



The month of August is commemorated as Women's Month in South Africa every year in tribute to more than 20,000 women who marched to the Union Buildings on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1956 to petition against the pass laws of the country at the time..

This is the 66<sup>th</sup> year of this event and the theme this year is "Women's Socio-Economic Rights and Empowerment: Building Back Better for Women's Resilience!" which is a call to action to all, to take steps in responding to the most persistent challenges affecting the lives of women and girls..

National Women's Day in South Africa draws attention to many of the important issues that women still face - such as domestic violence, discrimination and harassment in the workplace, equal pay, education for girls and more..

One of the beacons in this fight for the empowerment of girls and women especially in terms of education is Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng - Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Town..

Today I have the privilege of featuring Prof. Phakeng in this Executive Insights segment as an inspiration to countless students in South Africa and around the world..

**SFR :** Good afternoon Professor and thank you for your time today.

**MP :** Good afternoon and thank you so much for Inviting me.

***SFR : Vice Chancellor, Deputy Mother, FabAcademic, Leader of the #Past3amsquad, Educator and more.. What is your motivation behind the many roles you play in society and how do you juggle all these roles..***

**MP :** You know, it feels like many roles but at the center of it, it's the same thing. It's all about education, youth development, community development. For me, it's all of that, so it doesn't feel like I'm playing many roles because they are all centered around my passion for education and I'm deliberately saying my passion because then I do that with great enthusiasm as passions go.

It's always a joy to do education and it comes from a place of experience that I wouldn't be here without education. I was rescued by education and so it's like it's the same thing of course, except executive management, being Vice Chancellor.

It's an education institution, but the work of being Vice Chancellor is not just education, it's you know human resource development, management of people, resources, finances and so on and so forth. So, it's doable. 24 hours is good enough.

***SFR : And one of your jobs is also to receive students at the airport. 😊***

**MP :** Haa haa, that's the fun. You know. It's not written in the job description, but in every job you've got to insert the fun, because otherwise it becomes too heavy and too dreadful to do. So, I make sure that I inject the things that I enjoy, the things that give me energy, the things that invigorate me and the young people doing it invigorate me.

They give me energy and of course as much as their exuberance can be, it can sometimes go beyond what's expected. I appreciate it because there will be things that I don't think about, so fetching them from the airport and giving them Kit Kats at the library during exam time or on a cold winter evening.

It's something that that I do because I think about what I would have liked that many years ago on a cold winter night study in the library, or even if it's not so cold, but it's like 10:30 in the night and I'm studying in the library and maybe people have gone home and there's a few of us. And then what would I have liked to do?

And I thought, wow, they can just have a VC popping up, you know, just to encourage them and give them some encouragement to take a break with Kit Kats.

***SFR : How far have women in South Africa come since your time of your first school learning under the trees..?? Are we where we need to be..??***

**MP :** We are not. We are far away in my view, I mean, and I think, as much as sometimes there's a tendency to congratulate ourselves, we have only just started scratching the surface, and I'm saying that because there's still a perception that gender equality, particularly in the workplace and in many other spaces, is just about giving access.

So, you hire more women it, seems like, tick it's done. Get more women in leadership positions, tick, it's done and in my view, "**Access is not equity**". Access is just one level of equity. We need to go to the next level of equity, which is participation and the next level which is success. If we don't do that then we will not see success because even if you see women in the leadership we can end up with a situation that you have women in the space but nothing changes.

Nothing changes in terms of how women are treated in the in their workplace in schools, in different spaces, or even in sports. I mean, just in South Africa, women soccer players, our women soccer team is treated totally different from our men's national team. Our women national soccer team just won the Africa Cup, and they were phenomenal, you know, and the men's soccer team haven't.

And of course, they're supposed to be excited with some benefits, small benefits that they're given now once off for the win. But I say to people I'm not satisfied because that's not good enough.

That's like well done for winning this cup, we don't want well done for winning this cup. We want equal treatment with the men. Because these are national soccer teams and they are in public, so it's the one way for the business sector for government to show gender equality and if we can't show it there, there's no way you're going to see it in the boardroom.

***SFR : When you took over positions of leadership, did you have a plan in place as to what you wanted to achieve and what have been some of the challenges in achieving those..***

**MP :** You know top of mind for me was of course transformation and excellence. I mean, I've always been committed to excellence. But my understanding and my view is, in a context such as ours, if you drive excellence without transformation, it will do damage, and so I have to come with a vision that brings the two together and a convincing vision for the university and the academic sector.

To actually understand that the two are not, in contrast, they are not in opposition. They work together and if we do them this way, excellence, and transformation, we can produce sustainability, and this is what I mean when I say if we just pursue excellence in and of itself can do damage.

Excellence is great and we must pursue it. But excellence is complex, you know, excellence as much as it is good it can also marginalise others. It can silence people. It can exclude others if it's not done consciously.

One of the reasons why it is like that is because excellence is enabled, it doesn't happen on its own. You enable it, and because we come from an apartheid past, excellence in our history was enabled in a way that it advantages a particular race and gender.

That's why even today when you call excellence often you get white men in front and of course since 94 you get white men, you get black men, you get white women and then you get the black woman at the end of what I call the colonial process and you know and then it makes it look like women are lazy.

They don't work hard enough. That's not it. It's because we have enabled it that way. Women were generally regarded as minors during apartheid and when the country got democracy the struggle against racism and you know, pragmatically, whatever advantage first black men, I mean, patriarchy works together, right.

So black men went in the front and then obviously white women came next because you know, they they've got the networks in the space of white men and black women come at the back. As I said, as a leading university on the African continent, we have to enable excellence in all its diversity and the university didn't have a history of having targeted programs for previously marginalized people.

Because you know, as you can imagine, the top university the narrative was this is a meritocracy. You swim or you sink. Then I said but it doesn't work that way. We are not starting from the same point, so we've got to enable other people.

So, we've got to find programs there that can enable emerging researchers who are black only on their own without competing with others. As much as we want emerging researchers of all the other races and foreign nationals supported, but we don't want this group to be supposed to be competing with this group.

You give a same amount of money to support it, but it must be separate so that this money can all of it be used for this, and then we've got to also think about women and the university had no history of living women programs and the first program that I launched was "Advancing women for women by women".

We launched it on the 9th of October of August in 2018 after I took office and the idea there was to support scholarship where women in areas where women are in short supply. And then the second area was to support scholarship and research in areas that focus on women issues.

So, what are those areas that focus on women issues? We want to support scholarship there and also focus on women in short supply. Where areas where women in short supply and then the third area was to support people who identify as women and or who present as women.

But at scholarship in that area. Because the scholarship in South Africa we don't have a growing scholarship, for example, in queer studies and I wanted us to develop that and the idea was that we've got to get these scholars, women, only women can access the funds to do work in these areas.

And every year in August, we'll come back and report to the university community as to how the work is going, they will get money to do research, they'll get money to get students, but all of that, the people they employ, the students they supervise must all be women or presenting as women or presenting as transwomen. For us transwomen are women.

We did that, and every year we've been doing and that's kind of reporting back, and we're seeing some of the students who they started supporting and actually, are now employed in the departments, some of which were completely white. They've now got young black women in junior level positions who are completing their PhDs, they are mentored by the women in the department and that's the growth that you want to see. You want to see that change. Some of the areas were dominated by men.

Archaeology, it's dominated by men, and we've got few women, the three women who are there working together to bring a new cohort of women in there, and we can see the change. That's something that I wanted to see in terms of equity and but also in terms of sustaining the excellence of the university. I thought, you know, it's good to take over a university at that time when we're leading in one World University ranking and I thought, you know who are the people who are keeping us in these rankings?

One day they're going to retire. What should we do? So, I also set up the UCT 2030 future leaders' program. Young people who are selected solely on merit. We've got a rating system in South Africa and young people who are emerging superstars are rated P and the majority of them are at UCT and we take them, give them tailor made support to fast track their growth and make sure that they become the leading scholars that they're destined to be, but also that they train more leading scholars like them.

Also, as a way to retain them because these are superstars. If we don't do that, they're going to go overseas. That's why they studied anyway. And that has helped. As I'm talking to you now, we're leading in all the five major World University ranking when we led only in one. We have seen women emerging.

That group of young people below 40 that we selected on merit, the majority of them are women. We didn't say we are selecting women of course. We didn't use nationality or race; we

didn't use any demographic selection. We just said they could be rated and that's a peer review, international peer review and there are different nationalities, different races different genders, but mainly women.

I think that's fantastic, and it tells you, perhaps in history, women could have advanced if we had deliberately or intentionally supported them.

***SFR : And is that part of the objective that you had in mind when you launched your own scholarship? How many students do you think you will be able to assist with that?***

**MP :** So far we've got about 20 already that I think are in the pipelines. Some of them have completed. They've graduated, but every year we give about five, and so we've got a lot of students who go through and that was what I had in mind.

But in that program it's supporting women postgraduate students who are registered at UCT. The idea of that also was to say most young women at the time when they have to do postgraduate studies, it's a time when they have to start a family whatever and then there are no scholarships that focus on them, and they struggle.

And sometimes they say, I won't take postgrad, I'll go work or stay at home or be a stay home mom and so the scholarship gives them wrap around support so that they can get a stipend, so that they don't have to feel like they have to work. They can focus on their studies, graduate, and get on with life. So that's the idea again to grow the number of women in academia.

Hello everyone, we are back with Professor McCarthy Phakeng. We had to stop the recording yesterday because of some technical issues. Prof, Thanks for the time again today and let's continue from our discussion yesterday.

***SFR : What do you think is currently the biggest challenge facing the South African education system..?? You spoke about your plans and your scholarship, but I don't think any of those plans would materialize in the short term or even mid-term.***

For me the biggest challenge is the gap between the rich and the poor, which manifests itself in terms of the two basic education schooling systems, the private and public schools. Poor students go to public schools and students from wealthy backgrounds go to private schools and you can see that gap between the two.

Because the students in private schools do better than those in public schools in general, if you take their numbers altogether and the first time that the students meet and sit side by side is when they get to university, because when they get to university the public higher education system in South Africa has much more of quality than the private, as a high education system and so majority of students come to public higher education.

The danger of this gap of the two systems in basic education is that you get a higher drop out in the 12 years of basic education from the public schools than you do from private schools and that drop out means that very few students then can complete matric and then go to university and then at university you see also the disadvantage of coming from your poor background because the disadvantage when you get to university is that you actually do not have the cultural capital and the social capital to succeed at university.

Because at university you don't only need the intellectual capital to succeed, you can have the grades, you can have whatever, but then you come to university and then you've got to know how to behave in a lecture. You learn that if you don't talk, you don't learn if you don't ask your questions actually you left behind, you don't know that.

Actually, it's OK to say you don't know to ask your friends and all of that is the kind of capital that working class students don't have and they should know. They think that if they ask a question, it means they're not good enough. They think if they ask their friends or their classmates that they're not good enough and when they get to university then you see working class students struggling to complete.

So in my view it is a class problem that goes on and on, and the class problem in South Africa is also a race problem and therefore it actually is not so helpful given our apartheid past because our apartheid past was about race and so it creates this ongoing racial polarization, even though the government didn't do it deliberately, it is happening deliberately in terms of private and public schooling systems, and then at university when the black students don't do well, it's as if it's the race that makes them not do well.

It's not seen that it's the kind of capital that you need to succeed at universe. It's a challenge, not only educational. It's a challenge politically too because that's what brings instability. Because these are young people, these are young people who become politically active at university.

These are young people who feel that. They're excluded there, whatever. It doesn't matter how smart you are, how bright, how hard you have worked because they work hard to get to university and then suddenly all of that doesn't take them anywhere.

So, it's a huge risk.

***SFR : So, from what you say it's a class issue, and so obviously this is something that's going to take much longer than anybody anticipated. I'm sure. Are there any solutions in your mind as to how this can be addressed?***

I think at university I think all of us have to come in by the way to solve the problem. Universities are by definition middle class entities, they're elite entities. The middle-class

students find it very easy to come into university, so we as universities have to get ourselves ready to be able to teach working class students. To be able to house working class students and this is not just about giving them extra lessons and whatever it's about the kind of support that we give them when they're in residences. It's about the proactive support about mental health. It's about you know it's about what goes into the orientation program that that introduces them to university.

But it's also about ongoing support and what we're doing at UCT as we work at knowing how to support the working-class students is to. To join the data that we have of a student before the semester ends. How are they doing academically? Are they a client at our Student Wellness clinic? Is there mental health issue? Do they have mental health issues and not to get details but to get a coding system that indicates what level are they? And then do they have financial issues? Because when students are better with financial issues, their own fees or they don't want to pay their fees next semester it can affect their mental health.

Then it can affect their academic performance. So, there's a connection here and then also they can start with self-harm. So, we've been doing this work to see where and when is the period when students self-harm goes up, what happens in that period and we want to join the dots so that we can stop that, first deal with the issue of self-harm but also be able to support them academically so that they can succeed.

Because if it happens at the end of the semester, what happens is that then they are told that they're academically excluded. It's too late, so we're doing it now before it gets to that level. SFR : But isn't it also too late to start at the start when they enter the university, especially when you mentioned the class issue that happens in the past. They have gone through all that and then coming to university. So, shouldn't something be done at the beginning, at the basic education level where these things need to be set right?

Absolutely, so we're doing several things. Last year September we launched the UCT Online High School and one of the big reasons why we launched the UCT Online High School is precisely to deal with this problem.

There were three reasons.

- 1) Firstly, there aren't enough schools by the way in South Africa, just buildings and in the beginning of the year, in the big cities there are students who can't be accommodated because there are no schools and usually those are poor students. So, we can collaborate with government and be able to assist in that regard.
- 2) Secondly, even when students were able to get into schools the schools are overcrowded, right? And classrooms are overcrowded like a teacher has got 50 learners 60, and I'm saying overcrowded in our context because I know that in some Asian

countries the classes may be bigger, right? But in this case it's important for students to get a personal or at least interaction with the teacher.

In a class where learners from working class backgrounds are 50,55,60 students in a class, it is not possible for a teacher to perform miracles and be able to support them to learn. So, the online high school creates a possibility for those students to be accommodated

- 3) And then thirdly there there are many learners in our schools who are moved to the next level and the next grade and the next grade without having the requisite knowledge, you know they are moved on. In the online high school, we've come up with pedagogy, designing lessons from the ground up that actually take all of that into consideration. There's personal attention to students.

They've got a coach and they, and then we have recruited high quality teachers in the country, their lessons are recorded there online, but if the student is registered with the school, then the student gets personal online teaching lives, right, but the platform is available to everybody for free.

OK, so teachers can get it, learners can get it. Their parents can get it, and so they can get that a good teaching there. The other thing that we're doing in the online high school to foster social interaction and also get the students who might come from other backgrounds to interact with others. We've got social clubs. Students start connecting online. Then they meet those who are in the same area we connect them, they can connect physically, they make friends and it's working great right? So that gives them an opportunity to engage.

You might be sitting there thinking, OK, what happens to poor students though if they are on online and they are in homes that are not conducive. We have signed an agreement with the South African Human Rights Commission who work with students because education is a right in our country, and we have set up a micro school, so we are working with an NGO in KZN they are mentoring them in the school. The students are registered for the online high school, but they come together.

In the same class they we got them laptops and everything data. They sit, they went because they're registered. They've got their mentor who's here with us. They don't have to be at home and at a particular time they get a break. Like you know, in a particular time they can go home so we are trying the model of micro schools.

We are working hoping that the legislation will open in the country to allow micro schools because that will allow us to support students in rural areas like those and we've tried it in one school here in the Cape Flats now we try it with the students in a rural area and working with a

nongovernmental organization that's working with them. But it's not a school but they can use our school, because they can't stay at home, so this in a view will go some way in terms of supporting.

We've got other initiatives at UCT like the school improvement Initiative, the school Development initiative that we run with schools in the townships and rural areas where we don't only work with teachers you know in the school, we also bring our students who are doing occupational therapy.

We're doing psychology to work with the students, because if you're in a poor area, you don't get those services, so we bring them in so that the students in the school can get that access and sort of also get introduced.

The ones who are in the school improvement unit, we also bring them to campus before they can they finish high school so that they get a sense of what does the university look like? They spend time here; we teach them on a Saturday and so that they are not intimidated by university. They get a sense of how does university work and they're taught by some of our staff, yes.

So, there's several things that we can do. The online high school helps us to reach more. The School Improvement Initiative can only reach the schools here in the Cape Flats, the poor schools in the townships here in Cape Town, so we're doing our best.

We can do more, but this is the best that we're doing.

***SFR : Being on the shipping and freight resource show, I have to ask you something related to shipping. I get a sense that there's been a disconnect between the educational system and the shipping and freight industry because there's not many people who are aware of what shipping and freight and logistics is all about. Many many many people around the world, in fact, and South Africa is no exception as well don't know much about what we do. Is there any reason there is not much of a focus at the university level even. I mean there are logistics degrees and things like that, but I feel there, there's no practical action towards in that area. Do you have any views on that..??***

You know, I think it's because it's such a specialized area. I mean we have a postgraduate program in shipping law. But the students who do it, will tell you if they do that program they have to be in an area where that's needed.

They can't go to Johannesburg, or even if they do maritime law or shipping laws like that kind of stuff it's not necessarily needed everywhere, even though it serves everyone.

People are not aware of the importance of shipping in their lives because a lot of goods come that way and so on. But many people are not aware, and I think as universities we don't necessarily have big programs in these areas.

It's something that not all of us think we need every day.

***SFR : Yeah, but without the industry nothing will move but that's a discussion for another day and my last question in this women's month of August, every year we celebrate in South Africa, what is your one important message for our women and young girls?***

You know my message would be perhaps three things briefly.

- 1) Own who you are. You're not going to be someone else simply because you don't like who you are. So, own who you are.
- 2) Work hard, make yourself indispensable through your work. It doesn't matter how hard it is, just work hard.
- 3) Stay the course, stay the course. It's not going to be easy. It's not easy to be a woman in leadership. It's not easy being a woman in science, and I'm sure it's not easy being a woman in shipping and freight. It's not easy at all, but we can only win as women if those of us who are there can stay the course, so stay the course.

***SFR : Very well said Prof and once again thank you for your time and the inspiration that you bring to countless students around the country and around the world. And congratulations on your doctorate at the University of Ottawa and thank you for all the work that you're doing and wish you all the best.***

It was incredible and thank you very much Hariesh thank you so much.