

Gender, HIV, development

AND THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Genuine liberation in our country will not have been achieved “unless we see in visible and practical terms that the condition of women has radically changed for the better and that they have been empowered to intervene in all spheres of life as equals with any member of our society”. Nelson Mandela’s Inaugural Address, 1994

Inequality between the sexes is slowing down transformation in South Africa. This inequality is compounded by the fact that women disproportionately bear the brunt of the devastating impact which HIV has on communities and families. The HIV and AIDS epidemic continues to hit the most productive part of the population the hardest. The result is that it also impacts negatively on local government service delivery, in that municipalities have to meet the increasing demand for social services.

That is why addressing gender issues, promoting gender equality and preventing and mitigating the impact of HIV are developmental concerns that must be tackled by local government. It is a well-established fact that HIV and gender issues are interlinked and any progress towards gender equality will contribute to combating HIV.

This article seeks to explore first what gender is, and then how gender, HIV and poverty are interlinked. In doing so, we look at the role of local government in addressing gender issues and the tools that have been developed to guide municipalities in fulfilling this role.

What is gender?

‘Gender’ describes *the socially constructed differences between men and women in particular societies and at particular times. It refers to the roles, rights, responsibilities, obligations and behaviours attributed to women and men.* These are conditioned by a variety of political, economic, ideological and cultural factors.

If gender relations are characterised in most societies by unequal power relations, it is important to note that these relations are a learned dynamic that can be changed.

But women are not all the same, and do not all find themselves in the same circumstances. Factors such as class, age, race and geographical location may strengthen gender inequalities, with the result that some women are in more disadvantaged positions than others.

- **Gender issues are not only women issues, but development issues that affect the whole population.**

Gender issues ... manifest themselves in terms of different and unequal access to and control of resources and power between men and women. As such, they can entrench poverty among specific segments of the municipal population (i.e. single headed households, children, etc), which in turn affects the overall level of poverty and/or development at the local level (Integrated Development Planning Guide Pack).

- **Working on gender issues is working on development.**

Similarly, because women are more represented in the disadvantaged categories of the population, and because

women have an active role in the well-being of the entire family, measures that answer women's needs and promote women's rights contribute to the development of the whole population. It has been proven that countries with higher levels of gender parity tend to be near the top of the Human Development Index, while the ones that have not addressed gender inequalities have been unable to climb the developmental ladder.

- **Gender and HIV issues are interlinked.**

The Gender Policy Framework for Local Government mentions HIV as a critical gender issue. The Framework for an Integrated Local Government Response to HIV and AIDS in turn recommends that municipalities pursue “effective interventions ... to address gender inequity and inequality beyond prioritising access to development interventions for women” as a key performance area.

Statistics show that the gender imbalance is striking amongst the youth: in 2006, more than four times as many young women between the ages of 15 and 24 were infected (16.9%) as men in that age group (3.7%) (HIV and AIDS and STI Strategic Plan for South Africa, 2007–2011).

This is due to several factors. Firstly, women are physiologically more prone to contracting HIV. Secondly, gender inequalities further exacerbate their risk of HIV infection, since the imbalance in power in society translates into an unequal balance of power in sexual interaction. Sociocultural and economic forces come into play in determining this uneven distribution of power and in increasing women's vulnerability to infection and its impact on them.

The socio-cultural norms defining the way a woman and a man are expected to behave as a couple influence their vulnerability: for example, women are expected to be more 'naïve' and less proactive than men about sex, and that hinders their ability to be informed about risk reduction or negotiate safe sex. Multiple partnerships are more valued for men, and even encouraged by polygamy, while they are not for women.

The most extreme form of male domination over women is seen in violence against women, which contributes directly or indirectly to women's vulnerability to HIV: fear of violence can dissuade a woman from discussing fidelity or safe sex with her partner, and it may deter pregnant woman from testing for HIV or disclosing their status to their partner.

Youth show a special vulnerability to the epidemic, partly due to the gender differences in socialising young people. For example, research has proven that gender norms which are meant to protect young girls, such as virginity, can instead increase the vulnerability of young women by preventing them from seeking information on reproductive health.

The stigma and discrimination associated with HIV and AIDS reinforce prejudice, discrimination and inequalities related to gender. They may make women infected by the disease even more reluctant to contact health services. Furthermore, women frequently suffer dispossession of their goods by in-laws in the event of their spouse's death.

Feminisation of poverty and the link with HIV and AIDS

While both women and men experience poverty, women tend to be in the majority.



disproportionately vulnerable to physical violence and emotional abuse.

- Because of their larger workload, women who live in poverty have less time to access services.

In addition, because of their subordinate position, women face greater difficulties than men in surviving and overcoming poverty.

- When a family is affected by HIV and AIDS, this brings additional caring work, which deepens the family's poverty and can cause girls to drop out of school to help their mothers at home.
- Women often care for orphans.
- They might also be silent about their own health and seek care at a later stage.
- Their economic vulnerability exposes them to more serious consequences when excluded or criticised by their communities.

- The rate of poverty among women-headed households is double that in male-headed households.
- Women continue to earn less than men and are often found in the lowest-paid positions, including in the informal sector, where they suffer difficult working conditions.
- The unemployment rate is higher for women than for men.
- Women's contribution to the well-being of society is different from that of men. They are usually responsible for meeting the basic needs of the family: domestic tasks (cooking, housekeeping), bearing and raising children, and seeking health care for the family. This type of 'reproductive work' is very time-consuming, undervalued and unpaid, as opposed to 'productive work', which is paid for and valued in society. Women's responsibility as caregivers for children and other family members means that their experience of poverty is different from that of men, and when the reproductive work is too time-consuming for them to engage in productive work, they are in a position of economic dependency.

Poverty and economic dependency increase women's vulnerability to HIV.

- Through transactional sex, women can decide to exchange sexual favours for economic support; they are then not in a position to negotiate safe sex.
- Economic powerlessness makes women

Local government's role in tackling gender issues

Local government is best placed to tackle poverty- and gender-related issues, as it is the sphere of government closest to the people and the one that impacts the most on women's lives. Because of their different roles and responsibilities, needs and priorities, women and men are affected differently by policies and development interventions.

Local government is an important sphere of government for women and gender equity, as it has the potential to transform women's lives through the provision of services, such as water, sanitation, clinics, child care facilities, roads and transport (Gender Policy Framework for Local Government, page 12).

It is important to bear in mind that these services are essential for the execution of women's tasks: they can assist women in performing the tasks or relieve them of the responsibility.

These services have to be made accessible to women, and women have to participate in designing policies about them.

The informal sector, where women are in the majority, presents local government with opportunities to create jobs and livelihoods, through local economic development initiatives.

On the other hand, limited or no access to services exposes women to longer working hours (carrying out tasks such as fetching water). This allows them less time for income-generating activities and participation in community development. It also limits their availability to enter empowerment programmes.

Because the health and education of mothers play an important role in the health and education of children, women's lack of access to social services often impacts negatively on the next generation's chances of escaping the poverty trap.

Similarly, the absence of basic services is linked to women's safety. The lack of water, electricity, street lights and roads makes women vulnerable to rape and physical violence, which increase their risk of contracting HIV.

Gender strategies, guidelines and tools for local government

- The goal of government is gender equality and equity. Men and women are equal before the law, so men and women must have equal understanding of, access to and control over social, political and economic resources.
- Gender mainstreaming has been adopted as a strategy to achieve this goal. In practice, mainstreaming gender means "taking account of gender equality concerns in all policy, programme, administrative and financial activities, and in organisational procedures, thereby contributing to a profound organisational transformation" (United Nations Development Programme).
- The Gender Policy Framework for Local Government launched in August 2007 aims to guide local government in mainstreaming gender. It specifies the roles of the Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG), the provincial departments of local government, SALGA, traditional leaders and municipalities. It explains why gender should be mainstreamed, particularly in municipalities' integrated development plans (IDPs) and project cycles. It also explains, in a very practical way, how to integrate gender in the key focus areas of the five-year Local Government Strategic Agenda by identifying critical issues and related indicators for each area. These areas are: municipal transformation and organisational development; basic service delivery; local economic development; municipal financial viability and management; and good governance and public participation. The framework also addresses two specific issues affecting women: gender-based violence and HIV and AIDS. It then specifies who should be responsible for driving the gender mainstreaming process, and it proposes a monitoring and evaluation system and an implementation plan.

- A South Africa Local Government Gender Action Plan Manual was developed in November 2007 by the DPLG, SALGA and the NGO Gender Links. As a complement to the framework, it seeks to build the gender analysis skills of councillors and staff, including those relating to gender and governance, and to assist municipalities and gender practitioners in developing gender action plans, based on the Gender Policy Framework for Local Government.

Following the development of the manual, workshops were held from April to July 2008. The three-day workshops, held in all the provinces, involved 309 people representing 55% of the country's municipalities. Nine provincial draft gender action plans were developed, to be adapted to the circumstances of each municipality with the support of SALGA provincial officers.

- A Municipal Toolkit on the 16 Days of Activism for No Violence Against Women and Children Campaign has been developed to guide municipalities in how to actively participate in the eradication of violence against women and children. It outlines practical ways of implementing the campaign, which runs from 25 November to 10 December every year.

Included in the tools at the disposal of municipalities are the white ribbon, a symbol of support for the campaign which municipalities can distribute to their employees; the logo "Act against abuse," to be used in publicity about the campaign; and information on the website www.womensnet.org.za/campaign/16-days-activism-against-gender-violence which features a national calendar of events for the campaign and links to helping institutions. Municipalities can also use this website to advertise programmes on gender-based violence running in their area. Programmes have been added to the campaign to help reach the marginalised communities of rural areas, such as the Farm Workers Awareness Programme. Cyberdialogues are also organised to enable citizens around the country to discuss the issues, and municipalities can play a critical role in mobilising them to participate. Finally, the campaign raises funds that are channelled to civil society organisations working on gender violence. Municipalities are encouraged to use ward committees to disseminate information on gender-based violence and to enlist community development workers in efforts to

mobilise communities.

- The SALGA Annual Women in Local Government Summit is yet another opportunity for municipalities to share experiences on gender initiatives.

The HIV epidemic weakens local economies and exacerbates poverty. It has a particularly detrimental effect on the usual coping mechanisms employed by poor women, in that, for example, it places additional caring burdens on them. These additional burdens lessen their chances of escaping the poverty trap. Gender initiatives at local government level not only have the potential to advance development and contribute to

reaching equality, but can also help prevent and mitigate the impact of HIV and AIDS.



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