

## AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Lifetime Achiever Award from the National Research Foundation (2007)
- The Barnard Medal of Distinction from the Barnard College for Women in Columbia (1991)
- A shared NOMA Award for Publishing in Africa with Francis Wilson (1990) for their book, *Uprooting Poverty: The South African Challenge*

## DEFINING MOMENT

Her PhD on the politics of space was an awakening. "I had always known about inequities in South Africa as an activist, but I got close to the humiliating circumstances of migrant hostels in Cape Town during my study of the living spaces of the workers; it brought to light the severe limitations of those spaces on their physical, mental and emotional well-being."

## WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

"I love my sleep. I don't believe you can be a leader and effectively tackle what the day brings if you don't look after your health. So, I try to sleep for eight hours every night, to eat healthily and to exercise."

## SCIENCE GIVES SOUTH AFRICANS DIGNITY

As a medical doctor plunged into the realities of poor South Africans, and as a political activist detained without trial and banished by the apartheid government after the Soweto uprisings in 1976, Ramphele thought she knew about inequality in South Africa. She thought she understood how closely societal factors and the disease burden were tied together.

She says many health issues, some of which persist today, come about because of poverty and the lack of education, which has resulted in people having little understanding of nutrition and reproductive health. "Nobody should be denied the education to know their own body," says Ramphele. "It is humiliating."

In the mid-1970s, in King Williams Town in the Eastern Cape, a young couple who had been struggling to fall pregnant came to see Dr Ramphele for help. "I examined the woman," recalls Ramphele, "and saw she was a virgin." Gently,

Ramphele explained the difference between the anus and the vagina to the couple.

Later, in Tzaneen, Limpopo, she encountered children with vomiting and diarrhoea who were dying of kwashiorkor and malnutrition. "Although mothers understood the importance of breast milk, those who had to go to work had no money to buy substitute formula, so their infants were fed inadequate diets by their grandmothers. Under those circumstances, people accepted that you might have six kids, that three would die and you would have three left."

Her PhD in social anthropology in 1991, which led to her book, *A Bed Called Home* (1993), was another big awakening: "I have never been so close to humiliation as when I was working in the migrant labour hostels in Cape Town." She says as many as 12 adult men, who had left their homes and families to find work in an economic system intended to benefit mainly white people as labouring 'boys', all shared a room and slept on cement bunk beds. "I wanted to know what it actually means when home is a bed in full view of everyone else. I asked myself what impact this would have on the minds and emotions of these men; how they felt about themselves and what effect it would have on their social relationships. They had sacrificed their manhood and human dignity to become people without privacy."

Her research showed that the consequences of humiliating working men over multiple generations is a sense of worthlessness. "In my view, this humiliated manhood is at the base of the grotesque gender-based violence we have in South Africa," says Ramphele. "When men are seen as protectors, providers and leaders, but have to leave their women behind to survive without them, they feel worthless at home and at work. This is still the case today. It's unconstitutional!"

## MISTRUST OF SCIENCE

Ramphele says that sadly, there was no response to her research from the new South African democratic government at the time, and this is another example of the huge disconnect between research and policy in South Africa. "Many of



the people who came into the new government had not lived in the country for many years, so were distrustful of researchers who had been working here. There was an inherent mistrust of scientific knowledge by politicians, because most researchers were white."

Although she feels that the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) has gone a long way towards closing the gap between science, society and government, Ramphele stresses that social and other scientists have to build more effective connections between their work and society.

During her tenure as Vice-Chancellor at the University of Cape Town (UCT), Ramphele applied her insight into the importance of personal space to create a conducive learning environment for poor students and first-generation students. "There was not enough protection for those students, so we created residential spaces that could connect them to the academic space." She also promoted a radical transformation of the academic curricula to create better choices for students and says the nine years she spent in leadership roles at the university were the most meaningful of her career. "I came to the job as a non-academic: Although I was doing research, I was not yet established."

But she knew enough to surround herself with strong people who could complement and support her goal of transforming UCT from an 'old-boy's college' to an inclusive South African university that aspired to be a world-class African university. "We made UCT itself better, but we also set standards for the rest of the country." UCT was the first university to have anti-harassment policies on racism, sexism and intolerance of any kind. "Institutions had no idea of the damage they were doing to the scientific endeavour by not making places of research and teaching safe for women. Women have to feel safe to be at their most innovative and creative."

She feels her greatest legacy at UCT is its new library. She drew on the example of the University of Southern California to champion the building of a library that made the most of technology and created conducive working spaces

for both students and academics. Because of her guiding role at UCT, and at various other organisations like the World Bank and the Technology Innovation Agency since 2000, many more people have had the opportunity to access knowledge.

In fact, sharing knowledge has been at the core of Ramphele's work since her community health service to poor and uneducated people in King William's Town and Tzaneen. "I believe if we proceed from the assumption that science is universal, then people who are illiterate or uneducated are entitled to access that universal pool of knowledge. We should approach those people with respect, not assume they are stupid; they want to do their best, so instead of alienating them, we should embrace them.

"I learnt that you have to understand where people come from, and that science can give dignity to people depending on how you share your knowledge." In the case of infants with vomiting and diarrhoea, for instance, traditional healers would place herbs on the baby's sunken fontanelle (the soft spot on an infant's skull where the bones have not yet fused). "I said to them, we have the same diagnosis, and oral rehydration therapy will help the herbs do their work," she recalls, referring to the fact that a sunken fontanelle is a symptom of dehydration. She says there are many traditional remedies that have a scientific base. "We need to reconnect indigenous knowledge with science. The idea of Western science is inaccurate because it discounts the contribution of Africa."

Her own connection to science began with her first love, chemistry, but her high-school physical science teacher had advised at the time that as a black woman she had no prospect of becoming a career chemist, so it would be better to pursue a medical degree. Today, she is still grateful for the advice that led her to the former University of Natal (now part of the University of KwaZulu-Natal) where she became part of the circle of black students who founded the Black Consciousness Movement. "That accident put me in the right place at the right time."

**Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)**

**ASSAf Research Repository**

**<http://research.assaf.org.za/>**

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A. Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) Publications

C. ASSAf Policymakers' Booklets

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2020

# Legends of South African Science II

**Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)**

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

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