

Commemorating Women's Month

By: Litlhare Rabele*

Wednesday 19 August 2015

August gives an opportunity for all of us in South Africa to reflect on the status of women in South Africa, the role that women play in development, to take stock of achievements, celebrate women who have contributed to the political and socio-economic development as well as the advancement of other women in South Africa, identify challenges ahead and strategies to overcome these challenges faced by women. This year's commemoration comes at an opportune time in 2015 when the country celebrates 59 years of the Freedom Charter and 21 years of democracy. Furthermore, 2015 has been declared as the African Union (AU) Year of Women Empowerment and Development towards AU Agenda 2063. These indeed call for renewed political will and commitment on the side of the government and decision makers to ensure respect of women's rights as provided for in the African Union Maputo Protocol on the Rights of African women and the constitution of South Africa.

As we reflect on areas that need more focus, the following comes to mind:

- Development of rural women and how government departments work together to develop them, in particular socio-economic development that has to deal with, among others, access to quality sexual and reproductive health services, access and right to own land and the means of production including financial capital and a right to live in safe environments. The country has over the years been affected by domestic and gender-based violence in all areas of the country, both rural and urban, leading to many women being tortured and some losing their lives in the hands of family members and lovers. In addressing these, renewed efforts have to be made to ensure that police officers are safe so that they can be able to assist to protect lives and property especially lives of women and children. The recent alarming rate of police killings are a concern to us advocates of women's rights and we urge the government to commit more resources to ensure that police officers are not killed in the line of duty.
- Development programmes targeted at women with disabilities across the country have to be made a priority. Although government has programmes to empower women politically and socio-economically, women with disabilities are still left out in the mainstreaming of development programmes. Women with disabilities are further marginalised more than other women due to their disabilities. The government has to consider more the provision of special education and access to quality education for women and girls with disabilities. This can assist them fight poverty and marginalisation, hence to be able to participate in all areas of development. Unfortunately women with disabilities do not have access to good quality education across the country especially in rural areas, as there are limited centres of study for people with disability in general. The sexual and reproductive health rights of women with disabilities are often neglected, as health workers are not conversant with sign language. This poses a challenge to women with disabilities when they have to express their health concerns. It would be helpful if government could invest in ensuring that some health workers in public health centres are familiar with sign language. Government has to document the numbers of disabled people in the country, and disability should be categorised by gender, age and by disability type. This will help government to plan programs to empower and develop women with disabilities and girls as well as people with disabilities in general.
- More commitment to girl child education especially in rural areas where the traditional practice of *ukuthwala* (traditional practice where young girls are kidnapped into being married as wives) is still a norm. Although enrolment rate has increased over the years, girls drop out of school in high numbers due to a number of factors such as early teenage pregnancy, *ukuthwala* and some of the girls having to go and work to provide for their siblings, especially in child-headed families. It is important that government increases efforts to retain girl children in schools, especially in rural areas. Teachers should be trained in the use of sign language and braille, and appropriate teaching and learning aids should be provided across the country for girl children with disabilities.

Having said these, one appreciates the work that the government has done, efforts that are continuous and would like to encourage government to do more in the above mentioned areas.

Happy women's month- Wa thinda bafasi, wa thinda imbokotho!

* **Litlhare Rabele is SALO's Gender, Peace and Security Coordinator.** *She has a Masters Degree in Public Policy and Governance from Wits School of Governance. Her Masters Thesis is on Factors that contribute to low participation of women as candidates in Lesotho's National Elections 1998-2012 National elections. Her work includes research, advocacy and lobbying for more active participation of women in the peace process, mediation, electoral democracy and participation of women in the elections. Her interests are mainly on research on South Sudan, South Africa's foreign policy, African Union instruments and UNSC. She has vast experience across the continent including working in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, South Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia and the SADC region.*

The Dialogue Online, is an online extension of SALO's national, regional and international consensus-building dialogues (typically workshops, seminars and small meetings) on Peace and Security, Development, SA Foreign Policy, Gender (including LGBTI rights), Natural Resource Governance, Human Rights and the rights of migrant communities through *weekly written articles and/or commentary*. It is a channel through which critical issues raised during dialogue events are synthesised and shared with wider audiences. By taking the dialogue 'online', the conversation is enabled to continue beyond the limits of space and time and to a wider audience.

Since SALO's central focus is peace and security, *Dialogue Online* articles focus primarily on this theme, but drawing attention to the nexuses with development, natural resource governance, human rights and gender, mediation, environment and climate change. Preference is towards articles that speak to international development and peace building policy and practice, raise awareness about conflict situations and the gender dimensions thereof and provoke fresh thinking and policy debate. Contributions are drawn from SALO's pool of experts, peace building and development practitioners, activists, academics, former and current diplomats and workshop participants.

Please note that the articles represent views of respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect SALO's view or position.

Interested contributors are welcome to email articles of 750 to 1000 words in length to info@salo.org.za for consideration.

Please follow us on twitter [@salo_info](https://twitter.com/salo_info) and [#DialogueOnline](https://twitter.com/DialogueOnline) SALO for comments.

SALO would like to thank

(in alphabetical order) the European Union; Irish Aid and the Embassy of Ireland, Pretoria; the Royal Norwegian Embassy, Pretoria; The Olof Palme International Centre; Open Society Foundation; the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA); the Southern African Trust and UK aid, among others, for their for their ongoing support of our Policy Dialogue Series.

