



# Women's statement at the 1990 Rustenburg Church Conference: Still an important voice from the past

**Author:**Johan M. van der Merwe<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

**Research Project Registration:****Project Leader:** Johan van der Merwe **Project Number:** u02383810**Description:**

This research is part of the project, 'The Church and Poverty in South Africa', directed by Prof. Johan van der Merwe, Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

**Corresponding author:**

Johan van der Merwe,  
johan.vdmerwe@up.ac.za

**Dates:**

Received: 08 Apr. 2022

Accepted: 29 Aug. 2022

Published: 21 Nov. 2022

**How to cite this article:**

Van der Merwe, J.M., 2022, 'Women's statement at the 1990 Rustenburg Church Conference: Still an important voice from the past', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(2), a7628. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i2.7628>

**Copyright:**

© 2022. The Author.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

The Rustenburg Conference of churches that took place in 1990 was a critical turning point for Christianity in South Africa. Besides the important declaration at the end of the conference, a statement was also made by the women at the conference. Although this statement is lesser known, it was and still is of utmost importance because it addresses the plight of women in South Africa. The focus of this article is the relevance of the statement made by the women more than 30 years later. The article is written from a church historical perspective. To achieve this objective, the research in this article is based on qualitative literature search. It focuses on relevant literature that includes books, scholarly articles, online articles and scientific data provided by Statistics South Africa. It starts with a brief overview of the conference and important events that took place; it then moves on to the statement by the women at the conference before arguing that the content of the statement still is an important voice from the past that reminds us of the plight of women in South Africa. The role of the church as an important agent of change is then discussed briefly before concluding with an example of a programme by the South African Council of Churches (SACC) that is aimed at change in society.

**Contribution:** In the conclusion, the author proposes a South African conference for women where current programmes can be synchronised and planning for the future can be done.

**Keywords:** women; Rustenburg Conference 1990; poverty; gender-based violence; challenges; apartheid; church; change.

## Introduction

The Rustenburg Church conference that took place from 05 to 09 November 1990 was a critical turning point for Christianity in South Africa. This statement is confirmed by Alberts and Chikane (eds. 1991) who said:

[N]ot since the Cottesloe Consultation in the 1960s has the church been presented with so significant a challenge to rediscover its calling and to unite Christian witness in a changing South Africa. (Hofmeyr & Pillay 1994:295)<sup>1</sup>

They confirmed the historic importance of the conference further when they emphasised that it was the first time in the history of the country that 230 delegates from 80 churches and four Christian organisations with divergent theological views assembled. It is within this important *Kairos* that the women at the conference made a statement to address the plight of women in South Africa. As such it not also became an important turning point for the role of women in the different churches, but it also put the plight of women on the agenda of a national convention of churches and religious organisations at an important moment of change in South Africa. More than 30 years later, the Statement challenges churches and society to reassess whether the changes that happened in South Africa after 1994<sup>2</sup> also changed the plight of women. The question asked in the article is as follows: what have changed with regard to women in South Africa? The author concludes that although the change took place, the plight of millions of women in South Africa remained the same.

1.Through the history of the church various documents and declarations played an important role in changing the history of the church in South Africa. Although the *Cottesloe Declaration* of 1960 was the first, it was followed by *the Message to the people of South Africa* in 1968. Another important document was the *Kairos document* of 1985 to name but a few. It falls beyond the scope of this article to discuss the importance of these documents and exactly how they influenced the history of the church.

2.The first democratic election that saw the formal end of apartheid was held on 27 April 1994.

**Note:** Special Collection: Women Theologies, sub-edited by Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale (Midlands State University, Zimbabwe) and Tanya van Wyk (University of Pretoria).

The conference was convened after Prof. J.A. Heyns<sup>3</sup> gave a hint to President F.W. de Klerk late in 1989 on the important role the church in South Africa could play on the journey to a democratic South Africa. The purpose of the conference was therefore to get the different churches together to discuss this important role in the advent of a new democratic dispensation for the country (Van der Merwe 2020).

Looking back at the conference, the stage at the conference was set by the important contribution of Prof. W.D. Jonker who confessed not only his own sin but also the sin of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Afrikaner people<sup>4</sup> for their support of the policy of apartheid (Jonker 1998:205). After Jonker's confession, Archbishop Desmond Tutu reacted by saying that the confession touched him and then proceeded to say that: 'when confession is made, those who have been wronged must say "We forgive you" so that together we may move to the reconstruction of our land' (Jonker 1998:205). The way in which Jonker describes this moment at the conference emphasises the importance of the moment and how it influenced the atmosphere of the conference. He wrote (Jonker 1998):

At that moment everybody stood up. There were tears. There was a feeling of affection. Something like which I have never experienced in my life. It felt as if I were embraced and accepted by co-believers who took the guilt from our shoulders. (p. 205)

The confession of Jonker and the acceptance of the confession by the delegates at the conference created an atmosphere of reconciliation and prepared the table for the women delegates at the conference to make their important statement.

## The Statement by women at the conference

The official title of the document was *Statement from Women at the National Conference of Churches*. Van der Merwe (2020) is correct when he argues that although this declaration is lesser known, it was and still is not of lesser importance in a country where violence and discrimination against women are the order of the day.

According to the list of attendees, the women who attended the conference were Miss Brigalia Bam, Prof. Elaine Botha, Ms Elsie Buthelezi, Mrs Virginia Gcabashe, Mrs Betty Govinden, Miss Jennifer Irish, Mrs Emma Mashinini, Mrs Thoko Mpumlwana, Ms Marie Naidoo, Ms Notembe Seroke and Sister Sheldon Wasoe (RC 1990 List of attendees).<sup>5</sup> Just the number of women delegates was an indication of the

3.Although Prof. J.A. Heyns and Prof. W.D. Jonker were both members of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), this does not mean that the conference was organised by the DRC. It was President De Klerk who was a member of the Reformed Churches in South Africa who made an appeal on the churches of South Africa to convene a conference. For more details, see Van der Merwe (2019).

4.Jonker made his confession not only on behalf of the DRC but also on behalf of the *Afrikaner people*, which is inclusive of all Afrikaners in South Africa. It must therefore not be interpreted as a church-specific confession.

5.The different abbreviations for the women are quoted from the primary list of attendees. Although the author recognises that this issue of naming is a key issue in women's struggles for dignity and recognition, it falls beyond the scope of this article to discuss it.

position of women in the church and the inferior position of women in churches and religious organisations. It was also symbolic of the inferior role women played in the country. Out of more than 180 delegates, only 11 were women. These women were not invited as individuals but were randomly sent to the conference as part of the delegations of churches and church organisations.

Because the declaration by the women is the focus of this article, the text is quoted in full:<sup>6</sup>

The historic National Conference is a gathering of churches in SA to reflect on a united witness in our land. It happens at a time when her people are looking for a just order to replace a legacy of injustice inflicted upon her people in the name of God.

The victims of this legacy are mainly people from the oppressed community, especially black women, and the representation at this conference reflects the old order of selective justice!! This is a deep concern for those of us who had the special privilege to be invited to participate in this conference. While the conference has been grappling with the issues of justice, the humanity of women is gravely neglected.

Women also suffer with Jesus Christ on the cross and also hope to experience a resurrected life from the death of injustice to a life in a community of the holiness of our creation as women in the name of God.

We call on all the delegates at this conference to:

- Confess, repent of and leave the sin of dehumanising and belittling women through discriminatory practices
- Right the wrongs, past and present by:
  - supporting and promoting a constitution that upholds the rights and dignity of women in all aspects of cultural, political, social, economic and religious life
  - creating educational and vocational opportunities within the church to foster the ordination of women as clergy
  - developing a Women's World Day of Prayer into one that is non-racial in nature
  - convening a conference like this one for women in South Africa (SA) where women would have the opportunity to engage in dialogue about developing a united Christian witness in a changing SA
  - engaging in affirmative action to enable women to participate equitably in church structures through the development of a more critical theology that conscientises both women-women and women-men
  - accepting that the Ecumenical Women's Decade is a Decade of Churches in solidarity with women.

We acknowledge that women are divided because of apartheid. If we are to develop a united witness, it is imperative that together women and men work towards the eradication of the sin of injustice' (Rustenburg Conference Statement by Women 1990b).

It falls beyond the scope of this article to make an in-depth analysis of the plight of women during the apartheid

6.The Statement is an important primary document that can be the subject of further research. The author has decided to quote the whole document to make it easier to access.

era.<sup>7</sup> Careful reading of the statement emphasises that the women delegates at the conference were a collective voice that expected profound change in church and society as one of the important outcomes of the conference. They asked for a new just order in church and society to replace the system of injustice that was created by apartheid. This was especially true of the humanity of women who were gravely neglected during apartheid. They referred to the fact that women were also part of the suffering of Christ, which meant that they also shared in his resurrection and in the hope of a life in a community of holiness. The women felt strongly that 'all the delegates to the conference had to confess the sin of the dehumanizing and belittling of women through discriminatory practices' (RC Statement by women 1990). They called on all the delegates to 'support and promote a new constitution for South Africa, which upholds the rights and dignity of women in all aspects of life' and to 'play an important part in creating educational and vocational opportunities within the different churches and to foster the ordination of women as clergy' (RC Statement by women 1990).

The historical importance of the Statement is emphasised by Prof. J.W. de Gruchy (1990) in his address to the conference. He emphasised that the way in which women were treated under apartheid severely influenced the witness of the churches in the country. He stated that:

[T]he church in South Africa has been and is divided between those who believe Scripture requires it to be a community controlled by males, and those who believe that the same Scriptures require a church in which there is equality of all in Christ. A church in which there is 'neither Jew nor Gentile, male or female, slave or free person', but in which all are united fully in Christ Galatians 5:28 [sic]. (p. 1)

De Gruchy continued by stressing that most active members within the church in South Africa today happen to be women, but the leadership of the church often functions as though women were only there to be used as men decide and that this practice was often based on shaky biblical exegesis. He then said (De Gruchy 1990):

[H]ere, as elsewhere, we have allowed cultural norms, whether ancient or modern, rather than the gospel to determine our reading of Scripture. As a result, the church has said very little about the way in which women in general, and black women in particular, have been abused in society. (p. 5)

He also referred to patriarchy in society by saying that (De Gruchy 1990):

[T]he church has too easily conformed to some questionable values of a male-dominated society, contradictory to the values of the kingdom of God. While the so-called 'house tables' in Ephesians (5:22–6:9) seem to sanction inequality between men and women, as well as between slaves and free, they also inject into these cultural norms of society a new and radical dimension which eventually undermines them. This becomes especially clear when read in the light of Jesus' own teaching. (p. 5)

7. Many scholarly articles have been published on the subject, for example, Laber (1999:28–36); Nolde (1991); Dlamini (2017).

It is clear that a sensitivity about the plight of women in South Africa emerged at the conference. Although many of the above-mentioned facts were in general included in the *Conference declaration* without specific referral to women, special mention of women was made in important parts of the declaration:

As part of the *Confession* made by the conference, the following was stated about women:

[T]hose of us who are male confess that we have often disregarded the human dignity of women and ignored the sexism of many of our church structures. By limiting the role and ministry of women-as was reflected in this Conference-we have impoverished the Church. We have been insensitive to the double oppression suffered by black women under sexism and apartheid. (RC Declaration 1990)

Under the heading *Declaration*. The following was stated:

[T]o the Church of Jesus Christ in South Africa we address an appeal to adopt our confession and pledge itself to restitution. We call for an end to racial disparities in clergy remuneration: to deploy clergy without regard to colour social status; and to end all discrimination within the church on the basis of sex or race. We call on church leaders to carry the confessions and commitments of this Declaration into the life of every congregation in the country. (RC Declaration 1990)

Under the heading *Affirmation*, the conference declared the following: We affirm and highlight the following:

4.1 Justice The Bible reveals God as a God of compassion and love who has a special care for the sinner, the downtrodden, the poor and all who suffer injustice. Obedience to Christ therefore requires that we develop an economic system based on justice, compassion and co-responsibility, so that those in need benefit more than those who have more than they need. More equitable wealth distribution must go hand in hand with economic growth. (RC Declaration 1990)

It went on by saying:

[W]e therefore commit ourselves to the struggle for a just, democratic non-racial and non-sexist South Africa so that our witness may carry greater credibility when we address Church-State relations in the new dispensation. (RC Declaration 1990)

More than 30 years have gone by since the voice of the women at this historic conference was heard for the first time. The burning question that must be asked in the light of the above is as follows: what has changed with regard to women in South Africa?

## Change in a post-apartheid South Africa

Four years after the Rustenburg Conference, the first democratic election in South Africa took place on 27 April 1994 (Butler 2019:347). This was officially the beginning of the post-apartheid South Africa in which equality for all was introduced. This led to changes in church and society.

## Equality for all under a new Constitution

Bower (2014:107) correctly indicates that shortly after the election, South Africa became one of the nine Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries that have signed and ratified the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (the SADC Protocol); it has also signed and ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (the African Charter), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Maputo Declaration on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. A further development was the new Constitution that was passed by parliament in 1996 and one of the requests of the women at the Rustenburg Conference became a reality. In the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, equality to all is guaranteed under the Bill of Rights in chapter 2. Paragraph 9 of chapter 2 of the Bill of Rights reads as follows:

2. Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms. To promote the achievement of equality, legislative and other measures designed to protect or advance persons, or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination may be taken.

3. 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. (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996)

Bower (2014:107) further points out that in addition to the Constitution, South Africa has a number of laws that are protective of women and children, in particular the *Domestic Violence Act* (No. 116 of 1998), the *Children's Act as Amended* (No. 38 of 2005) and the *Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Act* (No. 32 of 2007). It is therefore clear that definite legislative change took place in South Africa.

## Change in churches

Another important contribution of the conference was the call for equal opportunities with regard to the ordination of women. Because of the limited space and the focus of the article, two examples are described: the first example is the Dutch Reformed Church. Although the Dutch Reformed Church decided at its General Synod in October 1990<sup>8</sup> that all the offices are equal, it took another 4 years for the first woman, Gretha Heymans, to be ordained as a minister in the church (Landman 2002:214). At the General Synod of 1998, a document was tabled that asked for fair labour practices in congregations regarding women. It also went a step further in asking for restitution for women who have completed their studies a long time ago but could not become members of the church's pension fund. This report led to a confession by the General Synod about the injustice done to women in the church by excluding them from the offices. In a further development, a conference was organised at the Andrew

8. Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk: Notule (1990:718).

Murray congregation in Johannesburg from 15 to 16 September 2000. The central theme of the conference was the frustration of women ministers who were not called to congregations and who often found themselves in the position where they were used as cheap labour. The General Synodical Commission, whose members attended the conference, once again confessed the marginalisation and exclusion of women in the history of the Dutch Reformed Church (Landman 2002:215). These were some of the developments that opened new doors for women in the Dutch Reformed Church and led to more women becoming full-time ministers in congregations.

A second example is the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. The historic decision to ordain women to the priesthood was taken in 1992 and was viewed by many as a 'major transformational turning point for the church, especially towards becoming a more representative and inclusive entity that would welcome and embrace diversity' (Anglican Church 2022). This decision implied that the church had to re-model its structure, canons, leadership styles and liturgy to be an inclusive church with greater participation of women at all levels. In 2017, an important conference took place, which marked the 25th anniversary of women to the priesthood. It took place from 25 to 27 September at the Kopanong Conference Centre in Gauteng. The official topic of the conference was *The 25th anniversary conference of Anglican women's ordination to the priesthood*. The vision of the conference not only told the story of the struggle, which the church went through to arrive at that important decision but also projected the way forward to create a safe and collaborative space for ordained women. The sub-themes of the conference were:

- Commemorate the years of struggle leading up to the first ordinations of women to the priesthood in 1992.
- Celebrate this 25th anniversary as a victory over exclusion, inequality, and injustice in the church.
- Cry with lamentation for the exclusion, inequality and injustice that remains in the leadership, structures and practices of the church.
- Critically consider the nature of these practices of exclusion, inequality, and injustice and how they continue to marginalise women.
- Commit to work collaboratively for the transformation of church structures and practices to truly become an inclusive and life-giving church (Anglican Church 2022).

It is clear from the conference themes that although important changes were made in the Anglican church of Southern Africa, there was still a long road ahead. This was also a reflection of South Africa as a whole.

## The more things changed, the more they stayed the same

Despite important legislative changes and change that took place in some churches, South Africa has remained a country where to be a woman means 'to be poor, disempowered, and vulnerable to appallingly high levels of sexual violence. The gap between the principles espoused on paper and the reality



on the ground is profound' (UNICEF 2013:n.p.). This statement is confirmed by the research of Kunle and Matsha in which they state that the number of GBV cases increased to 52 420 in 2018/2019 from 50 108 in 2017/2018, most of which were cases of rape. The rate of sexual offences increased from 88.3 per 100 000 in 2017/2018 to 90.9 per 100 000 in 2018/2019. Reported sexual offences in 2019/2020 again increased to 53 293 (Kunle & Matsha 2021:2). The fact that the South African government identified gender equality as one of its development goals further confirms the seriousness of the problem. The target that has been set is to 'eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation' (Statistics SA 2020:2). This is an indication that although some of the important challenges from the Statement by women at the Rustenburg Conference had been answered by the new Constitution and other laws, it did not change much for millions of women in South Africa.

Bower (2014) is therefore correct when she states:

[F]or women and children in South Africa, not much has changed since the first democratic elections in 1994 and the presidency of Nelson Mandela. Progress toward the full realization of the rights of women and children has been unacceptably slow, given the extent of available resources and the commitments the country has made in its own legislation. (p. 106)

She continues (Bower 2014):

[T]he patriarchal and traditional view of women and children as inferior to men prevails, with more men in positions of power and influence than women. Although the Constitution and legislation are clear about the equality of all citizens. (p. 106)

She continued to indicate that 'the government, the economy, and civil society were run by men who frequently showed scant regard or understanding for the rights of women and children' (Bower 2014:107). This leads to the precarious position of women in South Africa. This point of view is also supported by Omololu Fagbadebo (2021) in the conclusion of his article with the title 'A discourse on the plight of South African women in the face of abuse and neglect' when he writes:

[A] number of factors, such as violent sexual habits and behaviour, and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and poverty have been unkind to South African women and ravaged their pride of place as fundamental stakeholders in the State. (p. 111)

He then continues by stressing that 'injustices, occasioned by unequal and unfair treatment, have subjected them to be objects of oppression by their men counterparts' (Fagbadebo 2021:111).

Although much more research has been conducted on the plight of women in South Africa, it is clear enough from the above that the first huge challenge for women in South Africa is gender-based violence, which is endemic in South Africa. Brook's point of view is supported by Kunle and Matsha (2021:1) who state that 'Gender-based violence, hereafter referred to as GBV, has been and continues to be a social ill

with far-reaching repercussions'. While gender-based violence is a world-wide phenomenon, Human Rights Watch (2010) labelled South Africa the 'rape capital' of the world. Something has to be done urgently to change this awful plight of women in South Africa.

It is, however, not only gender-based violence that attracts attention. Hand in hand with gender-based violence is the extreme poverty that affects especially women. Bower states it clearly: 'South Africa has high levels of deep intergenerational poverty' (Bower 2014:107). Which according to Gumede (2013) affects Africans, women and the youth the most. This point of view is supported by Kehler (2001) when she writes:

[F]or the majority of women in South Africa existing socio-economic rights, as guaranteed in the constitution, remain inaccessible resulting in the perpetuation and increase, as well as the feminisation of poverty. (p. 50)

She then explains that:

[F]or rural women and women on farms the constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination remain merely theoretical rights that lack practical implementation. What remains is women's day-to-day realities marked by the struggle for pure survival that is additionally determined by deteriorating socio-economic conditions and lack of development. (Kehler 2001:50)

Although the so-called Millennium Development Goals<sup>9</sup> were specifically set to improve the situation of women and children, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) had devastating effects on the livelihood of especially women. The economy of the country was already in trouble with persistent low growth rates, a technical recession and triple challenges of low unemployment, poverty and inequality, but data published by Statistics South Africa on 29 March 2022 show that the country's official unemployment rate rose by 0.4% points to a record of 35.3% in the fourth quarter of the last year. However, the expanded definition of unemployment is currently sitting at 46.2% (Statistics South Africa 2020). This statistic calls for urgent attention and action. Somehow somewhere the situation must change. The question is, 'where must the change come from?'

## The important role of the church as agent of change

Van der Merwe (2019:6) argues in his article with the title 'Poverty and the COVID-19 pandemic: A challenge to the church' that the church is one of the prime agents of change in South Africa.<sup>10</sup> This point of view is based on the research of Pillay (2017:1) who says that 'the church is, from its inception an agent of transformation and change'. He states that: 'Through the history of the world the church was involved in important changes in society' (Pillay 2017:1). Pillay (2017:9) uses the Reformation of the 16th century as an

9.The millennium goals were as follows: eradicate extreme poverty, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality and improve maternal health.

10.For a definition of what is meant by 'The Church', see Van der Merwe (2020).

important example to illustrate that the church did not only renew itself but also led change in societies.

In South Africa, the struggle against apartheid serves as an important modern-day example of how the church can play a role in changing society. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who played an important role at the Rustenburg Conference in 1990, described the role of the church in the struggle against apartheid as follows (De Gruchy 2004):

[T]he struggle of the church in South Africa was fundamentally how to bring about a more just society where differences of race, colour and culture were seen to be irrelevant and without theological significance. (p. ix)

Pillay (2017) also stresses that the system of apartheid in South Africa challenged the church into action – to fight on behalf of most of the people of South Africa against an unjust system. This was done in various ways through leadership, documents and conferences like the Rustenburg Conference. Pillay continues by emphasising that ‘with the rise of poverty, violence and injustice, the Christian church is called upon to embrace, engage and continue with its task of being an agent of change’ (Pillay 2017:11). Reverend Frank Chikane, one of the chairpersons of the Rustenburg Conference, supports this view with his point of view: ‘Even if we eventually have a legitimate system in South Africa the struggle for the ideals of the reign of God will not stop’ (eds. Alberts & Chikane 1991:15). The important voice of the women at the Rustenburg conference challenges the church into action on behalf of the women of South Africa today.

## The South African Council of Churches embraces the challenges

One of the best examples of how the churches in South Africa are reacting collectively is through programmes of the South African Council of Churches (SACC). The programme on *Patriarchy in Society* is described as a ‘multi-pronged Patriarchy & Society Campaign against sexual and gender-based violence, and its social conditioning in society’ (SACC 2022). The aim of the programme is to:

- Mount a preventative campaign – to conscientize various sections of society about the impact of a patriarchal society and its outcomes on sexual and gender-based violence, for the safety and flourishing of women and girls.

Moreover, the programme is also targeting ‘traditional cultural programmes of boy’s’ initiation to manhood, in consultation with relevant cultural authorities. The main activities of the programme include the following:

- Republic of Sexual Abuse Exhibition Virtual Roadshow: To put the ‘Republic of Sexual Abuse’ Exhibition on a virtual roadshow, to dramatize the frightening experience of the lived reality of sexual abuse in South Africa.
- Botho jwa Basadi Campaign: To create social change against gender-based violence and its roots in socialization, religious and cultural psyche, norms and mores through a large-scale communication blitz of what should be the

obvious, the fullness of woman humanity – Botho jwa Basadi (SACC 2022).

Although this programme of the SACC has merits, one important proposal from the women’s declaration can make an enormous contribution to give momentum to these programmes to change the plight of women in this country. That is a national church conference for women where the plight of women can be discussed, and where the way forward can be planned in a coordinated way by all role players involved. This will not only put new focus on the plight of women but will surely energise society to take serious action. Like in the past, the South African Council of Churches can play a major role in organising such an event.

## Conclusion

Although the Rustenburg Conference took place more than 30 years ago, the *Statement* by the women at the conference addressed critical flaws in the South African society. Since then, important changes have taken place, but problematic fault lines in society still seem to be there – more problematic than ever before. Change needs to happen and happen quickly if South Africa still wants to be the rainbow nation that Nelson Mandela dreamt of. The churches in South Africa proved in the struggle against apartheid that they have the capacity to bring change to a wounded society. The journey of the church since the 1990 conference shows that sustainable change in churches and society could take place if the programmes developed by the South African Council of Churches are embraced. This will help changing the plight of women in the country. The *Statement* by the women at the 1990 conference reminds us of this important fact and as such is still a clear voice 30 years onwards.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

### Author’s contributions

J.M.v.d.M. is the sole author of this research article.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

## References

- Alberts, L. & Chikane, F. (eds.), 1991, *The road to Rustenburg*, Struik Christian Books, Cape Town.
- Anglican Church, 2022, viewed 25 March 2022, from <https://anglicanchurchsa.org/mission/women-and-gender/25th-anniversary/>.
- Bower, C., 2014, 'The plight of women and children: Advancing South Africa's least privileged', in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 652, pp. 106–126, Thousand Oaks, Sage.
- Butler, A., 2019, *Cyril Ramaphosa: The path to presidential power*, Jacana Media, Auckland Park.
- De Gruchy, J.W., 1990, *Address Rustenburg Conference*, 29 September 2020, s.n., s.l.
- De Gruchy, J.W., 2004, *The church struggle in South Africa*, SCM Press, London.
- Dlamini, N., 2017, "'Comrades in their own right": Women's struggle against apartheid in the South African novel', master's thesis, Department of English, Graduate School of Stephen F. Austin State University.
- Fagbadebo, O., 2021, 'A discourse on the plight of South African women in the face of abuse and neglect', *Law, democracy & development*, vol. 25, Spec edn., Government of the Republic of South Africa, viewed 23 March 2022, from <https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/chapter-2-bill-rights#9>.
- Gumede, V., 2013, 'Facing SA's real "triple challenge"', *Mail and Guardian*, viewed 17 February 2012, from <https://mg.co.za/article/2012-02-17-facing-sas-real-triple-challenge/>.
- Hofmeyr, J.W. & Pillay, G.J., 1994, *A history of Christianity in South Africa*, vol. 1, HAUM Tertiary, Pretoria.
- Human Rights Watch, 2010, *Human Rights Watch world report: South Africa*, Seven Stories Press, s.l.
- Jonker, W., 1998, *Selvs die Kerk kan verander*, Tafelberg, Kaapstad.
- Kehler, J., 2001, 'Women and poverty: The South African experience', *Journal of International Women's Studies* 3(1), 41–53.
- Kunle, O. & Matsha, R.M., 2021, 'Powerful discourse: Gender-bas violence and counter-discourses in South Africa', *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 8(1), 1911035. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2021.1911035>
- Laber, M., 1999, 'Women's resistance to apartheid', *The Review: A Journal of Undergraduate Student Research* 2, 28–36.
- Landman, C., 2002, 'Vroue in die kerkraad en op die Kansel', in G. Hofmeyr (red.), *NG Kerk 350*, Lux Verbi, Wellington.
- Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, 1990, *Notule*, viewed 23 March 2022, from [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/AS\\_Notule\\_1990.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/AS_Notule_1990.pdf).
- Nolde, J., 1991, 'South African women under apartheid: Employment rights, with particular focus on domestic service & forms of resistance to promote change', *Third World Legal Studies* 10(1), a10.
- Oparinde, K. & Matsha, R., 2021, 'Powerful discourse: Gender-based violence and counter-discourses in South Africa', *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2021.1911035>
- Pillay, J., 2017, 'The church as a transformation and change agent', *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 73(3), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4352>
- Republic of South Africa, 1996, *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, Government Printers, Pretoria.
- Rustenburg Conference, 1990a, *List of attendees*, s.n., s.l.
- Rustenburg Conference, 1990b, *Statement by women*, s.n., s.l.
- Rustenburg Conference, 1990c, *Conference declaration*, viewed 20 March 2022, from [https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/bely/DF\\_Rustenburg.pdf](https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/bely/DF_Rustenburg.pdf).
- South African Council of Churches, 2022, *Programmes/ campaigns*, viewed 28 March 2022, from <http://sacc.org.za/programmes-campaigns/>.
- Statistics South Africa, 2020, *Crimes against women in South Africa, an analysis of the phenomenon of GBV and femicide*, viewed 22 July 2022 from [https://www.parliament.gov.za/storage/app/media/1\\_Stock/Events\\_Institutional/2020/womens\\_charter\\_2020/docs/30-07-2020/A\\_Statistical\\_Overview\\_R\\_Maluleke.pdf](https://www.parliament.gov.za/storage/app/media/1_Stock/Events_Institutional/2020/womens_charter_2020/docs/30-07-2020/A_Statistical_Overview_R_Maluleke.pdf).
- United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), 2013, *Women and children in South Africa*, viewed 21 March 2022, from <http://www.unicef.org/southafrica/children.html>.
- Van der Merwe, J.M., 2019, 'Cottesloe 50 years later: did the Dutch Reformed Church answer to the call?', *NGTT: Dutch Reformed Theological Journal / Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 51(3&4), 154–163.
- Van der Merwe, J.M., 2020, 'Poverty and the COVID-19 pandemic: A challenge to the church', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(1), a6221. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6221>