

Meet Shamila Mpinga, a giant of her generation

 By [Shan Raddiffe](#)

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Shamila Mpinga is a young woman on a mission. And that mission is to use her multiple Masters degrees to the benefit of South Africa's economic, environmental and social development.



Shamila Mpinga, Candidate Attorney, Baker McKenzie, Johannesburg

Despite the financial challenges of her upbringing, Mpinga is a testament to what hard work, coupled with community faith and support can get you... starting with an LLB degree (summa cum laude) from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. In 2017, she was awarded the Mandela Rhodes Scholarship, which enabled her to pursue a Masters in Mining Law at the University of Cape Town. Two years later, Mpinga was off to Oxford University having won the Rhodes Scholarship, where she achieved not one, but two further Masters degrees - an MSc in Law and Finance and an MBA.

Before joining Baker McKenzie as a candidate attorney, Mpinga was working at Schmidt Futures, a philanthropic startup backed by a billion dollar commitment which brings together talented individuals to generate creative solutions to social problems globally.

As part of our Youth Month features, we chat to Mpinga about honouring past giants and building towards a better future.

Tell us a bit about yourself and why you decided to get into law?

Growing up in a low income household in KwaZulu-Natal, I was not exposed to white-collar professionals. In fact, I had worked part-time in retail from the age of 12. Thankfully, the adults in my life saw my potential and suggested that I consider law as a profession. I pursued law because I recognised its role as an agent for both oppression and for good. As a product of a supportive community, I knew that I wanted to be part of the good by contributing to South Africa's development by becoming a lawyer.

Being the first person in my family to get a degree, I knew I could not be last. Hence my decision to understand the higher education sector by pursuing three Masters degrees. As a graduate, I gained significant leadership training through my scholarship programmes and feel prepared to use the law to advance Africa's social, economic and environmental development.

■ ***What is the significance of Youth Day to you, as a young attorney?***

Youth Day is an annual reminder that we stand on the shoulders of giants. The generations before us sacrificed their lives for our freedom and we cannot take that lightly. We have a responsibility to protect the constitutional rights we've been afforded and to safeguard our democracy. As a budding attorney at Baker McKenzie, I feel a sense of pride when we work on transactions that bolster global investments into our economy. By contributing to the country's economic stability, we protect our democracy.

■ ***What do you feel is the most important right young people have today?***

The right to human dignity. During apartheid, the majority of South Africans were robbed of this basic right. It encompasses other rights, such as the right to equality, water and sanitation services, housing, healthcare and education.

■ ***What is one of the liberties you are grateful for today that weren't available to, or were hard-won by earlier generations?***

Access to education. I have fortunately been able to get an education through the support of my community. My education has literally expanded my worldview through opportunities to study in China, Kenya and the UK. Unfortunately, generations that preceded us did not have such opportunities and this remains true for many of my peers. Access to basic rights, such as education, should not be left to luck and the kindness of a few. We need to scale the access to quality basic rights and ensure that no one is left behind.

■ ***Older generations often comment that the youth today "have it easy", but it's not necessarily true. What are some of the challenges youth are currently experiencing that other generations possibly don't understand?***

We cannot deny the hardships endured by the generations before us. The youth today live in a democratic country, but continue to suffer the consequences of apartheid. Poverty persists and youth unemployment is currently at a staggering 46%. As the youth with access to resources, we must work towards leading South Africa to a place where it is globally competitive, socially, economically and environmentally; and all South Africans enjoys its success.

■ ***Share one piece of advice given to you by an elder...***

"To whom much is given, much is expected" - this reminder was given to me and other Rhodes scholars before leaving South Africa for Oxford. It is a reminder to not be a spectator in the face of injustice.

ABOUT SHAN RADCLIFFE

Shan Radcliffe is the editor of Bizcommunity HR, Education and Legal.

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