Embracing diversity for revolutionary activism

By Athinangamso Esther Nkopo

“you can’t effectively resist domination when you’re all messed up”
Bell Hooks

One thing I have learnt is that gender is central to every form of activism even when the cause does not appear to be explicitly gendered. In the RhodesMustFall movement we learnt this the hard way. When embarking on the project of decolonising the university, in our efforts to get rid of the hangovers from colonization and apartheid, we single mindedly targeted institutional structures. Initially we hadn’t centered violence against women. We had blind spots around gender politics, another hangover from identity politics in nationalist liberation movements.

As black women, we suffered erasure and violence in a movement we had birthed. We accepted that we would be the ones to toil, yet again, for the birth of a new politics of decolonisation. The issue of decolonising the university was very early identified as the issue of the black child within the South African context. The movement was a self-identifying Black conscious space and led for the education of the black majority in the country who remain marginalised and effectively excluded within the realm of higher learning.

From the early days of RhodesMustFall, women, non-gender binary identifying and queer black people were at the forefront of conceptualising and leading the movement, and the issue of reconfiguring the university space. It was not until the taking of the fight to the statue itself and mass protest
action that the movement took on a much more masculine posture. This led to RhodesMustFall and subsequently, FeesMustFall being portrayed as led by militaristic young men who readily took up the space and power to lead very visibly from the front.

The actions we undertook were conjoined with the occupation of university spaces for long periods of time in #NationalShutDowns, and issues of appropriate sexual conduct became an issue. Women in the movement, realising that the space had become male dominated, even violent, began to contest that narrative in protest and counter protests. We amplified a narrative that showed our contributions and labour to the movement in the face of dominant male figures who had become the public leadership of the movement. Women also made the movement one which stood in explicit opposition to violence against women, be it physical or structural by doing the work of analysing the internal politics of the movement and making violence against women an unacceptable disqualifier in all spaces of activism.

In Cape Town, this took the form of disruptions at exhibitions that glorified anti-women, queer phobic and or problematic men within the movement, while foregrounding the women in the space. This emanated in the slogan “The Revolution will be Intersectional or it will be bullshit!” a phrase taken from the idea that the suffering of black women, in particular, occurs at various intersections of discrimination such as race, gender, sexuality, class etc. In Johannesburg, women often insisted on leading protest action as the ‘Mbokodos’ using the image of the African head wrap to make themselves visible. Students at Oxford University in the U.K showed solidarity and support with the political action around RhodesMustFall and Fees Must Fall but even in that space we experienced and had to fight invisibility. As the black women of RhodesMustFall in Oxford, we used our networks with progressive women of colour publications such as ‘Skin deep’, to recenter, particularly black women from Southern Africa and the African diaspora. We also used the protest action and media exposure to depict the movement as being one led by many as opposed to individual black men, non-black people of colour and whites; a solidarity movement of and inclusive of black women.

The slogan of intersectionality emerging from Cape Town provided much needed sophistication for the ways in which we undertook every action that
informed our politics and cause. It gave black women and queer bodies in particular, both in South Africa and Oxford, the voice to interject and say ‘We are here too!’ More than that, it provided, not complete, but very necessary protections for those of us still exposed to sexual assault and violence even within our emancipatory projects. Adopting an intersectional perspective to doing politics meant that we could provide critique and lift up unlikely agents even in the face of what seemed like primary, singular issue visions. Testing our devotion to the ideals of decolonising (against the scope of inclusion that Decolonisation could take/handle,) caused us to think through and rethink even what we imagined we understood. It seems the only way to push the future into deeper consciousness is to make the future fully conscious of us.

From 3 - 5 October 2017, join an online campaign @GBVnet on the theme ‘Activists Disrupting Injustice’ by the Gender Based Violence Prevention Network, coordinated by Raising Voices in Uganda. Join the conversation on #VAWactivism