

NEVA MAKGETLA: Second-class citizenship exposes women to violence

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The campaign to stop gender-based violence has centred on laws to penalise it. That's necessary, but not sufficient. The new legislation will remain mostly symbolic if we don't spend more time (and resources) on understanding and tackling the systemic underpinnings of gender inequality.

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In the economic context in particular, most women remain second-class citizens in terms of employment, income and assets. That leaves them vulnerable to family violence. The child support grant and old age pension have been critical in partially counteracting these realities by giving jobless women an income of their own.

Though more women than men have post-matric qualifications, their levels of employment, income and business ownership lag. That said, the persistent economic chasm between white and black women means any realistic understanding of women's conditions in SA has to differentiate by race.

According to the official 2019 Labour Market Dynamics survey, a seventh of both women and men older than 25 years studied past matric. For Africans, the figures were 13% for women and 10% for men; among whites, who still have privileged access to quality general education, the figures rose to more than 40% for women and men.

Nonetheless, women were systematically less likely to find employment than men with the same education. Only 47% of women were employed in 2019, compared to 61% of men. For people with matric or less, 42% of women and 57% of men had paid work. For those with postsecondary qualifications, the figures were 75% for women and 82% for men.

The differentials were particularly stark for formal employment. Only a third of women had found a formal job, compared to almost half of men. Women in the formal sector were more likely to end up in the big public services, mostly as educators or nurses, or as domestic workers. About 80% of domestic workers and almost 60% of public servants were women. In the private formal and informal sectors, however, women made up less than 40% of employees.

These realities meant employed women earned less than men. In 2019, the median income for formal African wage workers was R3,700 for women, compared to R4,300 for men. For whites, the figures were R13,000 for women and R15,000 for men. Domestic workers got median pay of R2,000 a month, while in the informal sector the figure was R1,800 for women and R2,900 for men. For Africans, the gender differential for people with a degree was 5%, but it rose to 25% for people without matric.

Women were also far less likely to have assets than men. Three-quarters of formal business owners are men. Only 10% are African women, while African and white men comprise 30% each.

Unequal access to economic opportunities leaves women disproportionately dependent on their families and on social grants. In 2019, more than half of all women were jobless. Of these, 75% relied in part on their families, while 35% also depended partially on child support grants. Only 4% had savings, and 14% an old-age or disability pension.

Only two out of five men were jobless. About 70% of them relied in part on family support, while 9% had savings and 15% a pension. Virtually none relied on a child support grant.

These economic realities underpin gender-based violence. As long as extraordinarily high joblessness combines with discriminatory hiring, pay and promotion systems to deny women economic independence, they cannot hope for equality in the home or on the street.

The child support grant and old age pension have helped level the playing field, enhancing self-reliance for women who cannot find paid employment. Any reforms to the social grant system should take these gender effects into account or they could counteract the benefits of the new laws.

More fundamentally, to end gender-based violence requires practical, adequately resourced policies to deal, on a mass scale, with the mechanisms that largely shut women out of economic opportunities.

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