



## **A PRACTICAL AGENDA FOR WOMEN'S DAY IN 2017**

### **A slippery slope to the top**

In the era where transformation and women empowerment receive rhetorical attention, Women's Day might feel more ritualistic than programmatic. In a society in which women contend with despicable abuse, they still have to fight for unfair treatment and equal pay in the workplace. Are we living in a world where a leader is a leader, not a female leader?

Sheryl Sandberg has hit the nail on the head: "In the future, there will be no female leaders. There will be just leaders." But we don't live in such a future yet. Women remain on the margins of decision-making in our society, despite the fact that some studies have shown that more women than men possess traits that are suited for leadership. This was confirmed in a study led by Professor Oyvind Martinsen of the Norwegian Business School whose team assessed characteristics of nearly 3 000 managers. The conclusion was emphatic: that in all areas women are better leaders than their male counterparts.<sup>i</sup>

Another study involving 7 820 leaders, undertaken by Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, appearing in the Harvard Business Review, arrived at a similar conclusion. While the majority of men remain leaders, the study found that many women were rated on 360-degree evaluations as better leaders than their male counterparts.<sup>ii</sup> If this is so, why are women conspicuous by their absence in positions of leadership?

The answer probably lies in gender biases and negative filters, rooted in part in societal perceptions, with which women are viewed when it comes to promotion or appointment to leadership roles. They have to climb a steep slippery wall to get to the top. Even when they are at the top, their performance tends to be judged harsher than that of their male counterparts.

From a worker's point of view, the task of creating a fairer workplace must involve the institutionalisation of checks and balances that protect women from unfair discrimination. Importantly, empowerment programmes should be genuine and deliberate. Perhaps the best way women can be celebrated this 9<sup>th</sup> of August is through a year-round commitment to constant awareness about the iniquities that still persist in the work place. Shifting the terms of the debate from rhetoric to real policy interventions is no doubt going to be a steep mountain to climb in a milieu characterized by backward ideas about the role of women in society.

### **Supporting working mothers**

The foregoing observations must not be misconstrued to imply that our society has not moved an inch. Women have made some notable progress in recent years. Even though patriarchal prejudices still exist, misogynists are no longer as emboldened as they were decades ago to peddle their mad ideas against women in the public domain. This is no small feat considering the strategic importance of the realm of ideas.

We must be practical when dealing with the challenges that affect women. The working mother confronts unique challenges in the workplace. We know from research and experience that from the age of 22, a majority of women have at least one child.<sup>iii</sup> It is true that having a child does affect work-life balance for women, and in many instances it has an impact on disposable income, careers, and access to education. The role of women as primary caregivers at home is not recognised in society in ways that enable them to advance in their careers or to compensate for career disadvantages such role imposes. Policy interventions that are aimed at supporting mothers indirectly support children, thereby contributing to their long-term well-being as human capital.

A policy-driven support for women as working mothers could have a number of features. First, there should be a system of state-backed childcare centres to relieve some of the strain associated with being a mother in a society that rewards success in a defined work environment biased towards men. Despite its indirect benefit to society, unsupported by the state, childcare can be a burden. Without access to childcare, many working women tend to rely on either family support or short-change the well-being of their children in ways that could potentially generate risks for society in the long run. The promotion of state-supported childcare can be transformative, helping promote the role of women in the workplace, and ensure a more stable support structure for children in the long-run.

There are also substantial benefits on offer to both the community and the child. This could increase jobs in the social sector – with demand for child care specialists. Trained childcare professionals can be important assets in the education of children, with recent research indicating that much of a child’s cognitive development is determined in the first five years of a child’s life. Building childcare centres that are safe can provide for the needs of children, and offer stimulating educational environments. Placing these centres where the need is greatest (particularly in townships) would also create job opportunities for members of the local community. Particularly inspiring in this regard is the Home Based Community Based Care (HBCBC), which trains local women to work as caregivers in their community (with a focus on those living with HIV/AIDs), and building resilience in the community while offering income to local women and creating future training opportunities.

Second, there should be consideration given to a system of variable payouts from the Unemployment Insurance Fund. The UIF is currently sitting on a surplus that is estimated to rise to R175 billion by 2019. Redistributing this money in innovative ways could offer real benefits from a preexisting pool of government funds. One way to do this would be to recognise that mothers often have higher costs than other people, having to support themselves and their children. While some of this extra gap is covered by the childcare grant, at only R1 500 this is not sufficient. Offering higher UIF payouts to mothers (and fathers caring for children) could offer additional support that is consummate with the additional role of mothers or male caregivers in society.

Third, there is an urgent need to reconsider how the childcare maintenance payment system works in South Africa. The country faces an epidemic of absent fathers, with 67% of fathers not part of the household where children are raised.<sup>iv</sup> While a part of this number reflects fathers who are deceased or who live elsewhere, a substantial portion is believed to indicate fathers who are renegades from families or households. Having support from two parents has been consistently shown to offer benefits to children, and these include better educational results and better health outcomes.

### **Rhetoric is not enough**

Many of the creative ideas that could empower women are cross-cutting, breaking across gender lines, and offering the potential to create real benefits for all working people in the country, and act as a point of solidarity in the advancement of gender equality.

Apart from efforts to support women for the advancement of their careers or improvement of their well-being, there is a need to intensify the fight against gender-based violence. Support to survivors of gendered violence needs to be broad-based - with urgent reforms needed to policing, hospital care, and changing community attitudes. Some of these reforms would have to be targeted, for example, creating a special unit within the police to deal with gender-based

violence, rather than trying to reform the entirety of the police force (which is an impossible task in the short-term).

Perhaps the priority intervention should focus on the expansion of the system of state-funded women's shelters, and the running of aggressive public awareness campaigns to assure that survivors of gender-based violence know where they can find safety, and understand the protections that the shelters offer. The 2017 Women's Day should mark a moment when a decisive step is taken in the direction of genuinely empowering women. Rhetoric is not enough. It is real action that is required.

### End notes

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<sup>i</sup> Hosie, Rachel, "Women are Better Leaders than Men, Study of 3000 Managers Concludes", *Independent*, 30 March 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> Zenger, Jack and Joseph Folkman, "Are Women Better Leaders than Men?", *Harvard Business Review*, 5 March 2012.

<sup>iii</sup> StatsSA, Census 2011

<sup>iv</sup> StatsSA, General Household Survey 2016