



The Cape Times' Big Friday Read is a series of feature articles focusing on the forgotten issues that often disappear in the blur of fast news cycles, and where we also feature the everyday heroes who go out of their way to change the lives of others in their communities. As part of commemorating International Women's Day today, Stellenbosch University Professor of Philosophy LOUISE DU TOIT highlights the urgent need to end gender-based violence through reconnecting with powerful women leaders from the past and influential present-day actors from beyond our borders.

ENDING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: WOMEN MUST TAKE THE LEAD

LOUISE DU TOIT



AT 14 YEARS old, she was given in an arranged marriage to her 13-year-old husband, and at 17, this illiterate girl gave birth to her first child prematurely. The baby did not survive his first year. Not a promising start to a life.

History is predominantly told and written by men and from a male perspective. That is why, even though her husband is an enduring global icon of peace and justice, known as Mahatma Gandhi, far fewer people know the name of this woman, Kasturba, who played a key role in the famous and decisive 1913 Satyagraha March from Natal to the Transvaal.

The march was arranged as part of an ongoing campaign to get the Union government to desist from implementing its increasingly draconian immigration laws.

While in the development of the idea and practice of Satyagraha (or the practice of the force of truth and love), Gandhi drew much inspiration from pre-existing women's movements, including the Irish Ladies' Land League and the Suffragettes. He opposed women's participation in the frontlines for some years and insisted that Satyagraha or non-violent opposition (disobedience, non-co-operation) was a "manly" pursuit. Strong and energetic women all the while contributed crucial support in the background.

No doubt inspired by the August 1913 collective uprising of African women in Bloemfontein, who handed their passes back to the authorities and pledged never to carry them again, Kasturba insisted on joining the frontlines of the Indian cause. Gandhi relates in his writings in "Satyagraha in South Africa" (1928) how he had to be persuaded by her and ended up agreeing reluctantly.

The plan was that a group led by Kasturba would cross the border from Natal into Transvaal, illegally, in protest of the immigration laws, and, simultaneously, an all-women group would cross from Transvaal into Natal.

In "Gandhi Before India" (2013), Ramachandra Guha, a biographer of Gandhi, writes, "They [the Gandhis] were breaking a boundary far more rigid or sacrosanct than [transgressing a provincial border], in that, for the first time, some of the protesters



POLICE used stun grenades and teargas as they clashed with protesters and bikers who took part in the Gender Based Violence march outside parliament in August 2020. The march followed a huge outcry after a number of women were killed in South Africa during Women's month. Women must take the lead, even as we need men to follow and support their movement en masse, says the writer.
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were women. In South Africa and in India alike, at this time, it had been unthinkable that women could mingle with men and participate in protests." The Kasturba group was arrested and imprisoned, while the other group was let through and then continued to organise the movement in Natal, culminating in the mass march from Natal to Transvaal.

The women's visible leadership in the frontlines of the marches galvanised unprecedented support and enthusiasm for the movement and thousands of male workers, even from remote parts of Natal, joined the strike. Gandhi wrote: "[The women's] influence spread like wildfire ... I was not prepared for this marvellous awakening." At the gatherings, pictures were shown of the women leaders in prison. By November 1913, there were one thousand Indians in jail and the international community, including the Viceroy of India and the Governor-General of South Africa, started to exert pressure on the South African government to change its policy.

When Kasturba was released from prison in December, she received a hero's welcome, but she had clearly paid with her health. At the same event, close friend and ally Millie Polak declared: "This was essentially a women's movement, and there was no question that had it not been for the women taking the lead, there would have been no strike.

"When women once realised the enormous power they had, they would rise up and make their own lives and the world that they wished (loud applause)" (Natal Mercury).

When we in South Africa celebrate International Women's Day (March 8), we always bemoan the horrific statistics on violence against our women. And rightly so. But recently, I have come to wonder whether we are not too insular, too inward-looking, too focused on the causes, the diagnosis, the description of the problem.

No doubt, these are also important, but in my experience, we too often stop short of proposing and working towards realistic solutions, or at the

very least, towards forms of hopeful and hope-inducing action.

Hence the title of this piece, which I took from the title of a recent book by Hannah Britton "Ending Gender-Based Violence: Justice and Community in South Africa" (2020), where her focus is precisely on those individuals, service providers, organisations and institutions that play key roles in resisting and disrupting the scourge of gender-based violence (GBV) within our communities, at grassroots level. I believe that often we attribute the high levels of violence to something unique or exceptional to our history, and somehow then restate that (therefore) there is very little that can be done, the problem is intractable.

To break out of our insularity, our peculiar South African exceptionalism, we have to design multipronged, creative and transformative practices of collective resistance to a kind of socially embedded hopelessness.

We must liberate ourselves from the tyranny of the parochial here and now. We need to remind ourselves of

foremothers like Kasturba and thousands of others who courageously worked to forge non-violent transformation (breaking out of the narrow now) and we must more actively seek transnational alliances and solidarities beyond our national borders (breaking out of the narrow here). And as in the 1913 march, women must take the lead, even as we need men to follow and support our movement en masse.

To give one example of how we might break out of our spatial insularity, in 2019, I visited Colombia and was impressed with how national recognition of and restitution for victims of conflict-related sexual violence had been written into their peace accord after over 50 years of civil war. Somehow, these victim-survivors have managed to organise themselves into a large network of survivors, professional women, activists, artists and others (including some male survivors and professionals), that supports individuals in their application for restitution (in the form of study fees or start-up money for small businesses) and also advocates for symbolic and other forms of recognition.

I was amazed at how these victim-survivors have managed to obtain a voice, a collective body and a powerful presence that demands to be heard and seen and that demands accountability.

What would it take for us to learn from them? How might things change if we could establish in South Africa a visible and audible network of victim-survivors and professional women and men that assist with legal, medical, research and other support?

Dr Denis Mukwege is a Congolese gynaecologist who received the Nobel Peace Prize for his work with conflict-related sexual violence victims.

His Mukwege Foundation aims, amongst other things, to "connect survivors in networks at the national and global level to unite and stand up for their rights". It is high time that we work harder towards ending gender-based violence through reconnecting with powerful women leaders from our own past and influential present-day actors from beyond our borders.

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