

# Aggravating the Housing Crisis Demolition policy instead of regeneration

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THERE are many buildings in Durban, Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth and other South African cities that have fallen into abject state of disrepair.

Tenants are often subjected to living under squalid conditions, having to pay exorbitant rentals and always threatened with eviction when they complain. The scarcity of residential accommodation is critical, but cities seem to be demolishing dilapidated buildings rather than implementing a regeneration programme that would retain the housing stock and making it available to people in need.

Some families and individuals are shack dwellers (or informal dwellers, to put it euphemistically) for more than three decades in and around our cities and those who sleep on the “pavements” would appreciate giving meaning to the provisions of our Constitution.

In *Government of the RSA v Grootboom* 2001 (1) SA 46 (CC), the Constitutional Court in interpreting section 26(1) of the Constitution points out there is at the very least “a negative obligation placed upon the State and all other entities and persons to desist from preventing or impairing the right of access to adequate housing.” Durban like other major South African cities has warehouses and abandoned commercial properties that were converted for residential accommodation occupied by self-employed individuals and families.

These “sweatshops” (or workhouses”, to use another euphemism) provide cubicles divided by thin walls made of flimsy materials to allow for a multitude of “units” within a floor. Tenants are squeezed-in like sardines, with perhaps a single tap and at least one ablution (toilet) facility servicing about 300 people.

Women are the main occupiers in these buildings and another large number of self-employed women are “pavement” dwellers. This Saturday (August 9) is National Women’s day when we celebrate the power of women who demonstrated 52 years ago against the pass law and the racist residential Group Areas Act of 1950.

The Federation of South African Women, which was formed in 1954, was part of the Congress Alliance together with the Congress of Democrats (COD), the Coloured People’s Congress (CPC), and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) under the direction of the African National Congress (ANC).

The Alliance developed the Freedom Charter, which was later ratified in Kliptown in 1955. The ideals of the Charter resonate in our Constitution. Today, 14 years into our democracy, women are largely marginalised and yet to benefit from the aims and objectives of the Freedom Charter and the SA Constitution.

Women have to bear witness to their homes being demolished and their personal belongings destroyed by brute force. They are evicted with no alternative accommodation and without security of tenure.

According to a United Nation’s report, one billion people are homeless; women are in the majority. Every day about 50, 000 people, mainly women and children, die from poor shelter, polluted water and inadequate sanitation. Poverty is the main reason for homelessness and death.

## **What do we celebrate on August 9?**

Many achievements made possible by our nascent democracy and we should not undermine the great strides made by the government. However, examined holistically, the empowerment of women and recognition of their unconditional rights to human dignity, equality, shelter, economic activity and health care, among others, such achievements are minuscule.

We salute all women for their courage, perseverance, productiveness and for their dignity. We need to do more to ensure women get the same opportunities, incentives and respect as men.

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