



**OUT OF POCKET** The block of toilets at Kgutliso Primary School that was built by Sarah Shezi in 2006. She claims she has not been paid for her work by the Free State government

PHOTO: TEBOGO LETSIE

Province allegedly has not paid **R1.3 million in debt** after completion of a project at a school

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**'I**s this how the new South Africa exercises the empowerment of women?" asks tearful builder Sarah Shezi, who lost everything she had while fighting a decade-long losing battle to get the Free State government to pay her.

The 61-year-old contractor is accusing the Free State public works and infrastructure department of defrauding her of about R1.3 million after it refused to pay her for a building project at Kgutliso Primary School in Clocolan.

Shezi said she had worked on the project from 2006 to 2007, during which she built toilets and classrooms. In December 2006, a month before the project was to be completed, the project management office allegedly asked her to build three extra toilet blocks and a walkway, which were not included in the initial project documents.

She said she demanded a variation order - an official document authorising additions to her original project - but was assured by a senior provincial official that the paperwork would be sorted out and that the payment would be honoured.

She built the additional structures - a decision she has regretted for 10 years and that has since bankrupted her.

Shezi told City Press: "First, I was told that the principal was already on holiday, so I refused to continue working and suggested that the project be halted until January 2007, when the principal's office reopened. However, I was urged by management to continue working despite the incomplete paperwork."

Shezi tried to approach the then head of the provincial public works and infrastructure department, Makhosini Msibi, to demand a variation order for the changes and additions to the project. However, Msibi, who is now the CEO of the Road Traffic Management Corporation, was on leave at the time.

She then approached Stover Maganedis, whose role at the time was to assist the head of department's office with reporting. He has since joined National Treasury. Maganedis allegedly advised her to continue with the



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# Free State 'bankrupts' builder

project, despite not having a variation order.

"Maganedis told me that government would pay me as soon as I was done with the project. He said government would not let me down," she said.

Shezi said she then continued working and managed to finish the entire project, including the additional toilets and walkway, by January 2007.

But instead of being paid, she was left with mounting debts to several supplier companies.

Maganedis denied any knowledge of making such an undertaking on behalf of the department, adding that he did not even remember Shezi.

"The complainant is not telling the truth... I didn't give her verbal instructions to do additional work, nor was I permitted to give or approve variations of work. I resigned from the department in August 2006 and I don't remember the complainant," he said.

City Press saw the classrooms and the toilet facilities that Shezi built, which are still in good condition and are being used daily by pupils.

Shezi said after months of failing to settle her bills, and with the provincial government not interested in talking to her about its outstanding balance, she was taken to court by SA Timber in 2008, after which she lost her business and assets, including a bakkie. In 2012,

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she was evicted from her house in Panorama in Bethlehem by Cooper Trust over unpaid debts to SA Timber.

Two years later, her husband died, which forced her to move in with her son in Bohlakong township.

"I have nothing. Seeing my house [auctioned off] just brought me sorrow and grief. All I do now is cry and wonder why this happened to me," she said.

After receiving Shezi's documents, Bandile Ntombela, the senior manager of information and communication technology at the Free State department of public works and infrastructure, told City Press that the department had begun scrutinising Shezi's paperwork and that a thorough appraisal would be carried out.

"We now have all the project documentation. We are perusing these for answers," Ntombela said.

"Most of the role players mentioned by Shezi have left our department, so we cannot answer on their behalf. The matter is being assessed. Please bear with us," he said.

Oupa Segalwe, spokesperson for Public Protector Busisiwe Mkhwebane, told City Press that, although the office was not aware of the case, the matter warranted a probe, which would be instituted.

"I have forwarded the matter to our intake division and brought it to the attention of the Public Protector. We will take it from here," he said.