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KwaZulu-Natal women in the construction industry were given the opportunity to talk about the challenges they face at an engagement with the MEC of Public Works and Infrastructure Martin Meyer in Pietermaritzburg yesterday.

The women-only construction workshop was held by the department to commemorate women's month.

Some of the main concerns raised at the engagement were the construction "mafia", late payments and the poor treatment of subcontractors by contractors.

With regards to the construction mafia, Meyer said he would engage with anyone in the industry that comes to him with a white flag, but he will not speak to "those who come with weapons to disrupt sites".

The minister said: "I do not negotiate with criminals."

He explained that everyone in the industry must unite to root out these individuals and that will require engagement between communities, those in the industry and the department.

He said that this issue is a big one and that he plans on tackling it by getting other departments and the community involved.

"A lot of police officers have said to us that there are no crime statistics for the [operation of] construction mafia because people are not



FROM LEFT: KZN Public Works CFO Zanele Dlamini, MEC Martin Meyer and acting HOD Dr Vish Govender at the department's women in construction event held yesterday in Pietermaritzburg. **PHOTO: PRASHALAN GOVENDER**

reporting them," he said.

"We really want to sit down with all contractors and urge them to report individuals who come to construction sites with weapons or threatening messages to call SAPS or the task team that exists or go to the relevant police station and open a case.

"Only by all of us playing our role will the construction mafia come to an end," the MEC said.

Another big concern raised at the engagement is not being paid for the work that they complete.

One woman said that it's disheartening how contractors deliver what they were asked to do, but are not

paid for it.

"Our suppliers become frustrated with us and many of us go into overdraft trying to keep the projects afloat," she said.

Meyer acknowledged the anguish expressed by many over not being paid for services rendered.

He said that payments are "one of the biggest issues the department faces" and that he will be working with different departments to resolve the issue.

"Budgets are not given to us by the treasury, they are given to our client departments such as the Department of Basic Education or Health and we then employ contractors," he said.

"If their department does not pay us, we cannot pay you," he said.

Meyer said that it is simply not right for people to do work and not be compensated for their work when the construction is budgeted for.

"As a department, we have started discussions with the treasury and other departments to try and get the money for projects ring-fenced, so once the project is agreed on, that department cannot touch the money for anything else," said Meyer.

In addition, he said Premier Thami Ntuli is aware of the issue and has initiated a pay-on-time project that he is conducting directly from his office which requires members to report back to Cabinet regularly.

"It's not going to be an easy fix, but we are going to do everything in

our power to make the payment situation a lot smoother," he said.

When asked about the lack of payment to contractors and communication with regards to the issue, Meyer told *The Witness* that the department has, in the past, not communicated effectively with contractors.

"Our communication, over the last few years, has been lacking and I have listed it as a priority point so that it can be improved," he said.

Chairperson of South African Women in Construction (Sawic) KZN, Tholie Cibane, said this engagement opportunity was important for the industry and she felt her organisation's input in bringing their concerns to the MEC's attention was imperative.

Cibane said she hopes that the minister will "walk the talk" when it comes to providing aid to those in the industry.

She said there are many issues plaguing the construction industry and this included the mistreatment of those completing the work.

"There are so many cases where sub-contractors have been taken advantage of by the contractors as the scope of work they do is often not aligned with the compensation they receive," she said.

Cibane said it would be ideal if the department made payment to sub-contractors directly to avoid such incidents occurring.
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