

Our young black women are dying and nobody seems to care: a young woman's call for a strong women's movement!

By Thokozile Budaza

As a young woman in today's Africa I often feel like I belong to a doomed generation. Because of the AIDS epidemic, we are the girls who have to stay away from school to take care of our families; we are the youth who get buried by their grandmothers, the young women who are parents even before we can enjoy our youth, the young people who attend a friend's funeral every other weekend. Yet, we are also like women in previous generations; we still find it hard to advance professionally unless we pay homage (sexually or otherwise) to the men above us. Does the women's movement, if it exists speak of our issues or it is still stuck in our mother's era?

Growing up, I quickly learnt that men held the power in society, for how else I could explain the torturous nightly visits by my uncle's friends to my bed. I also couldn't explain the frequent beatings my aunt received from my uncle. The power that I saw was mainly physical and this was completely acceptable in my community. I also observed that macho women seemed more respected by the men than those who were feminine. I began to believe that women who could drink men under the table, who were fearless in handling weapons and could spit as far as any man, weren't beaten up. I wanted to be like them.

By the age of 14 I had successfully molded myself into an image of a young man; I smoked, drank and acted tough, and for five years I didn't wear a dress. Yet I felt miserable; caught between a hollow space where boys never really accepted me, and girls brushed me off as being too boyish. How many young girls are in the same situation as me, presented with an idea that in order to be a strong woman you have to act like a man? I was defining myself as something I didn't want to be: weak, girlish and vulnerable. I needed to define myself as what I wanted to be: strong and confident regardless of the position defined by society for me in relation to my sex. Due to the lack of a strong women's movement we are still raising young girls who are learning from the streets, and because of the violent nature of our society that is dangerous and confusing. Isn't *bagotywa bebatsha* (get to them while they are still young) an accepted child raising technique?

Although I had met strong women, I never encountered a gender activist when I was growing up; everything I knew about gender was from TV. Through a workshop at university I learned about gender activism and I immediately felt that this new language provided the platform I had been looking for all my life. I now had a way to express all the fear, pain and angst I had experienced. I could understand that I wasn't the odd one out, that there was a system of gender inequality that made my experiences common amongst women. Above all I felt it was a platform to redress the injustice I had suffered in my short life.

Three years into this journey I still struggle to fully articulate the issues. When I try to read more in order to get a fuller understanding of women's issues, the articles are written in an academic language that often doesn't connect to my heart. I have attended countless conferences on gender, and I am often bored. The discussions don't speak to me. Instead they are aimed at my mother's generation, as though nothing has changed in the last twenty years. I am a university graduate for crying out loud if I am struggling, what more of my sisters who have not had the privilege to attend university let alone matriculate.

The women's movement in Southern Africa needs to move beyond meetings in which gender types talk to each other about how little leadership there is in the movement or about how little participation there is by young women in advocating for gender equality. We need to engage and debate over issues that are relevant to us. . For example there is a call that the next South African president be a woman, and yet there has never been a call to make sure that Fikile Mbalula's (ANC Youth League President) successor is a young woman. Young women within and outside the movement need to energise this debate and start asking questions like: what difference would it make to us if it is a woman? What should we demand from any candidate whether it is a woman or a man?

Too many young women think that feminism is about women keeping up with men, have sex as much, with as many different partners as our male counterparts. Yet the movement needs to understand that they have raised a generation of young women who have more choices economically, sexually, and socially. As a movement we now need to define what it means to accept that different generations of women have different needs; we are not all the same. Surely we need a reference point that doesn't define strength as 'being like a man' and doesn't treat feminism like a dirty word. This can only be done if the women's movement is able to reach out to all women in our communities especially young women. The women's movement or what is left of it should give us a reason to stand up and be counted on the feminist platform.