

THE JOURNEY OF BUILDING FEMINIST NETWORKS

SURPLUS PEOPLE PROJECT
HERSCHELLE MILFORD, CEO



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SPP CEO.**

When Surplus People's Project's CEO, Herschelle Milford, was invited to participate in the African Women's Development Fund's CEO Forum on Leadership and Governance in 2015, it would be the start of a journey of growth that would build networks with feminist leaders across the African continent.

At the time, Milford said her “biggest drawback has always been my struggle with self-confidence and public speaking”.

Milford represents an organisation that envisages a transformed and just society and stands in “solidarity with radical social movements in struggles for pro-poor agrarian transformation for food sovereignty”.

SPP research conducted in

2009 indicated that land reform and food security strategies were not well integrated in South Africa and these policies have not paid sufficient attention to the patriarchal structures which limits women's access to productive land.

South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world with a Gini coefficient of about 0.65 and there are constant struggles to ensure that the poor have access to land and resources.

SPP's discussions with women across the Western and Northern Cape - where the organisation operates – have identified inequality in food, violence against women, women's access to land, unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse as critical issues.

SPP recognises that while



there is a general challenge to have more South Africans gain access to the land, that challenge is greater for women.

To this end, the SPP works with social movements and communities helping them to amplify their agrarian struggles.

“Generally, I am a self-driven person and set high expectations for myself,” noted Milford. “A positive attribute has always been my leadership style that emphasised inclusivity, transparency and shared accountability.”

The Nairobi intervention, however, focused on individual skills – starting early with yoga before moving on to three full day sessions that included board governance, media training, personal care, resource mobilisation and feminist engagement.

The Personal is Political

“Since the CEO Forum, I have started eating healthily and embarked on a spiritual and personal journey that enabled me to connect to my true self and possibilities,” said Milford.

“The personal is indeed political.”

She stressed that this is an ongoing process of learning.

“The interaction with other women leaders from across the continent allowed for maximum learning and exposure and made me realise that we as feminist and women leaders share similar struggles, have common ideals, challenges and dreams.”

To this extent, the emphasis

on self-care and wellness expanded and extended beyond Milford and into her organisation.

“We introduced time for staff team building sessions and during organisational reviews and reflection spaces introduced sessions on self-care and practical things like massages and meditation practices and drumming,” she explained.

There have been real changes to her life as a result of this experience: “I have become more in touch with myself as a person and the need for a holistic leadership approach that also infiltrates organisational life and staff well-being. This has been an ongoing journey of reflection.”

This change supports the organisation's desire to work in a respectful and caring way with communities and to adopt a participatory, listening, open, caring, transparent and, gender equality focused environment.

But the impact extended beyond the community.

“The importance of self-care, self-development and good governance was shared within all my networks. SPP always placed high emphasis on ethics, compliance and good governance, and as a part of national networks, we could broadly share these learnings from the CEO Forum and our prior experiences – which were affirmed through the forum,” said Milford.

The Forum offered relevant content from a team of experienced resource persons that allowed participants to take practical steps once they returned to their organisations.

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One such practical intervention at SPP was the establishment of a sub-committee on finance and fundraising which now also monitors the organisation’s resource mobilisation strategy, an outcome of the AWDF-facilitated process.

Mentoring Privilege

In addition, Milford was assigned a mentor to support her during the next year.

“The coaching programme was a novel approach to support such a capacity building programme. It was a real privilege and gift to have access to a person who could guide my personal development,” said Milford.

“The regular interactions and check-ins with the coach was

challenging but also engaging.”

A key output for the programme was writing in order to influence public policy. For Milford this meant writing a public opinion column to support her organisation’s advocacy.

Working with her coach, Milford produced a column on women’s right to land which was published in a national newspaper under the headline, “A woman’s place is on the land...” to coincide with International Women’s Day in 2015.

“Writing for the public domain has always been an experience of angst,” said Milford. “Through the coaching programme it was possible to have an opinion piece featured in a national newspaper. This was extremely rewarding and changed my attitude to writing and putting out ideas for public dissemination,” she added.

“As part of the coaching process we also extended a session to staff around engaging the media to enhance our work as an organisation. The use of social media as a strategy was explored in depth. This has resulted in a substantial increase in Facebook friends, a very active Facebook page and an increase in individual giving,” she added.

Surplus Peoples Project’s Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/surpluspeopleproject/>) now has well over 1,100 likes – up from 400 likes - and boasts strong engagement with continuous comments and shares.

SPP’s Twitter profile (@SurplusPP) is also growing with over 350 followers and a strong

focus on news and advocacy.

The organisation also has a YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9siLdTmzdLasWtwS4ujlYg>) which features short videos from their training and projects.

SPP believes in social justice and equal rights for all and it is this mandate that they strove to ensure across their social media platforms.

In addition, the organisation strives to ensure that they support the communities they work with to determine their own choices, strategies and approaches of struggle. This is reflected in the powerful storytelling evidence on SPP’s Facebook page while their Twitter page has grown tremendously.

SPP’s processes encourage and establish a will within people to believe in themselves

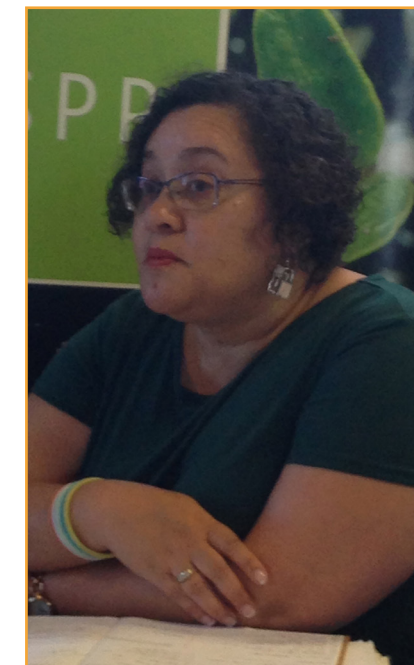
and their vision. The common vision is improved livelihoods for women and communities through systematic changes to the economic, political and social conditions experienced within institutions that represent their interests.

For Milford, this means a constant process of identifying opportunities to ensure that women are at the table ... and on the land.

“Some of the lessons that guide my leadership is to lead with integrity even if it means an unpopular stance, decision or position. That is all we have as leaders of organisations such as SPP,” said Milford.

“Shared leadership and recognising, developing and utilising the full potential of the team you work with, lead, and sometimes follow, is a powerful attribute. It is a critical element

of self-care. I have learnt not to underestimate the value and power of building authentic relationships – with communities, donors, alliances, the Board - and of course, staff and myself.”



Grantee Information

Surplus Peoples' Project (SPP) was formed in 1985 by researchers who documented forced removal during apartheid in an effort to address lack of land and housing for black people. The purpose of SPP is to build and support social movements in its struggles for food sovereignty and agrarian transformation. To achieve this, SPP facilitates pro-poor agrarian transformation and food sovereignty. It supports and promotes the implementation of agro-ecological practices as an alternative to the dominant forms of production. The organisation currently works in two provinces in South Africa (Northern and Western Cape). SPP's programs are targeted at small-scale farmers, farm workers & dwellers (women and youth in particular). It has 17 staff members and 7 members on its board of directors steering the affairs of the organisation.

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