al, p. 5

¹⁸ Grace Khunou et al, p.42

¹⁹ Grace Khunou et al, p. 65

²⁰ Grace Khunou et al, p.81

²¹ See also Tinyiko Maluleke & Sarojini Nadar “ Alien fraudsters in the white academy: Agency in gendered colour”, *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa*, Vol 120 (November), 2004, 5-17. And also see, Maluleke and Nadar, “Breaking the covenant of violence against women”, *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa*, Volume 114. November 2002, 5-17.

²² Gayatri Spivak, “Can a Subaltern Speak?” in, G Nelson and L Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London: Macmillam, 1988, 271-315.

many other absences. The presence of women in the academy is also at the same time an absence that needs to be read critically and carefully. We need to have the epistemological language, the theoretical eyes and astute ears to hear, to see and to articulate the absences through which women are present, and the silences through which women are speaking in the academy.

In 1966, Simon and Garfunkel, in only their second album, released one of the greatest songs of all times, titled, “sounds of silence²³”.

One stanza, from the lyrics of this timeless classic, stands out:

And in the naked light I saw
 Ten thousand people maybe more
 People talking without speaking
 People hearing without listening
 People writing songs that voices never heard
 And no one dared
 Disturb the sound of silence

The song offers a rich array of metaphors and symbols to characterise forms of silence, speech and listening. The musicians might as well have been speaking about women in the South African universities. They, who often have to talk without speaking because to speak out could be too costly. They, who hear without listening because one does not need to hear the sound of pain in order to feel it. They, who write songs that may never be heard because either it may be too costly for them to sing or they may not live long enough to sing their own songs. They, who bear burning questions about the men who maim and kill them, questions which may never be answered since they will never be posed, because no one dares disturb the sounds of silence.

²³ Simon and Garfunkel, “Sounds of Silence”, New York: Columbia, 1966.

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