

*"AS WOMEN WE CAN  
RISE. BUT WE NEED  
MEN AND WOMEN  
WORKING TOGETHER  
AS ALLIES TO FIGHT GBV  
AND TO LIBERATE US  
COLLECTIVELY."*

# EXPLORING GENDER: DOING IT **TOGETHER**





## INTRODUCTION TO THE GENDER WORKSHEETS



### TOGETHER WE CAN

The pursuit of gender equality and equity lies at the very heart of South Africa's being. The needs and rights of both women and men should be considered to advance policies and developments across all sectors of life.

Communities vary in structure and represent many forms of traditions. We find that gender inequality is especially rife in mining affected communities. The material presented here is summarising activities from a gender workshop with community activists held by the Bench Marks Foundation in 2023.

It is challenging to educate people about gender concepts, especially when it comes to sexual orientation and gender identities. Culture, tradition and religion are also known as the masterminds of patriarchy and influence gender dynamics and politics. In the gender workshop we discussed that gender empowerment is not only about equality and equity but that for gender relations to become more equal, the entire system of inequality must be altered. This involves addressing power imbalances that are perpetuated by various structures in our families, communities, schools and society in general. Only once we challenge these structures we have a chance to create long lasting and meaningful change. The journey starts with us.

The workshop was a forum for learning and unlearning. It brought hope for a different future and showed that community activists were eager to engage the concepts, challenge themselves and one another and put in the effort to make the dream of gender equality in society a reality.

With the material presented here, we hope that the discussions we started at the workshop can be continued by community activists in the communities they come from. We hope they will assist with:

- Strengthening gender competencies through a deeper and personal understanding of gender concepts
- Challenging our values and beliefs and planting a seed for a mind-set shift
- Reflecting on our work in communities, our shortcomings and what we want to do differently going forward

## THE BENCH MARKS FOUNDATION

The Bench Marks Foundation focuses on **strengthening a human rights culture in contexts where power dynamics disenfranchise rights holders**. We specifically enhance the ability of mining-affected communities to hold government and corporations accountable for delivering on their economic, social and environmental obligations **along the life-cycle of mining**. In that way we foster sustainable and thriving communities. We are research driven and produce research reports, such as the Policy Gap Series, and shorter action research pieces, to influence policy developments, support communities' compensation efforts and drive **national**

**and local advocacy** efforts for increased accountability and transparency of mines and government. We provide active **leadership to various national coalitions on mining advocacy** and have contributed to the visibility and elevation of the voice and plight of mining-affected communities in the media. We **educate rights holders** to know and exercise their rights and empower community activists to be monitors, researchers, negotiators and advocates in defence of their human rights. We **organise, mobilise and capacitate** mining affected community structures for their advocacy efforts.



For more information see the website of the Bench Marks Foundation:  
[www.bench-marks.org.za](http://www.bench-marks.org.za)  
And the Community Monitoring School: [www.communitymonitors.net](http://www.communitymonitors.net)





# TALKING ABOUT GENDER



We can think of **gender** as a collection of traits, styles and meanings that we associate with being masculine or feminine. Gender is often thought to be the same as a person's **physical sex**. But gender goes beyond our bodies – its about what we like and prefer, what makes us happy in our hearts, minds and souls. There are feminine men and masculine women and people that express themselves in ways that are bot feminine and masculine and also non-binary people, who don't identify as male or female. Gender is a helpful concept to express who we are, but it should not limit us or make us less than equal.

**Transgender** are people whose gender is something other than the sex they were assigned at birth. Their body might be male but in their mind, heart and soul they feel female or the other way round.

**Sex** is natural. It is given by birth

**Gender** is ascribed by society. It is a complex concept that refers to the social and cultural roles, behaviors, and expectations associated with being male, female or non-binary.

Gender stereotypes are when people think certain things are only for boys or girls or for men or women.



There is no "right" way to be any gender. We are all human beings, capable of expressing ourselves in ways that feel right for us. Anything else promotes gender inequality.



**Exercise:** Take some paper and a pen and reflect on your life journey. You can draw a road and reflect or just mark some important events.

1

What were you born as – a boy or a girl?

2

How has that shaped your life?

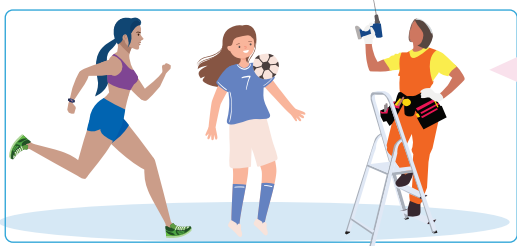
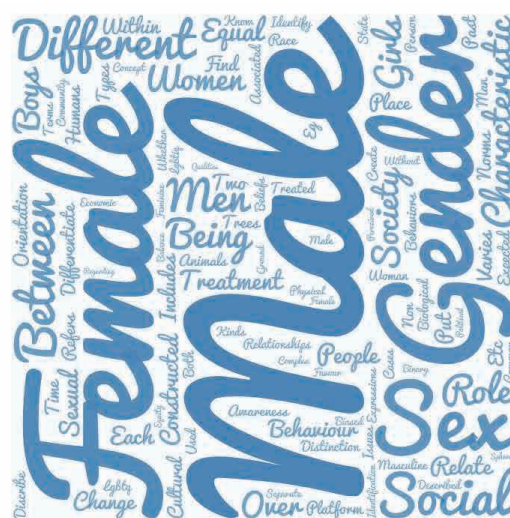
3

What would have been different in your life if you would have been born as a different sex?

4

Which significant things do you remember about growing up?

After your own reflection share with a partner. Finally, share the 3 or 4 most important learnings with a bigger group



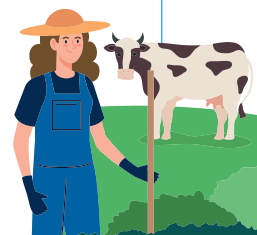
In our conversations a woman shared: *"I wanted to do athletics as a child and become an athlete but my father did not allow me. He wanted me and my body to stay covered. He did not want me to run."* Another one shared: *"I was not able to go into the job I wanted because the industry was only recruiting men."* A third shared: *"I wanted to be a professional soccer player but I could not go far as soccer was not seen as a girl's sport."*

We are thought certain roles as girls and boys. Boys are often brought up in a way where they have to perform. As they grow they are told that victory brings power and they have the pressure to proof that they are capable and can fulfill their role as a men.



For gender roles and norms to change we need to challenge the whole system of gender inequality in the society. We agreed: *"Anything that is not natural can be changed."*

*"Equal responsibilities between boys and girls in my family in our upbringing made me a strong woman. I know I can fend for myself."*





## WORK AND THE VALUES WE ATTACH TO IT



**Exercise:** Reflect on a 24 hour day in your family. Which responsibilities do the women and girls in the family take and which ones the boys and men?

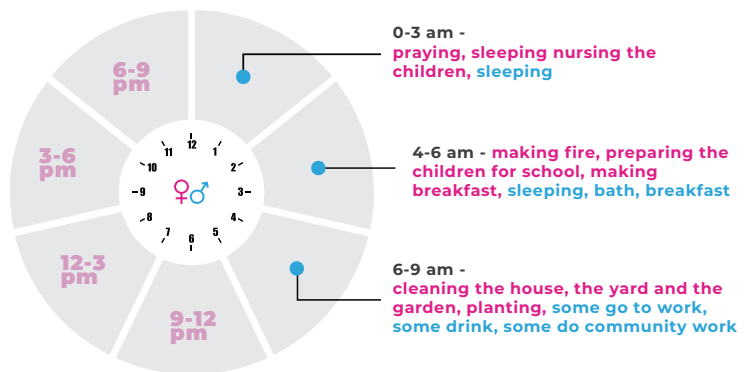
What other things do you do throughout the day? Note the responsibilities down on a 24 hour clock.

Use one colour for the work done by boys and men and one colour for the work done by girls and women. See some examples in the clock.

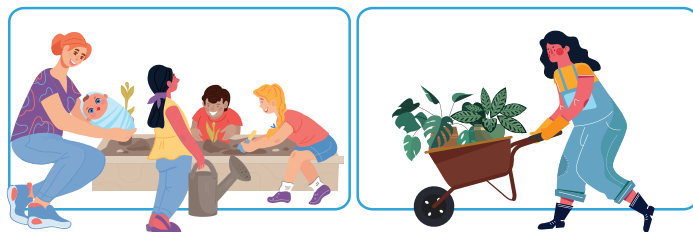
Share your 24 hour clock with a partner. First share generally what you observe and then look into the types of work men and women do.

- What are common patterns or observations?
- Which work is seen as important, which one is not?
- Which values do we attach to the described work?

Start having conversations about how things are currently and what you would want to see changed in your family context and where you could start.



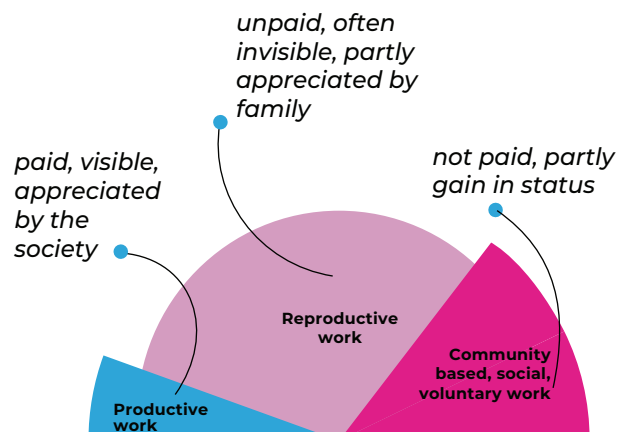
In our conversations some men shared that they assist with the household chores or with the children. Women then said that there is a difference between assisting and taking full responsibility for chores. Some women acknowledged that as women we also need to give men the responsibility for household chores rather than believing that we can do it better.



In our conversations women shared: "Like it or not I have to do the care work.", "Providing for all is my responsibility as a mother even if it means I have to stop doing what I want to do for myself."

In our conversations women who do paid work said: "We work before we go to work and we work after work. Yet, there is a perception at work places that we are less productive."

We also talked about Women's Time Poverty and that it is important to find room where women can share with one another and invest in their own development and growth.

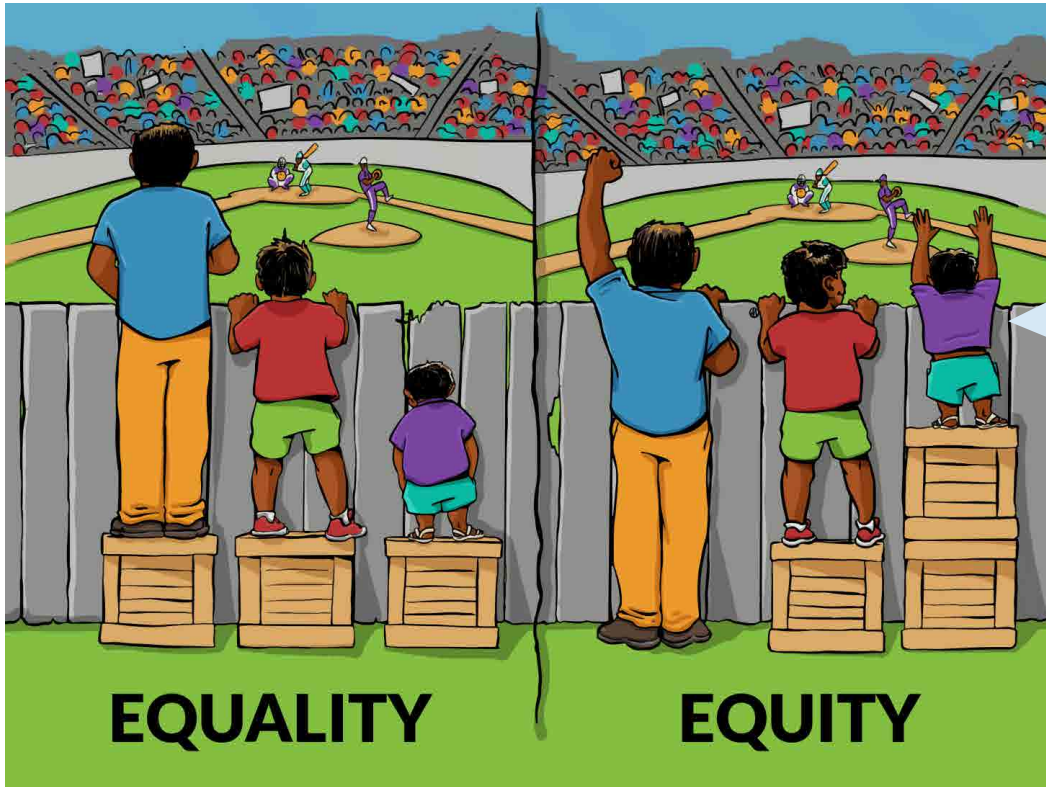
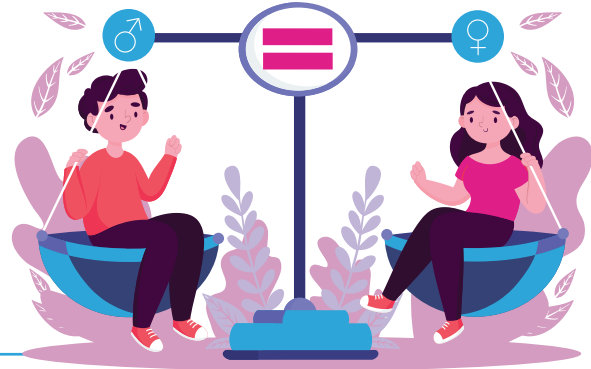


# GENDER EQUALITY



**Equality** is when everyone is treated with respect and kindness and when everyone has the same opportunities. In an equal world everyone would be able to be themselves, to have their differences honored while living in peace. Everyone would be treated fairly and would be able to make the best of their lives.

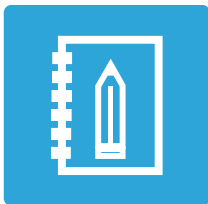
**Gender Equality** is achieved when women and men, boys and girls have equal rights, life prospects and opportunities and the choice and the power to shape their own lives and contribute to society.



**Equality:** is giving people the same thing/s.

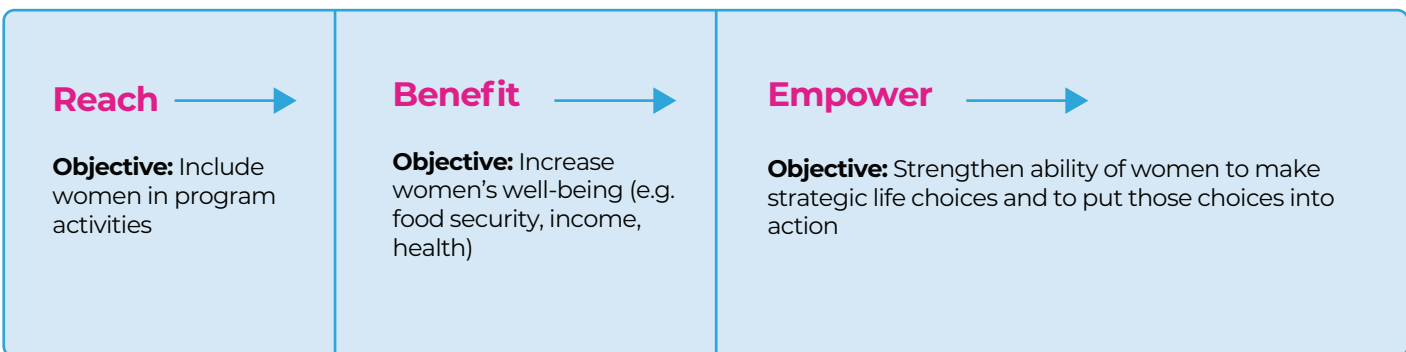
**Equity:** is fairness in every situation.

**Equality vs Equity**  
While equality seeks to treat everyone the same, equity is about creating fairness.



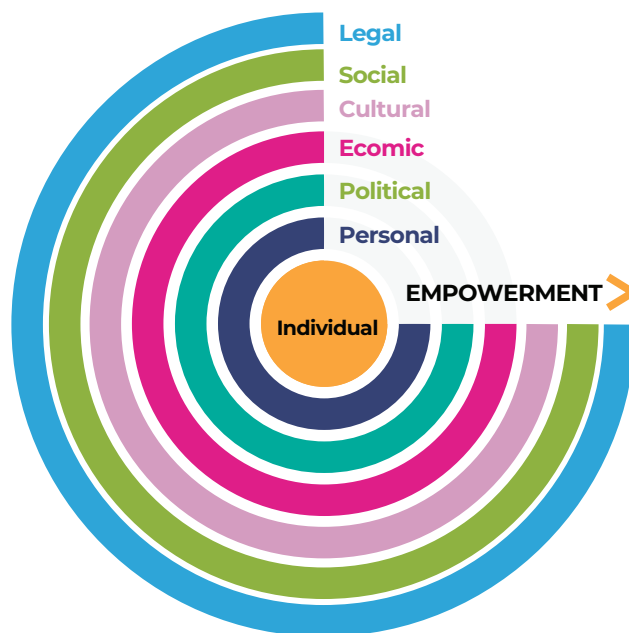
**Exercise:** Reflect together. Which situations can you remember that have increased reach or benefit or lead to empowerment?

**Gender focused work has different elements: It starts with applying a gender lens to our work, by increasing reach, moves to better benefits for women and has the goal in mind to create empowerment for women.**





Women empowerment can happen on many different levels or in different contexts.



**Exercise:** Reflect back with a partner on the situations of empowerment you experienced as women and shared above.

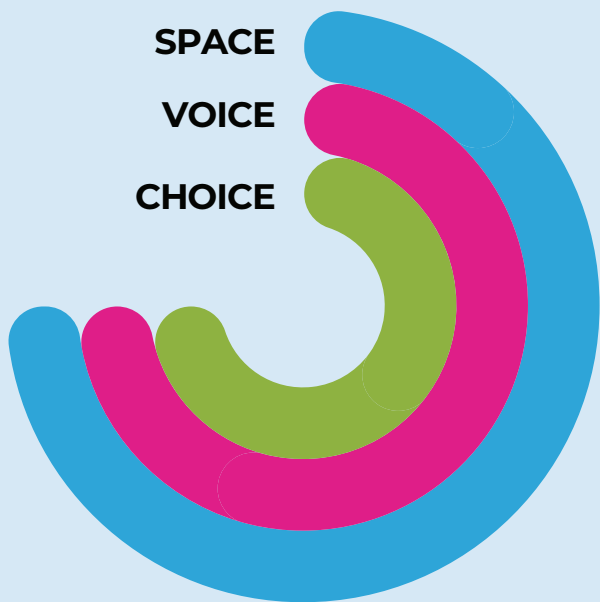
Are there any others that come to mind? Try and locate the level or context for these empowerment experiences.

**Women empowerment is about creating safe spaces for sharing and public spaces for voice and choice. It is about being able to live your dreams no matter what they are.**

In the fight for **gender equality:**

- Move from a position of empowerment
- Challenge cultural norms and patriarchy
- Unite with others to make your voice heard
- Together you can create a space of equality.

**SPACE  
VOICE  
CHOICE**



Dear Diary,

Llife as a girl has been pretty tough for me. As a girl I have been taught to behave in a certain way, dress in a respectful manner, walk and talk the way they said is to be respectful.

I find it unfair that everything in the house is on my shoulders though my big brothers are there to help with things such as cleaning and cooking.

Even in the current era women are still oppressed and have less chances to speak their mind. And we are capable of doing things for ourselves. We just need the power and opportunities from men and society to make mistakes. Let us all be equal and do the opposite of what we have been brainwashed on in terms of what right and wrong for women.

Gender Workshop Participant 2023





# MAKING WOMEN'S VOICES HEARD



## VOICE



### Exercise on Voice:

First reflect for yourself, then share with the group: Do you remember a time where your voice was not heard? How did that make you feel? Do you remember times where you gained or were given voice and how was that for you?



### Loosing voice

This could be in your family, when you take a taxi, in church or with elders ...

**For example:** "As a woman I have experienced not being heard by my church leaders. When I made proposals, my ideas were not taken seriously. When a man proposed my ideas a month later, they were valued and taken on."

### Gaining voice

This could be in your family, in the context of a traditional authority, elders, at work ...

**For example:** "When growing up I was never listened to by the larger family. When my uncle passed away and we had to discuss important family matters, I was invited into the meeting for the first time. I was asked for my views and inputs. This was so empowering for me."

## CULTURE



**Exercise:** Describe an experience where you said these words: "It's my culture – I will not do this or I will do this ..." Reflect as a group: What is culture? And who determines what is cultural or not?

## PROVERBS

Proverbs are traditional moral and wisdom expressions that are handed over from generation to generation. Gender relations are often revealed in proverbs.



**Exercise:** In a small group share a favorite proverb from your culture about women or men (positive or negative). Discuss what you notice about the proverbs on men and women.

### Examples on women:

*"Ya eta ke tshadi ka pele e wela ka leweng."*  
(If women lead there is no forward movement or progress.)

*"Ntlo e senang mosadi e tswana le lesaka le le senang dikgomo."*  
(A woman makes a house a home.)

*"Mosadi ga inama wa be a ikantse motlokolo."*  
(Women's actions are always intentional and well thought out with a backup plan.)

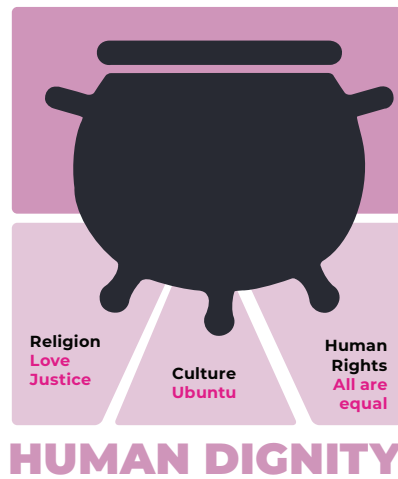
### Examples on men:

*"Monna ke tsepe e ntso"*  
(Hlalele 1972:14)  
(A man is a black iron) 'Men are strong and endure suffering without complaining'

*"Pharela banneng ha e hlole"*  
(Sekese 1975:204) (A puzzle cannot defeat men) 'No problem is insurmountable to men'

During our reflection we found that women's positive proverbs often align with expectations of women to be wives and mothers. Marriage is perceived as the ultimate achievement of every woman and many proverbs focus on marriage or getting ready for marriage. Negative proverbs about women often provide the social basis for exploitation and systematic exclusion of women. Proverbs about men often emphasize leadership, intelligence and high achievement. Women often feel constrained by proverbs, whereas men are empowered and see them as guidance. On the downside some are also creating pressure for men as the idea that manhood has a monetary worth is forcing men to be stronger than they sometimes can bear. The expectations portrayed in proverbs often go against the idea of equality and diversity. Ask yourself are proverbs truth that stands forever unchallenged? Or can you be an agent for reframing them in your day to day engagements?

Proverbs show that cultural norms can shape us. Similar examples can be found in the religious context. Culture and religion have the potential to build us. The emphasis is on relationships, on how we treat one another and how we connect. Ubuntu is a cultural resource that goes beyond gender roles emphasising human dignity and equality. Similarly, core values in our religious contexts are love and justice. They don't divide, they build. And the human rights culture focusses on the legal aspects of equality. In terms of the law we are all equal.



The interplay of religion, culture and human rights can be symbolised in a three-legged pot that creates the foundation for our collective human dignity and humanity.

## WOMEN'S VOICES AND THEIR POWER IN SOUTH AFRICA'S HISTORY

Women's activism during apartheid culminated in the march to Union Buildings on 8 August 1956 to fight for the abolition of passes. The women of that time mobilized the entire nation with little finance and limited resources. They acted strategically and used their political power to achieve their objectives. A four-minute BBC film clip (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIPk-yhYuvA>) shows the build-up to the historic women's march.



**Leaders:** Lilian Ngoyi, Rahima Moosa, Helen Joseph and Sophia Williams de Bruyn - The women leaders that came together from diverse backgrounds exemplify the power, strength and dignity women can take in leadership in governance

It illustrates that power is not given but needs to be taken and that women are not helpless.



**Exercise:** After watching the clip, reflect and share as a group: What did it take for the women of 1956 to take power? What characteristics of leadership did they show?

See some leadership characteristics we identified in our discussions.

### Characteristics of leadership shown by the women of 1956:

- They were brave and courageous
- They were strong willed, resilient, willing to suffer and able to bounce back when they were challenged
- They trusted each other, shared information and communicated well
- They were organized and united and had the capacity to lead and inspire
- They stood up for what you believed in and did not lose focus
- They had a common goal and vision
- They had a proper problem analysis and a clear advocacy strategy
- They were united in their diversity and lived the UBUNTU spirit



Dear Diary, today I had an interesting day. I learnt a lot about men and women. I know now that women and men have the capability to perform any task. As a society we should unlearn all the stereotypes about roles and responsibilities in terms of gender. I also discovered that the media plays a critical role in how we perceive things as a society. It has the power to amplify or suppress our views or voices as women. Our African proverbs often portray negative characteristics for women and we must teach the younger generation to reject these proverbs. Both men and women hold the power and women's participation in decision making results in a powerful determination. **Gender Workshop Participant 2023**



# GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)



**GBV Context:** While boys and men do experience abuse the majority of victims of violence are female and the majority of perpetrators of violence are boys and men. Violence against girls and women mostly stems from male dominance in society and the socialization of men. Often it is an integral part of how we relate when growing up.

**“It takes a village to raise a child.” African proverb**

As women we can rise. But we need men and women working together as allies to fight GBV and to liberate us collectively.

**Language is a powerful tool** - Words are powerful, especially when used by people who have power over others. We live in a society where words are often used to put girls and women down. Gendered name-calling sends the message that girls and women are less than fully human. When girls and women are seen as inferior, it becomes easier to treat them with disrespect and violence.

Changing the way we speak will help change the way we think.

Gender based violence has many ‘faces’ – physical, emotional, spiritual, mental and psychological. It also includes the marginalization and silencing of women’s voices and their exclusion from equal participation as citizens.



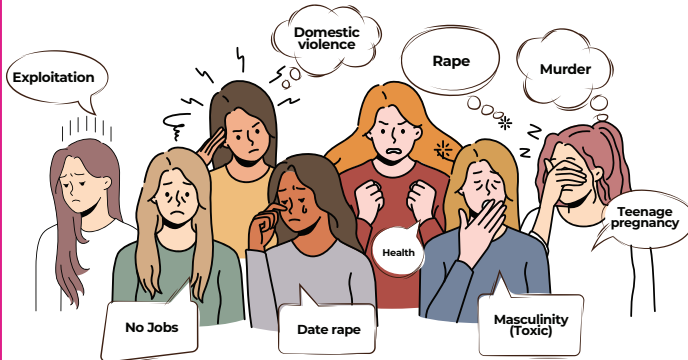
## WHAT CAN YOU DO:

- **Be critical and question**, especially reporting in the media and on social media
- **Get the message out!** Help change the dominant narrative and share articles, tips and tools for support
- **Report photos and posts** you see that exploit or degrade girls and young women on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.
- **Interrupt abuse** – if a guy grabs a girl or pushes her, say something to stop his abusive behaviour.
- **Stop sexual harassment** - Do not engage in any acts like catcalling and unwanted touching. Speak up against friends and peers who do. Do not look the other way!
- **Develop an action plan** - plan what you would do in situations where people are being abusive. Sometimes it is easier to interrupt the abuse when you know what you will say beforehand.
- **Stand up against victim blaming** - girls and women cannot be blamed or judged for how they choose to dress. Violence cannot be prevented through limiting the freedoms of girls.
- **Stop rape culture** – do not allow people to minimize or normalize sexual assault and rape through jokes.
- **Call gender-based violence what it is:** violence, not “bullying.” By naming it correctly you are helping to stop a culture, which normalizes and minimizes violence against girls and women.
- **Create safe spaces** to discuss gender-based violence openly, share your views and experiences and support your peers.
- Confront and reflect on your **own ideas and beliefs, actions and opinions** and why you have them. Be honest to yourself, admit your faults and commit to changing the way you think and act.
- **Stop stereotyping** men and women’s roles.
- Remember that **violence is a choice and preventable**. Do not make excuses for friends and peers who are violent. Do not support the notion that violence is caused by mental illness, lack of anger management skills, alcohol and drug use, stress, etc.
- **Be supportive and believe:** When girls tell you about violence they have experienced in their lives believe them without being judgmental. It is extremely rare for girls to invent false stories about sexual assault and violence. You may be the first and only person she tells.
- **Be aware of available resources** for girls and women: Familiarize yourself with the resources for girls and women in your community, like women’s centres, shelters and anti-violence organizations. Be a positive resource for girls close to you by sharing information and making referrals.
- **Be a mentor** – Volunteer your time to preventing violence by speaking to others. This brings awareness to the issue, which will motivate others to act.
- **Understand and practice consent!** - Boys and young men need to be respectful when entering into a sexual relationship and should not feel entitled to girls and women’s bodies. Just because you are a ‘nice guy’ does not mean you should have any expectations.

# TRANSACTIONAL SEX

We speak of transactional sex when women or girls enter into sexual relationships for financial gain.

Women and girls experience a multitude of challenges. Women and girls from Phokeng drew some of these.



**A women from Phokeng shared:** “The current norm is women are in relationships for money and there is a lack of respect in such relationships as one believes they have paid for illtreating you.” “Some men in these relationships even do groceries themselves and determine what’s on the menu for the day and would become violent if a different menu is cooked, simply because he is the one who has buying power.”

Women and girls enter into transactional sexual relationship as an option for survival or as a ticket to better living. This often happens when women are not employed, are having a low income, are single mothers who struggle to feed their kids or are from poor families depending on social grants.

- Young women date older men, especially mine workers, to sustain a certain life style. The men can buy them expensive clothes and material things they need or want.
- Peer pressure to engage in this type of relationship plays a role for some of the girls as they are influenced by the materials things they see their peers have.
- Some girls are from poor families and are encouraged by their family to enter into this relationship.
- Many of the young women do not use protection with their partners but rather use Oral Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEp), in order to keep their partners, and go for family planning.



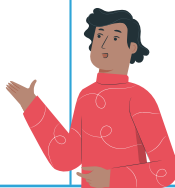
# 1

Discuss with a partner what experience you have personally had with transactional sexual relationships thus far or what you have heard about them. Discuss in the group.



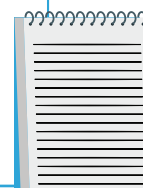
# 2

Brainstorm ideas of how you can raise more awareness.



# 3

As a group list the organisations or institutions in your area that you know of that could provide support.



**PrEp** - Oral Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis is a pill used by HIV negative people. It is an Antiretroviral medication (ARV) best taken every day to prevent HIV infection but does not protect against other STIs. It starts to work after being taken 7 days in a row. It can be stopped anytime when the user does not need it anymore.

**PEP** - Post Exposure Prophylaxis is a short-term Antiretroviral treatment (ARV) that reduces the likelihood of HIV infection for HIV negative individuals after exposure to HIV infected blood of sexual contact with an HIV positive person. It is to be taken within 72 hours or within 3 days of exposure. PEP should be used only in emergency situations. It is not meant for regular use by people who may be exposed to HIV frequently.

**From young people we know that condom use with transactional partners is very low. Women in transactional sexual relationships are very often exposed to unprotected sex as the male partner with financial power dictates so. In order to protect the financial support, the woman gets from the male, she has limited choices to protect herself. PrEp taken every day is the best option for continuous HIV prevention for women in transactional sexual relationships. But PrEp will not protect them against other sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancies.**



# THE UNINVITED GUEST IN MALETSATSI'S VILLAGE



Case Study written by Olebogeng Motene and Friederike Subklew-Sehume

In 2008 Maletsatsi's village had an uninvited guest. Little did they know that this unwelcomed guest was not just passing through but that its intention was to stick around. It distracted the way of life people were used to.

For generations the community had primarily depended on livestock and crop farming and employment from mines in nearby communities. Suddenly Platinum was discovered in the village. The village had never experienced the direct impacts of mining operations before.

The village is governed by the elders through the Kgotla process. All the elders are men. The mining company had been granted mining rights by the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy and then consulted the Kgotla committee. The elders in the Kgotla believed they would bring development to themselves and the community when they consented to the mine's operations in the village. Most of the women and the larger community were not consulted in the process. One day, without the community's knowledge, the company started sinking the shaft. The community was left confused as their land was utilized without their consent.

Maletsatsi, a young resident of the village, had been away from her home village for three years to study. When she returned home she found a mining operation on the grounds where she and her peers grew up playing, collecting wood for fire, wild fruits and African medicinal herbs.

arrested and fortunately bailed out on their first bail hearing. As there was no response from the mine to the issues raised in their protest, the community remained angered and continued protesting.

caused by rubber bullets. This was the start of endless community protests against the Kgotla and the mine.

A few weeks after coming home she observed that there was a community roads block created by young members of the community. She decides to join in a community meeting which ended up in a late-night protest. At the end of the protest a group of 4 males and 2 females was

Maletsatsi, who was missing the peace and community spirit of the village she grew up in and had become a strong advocate for human rights during her studies, joined the second protest. Six young females are arrested in the second protest. Maletsatsi is among them. They are detained for 7 days without bail. No medical attention is given to their wounds and bruises which were

Lethlogonolo, an old friend of Maletsatsi, shared with her how things changed since the mine began operating in the community. The bush, where she and Maletsatsi used to learn about indigenous trees, where they were herding the family's cattle and hunt wild animals had been taken out in large portions leaving the community to experience environmental destructions, poor air quality and water pollution.







Social challenges such as increasing population growth of mostly men from labour sending areas, like Lesotho or the Eastern Cape, unemployment and high rates of HIV/AIDS are changing the way people live together. Maletsatsi's and Lethlogonolo family homes have many cracks by now and the families are traumatised and frightened by the constant blasting.

Maletsatsi reminds Lethlogonolo of an African proverb which says: "If your cows are stolen, it's fine because the meat will be

roasted and feed people but if your land is stolen you can never forgive and forget." Lethlogonolo says: "It is so true. Because the land is our way of living, it feeds us, nurtures us and it's where we lay our loved ones to rest." The youth of the community, the majority of them females, continued to question the mine's legitimacy and demonstrated for inclusion of the community in decision-making processes, for example around employment or community development. Eventually, the youth managed to shut down the operations of the mine for a while and made relevant government

departments to come to the party to ensure proper engagement of the mine with the community. As part of the engagement Kgotla members and youth leaders were taken on a tour of the operation. As a community that had never experienced mining, they were shocked by how dangerous mining underground is and report that back to the community. At the end a few agreements were made and a number of locals, mostly men, were employed by the mine.

With Lethlogonolo's and Maletsatsi's leadership the youth demanded that women be offered employment opportunities as well to work on the surface as underground work was regarded dangerous. They succeeded again and a few local female mine workers got employed. After a few months of work for the mine they shared with youth like Maletsatsi and Lethlogonolo that they experience discrimination in the mine, poor working conditions, unequal pay for an equal work load and that they are not well represented by the unions when grievances are laid.

As the mining operations continued further the community witnessed an increase in alcohol consumption, crime and violence, sex workers and high rates of GBV and femicide. All these aspects were affecting the safety of women and children.

Through the mining operations a traditional village where one homestead used to be only for the family was also changed. When migrant labourers needed rental spaces as the mine provided no housing but a living out allowance, mine workers were seeking for accommodation spaces in residents' unutilized backrooms. In a time where everyone needed money, rentals were agreed upon quickly and further implications. Transactional sexual relationships, which the community just called backroom relationships developed. In these relation-

ships locals date mine workers from labour sending areas, who have left their spouses behind. The terms of the relationship are often agreed upon by both parties but a core concept is that women and girls engage in them for financial gain. This phenomenon has bruised the local males' egos as they are largely unemployed and believe that migrant male workers take their women.

With all these changes in the social fabric and the noted increase in violence and

crime, local men held the perception that it is all women's faults as they were entertaining outsiders instead of locals. They also blamed the mine that its employment opportunities for locals remain limited. To this date the villagers are still to be compensated for their land and continue to experience the impacts of mining with little to no beneficiation. This has left the community changed for ever and divided it between the few that benefit and the masses that suffer.



**Exercise:** Note the challenges that mining brings to communities in small groups. Then use the gender lense and discuss:

- How is the situation in Maletsatsi's village affecting the women? Why?
- How is the situation in Maletsatsi's village affecting the men? Why?
- What gender sensitive action can the community take to restore the values of the village?

Share your group's findings with everyone.



Pictures: Bread for the World / Karin Schermbrucker







# WHEN WE CALL A PLACE OUR HOME WE ESTABLISH A BOND TO THE LAND, EVEN IF WE DON'T OWN THE LAND.



By Vanessa Pillay (born Packery), a trade unionist who served workers in the South African labour movement for more than twenty years first as a shop steward and later as a worker educator in the national workers' education institute (DITSELA). Currently serving workers in informal employment through the global network of Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). Vanessa facilitated the 2023 Bench Marks Foundation Gender workshop. In preparation for the workshop she also reflected on her own family's experience. She is sharing her reflections on the process of defending family graves and the lessons learnt from her perspective as a feminist activist for social justice.

## A PLACE CALLED HOME

Growing up in Ogies on the coalfields of the eastern highveld of Mpumalanga, before the area was overtaken by coal mines, gave us a sense of carefree living in the countryside. We had livestock, healthy milk producing jersey cows that produced enough milk for two households and to supply the local community. Our backyard overlooked thriving mealie plantations and watching the seasonal mealie harvest was our favourite holiday activity. Our front yard faced a dense forest of eucalyptus trees. Family members died over time and they were buried on a private plot about two kilometers from where we lived, our family always maintained the site. Totally oblivious about land

ownership. The passenger and goods railway system was functional and my grandfather ran a successful taxi service from the Ogies train station to the surrounding farms. We went to the local primary school and everything was good.

Our extended family gradually relocated to nearby townships but my grandparents remained there until they died, my grandmother died in 1981 and my grandfather died in 1984. My father continued the family legacy for another decade. Eventually everyone had moved away but the gravesite where 20 family members spanning four generations were buried remained and was our only connection to the land.

## MINING COMES

When an international mining company started its coal mining operation in the area in 2004 there was much talk about development and jobs. However, for our family their arrival meant the destruction of what used to be our homes and later rumors of the mine's intention to 'move the graves' started to circulate. The rumors of an intended exhumation surfaced every now and then over the years. In late 2015 / early 2016 the rumors had escalated to what would be an imminent final decision to exhume the graves and an offer of R9000 compensation for each grave was made. At that point we knew, we had to organise ourselves as a family to engage the mine formally if we wanted to preserve the family grave side.



## STANDING UP AGAINST A GIANT

The first step was to **establish the facts and not to rely on rumors**. Although the information emanated from trusted family members, some of them were working at the mine and we needed to consider that they were maybe more interested in the money than the preservation of the graves. We knew, if there was an amount for compensation on the table, then it meant there was a budget for the exhumation. We had to act fast.

The next step was to enter into **formal correspondence** with the mine, so that we could **have a record** of what was discussed and agreed with the mine instead of informal agreements with individual staff who could leave at any time. While finding out who to talk to at the mine, we also had to organise as a family. Most families have tensions and disagreements, our family was no different. The threatened uncertainty of taking on a big mining company in defense of a family's legacy required us to look beyond our differences and organise **around a common cause**. We had to negotiate among ourselves on the following main issues:

- **Whether we agree to the exhumation or not.** We were divided on this matter, some family members, especially the older generation were uncertain about challenging the mine's perceived authority. Others opportunistically considered accepting the R9000 compensation per grave. The rest of us were ready to challenge the mine and protect the dignity of our ancestors on a plot of land that never actually belonged to our family. Despite the lacking land

ownership, we were willing to fight for it's sanctity because four generations of our family were buried on that piece of land.

- We had to **conscientise the rest of the family** about our right to challenge the mine and protect the dignity of our ancestors. We had to question the intentions of those who supported the exhumation.
- We managed to **assert women's voices and negotiation strategies** as the men in the family assumed they would 'naturally' be the family's representatives in discussions with the mine. As the only woman among the family delegation mandated to engage with the mine I led the process of formal correspondence, seeking legal advice and negotiating to have a written agreement as the outcome.
- We **sought legal advice** about our rights in anticipation of a court battle against the mine. If necessary, we were ready to take that step. A human rights lawyer advised us about our right to refuse the exhumation of the graves. We learnt that in terms of the National Health Act Regulations on human remains (2013)<sup>1</sup> families are not obliged to agree to the exhumation of a deceased family members' remains. Even if the majority in a family or community agree to exhumation and one person does not agree, the exhumation cannot go ahead.
- The family also held several **discussions in smaller groups** among trusted kin to reach consensus on our position regarding the exhumation and other issues we wanted to raise with the mine.
- We kept **written records of both processes** - the family discussions and the negotiations with the mine.
- When we were ready to engage the mine we had **clear 'demands' and a clear goal**.

### OUR GOAL:

Our goal was to formalise the outcome of our negotiations through a written agreement for future reference.

### OUR DEMANDS:

1. No exhumation
2. Agreeing on a boundary for mining operations to safeguard the gravesite
3. The mine to take responsibility for any damage caused
4. Free access to the graveyard for the family

- After the initial discussions with the mine, four of us, me and three male family members, arranged a **site visit with the relevant mine representatives**. We wanted to see the extent of the alleged damage to the graves and to impress upon the mine our affinity to the place. Two of us were raised in Ogies by two generations of grandparents.
- After the site visit we were resolute about our decision to resist any exhumation and communicated that to the rest of the family. In a **report-back family meeting** attended by two remaining family elders, my aunt and her aunt's husband, and about ten more uncles, aunts and cousins we motivated for the family resolution to oppose the exhumation at all costs. The majority of women in the family pushed to resist the exhumation but some were still afraid of the mine's power. Having sought legal advice on the matter we could explain our rights more clearly to the family, which provided confidence and reassurance regarding the matter.
- We also proposed the other two demands: Agreeing on a boundary for mining operations to safeguard the gravesite and the mine to take responsibility for any damage caused. Everyone decided to add the fourth demand to ensure regular access to the graveyard.

- After some final discussion **the family agreed to the common demands**: we wrote down what was agreed **and** everyone present **endorsed the collective decision with their signatures**. The written and signed family decision is our institutional memory for future generations.
- In our case a **written and signed record** was important as five family members who were in the meeting on the 16th October 2016 when the collective decision was made to oppose the exhumation of our family graves have since passed away. Interestingly none of them were buried in Ogies.
- In the family meeting three of us were **selected to represent the family** in presenting our demands to the mine and to negotiate for any further agreements we could get from the mine. I was the only woman in the family delegation and as I had already started email correspondence with the mine I continued the follow-up.

<sup>1</sup> A local authority may refuse an exhumation licence because the consent of the next of kin has not been given





## THE ENGAGEMENT

- We arranged to meet the relevant decision-makers and to visit the graveyard together because we wanted the mine's representatives to understand our family history and our affinity to that graveyard. In our first meeting with the mine on the 16th August 2016, their delegation of five included only one woman and I was the only woman in our delegation. The mine presented their plans for continued mining operations in the area and subsequent rehabilitation and we presented our demands.
- After seven months of engagement and continuous follow-up from our side; on the 13th of March 2017, the family received a letter from the General Manager of the local colliery managed by the global mining company, confirming two of our demands; no exhumation and unhindered access to the graveyard. **This was a victory! Our bond to the land could continue to live.**
- Although the rest of our demands were not acceded to in writing we have continued our engagement with an official from the mine assigned to community relations over the coming years to eventually have some of the damages repaired earlier this year, 2024.
- Further to our family struggle, there is an ongoing struggle against the destruction caused by coal mining in the Highveld.<sup>2</sup>

## MY LESSONS LEARNT

- One of the most valuable lessons for me through the whole process was to be assertive all the time and ready to challenge several layers of power expressed as;
  - o The automatic assumptions of men to speak on behalf of everyone including a majority of women
  - o Decision-making deferred to elders usually men as family or community elders.
  - o Corporate power over communities
- The importance of documenting processes for your own records, as evidence in the case of a dispute and for future reference as institutional memory
- Research to establish the facts and to know your rights to challenge injustice

*Keeping a written or audio-visual record as evidence of who's voice is represented in a collective decision is important. In a community setting, meetings could be video recorded, with permission.*



### Questions for reflection and discussion:

- What are you learning from Vanessa's story?
- What stood out for you?
- Have you had similar experiences?
- What has worked for you in similar situations?

<sup>2</sup><https://groundwork.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Digging-coal.pdf>.



For more information see the website of the Bench Marks Foundation: [www.bench-marks.org.za](http://www.bench-marks.org.za)  
And the Community Monitoring School: [www.communitymonitors.net](http://www.communitymonitors.net)

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