

# Naked Protest

## The Intersections of Gender During Counter-Movements

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In South Africa, rape culture is a product of systemic and institutionalized patriarchy. Various patriarchal structures have become entangled and historically co-dependent, to the extent that we may now observe how history speaks through legacies of masculinities advanced by colonialism and apartheid. The country's post-colonial and post-apartheid reality is far from Nelson Mandela's "rainbow nation" utopia that was marketed to the world in 1994. South African women have been active participants in all anti-establishment movements since then and, for this reason, issues that affect women's freedoms cannot be ignored. Women activist Simamkele Dlakavu said that "protests are often romanticized, but they come with personal costs. The psychological trauma that leaves those on the frontlines of these movements damaged and scarred for life is not often highlighted." Dlakavu was one of the frontline protesters during #FeesMustFall, the Rhodes University Naked Protest (#RURferenceList), #RhodesMustFall, and the #RememberKhwezi protest. During the peak of the aforementioned protests movements, Jacob Zuma was the President of South Africa.

I have a growing feeling of grief towards women in my country. The way that South African women use their bodies during protest movements to send a message becomes a sort of martyrdom. We experience grief and our mourning is perpetual. Perpetual mourning has the draining impact of feeling like the burden is ours to bear

indefinitely. At the intersection of the current gender-based politics and the effervescent youthful energy, is an emboldened women's rights movement. The grieving process brings me close to indignation and sometimes hopelessness, a feeling I share with my sisters. A large part of the work against gender-based violence that we are doing as a collective is converting emotion into action.

### The trial – a symbol of a woman's place in South Africa

On 6 December 2005, *Khwezi* (Star) – the complainant who was given a pseudonym by her supporters to conceal her identity – brought rape charges against Deputy President Jacob Zuma. This was the beginning of one of the most high-profile trials in post-apartheid South Africa. After months of litigation in the Johannesburg High Court, in 2006 Zuma was acquitted of the rape charge. Statistical evidence has shown that there was a reduction in sexual violence and rape reports after the Zuma trial.

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Jake Moloi from the Institute for Security Studies, argued that the judge's decision to set aside section 227(2) of the Criminal Procedure Act "has set a worrying precedent that is now binding on the lower courts". In 2007 Zuma would become the president of South Africa. Khwezi's ultimate passing in 2016 and Zuma's ascension into power following the trial remains a gut-wrenching reality. As a collective, we continue to honour her life, and the lives of our sisters, by wearing black *doeks* (headscarves). I observe our collective mourning with my "mourning sisters" art piece, a visual journey that talks about the perpetual and shared nature of grief.

## Gendering protests

The #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protest movements mobilized multiple identities. The radical manifestation of the visibility of women in contemporary protests in South Africa revealed the complexity of intersectional issues faced by women. Apart from the Women's March on 9 August 1956 – during which 20,000 women from different races and political backgrounds organized a national march to protest against the racist "pass laws", an internal passport system designed to segregate Blacks and Whites – there was no other publicized protest before 1994 in which women were recognized as leaders of mass resistance. Between 2015 and 2016, the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protest movements demanded higher education institutions and the state to decolonize education. During these uprisings, the intersections of gender, race, and class led to multiple revolutionary happenings. Initially, the imagery in the media reporting on the protests, depicted images of men on the frontlines of protests. Historically, mass action movements were seen as a domain for men and women's leadership and presence was perceived as insignificant. Women manoeuvred themselves into positions of leadership during the mobilization of #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protest movements that sparked *Mbokodo* Moments, the Rhodes University Naked Protest (#RUnreferenceList) and later the #RememberKhwezi protest. We moved from sharing emotional experience of patriarchal oppression towards social action, regardless of male support. The defiance I capture with my artwork "sisters in arms", is a celebration of this progression towards a collective commitment to be active participants in socio-political change, again and again.

## Mbokodo Moments

*Mbokodo* Moments are used to describe the turning points catalyzed by women during the #FeesMustFall protest period. During these moments, women asserted themselves as active leaders in protest actions. The word *mbokodo* is a Zulu term meaning grinding stone. The internal gender marginalization of women on campuses around South Africa during #FeesMustFall lead

to different *Mbokodo* Moments. The intersectionality of the multiplicity of identities came to a head in one significant Moment at Wits University. A group of women comrades decided to wear large African headwraps, white t-shirts, and blue jeans. The group of women sang as they approached the student masses. United, the elected women Student Representative Council (SRC) leaders – outgoing SRC president Shaeera Kalla and incoming president Nompengulo Mkatshwa – took over the podium. Up until this point, women were hardly visible in the leadership ranks of the protest movement and they were sidelined into playing supportive roles. Dressing up as a collective and asserting their place in the protest sent a clear message to male comrades about women's "rightful" place in a protest movement. Women would not be leading from the back.





## Communicating displeasure through nakedness

On 17 April 2016, the RU Queer Confessions Facebook group published a list of ten names of male students as part of a confession, titled: "Reference List". This list would later be known as the #RURferenceList and spark a protest against sexual assault and rape culture on campus, even though the original #RURferenceList Facebook post did not explicitly mention rape or sexual assault. News about the post spread across campus and an impromptu meeting was held that evening by female students. The following day a crowd of about 50 female students shut down campus and staged a topless protest (though some students wore bras) with statements reading "No Means No" and "Still Not Asking For It" written across their bodies. The women formed a body barricade as a symbol of unity.

It is known in African indigenous episteme that Bantu women communicate their displeasure through nudity. In this instance, the naked women were trying to use their bodies to also mediate non-violence between the police and the protesting student force. However, this vulnerable act of protest was met with excessive force from Rhodes University's Management and the South African Police Service (SAPS). The police used stun grenades and rubber bullets to break the body barricade. A few women were also arrested. The women-led protest was a desperate plea to expose the callousness of the daily life of women at Rhodes University and women around the country. Women on other university campuses staged their own naked protests in solidarity resulting in multiple *Mbokodo* Moments. Yolanda Dyantyi and Dominique McFall, who were students at Rhodes University at the time, were found guilty of insubordination. Dyantyi was charged with "engaging in offensive/defamatory conduct", and both women were excluded from Rhodes University for life. A documentary titled "DISRUPT" would be released as a documentation of the events that unfolded during the #RURferenceList protest. Despite the weaponization and criminalization of the female body, nudity has continued to be the last resort for women to resist and communicate their displeasure when they feel that they have nothing left to lose. Nudity is a potent protesting tool because it sends a strong physical message that the person or group has no other alternatives.

## Resistance art and guerilla campaigns

Guerilla-style protesting is one of the methods of resistance that women and students used during #FeesMustFall, the Rhodes University Naked Protest (#RURferenceList), and #RhodesMustFall. On 16 August 2016, during a ceremony where President Jacob Zuma was delivering a speech on the results of the 2016 local government elections, four young women dressed in black staged a guerilla-style silent protest. Simamkele Dlakavu was one of four who stood in front of the podium with posters that read "Remember Khwezi", "I am 1 in 3", "#10 years later", and "Khanga". President Jacob Zuma was overshadowed. The crowd and the cameras were drawn to the women donning posters written in red marker. The women were violently and forcibly removed from the stage by presidential security. This was an iconic silent protest that was seen and broadcast to millions of people in South Africa. The silent protest was the women's democratic right as stated in the South African Constitution. In an interview following the protest, one of the women said that the protest was a spur-of-the-moment decision. Witnessing

these four women on television played out like a beautiful theatre piece, sending shivers down my spine. The audacity of the four women brought a smile to my face. We are often told that there are "appropriate" or "inappropriate" times to bring up certain subjects. People who hold patriarchal norms are often inconvenienced by our grief as women. We too are gravely inconvenienced by the brutality of gender-based violence.

## Reflection and looking forward

In the aftermath of the protests in South Africa, university campuses have become more militarized. Protests such as #AmINext and #Total-Shutdown erupted following multiple reports of brutal rapes and murders of women after 2016. Women continued rallying on the frontline of all these protests. Women marched to Parliament and handed over a memorandum of demands after Uyinene Mrwetyana was raped and killed at a local post office. President Cyril Ramaphosa passed three new amendment bills to address the scourge of gender-based violence in 2020. South African women have never known a period of rest. In theory, women in South Africa should enjoy the highest fundamental freedoms of dignity, safety, and security but in practice we continue to mourn our unfulfilled promise of freedom, safety, and equality.