

# Mamphela Ramphela, a Biography

## By Bonnie Leib

### Personal Reflection

Mamphela Ramphela is significant in her ability to transcend personal loss and tragedy in order to succeed. I've taken personal lessons from her story about how important meaningful work can be to someone's life. Ramphela used this work to sustain her through times of devastating personal loss. She kept moving forward, and she never stopped learning and educating herself despite the deaths of her family members and friends. She also was remarkable in her ability to achieve. I learned a great deal from her descriptions of goal-oriented work. I agree with her description of women who hijack their success due to their inability to shut out the world and focus on specific goals. I appreciated her honest discussion of her ambivalence toward motherhood. While she values her sons, she questions the romantic vision of motherhood. She describes her preference for uninterrupted sleep to dealing with crying babies. She is a completely unapologetic feminist. She never let her class, race, or gender constrain her in any way. She is in one word, remarkable.

### Biography

Mamphela Ramphela is a woman whose life story presents a case study of success against harrowing odds. Ramphela rose from poverty and the brutal affects of South Africa's apartheid regime in order to succeed in multiple careers. By her mid 50s, Ramphela had already been a successful doctor, activist, anthropologist, university administrator, and executive. Ramphela's remarkable and numerous careers all converge around the theme of activism for the disenfranchised. Whether she was a doctor, a Black Consciousness activist, an anthropologist, or a university administrator, Ramphela spent her life devoted to the underdogs of South Africa- the poor, blacks, and women. While she has risen from her humble upbringing to positions of real power in South Africa and around the world, she has never forgotten her origins. She has spent her life giving back to the people of South Africa.

From the age of one to her late forties, Mamphela Ramphela's life was shaped by the legacy of apartheid. She was born in South Africa in the year 1947. When Mamphela turned one, the National Party won the elections and put their racist ideology into place. They were to remain in power until the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994. During the first decade of the National Party's rule, the Population Registration Act was passed. This law classified all South Africans into four racial categories: White, Coloured (mixed race), Indian, and Bantu (Black). These racial classifications were used to limit blacks' access to social services, interaction with other racial groups, voting rights, property ownership, and movement throughout the country. The National Party also passed extreme security measures to prevent opposition from blacks to the repressive laws. These laws were necessary to maintain white minority control over the majority black population.<sup>1</sup>

Mamphela Ramphela was born in the Northern Transvaal, the third child of two primary schoolteachers. Ramphela describes the difficulty of growing up under apartheid. in her autobiography: *"I believe that growing up under apartheid promoted premature aging. One's childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood were knocked out of one very rudely".*<sup>2</sup>

Actually, as Ramphela admits, she was one of the lucky children of apartheid. Since both of her parents were teachers, Ramphela's family existed in a position of relative privilege compared to that of her peers. However, Ramphela was exposed to the extreme poverty of her neighbors as a child. The Northern Transvaal is the poorest province in South Africa and is characterized by high population growth, large rates of unemployment and extreme poverty.<sup>3</sup> Many of her childhood friends were the children of migrant laborers. They were raised by their mothers, and lived on remittance payments from their absent fathers. Mamphela was fortunate to have a father who worked in the village and was able to live at home. Pitsi Eliphaz Ramphela walked an uneasy tightrope between blacks and the white

Afrikaners he worked for. He was an elementary school principal at an Afrikaner run school in the village of Kranspoort. As a result, he was expected to serve in a position of authority at the local Dutch Reformed Church, an institution which was associated with Afrikaner nationalism. Pitsi Ramphele conducted Sunday school and served as a churchwarden, choirmaster, and interpreter for the local Afrikaner Domine, a racist clergyman named Reverend Lukas van der Merwe. The Domine treated his congregation as if they were his personal property. He employed his parishioners at slave wages on his farm, banned blacks from drinking alcohol, and decreed that pregnant, unmarried black women were to be banished from his mission.<sup>4</sup> Mamphela's father was considered to be a favorite Bantu of the Reverend van der Merwe. When Pitsi Ramphele accompanied the Domine on parish visits to other Afrikaner households, a separate table was set up for Ramphele so that he could eat in the same room as the whites. According to Mamphela, her father "negotiated a fine line between obedience to and defiance of this racist tyrant."<sup>5</sup>

As a young girl, Ramphele was exposed to politics at a very young age. Her sister Mashadi was expelled from high school after she demonstrated against the celebrations of South Africa's becoming a Republic in 1961. Mashadi refused to commemorate an occasion that had so many negative consequences for blacks. Ramphele also remembers her parents discussing the detention of her uncle under the 90-day detention clause.<sup>6</sup> This Ninety-Day Act gave police officers the right to detain, without an arrest warrant, any person suspected of unlawful political activity.<sup>7</sup> In 1955, Ramphele witnessed a conflict between the racist Domine and the villagers of Kranspoort that contributed to her political awakening. The dispute centered on whether the mother of a villager could be buried in the mission graveyard. The Domine refused to allow the burial since he considered the woman to be a heathen who had not converted to Christianity. In defiance, local villagers took control of the church grounds and buried the woman. In revenge, the furious Domine enlisted the police and banished all of the villagers who were involved in the burial and those known to be sympathetic to it. Two thirds of the villagers were cast out, losing their property in their rush to escape the violent police. Ramphele remembers the event as a "significant development involving people who had hitherto been compliant and docile." It was the young girl's first direct experience with Blacks' defiance to the apartheid system.<sup>8</sup>

At the age of fourteen, young Mamphela went away to Bethesda Normal College, the Dutch Reformed Church School where her parents had trained to be teachers. The terrible conditions at this school affected her strongly, motivating her to strive for something better in her education. She recalls the bedbug-infested dormitories, the poor quality of the food, and the "us and them" attitude of the white teachers. Students were not allowed to shake hands with teachers and entered the local church from a separate entrance. Additionally, there was *huiswerk* (the Afrikaans word for housework) where black students were assigned to do menial domestic work for white staff members for an afternoon per week. This arrangement reinforced the unequal social relations between students and teachers. During these times, Ramphele remembers one of her teachers saying to the students, "You were born to work for us."<sup>9</sup>

Ramphele then decided to pursue a highly unusual career for a black South African woman in the 1960s. She decided to become a doctor. According to Ramphele, she made this choice because she believed that medicine could offer her the greatest freedom. States Ramphele, "*It was not the desire to serve which influenced my career choice, but the passion for freedom to be my own mistress in a society in which being black and woman defined the boundaries within which one could legitimately operate.*"<sup>10</sup>

Ramphele experienced a number of roadblocks during her path to a medical career. When she informed the Domine of her educational plans, he was livid that a poor, black woman would attempt to enter such a prestigious field. He said to her, "Your father is dying of cancer. Who is going to finance your education anyway?"<sup>11</sup> It was in this insensitive manner that the young woman learned her father was dying. She decided to prove the Domine wrong, but was confronted with other challenges. Her mathematics instruction at Bethesda Normal College had not been sufficient for admittance to medical school. The white missionaries at Bethesda had followed the Bantu Education Act of 1953, which stated that black children "should not be shown green pastures where they would never be allowed to graze."<sup>12</sup> Additionally, as a poor black woman without access to information about higher education, Ramphele missed the application deadline to medical school at Natal University. By the time she had applied to Natal, the only medical school in South Africa that accepted black students, the application deadline had

passed. And there was the financial problem. With her academic gift and her determination, Mamphela was able to overcome these difficulties. She received extra help in mathematics, attended classes at the University of the North for a year, and borrowed money from the state and her friends.<sup>13</sup> In January of 1968, Ramphela finally began her study at Natal University Medical School. Her years at the school were to shape the rest of her life, both personally and professionally. She was to receive a medical degree, which placed her, a member of the lowest echelon of South African society, into the most prestigious career path for any South African. She was also to meet Steve Biko, the man who was to play a significant role in her personal and political future.

Before Steve Biko, the person who played the strongest influence on Ramphela's life was her mother. She learned from her mother that a woman's life did not have to be constrained by her gender. Ramphela describes her mother as fighting many battles within the patriarchal family system. She resisted the authoritarian edicts of her father-in-law, demanded respect from her brothers-in-law, and carved out a space for herself and for her family. As a child growing up in the 1950s, Mamphela saw that her gender did not have to constrain her behavior or her choices. Her mother was a professional woman who stood up for her rights and spoke out whenever they were trampled on. Her mother's example was one that Mamphela was to emulate. She was never one to let South African ideas of suitable roles for women hinder her in any way.

The man who was to have the most effect on Ramphela's life was Steve Biko. At the University of Natal, Ramphela experienced a political transformation and became one of the founding members of the Black Consciousness Movement. Over the next four years, her political activities and experiences were to have more effect on the young woman than her medical studies. Ramphela attended student body meetings that were dominated by criticism of the white liberal politics of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). Biko, a fellow med student, was the main critic of white liberal politics at these meetings. He argued that white liberals' opposition to racial discrimination was ineffectual and unlikely to lead to any real change in the quality of life for black South Africans. Biko claimed that the only way to achieve real change in South Africa was for blacks to take initiative and work for their own liberation. Under Biko's leadership, the black students at the University of Natal broke away from NUSAS and formed the South African Students Organization (SASO).<sup>14</sup> This student organization and Biko's ideas formed the basis of the Black Consciousness Movement. Biko achieved huge political success and fame in South Africa as the founder of this movement. This success led to his ultimate banning and murder at a young age by the apartheid government.

During this time, Ramphela became good friends with Biko and other members of the movement. She became chairperson of the SASO local committee, organizing discussion sessions on campus, canvassing for membership, and helping to run a clinic for the poverty-stricken blacks in the University's surrounding communities. Ramphela describes these years as a time of immense personal growth. She became increasingly confident, a strong public speaker, and a debater who was "known for not suffering fools gladly." According to Ramphela, she intimidated men who were not expecting aggression from women. Much like her mother, she insisted on respect and being taken seriously in her community.<sup>15</sup>

At this time, Ramphela embarked on a romantic relationship with Biko and fell hopelessly in love with him. The two were to remain star-crossed for the rest of his life. Due to a sense of guilt and obligation, Mamphela married a boyfriend who had supported her financially through difficult years, Dick Mmabane. The marriage failed, but Biko married another woman before she was free. The two remained lovers for the rest of Biko's life, and had a child together despite Biko's marriage to another woman. They were to remain professional colleagues and friends throughout the following years, in addition to lovers.

In 1973, Biko and other student leaders found themselves the victims of banning orders by the apartheid government. They were exiled to their birth homes and were forbidden from participating in political activities, entering any educational institutions, or attending any social gatherings. Security policemen harassed Biko, bursting into his mother's home in King Williamstown at any hour of the day or night, looking for violations of the banning order. Despite these challenges, Ramphela and Biko continued their activism and work in the Black Consciousness Movement. Ramphela combined her

medical skills with her activism, setting up a community health care center to serve the poor black community in Zinyoka, ten kilometers outside of Biko's new home in King. The health center was called the Zanempilo Community Health Center and it opened in January of 1975. It was a comprehensive health-care center with an outpatient section, a maternity section, a labor ward, a nursery, and a lie-in ward for post-delivery care.<sup>16</sup> During this time, Ramphele also took over the directorship of the Black Community Programmes from Biko. The Black Community Programmes were set up as a wing of the Black Consciousness Movement to "give practical effect to the philosophy of black self-reliance, self-help, and liberation through development of the whole person."<sup>17</sup> According to Ramphele, her dual responsibilities contributed to her personal growth. She became extremely focused, disciplined, and goal-directed.<sup>18</sup>

In 1977, Mamphela became the target of her own banning order. She was sent to the Naphuno district of Tzaneen in the northern Transvaal, a remote area she had never heard of before. She was driven by the police to her new home without any belongings and without any time to say goodbye to her family, friends, and work colleagues. Ramphele set up a home in the Lenyenye Township in Tzaneen and continued her activist work, starting a clinic at the back of a Roman Catholic Church. In September of 1977, Steve Biko was picked up by the security police, and on September 12 died as a result of torture from a brutal interrogation. In Lenyenye, Mamphela Ramphele was confined to a hospital, pregnant with his child.<sup>19</sup> She was destroyed by the death of the most important man in her life, and was not to fully recover from it until ten years later. In 1978, she gave birth to Biko's son, Hlumelo, a name that means "the shoot that grows from a dead tree trunk."<sup>20</sup>

Despite her personal devastation, Ramphele looked to work for solace. During the seven years she lived under the banning order, Ramphele started another health center, the Ithuseng Community Health Center, and completed three degrees. She completed a Bachelor of Commerce degree and received a Diploma in Tropical Hygiene and a Diploma in Public Health. In Lenyenye, Ramphele also launched a day-care center, a literacy project and a communal vegetable garden.<sup>21</sup>

After her banning order was lifted, Ramphele left Lenyenye for Cape Town in 1984. During this time, she began to transition from medicine and activism to a career in academia. She co-authored a book on South African poverty, *Uprooting Poverty*, with Francis Wilson, a professor of Economics at the University of Cape Town. According to Ramphele, she and Wilson integrated an analysis of race, class, gender, age, and geographic location into the book in a way that went "beyond what was politically correct in the mid-1980s."<sup>22</sup> While working on this book, she moved into an office in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Cape Town. This move introduced Ramphele to the discipline of anthropology. She would go on to receive a Ph.D. in anthropology, writing her dissertation on the lives of South African migrant workers. This choice was a second remarkable career choice for Ramphele. In the 1980s, it was considered highly unusual for a black South African woman to work in native anthropology. However, Ramphele found the transition to be a natural one. Anthropology required strong observational skills, which she had already honed as community development activist. Ramphele created waves with her colleagues in the Department of Anthropology by introducing the term "patriarchy," to describe the system of male-dominated power relations she saw in the migrant-labor hostels. Ramphele was informed by her male colleagues that anthropologists did not like to use this term. She retorted that she had no desire to be an anthropologist, and would continue to use the term anyway.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Ramphele introduced gender analysis to the Anthropology Department at Cape Town.

In 1991, Ramphele entered the field of educational administration. She became one of four Deputy Vice Chancellors at the University of Cape Town. In 1996, she became Vice Chancellor of the school, the first black person to head the previously all white academic institution. According to Ramphele, her focus during her time at the University of Cape Town was on equity. To Ramphele, equity was not to be seen just in terms of blacks and whites, but also had to include gender and class.<sup>24</sup> She worked to create a more inclusive academic environment during her time at the University. Ramphele's accomplishments were to continue to still greater heights. In the year 2000, she became one of the five managing directors of the World Bank. Her formal title was the Managing Director of Human Development, which included health, education, and social protection for the poor.<sup>25</sup> She was the first African to be a Managing Director of the World Bank. In July of 2005, Ramphele launched Circle Capital,

a capital investment company that she started with her son, Hlumelo Biko. Circle describes itself as a “new-order, blue-chip black empowerment investment holding company.”<sup>26</sup> Circle plans to deliver sustainable empowerment to established companies in South Africa.

When describing her life, Ramphele discusses the role gender has played. As a poor, black South African woman, Ramphele had to repeatedly transgress boundaries. Ramphele states that on many occasions she had “to be outrageous to be heard, let alone be taken seriously.”<sup>27</sup> Ramphele hopes that her role as a successful black, South African woman, the ultimate transgressor, turns “what is seen as abnormal for women into everyday practice.”<sup>28</sup> Ramphele believes that her success can be attributed to her independence, self-confidence, and her ability to focus on goals. Ramphele honestly discusses her non-traditional view of motherhood. She describes her ambivalence about the many sacrifices women have to make as mothers and explores her honest resentment of these sacrifices.<sup>29</sup> Ramphele also discusses the “reductionism” she had to contend with as the political widow of Steve Biko.<sup>30</sup> Ramphele is often defined only in terms of her relationship with Biko instead of on her own merits. While she confirms the importance Biko had on her life, she questions why she is so often only defined by her relationship with him. She prefers to be defined by her own accomplishments rather than as Biko’s political widow.

Always questioning, always learning, and always transgressing boundaries, Ramphele continues to achieve today and to set a remarkable example of success and courage for South African women. She challenges all women to move beyond the limited roles that have been set for them and to be independent and unafraid.

---

<sup>1</sup>Sutherland, Carla. “A Life in Context: Historical and Political Background” in Across Boundaries pgs. 230-231

<sup>2</sup>Ramphele XI

<sup>3</sup>Sutherland 239

<sup>4</sup>Ramphele 29-30

<sup>5</sup>Ramphele 30

<sup>6</sup>Ramphele 28

<sup>7</sup>Sutherland 233

<sup>8</sup>Ramphele 31-32

<sup>9</sup>Ramphele 35-38

<sup>10</sup>Ramphele 44

<sup>11</sup>Ramphele 45

<sup>12</sup>Ramphele 44

<sup>13</sup>Ramphele 44-47

<sup>14</sup>Ramphele 54-56

<sup>15</sup>Ramphele 66

<sup>16</sup>Ramphele 97

<sup>17</sup>Ramphele 94

<sup>18</sup>Ramphele 104

<sup>19</sup>Ramphele 134

<sup>20</sup>Ramphele 137

<sup>21</sup>Kraft, Scott. Los Angeles Times. August 31, 1997.

<sup>22</sup>Ramphele 162

<sup>23</sup>Ramphele 167

<sup>24</sup>Ramphele 207

<sup>25</sup>Katzenellenbogen, Jonathan. Business Day (South Africa). October 02, 2000.

<sup>26</sup>Gunnion, Stephen. Business Day (South Africa). July 15, 2005.

<sup>27</sup>Ramphele 71

<sup>28</sup>Ramphele xii

<sup>29</sup>Gaidzanwa, Rudo. Southern African Feminist Review. January 31, 1996.

<sup>30</sup>Gaidzanwa, Rudo. Southern African Feminist Review. January 31, 1996.

---

## Bibliography

- Gaidzanwa, Rudo. "A Life." South African Feminist Review. January 31, 1996. Volume 2, Issue I, p 131.
- Gunnion, Stephen. "Ramphela calls for partnerships for BEE." Business Da (South Africa). July 15, 2005. Business & Finance, p 11.
- Katzenellenbogen, Jonathan. "Former activist loves World Bank job." Business Day (South Africa) October 02, 2000. Opinion & Analysis, p 12.
- Kraft, Scott. "Mamphela Ramphela: On Mandela, Biko and the struggle to integrate South Africa." Los Angeles Times August 31, 1997 p M, 3:1
- Ramphela, Mamphela. Across Boundaries- The Journey of a South African Woman Leader. The Feminist Press: New York. 1996
- Ramphela, Mamphela. Political widowhood in South Africa: the embodiment of ambiguity. Daedalus January 1, 1996.
- Ramphela, Mamphela and Wilson, Francis. Uprooting Poverty The South African challenge  
W.W. Norton & Company: New York. 1989.
- Sutherland, Carla. A Life in Context- Historical and Political Background in Across Boundaries-  
The Journey of a South African Woman Leader. Ramphela, Mamphela. The Feminist Press: New York. 1996

### ***Interview Questions for Mamphela Ramphela:***

- 1) How were you able to put aside personal tragedy (the death of Steve Biko, your banning) and focus on your community work during the seven years of your banning?
- 2) Which of your multiple careers do you feel has brought you the most fulfillment?
- 3) What policies do you support in order to reduce poverty in South Africa?
- 4) Do you feel that the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been an effective way to deal with legacy of apartheid?

## Timeline

- 1947: Mamphela Ramphela born in Northern Transvaal
- 1948: National Party wins elections. Put racist ideology into place.
- 1950: Population Registration Act, classifying South Africans by race. ANC starts campaign of civil disobedience.
- 1953: Bantu Education Act limits types of instruction Black South Africans receive.
- 1961: Ramphela goes to Bethesda Normal College.
- 1964: ANC leader Nelson Mandela sent to prison "for life."
- 1968: Ramphela begins study at Natal University Medical School.
- 1973: Steve Biko, leader of the Black Consciousness Movement, exile to his homelands, forbidden from political activities, education, etc.

---

1975: Ramphela sets up community health care center in Zinyoka. Takes over directorship of Black Community Programmes from Biko.

1976: Uprising starts in Soweto. .

1977: Ramphela exiled to remote district in northern Transvaal. Starts community health clinics, day care centers, literacy projects there.

1977: Steve Biko jailed, and dies as result of torture.

1978: Ramphela gives birth to Biko's son, Hlumelo

1984: Ramphela's banning order lifted, she moves to Cape Town.

1990: ANC unbanned, Mandela released from prison.

1991: Ramphela enters field of educational administration.

1994: First democratic elections, ANC wins.

1996; Ramphela becomes Vice Chancellor of University of Cape Town.

2000: Ramphela becomes Managing Director of Human Development in World Bank.

2005: Ramphela launches a capital investment company, Circle Capital.