

# Gender Equity Unit

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## an interview with Rhoda Kadalie

The Gender Equity Unit, the establishment of Women's Studies at UWC, and many policies for securing women's rights on campus are results of the leadership and vision of the first Co-ordinator of the Gender Equity Unit, Rhoda Kadalie. In commemorating her role, the GEU conducted the following interview

**GEU: Can you describe the personal circumstances and experiences that first led you to feminism?**



I am one of 9 children; seven brothers and a sister. In my family I grew up with a feeling of being more than equal. School and university were the first places where I experienced racism and sexism, and this was something of a culture shock to me. Sexism at UWC was most distressing because of the contradictions I experienced there. We were all consciously opposing apartheid and the legacy of the university as an apartheid institution. Yet discrimination against women was considered normal. When women academics nearly gave birth in their offices due to the absence of maternity leave, and struggled with their teaching responsibilities and child-care, the struggle for liberation took on another form. Sexual harassment and violence against women were particular problems. Long before the Gender Equity Unit and the Women's Commission, women academics, administrative and secretarial staff joined forces to address these issues. The Women's Commission and the GEU were formal attempts to tackle deeply-rooted obstacles to the full development of all women at the university. Racial and class divisions among women came later.



**GEU: You were a student at UWC before you began teaching there. What are your perceptions of the changes in women's status on campus?**



I enjoyed my student years at UWC and developed my voice during student struggles. There was a real equality among my student groups and peers - perhaps because there were so few women at the time. In every class I attended, I was part of a small group of women students. It was in the bigger classes like sociology, the languages and religious studies that sexism was rife among students and lecturers. Political consciousness on the campus grew organically in response to a university run by the Broederbond, which was politically reactionary and extremely anti-women. The total subordination of women was evident at different levels. The Human Resources Committee was called the Manpower Committee; the men monopolised the Research Committees and funding for research. Women academics barely featured in decision-making committees, or as heads of department, or in professional positions. Staff benefits for women were non-existent.



By the time Professor Genwel became Rector, the university had been thoroughly politicised. The university grew rapidly, and became more culturally diverse. Student residents grew at an alarming pace, and this created all sorts of undesirable social conditions.

While the university increasingly adopted the rhetoric of democracy and transformation, the position of women did not change concomitantly. Conditions of employment for women remained unchallenged, and women started demanding more rights and representation on committees. In 1987, when I returned from the Institute for Social Studies in the Hague with a Women's Studies Degree, I set up a Women's Commission to look at the conditions of employment for women.

We drew up a document listing all the discriminatory practices and made proposals to address them. At the time there was a critical mass of women who united across race, class, and occupation around issues of maternity benefits, housing subsidy, childcare for women, sexual harassment policy, and the safety of women. We fought and made representations on each of these issues and won one victory after another.

Management was compelled to become more supportive and gender-sensitive in their dealings with women. While they spoke of political transformation, we made it difficult for them to exclude the rights of women in this discourse.



**GEU: When did you take up the position of Director at the Gender Equity Unit? What main challenges did you face in promoting gender justice at the time - both on campus and more broadly?**



I was appointed to the Gender Equity Unit as its first Gender Equity Co-ordinator in 1993. The appointment was not without controversy; many wanted Anne-Marie Wolpe, recently returned from exile, to get the job.

From the eighties, the University was openly aligned with the Mass Democratic Movement, and our students considered themselves the vanguard of the liberation movement.

But this vanguardism didn't extend to the liberation of women. It openly denied women's demands for basic rights - related to sexuality, bodily integrity and choices about motherhood and family life. Women's struggles were generally labelled bourgeois, Western-centric, divisive of the national liberation movement. This deep hostility to feminist demands reflected views within the MDM at a national level.

On campus, women tackled this head on. And it took countless public debates, reforms of the student disciplinary committees, awareness workshops, education and training of student leaders, and extensive conscientising programmes in the residences to transform the climate on the campus.

All of this activity was done within the broader context of women's struggles for democracy in South Africa. Many women on campus were involved in LWCO, the ANC Women's League, the UDF and other organisations. This provided the strength and courage to continue that struggle on campus. It was

**GEU: What for you were the greatest triumphs - in terms of particular events or processes?**



Strictly speaking, could be seen to something like an 1 celebration of all feminist activities at UWC. So though the Unit was established in women's struggles and triumph campus can be identified long before I found a copy recently, of our Women's Bulletin dated April 199

It is a record of what women achieved from 1987 onwards, ahead is no mean feat - given that universities are going through what were involved in only now.

By the late eighties, the Unit could boast a Women's Commission tasked with making recommendations concerning the conditions of sex women on campus.

The first achievements were maternity benefits for women, any in the country - 5 months full leave and 7 days paternity leave for housing subsidies for married women, chief investigation duties for some an educate centre for children of Alongside the Women's Commission was a very vibrant Women's Studies Group set up to address concerning women in all spheres university life. *Ad hominem* provision soon became *ad feminam* provision and in one instance all the *ad hoc* posts went to women. We also introduced equity in the allocation of leave and funding for women's promotion for women academics. We developed a statistical profile of gender composition of UWC staff, could track how long it took for women to reach the same positions as

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