

## Women traders in Rustenburg take charge of their struggle

Great strides is being made by women informal traders in Rustenburg, North West just few months down the line following with them on their rights and how these are continually undermined. The reflections took place at the Rustenburg Taxi rank, with about 30 women. The platform gave women a space to critically analyse the rules and regulations of informal trade; their experiences in the existing spaces for participation and engagements with government departments that have been constitutionally entrusted with the responsibility to bring development in the informal trading sector. These reflections also gave women a space to voice out issues affecting their day-to-day work and to devise strategies to ensure that their voice is heard.

A number of disturbing issues emerged from the reflections. We learnt that there is no clear policy on informal trade. The laws that are used to regulate informal trade in the area and the province still reflect the old apartheid rule. The municipality tends to communicate with traders through newspapers and by-law booklets written in English and Afrikaans, which is not reader-friendly to most traders who are illiterate. These by-law booklets or newspapers would have on them information on the the processes that should be followed when goods are being confiscated, but because the traders are not familiar with the language, they will then have to bear the feeling of loosing their goods. Traders are not involved in policy formulation processes affecting them with no measures made to ensure that they participate. The current by-laws work against informal traders, who are mostly women. Women traders also suffer unfair law-enforcement by municipal police who often fail to follow proper procedures. Women complained that whilst the informal trade sector is dominated by women, most of their leadership committees consist of mainly men, who at times are not even traders themselves. Decisions taken thus fail to consider their views.

Another concern raised by women was that in as much as women traders are aware of the unfair policy processes that exclude them, they preferred to remain silent and focus on the fact that they are able to wake up everyday and work for their families. When questioned about why they did not oppose this unfair practice, they indicated that that this is how things are done there. They linked this to their Ba-tswana culture where women are expected to remain submissive to their men. In this regard, they expressed their belief that a better solution for a woman or for a woman's problem is a man, "*Sethlare sa mosadi ke mmona*". This basically means that, whatever the man or (leaders) do either wrong or rightly so, is ok because they were 'meant' for that – to be decision-makers, leaders and heads of the family and society. The women have also extended this belief to other areas of their lives, including race. They alluded to the fact that generally, poorBatswana community believes that a solution for a motswana person or a black-person is a white man. This in essence indicate that there is nothing a motswana person can do without the intervention of a white person.

Listening to these assertions, it was very clear that socialisation and internalised oppression is playing a major role in delaying transformation in the lives of these women. In fact, to us their socialisation is playing a critical role in reinforcing their harrassment and violation of their rights both by government and some of their male counterparts. The kind of oppression witnessed in this province is not peculiar amongst informal traders but is

prevalent amongst other people in other provinces as well. Many people as a result continue to be disempowered as those in power take advantage of their vulnerabilities.

However, we were pleasantly surprised at the end of our engagements with women traders in Rustenburg when they indicated that the reflections have opened their eyes and minds. The women also strongly felt that it is in their best interest to raise their own voice in all processes that concern their sector and their lives. They resolved to mobilize themselves as women informal traders in that area. This was going to begin with a meeting they planned to convene as women to start to conscientize each other on their rights and how they can protect and promote those rights.

We visited the group three months later. We learnt that the women did not waste time in putting their resolutions into effect. They started to mobilize themselves with the aim to address some of their internal issues such as encouraging unity amongst themselves as traders, liaise with the other groups of informal traders in the area. During that time, the local municipality through its law-enforcement agency – metro police, embarked on a clean-up campaign which led to the confiscation of their stock. This took place without prior consultation with traders. As usual, the women traders expected their leaders who are men to act in their defence. When women observed the reluctance of their male counterparts, they were reminded of the information that was recently shared with them on their rights. They decided to take matters into their own hands using the knowledge they have gained and commitments they have made. They contacted the Lawyers for Human Rights and narrated their ordeal, which the lawyers agreed to help them. They set an appointment and organised their own transport to meet with the lawyers. There were about 33 women in total who met with the lawyer.

The decision by women traders to consult the lawyers evoked a reaction from the male dominated leadership committee who felt disrespected. This kind of reaction is of course a matter of concern, and reflects the general resistance to gender transformation in our society. This attitude is prevalent in most spheres of our society where men feel disempowered when women start to take a leadership role. This tendency also tends to contribute to domestic violence .

However, despite this setback, the meeting with the lawyer ended on a positive note with the lawyers agreeing to file a court case against the municipality. On the day of the court case the women traders organised their own transport and went to Mafikeng High Court on their own. One could see the joy and pride in their faces as they told their story. They were proud of the way they have acted upon their plight by themselves. Certainly to them, the ruling of court which worked in their favour was a cherry on top.

The Mafikeng High Court ordered the municipality to stop harrasing the traders and to stop confiscating their stock until the municipality arranged a meeting with the traders' lawyers to find a mutual agreement or an out- of court settlement. The court also ruled that the municipality should compensate each trader an amount of R500 for the confiscated stock. If the municipality continues to violate the rights of informal traders, the municipality would have to pay a fine of R50 000. This was clearly a resounding victory for informal traders. **33 women informal traders from Rustenburg stood the test of time by taking a lead in**

**fighting for justice and protecting their rights by challenging the local authorities and forces of power that sought to undermine their rights.** The women were happy that they can now trade without fear of being harrassed by the authorities.

Clearly, there is a sign of a real shift of mind-set from the time when we met women traders in Rustenburg. This also verifies that women can really effect change in our society. Even those in power in that area will from now onwards have to think twice when dealing with these women. Some of them have told us that they have also decided to stop believing on the cultural phrase that says: "the solution for women's problems is a man". They said taking a lead in their struggle has been something that they have always longed for and just one initiative has proven that they are capable. They stated that they could not afford to be led by people who seem to care less about what matters most to them as women. Forward with women empowerment!

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