

Gill Marcus: Inspiring young women to make South Africa more inclusive

Address by Ms Gill Marcus, Governor of the South African Reserve Bank, at the Ruth First Jeppe High School for Girls Memorial Trust, Johannesburg, 29 October 2013.

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Good evening ladies and gentlemen.

It is a real honour and a privilege to be asked to speak to you tonight, not just because this event honours an exceptional person, Ruth First, but also because this event supports the education and development of young women in our country. There can be no investment more important than to invest in the education of young people. And, given that the odds remain heavily stacked against women from all walks of life in our society, investment in the education of young women makes a real difference to the individual, the family and society as educating the girl child is a sure way to break the cycle of poverty and the skills shortage that is spoken about so often.

Jeppe High School for Girls has a long and proud tradition of delivering education of the highest quality to girls in Johannesburg. The excellent track record of the school in maintaining a 100 per cent matric pass rate for 20 years, and ensuring that an incredibly high proportion of young women go on to university, deserves praise and recognition. I wish to congratulate the school, its head mistress and teachers, as well as the school community for this outstanding achievement.

Public education of the highest standard for all children is critical for democracy to flourish, and was integral to the liberation struggle, as lack of education is the greatest exclusion there can be. I fully support and endorse the establishment of a trust that funds scholarships to support young women from less advantaged backgrounds who show academic potential.

Tonight I would like to add my voice to those of many others in congratulating the young women who have won scholarships to study at this wonderful educational institution. Jeppe Girls High, through the Ruth First Jeppe Trust, has set an example of how communities can come together to provide education for all, not just the privileged few. We need many more of these initiatives so that the ugly shadow of our apartheid history is eliminated from the lives and opportunities of our children.

Let me say a few words about Ruth, the inspiration for this initiative and whose life comprised multiple facets. She was an activist, a revolutionary, a woman, a mother, a journalist, a writer and an academic. In addition to these attributes, she espoused and lived a set of values that continue to shape our country today and are deeply embedded in our Constitution and our aspirations. These values include non-racialism and non-sexism, a sense of justice and fairness that puts the interests of the poor and ordinary people ahead of self-interest; the commitment and courage to not only stand for what is right, but also to stand against what is wrong.

It is Ruth's sense of justice that continues to inspire millions of South Africans today, even as we increasingly live in a world where injustice prevails and material benefit is idolised. Ruth's struggle and our Constitution should inspire all of us to continue the fight for a more just world, where the provision of high quality public education to all children must take the highest priority.

Ruth fought for a world in which all people, irrespective of race or gender, had equal opportunities, a world where children from both rich and poor families would have access to the best education and the best work opportunities. Despite all of our problems and challenges as a society, we should remain steadfast in our commitment to build a South Africa in which opportunity is shared more equally, where hard work and effort trump the shadow of history.

Ruth used her education and her enquiring mind, analytical thoroughness and personal courage as tools in the struggle against apartheid and colonialism, and in working for a world committed to fairness, justice and the advancement of people. She read voraciously. She studied all manner of topics. Ruth is credited with writing books on diverse topics ranging from Mozambican migrant workers to Libyan politics.

There is a Chinese proverb – *Shi Shi Qui Shi* – seek truth from facts, that epitomised Ruth's work. Her ground breaking research and direct investigation into the working conditions of potato farmers in Bethal in the 1950s with the late Joe Gqabi, who was also later assassinated in Zimbabwe, led to an exposé of the prison-like conditions faced by farm workers and the consequent potato boycott. Also, it set a new standard for investigative journalism and a complete rethink on labour relations in the agricultural sector. Her detailed research into the lives of migrant workers on South African mines is still used today to understand the social and economic aspects of the migrant labour system. If only world leaders had read her writings on Libya, they would have had a far better insight into that complex society.

Ruth was a committed communist; she was not a revolutionary who simply used ideology to win an argument. She looked at the facts; she analysed the evidence and came to conclusions that could be defended by the data and analysis, even when such conclusions were uncomfortable for some, especially those in leadership positions or high office. Ruth was an outstanding investigative reporter and mentored dozens of young journalists to look analytically into an issue before putting pen to paper. Our journalism profession today can learn a great deal from the rigour she applied to any story she wrote.

Ruth First was also a woman who was not scared of challenging authority. Not only did she dedicate her life to the struggle against apartheid, even within the liberation movement she spoke out when she saw abuse, policies and practices she felt were unjust and unjustifiable. Ruth spoke out against the invasion by the Soviet Union of Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1956 and 1968, respectively, even though the South African Communist Party held a different position at the time.

Ruth paid the ultimate sacrifice, not only for her beliefs but because of her voice. She was killed by an apartheid government intent on keeping an immoral and unjust system of racial oppression in operation. But it was Ruth and the many millions of people who fought for justice and equality who ultimately prevailed. Apartheid has been defeated, but the struggle for a just and equal South Africa and Africa in a more caring world must continue.

Ruth leaves us with many lessons that are particularly pertinent for young women today. She became a respected leader in a male dominated world. She used her knowledge, analytical rigour, voice and education to fight for justice. She worked hard to uncover the facts, analyse the data, and thereby defend her findings and arguments in a profession and world that was not entirely comfortable with such an approach.

I have had the singular privilege of, though to various degrees, knowing Ruth, her mother and father Tilly and Julius, her husband Joe Slovo and their daughters Shawn, Gillian and Robyn. Having been inspired by Ruth and many other leaders of the struggle for liberation and democracy, I hope that her life will inspire young women to continue to make our world a better place. There can be no better way to honour Ruth and all she held dear than to ensure that young women be given the opportunity to receive the best quality education that there is to offer. And for that education, that search for knowledge, to be valued, and not just the certificate, important as that may be.

To live such a life takes courage and, as we all assess the many and different challenges young people face now and in the years ahead, let us be inspired by what has been achieved and have the courage, determination and tenacity to build a future and a people bound together by values that would make Ruth smile.

Again, I wish to thank the School and the Trust for their sterling efforts in educating our youth. Congratulations to the recipients of the scholarships on offer today. Your efforts will inspire a new generation of women to live lives that have meaning, that contribute to making our country more inclusive and just, a celebration of all that life and living has to offer in a South Africa that has been shaped by women like Ruth.

I thank you.