

Carrying the flame

Bridging the past and present in 30 years of democracy and the women's rights movement. By Bongwiwe Ndondo, Chief Executive Officer



As we reflect on 30 years of democracy in South Africa, it is imperative to acknowledge the invaluable role women have played in shaping our nation's history. From the courageous women of 1956 who stood united against the oppressive forces of apartheid to today's dynamic leaders driving progress in the digital era, women have continuously demonstrated strength, resilience and a deep commitment to justice and freedom.

August 9th 1956 remains a powerful reminder of South African women's determination and courage. On that day, more than 20,000 women of all races marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, protesting apartheid's pass laws and declaring, *Wathint' Abafazi Wathint' Imbokodo – You Strike a Woman, You Strike a Rock*. Their bravery ignited a flame for freedom that continues to burn today, inspiring the fight for equality and justice.

In the years following the 1994 democratic transition, significant progress has been made. Policies supporting gender equality have enabled women to rise in leadership across various sectors – from parliament

to corporate boardrooms, women have claimed their rightful place. The digital age has further amplified their influence, with social media empowering millions of women to advocate for gender-based violence prevention, reproductive rights and pay equity.

However, as we celebrate these strides, it is crucial to confront the ongoing challenges that threaten the advancement of women, particularly in areas such as economic empowerment, reproductive health and access to basic services. Hlanganisa conducted research on the status of women 30 years into democracy, revealing a complex reality of progress alongside persistent challenges. While South Africa's legislative reforms have earned global praise, gaps in implementation remain, particularly in addressing the economic and social vulnerabilities that many women continue to face.

South Africa's Constitution protects the rights of women to access safe and effective reproductive health services. Despite this, significant barriers persist, particularly in rural areas where access to contraception

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and abortion services is limited. Geographic disparities often mean that many women, particularly in rural provinces, cannot easily obtain safe, legal abortions. Stigma surrounding sexual health and abortion further exacerbates the issue, deterring young women from accessing essential care.

Compounding these challenges is the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS among South African women, especially those aged 15 to 49. Women often face unequal power dynamics, limiting their ability to negotiate safer sex practices and increasing their risk of contracting HIV. The pandemic has placed an additional burden on women as caregivers, with many shouldering the emotional and physical labour of caring for sick family members, a reality made worse by gender inequality in health access.

South African women, particularly in rural communities, continue to experience disproportionate levels of poverty. While significant strides have been made, with more women now participating in the formal economy, women remain overrepresented in low-paying jobs, including domestic work, which often lacks labour protections like pensions or paid leave. A staggering 12% of working women in the country are employed as domestic workers, highlighting the need for greater policy clarity and the enforcement of economic empowerment programmes.

Economic participation remains a critical issue, as evidenced by a gendered division in employment. Despite women making notable gains in entrepreneurship – owning a significant percentage of informal businesses – women still face systemic barriers to accessing financial resources, land and formal employment opportunities.

As we move forward, it is essential to ensure that the gains made are not undone and that all women, regardless of their socioeconomic status, have

access to the resources and opportunities they deserve. This can be achieved through corporate social investment (CSI) funding which can significantly improve the fortunes of women by prioritising their inclusion in project initiatives and allocating substantial resources in CSI budgets to empower them. By directing funds towards education, entrepreneurial development and healthcare initiatives tailored specifically for women, CSI can foster economic independence and improve social outcomes.



For more information on how we can help you maximise your CSI initiatives, contact us today at info@hlanganisa.org.za or call us on +27 (0)11 726 1090.



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