



Women's Month in South Africa

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On 9 August 1956, women of different races, from all over South Africa, united together in protest against the “pass laws” under the Apartheid regime. The “pass law” was a system implemented during Apartheid which forced people of colour to carry identity documents in the form of a 'reference book', when they ventured outside of what became known as the “homelands”. These pass books contained details of their employment history and rights of residence. On that day, a written petition against the law was handed to the South African Government, and post-1994, 9 August has been marked as a public holiday to commemorate this event, and the courageous steps taken by women across the country. As an extension to “Woman's Day” on August 9, South Africa now also celebrates “Women's Month”, during August.

Primarily inspired by these events in August, over half a century ago, the South African Government formed the “Progressive Women's Movement”. Through this movement, South African women are acknowledged as far more than just a homogeneous group, and bring together many different groups in support of the development of women. These groups include, but are not limited to researchers, faith-based women's groups and feminist groups. The overall aim of the movement is to realise gender equality and fight against any form of gender discrimination.

This year's “Women's Month” was one full of events organised by the Government. These events stretched throughout the country, running from province to province, and across all sectors of society. The plan of action for the 51st year of the celebration of South African women was termed, “Emancipation, Empowerment, Equality and Eradication of Poverty...NOW”. Although an assortment of activities were implemented throughout the country, similar issues were brought under the spotlight. Issues such as violence against women, economic empowerment for women, men as partners, the development of young women, and the experiences of rural women, just to name a few.

HIV & AIDS is another huge and very multi-faceted issue, which formed the focus of many meetings held this month throughout the country. Amongst these facets related to HIV & AIDS, few impact more on the women of South Africa than the ‘Incidence and Impact of Gender-based Violence’, which was a major discussion point during many of this month's events. Subsequently, strategies to reduce violence in relation to HIV & AIDS have been drawn. Post-rape care and HIV post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) in rural areas was another important issue that was raised. Rural women are often in the margins with regards to accessing services, due to poor infrastructure or other economical reasons. Therefore to have a programme that specifically targets the issues of prevention of HIV transmission, following rape, is another huge step.

Another important issue, addressed by the reproductive health services, is targeting men to become more involved in maternal health care. This was motivated by a study that sought to investigate the impact of involving male partners in women's antenatal and postnatal care. Men are often decision makers, with regards to financial matters in the household, and the number of children a woman should bare, for example. Men therefore often play a huge role in maternal health, but have very rarely been incorporated as role-players into the maternal health care system. Progressively, more and more men's groups have developed over the years, and have

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become more in tune with the promotion of gender equality. This is largely due to the fact that men have now been recognised as important role players in the path towards gender equality. This effort will assist in elevating the many discriminatory practices of gender and maternal health. There currently exists a slow paradigm shift within the realm of gender equality, moving away from a sole focus on women, towards the incorporation and involvement of men, which will bring a more balanced and truly equal view of both genders.

The development of young women is another poignant issue, and some workshops this month involved the engaging of women in business dialogues. This is particularly important, as entrepreneurship is fast becoming the buzz of the country. This will certainly play a critical role in the further development of women within South Africa, and of the South African community. It is also important, especially in terms of future empowerment, for women to take part in discussions focused on law, and human rights. This month there were also a number of workshops which focused on teaching women about customary marriage, child maintenance and divorce.

South Africa's First Lady, Zanele Mbeki, wife of President Thabo Mbeki, also played her role in this month's celebration of South African women, with the initiative titled "Women in Dialogue", which was developed in support of the Presidents "African Renaissance" ideology. Meetings were held across the country, with the aim of providing women from different sectors of society a platform from which to express their views and concerns. Many discussions were also held within different departments of the Government, intending to bring to light the ways in which the Government processes affect women. These types of discussions are incredibly valuable in attempts to clear out the issues that women face on the grassroots level. These dialogues are to be further developed into a report, which will enable the Government to more effectively meet the needs of the women of South Africa.

On a lighter, yet still very significant note, female performers and musicians took part in a jazz festival, held in Johannesburg. Women from a wide array of performing arts took to the stage, showcasing their talents, and showing the country why it is so important to fight for the rights of women. The late critic, Nat Hentoff was reported to have said that, "Years ago there used to be grudging compliments to women jazz musicians: 'you play like a man!'". This concert has hopefully recognised women jazz musicians as being in a league of their own, with no need to compare them to their male counterparts. In addition to the demonstration of South African women's musical talents, a photograph exhibition was also held in Johannesburg, exhibiting some of South Africa's most talented female photographers. The exhibition was titled "Face Her", and runs through to September 6. The photographs contain images, which attempt to portray the true meaning of gender, evoking a diverse interpretation of the choices woman make.

One can only hope that the true portrayal of the importance of gender issues, through activities and discussions such as the ones that have taken place this month, will bring about a positive and progressive movement, not only for women, but for all humanity.



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