

Remarks by H. E. Sibongiseni Dlamini-Mntambo

On Women's Day at Lisgar Collegiate, Ottawa, 8 March 2019.

Patsy Agard, Principal of Lisgar Collegiate
Teachers
Student leaders and
Learners, Good Afternoon,

I must confess that I have mixed feelings by being here today. On the one hand I am happy to have been invited to share with you my thoughts about diversity and the black history month but also there is something not right in specifically identifying a month in year to recognising and appreciating black excellence. I will talk more about this in a moment.

Also I would like to share my thoughts on diversity with you and why we should always strive to embrace it. For me to do this I may have to go to areas which we sometimes try to avoid because they make us uncomfortable. For instance talking about racial issues can sometimes make us uncomfortable, but ignoring them does not make them go away. So I am very grateful to you and all your teachers for allowing this discussion to take place.

Now, let us talk black history month

The question that still bothers me is why in this day and age do we still divide the human race according to racial lines? Why black excellence and the contributions by black people in society is still not appreciated and recognised all year round?

But, be that as it may, this is the month we celebrate diversity, a month in which people of colour remember their roots, pay homage to heroes and heroines, whose positive influence in the world has not been decorated, because some think “ black people are not smart, are not inventors, or anything to be celebrated”. It is a month when we recognise the giants on whose shoulder we stand on.

It is my hope that this one month, commemorating black history will one day come to an end and that we will see each other as a human race, human beings, united in our diversity.

I feel very strongly about this because as a black South African woman I have been subjected to both racial and gender discrimination in my country.

I grew up in a country in which racial segregation and white supremacy were central aspects of the South African policies. A country whose system progressively disenfranchised the indigenous black people, stripped them of their dignity, curtailing their rights, their citizenship.

For more than 300 years black people were subjected to unethical, immoral acts of cruelty and discrimination by one race. We really struggled to get decent education. Going to a school as good as your school Lisgar Collegiate, was impossible for a black South African. Most South Africans my age went to school barefoot on long dusty roads and had to cross rivers to be taught an inferior education system under trees or dilapidated classrooms.

When our people were killed, tortured, exiled, jailed, we did not know how much the world was fighting for our freedom because the apartheid government controlled the media. We had lots of friends around the world – including here in Canada. Ethical leaders like your former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney led the international community fighting for us. So cruel and evil was racism in apartheid that the United Nations even declared apartheid a crime against humanity.

Apartheid carried on for decades but thanks to heroes like Nelson Mandela, the system ended in 1994. Nelson Mandela had been imprisoned for 27 years for fighting against apartheid. He became the first black democratically elected South African president in 1994. He also became the honorary citizen of Canada, the first non-state president to ever address a joint sitting of parliament in Canada.

As you would know racism is not unique to South Africa and some of you may have been subjected to this cruel discrimination possibly here in your country or elsewhere because of your pigmentation.

Nelson Mandela in his book, *The Long Walk to Freedom*, he says and I quote

“No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to

hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.” Close quote

I will tell you that racism, a systematic denigration, oppression and exploitation of black people and the permanent relegation of blacks to second-class status is learned.

You see, our mind is race agnostic (not sure) until society teaches us that not all skin colours are equal; that a white skin (which produces less melanin) is superior to a dark brown skin. It is baffling why a white skinned person would be rendered more superior than a dark or brown skinned person when the color of the skin is determined by melanin, and melanin has nothing to do with superiority and how the brain functions.

So please do ask yourself why a production of less melanin pigment resulting in lighter skin would make some light skinned people believe that they are an inherently a superior race over all others and thereby have the right to dominance. I still don't know the answer to that.

Unfortunately media, like television, magazines, movies etc. do not reflect a true representation of society. As a black child growing up, it would have been almost impossible to see successful or powerful black people on screen, or winning awards. All one saw and still sees in the media are one-sided negative stories about Africa or South America.

The sad part is that we as black people often believe this and subject ourselves to unnecessary pressure. For instance we try to define beauty according to European standards. Think for instance who are brand messengers for most beauty creams; anti-aging this and anti-aging that....We will buy these anti-aging creams for wrinkles and forget that our skin does not crack.

GENDER DISCRIMINATION

You see gender discrimination, like racism is learned. Certain behaviours and power structures have been entrenched which, unfortunately, have reinforced gender inequalities and overt discriminatory practices. I do hope your school here discourages these behaviours.

We create these false ideas of what “normal” and “decent” look like. In most societies, a woman must, for example, have a certain type of hair, be a certain weight, speak and walk a certain way. Certain careers have been known to be the preserve for men- pilots, diplomats, mine managers etc. A girl child can be anything she wishes to be as long as the environment is enabling.

It is our duty to not give in-or give up. It is our responsibility to teach and educate the racists, the oppressors, the bully about our humanity.

Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. I am black she is white, She is a woman, he is a man, She is blonde, she is a red hair, let us embrace diversity and learn to appreciate our differences. Learn how different people think and act. And then grow through that sharing.

But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognise those differences; and to ignore their effects on human behaviour and expectation. We are *all* different. In a world where every one of us is different, there is no such thing as “normal”.

We have to move toward creating a society, within which we can each flourish. To the people of colour, wear your beautiful porcelain skin with pride.

It is indeed my hope that one day we will stop commemorating black history month, because black people also need to be celebrated and recognised every month, and every time they make a contribution towards society.