

## **A Practical Agenda for Women's Day**

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In an era in which transformation and the empowerment of women have received unprecedented attention, Women's Day can often feel more like a concentration of conversations we have year round than a real opportunity to address change. That is something to be celebrated. In a society in which they still must content with disproportionate abuse, unfair treatment in the workplace, and a broader system of misogyny and discrimination, there needs to be ongoing debate that draws attention to the issues that matter most. From a worker's point of view, the task of creating a fairer workplace must involve the institutionalisation of checks and balances that protect women from unfair discrimination, and the extension of that away from the institution and into the individual mindset of fellow workers, men in particular. Perhaps the best way women can be celebrated this 9th of August is through a year-round commitment to constant awareness about the injustices that continue to be perpetrated and the small role all of us can play in stopping them.

And yet even as the narrative of gender empowerment has gained an ever more prominent role in South Africa and beyond, too often this narrative is left to exist on its own, without real policy interventions to tackle the most pressing issues facing women. Part of this is understandable. Grappling with an issue like structural inequality is very difficult, and well-meaning policy makers can often be at a loss as to where to start or how the tools available to government can make a real difference. But shifting this narrative, from one of broad discussions of empowerment to more technical discussions of what policy interventions could have the greatest impact, is essential to creating real change. This short piece will propose a basket of possible interventions that could promote great equality in both the workplace and broader society, and contribute to the empowerment of women.

### **Supporting Mothers**

The role of woman has expanded rapidly in recent years, and it would be wrong to equate the debate on support to female workers as being equal to a debate on support to mothers. But offering state assistance to mothers remains a vital issue, for a number of reasons. First, a very large number of South African women will have a child at some point in their lives, and many of them very early. From the age of 22 onwards, a majority of women in every age cohort has at least one child.<sup>1</sup> Second, having a child can be transformative to the lives of mothers - impacting on disposable income, careers, and access to education. Third and finally, supporting mothers means supporting children, and contributing to an environment in which the next generation of learners have solid home support structures that enable them to learn and thrive.

There are any number of ambitious programmes that already exist for mothers, and protecting the likes of the childcare grant is essential. But more can be done, such as the following three ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> StatsSA, Census 2011

First, a system of state-backed childcare centres should be considered. Childcare can be a serious strain on the family budget, and is unobtainable for the majority of mothers. Without access to childcare, many rely on either family support or, failing that, are forced to leave the job market to care for children. The promotion of state-supported child care can be transformative for the careers of these parents, helping promote the role of women in the workplace, and assure a more stable support structure for children in the long-run. But there are also substantial benefits on offer to both the community and the child. Trained childcare professionals can be important assets in the education of children, with recent research indicating that much of a child's cognitive development is determined in the first five years of a life. Building childcare centres that are safe, can provide for the needs of children, and offer stimulating educational environments could be transformative for a generation of children. Placing these centres where need is greatest (particularly in townships) would also create job opportunities for members of the local community. Particularly inspiring in this regard is the Home Based Community Based Care (HBCBC), which trains local women to work as caregivers in their community (with a focus on those living with HIV/AIDs), strengthening the community while offering income to local women and creating future training opportunities.

Second, would be to consider a system of variable payouts from the Unemployment Insurance Fund. The UIF is currently sitting on a surplus that is estimated to hit R175 billion by 2019, and looks to be structurally raising more money than is needed. Redistributing this money in creative ways could offer real benefits from a preexisting pool of government funds. One way to do this would be to recognise that mothers often have higher costs than other people, having to support themselves and their children. While some of this extra gap is covered by the childcare grant, at only R1500 this is not enough. Offering higher UIF payouts to mothers (and fathers caring for children) could offer additional support that is commensurate with the additional role mothers play in society.

Third, there is an urgent need to reconsider how the child care maintenance payment system works in South Africa. The country faces an epidemic of absent fathers, with 67% of fathers not being part of the household.<sup>2</sup> While a part of this number reflects fathers who are deceased or who live elsewhere, a substantial portion is believed to indicate fathers who are simply absent from the lives of their children. Having financial support from two parents has been consistently shown to offer any number of benefits to children, from better educational results to better health outcomes, and with so many mothers raising children without the support of fathers, it is vital that the state compels fathers to pay their fair share in the raising of their children. This is a difficult proposition in a country where so many are unemployed and unable to offer support, but a closer examination of how to compel those who can offer support is urgently needed

### **Stability for the Working Poor**

Many of the pressing issues that could empower women are cross-cutting, breaking across gender lines, and offering the potential to create real benefits for all working people in the country, and act as a point of solidarity in the advancement of gender equality. Core to these

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<sup>2</sup> StatsSA, General Household Survey 2016

issues are ensuring a level of stability in employment and earnings. Poverty often takes the form of cycles of good times and bad, with opportunities to earn a living being offset by long periods without work. This instability makes planning difficult, and limits the ability of people living in poverty to envision a way out. Two policy interventions may help.

First, would be to introduce a new system of public debt-protection. The credit act made significant strides in targeting predatory lenders that cripple the poorest with overwhelming debt burdens and garnishee orders that undermine livelihoods. Even still, debt and defaults remain high, with a monthly average of 48,581 cases of civil cases related to debt in the last year.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the central reason this number remains high is that people need debt. For many, it is the only option when faced with large lump-sum costs like education or a medical emergency, or when buying capital assets like furniture. In essence, each default locks the poor out of the safety net of a line of credit, which can be essential in investing in crucial social goods. Building a system of public debt insurance, subsidised by the state and paid for in part by lenders, would mean that in times of momentary crisis, where debts cannot be paid, the result is a couple more months that debtors can use to keep access to a vital source of security. Such a system would also create direct incentives for the state to play a more proactive role in protecting the most vulnerable from predatory lending, as the state themselves would be liable in such cases. This is particularly important for women, who are often at the frontline of bearing the costs for the likes of education and debt, and must too often face the brunt of these income crises.

Second, would be to continue progress on ending the informalisation of work. This is a problem that crosses gender lines, and in fact women are a little less likely to have informal work without benefits, but nevertheless many in sectors like retail can be greatly helped by more basic justice in the workplace. Having jobs that are predictable, protect against unfair dismissal, and avoid fallacious 'permanently-temporary' positions (while maintaining enough flexibility for employers) is essential to allowing for the type of stability of income that is most needed.

### **Support to Survivors of Gendered Violence**

Finally, policy efforts need to be developed that can help counter the scourge of gender-based violence. While the problem is clearly extremely critical, it is also among the most difficult to address. With a dysfunctional policing system, and with violence driven by a complex mix of societal factors, policymakers can easily be lost on a way to proceed. Given the limitations on what can be done in the short term, policymakers should focus on two core issues: support to survivors of gendered violence, and long-term interventions that give the state the capacity to face some of the more everyday forms of harassment.

Support to survivors of gendered violence needs to be broad-based - with urgent reforms needed to policing, hospital care, and changing community attitudes. Some of these reforms would have to be targeted, for example creating a special unit within the police to deal with gendered violence, rather than trying to reform the entirety of the police force (which is probably an impossible aim in the short-term). Perhaps the priority intervention should focus on the

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<sup>3</sup> StatsSA, Statistics of Civil Cases for Debt

expansion of the system of state-funded women's shelters, and the running of aggressive public awareness campaigns to assure survivors of gendered violence know where they can find safety, and understand the protections that the shelters offer. Having a safe place woman can go and be supported avoids some of the strongest barriers to women feeling they can seek help, which often involves concerns of losing support from the husband, or suffering a backlash from their immediate community. This latter reason is why the state needs to run these homes (or at least have a strong overseer role): privately-run organisations are often closely intertwined with the community, and this closeness can be a deterrent for women seeking help that is anonymous and non-judgemental. A working system of shelters can create the first step to deep interventions, by creating an institutional environment through which specialised police units can reach victims and work in a concentrated fashion to find and bring to justice the perpetrators.

While outright violence is the priority, the forms of everyday harassment women face plays an important role in creating an environment that facilitates that violence. And yet addressing constant harassment is extremely difficult, with policies like public information campaigns rarely proving successful in changing deeply imbedded cultural mores. Rather, the state should think long-term, and examine the types of interventions that can create checks and balances where there currently aren't any. The taxi industry is one good example. Women face near-constant harassment while taking taxis, and for most there is little choice but to suffer through it, with few obvious policy interventions (although improving policing at taxi ranks would help). Rather, the state should make a concentrated effort to introduce a system of controls, such as a state-backed single payment system for taxis. This would involve a card system similar to that used by buses, where you tap a card to pay taxi drivers. Such a system has a range of spill-on benefits - allowing taxi drivers and passengers to avoid carrying cash, creating better monitoring systems for how many taxi drivers operate in different areas, and so on - but it would also create a system whereby harassment experienced by a passenger in a given taxi, can be traced back to both a specific driver and a specific set of riders, enabling greater accountability. This type of system-thinking is rarely likely to be driven by women's issues alone, but demonstrates how imbedding women's issues throughout policy making can help combat issues like harassment.

## **Conclusion**

This Women's Day 2017, we need to raise the standard for what counts as progressive action by our leaders. Saying the right things is not enough, real action is required. Politicians that are committed to building an accountable and creative state, and who put their weight behind the type of initiatives detailed here, are the ones truly honouring South African women.