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THIS WOMEN'S DAY... LET'S TALK ABOUT MEN

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On Women's Day we recognise the accomplishments of women, having moved forward in leaps and bounds over the decades. Apart from these accomplishments, we also recognise and celebrate our constitutional right to dignity, equality and fundamental freedoms - not necessarily as women or men, but as equals before the law and society. Gender equality is, however, not a zero-sum game - the promotion, protection and realization of the rights enshrined in our Bill of Rights is a gain for all. Founded upon the constitutional values of equality, human dignity and the advancement of human rights and freedoms, the freedom and security of the person is a fundamental right provided for in the Constitution. But do we, and in particular men, have an equal understanding of these rights?

In gender policy discourse we often observe rhetoric of women's empowerment by way of legislation and civil society initiatives to improve the lives of women in order to address the challenges of gender equality. But too often a necessary component of success in such efforts is overlooked. The reality is that any hoped-for advancement in women's rights cannot be divorced from a necessary evolution of the male attitude towards women in South African society. Thus, we must not forget the other, equally important, side of the equation: men.

Recently, we saw the appointment of Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, South Africa's first female deputy president, to head of UN Women, no doubt, an exceptional achievement on behalf of South Africa. This followed the appointment of former South African judge, Navanethem Pillay, to the position of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2008. However, the problem is exactly that. Although the achievements of Ms Mlambo-Ngcuka and Ms Pillay and the values of gender equality and female empowerment that these women represent are truly admirable, they are but an exception and not the norm amongst most South African women. Women in South Africa are subjected to some of the highest rates of rape and violence in the world. The plight of these women is often met with a degree of complacency that reflects the normalcy by which such abuse is now regarded. Eudy Simelane, Zoliswa Nkoyana and Anene Booysen all come to mind. In fact, Interpol claims that a woman born in South Africa is more likely to be raped, than educated. This bleak assessment is due in part to the exploitation by men of the unequal power relations between men and women, and to that extent, this disparity is largely responsible for continuously undermining the advancement of women's rights and the well-being of our female partners in society. The time to review and recalibrate gender norms and rigid attitudes, particularly those of men, has come.

The gender complex of men and that of women do not exist in mutual exclusivity - men play a critical role in the evolution and reinvention of gender identity for women, in that they react to and sometimes reinforce shifting norms of the gender complex. It is in this capacity that a symbiotic relationship emerges, whereby one gender does not exist in isolation from the other and changes in one group will invariably mould the other. Men themselves often undergo a sociological transformation in gender identity in tandem with that of women.



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However, this does not necessarily lead to an acceptance, on the part of men, of the new role of women in society. As a growing body of research shows, this misstep is often the basis for gender-based violence (GBV) and other harmful behavior that threatens women each day.

As a result, there is an emerging recognition that to achieve the desired level of women's rights and to reduce violence against women, we must work towards forging a "new normal" and with men as our partners. All too often, women's rights is perceived as a challenge for women and as a struggle that we, women alone, must endure. However, what we need is for men to recognize that this challenge is incumbent upon them as well and that men can play an active role in, and benefit from, advancing women's rights.

A number of NGOs and civil society actors have already recognized the need to examine masculine culture, redefine the construct of the male identity, and educate men in their role in gender equality. Programs such as the One Man Can campaign (Sonke Gender Justice Network) and the Men as Partners programme (EngenderHealth) are examples of such initiatives that involve men in the process of achieving gender equality. Grassroots programmes that seek to influence men as individuals, with the focus that change can start at home, are a critical complement to legislative initiatives that put an external pressure on men to adjust to gender-based policies. The prevailing belief is that with gender equality a reduction in GBV, intimate partner violence (IPV), substance abuse and HIV/AIDS will follow - all of which are welcome benefits for society.

It is important that we continue to encourage the development of programs that are sensitive to the male experience while taking into account the varied and complex reactions of men to gender-based policies. Furthermore, it is critical that such initiatives are not designed as or perceived to be anti-male or attacking men's rights but instead that they are in the interest of advancing human rights - including the right to equality.

However, these efforts alone are insufficient. Government measures play an integral role in achieving gender equality by establishing a legal framework through which values to protect women are upheld - any misconduct that violates these values should lead to prosecution and serious consequences. To that extent, there is a need for greater emphasis on preventive and rehabilitative elements that are key to fully mitigating GBV. Current conditions necessitate a proactive approach to discourage men that might become perpetrators of GBV while those who already have committed acts of GBV must be reconditioned to understand that it is simply unacceptable.

Furthermore, as the signatory to regional and international instruments that promote gender equality - including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) - the government must extend its efforts beyond commitment. It must also implement, monitor and evaluate initiatives that focus on men to make gender equality a reality.

On the other hand, we must not forget the men who do support gender equality and who forswear GBV; however, they are not exempt from contributing to the shifting gender



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dynamics in society. It is critical that these men be more vocal and visible about their support for gender equality. These men can serve as role models for young men who are often indoctrinated into a culture of masculinity that thrives on the subordination and objectification of women and seeks the approval and respect of older males, and also for other men, who are heavily influenced by how they are perceived by their peers.

This Women's Day, while we take a moment to reflect on the past, let us not forget the struggle that still remains and look to a future where the men and women of South Africa can be fully equal partners in society. The Constitution already provides the framework for such a future, but it will be up to us to translate that framework into a reality.