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Vusi Gqomose Column

GBV perpetrators exploit initiatives and projects designed to empower women

In the heart of every promising women's development initiative in SA lies a paradox — a troubling surge in gender-based violence (GBV) perpetuated by harmful gender stereotypes.

Within the heart of rural and township communities, the empowerment of women is both a triumph and a challenge.

As women actively participate in public employment programmes like the community works programme (CWP) and the expanded public works programme (EPWP), contributing to the economic and social fabric of their households and communities, they also find themselves navigating a precarious terrain where newfound self reliance intersects with rising vulnerabilities.

The gender bias that puts focus on women, intended to redress historical imbalances, has inadvertently become a catalyst for GBV, casting a shadow over the very progress these programmes aim to achieve.

With the youth unemployment rate at 43.4%, SA's commitment to community development through CWP and EPWP is undeniably laudable, with the intent to uplift and empower marginalised populations, particularly women.

It supplements the existing livelihood strategies of participants and provides a basic level of income security through work. The 2021-22 annual report by the public works & infrastructure department revealed that 701,485 (69%) women participated in the EPWP projects which amounted to R1.2bn transferred to provinces and municipalities through the EPWP integrated grants to fund 1,491 projects that provide assets and services in the infrastructure, environment & culture and social sectors.

The report however is silent on social cohesion as it directly impacts on maintaining public order and promoting safety, especially of women and girls.

In comparison, the CWP which falls under the co-operative governance department has female participation that stands at 79% as recorded in their 2022-23 annual report, yet is also silent on social cohesion.

Violence against women is a societal issue that affects everyone, and it carries significant cost consequences borne collectively by society as a whole.

In 2013, KPMG estimated that in SA, violence against women costs up to 1.3% of our GDP — this has increased globally to about 2% of GDP (UN), and for 2023 would amount to R92.7bn.

This is more than the Eastern Cape's total fiscal envelope of R89.6bn in the 2023-24 financial year.

Erin Kenny from Spotlight Initiative (spotlightinitiative.org) also suggests that violence costs a woman over 30% of her earnings potential due to a combination of direct costs of gendered violence and lost work opportunities.

Tanzarn and Gutierrez's 2015 groundbreaking analysis of 43 employment-intensive investment programmes (EIIPs) across many countries over 18 years, illuminates the flip side of the coin — the unintended consequences of the very empowerment meant to uplift marginalised communities.

This is not a mere coincidence but a distinct interplay of societal dynamics that demands our immediate attention and action. For example, the living conditions in informal settlements and backyards lay bare the stark dichotomy between empowerment

and vulnerability. As women engage in public employment programmes, their homes become targets for crime and violation.

Men, often living in the same community, become the perpetrators of these crimes, preying on the vulnerability that comes with the prioritisation of women in these programmes.

Money and cellphones are snatched by force daily, leaving these women not only economically disempowered but emotionally scarred.

There must be a cultural shift within society that challenges patriarchal norms, toxic masculinity, and deeply ingrained attitudes that perpetuate violence against women.

The empowerment we seek must extend beyond the workplace to encompass the entirety of these women's lives.

The vision articulated in chapter 12 of the National Development Plan envisions a future where women can walk freely in the streets and children can play outside without apprehension. It recognises that safety is not just about combating crime but encompasses building inclusive communities that foster trust, respect, and equal opportunities for all.

Only through a united effort can we build this sort of society.

As Nelson Mandela once said, "safety and security don't just happen; they are the result of collective consensus and public investment".

It is time for SA to invest in the safety of its women and girls by combating gender-based violence with determination and resolve.

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