

Safety in Sistahood

SYMPOSIUM REPORT

8–10 August 2024
South Campus, UFS



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*Inspiring excellence, transforming lives
through quality, impact, and care.*

VISION **130**
Renew and Reimagine
for 2034

UNIVERSITY OF THE
FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE
VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA
FREISTATA

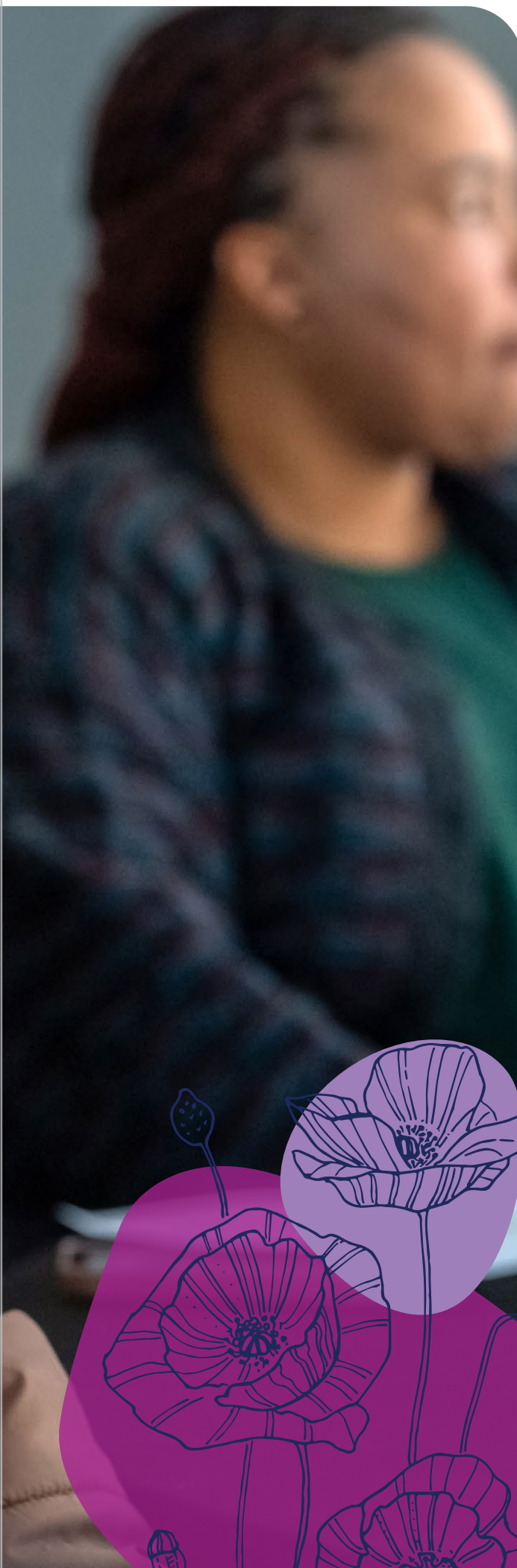


UFS
STUDENT AFFAIRS
STUDENTESAKE
DITABA TSA BAITHUTI
SOCIAL SUPPORT OFFICE



Table of **contents**

1. Introduction	3
2. Objectives of the Symposium	4
2.1 Awareness and Empowerment	4
2.2 Access to Support	4
3. Day 1: 8 August 2024 Gala Dinner	5
4. Day 2: 9 August 2024 Conference	6
4.1 Sexual and Reproductive Health	6
4.2 Women and Safety	6
4.3 Women and Finance	8
5. Day 3: 10 August 2024 Physical Well-being	9
6. Conclusion	10



1 Introduction

The Safety in Sistahood symposium was hosted over three consecutive days, from 8–10 August 2024. Its aim was to enhance female student well-being at the University of the Free States (UFS) and ensure increased safety and security for this community of students. The symposium aligns with the university's broader objectives of improving students' physical well-being, mental well-being and safety, as well as the Division of Student Affairs (DSA) Strategic Goal 2, as listed below:



Objective 2.1:

Students' Physical Well-being Increased



Objective 2.2:

Students' Mental Well-being Increased



Objective 2.3:

Students' Safety and Security Increased

The theme of the symposium was **Safety in Sisterhood: Creating Safe and Brave Spaces for Female Students**. As such, it aimed to foster a sense of community and address critical issues related to women's safety, health, financial literacy and career advancement at UFS. The programme emphasised the need for safe spaces where female students could openly discuss their challenges, share experiences and find practical solutions through engagement with experts. All UFS campuses were included in the symposium. The event was undertaken with collaboration with various internal and external stakeholders of the institution.

This report will be presented in three segments, each one detailing one of the three days of the programme.



2 Objectives of the Symposium

The programme set out to enable life-long learning, and the development of new realisations of self, in an environment that encourages transformative human encounters. The symposium aimed to address:

2.1 Awareness and Empowerment:

Increase awareness and knowledge of the importance of female reproductive health and safety.

2.2 Access to Support:

Provide attendees with access to professionals who can offer guidance, advice and support in case of pregnancy, crisis or abuse.

*Think like a queen.
A queen is not afraid to
fail. Failure is another
steppingstone to
greatness.*

OPRAH WINFREY

3

Day 1: 8 August 2024 Gala Dinner



The symposium was opened with an evening gala dinner. The intention was to allow participants of the symposium to network at the start of the programme. The dinner began with a welcome address by Head: Social Support (EDSA) Nothando Hlophe, who highlighted the importance of the gathering and welcomed everyone present. Following this, the Executive Director of Student Affairs (EDSA), Temba Hlasho shared a supportive message and also welcomed the female students to the Safety in Sista hood event.

The keynote address was delivered by Ntombi Nhlapo, a dynamic and trailblazing leader who serves as the youngest Member of the Mayoral Committee (MMC) in the Mangaung Metro Municipality. Entrusted with the critical portfolio of Human Settlements, she oversees the department with the biggest budget in the municipality, reflecting her expertise and the municipality's confidence in her leadership.

Her leadership journey began at UFS, where she served two terms as the Treasurer of the Student Representative Council (SRC), with her second

term returning unopposed. During her time on the SRC, Nhlapo played a pivotal role in fundraising initiatives such as Kopsie's Biggest Braai and the Right to Learn cycling tour, both aimed at assisting students with registration.

Currently pursuing a Master's degree in Urban and Regional Planning at UFS, she continues to deepen her knowledge and commitment to sustainable urban development. In addition to her municipal role, she is an Executive Member of the UFS Convocation and a Provincial Executive Member of the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), where she chairs the Human Settlement and Urban Agenda Working Group. Nhlapo's work is driven by a passion for creating inclusive and thriving communities, making her a key figure in the future of urban planning in the region.

In sharing her personal journey, she engaged with the female students, encouraging them to discover and pursue their purpose. The dinner concluded with a heartfelt note of thanks, expressing appreciation for the contributions of all speakers, performers and attendees.



Day 2: 9 August 2024 Conference



On 9 August 2024, the Safety in Sistahood symposium took place on South Campus, at Legae Residence. The symposium commenced with registration and an overview of the symposium’s purpose presented by Director: Student Affairs (Qwaqwa Campus), Zoleka Dotwana. The day featured a series of informative panel discussions, beginning with a focus on sexual and reproductive health, where social worker Neo Ravhuhali, and Makena Motlalepule, a professional nurse, midwife, lecturer and Assistant Manager for Women’s Health, shared insights on contraceptive methods, their pros and cons, and common myths. Below is the data received from students regarding the first panel.

4.1 Sexual and Reproductive Health

The responses received from students regarding this discussion reflected a focus on empowering women to make informed decisions about their health, fostering awareness about preventative measures, and promoting holistic well-being. Responses highlighted six themes, the frequency of which is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Within the prevention and protection theme, participants mentioned the importance of contraception and the value of learning about contraceptive methods and their proper usage to prevent unintended pregnancy, HIV and STIs. This theme was identified as the highlight of the session for a third of the participants.

Two other prominent themes, each mentioned by five participants, were “holistic health and self-care” and “self-awareness and body knowledge”. Within the “holistic health and self-care” theme respondents mentioned learning about prioritising their physical, mental and emotional well-being. Participants identified the need to take care of and protect themselves in all aspects of life. This theme also highlighted the intersection between self-care and health. In the “self-awareness and body knowledge” theme participants noted that they learnt about the importance of knowing and understanding one’s body to detect issues early on and to seek medical help when needed. They mentioned the importance of regular health check-ups and the significance of regular Pap smears for cervical cancer screening.

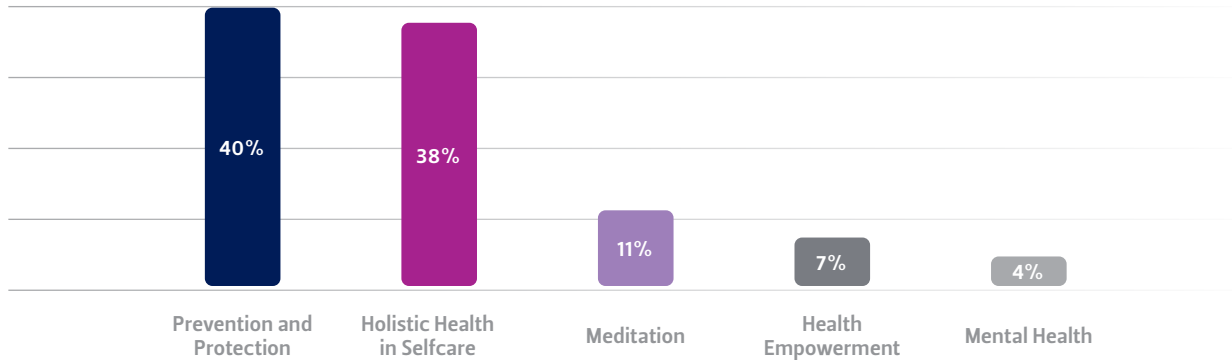


Figure 1: Key highlights from the women and health panel



The “health empowerment” theme mentioned advocating for gender equality in healthcare access and treatment and understanding the unique health challenges faced by women. Participants appreciated the creative use of demonstrations and games (for example, different coloured sweets) to bring valuable messages across.

4.2 Women and Safety

The second panel discussion addressed safety concerns, with SAPS personnel discussing gender-based violence awareness and consent education. Captain De Vos from the Provincial Victim Empowerment Office presented this segment. Below is the data from the student reflection on this segment of the programme.

The responses reflected the importance of awareness, reporting abuse, practical self-defence skills, and leveraging community support to empower women and ensure their safety in various situations. Responses highlighted nine themes. The frequency of themes with two or more responses is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

The most frequently reported theme (41%) was

self-defence. Participants mentioned learning about self-defence to handle emergencies, practical skills (such as using arms or kicks for protection) and understanding self-defence as a preventative (not aggressive) measure.

Taking measures to ensure personal safety and overall awareness was the second most frequently mentioned theme (22%). Strategies invented by the participants were to always be aware of their surroundings, avoid posting location details on social media, and informing trusted people of their whereabouts. This theme also included mentally preparing oneself to handle emergencies.

The third frequently mentioned theme was reporting abuse and violence (19%). Participants learnt about the importance of reporting all incidents of abuse and empowering women to leave toxic or abusive relationships.

Three participants mentioned self-care-related responses and two mentioned setting boundaries. One respondent mentioned the availability and importance of community support and one mentioned empowering oneself and others through action.

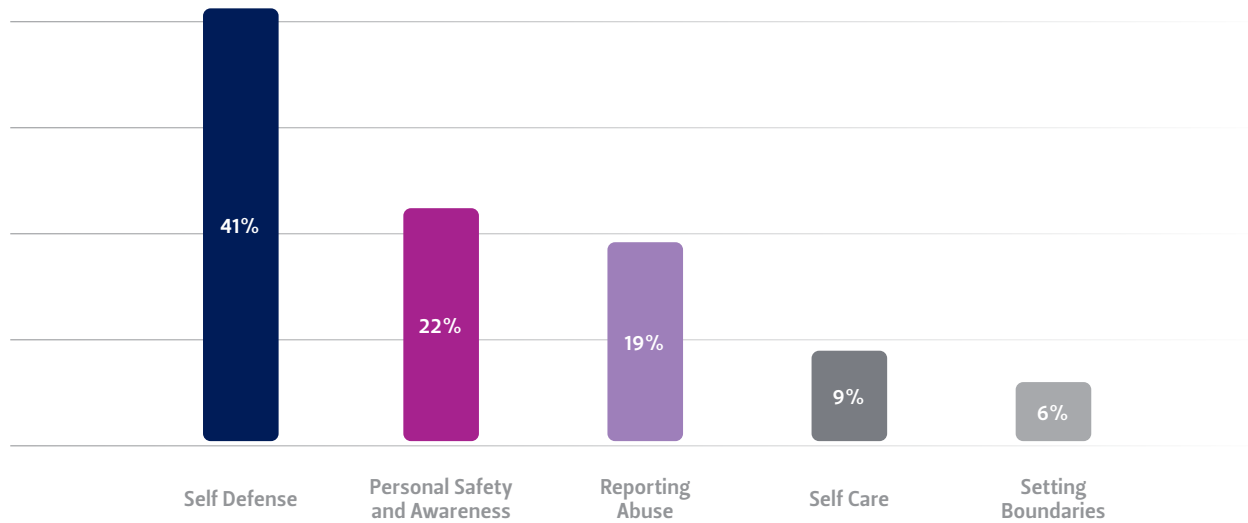


Figure 2: Key highlights from the women and safety panel

Do not live someone else's life and someone else's idea of what womanhood is. Womanhood is you.

VIOLA DAVIS

4.3 Women and Finance

After a lunch break, the next symposium section, led by representatives from Old Mutual, explored financial literacy for women. This segment was presented by Kamohelo Matselili. Below are the responses from students regarding the discussions of this topic.

Old Mutual was present to discuss the importance of saving as a student, as well as investing. Responses highlighted nine themes. The frequency of themes with five or more responses is illustrated in Figure 3 below.

The most frequently mentioned highlight from the panel was learning about budgeting (59%). Respondents mentioned that they learnt to budget effectively, learnt to stick to a plan, understood the importance of setting a budget and the necessity of not overspending.

The second most frequently mentioned highlight was learning about saving (38%). Participants mentioned that they learnt the importance of saving regularly, the need to develop the saving habit for future goals and the importance of saving for emergencies. They also noted that it is possible to save with discipline.

Learning about investing was a highlight for 19% of participants. They learnt the value of investing to grow wealth over time, the principle of compound interest and its role in financial success, and about the different kinds of investment options.

Financial planning was mentioned as a highlight by 19% of participants who noted the need for financial management to achieve independence, the importance of financial services and credit scores, and gaining knowledge about marital finance considerations.

The need to spend wisely was mentioned as the highlight by 16% of respondents. They learnt about avoiding reckless spendings to make informed decisions about financial priorities, and to strike a balance between spending and saving.

One or two respondents also mentioned financial literacy, the need for financial services, and the value of early financial education.

Following each discussion, interactive Q&A sessions allowed participants to voice their questions and concerns, fostering an engaging dialogue.

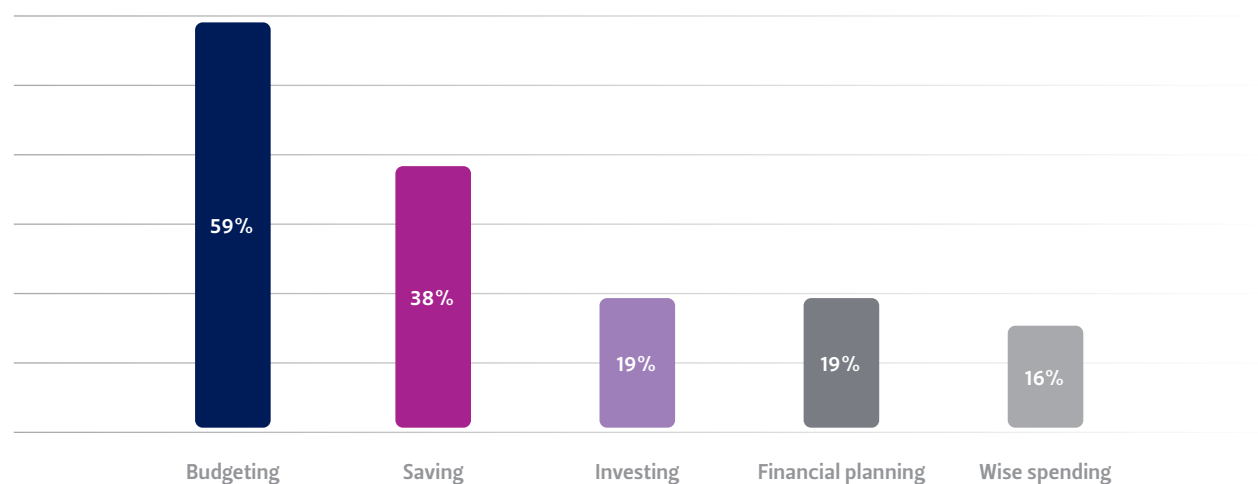


Figure 3: Key highlights from the financial literacy session



Day 3: 10 August 2024 Physical Well-being

The importance of physical health was emphasised through sports activities designed to encourage overall physical well-being. Kovies Sport led this session. The day began with a self-defence session led by Cherylee Hartzenberg and her team, followed by an aerobics session led by Nthabiseng Mokhali, a gym instructor from Virgin Active. A calming meditation practice led by Boipelo Malope concluded the session.

Students shared the following:

- “I discovered that aerobic exercise is not just about physical fitness, but also about mental endurance and resilience. I surprised myself with my ability to push through physical challenges and discovered a newfound respect for my body's capabilities. Observing others, I saw how a shared commitment to fitness can foster a sense of community and motivation. I learned the importance of making informed decisions about health and wellness. I discovered that I have a strong sense of self-discipline when it comes to making choices that align with my values and long-term goals. About others, I realised that there are diverse perspectives

on these topics, and everyone's journey is unique. I discovered the immense power of collective support and shared experiences among women. I realised that connecting with others on a deeper level can provide a sense of belonging and strength. About myself, I found that I value these connections more than I had previously recognised, and they play a critical role in my emotional well-being.”

- “One of the most interesting discoveries I made during those events was how important it is to be supportive and encouraging towards others. It showed me the power of teamwork and positivity.”
- “A powerful learning moment was when I recognised the depth of support and encouragement that comes from being part of a sisterhood. This realisation made me appreciate the value of strong female friendships and how they can uplift and empower us during challenging times.”
- “As a transgender woman I learned that sisterhood is not about who you are and is not about your gender.”



6

Conclusion

The Safety in Sistahood symposium was a transformative experience for all who attended. Students gained valuable knowledge about reproductive health, financial literacy, safety and the importance of fostering supportive communities. They left empowered with the tools and confidence to make informed decisions and navigate challenges in their academic and personal lives. The event's emphasis on creating safe spaces and fostering a sense of belonging resonated deeply, inspiring attendees to champion the values of sisterhood and mutual support. Moving forward, students are committed to applying the lessons learnt and advice shared, ensuring that the impact of this symposium extends far beyond its three-day duration. Together, they will work towards creating a safer, braver and more inclusive environment for all women at the University of the Free State.





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