



# Two Sides of the Same Bloody Coin

## Sexual Violence and Social Inequality

by Sheri Hamilton

Women's Month is often celebrated for the progress women have made since the dismantling of apartheid. Achievements like a Ministry of Women, Children and People with Disabilities and that South Africa has among the highest levels of women represented in government are celebrated. These include the appointments of women into positions beyond its borders such as former Managing Director at the World Bank, now leader of Agang, Mamphela Ramphele and recently of Nkosozana Dlamini-Zuma as chairperson of the African Union and Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka as head of UN Women. But as a recent survey by the Institute of Public Policy and Research (IPPR) in Britain has shown, the elevation of a few women to the citadels of power is no guarantee that the problems and concerns of women will receive greater attention.

The IPPR describe as the 'decoy effect' of only a tiny minority of high achieving, high profile women giving the impression that the glass ceiling has been shattered. StatSA's Gender Index confirms this lack of progress for the majority of women and shows that men of all races in South Africa still get paid more than women. Employment is the lowest among black women at 30.8% compared to 42% amongst black men while 72.6% of white males and 56.1% of white women are employed. In several other indices, the statistics prove that black women in South Africa still carry the triple burden of oppression and exploitation in terms of race, class and gender. Those few women who are employed, are among the lowest paid in jobs traditionally dominated by them such as domestic, caring and teaching jobs. Many women in the retail industry earn only marginally more than domestic and farmworkers and are subject to the same poor conditions of service and job insecurity.

### Women suffer from neo-liberalism

Much more startling is that high levels of gender inequality are mirrored in extremely high levels of violence against women and children which must serve as a barometer of not only a lack of progress but a reversal of the minimal gains made in the early years following the defeat of apartheid. This is evident through the attempts to introduce the Traditional Courts Bill that will disenfranchise women in rural areas. It is also experienced through the impact of the neoliberal economic policies introduced in 1996 on women. The cuts, privatisation and withdrawal of services have disproportionately affected women as have the effects of the 'blood bath of job losses' inflicted by the world economic recession. The burden of unemployment, of making ends meet in a context of escalating food, fuel and energy costs are all disproportionately endured by women who are expected to absorb the frustrations of those who have been robbed of the dignity of work.

Notwithstanding the fleeting attention of the media to the magnitude of the problem of sexual violence, it has uncovered considerable research on the possible causes of sexual violence in society. Amongst the many studies cited, statistics that stand out is that South Africa bears notoriety for not only being the world's rape capital as claimed by Interpol which says that a woman is more likely to get raped than educated, but South Africa has also sunk to the bottom of the rung in levels of gender and social inequality. SAPS' own statistics show that violence against women and children exceeds that of all other countries in the world. Their figures show that there were 64,514 sexual offenses reported in 2011/12 or 127.5 per 100,000 people compared to 2.1 and 92.9 per 100,000 in Kenya and Botswana and 27.3 and 63.5 per 100,000 in the US and Sweden respectively.



### Social inequality and sexual violence

There can be no doubt that there is a correlation between increasing levels of inequality which are themselves a direct consequence of the worst crisis of capitalism in over 80 years, gender inequality and violence against women. But it is also the result of deep seated sexism and discrimination that has become embedded in class society over thousands of years. Although many of the formal laws that legitimised women's oppression have been abolished in many countries including South Africa, the values and attitudes towards women are still deeply rooted in the social relations that developed in the transition from pre-capitalist society. These values and attitudes are entrenched in the role women occupy as commodities to be exchanged in alliances between families to accumulate wealth or to satisfy the sexual desires of men and in the social reproductive function of women in giving birth to the next generation and nurturing and caring for the young, the aged and infirm in society. While this does not mean that women and men do not form relationships based on love and affection for each other especially in modern societies, such relations are almost always complicated and subjected to the harsh reality of the economic conditions that impact their lives.

Although it tops the ranking for highest levels of sexual violence and income inequality South Africa is not unique - the World Health Organisation estimates that globally 1 in 5 women will be a victim of rape or attempted rape in her life time. In the US, for example, feminist writer, Gloria Steinman estimates that more American women have been killed by their husbands

or boyfriends since 2001 than all the US citizens killed in the 9/11 World Trade Centre attacks and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars put together. Globally, women are more likely to be maimed, or die from violence at the hands of men than by cancer, malaria, traffic accidents or war combined. Recently, women involved in the demonstrations in Egypt have been raped and sexually assaulted as part of the collective punishment meted out by those opposing their struggle for democracy and the liberation from oppressive religious practices.

### Legacy of apartheid

In South Africa the legacy of the violent and repressive apartheid regime which amongst others led to the breakdown of the family as a result of the migrant labour system, outdated cultural practices pressed into service to support capitalism, lack of or poor implementation of the policies that protect women and children by the police, the justice and social welfare systems, compounded by extreme inequalities disproportionately endured by women, are some of the more compelling reasons that may explain the extreme forms and levels of violence against women and children.

The struggle for women's liberation is at root therefore part of the class struggle. The struggle against rape, sexual offences and violent crimes against women, children and LGBT people can only succeed if built around a united campaign that links the demands for effective policing, justice and social welfare systems to those for a living wage, for quality jobs and for a massive programme of public investment in housing, basic services such as proper sanitation, affordable electricity and transport, health and education. Only a mass

movement, led by organised formations of women, workers, communities and youth can cut down the scourge of violence against the most vulnerable members of society. Therefore, the struggle against the specific oppression of women must be linked to the struggle for a fundamental restructuring of society to end all inequality and oppression.

However, on the basis of capitalism and given its worst crisis in over 80 years, this is not going to be possible and ultimately, requires a struggle to end the system that is responsible for the violence, degradation and exploitation of women and children. Only socialism will guarantee a shorter working week, equal pay for work of equal value, facilities that ensure society as a whole is responsible for the care of the very young, the old and infirm, where there is decent health, education, affordable and reliable public transport, recreational facilities and most of all when we produce for the needs of society and not for profit. Only under these conditions will it be possible to drastically reduce the levels of violence against women and children and bring about the basis for new attitudes to take root that will embrace the equality of the sexes and appreciate the many different ways there are to express our sexuality. This is not to argue that sexist attitudes will disappear as soon as the socialist transformation is achieved. Human consciousness tends to lag behind material conditions and therefore education to change attitudes and measures to protect women will still be necessary to counter backward ideas of women's position and to ensure their safety and security until a consciousness that corresponds to the material conditions that socialism will make possible is prevalent throughout society.



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