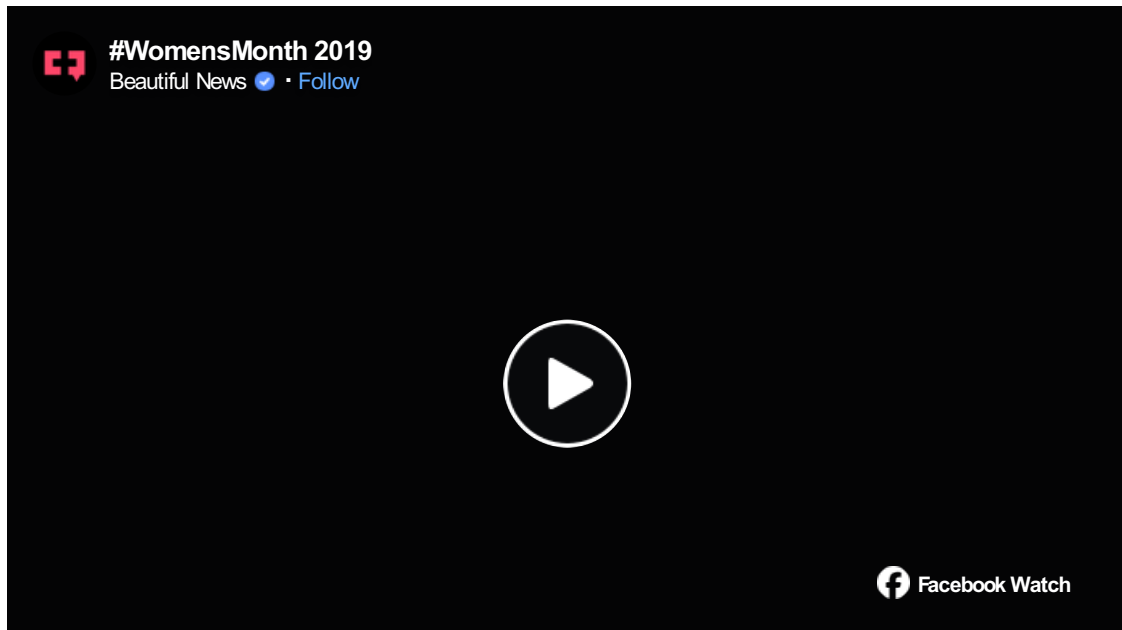


# What is Women's Day without equality?

By [Michael Hathorn](#), issued by [Ginkgo Agency](#)

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Women's Day should be a time to reflect on how we can reach real equality - and to honour the women who are fighting to get there.



Women's Day is a good thing. It's an important symbolic moment. But what does it mean that we single out one day to celebrate women when South Africa is nowhere close to achieving gender equality? This is a country where the femicide rate was [12.1 per 100,000 in 2016](#) – close to five times higher than the global average. It's a nation with [only one female CEO represented in the JSE's Top 40 companies](#).

In light of this, it's worth thinking about why Women's Day falls on August 9. The day commemorates the 1956 march by 20,000 women to the Union Buildings in protest against apartheid's pass laws. The names associated with that march – Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, and Sophia Williams De Bruyn – are among the most significant in South Africa's history. So too are the words of the songs they sang: *'Wathint' Abafazi, Wathint' Imbokodo'* – you strike the women, you strike the rock. On Women's Day we remember the courage and strength shown in 1956 – and celebrate the fact that those qualities live on in the actions of so many women in South Africa today.

## What does Women's Day mean today?

This year President Cyril Ramaphosa took the transformative step of ensuring that [50% of his cabinet in Parliament consists of women](#). But a gesture can only do so much. Gender-based violence is so prevalent that it costs South Africa's economy between [R28.4bn and R42.4bn every year](#) – or between 0.9% and 1.3% of the country's GDP. Having an equal cabinet sends a message. But that message lacks substance in a country that has made so little progress towards achieving gender equality.

Similarly, Women's Day and Women's Month are strong symbolic moments that lose their power when looking at the country as a whole. The intention behind Women's Day and a representative cabinet should be commended, but symbols won't break down the patriarchal structure of South African society – you need people to do that.

South Africans understand the strength of community and the power of commitment. The purpose of Women's Day should

be to honour and support the women who are creating positive change, to follow their example, and work together to build an equal society.

## Equality pays

South Africa has taken some steps towards achieving gender equality. The Constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex or gender. And the recent move to declare a [0% tax on sanitary products](#) is important – although pads and tampons remain prohibitively expensive. Changes like this inch South Africa closer towards realising a society that is truly inclusive and fair. We have an obvious and fundamental need to protect basic human rights. And [McKinsey's estimates](#) that advancing women's equality could add \$12tn to the global GDP by 2025. The lesson is clear: equality pays. So who are the women working for progress in South Africa today?

## Women leading the way

The issues women face in South Africa are broad and complex. They range from exclusion and discrimination to physical violence. There's no single solution, but widespread social change starts with individuals. And women from every walk of life are using their skills and platforms to create meaningful change at scales that extend from local communities all the way to South Africa's highest court.

[Joanie Fredericks](#) understands the importance of mobility. Growing up in Mitchells Plain, she had limited opportunities. Her father's energy and attention was focused on her brothers. There wasn't space for Fredericks to dream – until she got her driver's licence. Being able to drive meant freedom for Fredericks, and today she provides lessons to women in her community to create economic opportunity. And while practical skills are crucial, creativity and self-expression can also be powerful instruments for change. [Laura Windvogel](#), better known as Lady Skollie, uses art to promote sex education. Her work is a form of protest that confronts issues of consent, objectification, and gender violence.

[Anna-Marie de Vos](#) is taking up the cause through the courts. De Vos is a lawyer and retired judge who achieved an important victory when the Constitutional Court ruled that she and her partner should be allowed to adopt their children. The case was an important landmark for women and same-sex couples, and affirmed De Vos' strategy of using her legal skills and tenacity to create change. Today, along with her private practice, she runs a law clinic in Knysna that provides legal aid for women and children.

These women are working to solve problems that have been created by men. It's vital that more men recognise this and make their own contributions to rectifying South Africa's social imbalances. [Isaac Boshomane](#) is an entrepreneur who is training women to become car mechanics – to the benefit of his community. His decision to use his business as a platform to actively promote and empower women is one that others need to commit to.

Women's Day needs to be more than an empty calendar event. That won't happen through political declarations or symbolic gestures. It requires social transformation. The women whose stories appear on [Beautiful News](#) are full of ambition and courage, and they're making a real difference. As a society, we need to support their efforts and listen to them. South Africa needs action – from everyone. So celebrate Women's Day on 9 August, learn from the examples of those who are taking initiative, and decide what you can do to make our country a truly equal place.

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