

## COMMENT



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## SA should give a voice to HIV-positive teenage mothers

AS SOUTH Africans commemorated Women's Day and Women's Month to celebrate women and their important role in society, many young women, including teenage girls, continue to experience hardship and adversity.

Often, they are exposed to sexual abuse and exploitation. This often results in many teenage girls being stuck with an unwanted pregnancy and contracting HIV. South Africa has the highest rate of HIV infections in the world, with approximately 200 000 new infections per week.

Most of these infections are among young women, including teenage girls. This highlights their vulnerability in a male-dominated society.

Teenage mothers, especially those in rural areas, are in desperate need of support and empowerment as several of them are HIV-positive. Because of this, they have special needs, which include education about their and their babies' health-care necessities, and help to finish high school.

These mothers usually stay in dire circumstances with limited medical care and insufficient support.

Despite South Africa's progressive Constitution emphasising the right of all people to have access to housing, health care, food and water, HIV-positive teenage mothers in rural areas often do not have sufficient access to basic necessities such as potable water.

Furthermore, due to their HIV-positive status, they are unable to breast-feed their babies, thus burdened with the additional need for baby formula to keep their babies healthy.

Since their basic needs are not being met, teenage girls in poor communities often turn to older men for support. We see this imbalance in unequal relationships, commonly referred to as "blesser-blessee" relationships, in which girls are abused. In these relationships, sex is being offered in exchange for material well-being. Unfortunately, this leads to unwanted pregnancies and HIV as the men often do not reveal their HIV status.

Blesser-blessee relationships are thus one of the reasons why 80% of teenage mothers in rural areas fall pregnant, because of sexual abuse and poverty as they try to fulfil their needs.

HIV-positive teenage mothers' vulnerability is exacerbated as the blesser usually takes no responsibility. They are burdened with a lack of support, no money, almost no prospect of returning to school, the stigma of having HIV and the battle of being only children themselves.

This leaves them helpless and reliant on social work services and the childcare grant of only R460 a month, which is insufficient to meet even basic needs for them and their babies.

There may be several programmes aimed at preventing teenage pregnancy, but the effectiveness of these programmes is questionable as the rates of teenage pregnancies and HIV infections continue to rise.

Despite policies in schools to address teenage pregnancies and to look after teenage mothers, not enough is being done to help them, more so if they are HIV positive.

They can clearly benefit from prevention and support programmes that empower them to be self-reliant and keep them away from exploitative blesser-blessee relationships.

These programmes should also target men in a bid to create a sense of mindfulness which denotes accountability, as teenage pregnancy and HIV are not the sole problem of women and girls.

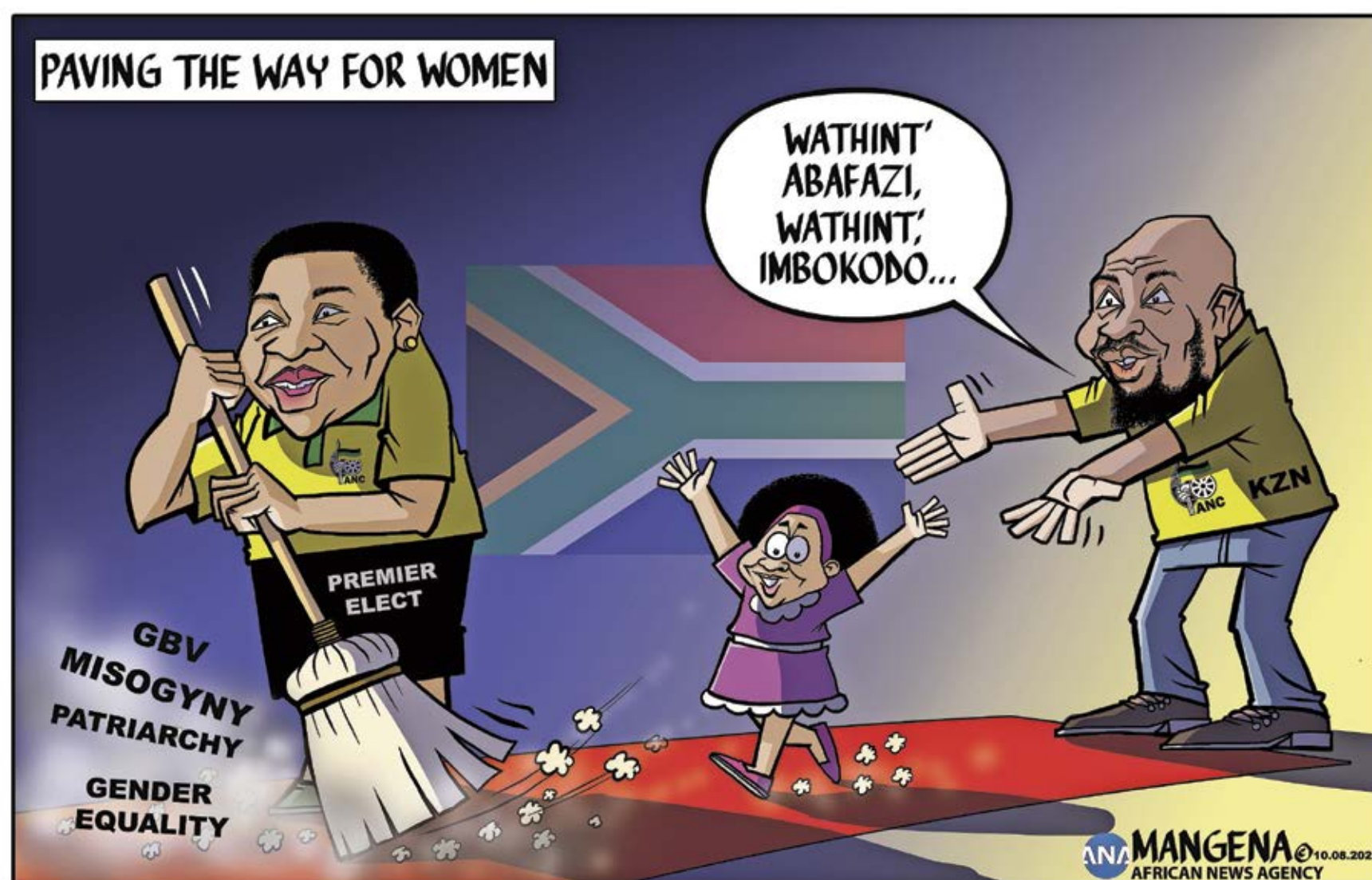
HIV-positive teenage mothers often experience an overwhelming sense of helplessness.

They need multi-disciplinary services that could help them to fulfil some of their basic needs such as financial planning, family planning, medical care, parenting a new baby, schooling and their own well-being.

As we celebrate Women's Day and Women's Month, we should also raise awareness about the plight of HIV-positive teenage mothers who remain forgotten, powerless and exploited.

We should make a conscious effort to give these girls a voice and a place in this beautiful country.

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# Women are the key to transformation and prosperity

## COMMENT



LINDWE SISULU

THE study of history is the beginning of wisdom. And as the anniversary of the August 9, 1956, historic march of women to Pretoria dawns on us, it is extremely important to take stock of how we got here, and where we are going.

The story of Queen Nandi, the pillar and centre of gravity for King Shaka Ka Senzangakhona, is hardly taught in schools. And neither is the powerful story of the amazing Queen Mmanthathi of the Batlokwa, whose totem is the tokwe cat and thus earned her the nickname The Wild Cat Queen of southern Africa. She militarily led her nation to migrate through periods of crises in history (including the Mfecane). She finally settled them peacefully at the majestic mountains, Jwala-Boholo, near Ficksburg, where she passed on and was buried. There are many more.

The legend of the rain queens of southern Africa, the Modjadjis, lives on. It is recorded that Shaka was so respectful of the magical powers of Modjadji 1 that he dared not step on her territory and rather asked for her blessings. She was referred to as *Mabelemane* (four breasts), and it was believed that the fertility and richness she brought to Earth were mirrored by her body.

Further afield, the story of the powerful Kandakes of Nubia is often untold. When the Roman Empire invaded and occupied the black lands of Kemet (aka Lower Egypt) and tried to push further south to Upper Egypt (Sudan), they did not reckon with the might of the Kandake, Amanirenas, who pushed back, raided, and thoroughly thrashed the Roman army, forcing Augustus Caesar to withdraw and sign a treaty favourable to the Nubians. (27 BCE to 22 BCE).

A disputed anecdote, which first appeared in the book *Alexander Romance*, also speaks of the Greek king Alexander's push down south and withdrawal when he came face to face with Pelekh (ruled from 345 BCE to 332 BCE), a powerful Nubian Kandake (called Candace in Europe). Alexander the Great was so frightened at the sight of Candace's awesome military formation that he fled backwards with his tale between his legs.

It was the calculations of the hidden figure, the mathematical genius Katherine Johnson (US), that made

the first and subsequent orbital space flights possible for America. When Nasa later got computers, they had to check with her manual calculations to make sure the computers were correct. And if it was not for the calculations of the genius African-American Dr Gladys West, we would not have the modern GPS (as we know it). Suffice it to say that all these glorious achievements of women, especially black women, were well hidden and suppressed until recently. Until the inevitable forces of time and truth brought them to light.

Back home, the 1956 march, mooted and led by our heroines, was pivotal in our liberation struggle. And so was the one woman who kept the flames of the struggle alive, Winnie Mandela, when her husband was in jail. She was persecuted and hounded by the powers that be and patriarchy to her grave because she was an indomitable truth teller.

It may sound self-serving to mention my own mother, Albertina Sisulu, but the details will remain a family secret for another day. Suffice it to say that without her, my father, Walter Sisulu, would neither have become the icon and struggle hero we know, nor the mentor of Madiba. In fact, Albertina found and approved Madiba's first wife, Evelyn Mase (the mother of Dr Makazwi Mandela).

A highly recommended book by Associate History Professor Thula Simpson, Pretoria University, (*History of South Africa. From 1902 to the present*), gives a riveting account: about 1200 Fedasaw (Federation of South African Women) activists had gathered at the Union Buildings on October 27, 1955, under the leadership of Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa, and Sophie Williams, for a "silent protest" against racist legislation. The demon-

stration was held a month after the Native Affairs Department announced its intention to distribute passes to African women in 1956. Fedasaw had written to Verwoerd before the protest, seeking a meeting about the pass proposal and other grievances, but his secretary declined on the grounds that the deputation would be racially mixed and that the matters raised were "subjects for praise and not protest".

On August 9, 1956, about 20000 women walked in twos and threes to avoid a 24-hour government interdict on marches in Pretoria. Led again by Ngoyi, Joseph, Moosa and Williams, the protesters assembled at the Union Buildings, but were told the prime minister was "not in".

Ngoyi and Joseph, who had respectively been voted Fedasaw's president and secretary at the organisation's national conference that year, were, however, permitted to submit more than 16000 signed statements of protest against the pass system. On returning to the amphitheatre, Ngoyi said to "cries of shame" that Strijdom had run away from the women. The women stood for 30 minutes in silence after which they sang *Nkosi Sikelel'IAfrika* and departed with a rendition of *Strijdom, wathint abafazi, wathint imbokodo, uzakufa* - Strijdom, you strike the women, you strike a rock, you will be crushed (excerpts from Pages 153 to 155).

Today, many of our children and adults go through school knowing nothing or little about this epochal game-changing piece of history. If they did, they would not be taking women for granted. We see public places, streets and hospitals named after these courageous women leaders.

But how many South Africans know where these names come from? How many really know why August 9 was chosen as National Women's Day? How many reflect on it? Perhaps we will simply enjoy the holiday, have a braai, go to a tavern, then go to sleep.

We look forward to the leadership of Mandisa Maya as deputy chief justice. We look forward to change. We look forward to a new and first woman premier of KZN. It is women who have their ears to the ground with respect to family, poverty, the condition and the health of our beloved country. No society or system can survive without women's balance.

## LETTERS

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## 'Taliban' faction got their branding right

rise of economic and political power of Islam and its adherents.

The Ottoman red cap was popular before the advent of the petro dollar, and now the Emirati outfits and styles.

My most fashionable item is an Obasanjo Nigerian outfit. This has different items and especially the different items and peculiar way of wearing your headgear. Incidentally, this is also worn by Christians as well.

The Omani dress code, which has a

certain style, can still be seen in parts of Zanzibar today.

Whether one supports the Taliban or Anko, I'm glad this was not some high fashion label, as many Gucci revolutionaries tend to associate themselves with.

All said and done, the bets are stacked pretty high, and both sides have big backers and a lot to lose. The Taliban faction seems to be keeping its leadership under wraps, and it seems

strange that the chairperson of the Taliban did not step in as an MEC or premier.

As for Comrade Sihle Zikalala, his support of both factions in speeches did not win him friends or influence people, but after taking a hammering at least he called it quits as premier.

Sadly, civil servants will wreck a government department until booted out. Taliban or not, the name associated with their campaign was very original, creative and the headgear was a brilliant branding strategy.

MUHAMMAD OMAR | Durban North

# O PINION

## EDITORIAL

## SA'S WOMEN HAVE LITTLE TO CELEBRATE

SIXTY years after the brave women of South Africa marched on the Union Buildings in Pretoria against the proposed amendments to the Urban Areas Act in 1956, also known as the anti-pass march, the current crop of women have very little to celebrate.

Led by the likes of Lilian Ngoyi, Charlotte Maxeke, Rahima Moosa, Ruth First and others, up to 20 000 women from across the country descended on the highest office in the land to hand over a memorandum to then apartheid prime minister, Johannes Gerhardt "JG" Strijdom, to highlight their plight.

The march was widely hailed as a success, even though Strijdom once again snubbed them.

Many of the women are said to have participated in the march with babies on their backs, while some domestic workers brought the children of their white employers along with them.

The march was seen as the turning point in the struggle for the emancipation of black people in general, and women in particular. It was followed by other demonstrations, such as the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, in which 69 people were shot dead by the apartheid police after more than 7 000 marched against the pass laws in Sharpeville Township, Gauteng, as well as the 1976 Soweto uprising that left scores of students dead for protesting against Afrikaans as the official medium of instruction.

Despite these historical achievements, women have very little to write home about 28 years in our democracy. Their socio-economic plight remains almost the same, if not worse, regardless of the rhetorical sloganeering politicians subject them to on August 9 (Women's Day) each year.

They still live in the most unequal society in the world, and one of the most unsafe countries. The 2021 Stats SA figures showed that the unemployment rate among black African women is 41.0%, compared with 8.2% among white women, 22.4% among Indian women and 29.9% among coloured women.

But just as his predecessors did in the past, President Cyril Ramaphosa used this year's Women's Day celebrations yesterday to highlight the historical strides made by women such as Maxeke, sing the praises of other heroines and promise to improve the socio-economic status of women.

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