

Womxn's Day Reflections

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Realising women's rights for an equal future

'Wathint'aBafazi, waThint'iMbokodo' (*You Strike a Woman, You Strike a Rock*). This phrase represents the courage and strength of South African women. Being a woman in apartheid South Africa was hard; but being a black woman, every day was a constant struggle for survival against a ruthless regime and system. Each day would bring new challenges and the promise of further humiliation, suffering, and oppression.

Today, when we reflect on the leaders that helped us through the struggle of apartheid, we tend to think of prominent men such as Nelson Mandela, Albert Luthuli, Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, and many others. However, we tend to underestimate and disregard the women that played a very important role in the struggle against apartheid. Women have been fighting and resisting oppression for years. During apartheid, black women faced racial, sexual, and social oppression which many still experience today, whether in the workplace, social setting, or at home. By looking back at monumental events in history, we are able to fully recognize the many women throughout the years that fought for equality and against oppression in South Africa.

On 23 September 1913, Charlotte Maxeke led a group of women who fought against the law that women in the Bloemfontein area had to carry passes. In 1952, the first recorded campaign that many women were a part of was the Defiance Campaign. This was a campaign against apartheid laws, where all races of women came together to publicly break segregation laws that could lead to their arrest. This would cause the apartheid criminal-justice system to congest and thus, reform would be unavoidable. Stripped of their rights and facing constant harassment women often bore the brunt of apartheid brutality. It is this reality that led thousands of courageous women to confront the regime head-on during the 1956 women march; led by the extraordinary women known as Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Albertina Sisulu, and Sophia Williams-De Bruyn.

Many women came with their children and protested against unjust legislation. This led to the completion of the Women's Charters' in 1994 that influenced the Bill of Rights.

Many other women, Black, White, Indian and Coloured, also played an important role in fighting the apartheid regime, changing the system, and in developing post-apartheid South Africa. We can all learn from the courageousness and unity portrayed on this day. Helen Suzman fought apartheid from within the system and fought for all South Africans' rights and the freedom of expression. Thus, it is also important to honor black history and how far we have come as a nation. Although very different, the reality today is that being a woman in South Africa is still hard. Many women remain marginalized from the economic and social mainstream and face a constant threat of violence and abuse. However, we have the example of strong women embedded in our history to inspire us as we fight for justice, equality, and for our voices to be magnified. We need to continue to reclaim black history and tell our own stories. As women, we should take advantage of the various outlets for self-expression such as plays, fashion, music, film, and more in order to forever be in protest against the silencing women's voices; particularly black women's voices.

We should continue to be women of change, justice, and courage in order to continue to break down the oppressive and inaccurate stereotypes that often limit women as merely child-bearing, house cleaning, and politically incompetent individuals. Our nation cannot hope to liberate themselves from discrimination and prejudice until women are treated with the equality we deserve. It is time to breathe new life in our country, South Africa cannot claim to be a democratic society when its women who contribute to half of the population continue to be dominated by men. Equality is good for all. Women's upliftment and equality should not only be visible in the law but should be visible and tangible in our society too. If more women have the opportunity to enter political, social, and economic spaces as decision makers and policy influencers, greater freedom and equality would be a reality for the women of South Africa.

For society to progress, equality, access, and economic freedom for women is imperative. Feminism and women empowerment has never been more relevant than right now. This is why, more than ever, being a young activist and calling out systems of oppression and injustice is motivated by the activists of the Women's March on 9 August 1956.

So to all our young and courageous women activists, we leave you with this:

Be fearless.

Your voice was not made to be silenced,

And neither was your thought.

Give it tongue, give it volume, give it song.

Give it your lips and your teeth.

This is what you are to the world.

This is your truth, and your way.

There is nothing more precious than this.

Fight hard, never let go.

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*Grace Mulenga is a **change advocate** with an avid interest in fashion, the creative and entertainment industry and fundamental human rights. Grace believes in reclaiming **black history** and black culture, **empowering black voices** and celebrating individuality through various outlets. In 2018 Grace appeared on SABC News for a Women's Day segment. Grace is currently studying for her first degree in **Fashion Design**.*