

VOICES FROM THE SOUTH



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Creating change through womens cooperatives

In this month's Voices from the south, we meet the South African organization Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation (Esset). Esset is an independent ecumenical organization working for gender equality and women's empowerment, with a special focus on socio-economic challenges. They promote the formation of economic and social cooperatives for women. These cooperatives can help create spaces for investments and income generation for women in marginalized communities, and challenge the structures in society that oppress women.

In 2016 Esset published the booklet, "Situation the role of patriarchy in sexual violence - the stories of black women", as a way of creating a platform for black working class women where they can tell their own stories of violence. The booklet, start with a powerful poem by the late Fezeka Kuzwayo who in 2006 made headlines when she accused then deputy president, and former comrade of her father, Jacob Zuma of rape. The poem is a powerful call for justice and equality for women in South Africa, and can highlight why the work of Esset and others are so important. You can read the poem at the end of the newsletter.



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Inequality

South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world, ranking among the top with regards to income inequality. With almost half the population living in poverty, the richest 1% of the population has 42% of the total wealth (DBSA 2005). The effects of poverty and inequality in South Africa have substantial racial, gender and age dimensions, with black African women being the most affected. The spatial dimensions are also very apparent; black African women are the least likely to be employed and at the periphery of basic service delivery. The HIV infection rates are highest amongst the youth with girls being more susceptible than boys. We hold that the correlation between gender based violence (GBV), poverty, inequalities and unemployment can no longer be ignored.

Acknowledging the socio-economic challenges confronting women, Ecumenical Service for Socio Economic Transformation (Esset)'s work is unapologetically biased towards gender equality and women's empowerment, making it a cross cutting theme in all of our programs.

Creating safe cooperatives

At the centre of Esset's agenda is the Economic Justice program. This falls under the Informal Trade program; a program that works at locating economic justice within the broad domain of women's rights. Through the Economic Justice program, women in marginalised communities in Lesotho, South Africa and Swaziland have been capacitated to form their own cooperatives. These cooperatives are crucial for income generation in the current South African context of gross unemployment characterised by gender discriminations. Esset underscores that when women participate equally in the global economy the positive outcomes can be far reaching. Yet, cooperatives are but one step towards curving a way for women to participate in the global economy.

Gender Based Violence

Esset also works towards politicising women to critically challenge the structural inequalities and patriarchal nature of today's society. GBV in all its forms including 'corrective rape' of lesbians remains a concern. Indeed GBV remains the most telling indicator of society's failure to protect and promote the rights and agency of women. In its efforts towards empowering mar-

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ginalised communities Esset is in the process of formulating a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex – Queer (LGBTI) program. Esset recognises the need to move beyond focusing on symptoms and rather address the structural conditions that allow inequalities to continue. As such, the work of Esset includes the politicisation of women’s rights, political training and the empowering of women with leadership

and financial literacy skills. Building on this, the cooperatives themselves work as an important agency for women as they provide a space for which women can not only voice challenges they face, but also develop strategies of how to deal with these challenges.

The social justice spinoffs are beginning to show; it is noteworthy that there has been notable shift in relations be-

tween men and women in the cooperatives with some women beginning to challenge the male dominated structures of their mother bodies. Furthermore, other programs including the Theology and Social Justice Program as well as the Community Development program have noted increased participation of women. Indeed participation in community processes and decisions affecting people’s lives are important elements

I AM KHANGA*

I wrap myself around the curvaceous bodies of women all over Africa
 I am the perfect nightdress on those hot African nights
 The ideal attire for household chores
 I secure babies happily on their mother’s backs
 Am the perfect gift for new bride and new mother alike
 Armed with proverbs, I am vehicle for communication between women
 I exist for the comfort and convenience of a woman
 But no no no make no mistake ...
 I am not here to please a man
 And I certainly am not a seductress
 Please don’t use me as an excuse to rape
 Don’t hide behind me when you choose to abuse
 You see
 That’s what he said my Malume
 The man who called himself my daddy’s best friend
 Shared a cell with him on [Robben] Island for ten whole years
 He said I wanted it
 That my khanga said it
 That with it I lured him to my bed
 That with it I want you is what I said
 But what about the **NO** I uttered with my mouth
 Not once but twice
 And the please no I said with my body
 What about the tear that ran down my face as I lay stiff with shock
 In what sick world is that sex
 In what sick world is that consent
 The same world where the rapist becomes the victim
 The same world where I become the bitch that must burn
 The same world where I am forced into exile because I spoke out?
 This is **NOT** my world
 I reject that world
 My world is a world where fathers protect and don’t rape
 My world is a world where a woman can speak out
 Without fear for her safety
 My world is a world where no one, but no one is above the law
 My world is a world where sex is pleasurable not painful

FEZKA KUZAWAYO

References: DBSA (Development Bank of Southern Africa). Development Report: Overcoming Underdevelopment in South Africa’s Second Economy. July, 2005.
 Photo credit: Esset (pg. 1), Charles Young (pg. 2)

* “Khanga” is a traditional light African cotton fabric printed with coloured designs, used mainly for women’s clothing.

