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A journey of GBV and femicide in SA and how the media reports it – UCT lecture

Women's stories and their experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) challenge the popular narrative of a passive and helpless woman. Instead, their experiences reveal "counter-stories" that challenge society's focus on physical violence as the only form of legitimate violence. Women experience psychological abuse as being more harmful than physical abuse.

This is one of the points made by Professor Floretta Boonzaier from the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Department of Psychology during her recent inaugural lecture titled "Finding hope and healing while researching violence: Decolonial feminist explorations into gender-based violence (GBV) and femicide". The inaugural lecture coincided with Boonzaier's 20th year at UCT.

For her, to profess as black and as a woman is two interwoven stories: the story of her scholarship and the story of her. She starts the journey of her life with the question: "How was it that this girl from Mitchell's Plain came to do this work at a place like UCT, where her experiences have vacillated between the extremes of alienation, isolation and exclusion to those of love, of joy, of belonging and of healing?"

Boonzaier said women portray themselves as strong and in control of their lives though deeply limited by the intersectional forms of oppression such as gender, race and class that shape their lives. She said women also use their stories as a form of resistance and empowerment.

"Collectively, this work was important for showing how – despite the fact that women survivors of violence often experience shame – women also use their stories as a means for resistance and empowerment, even in the face of economic and other difficulties. They find ways to centre the feminist narrative of resistance against men's violence," she said.

Boonzaier said feminism was practised in her home. Though the word was never used, she learned the true meaning of feminism from her mother and some family members. She also learnt feminism from women in the different Cape Flats communities where she lived in Heideveld and Mitchell's Plain. These women held their families together and displayed massive strength and resilience in the face of state and other forms of violence.

These women also ensured that their loved ones were fed, provided shelter and meals to those who were destitute.

"I learned feminism from respected members of these different communities, while doing work underground to support the struggle against apartheid," she said.

Her initial work focused primarily on intimate partner violence. The questions that regularly occupied her mind was society's obsession with why women stay in abusive relationships. Every article she read blamed women who stayed with their abusive partners, locating the question of abuse with the abused women rather than with the men who perpetuate that abuse. She then wanted to understand the context in which women in abusive relationships find themselves after suffering violence at the hands of a partner. Her research found that women find multiple ways to resist violence, and to resist the gendered expectations of them as women.

Her research next focused on how women relay their experiences of violence and abuse, and how these stories shape how they see themselves in the world, opening safe spaces for storytelling aided this process.

"Telling stories about the violence they experienced allowed women to represent their inner realities, to interpret their past, to understand their present and to envision their futures," she said. "Telling stories on their own terms allowed women the opportunity to reclaim their narratives in ways that challenge dominant ideas of what an abused woman is supposed to be."

Boonzaier also discussed how the South African media report on GBV and intimate partner violence and highlighted the story of 17-year-old Anene Booysen who was raped and murdered in Bredasdorp in the Western Cape's Overberg region. As she went through media reports, she realised that while much had been written about Booysen's death, the public knew very little about her life. "All we really knew was the recollection of her movements on the night of the murder and the very graphic details about how she died."

Her research demonstrated that while reporting on the murder, the media used colonial legacies that hyper-visiblise the bodies of black women in the most public ways and yet hid their identities. Her research also showed how the media's representation of GBV, particularly in the case of Booysen, dehumanised black women "making them less deserving of our empathy".

"I argued that the ways in which Anene Booysen was represented mirrored the colonial stories about Sarah Baartman," she said.

In concluding her lecture, Boonzaier returned the question she posed at the beginning, and asked: "What does it mean to profess while black and woman?"

"In this moment that I'm owning as a celebration, it's hard to stand here and not recall the indignities I had to suffer in order for me to be considered full, a full professor. It's hard not to recall the indignities of what it meant to be racialised as coloured in the apartheid and colonial imageries of fellow students when I was a student here," she said. "It's hard not to recall the snide remarks, forms of surveillance and racism I experienced from colleagues as I worked hard to move up the ranks."

"Here I am, in celebration of this occasion, talking decolonial love, hope and joy. For us, the practice of decolonial feminist psychology has centred radical hope, love and healing – a methodology of decolonial love and a commitment to creating alternatives to the present," she said.

Professor Floretta Boonzaier Photo: Lerato Maduna

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