

# STRENGTHENING EFFORTS AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE THROUGH WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES

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As summer hit in Gainesville, the opposite was true in a brutal first week of winter as I settled in Johannesburg for 12 weeks of research for my Masters practicum. I had partnered with Gender Links for Equality and Justice, a Southern Africa NGO that works towards promoting gender equity among the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) countries. My research was localized in Gauteng Province, South Africa and focused on monitoring the implementation of the second phase of their 'Sunrise Campaign' - a project that seeks to mitigate GBV regionally.

Gender Links has piloted quite a unique model that works with local municipality governments to end GBV and promote women's economic empowerment (WEE). The rationale behind collaborative efforts with local governments is grounded in the fact that municipalities are the closest representative of government directly in contact with the citizens and therefore capable of effecting change from a political policy level. Local governments are tasked with the responsibility of identifying women who are survivors of GBV from their councils. The women then undertake training facilitated by Gender Links. Community and national redress to GBV is thus approached from an eclectic standpoint incorporating both top-down and bottom-up methods.

The women attended workshops that first introduced them to concepts of gender, gender roles, violence, and self-agency. They were then taken through a combined training primarily centered on entrepreneurship skills and digital literacy. Integrating efforts between GBV and WEE has been proposed in multiple scholarly literatures, NGO working documents etc. as an effective way to tackle the problem. Economic dependence among women is highly interlinked with high incidences of GBV. However, this relationship has not been clearly delineated by existing research and data.

I spent the first few weeks combing



through in-house publications emanating from the pilot phase. I also had the opportunity to attend training workshops in Emfuleni and Midvaal municipalities, where I conducted participant observation, focus groups and interviews with the women and with gender focal persons (GFPs) who are municipality workers tasked with matters pertaining to gender. It was rewarding to witness young women who had never engaged with concepts like gender, socialization and power systems absorb all the new information at the same time and make connections to the bigger picture of why violence against women was so rampant in their country. It was an awakening.

From data collected, I was able to identify strengths and weaknesses that the project in general needed to look into. On the positive side, the women showed a high rate of absorption of training content and articulated interest in entrepreneurship not just as an escape route from violence but also a means to uplift their livelihoods. Trainer-participant engagement was very high, in a conducive environment that allowed optimum learning.

On the flipside, the relationship between Gender Links and the councils was not as strong as needed to be and this influenced

the sustainability of the program beyond the training. Councils indicated a need for further collaboration with Gender Links such that participants could be supported beyond the project's lifecycle given the fact that entrepreneurship is a journey and not a one-off event. There was also a need to establish a system to evaluate learning outcomes among the women so as to strengthen weak areas. Finally, monitoring & evaluation processes needed to be fortified especially when collecting information that relates to changes in income, personal agency and relationship control. In conclusion, there are future opportunities for Gender Links to expand on this program and contribute further to the documentation of link between GBV and WEE.

During my time in the field I also got the opportunity to contribute a chapter on Women and Security in the region for the current edition of the SADC Gender Protocol Barometer.

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