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Beyond commemoration: The unfinished struggle for women's equality in South Africa

South Africa (SA) celebrates National Women's Day annually on 9 August. The first official National Women's Day was commemorated on that day in 1995 by the country's democratically elected government to mark the 39th anniversary of the historic 1956 Women's March, which was a significant act of resistance against the apartheid regime during which women united to challenge discriminatory laws and practices. More than 20 000 women from diverse racial and social backgrounds marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria and submitted a petition containing over 100 000 signatures. Their protest was primarily directed against the pass laws, which required black South Africans to carry identification documents under the Population Registration Act and other apartheid legislation. The women also demanded equal rights and opportunities, and freedom from discrimination based on race and gender. The courage and determination of the women of 1956 have resulted in significant social and political progress. Many of the rights and freedoms they fought for are now enjoyed by the current generation. Over the years, several laws have been amended, and new legislation enacted to promote gender equality and protect women's rights.[1,2]

While National Women's Day remains an important occasion to honour the achievements and sacrifices of these women, it also highlights the fact that contemporary women continue to face various social, economic and gender-based challenges. The commemoration therefore acts not only as a celebration of past victories but also as a reminder of the ongoing work needed to achieve full equality and empowerment for all women. While the women of 1956 drew their strength and determination from the struggle against apartheid oppression, the fighting spirit of women in a democratic SA must be driven by the need to confront persistent social and socioeconomic inequalities.[1] Although significant progress has been made in advancing women's rights, many challenges continue to affect the lives of women today. Issues such as poverty, unemployment, workplace constraints, gender-based violence, unequal access to economic opportunities, and social exclusion remain widespread, and have not been adequately addressed. The struggle for equality therefore continues, requiring advocacy not only for the preservation of hard-won rights but also for meaningful social and economic transformation that improves the lives of all women.

The shocking levels of gender-based violence in our country remain a national crisis. Ironically, these statistics and personal stories tend to receive the greatest visibility during Women's Month and the 16 Days of Activism campaign. Although public attention often wanes outside of commemorative campaigns and awareness initiatives, this scourge continues to make headlines across the country, with each incident provoking public outrage and renewed calls for action from government, civil society, community organisations and other stakeholders.[1] While these groups consistently condemn such acts and advocate for stronger measures to hold perpetrators accountable, the persistence of these incidents raises serious concerns about the effectiveness of existing interventions. Despite widespread awareness campaigns, policy commitments and public condemnation, gender-based violence remains a pervasive challenge, highlighting the urgent need for more sustained, co-ordinated and impactful responses to address its root causes and prevent further abuse.

Workplace health challenges affecting women have long been overlooked and insufficiently addressed. Both men and women experience the pressures, uncertainties and disruptions that accompany life's challenges, but these experiences often affect them differently, and elicit distinct physical, emotional and psychological responses. Despite these differences and growing awareness of gender inequality in the workplace, workplace norms, policies and systems have traditionally been designed around male experiences and realities, reflecting the assumption that men's circumstances, career patterns and physical needs are representative of the entire workforce. As a result, the unique health needs, lived experiences and workplace challenges faced by women have often been historically underappreciated, inadequately understood, or insufficiently accommodated in organisational practices and decision-making. The examples that follow highlight some of these challenges, underscoring the need for greater recognition, understanding, and targeted intervention.

Awareness of workplace mental health and the implementation of related support initiatives have improved in recent years. However, women continue to experience rising levels of stress, while stigma surrounding mental health remains a significant barrier to seeking help. Women often contend with unique and compounding challenges both within and beyond the workplace, such as discrimination, harassment (including sexual) and unsafe working environments. In addition, they frequently bear a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities for children, ageing parents and household management.[3] Given these realities, organisations must take deliberate steps to prioritise women's health and wellbeing by fostering psychologically safe and inclusive workplaces where women feel valued, supported and empowered to reach their full potential and thrive in their careers.

Pregnancy is often a joyful and significant milestone for women and their families. However, because women's reproductive years frequently coincide with the most active and productive stages of their careers, there is an important interaction between pregnancy and work. Pregnancy can influence a woman's work experience, just as workplace conditions and demands can affect her health and wellbeing during pregnancy. For many individuals and couples, family planning begins long before conception, making reproductive health and fertility important considerations in the workplace. Employers should therefore be mindful of creating supportive environments that respect women's reproductive choices and avoid placing unnecessary pressure on them regarding fertility, pregnancy, or family planning. No woman should be forced to choose between pursuing a successful career and starting or growing a family; instead, workplaces should foster conditions that enable women to achieve both their personal and professional aspirations.[4]

Menopause can have a profound impact on a woman's physical health, emotional wellbeing and overall quality of life. It is therefore essential for organisations to recognise the challenges associated with this transition and provide appropriate workplace support, policies and accommodations to help women manage its effects effectively. At the same time, women should be empowered with information, and encouraged to take an active role in managing lifestyle factors, such as nutrition, physical activity, sleep and stress management, which can influence the severity of menopausal symptoms.[5]

As we approach 9 August and commemorate the 70th anniversary of the historic Women's March, we are compelled to reflect on the true meaning and value of National Women's Day. Beyond being a public holiday and a government-led celebration of women's achievements,

what tangible impact does this occasion, and the many events that accompany it, have on the everyday lives of women across SA? While Women's Month provides an important opportunity to honour the courage, resilience and sacrifices of those who marched to the Union Buildings in 1956, there is a risk that celebratory rhetoric can overshadow the realities that many women continue to face. Our Constitution guarantees equality before the law, and I have heard some contend that women have become the beneficiaries of preferential treatment, often at the expense of men and boys. Yet such arguments overlook a crucial distinction between formal equality and substantive equality. Legal recognition alone does not necessarily translate into equal lived experiences. Many women continue to encounter barriers that limit their access to socioeconomic opportunities, undermine their dignity, expose them to discrimination and, in some cases, threaten their safety and very survival. The struggle for genuine equality is far from over. National Women's Day should therefore be more than a commemoration of a defining moment in our history. It should serve as a catalyst for meaningful dialogue, critical reflection and collective action. As South Africans, we must use the space that August creates not only to celebrate the achievements of women, but also to engage in the work of building a future in which all women, regardless of race, class, or background, can live with dignity, safety and equal opportunity. We must ensure that SA's iconic rallying cry, 'Wathint' Abafazi, Wathint' Imbokodo!' ('You strike a woman, you strike a rock'), does not become a hollow slogan repeated only during commemorative events. Instead, the spirit of the 1956 Women's March must remain a living force that inspires continued advocacy, resistance against injustice and the pursuit of meaningful social transformation. After all, a society that empowers women strengthens the nation as a whole.



AI contribution. Artificial intelligence (AI) was used to refine language in this editorial.

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