Time of the signs: Feminism, by any other name?..?

City Press

Our pages have been filled with news and stories of statistics regarding gender-based violence and the abuse, assault and violation of women and girls. One that received great prominence was the case of Anene Booyens.

Men in her community, who were known to her, violently assaulted and raped her. She sustained heinous injuries and later died.

This is but one example of the violent acts perpetrated against South African women every four minutes.

South Africa said “enough is enough” and from that came a variety of protests and campaigns that were aimed at raising awareness to combat violence against women.

Predominantly middle-class, suburban people participated in a variety of campaigns ranging from One Billion Rising, hooting to stop rape and wearing black to writing for publications.

However, there were also others, also predominantly middle class, who questioned the impact and relevance of campaigns that seem to be confined mostly to media discussion and social network debates.

While some argued that “something is better than nothing”, the more sceptical asked: “What’s the point of something that resonates very little with me to think about how feminism or, more broadly, ‘the struggle for women’s full liberty’ should be or is expressed in the South African context?”

I wondered how I could explain feminism to my grandmother, and whether these principles cohere with the sense of indignation she often expresses at being denied full equality and opportunities to be educated simply because she is a woman, and one born in rural South Africa under white rule at that.

I have this internal dialogue because my brand of feminism is the result of the many worlds that are my life: a strong rural upbringing, suburban living, Western education and my calling as isangoma which ties me to ancient cosmologies.

In these many layers of my life I have found that it is often the suburban side of socialisation that believes that it has all the answers ready: the theory, the language and action plan for how we will tackle women’s oppression in South Africa.
However, when I am confronted with the lives of the women in my rural setting and even in my spiritual communion, I realise how inadequate my English-language, "book feminism" is for confronting the current context.

One complication in South Africa is that while politics and culture place women as "second" in the domestic hierarchy, many South African homes are actually female headed, either because there is simply no man present or because the primary breadwinner is a woman.

Once they have earned this income, women participate in izitokfela with other women, which means they actually furnish and build their homes, and pay for weddings and funerals among other things.

Women are constantly demonstrating economic independence and financial wizardry on incredibly small amounts of money.

They also take negative risks, borrowing from omashonisa (loan sharks) to balance the family books.

South African women are asserting, even if it's out of sheer necessity, economic and personal independence that the culture we live in refuses to fully acknowledge.

Women are expected to be subordinate but in everyday reality, they don't act that way.

The irony is that suburban, "awareness-raising" feminism is perhaps also not fully cognisant of how black, rural and working-class women are transmitting messages of independence.

There is a defiant personal politics that I have observed that cannot be spoken for or represented by blogging, social-media outrages, hooting against violence or "black Friday".

What is the liberation language of the grandmother who endured a difficult and heartbreaking marriage but through it raised strong, independent girl children?

What of the woman who defies cultural and social norms by choosing to never marry or have children yet supporting and standing by her sisters and other women in her community? What is their feminist politics?

While the theorised English-language suburban feminism we have inherited has given us useful concepts that have allowed us to formulate policies, it has its limits because of the worlds it does not encompass.

I think there is something that is politically diminished about the actions and messages of South African feminism that cannot draw on the language and experiences by the majority of its women.

I am aware of the gendered aspects of our South African culture(s) that cannot easily be transformed. But there is a lot for us to draw from, and for the worlds of the "visible feminism" to fully recognise the world of the majority.

A simple example is that ubungoma is a fundamentally feminine spiritual practice, and male and female izangoma are called "gogo".

If we suburbanites start learning in these places, there may be a way to innovate and deepen our participation in the struggle for women's freedom in South Africa.