

In respect of the rights of women

Daily News Tuesday August 10 2005

WE NEED to salute President Mbeki for fast tracking gender-related changes, especially in national and provincial parliaments. Such changes must be hard for those who cannot sever ties with a patriarchal society. In spite of the many radical changes in South Africa, women, are the main victims of abuse by their partners, landlords and other males.

When a terrified woman, Ms Gugulethu Mkize (not her real name), walked into the Civic Rights' office a few days ago, it was yet another case of an illegal lockout. She had already lodged a complaint with the Rental Housing Tribunal, but her case could not be heard urgently because the provincial Tribunals do not have the necessary rules to hear *ex parte* matters. She failed to get an attorney who was willing to make an application to court for a spoliation order: - the court ordering the landlord to restore her possession of her little cubicle she calls home because of his illegal action.

Illegal lockouts occur frequently and what it really translates into is a person or a family forced into the streets, their safety compromised, their world turned upside down. Ms Mkize, for example, was "punished" for paying her rental a few days late. She, like her fellow self-employed women, some eight thousand who live and work from their little cubicles, know, or soon come to know the reality of forced eviction.

These women have to share between themselves, some 60 to 200 hundred individuals, one or two toilets; work and live in appalling conditions, each occupying sections barely 4m² and pay a rental of about R500.00 month. Late payment includes exorbitant interest or immediate lockouts. Their meagre income has to cover rental and, any surplus, is sent to the families back home in rural areas. If luck has anything to do with these hard working, industrious, creative women, they may manage to visit their families once in a while.

Being locked out and put into the perilous streets would set Ms Mkize back by many more months before she can meet with her children and other family members. She will have to be the lucky one to escape from criminals, being mugged, raped or killed. We need to visit women in the inner cities to have a glimpse of their "workhouses"; to use a sugar coated description that masks the reality of abuse.

Our statistics is part of the global trend: of the 1.3 billion poor people in the world, 70 per cent are women, the majority of whom are illiterate with no access to basic amenities like safe drinking water (Cecilia Ng, 2000). Overcrowding affect women directly, the majority of whom are forced to live under such conditions.

According to Kothan (2003) about 600 million urban dwellers and over a billion rural persons live in overcrowded conditions, in poor quality houses without adequate water, sanitation, drainage or garbage collection. About 80 per cent of the world's 27 million refugees are women and children.

The stats go on and on and are mind-boggling. Despite all the progress globally, we are now increasing the privatisation of human rights. The 1997 Report of the gender-related development index (GDI) encapsulates the male dominated world: "no society treats its women as well as its men".

So, ten years into our democracy, women are the most marginalised, vulnerable persons. We need to honour women, respect them, recognise that they have rights and desist from the arrogance of "granting" women their rights. We need to increase the pace of redressing poverty and take off the kid gloves when dealing with men who abuse women.

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