

— MISS UNIVERSE —

ZOZIBINI TUNZI

*is a Voice in the Fight for
Gender Equality*

BY BRITTANY MAHER

More than just a beauty queen, Miss Universe, Zozibini Tunzi, is an empowered woman with an equally powerful voice. The 26-year-old has proven she's a voice to be reckoned with ever since millions around the world watched live as she was crowned Miss Universe on Dec. 8 in Atlanta after speaking with purpose on climate change, women's rights and diversity.

Hailing from the Eastern Cape town of Tsolo, South Africa, Tunzi stood out amongst the other contestants as she spoke with elegance and passion on pressing topics. Now, Tunzi's voice is amplified and she is using it on a worldwide platform to speak out against an area of women's rights she holds close to her heart: gender-based violence.

Before winning the competition, Tunzi was already actively campaigning against gender violence while simultaneously working toward obtaining her master's degree in public relations. At the Miss South Africa national competition, the one that took her to the Miss Universe stage, Tunzi first spoke out on the issue. "Through all the darkness that South African women face — emotional, physical, sexual, economic abuse — what reason do we have

to keep smiling?" Tunzi said. "We have absolutely no reason to keep smiling because South African women are dying every day... and, mostly, people are doing nothing about it."

Tunzi ended her message with a call to action to perpetrators to do better when it comes to the treatment of women. But she did not want to let her message die there on the national stage, so Tunzi decided to use her international platform to vehemently support women's rights.

As a part of her run for Miss Universe, Tunzi partnered with HeForShe, an organization run by the United Nations Women to encourage men to take a stand in the fight for gender equality. Her idea: ask men from her home country of South Africa to write supporting messages to women.

It was the words inside the influx of letters she received that inspired Tunzi's national costume at Miss Universe, one that had loud undertones of her message against gender violence. "I wanted to approach it in a way of love," Tunzi said in an interview with Insider. "I think if we start rewriting this narrative, teaching young boys to start looking at young girls as their equals at a young age, then maybe they will grow up to be the men that we need in society today."

During the preliminaries at Miss Universe, Tunzi confidently took the stage in her national costume. The costume, called "Wave of Love" was adorned with 2,000 of





It was her final word on women's representation that landed Tunzi the crown: "I grew up in a world where a woman who looks like me, with my kind of skin and my kind of hair, was never considered to be beautiful," Tunzi said. "I think that it is time that stops today. I want children to look at me and see my face, and I want them to see their faces reflected in mine."

Tunzi was in tears as 2018 Miss Universe, Catriona Gray of the Philippines placed the \$5 million crown upon her successor's head. Tunzi's gold and blue Biji Gibbs gown was sparkling under the stage lights, a look inspired by the South African sand and soil of her hometown's coastline at sunrise.

While her supporters in South Africa celebrated from a different time zone, Tunzi took her words to the world once again when asked about representing women's empowerment.

"It's said that we have about 180 years before women can catch up and be equal [to men] which is kind of ridiculous to think that I will not see equality between men and women in my time, so this is why this is so close to my heart because I do not see why women cannot catch up to men in 2019," Tunzi said. "Also, I don't see why women should remain victims of gender-based violence, especially under men who supposedly love them and are supposed to be taking care of them. So, that's what I am committing my time to, to make sure to bridge that gap between gender equality and gender-based violence."

Since winning the competition, Tunzi says she's realized that gender-based violence isn't just a major issue in her homeland of South Africa, but it's an issue across the globe. Women are fighting all over the world to feel safe, and Tunzi's goal in coming to a solution to this problem is to bring men into the equation. That starts with education.

"For me, I think educating the future generations is the best way to go," Tunzi said. "My thing always is if we fail now as adults, maybe we can do something to change the lives of future generations. So, I want to challenge men, to actually step up to teach their sons how to look at little girls and young girls as equals at a very young age so by the time they grow up, they grow up to be the men we need in the world."



the letters from men written to women, sewn into a skirt made of ribbons of all the colors of the South African flag. Her goal with the costume was to spread a message of love and support.

"For me, it was a way of saying, if you as a man can write this message to women, then maybe a young boy is looking at you doing this, then maybe you can teach him to be a better generation than we are today," Tunzi said. "That's where the inspiration came from."

Tunzi further explained she wanted to show people that gender-based violence is not solely a women's issue, but as a society, we must work together toward change. As she made her way through the Miss Universe competition, moving into the top 20, the top 10 and then into the top three, she was asked a series of questions. Her pearls of wisdom tied back to her stance on women's rights. When it came down to the end of the competition, the top three contestants responded to the question: "What is the most important thing we should teach young girls today?"

She responded that girls need to feel empowered to be leaders. "I think the most important thing we should be teaching young girls today is leadership," Tunzi said. "It's something that has been lacking in young girls and women for a very long time, not because we don't want to, but because of what society has labeled women to be. I think we are the most powerful beings in the world and that we should be given every opportunity and that is what we should be teaching these young girls, to take up space, nothing is as important as taking up space in society and cementing yourself."