

NEWS RELEASE

UP documentary spotlights dwindling practice of traditional midwifery



A scene from the documentary, Vroedvrou

PRETORIA - A new documentary by two University of Pretoria (UP) professors captures the diminishing expertise of traditional midwives amid the global shift towards Western medical practices, and is set to premiere in Springbok in the Northern Cape on 23 March 2024.

Titled *Vroedvrou* (Midwife), the film was directed by Professor Siona O’Connell, a professor of African studies and a member of UP’s School of the Arts, and Prof Loretta Feris, UP Vice-Principal: Academic. *Vroedvrou* was born out of research by Prof Feris, who had been approached by members of the Nama community in Namaqualand who were seeking support to preserve the knowledge of ageing midwives. The community was concerned that this invaluable expertise would be lost and the contributions of these midwives to community maternal health overlooked.

Prof O’Connell, who has made several impactful documentaries, joined forces with Prof Feris to capture the richness of traditional midwifery, and raise awareness about the indispensable role of traditional midwives in the Northern Cape. A shortened version of the film was screened on eNCA’s current affairs show CheckPoint (DStv, channel 403) on 6 March.

“This was a very personal project for me because I am from the Northern Cape, and I feel strongly about the role of women supporting community development,” Prof Feris says. “I wanted to capture the contributions that these women have made to community health, and even life, as they often provide emergency healthcare

to mothers and babies. Yet these midwives are not necessarily trained or educated, and often don't receive remuneration for their services. They are also not formally acknowledged for the vital role they play. Traditional and indigenous midwives are found in different communities in South Africa and in other parts of the world. In some legal jurisdictions, they are explicitly acknowledged and integrated into the healthcare system, but this is not yet the case in South Africa."

"This film has broad appeal," Prof O'Connell says. "It speaks about what it means to be pregnant, give birth and what is necessary for new mothers to flourish. It also urges all of us in the academy to think about the Western knowledge paradigms on which our institutions are built, and how we work with indigenous knowledge systems as equal partners. It can be used as teaching material across all faculties."

The film highlights the epistemic diversity of what we consider "knowledge", Prof Feris adds.

"Knowledge production does not reside in the domain of the academy only. Traditional midwives developed their own knowledge and expertise on childbirth and maternal healthcare, and if we can drive closer collaboration between the academy and traditional midwives, we will all benefit from each other."

There was urgency to make this film, given that one midwife had recently died and the others are ageing.

"So we made it in record time," Prof O'Connell says. "I don't work in the way that a conventional filmmaker does – there is no script or storyboard. The film really reveals itself through what is being said. We used a South African music library, and Prof Feris takes us through the film, not as a narrator who has little to do with the subject matter, but because traditional midwives are an important part of her personal and academic journey."

For Prof O'Connell, documentary filmmaking is vastly different to scholarly writing in that it is able to open up conversations with broader audiences and the general public, and in so doing, opens the academic space to new and novel ways of knowledge production.

"One of the most difficult things about making a film such as this – and it is no different to any of the 11 others I have made – is the constant back and forth," she explains. "There's a lot of research, and we have to leave lots of footage on the cutting room floor. You can't be precious. You also need a first-class team that includes students."

The two professors began making the film without a budget, but eventually received support from the University's Faculty of Humanities and the Department of Research and Innovation. The Northern Cape Department of Sports, Arts and Culture has also come on board as a partner for the formal premiere of the film.

Prof O'Connell hopes that the issues raised in the film about indigenous knowledge systems and women and birth will continue to generate debate and discussion.

"We are dreaming big about the next steps," Prof O'Connell says. "We have had invitations to screen the film abroad at notable institutions, including Brown University in the US."

Watch the trailer for the documentary here: <https://youtu.be/F2ZLTqpJQwQ>

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2024 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of Law, Veterinary Science, Accounting and Finance; Agriculture and Forestry and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their 2024 World University Rankings (WUR). UP was the only South African university featured in the 2023 World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za