

NARRATIVE REPORT

GENDER AWARENESS WEEK 2019

Background

Themed “Gender and Spirituality”, the Gender Awareness Week (GAW) 2019 recognised that as society in South Africa, and especially at the NWU, religious beliefs matter as a foundation for values.

These religious beliefs also extend to convictions regarding gender, even while we acknowledge forms of spirituality among our students and staff that are apart from religion, as well as non-spiritual and areligious experience, which translate into viewpoints on gender.

Therefore, the aim of GAW 2019 was to provide a forum for discussions on these different perspectives within religious communities, as well as dialogue between these perspectives and non-religion-based perspectives.

Participation across all three campuses

In compiling the GAW 2019 programme, the organising committee endeavoured to involve as many role players within university life (on all three campuses) as possible.

These role players included students through the respective campus student councils, residences and student associations (including Campus Pride), academic staff through the involvement of faculties (that were invited to plan their own programmes), and support staff through programmes planned by support services.

Specific faculties, departments and schools also engaged actively with the topic by facilitating specific events.

As a result of this approach, events prior to and during GAW varied widely according to topic, format and content. For example, events in the residences took the format of “red chair conversations” facilitated by Student Life, while the School for Music presented a music concert and an interactive workshop under the theme “Gender, Music and Spirituality” and the NWU Art Gallery presented exhibitions of Lhola Amira’s work on all three campuses.

As various stakeholders were involved during the programme compilation phase, event participation was marked by cross-sectional attendance, with even distribution among staff ($\pm 40\%$), students ($\pm 50\%$) and non-university/larger community attendance.

Care was taken to create a welcoming and nurturing space for participants from all backgrounds and identifications, including gender-fluid and non-conforming participants.

Visits led to honest conversations

In addition, the three campuses played host to a variety of speakers. Two of them are from GALA in Johannesburg. (Originally named the Gay and Lesbian Archives, GALA is a centre for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) culture and education in South Africa.)

Other speakers hailed from the USA and from the universities of the Free State and Johannesburg.

These visits led to honest conversations about how NWU still differs from other universities, specifically in how our sense of historical placement (geographic/geo-political, affective-ideological, and institutional) continues to impact on our current embodiment of institutional identity and our navigation of processes of transformation.

From many of the conversations, it was clear that gender – and in this case the mercurial resonances between gender and spirituality – should not be seen as de-contextualised or divorced from sexuality, culture or institutional structurings (such as a still seemingly segregated hostel culture).

Rather, many events suggested that intersectional approaches to gender experience would be more productive in tackling issues such as gendered violence and homophobia. In addition to this, many of the events also, hearteningly, brought to the surface something of the strides we have made *together* since 2004 and the institutional changes that had been introduced.

A variety of activities

The GAW programme entailed 23 events in all, including workshops, lectures, panel discussions and a conference.

Discussions ranged from a number of more intimate table-top dialogues with six participants engaging in honest and empowering dialogues to large student assembly-type events, with 120 participants in attendance. Other activities included art exhibitions on all the campuses, featuring works from local artists as well as international guests from the USA and New Zealand.

In addition, the South African Association for Gender Studies (SAAGS) hosted their annual conference on the campus in Potchefstroom during GAW. This allowed for cross-pollination among the SAAGS delegates from the seven South African universities attending the conference.

Faculties also planned their programmes within their own context. The Faculty of Humanities provided various opportunities for engagement on the general theme of GAW and more specifically gender diversity.

The Faculty of Engineering hosted their annual Femmegineering event at the beginning of August, the Faculty of Health Sciences launched a social media campaign and the Faculty of Theology focused on the aspect of spirituality in relation to gender.

Looking back

All events held across the three campuses, some of which were repeated on the different campuses, were well attended.

Feedback from participants pointed out that these events did indeed provide safe and thoughtful fora for discussions on gender issues and spirituality. A number of themes arose for future discussion, namely gender-based violence, questions around LGBTIQ+ and theology, divorce, remarriage, abortion, gender, queerness and culture.

It is our hope that GAW 2020 will reach ever greater heights and that participation across our institution will increase as the dialogue on gender and spirituality continues.

The following pictures were taken during the Gender Awareness Campaign at the NWU.









