

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

Volume One - Number Six - August 2001

Gender inequalities in South African society

South Africa's national policy framework for women's empowerment and gender equality, which was drafted by the national Office on the Status of Women, was the focus of two hearings held in Durban last month. These gave participants from government and civil society the opportunity to discuss priority issues for national and provincial action plans, recommend structures and institutions for implementation and debate areas for cooperation between civil society and the Office on the Status of Women.

The policy framework outlines South Africa's vision about gender equality and what the country intends to do to realise this ideal. It establishes guidelines for South Africans to take action in remedying the historical legacy by defining new terms of reference for interactions in the private and public spheres, and by proposing and recommending an institutional framework that facilitates equal access to goods and services for women and men. It also proposes a process that moves away from treating gender issues as 'something at the end of the day business'. The framework states that in discussing development issues it is often presumed that gender issues can be addressed after the debate around 'hard-core issues'. The policy framework attempts to ensure that the process of achieving gender equality is at the very centre of the transformation process.

The central principles of the framework are developed from the ideal contained in the Constitution under the Bill of Rights, which promotes the rights of all citizens irrespective of race, gender, class or age.

The contents of the policy framework will be the primary focus of KwaZulu-Natal's Office on the Status of Women which is being established in the Department of the Premier of KwaZulu-Natal Lionel Mtshali, according to an announcement at the provincial hearing. However, concerns have already been expressed about the capacity of the office, which has a small staff, to make an impact.

This is largely because of the extent to which the inequalities are embedded in South African society. This is detailed in a chapter of the policy framework entitled situational analysis and problem statement, which aims to provide a global view of the critical issues that impact on South Africa's progression towards gender equality.

Legal framework

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In its attempt to reverse the history of women's discrimination and marginalisation, the government since 1994 has passed a number of laws developed to promote equality between women and men regardless of race, class, disability and sexual orientation. These laws protect the interests of women and men in the family, the criminal justice system, employment health, property, education and training, governance and institutional support and general equality.

The legislation includes the Domestic Violence Act, Witness Protection Act, Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act, Housing Act, South African Schools Act, Electoral Act and Film and Publication Act.

The new and enabling legislation must be activated to ensure that women feel the remedies inherent in these measures. In addition, there are still some gaps that need to be addressed. Examples include African customary law, which is still based on the 1927 law that disinherits women.

Women and poverty

The last decade has witnessed a marked increase in the number of poor across the world and South Africa is no exception. In determining poverty rates, the usual approach in South Africa is to consider the poorest 40% of households as 'poor'. Adopting this definition, poverty is found to be concentrated in rural areas, and among black people. Close to three-quarters (71%) of all rural households are poor. Over three in five (61%) of black households are poor, compared to 38% of coloured households, five percent of Indian and one percent of white.

A number of factors contribute towards the poverty of women in South Africa. The gendered division of labour in the household, the low value accorded to women's work with the concomitant clustering of women in low paid jobs contributes to female poverty. Past discriminatory civil and traditional laws that have denied women access to land, loans and property have also hindered women's ability to be self-sufficient.

Women and education

In 1999 17% of black women aged 20 years and younger received no formal education.

Facts and figures

- In 1999, 36% of household heads were reported to be female.
- In 1995 four percent of women headed rural households fell among the wealthiest fifth of households.
- Over 37% of rural women-headed households and 15% of urban women-headed households were among the poorest fifth of households.
- 35% of economically active black women were unemployed in October 1999 compared to 25% of black women.
- 49% of employed black women were working in 'elementary' or 'unskilled' occupations such as cleaning, garbage collecting and farm work, compared to 21% of black men.
- Figures for 1999 indicate that in non-urban areas, 30% of all households were having to fetch wood for cooking and heating purposes.
- 44% of those who fetch wood had to travel more than a kilometre to do so. It is usually the women who perform these tasks.

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Domestic responsibilities lead to school absenteeism for girls, especially in rural areas. Girls, more often than boys, are likely to be the victims of sexual harassment, rape and other forms of violence. The resulting trauma frequently leads to a drop in school attendance.

Although women were found to comprise 38% of the academic staff of higher education institutions, according to a survey of higher education institutions conducted by the Gender Equity Task Team, the proportion of women declined as the level or rank increased. Fifty one percent of the lecturers were female, but only eight percent are professors.

Women and health

The combined impact of the legacy of apartheid and gender discrimination has had negative consequences for the health status of women.

The major causes of female deaths in South Africa are high blood pressure, pregnancy-related complications, prolonged labour and obstetric haemorrhage, septic abortions, HIV/Aids related diseases, cancer of the cervix, tuberculosis, malaria and other opportunistic diseases.

The 1998 Demographic and Health Survey found that 58% of sexually active black women, 68% of coloured women, 80% of Indian women and 75% of white women were using modern contraceptive methods. These trends clearly reflect inherited apartheid inequalities.

One of the first health programmes that the government implemented after the 1994 elections was free health care for pregnant women, lactating women and children under age of six years at state clinics and hospitals. The shortage of health workers in some areas, the inadequacy health facilities and the lack of adequate transport for many rural women have, however, limited women's access to such provision.

Violence against women

There are few support structures for victims of rape. There is a lack of facilities at police stations and there is widespread discontent about the unsympathetic treatment women frequently receive from the police and justice system.

Women and welfare

Women as the primary care providers for children, orphans, the elderly and those who live with physical and mental disabilities are particularly dependent on social security grants. The bureaucratic red tape involved in accessing many of the grants has resulted in lower take-up rates for women compared to men, for both pensions and disability grants.

Women, land and agriculture

Women's land rights are still limited and insecure and lack of information about land rights further hinders women's ability to access land.

The ability of women to claim land entitlements are variable and depend, to a large extent, on social status and the goodwill of male partners and relatives.

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The power and dominance of traditional systems often deny women their rights to represent themselves in land claims.

Women and the environment

Water schemes have tended to favour houses that are easy to connect to water supplies. This has disadvantaged poor rural women who live far away from accessible water supplies.

Women and the economy

The statistics on gender in the economy paint a grim and very unequal picture, with very large differences between women and men, and between black and white women. Compared to men, women, and especially black women, have low access to paid employment. When they do find paid work, black women typically have lower incomes and less security than men. Most women are found in poorly paid domestic labour and micro-enterprises which do not enjoy job security and benefits.

In October 1999, 26% of black women between the ages of 15 and 65 were employed compared to 41% of all black men.

Employed women are concentrated in particular low-paying occupations. One-fifth (21%) of black women have clerical or sales jobs. Four percent are in professions while 11% are in the semi-professions. Women account for 25% of all managerial positions.

Women, power and decision-making

Women's access to political power and decision-making has improved since the 1994 general elections. Women now constitute eight out of 27 ministers and eight out of 13 deputy ministers in the national government, 30% of the members of parliament and 24% of members of the provincial legislatures.

Women and information communications technologies

Telecommunication is an infrastructure capable of providing timely information and data, and as such it plays a pivotal role not only in economic development but also as a catalyst in human and social development.

Communication technologies, in some instances, still contribute towards the negative or degrading portrayal of women. Poverty, lack of access to opportunities, illiteracy, language barriers and other factors prevent women from positively and optimally using information communication technologies as a development tool.

Women and human rights

South Africa has a constitution in which the Bill of Rights entrenches non-sexism and non-racism. It recognises primarily that human rights are inalienable and that they apply to all human beings. South Africans understand that the enjoyment of human rights is the most basic requirement and standard for the enjoyment of all human life. To this end South Africa has enacted legislation and ratified international and regional instruments aimed at the protection and promotion of women's

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