Girls as "warriors": Addressing gender inequality in turbulent times in South Africa

Prof Naydene de Lange

Nelson Mandela University

University Way

Summerstrand

Port Elizabeth, 6000

South Africa

Naydene.delange@mandela.ac.za

Tel: +27-41-5044519

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Abstract

Gender equality is central to a just world – in the Global North and Global South - yet there is resistance to bring about equality for women and girls from several sides. In South Africa, a developing country in the Global South, equality is carefully scripted into the South African Constitution, yet reflecting on the situation of women and girls in South Africa, it is clear that the complexity and intersectionality of the inequalities makes it difficult to enable an equal society. For girls and women to resist and change traditional gender norms in a patriarchal dominated society, requires girls and women to understand their personal gender inequalities before they can address public gender inequalities which leave them vulnerable. In this article I draw on work with indigenous women university students exploring their own awakening to the awareness of their inequalities but also their potential for being warriors - activists for gender equality - to resist the structures which place them in an unequal position, vulnerable to gender-based violence. Turbulent times require warriors – women and girls with great vigor and courage to do the work.

Keywords: dialogue, gender violence, girls, South Africa, university, women, warriors

A **Introduction: 'Turbulent times' in South Africa**

> Only when women focus on themselves will they begin to discover their true identity and realize the cultural hold that has always oppressed and subordinated them. … We must strive, as African women, to name ourselves because when we name and define ourselves, we take the power to define from those who have "mis-defined" us. We must remove this power to define from the African traditions that define us as domestic, from the government that does not view women's issues as social issues, from the patriarchal academic systems that doubt our capabilities as educated women and from researchers who silence our voices and speak on our behalf. (Mumbi Mwangi 2009: 151)

South Africa, in its 23rd year of its democracy, is indeed experiencing turbulent times, still grappling with "establish[ing] a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights" (The South African Constitution, 1996: 1), and enabling equality for women. Connell (2005: 1801) drawing on her earlier work (2002) acknowledges that "[g]ender inequalities are embedded in a multidimensional structure of relationships between men and women, which, as the modern sociology of gender shows, operates at every level of human experience, from economic arrangements, to culture, the state, to interpersonal relationships and individual emotions." Draper (2017) in an overview of the recent World Economic Forum posits that "[t]hese times would test any government and country, but [that] South Africa faces its own domestic challenges [contested political power] that in the best case will inhibit its responsiveness, and in the worst case exacerbate the domestic political impact of these global currents [for example negative growth]". It is within this space of contested political power that addressing the inequalities of women are pushed back and that the experiences of most women remain an unacceptable reality filled with inequalities, oppressions, and violence. While there are efforts in South Africa to acknowledge women as equal partners in sustainable socio-economic development, most girls and young women

remain in a place of deep inequality. When the economy suffers, people suffer, and when people suffer, the face of suffering seems to be that of children (girls) and women. The intersectionality of being a girl/woman, being African, being poor, and in or from a rural context deepens the experiences of inequality.

When will the inequalities that women experience change? Mosua (2017) points out that women's rights and issues were shelved during colonisation and post-colonisation:

> During colonization and post-colonial eras, African women of various backgrounds, have been left with no time to speak for themselves. … Women joined hands with their men to fight colonization and during the process the fight for gender-empowerment was suspended as they were urged to shelve their concerns and join the men in the fight for their conquered land. (Mosua 2017: 69-70).

It seems that women's concerns are still not taken seriously. For example, at a dialogue held at my university in August 2016 and hosted by the national Department of Social Development, students were asked to raise their concerns in the context of the protests against a 'rape culture' at universities. The women students raised the issues of sexism, not feeling safe on campus, not feeling safe in campus residences (also in off-campus housing), harassment by some house committee members, ineffective responses from the university to a purported 'rape culture', insufficient support for women, insufficient support for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex persons (LGBTI), insufficient support for indigent students, an oppressive university culture, and racism. As the women students voiced their concerns, an irritated male student took the floor and declared that the women's 'soft' concerns were not important, and that what he wanted to talk about was money to cover the costs of studying. Once he had silenced the women students and articulated his needs, he promptly got up and left the dialogue.

Connell (2005: 1801) contends that "moving towards a gender-equal society involves profound institutional change as well as change in everyday life in personal conduct". It is on this contention or proposition that the article builds, beginning with the personal and private experiences of the girls and moving to the public and the systemic structures. For girls and women to resist and change gender norms in a society dominated by patriarchy, requires women and girls to understand their personal gender inequalities before they can begin to address systemic gender inequalities which leave them vulnerable.

Walters (2016), in her introduction to *The dangers of a metaphor: Beyond the battlefield in the sex war*, approaches het activist work with young indigenous women using the metaphor of a warrior, not to do battle, but to articulate their courage and strength to address gender violence. In this article I therefore ask the question: How might we engage girls to enable them to be 'warriors' in addressing gender violence in their communities?

Girls, equality and gender violence

The South African Constitution, in terms of equality, posits that:

> The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth (SA Constitution 1996: 6).

To ensure that there is no discrimination against girls and women and to push for gender equality, a Commission for Gender Equality, as required in the SA Constitution, exists and has the following functions:

> (1) … [to] promote respect for gender equality and the protection, development and attainment of gender equality. (2) The Commission for Gender Equality has the power, as regulated by national legislation, necessary to perform its functions, including the power to monitor, investigate, research, educate, lobby, advise and report on issues concerning gender equality (SA Constitution, 1996: 195).

In spite of the sound rights-based South African Constitution and the Commission for Gender Equality, and in spite of the girls in Girls Leading Change being 'born frees' (born in or after 1994), being enrolled at university, and having access to the Internet, social networks and global mass culture, they are still caught in the inequalities of the past and the present, the inequalities of being young women, young indigenous African women, and young indigenous African women from a poor background. One issue is gender violence on university campuses.

South Africa is in the unfortunate position to be identified as a violent country with high rates of gender violence, making it unsafe for women to live their everyday lives. For example, recently, in 2016, a double rape case made the newspaper headlines, when two women students studying at my university were in a taxi on their way to their home town in another province, were raped in the taxi by the taxi driver (Sowetan Live 2016). Not only does this happen in public transport getting to and from university, the university campuses are seen as sites of a 'rape culture', which lead to student protests at several university campuses in South Africa (Chengeta 2017). Girls at school are equally affected by sexual violence, also sexual violence from some male teachers (Burton & Leoschut 2012; Human Rights Watch 2001). While such violence happens at a personal level, it is informed by cultural values of gender roles and of masculinity and femininity which mis-define indigenous girls and women as objects of possession and positioning them as at the beck and call of men. It is the patriarchal structures which govern societies, which renders girls and women less that men and often less than human (Adam & De Lange 2017, In Press). Seeing girls and women as 'not human yet' (Gasa 2015) paves the way for violence, which according to Chuck Derry (2016), "is the foundation on which oppression happens." What is distressing is that, according to American First Nations knowledge, it takes four generations to heal one act of violence (Steinem 2015).

The Girls Leading Change, in this project, chose not to remain within these oppressions of gender violence, but to do work on the self and to be courageous in re-defining themselves, to make their own voices heard, and to address gender violence within their university. In this regard, Scharmer's (2007) Theory U, is used to frame their becoming courageous warriors.

Theoretical framework: Theory U

Otto Scharmer's (2007) Theory U (See Figure 1), provides a framework for understanding "deep personal-social change, and an experiential process (the U-process) for enacting that change" (Pillay, 2009: 229). While his theory is developed for the area of leadership and has been applied to several projects in other areas, I apply it to research as social change (see

Schratz & Walker, 1995), in this instance young women at university (and in a research project) bringing about change in the area of gender violence in the university context. The theory explains the change in people in responding differently to daily issues in their personal, professional, and social lives.

[Insert figure 1 here]

Scharmer (2007) posits that the way a person responds to a situation, individually and collectively, shapes and sustains the ecosystem. If one would want to change the situation, one should respond differently, for example stop responding reactively and instead respond generatively and begin to address the issue at its root cause. Theory U proposes five movements in the process of personal-social change, beginning with *co-initiating* and building common intent. This is where a person or a group of persons come together with the purpose of addressing an issue which affects them and which is of importance to all of them, and which they want to change (for example gender violence). This, according to Pillay (2009), is where suspending the "downloading" of mental models from the past which have dominated and shaped their being (that gender violence is normal) occurs, leading to a new awareness that it need not be so. The group envisages the purpose, the people they need to engage with, and the process that will get them to achieve their purpose. In this movement it is important to do "deep listening" so that one can observe self and others and how they respond to the issue (Scharmer 2007: 6). The second movement is *co-sensing*, that is observing and locating the potential for change, through "see[ing] deeply, sharply and collectively" (2007: 7). This seeing entails observing the self in relation to the bigger picture, that is "not about 'me' but about 'us'" (Pillay 2009: 233), opening up the possibility for freeing the self from past mental models and for change. "When sensing happens the group as a whole can see the emerging opportunities and the key systemic forces at issue" (Scharmer, 2007: 7). The third movement is that of *co-presencing*, connecting to the source of inspiration and the collective will to bring about the change. This is seen as a threshold crossing, which one cannot undo, and the possibility of a new way of being, the creating of a new reality, is beckoning. This co-presencing is seen as a "letting go" of that which is not wanted, but also as a "letting come" of that which is wanted. Once this has happened in the group a "heightened level of energy and a sense of future possibility" is awakened (Pillay, 2009: 231). The "perception that I am the other, and therefore it is in this domain of experiencing that creative social action – the letting come of the new through the letting go of the old – becomes the distinct possibility" (Pillay 2009: 231). This is followed by the fourth movement, *co-creating*, that is co-creating a prototype for the new through providing living examples to explore the future by doing. Scharmer (2007: 8) explains it as follows:

> The prototype is part of the sensing and discovery process in which we explore the future by doing rather than by thinking and reflecting. … The co-creation movement of the U journey results in a set of small living examples that explore the future by doing. It also results in a vibrant and rapidly widening network of change-makers who leverage their learning across prototypes and who help each other deal with whatever innovation challenges they face.

The fifth and final movement, is *co-evolving*, which reveals the new in the ecosystem that facilitates seeing and acting not from a 'me' perspective but from the 'us' perspective, the whole. When new ways of responding have been developed, or change has been leveraged, it

is also necessary to evaluate what is working and what is not working, and what makes the biggest difference to the situation or system. Scharmer (2007) points out that the Theory U process is not linear, nor that the group necessarily achieves that which they set out to achieve at the beginning, as something quite different might emerge.

I draw on this theory to make meaning of how the participatory visual work with the Girls Leading Change enabled exploring their personal experiences of inequality and gender violence and how it changed their thinking and enabled them to become warriors in addressing the gender violence not only in their personal lives, but in their university context, and in the communities they find themselves in. This bringing to the fore of that which was unconscious to consciousness, a shared consciousness - through the participatory visual work - was noted by Mumbi Mwangi (2009), the diaspora African woman scholar referred to earlier, and who is now working in the United States, and who met the Girls Leading Change[i] in 2015 in South Africa and in 2016 in the United States of America.

A A case study: Girls Leading Change

B Context

The qualitative and participatory visual study took place at a university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, where we invited all first year education students who came from rural areas to participate in the project. The Eastern Cape is a province of extreme poverty, unemployment, and also gender based violence. Fourteen just out of school, indigenous African young women, volunteered for the project.

B Methodology

A participatory visual methodology located within a critical paradigm (Mitchell, De Lange & Moletsane, 2017), was used for the project. The purpose of using a participatory visual methodology was threefold, one, to deepen our understanding of how we might engage girls to enable them to be 'warriors' in addressing gender violence in their communities; two, to enable the participants to see for themselves and name their world as they see it (Westmore-Susse 2014); and three, to enable them to see what their world might look like, and for them to take action to address gender violence on campus.

B Data Generation Methods

The participatory visual research process included creating cellphilms in phase one, policy posters in phase two, action briefs in phase three, and using these to facilitate dialogue with the policy makers in phase four (See De Lange, Moletsane & Mitchell, 2015). The fourteen participants worked in four small groups to make cellphilms – a film made with a cellphone (Dockney & Tomaselli, 2009) - using a participatory video approach. We started with some lead in time to contextualise the work, in this instance gender violence, which was followed by brainstorming examples of gender violence which affect their daily lives on university campus. Once a list was generated, they each had the opportunity to 'vote' by putting a self-adhesive dot next to the example they thought most affected them and which they wanted the university policy makers to know about. In this way they arrived at a topic in a democratic way. The topic with the most votes was discussed and turned into a storyboard of about eight shots which included a title shot at the beginning and a final shot with credits at the end. We also explained the No-Editing-Required approach we usually use (Mitchell, 2011). After a

brief training on how to use the cellphone camera to video record their film, they set out to film the storyboards they had created. We gave them 45 minutes to film, but they too, like other participants we had worked with, took longer as they kept on refilming, wanting a good visual artefact to share. When they returned with their cellphilms we downloaded them and viewed the four cellphilms, using a laptop, data projector and speakers. The four cellphilms (The Game, Careless Securities, Xanadu Square, Getting into Res) elicited a lot of discussion when everyone got to see what the other groups had made.

The topics of the cellphilms were turned into what we call a policy poster (Mitchell et al., 2017) - a poster which visually represents their topic and has a clear message. After much deliberation they added two more topics which they thought needed to be included and addressed as well. These policy posters were intended for the university community, and for consumption by the policymakers who are supposed to generate and implement policies for addressing gender violence at university.

We worked with the girls to think what needed to be done to bring about the change they wanted to see, for example, what they themselves could do and what the university policy makers could do. This information was turned into an action brief, a small document which explained the situation, the problem, and a collection of solutions (De Lange, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2015). The draft handmade policy posters and action briefs were digitised and printed in colour, ready for use in dialogue with the policy makers.

I was a staff member in the education faculty, and as insider set up the first meeting with the dean of the faculty of education and with the deputy vice-chancellor of research and engagement, to disseminate our work and initiate the first dialogue. I introduced the project, the girls introduced themselves, and together we presented our work and opened the floor for discussion. This was an exciting experience, with the girls putting their ideas and voices out in the public domain. We also asked who else we should set up a dialogue with, and so we went on to have several meaningful dialogues, with the girls making their voices heard and insisting on safety on campus (See also De Lange et al., 2015).

B Analysis

The cellphilms, policy posters, action briefs and the discussions around making them and presenting them was recorded and transcribed, as was the dialogues with the university policy makers. Looking at the whole process, also how the girls extended their work into different arenas, I identified three moments of change in which I saw the girls in various ways of becoming warriors, informed by Scharmer's Theory U.

A Girls as warriors: Pushing back gender violence in turbulent times

B Warriors-in-the-making

In the process of working with the group of fourteen first year university students from rural areas, it soon became clear from the participatory video process that they had similar as well as different experiences and knowledge of gender violence on campus. In discussion with each other they realised that they were not alone in what they were either seeing or experiencing, and that breaking the silence opened up a space for raising their own awareness of the magnitude of the problem – a problem which they felt they could individually and collectively do something about. As one of the GLC said:

I feel like we are … becoming young activists. As women we usually feel like we have no say, like we should take whatever comes our way, but now that I know my rights and that it is not okay to tolerate some things. I will also protect my friends and let them know they do not have to take it. Something can be done!

We interpret this as the awakening of the warrior within and the beginning of warriors-in-the-making.

B Warriors-in-action

We created opportunities for the GLC to speak out about what they had come to see, to engage the university public in joining their work, but they also took initiative to take a stand against issues affecting girls and women, to engage women and girls in their rural home towns, and also to help with mentoring young girls at a rural school. They had become warriors-in-action. Here I offer visually verifiable data (Mitchell 2011) to support my claims.

   C Speaking out

The GLC engaged in a series of dialogues, drawing on their visual productions to facilitate the dialogues. Their starting out a bit hesitantly soon changed with them taking full ownership of the dialogue about gender violence on campus and what they thought needed to be done. They were invited to participate in the initial gender forum discussions within the university, and to participate in national feminist dialogues beyond the university, as well as to share their work at local and international conferences. (See Figure 2). The young women demonstrated courage and confidence in speaking out at every opportunity they got, but importantly, also kept talking among themselves.

[Insert figure 2 here]

   C Engaging the public

On several occasions the GLC embarked on engaging other university students – both men and women – to generate ideas on what they could do to turn the tide against gender violence. To do this they drew on photovoice (Wang, 1999) and what we called a "photo hand activity" where the public is invited to participate in taking a photograph of their hands held in some way to show their resistance to gender violence, or to support the protection of girls and women, and then to write a message on the photograph. These were then exhibited to facilitate engagement between the photographer and the GLC on gender violence and how they could address it (See Figure 3).

[Insert figure 3 here]

   C Taking a stand

It was important for us as researchers not to speak on behalf of the GLC and we encouraged them to take ownership of their gender work and to see their work within the context of gender violence in South Africa, Africa, and globally. When a national movement to stop gender violence - Kwanele, Enuf is Enuf! - started by a rape survivor, was launched on our campus, the girls were invited to present their resistance work and vociferously argued the case for ensuring young women's safety on campus. It was the same time that Nigerian girls were abducted by Boko Haram, so they also created protest placards stating, "Bring our girls back" and posted them on social media. When they were guests of The Women's Centre and

the Women's Studies programme at St Cloud State University, Minnesota, USA, they participated in a protest march to the Capitol, St Paul, to lobby against violence against women and to deliver a set of policy priorities to the legislature (See Figure 4).

[Insert figure 4 here]

C Paying it forward

The GLC, all from rural areas where gender inequality and gender violence is a reality too, returned home during the university holidays, some girls realised they could pay forward their new learning to the community. One of the girls, Elethu Ntsethe, asked my assistance to write a proposal to get a portion of tribal land on which she could – with the help of her family – create an opportunity for other girls from the community to plant crops, and for her to simultaneously initiate a dialogue about gender, gender inequality and gender violence with the girls working the land (See Figure 5).

[Insert figure 5 here]

C Training new girl warriors

The Networks for Change project was extended to school girls from a school in rural Eastern Cape – addressing gender violence in their school and community. The GLC met the YGLC and shared with them the knowledge and skills they have gained, in so doing mentoring the younger girls.

B Warriors contributing to policy development

The dialogues with the university policy makers (See Figure 6) opened up a broader discussion in the university on how to institutionalise gender work and has led to a proposal for a Women's Centre (NMU, 2016) and for a Gender Studies programmes (NMU, 2016). A Gender Forum (2015) has been established to address gender inequalities.   A National Policy framework for addressing gender violence in higher education (Vetten, 2017) is also underway, which I believe, adds to make a difference in how women university students are treated and are to be protected on a university campus.

[Insert figure 6 here]

A Conclusion

In this article I have indicated that South Africa has a strong rights-based Constitution, and a Commission for Gender Equality, as well as several other policies which should be able to protect girls and women in every sphere of life, also on university campuses. Constitutions and Commissions and policies however are not enough, and it is necessary to ensure that the girls and women and politically educated (Taft, 2010) about the injustices - inequalities in terms of gender, race, class, and rurality - and its effect on their personal lives. The personal awareness and seeing the connectedness to the larger challenge of gender violence enabled them to be courageous warriors who could contest the inequalities, gender violence and oppressions in the university and in other spaces. We used participatory visual methodologies to enable the first year women university students, from rural areas, to suspend their "downloading" (Scharmer, 2002), and to move to "seeing" their own experiences within a

broader context and to move to "sensing" that their realities need not be filled with gender violence, and then through "presencing" begin to work towards reconstructing a reality - through their participatory visual work – a reality as they would want it to be: a university where they as young women feel safe and protected. I have shown that they have reached the point where they are warriors and are saying "*Kwanele, Enuf is Enuf*!" and are pushing for and acting for positive social change for all girls and women. As one of the Young Girls Leading Change they mentored said, "*Once your eyes go wide open you cannot go back!*"

The Girl Warriors

Girls Leading Change: Sandisiwe Gaiza, Zethu Jiyana, Melissa Lufele, Bongiwe Maome, Lelethu Mlobeli, Asisipho Mntonga, Takatso Mohlomi, Wandiswa Momoza, Happy Mthethwa, Elethu Ntsethe, Zikhona Tshiwula, Zamahlubi Mabhengu, Thina Kamnqa,

Young Girls Leading Change: Nozinga Nyamakazi; Phelokazi Mahashi; Precious Xabisa; Siyamthanda Nogaya; Amalile Day; Xoliswa Nocwaka

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[i] Girls Leading Change, is the name the women students who are participating in the *Digital media for change and well-being: Girl-led 'from the ground up' policy-making in addressing sexual violence at a South African university* (NMMU)(2013-2014)(PI, Naydene de Lange) and the *Networks for change and well-being: Girl-led 'from the ground up' policy making in addressing sexual violence in Canada and South Africa* (SSHRC/IDRC) (2014-2020)(PI, Claudia Mitchell and Relebohile Moletsane) chose to identify themselves as.

Figure 1. Theory U (Scharmer 2007: 6)

1. CO-INITIATING:
Build Common Intent stop and listen to others and to what life calls you to do

5. CO-EVOLVING:
Embody the New in Ecosystems that facilitate seeing and acting from the whole

2. CO-SENSING:
Observe, Observe, Observe go to the places of most potential and listen with your mind and heart wide open

4. CO-CREATING:
Prototype the New in living examples to explore the future by doing

3. PRESENCING:
Connect to the Source of Inspiration, and Will
go to the place of silence and allow the inner knowing to emerge

Figure 2. Bongi Maome speaking about their gender work at *Women on Wednesdays*, at St Cloud State University, Minnesota, USA
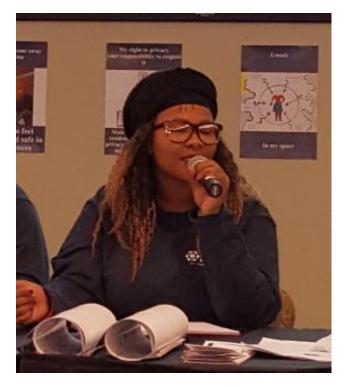

Figure 3. Takatso Mohlomi engaging a male university student about stopping gender violence at university

Figure 4. Girls Leading Change ready for the protest march in Minneapolis, USA.

Figure 5. Elethu Ntsethe in her traditional attire and her LinkedIn profile

Figure 6. Some of the Girls Leading Change engaging with the director of the Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy