

OPENING REMARKS BY DR JUDY DLAMINI

Wits Chancellor

5 October 2026

Programme Director,
Dean of the Faculty of Humanities Prof Musemwa, Head of
School Prof Sumaya, our co-host Prof Lebo Moletsane,
Colleagues, student leaders, staff and distinguished guests,
Good Afternoon.

Thanks for inviting me to this important event.

There are moments in the life of an institution when leadership is tested not by what it says, but by what it is prepared to do.

Gender-based violence and femicide is one of those tests.

Every university can adopt a policy, issue a statement condemning violence, host a campaign, display posters and declare its commitment to safety and dignity.

But the true test comes later.

It comes when someone walks into an office and says:

“I am afraid.”

when a student says: **“I have been harassed.”**

when an employee says: **“The person doing this to me has power over my career.”**

It comes when a survivor asks:

“If I report this, will this institution protect me?”

In that moment, the credibility of the entire institution is on trial.

And that is why today I want to speak about two things:

leadership accountability, and institutional duty.

Leadership cannot be delegated away

GBVF is not simply a matter for a transformation office, gender office nor merely a student affairs issue.

It is not only an HR matter, or something that can be passed from Security to Legal Services, from Legal Services to a committee, and from that committee to another office until responsibility becomes so fragmented that no one is accountable.

GBVF is a leadership issue. And leadership begins with ownership.

If a student or member of staff reports a credible threat, somebody must take responsibility.

If a complainant is being intimidated, somebody must act.

If an investigation is unreasonably delayed, somebody must explain why.

If policy timelines are ignored, somebody must account.

If senior people are implicated, the standards must not suddenly change.

Leadership means ensuring that the institution's machinery works not only when cases are easy, but especially when they are difficult.

Because institutional values are not measured in easy cases.

They are measured when applying the policy is uncomfortable.

The Constitution enters every lecture hall, residence and office

The Constitution does not stop at the university gate.

Every student who enters a lecture hall enters with constitutional rights.

Every employee who enters an office enters with constitutional rights.

Every person living in a university residence remains entitled to constitutional protection.

Section 9 protects equality, Section 10 protects dignity, And section 12 protects freedom and security of the person, including the right to be free from violence from public or private sources.

Those rights are not abstract.

They speak directly to what safety means in a university.

They speak to the student who is being stalked.

The employee who is being sexually harassed or bullied.

The postgraduate student who fears retaliation from a supervisor.

The junior employee afraid of challenging a senior manager.

The woman who has reported abuse and now fears what will happen because she spoke.

When those risks are brought to the attention of an institution, its response matters.

A university cannot promise that wrongdoing will never occur.

No institution can.

But a university can and must ensure that when harm is reported, its response is lawful, fair, humane, timely and consistent.

A policy is more than paper

Every GBVF and sexual harassment policy carries an institutional promise.

A promise that people can report, that they will be heard, that confidentiality will be respected, complaints will be handled properly, that survivors will receive support.

A promise that retaliation will not be tolerated. And above all, a promise that the rules will apply equally.

If those promises are not honoured, then the policy becomes little more than institutional decoration.

And we must be courageous enough to say this:

A policy that is ignored when someone needs it most is not protection.

A reporting mechanism that survivors do not trust is not an effective reporting mechanism.

A process that exists but takes so long that the complainant gives up is not justice.

A confidentiality rule that collapses when an influential person becomes involved is not confidentiality.

And an anti-retaliation commitment that is never enforced is not accountability.

The question is not only “is there a policy, Was there a process?”

Too often institutions defend themselves by saying:

“There was a process.”

But the existence of a process does not end the inquiry.

The question is, Was the process accessible, fair, timely, and effective?

Did senior management know when the system was failing?

Did anyone take responsibility?

Because bureaucracy can sometimes become a form of abandonment.

A survivor should not have to become an expert in the university's organisational chart simply to obtain protection.

Leadership means ensuring that behind every policy there is a functioning system — and behind that system there are accountable people.

Fairness does not mean paralysis

Retaliation reveals the true culture of an institution

Perhaps one of the greatest tests of a GBVF system is what happens after somebody reports.

Because sometimes the original incident is followed by another form of harm. The complainant becomes isolated.

Her work opportunities disappear. Her academic environment becomes hostile. Confidential information starts circulating.

She becomes known as “difficult.”

She is pressured to withdraw.

She fears that her career, qualification, contract or reputation will suffer.

This is why retaliation must be treated as a leadership issue.

The institution must ask:

“What happened to this person because they reported?”

Because if speaking up creates greater danger than remaining silent, then the institution has not created a safe reporting environment.

It has created a warning to everyone else.

Power must never determine whose rights matter

GBVF, bullying and sexual harassment often flourish where one person believes that their power will protect them from consequences.

That is why leadership must send an unmistakable message:

No title is greater than the policy nor people's constitutional rights and their dignity!

If the rules apply only to the powerless, then they are not rules.

They are instruments of power.

Protecting reputation means protecting people

The strongest institution is not the one that claims never to have a GBVF complaint.

It is the institution that can say:

When people report, we listen.

When they are at risk, we act.

When allegations arise, we investigate fairly, timeously with credible outcomes.

When people abuse power, we hold them accountable.

When our systems fail, we correct them.

And when our own policy requires something of us, we respond with speed and fairness.

That is institutional integrity.

So today I want to leave every leader in this room with five questions.

If I were a student experiencing GBVF today, **would I know where to go, do I even know about the policy that compels Post-School Education and Training institutions to create awareness of GBV policies, prevent incidents of GBV and address GBV when it occurs?**

If I reported, **would I trust the institution to take me seriously?**

Would I believe that speaking up would make me **safer rather than more vulnerable?**

Would I receive meaningful information, protection and support while the matter was being addressed?

And finally:

Would I still trust the process if the person I was reporting was powerful?

Those five questions are a leadership audit.

If the answer to any of them is uncertain, there is work to do.

Colleagues,

This is ultimately about what kind of university we choose to be.

Each one of us in this room is a leader. Here is my request to you:

Do not merely condemn GBVF. Confront it.

Do not merely adopt policies. Enforce them.

Do not merely create reporting structures. Make them worthy of trust.

Do not merely promise protection. Provide it.

Because in the end, leadership will not be judged by the policies we drafted.

It will be judged by what happened when someone needed those policies to work.

That is the test of leadership.

That is the test of accountability.

And that is the standard a constitutional university must meet.

I Thank you.

Dr Dlamini is a medical and academic doctor, business woman, author, and philanthropist. She serves as the Wits Chancellor and has lead numerous programmes at Wits aimed at advancing transformation. This includes the Female Academic Leaders Fellowship (FALF), which she founded in 2020.