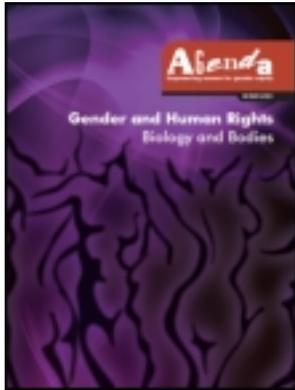


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Black feminism in the 1980s

Rozena Maart, Itumeleng Mafatshe and Zanele Hlope

Introduction

Itumeleng Mafatshe and Zanele Hlope interviewed Prof. Rozena Maart, Head of Gender Studies, who also recently became Director for the Centre for Critical Research on Race and Identity at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), after both had separately talked to her about how they felt that they did not know anything about feminism in South Africa during the 1980s. Prof. Rozena Maart is one of the founder members of Women Against Repression (WAR).

The interviewee, Rozena Maart: I met Zanele Hlope in 2012 when she took courses in Gender Studies towards her Honours degree. I also supervised her Honours dissertation on gender dynamics in the ANC Youth League in KZN, wherein she interviewed women in the UKZN Student Representative Council (SRC). Her work opened up possibilities for us to talk about gender politics in South Africa over the past four decades and in particular in the 1980s, during the time I was most active as a woman in my twenties who was a founder member of WAR – the first Black feminist organisation in the country.

Throughout our consultations and discussions her commitment to understanding these historical complexities brought forth a particular realisation – that many of our young students do not know how the 1980s shaped the current state of gender politics in South Africa, nor has there been much written on it, especially by Black women. She would come back to me each time and ask about the move from the 1970s to the 1980s and how Black Consciousness determined the way that I began identifying as a feminist, and as a Black woman who was active in feminist

politics during the 1980s. Her insistence that she found little written by Black women of this time period prompted a particular discussion; she then began to ask how she could quote what I was saying, and whether I had written a paper on it. I alluded to several, but none had the history of the 1980s that she was interested in.

I got to know Itumeleng Mafatshe when I gave a talk in the Politics department at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2012 on Black Consciousness and Feminism, which was followed by a workshop. Itumeleng was one of the students who asked questions about the four decades of Black women's involvement in feminism. At the time she wanted to know about the ANC's role and whether the ANC was instrumental in shaping feminism in the 1980s for women like myself. I replied in the negative, and asserted that it was in fact Black Consciousness and the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania that had determined that path for me.

A few months after our meeting I participated in the research and writing retreat organised by Dr Antje Schuhmann as their Visiting Professor. Each day we had workshops and discussion sessions, and when I saw Itumeleng alone, her work on Black feminism and the ANC brought forth particular questions, much like with Zanele Hlope. I wanted to put the two of them in touch and tell them about one another's work, but knew that ethical reasons prevented such a possibility. Itumeleng asked pertinent questions about feminism, and when I responded she would ask whether she could quote me as she found little written on Black feminism of the 1980s, and stated how frustrating it was.



Figure 1. Rozena Maart, 1987.

After several months I was able to bring Zanele Hlope and Itumeleng Mafatshe together on Skype to conduct this interview. What I learnt through this process is that sometimes students demand that we give an account of who we are and what we do in ways that we don't demand of ourselves – partly because we've become accustomed to writing about South African history but not about ourselves as subjects of South African history. While peculiar in some ways, since I am also a fiction writer, I was now put under the immediate questioning of two students who asked me to respond to what they were asking. They were doing the questioning, and I, as supervisor and guest professor, had to respond.

The interviewers

Itumeleng Mafatshe: One of the most striking experiences I have had with Professor Maart during her visit to Wits University in 2012, under a programme facilitated by my supervisor Dr Schuhmann, was her assertion that we cannot just read feminism but we ought to do it, be it and live it. Not only did these words convict me as a self-proclaimed feminist, but they challenged me to be a better activist. As a student and youth activist of the mass democratic movement in the twenty-first century, I have for a while

wondered about whether or not there is a way in which women should and perhaps do actually perform their activism. My Master's dissertation titled 'Gender Politics and A comparative study of ANC YL branches in Seshego (Limpopo)' looks at how activism among women in the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) is understood and performed and how their presence in a structurally patriarchal organisation advances struggles that are women's struggles specifically. It is interesting for me to also look at Black women's activism in the 1980s and tap into the shared experiences of women then and now in pursuit of imagining a gender politics that focuses on women and prioritises women's issues alongside equally important issues like class and race in South Africa's democracy. Upholding certain gender norms in a somewhat fearful way that silences the women continues to be a problem in youth politics even today, and as women who are committed to making progress on issues affecting women, a rich understanding of our own history is necessary. Hence this interview is both relevant and important as it contributes to our understanding of the history of women's activism in South Africa.

Zanele Hlope: I met Prof. Maart in 2012 when I took an elective in Gender Studies. Upon attending a couple of seminars I then decided to ask her to supervise me for my Honours research, titled 'The role of women in the African National Congress Youth League'. As a young activist within my organisation I knew I did not have enough theory on issues that young Black women faced, and Prof. Maart was the perfect mentor on gender-based violence and feminist theory. One of the things that I questioned while working with Prof. Maart was how much of a difference am I making to the women in my movement, or was I also being absorbed into the patriarchal society that already favours men. Like the feminists that emerged in the 1980s, feminism is not only fighting the men in a male-dominated society but also fighting against capitalism, which is also a tool that advances male domination, discrimination and the marginalisation of women.

I looked at the way in which I had treated women as opposed to men and I realised that men within revolutionary organisations still get away with a lot, while women are still very restricted even when they occupy

strategic positions in political office. We still lack women chairpersons and secretaries within political organisations. That is still the struggle that needs to be fought at all costs. Looking at the women who paved the way in the mother body of the ANCYL, that is the ANC, Winnie Madikizela Mandela has challenged men within the liberation movement and strived for women to have recognition for who we are as women, not simply as women in relation to men. My generation needs to know more about our 1980s history – and this is why I wanted to do this interview.

The interview

I & Z: There is very little published on the emergence of Black feminism during the 1980s. We both saw this when we were researching this for our Honours research. Why is this? Was there a notable Black feminist presence within the country during the 1980s?

RM: I think the lack of published material on Black feminist activity during the 1980s has to do with the restrictions imposed upon the media at the time by the apartheid regime. It was at the height of the apartheid regime's crackdown and continued imposition of all of its structural, systemic and institutionalised forms of maintaining White domination. The fact that there was hardly anything published on Black feminist activity is also due to the fact that any form of protest under the Rioter's Assembly Act meant that Black women who were protesting against sexism would face the same consequences as anyone pointing directly to apartheid. If the police saw anyone protesting we would be arrested. Some of us who wrote at the time could not get anything published.

It is hard today to give your generation a sense of some of the complexities that existed. We were not women who only protested against sexism or male violence – we were women who were active in anti-apartheid and anti-capitalist organisations who had a commitment to the national liberation struggle, just like any one of our comrades. Unfortunately in many places of Black activism feminism was treated as a 'White women's issue', not a cause that Black women felt strongly about. When newspapers covered what we were doing in WAR they zoomed in on the protests at

schools where we focused on the sexual assault of young girls by male teachers – they did not write about what we were doing under the heading of 'Black feminism'.

No, there was not a notable Black feminist presence in the country; there were Black women, few and far between, who would talk about being feminists but who also tried to talk us out of starting WAR. There were Black women who were understanding and sympathetic to the frustrations we had – they had them too. Many certainly agreed with us that what these male comrades were doing to young schoolgirls was oppressive and exploitative, but they did not speak out against sexual harassment publicly.

I & Z: These protests against sexual harassment and rape of schoolgirls were happening in Black and Coloured schools?

RM: Yes. Because WAR was Cape Town-based we protested at schools in Cape Town where male teachers who were known as activists had sexually harassed and assaulted young girls. They were supposed to be our comrades!

One particular protest was at Alexandria Sinton, which was considered a very important school in view of the revolutionaries the school produced – from the Coloured middle class, I might add. Bear in mind that the location of the school itself was considered a middle-class area. There was also an enormous sense of entitlement among Coloured middle-class men who taught at the school, who saw themselves as leaders ... that they were untouchable, the *amajonis* who were given the kind of praise they thought they deserved. They were university or college educated, the *crème de la crème* in their family, in their community, and certainly among the women activists, who they believed were not as well read as they were.

These men operated on the basis that anyone who saw their commitment to the struggle, and who knew of how well they were able to quote Marx and Lenin, would see them as special. Girls who came from working class backgrounds did not stand a chance – they were the girls who were targeted, mocked, ridiculed. At our first visit to Alexandria Sinton the Principal at the time, when confronted about three incidences of sexual

assault on young girls aged 14 and 15 at his school by male teachers who were trade union activists, told me and my comrades in WAR that it was because “how these young girls walked”, and when we confronted him and said, “are Black people oppressed because of how we walk ... are our fathers and mothers oppressed and exploited because of how they walk and how they carry their bodies? Do they deserve the racism that is inflicted upon them because of how they carry themselves?” he lashed out and said “that is different!”

We were not talking to ignorant men who were oblivious to discussions on violence against women or sexism – these were educated men who claimed leadership positions in our communities. The truth of the matter is that the national liberation struggle was not taking it up – sexism, rape, sexual harassment and sexual assault was not a political issue – so why did they have to worry about it?

I & Z: Can you sketch out the period of the early 1980s for us? What was happening in terms of gender issues? How did issues of race and gender merge and where did the focus lie for Black women?

RM: I finished school in 1980. I was on the infamous Committee of 81. This committee was composed of representatives from every high school and college in the Cape. I was the Steenberg representative. This was really insignificant in the eyes of the middle-class male leadership who ran everything; there were other schools more important than Steenberg, with male leadership, which was more important. The Committee of 81 was very much dominated by men. The leadership within it got very clear direction from male leadership working on the ground from the then banned ANC.

The women who were involved in the struggle were one of three things: their wives, their girlfriends or their mistresses. If you were none of those, then there was very little place for you. If you were the girlfriend of one of their friends who occupied a menial position (in other words, who took orders from them), then you might be considered, in a patronising way, as someone who was making a small contribution. It also meant that your boyfriend had to be spoken to and

certainly some man, if not him, had to ensure that you were kept in your place.

If you were a disobedient woman who did not know your place, in other words, a woman who could think for herself and understood that oppression at its very core had to consider the way that women were oppressed by the system of male domination, it had to be strongly communicated to you that it was not up to you to define the parameters of the struggle. You were either shunned or told off. The worst accusation that male leadership could levy at you was that you were acting in favour of the apartheid regime by distracting the course of political action and focusing on matters like sexism and patriarchy, when as Black people we were oppressed as a nation.

In some situations you were flirted with, to remind you that you were just a skirt with tits and arse, and when that did not work you were ousted, shut out of the activities that you had participated in, like doing *huis-besoek* (door-to-door mobilisation) with your comrades in the area, talking to neighbours, community members, gangsters, priests, everyone who lived in your area. Women understood very quickly that they had to toe the line.

I & Z: What about the 1980s at the University of the Western Cape? How did race and gender play out there?

RM: My first year at UWC in 1981 saw 16 men on the SRC. It was shocking; it was embarrassing to me as a woman, and yet they had no problem with it at all. But let me just say from the start – it was not only an issue of race and gender ... it was race, gender, class and sexuality. Sexuality was a huge issue. During my first year at UWC I challenged one of the SRC members during the debate session. I asked him what his definition of democracy was. He was livid. He looked over to his male comrades, and they all shook their heads as though I was trying to upstage them. I pressed him again, in front of a whole university mass waiting to hear what he had to say. He came up with an Abraham Lincoln definition of “democracy by the people for the people”. I asked him whether he thought women were people. His face grew redder and redder. He looked over towards his male friends again. They were all so angry because

the chair had not given me permission to speak. The chair had in fact pointed to another young male student to speak, but I never gave him a chance to stand up – I just spoke. I spoke loud. I was very loud.

I am still loud, not necessarily by the volume of my voice but by way of the intention of my Black Consciousness feminist interrogation – except now those comrades who are my age who are in government, prefer to believe that they don't recognise me, or that my lipstick and high heels has altered my appearance so much that they don't recall me. I think there is certainly an assumption on their part that a university job has 'toned' women like me down. None the less, let me return to that incident in 1981: he answered me with fury, while women, gay men and transgendered women who were my friends clapped and cheered, which is precisely why I did not sit down. I then asked him why there were no women on the SRC, and he noted that women could also run but didn't. He pointed to the United Women's Organisation, that had Black women and White women as part of its membership, and where White women called Black women 'mamma'. This was a very nice way to say that women belonged in women's organisations – being mothers, taking care of the tea during the break, and assuring that our role as adjuncts was noted.

Many of my friends asked me to run for SRC at UWC, but I didn't. I am not sure if I made the right decision; all I know is that I wanted to stay far away from men who thought that women played a menial role in the world and whose *only* place in the world was as mothers or wives.

1981, my first year, was the first year that UWC had openly gay transgendered men-to-women and gay men who did not hide their sexuality. It became enormously convenient for these *amajonis* to refer to me and my "moffie friends", as a distraction. I use the word 'moffie' here as it is used by those who take on the derogatory term as a term of identity and also by friends and peers who form part of the in-group, so to speak. I also use it to make a point about gay, lesbian and transgender identities at the time, that went unnoticed. Gender inequality and inequality with regard to sexuality was mocked or ridiculed by these *amajonis*.

I am a woman who does not believe in compulsory heterosexuality and motherhood.

Why should a woman's worth be determined by whether she has a boyfriend or husband? And why should women constantly be referred to as mothers – politically, socially, in all areas where the word woman is placed. It suggests that women have to procreate in order to be worthy of consideration. No one expects that of men – men never have to qualify their worth in any way. All they have to do is be men – nothing else.

I & Z: Was there a strong presence of Black feminists in the United Democratic Front?

RM: I was in my third year of university when the UDF was launched in 1983 in Mitchell's Plain. I remember the day very, very, clearly. I cannot say that I ever recall there being a strong Black feminist presence in the UDF. There were certainly Black women who would talk about their concerns – the kind that one can only call feminist concerns, but we were all educated, through the male leadership that forged and instructed the masses, on what to think and how to think. We believed that they knew best, on behalf of the anti-apartheid and anti-capitalist organisations they represented.

When the UDF was formed, anti-apartheid organisations came together strongly. The Freedom Charter was the main document everyone cited. And of course, even those among us who shared our Black feminist objectives stuck to the weekly agenda that was rolled out. Commitment – the word itself – meant having to adhere to what the male leadership put forward. Those who addressed sexism and violence against women, openly, as feminists, were few. I do not ever recall there being a Black feminist presence within the UDF.

There are Black feminists I know who would now say that they wish they had spoken up then; there are also those who claim that the issue of national liberation was so strong that it took over everything. I get annoyed sometimes because I think this suggests that Black feminists like the women who formed WAR were not moved or concerned with the national liberation struggle. I mean, Alan Boesak was there, and he was a key figure in our young lives – certainly to how women and men from my background got involved and engaged with the struggle. There has been quite a lot written about him, some very negative, but he was enormously

influential and inspiring. He gave my generation hope, and his words offered a possibility for a future many of us did not envisage until he said it, spoke it, imagined it with us.

I don't think one can separate gender struggles from the struggles that point directly to race. Yes, there were enormous struggles when it came to gender and transgender issues, but at the same time in the very organisations where there was conflict, contradiction and confrontation, there was also a sense of being strengthened by the mood that was created – the mood that determined how we became feminists, revolutionaries, thinkers, scholars.

I & Z: Can you say something about WAR, and how and even why it emerged in 1986?

RM: The period between 1983 and 1985 saw quite a lot of intensification of the struggle *vis-à-vis* the UDF. During those years I went to several funerals of ANC comrades who were shot and killed by the South African government. Throughout, a small group of my women friends talked about how rape and sexual assault was everywhere we went, and how somehow the minute the meeting started everyone had to stop talking about issues that affected women when men were the culprits; we then had to resume the regular meeting procedure and pay attention to the already set agenda.

With the UDF leadership fully entrenched, one saw a new kind of arrogance among male leadership; it was as though the Freedom Charter became the document they memorised in order to silence us, to shame us, to cite and recite as a means to show us how our demand for gender equality was not a "demand of the people." By 1986 we were all so fed up and many of us were determined to see that gender be brought into the discussion as a political issue. It was one of those 'now or never' moments, where you know that if you don't take a firm stand, irrespective of the kind of shunning that would follow, you would never be able to live with yourself.

There were five of us as Black women, ranging from 21 to 30 years in age. Three of us were students, and two were working, having been to university earlier. Whenever we got together we would lament the difficulties we heard of – sexual assault, sexual

harassment, rape ... and it was a never-ending story. I worked at Groote Schuur Hospital in Emergency and Gynaecology, and in those kinds of jobs there was a code of ethics to observe. The code of ethics that concerned me most was confidentiality. To me it meant a particular kind of silence I had to observe for the benefit of the men who sexually abused women; some knew that the women they had sexually assaulted would seek advice, counselling and medical services, and of course they knew they were protected by my code of ethics as a social worker, which was my first job. How bloody convenient, I thought. Many were in the leadership of the UDF, who had sexually assaulted young women (many under the age of 18 and therefore girls). Women who had started the abortion process at home and came into hospital for the medical D&C would tell me that they either had a one-night stand with a man (whose name they mentioned, and that he was in the UDF), who was married or who had a girlfriend, or that they were coerced into sex as someone drove them home.

I had to do my job, and this I did by making sure that proper procedures were followed. It left me in despair quite a lot of the time. When we spoke as women who were friends and comrades at night when we got together, we had to leave the names of the women out of the conversation. When we realised that more and more young schoolgirls were targeted by male activists, our disgruntled souls grew more and more determined to do something to expose these acts of violence.

It was when girls sought us out personally, outside of our respective jobs, that allowed for us to talk about why or how this was going to stop, and this part was crucial in our thinking towards taking a stand against the acts of male violence. It was not about going against anything or anyone – it was simply about taking a stand against violence against women. And where better to start than within a political struggle that fought for freedom.

I & Z: What were the most difficult challenges that you faced at the time of WAR's emergence?

RM: There were many challenges – I don't think I could retrace all of them in the order of

their emergence. I think the most shocking aspect of starting a feminist organisation, a Black feminist organisation at that, is to see how Black women you've known all of your life turn their backs on you. Then there were those who would speak to us at home, when they visited, but would not want to associate with us publicly because their male comrades (including their boyfriends, partners and husbands) made it clear that Black women like us were troublemakers, and that we did not take the national liberation struggle seriously.

One felt a sense of despair knowing that those around you were well aware of the oppression of women, of the high incidence of rape and sexual assault in our country, even within the anti-apartheid and anti-capitalist organisations which we found ourselves active, within which there were Black women – especially the girlfriends and partners of men in leadership positions – who adamantly stated that we were in the wrong for forging our Black feminist agenda. Then of course there were White women in the anti-apartheid movement who understood where we were coming from, but when WAR emerged they had the cheek to tell us that we were in the wrong, that we were going against the leadership, and that they could not stand with us.

I felt sick to my stomach at times; when one comes face to face with anyone who wants to tell you how to fight for liberation from the oppressor when they are the very beneficiaries of the very oppression you are fighting – I am pointing to White women who are beneficiaries of racism and Black men who are beneficiaries of sexism and patriarchy – treating one as though one was somehow holding the struggle for liberation back ... that is how deep their fear was. I do not call that commitment to the struggle – I call that ignorance and arrogance, a lethal combination.

I & Z: Can you give us some personal input here about Black Consciousness and its impact on you?

RM: I was a student at Steenberg High School when Black Consciousness spread across the Cape. In 1975 I started my first year of high school. I was 12, very young, I think. Pamphlets were distributed with Biko's words across the Western Cape. It was a quiet year for me. I think that I, like so many young people who had been

forcibly removed from the slave quarter of District Six, were withdrawn, in shock somewhat, and so were our parents and grandparents. It was only the following year, in 1976, when the Head Boy at school asked whether I would read the contents of a pamphlet to my class. It was the one where Steve Biko wrote on the mind, and the definition of Black Consciousness. I read it over and over. No one had ever spoken to me about the mind.

I always had friends who were older. When I was 13 and 14 my friends were 16, 17 and 18. They were reading Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*. I read it in Standard 8. I put it in my Math book. My Math teacher saw it and just rolled his eyes. He saw me reading books that were off the curriculum all the time, and considering that I was not good at Math, I think he was relieved that I was reading something, at least.

I & Z: What would you say was the most challenging aspect of the struggle that Black women who were feminists faced during the 1980s as compared to the 1990s or even previously?

RM: Black women who identified as feminists during the early 1980s were few and far between. Remember that when we talk about the 1980s we have to situate the fact that the ANC was banned, the South African Communist Party was banned and the UDF only emerged in 1983, in the Western Cape. Many of us who identified as feminists were teenagers during the 1970s when the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania was alive and well, and when the words of Steve Biko entered our lives.

I think the 1980s were more challenging because there was the build-up to the UDF and all efforts were made to ensure that it took place. One knew, as a Black feminist, that one had to be careful not to be constructed as someone who spent your time focusing on ways to detract from the struggle. When WAR was formed we drew attention to feminist issues around the country – talks, spray-painting, one-minute protests where we could in order to take a stand against violence against women, making stickers that drew on the Freedom Charter (like 'women's oppression – the struggle still continues'). I cannot fully speak for the 1990s, partly because I was not in the country for the most part; moreover, the smell of liberation was in

the air when the 1990s were ushered in, and throughout the activism of WAR was remembered, even if many in leadership positions did not want to acknowledge it. The older members of WAR were teenagers when Biko and Black Consciousness emerged; we were influenced by Steve Biko, conscientised and politicised by him, and the three older women in WAR (ages ranging from 24 to 29) felt very strongly that Black Consciousness compelled us to look at all forms of oppression and not to be silent.

RM: Absolutely! Black Consciousness offers much more than simply a path toward revolutionary consciousness – it challenges us to examine the historical, locate it within the contemporary, and question how the mind is central to the history of oppression, all forms of oppression. All forms of activism in our country need to grapple with Black Consciousness. Black Consciousness itself – as a history, a movement, a philosophy, an analysis, a reflection of the thinking of the 1970s that interrogated apartheid and White Supremacy – is an important part of South Africa’s intellectual history. Where would our country be without it?

I & Z: Do you think that Black Consciousness still has a role to play within gender organisations and gender politics?



ROZENA MAART is an Associate Professor, former Head of Gender Studies at UKZN, and now Director of the Centre for Critical Research on Race and Identity (CCRRI). In her capacity as Director of the Centre, she collaborates and works with international institutions, universities and organisations on gender, race, sexuality and identity as well as facilitating and directing research groups coordinated by postgraduate students.

She was born in District Six in Cape Town, went to Steenberg High School and later UWC. She obtained her Master’s degree at the University of York in England and her doctoral degree at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in Political Philosophy and Psychoanalysis.

In 1987 at the age of 24 she was nominated for the ‘Woman of the Year’ award for her work in the area of violence against women and for starting, with four women, Women Against Repression (WAR), the first Black feminist organisation in the country. She writes both fiction and non-fiction and won The Journey Prize: Best Short Fiction in Canada in 1992 for ‘No Rosa, No District Six’, a short story is now part of a larger collection, *Rosa’s District Six*, which made the bestseller list in Canada and the HOME BRU list in 2006 in South Africa. Her novel *The Writing Circle* made the top ten South African novels list and was nominated for the African Studies Award in the United States of America.

Prof. Maart is a member of several international organisations, such as the International Assembly of Women in Philosophy (UNESCO), the Collegium of Black Women in Philosophy and the Caribbean Philosophy Association. In addition to her work at the CCRRI, she is also the African regional co-ordinator of the UNESCO Scientific Committee SOPHITHINK. Her research interests revolve around identity, gender, race and sexuality. Email: rozmaart@gmail.com



ITUMELENG MAFATSHE is a Master’s student in the Politics department at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. A student and youth activist, African Nationalist, feminist, scholar and social entrepreneur, her research interests are in race, class, gender, development and social justice. Born and bred in Soweto, Gauteng, a child of the working class, she is a revolutionary that pursues the values attained in education and who is interested in making these practical and useful for the development of a broader society. Email: itumeleng.mafatshe@gmail.com



ZANELE HLOPHE is the youngest daughter of the late Mr and Mrs Hlophe, and was born and bred in Dassenhoek near Pinetown. She is a Master's student in the discipline of Tourism at UKZN. Her interests are in gender, gender-based violence and sexuality, which came about after she realised the harsh realities that women lived under in an organisation she served in. She is a student activist and radical feminist and does not compromise nor feel apologetic about her values and views where women are involved. She says that her activism will end on the day when women are truly free to express themselves without any comparison to men or any limitations imposed upon them. Email: zannyh1@gmail.com