

Reframing the fight for gender equality

By Professor Flavia Senkubuge, a medical doctor and UP's Acting Vice-Principal for Student Life

“Inspiring others to see the value of women begins with us as women seeing the value within ourselves,” says UP’s Prof Flavia Senkubuge, who writes about taking a new approach to advancing gender equality.

It’s always somewhat amusing when reading about including women in spaces and places in society. It comes across as women not being part of the broader ecosystem, and perhaps being seen as somewhat interfering and invasive, and needing to be handled and slowly introduced into society.

I think the time has come for society to look for a new approach and a new architecture that will ensure gender parity. “Allowing” for women to be included comes across as some sort of favour being bestowed upon women, giving us the “privilege” to participate in our own societies, as if that were not already a right.

We need to alter society’s DNA and architecture so that the participation of women is no longer seen as an anomaly but as a norm.

Every few years a strong fight and movement for women’s liberation and rights comes along. For various reasons, we find ourselves moving forward, but invariably, after some time, we take numerous steps back again. The regression is characterised by, among others, suppressing and hiding our femininity, erasing our occupancy and minimising our humanity. All this in an effort to make invisible our being, lest we incur the wrath that may affect our peace in the spaces we occupy and where we serve.

We can no longer speak about the inclusivity of women, as our forebearers have already fought that battle. Perhaps we can argue inspiration – to inspire society to be brave enough to build a new architecture that will break down the walls and ensure gender equality in all spaces; to accept that when women achieve, they have done so through merit and hard work, which is often harder because women have so much more to navigate.

Inspiring others to see the value of women begins with us as women seeing the value within ourselves, remembering that we have been created from the divine feminine. We need to remember the divinity that exists in each woman, where through it all, women still show up for work, and love, care, fight, win and triumph over society’s hard-handed fist.

We cannot inspire others until we as women are inspired. Additionally, we need to embrace one another as women, rather than be shaken by each other’s greatness. We need to work towards a time and place where mothers in our communities feel a sense of responsibility towards younger women, and protect and nurture them; and where young women see elder women as their own mothers and respect them accordingly.

The sanctity and sacredness of a woman should be brought back into society, because it will be through that admiration, honour and respect that inspiration will follow.

In a society where few things are sacred any longer and where the rapid rate of consumption – visually, intellectually and spiritually – has devastated what was once held dear, we have to dive deep as individuals, as societies and communities. We need to return to an era where certain places and spaces were considered sacred, and in that, once again find the beauty of a woman.

Beauty in mind, body and soul, should be respected, honoured, valued and appreciated. This intervention needs to begin from childhood, where we reshape the thinking of our society; where we build societies of young girls and boys who are inspired by women; and where men are equally honoured. In this way, the two will be more able to work side by side towards a common goal of building something great.

When we look back at the queens and empresses of our beautiful African continent, their participation in society was embraced, and their very existence inspired – Queen Yaa Asantewaa, Queen Aminatu, Queen Njinga, Queen Moremi and the Empress Candace, the list is endless.

As their daughters who have become the embodiment and existence of the prayers that they prayed, let us take back that mantle and stand tall. Let us refuse to bow our heads, and instead embrace our greatness and the vision that our forebearers had for us. Let us embrace our strength and talent, and let us not fight to be included in places where we already exist, but rather live to inspire and bring back the essence that is woman.

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