

Budget Cuts Leave GBV Survivors in the Cold

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South Africa, a country grappling with rising gender-based violence (GBV), femicide, and violence against children, has a government that contradicts its words with actions. Despite assurances of working tirelessly to address GBV, the government continues to undermine organisations fighting against it.

The 2023 statistics reported by Police Minister Bheki Cele paint a grim picture: 12,200 rape cases and 969 women murdered in just three months. The fear of appearing in the '*Women for Change*' page has become a harsh reality for many women, with hashtags like '*Am I Next?*' gaining momentum on social media. Why, then, has the government decided to cut funding for organisations dealing with this pandemic?

Eldorado Park Women's Forum (EPWF), established in 2000, has been a safe haven for women escaping GBV. The organisation provided a shelter, counselling, victim empowerment, anger and trauma management, Early Childhood Development (ECD), and other essential services to 22 beneficiaries (17 women and 5 children). However, due to funding issues with the Department of Social Development (DSD), EPWF faces permanent closure.

On 9 February 2024, Staff members, who went without salaries for over four months, finally left the organisation, forcing beneficiaries to vacate the shelter. Beneficiaries were re-united with families, which meant some women had to return to their perpetrators or abusive partners, while others were moved to other shelters.

The funding issues with DSD began in 2021, with delays in disbursing funds and eventually, without warning, DSD cut funding altogether, citing non-compliance as the reason. Over five shelters in Johannesburg face closure due to similar funding issues.

According to Sibongile Thwala, DSD requires organisations to use government-approved service providers and submit various documents, including building plans, zoning certificates, food handling certificates, evacuation plans. While organisations have some of these documents, DSD regards them invalid as they are provided by private service providers. While it is valid for DSD to require this compliance for the safety of beneficiaries, they can't completely ignore the certificates provided by private service providers and opt to shut down organisations who do not use the City's service providers, completely ignoring the cost implications for organisations to get all this compliance certificates. "DSD showed very little empathy and compassion for the affected women, children and staff members. Even after cutting our funding, DSD still requested statistics, yet, they have not asked about the state of the beneficiaries, their placements and the staff who have lost their jobs" said Thwala.

The tensions between the organisations and DSD came to the boil that they ended up in court. Gauteng Care Crisis Committee (GCCC) represented the 5 organisations in court, and on 15 May 2024, the court ruled in their favour, instructing DSD to issue Service Level Agreements (SLA) and disburse payments to organisations in the first week of June. However, DSD failed to comply, leading to another court hearing on 13 June 2024.

The future for community organisations remains uncertain, leaving vulnerable women and children in the cold. The democratic government's actions contradict their claims of

working to curb violence against women and children, worsening their vulnerability. This organisations play a critical role to respond to the psychosocial needs of children, youth and women. In a country where women are killed daily, EPWF plays a vital role in keeping women safe and children safe from their violent homes.

Due to staff leaving EPWF, it has fallen victim of a burglary where laptops, computers and other equipments were stolen. This has worsened the situation for the organisation, which may be forced to permanently close its doors unless an intervention is made.

* Sibongile Thwala is not the real name of the interviewee.

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