

The feminist that was Chief Albert Luthuli

[Chief Albert Luthuli](#) believed in the importance of forging solidarities, and through his works also promoted gender justice. This was the sentiment presented at the second lecture of a three-part seminar series honouring the late teacher, activist and politician. The seminar series is being held by the Unisa Chief Albert Luthuli Research Chair, housed in the College of Human Sciences.

Explaining the theme, *Transnational Solidarities, Gender Justice and Chief Albert Luthuli's Legacy and Ethos*, was programme director, Professor Edith Phaswana, from the Thabo Mbeki African School of Public and International Affairs. She said Chief Luthuli was passionate about forging solidarities across different races, communists, liberals, religions, modernists and traditionalists. His character commanded the survival and the impending progression of the anti-apartheid struggle and the formation of contemporary democratic South Africa, said Phaswana.

“As an international leader, Luthuli’s influence centered upon his moral stature on his unwavering stance on the use of nonviolence. As we highlight the importance of being in solidarity with one another, we acknowledge that transnational solidarities are about recognising equal human rights and a display of empathy in various social contexts and through Luthuli’s life, this has been demonstrated.”

She said transnational solidarity relations are directed at supporting people in overcoming oppression and the involvement of committing to ensuring justice for all. “It is about engaging fully with others across borders, and if we think about South Africa, we wouldn’t be where we are if we didn’t forge these kind of transnational solidarities, and many other spaces of struggles and places where our people experienced oppression. So, the African continent peacefully reconstructed through cultural principles that promote human dignity and individual wellbeing by contextualising that indigenous value system that promotes social solidarities.”

Research approaches and methods to analyse GBV

Professor Phaswana also highlighted that gender relations are at the centre of solidarity efforts. “Luthuli promoted and contributed to the advancement of women in his community. He achieved this by involving women in the chieftom which was something that was unfamiliar and not common in the past, particularly within some of our ethnic groups in the country and perhaps even the country at large ... This is the legacy colleagues of a man that was born on this African soil and in particular in this country of ours.”

Welcoming guests and providing opening remarks was Professor Thenjiwe Meyiwa (Vice-Principal: Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovation, and Commercialisation). She said much has been written in South Africa and beyond about Chief Luthuli’s legacy, however his philosophy on gender justice has received less focus, and she was glad that through this seminar, and the work of this Chair, there is a spotlight on this part of Chief Luthuli’s legacy.

“This is being done at a time that South Africa is tormented. We are living with extreme violence in the context of gender-based violence (GBV) and femicide. We seem to be creating the wrong legacies. We are in the month of Heritage and we should be looking back and saying we appreciate the legacies of icons such as Luthuli, but unfortunately, we are seeing and experiencing more and more legacies that we should not be celebrating.”

Professor Meyiwa, who regards, Chief Luthuli as a feminist, highlighted that when it comes to GBV, there remains a great deal left to do. She said that the history, legislation and the lived experiences of young people and especially girls and young women is linked to the violence inflicted and felt by the

marginalised during apartheid in South Africa. “I want to argue that the violence on girls and women's bodies also reflects this violence.”

She challenged researchers and social activists and asked what approaches and methods they will use to analyse these challenges of GBV to ensure that social policy and social change is influenced. “The work of this Chair must seek to disrupt these shameful legacies, shameful legacies of violence, which will come out of translational studies on sexual violence, and create new legacies, better legacies, wherein we are reclaiming back, raising our voices, and using methodologies of research to disrupt colonial legacies, violence legacies, the privileging of a few legacies, and the privileging of particular genders' legacies.

“By us taking back the microphone and privileging us speaking up, and speaking back through the various forms of the work, be it the arts or social practice, the work of this Chair, the work of the Chief Albert Luthuli Museum, must challenge the situational sexual violence that we seek to change and put a spotlight on.”

Following Professors Phaswana and Meyiwa's contextualisation of the theme, the keynote speakers delivered their papers. The panellists included Dr Beverley Ditsie (Managing Director: Ditsie Media), Dr Tinyiko Chauke (Post-doctoral fellow, Chief Albert Luthuli Research chair, Unisa); Khosi Motlatsi (Lecturer: Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology, Unisa); and Professor Malehoko Tshoaedi (Associate Professor: Department of Sociology, University of Johannesburg). Also forming part of the programme was a creative piece by Natalia Molebatsi (poet, writer, and performer), and the closing remarks and vote of thanks by Professor Puleng Segalo (Incumbent: Chief Albert Luthuli Research Chair, Unisa).

Learning how to adapt from Chief Luthuli

In celebrating Chief Luthuli's legacy, Dr Ditsie focused on three areas of the Chief's leadership – the need for solidarity, adaptability and putting the needs of people first. “I believe we can all learn from or at least be inspired by the Chief in this regard, given the current climate where the world and her leaders and populations are facing what feels like such insurmountable challenges in a deeply capitalist and deeply patriarchal world that we live in.”

She said that Chief Luthuli may have been one of only a handful of African patriarchs to really acknowledge the role of women in every aspect of our lives, and not just in domestic affairs. “I am in awe of how Chief Albert Luthuli had the vision to understand and know how transnational solidarity would also help to ensure that he himself does not get silenced and erased.”

Dr Ditsie said we can learn the trait of adaptability from the leadership of Chief Luthuli, to shift mindsets even when it is the most difficult thing to do. She referenced how Chief Luthuli, who was a staunch proponent of peace, had to adapt his stance as nonviolence was not producing results. “The solution was to adapt, and adapt he had to, and if we do not adapt, we do not move and address challenges head on.”

She said leaders are currently required to be courageous and resolute as we face so many obstacles. “One of these challenges is the subjugation of the feminine in order to maintain a clearly failing patriarchal system,” said Dr Ditsie, adding that we can all learn from Chief Luthuli's life as his ideas and ideals were such a danger to the apartheid regime simply because his ideas had the potential to change life as everyone knows it.

“And this was an obvious threat to the status quo, to those whose very existence was dependent on maintaining power. Aren't we, as women, as the gender nonconforming, as the gender diverse, as

feminists who want to change the status quo facing the same threat? We are a threat to the very existence of those who want to maintain this power ... Seeing how the media together with the legal system are being used to silence those with dissenting opinions or those who are victims of violence, the silence, just like the Chief's banning, is to ensure that the dangerous message of freedom does not filter to the most marginalised members of our society, the feminine, because that would be too dangerous."

Dr Ditsie said feminist ideals are about toppling down the patriarchal system, and therefore, these ideas are a danger to those who need to maintain the power over the feminine. "So, I also am not surprised at the rise of violence against the feminine because it is very clear that while we may speak of changing policies and systems at the top, policies and systems are changing also on a personal level. As someone else said, women are leveling up, and so of course there will be a fight to attempt to maintain that power."

The importance of Black feminist research approaches

Following Dr Ditsie was Ms Motlatsi. She shared some of the theory that she has been engaging with in her research. In doing so, she provided a guide of the analytical tools that could be useful when weaving theory, history and social political, to the experiences of Black women. The goal of her presentation was to understand the collective struggle in search of a radical empathy. "I hope to make sense of the pain and in doing so forge a path to understanding our struggle."

She started her discussion by highlighting the recently concluded women's month (August). "During this month I found myself again overwhelmed with what was this commemoration supposed to mean for me. Our government describes this time as one where we pay tribute to the 20 000 women that marched to the Union Buildings to end the pass laws in 1956. On their website, they celebrate the month under the theme of gender equality, explaining it as the realising of women's rights for an equal future. As compelling as this act may seem, their actions are reduced to mere rhetoric considering how violent our reality is. There is something about women's month that makes the media reports on gender-based violence sting that much harder. I feel myself numbing to these reports which seemed to be getting even more violent as we progress into the year."

Motlatsi said she was overwhelmed between the feelings of anger and sheer hopelessness. "By virtue of being a woman, I become part of the story as I am reminded of my own vulnerability of being this gender. Yet our personal narratives also give vivid accounts of how we have already been a part of the story for most of our lives."

She shared some of the theory that she has been engaging with in order to make sense of the bombardment of the pain and loss, especially from the experience in engagement with the collective struggle. Sharing a personal story of losing her 24 year-old niece, who was also a mother, due to Covid-19, Motlatsi said having to work through the fog of depression and anger, she sought new understanding of what she was experiencing, searching to make sense of her life while also having to perform being a functioning adult. "I sought answers to the questions on what to do with my grief, grief over the loss of my niece and the loss of a mother in our family. This grief intertwined with how I was already feeling over women's month. It was one interwoven with feelings of constant fear of being a woman and the inability to deal with the constant destruction of life, women, and queer bodies in South Africa."

She said there is a further violence that comes with women having to push their feelings aside as they perform normalcy and complete everyday tasks. "Finding ways in which we can engage the pain and grief in our political and theoretical work affirms an aspect of our humanity that really finds

solace in everyday practice. Black feminist approaches offer a means in which we can frame our narratives of everyday struggle.”

A Christian politician and an ally to women’s activism

The third panellist was Dr Chauke and her presentation focused on *Whose is South Africa*, a title birthed from chapter eight of Chief Luthuli’s autobiography, *Let my people go*. During her discussion, she interpreted and analysed Chief Luthuli’s autobiography and his life through a theological political engine and lens. Citing scholars who studied Chief Luthuli’s life, Dr Chauke said he was characterised as a Christian first, then a politician. “He said of himself, ‘I am in the Congress (African National Congress) because I am Christian’. Chief Luthuli is remembered as a leader who proudly pronounced his Christian commitments as a foundation for his dedication to liberation from apartheid.”

Dr Chauke said that a reading of congregationalism and its focus on religion, political, and individual liberty, explains Chief Luthuli’s journey and motivations to free Black South Africans from the shackles of apartheid. Congregationalism values also provide an interpretive lens to understand how Chief Luthuli supported women’s plight in 1959.

For “several months’ women stormed municipal beer halls and destroyed cattle dipping tanks. Among women’s grievances were poor working conditions and the difficulties of influence, control, and the extension of passes to women. The women sang a song that translated to, ‘this load is heavy, we need the men’. The song suggested gendered divisions, calling attention to men’s failure to protest alongside them.

Dr Chauke’s research has shown how women challenged gender hierarchies when they initiated violent resistance and ideas about masculinity and the family to shame their husbands and the ANC leaders into joining the rebellion. As the ANC president, Chief Luthuli sought to harness women’s violence, declaring it the Congress’s task to educate them “on the efficacy of Congress methods of struggle and use their behaviour to mobilise men into action”.

“The research demonstrates how the women used and challenged socially acceptable gender norms with the government officials, ANC leadership and their husbands, sons and fathers to shame men into action. Chief Luthuli also drew on this tactic, utilising the very conceptions of the family and using shame as part of the methods to mobilise men.

According to Dr Chauke, Chief Luthuli’s desire to shape and harness women’s energy created a space for women to be politically active in the Congress. “It is important to note that Chief Luthuli’s marriage may have shaped his gendered methods of mobilisation. His wife ([Nokukhanya Luthuli](#)) served as his coach when he was writing and planning his speeches.”

She concluded by asking, what lessons can we draw as people and higher education by examining Chief Luthuli’s legacy as a Christian politician? “I will speak from an engaged scholarship position. Clearly, as the women’s narratives have demonstrated, learning institutions in South Africa have become sites wherein gender and sexuality serve as conduits to keep women in subordinate positions. Such inequalities have rendered women invisible to the economy.

“Our job in higher education and our networks, is to actively engage with our communities and government, to look at how we can restore the invisible person’s socio-economic visibility in society and restore their relationship to society. We can achieve this by understanding the historical contours that rendered women invisible to South Africa’s social contract. I thus agree with feminist scholars’ arguments that citizenship and empowerment projects overlook the harsh social, cultural, and economic challenges and the challenging realities South African women face.”

Lessons from Chief Luthuli on intellectual activism

The final presenter was Professor Tshoaedi who spoke on intellectual activism. She discussed the meaning of this kind of activism in the spaces that researchers, scientists and academics occupy especially in a country such as South Africa, with its history of apartheid where so many were discriminated against and continue to be discriminated against, “continued to be made to feel inferior, unintelligent and therefore empty vessels”.

She said: “So many of our students come into this space with the false knowledge that their communities, or our communities, have nothing to contribute in the knowledge space. This is in a context where race, class and gender still matter, and it shapes the kind of experiences that one is exposed to at a university.”

Professor Tshoaedi said there is a need for the intellectuals in higher education to make a difference, challenge the education setting, especially in the context where higher education spaces were not built to be inclusive of Black women and Black people in general. “It is a call to appreciate the significance of our presence in these spaces, we are required to disrupt the practices and the entrenched culture that is used to alienate our young people from universities.

“Our presence in the academy must not be for assimilation purposes but to transform the academic spaces, especially in the teaching practices and the knowledge that is produced through writing. It is about consciously taking a political stand within the academy to challenge the neoliberal hegemony that seeks to reproduce itself through the education system by preserving education for the few, separating them from their communities.”

In talking about intellectual activism, Professor Tshoaedi referenced lessons from Chief Albert Luthuli who believed in equality and fairness for all regardless of one’s social status. “Chief Luthuli was a teacher by training, he was chosen by his people to become the chief in his village, not only because he was educated, but due to his leadership principles and ethics which were admirable.”

When Chief Luthuli became the chief, he saw this as an opportunity to serve his community, according to Professor Tshoaedi. “He understood that his education as a teacher was not necessarily for his own personal benefit, but he had a responsibility to use his education for the purposes of benefiting the people in his village. And it was because of these principles, that in his chieftaincy, he challenged policies that did not make sense, policies which were meant to further impoverish his community.”

Professor Tshoaedi added: “I want to draw from his leadership and principles in speaking about intellectual activism and using our position as academics to challenge the social injustices in the spaces that we occupy. The life of Chief Luthuli is pivotal in teaching us on how to affirm ourselves in meaningful ways, in putting our ideas and beliefs into practice for social change.”

** By Rivonia Naidu-Hoffmeester*

[Click here to watch the second seminar in the Chief Albert Luthuli seminar series.](#)

[Click here for the news feature and video for the inaugural Chief Albert Luthuli seminar.](#)