

## **Gender Equity and the Role of Women in South African Society**

In fall 2011, a delegation of nine American Association of University Women (AAUW) members traveled to South Africa for 10 days of research, dialogue, cultural events, and educational experiences. From October 24 to November 2, the AAUW Women in Society Delegation visited sites around Johannesburg and Cape Town, including the infamous Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. The highlight of the visit was the many meetings the delegates had with women leaders in education, medicine, politics, and law.

This historic trip—taking place just 20 years after apartheid was abolished in South Africa—was designed to build relationships and open opportunities for dialogue with leading professional women who are working to break through barriers for the women and girls of South Africa. Through these discussions, the delegates gained a deeper understanding of the region’s challenges and learned how women are helping to develop positive, creative strategies to improve the educational, social, economic, and political status of women and girls.

This paper summarizes the findings of the delegation. Unless otherwise noted, statistics and statements cited in this paper are based on delegation member notes from the discussions and cannot be verified by public data.

### **I. The status of women in South Africa**

During the trip, the AAUW delegates met with women leaders in a number of different fields, including

- Sibongile Khoza, headmistress of Mdelwa Hlongwane Primary School
- Bob Nameng, founder of Soweto Kliptown Youth
- Keira Powers, managing director of Spirit of Africa
- Angelica Pino, resource mobilisation coordinator for the Sonke Gender Justice Network
- Wesahl Domingo and Elsje Bonthuys, law faculty at the University of the Witwatersrand
- Alison Gitleson and Colleen Larsen, Women in Finance
- Sadeeka Williams and Noeline de Goede, Hope Cape Town
- Vivian Zilo, Iliso Care Society
- Judith Smith Vialva, director of the Southern African Media and Gender Institute
- Jennifer Williams, director of the Women’s Legal Centre

Women’s rights are guaranteed in South Africa’s constitution (1996), which holds that “everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law.” The constitution’s Bill of Rights specifically prohibits discrimination based on “race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language, and birth.”<sup>1</sup> The Parliament has passed additional laws to protect the rights of women and children against violence, including the Domestic Violence Act, the Children’s Act, and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters)

Act.<sup>2</sup> But, as the delegates learned, even though on paper South Africa is one of the most progressive nations for women, South African women and girls have a long way to go before they achieve full equity.

One of the greatest hurdles to equality is the sexist behavior and gender roles that pervade South African society. Notions of masculinity and manhood, predicated on a traditional gender hierarchy and male sexual entitlement, continue to dominate even at the highest levels. The country's president, Jacob Zuma, currently has three wives and a fiancée.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, an alarming number of women are infected with HIV/AIDS, and violence against women and children remains a serious problem throughout the country.

Adding to the complexity of South African society is its diversity: the country recognizes 11 official languages, and its population includes Christians, traditional Africans, Hindus, Muslims, and Jews.<sup>4</sup> Before 1991, South African law divided the population into four major racial categories: Africans (black), whites, coloreds (mixed-race), and Asians (Indian). Although this classification system and the other pillars of apartheid were officially abolished in 1991, many of the country's more than 50 million citizens still view themselves and others according to these categories today. Black Africans, divided into a number of different ethnic groups, make up approximately 80 percent of the population. Whites account for 9 percent of the population, with coloreds at 9 percent and Asians at 2.5 percent.<sup>5</sup>

The AAUW delegation met with individuals and groups that are working passionately to break through the complex and formidable barriers for women and girls through outreach, education, counseling, and litigation. But, as delegates observed, the country seems to lack a unified women's movement. Although there are a number of women's organizations, individuals, and projects dedicated to protecting and empowering South African women, these groups are not reaching out, coordinating, and working together.

As one source says of the current situation, "Gender equality is enshrined in South Africa's democratic constitution of 1996, and a spate of progressive laws has since been passed to advance women's human rights. But while (especially black) women continue to carry the brunt of poverty and gender-based violence, implementation of the laws has been inconsistent, and service delivery has in some cases all but collapsed. South Africa's high level of women's representation in the executive and parliament seems not to make much difference, a situation exacerbated by the lack of a coordinated women's movement."<sup>6</sup>

## **II. Employment**

The Employment Equity Act of 1998 seeks to eliminate discrimination in the workplace and ensure that Africans, coloreds, Indians, women, and people with disabilities are equitably represented at all occupational levels.<sup>7</sup> But more than a decade after the act's passage, many of these groups—including women—still face significant challenges in achieving true equality in employment.

### **White men dominate the top echelons of the workplace.**

Women make up nearly half the labor force in South Africa.<sup>8</sup> Most are in lower-wage jobs, particularly domestic service.<sup>9</sup> Women are also more likely to be unemployed<sup>10</sup> and to head the poorest households.<sup>11</sup> As one speaker told delegates, employment in South Africa “remains very much a male-dominated job market.”

This especially rings true for upper-level positions. Delegates learned that the higher up the ranks you go, the fewer women you see. White men continue to hold the majority of management positions in both the public and private sectors. According to the Commission for Employment Equity’s 2009–10 annual report, white men hold 63 percent of the top management positions in the country’s private sector. Meanwhile, African women hold just 3 percent of those positions, and colored and Indian women hold just 1 percent each.<sup>12</sup>

The news is not all bad for South African women, however. Progress has been made in some areas. For instance, women now account for 45 percent of academic staff in universities, and about a quarter of judges are women.<sup>13</sup> Women are also making gains in the political arena (see below).

### **Women continue to earn less than men do.**

Across the globe, women continue to earn less than men do for equal work performed. South Africa is no exception.

In its 2009–10 annual report, the Commission for Employment Equity notes that salaries are still based on race and gender in a number of workplaces and that some employers actually admit to this discriminatory practice.<sup>14</sup> Some estimates claim that women make 25–35 percent less than men do for equal work performed.<sup>15</sup> The commission is calling for a new section to be added to the Employment Equity Act that deals explicitly with wage discrimination based on race and gender for employees doing the same work, similar work, or work of equal value.<sup>16</sup>

AAUW delegates learned of the country’s pervasive wage gap when they visited the University of the Witwatersrand. They met with Wesahi Domingo of the law faculty, who had conducted research on pay equity at the university. She found that women faculty members were being paid 3–6 percent less than men of equal rank. Domingo brought her data to the administration and is currently pursuing a case to adjust women’s salaries.

### **Women are making strides in the political arena.**

Women have been making significant political gains since the country legally ended apartheid and started holding fully democratic elections 17 years ago. Before that, women held just 2.7 percent of nationally elected seats in Parliament.<sup>17</sup> Today, 44.5 percent of those serving in South Africa’s Parliament are women.<sup>18</sup> Some attribute the gains in part to the African National

Congress' 50/50 Campaign, which aims to achieve 50 percent parity in all areas of government and governance.<sup>19</sup>

### **III. Education**

Under South Africa's Bill of Rights, everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education. The Bill of Rights also grants everyone the right to further education, which the state must make available and accessible through reasonable measures.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Girls and boys have relatively equal access to primary education.**

According to the United Nations Development Programme, primary education in South Africa enjoys strong gender equity. At the primary level, almost the same proportion of school-age boys and girls attend school. Where small differences do exist, they favor girls.<sup>21</sup>

Although access is high, the quality of education is still a problem.<sup>22</sup> The United Nations states that serious interventions are needed to improve the quality of education, particularly within the historically black section of South Africa's school system.<sup>23</sup>

In Johannesburg, delegates visited Mdelwa Hlongwane Primary School. The school includes pre-K to seventh-grade students and has 20 teachers, 15 of whom are women. The school's principal, Sibongile Khoza, explained that most students come from a "squatter camp" and must walk 8–10 kilometers to school each day.

Although reports cite equal access in South African schools, the delegates were concerned about the lack of girls at Mdelwa Hlongwane Primary School. They found that approximately 30–35 percent of students were girls. When asked, the teachers could not provide a reason for this disparity. Many delegates got the sense that the teachers were overwhelmed with their work and the demands of students and that they simply did not know the answer.

#### **Women and men also have relatively equal access to higher education.**

According to the South African Council on Higher Education, in 2009, women made up 57 percent of the total enrollment in public higher education for that year (478,175 women enrolled). The council adds that "at the undergraduate and honors levels, more women enroll than men, but at the master's and doctoral levels, there are more men than women."<sup>24</sup>

### **IV. Health**

South Africa has one of the highest rates of HIV infection in the world, with more than 5 million HIV-infected individuals. Overall, more than one-tenth of the country's 50 million people are infected.<sup>25</sup> Nearly 1,000 new infections occur each day, and approximately 350,000 people die

of AIDS-related complications annually.<sup>26</sup> And as delegates learned during their visit, the situation is particularly dire for women and girls.

### **HIV prevalence remains disproportionately high for girls and women.**

Girls and women ages 15 to 24 are four times more likely to be infected with HIV than are boys and men.<sup>27</sup> In fact, among this age group, women account for about 90 percent of new HIV infections.<sup>28</sup> One report notes that in some parts of the country, more than 35 percent of women of childbearing age have HIV.<sup>29</sup>

### **Groups are working to overcome misconceptions and protect women.**

The delegates heard accounts of older, rich “sugar daddies” who target girls as young as 8 or 9 years old for sex, thus increasing their vulnerability to HIV infection. Delegates also heard accounts of grave misconceptions about HIV and HIV transmission. Dr. Sadeeka Williams of Hope Cape Town told delegates, “We are dealing with a myth that says if a man has sex with a virgin, he can rid himself of HIV/AIDS. This is driving young girls’ issues with the disease.” Williams added that 60–70 percent of the cases coming into her emergency room are related to HIV/AIDS. According to Williams, “Among health care issues for women, HIV/AIDS is number one, and number two is trauma and abuse.”

Misinformation about HIV/AIDS reaches even the highest levels in South Africa. The country’s current president, Jacob Zuma, said in 2006 that he took a shower after having unprotected sex with an HIV-positive woman because it “would minimize the risk of contracting the disease.”<sup>30</sup>

Compounding the situation is a culture in which male dominance is pervasive and contraceptive use is rare. In addition, traditional beliefs prevail in many areas. For example, healers known as “sangomas” administer the majority of health care in many communities, and Zulus—South Africa’s largest ethnic group—do not practice circumcision, which has been shown to decrease a man’s chance of contracting HIV/AIDS by nearly 60 percent.<sup>31</sup>

Nonprofit groups such as Hope Cape Town are working to tackle these misconceptions and challenges and help protect women and children through outreach, education, and counseling at the community level. Delegates learned about Hope’s core program, in which community health workers provide HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis counseling and support the treatment regimens and health concerns of clinic patients in low-income communities in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. Hope is also collaborating with sangomas to provide coordinated services to clients exploring traditional options and clinic treatment.<sup>32</sup>

## **V. Violence against women**

### **Sexual violence against South African women is alarmingly high.**

South Africa has the world's highest rate of rape and sexual assault for any country not entangled in conflict. Some estimate that a woman is raped every 26 seconds in South Africa.<sup>33</sup>

A study conducted by South Africa's Medical Research Council reveals that rape is deeply embedded in the ideas of South African manhood, gender hierarchy, and male sexual entitlement. The study found that more than a quarter of men admitted to having raped someone, and 46 percent of those said that they had raped more than once.<sup>34</sup> Of those admitting rape, 73 percent said that they had committed their first assault before the age of 20.<sup>35</sup> A separate study by the World Health Organization found that 40 percent of South African women said that their first sexual experience was nonconsensual.<sup>36</sup>

The most recent statistics show that 56,272 cases of rape and sexual assault were reported to the police in 2010–11.<sup>37</sup> However, delegates heard from several speakers that the police are often slow to help women who report an assault. The delegates listened to tales of police ignoring women, losing files, or being generally unresponsive. They also learned that media coverage of violence against women is nonexistent.

### **“Corrective rape” appears to be on the rise.**

On paper, South Africa appears to be a champion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights. The country's constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and in 2006, it became the fifth country in the world—and the first in Africa—to allow same-sex couples to marry.<sup>38</sup>

In practice, however, LGBT people continue to experience discrimination and violence. Delegates heard horrifying accounts that “corrective rape”—a term used to describe men raping lesbians to “correct” their sexual orientation—is becoming more common in South Africa. The prevalence of corrective rape is difficult to document, as many women do not report the abuse to police. However, one media outlet reported that more than 10 lesbians are raped or gang-raped every week in Cape Town alone, according to Luleki Sizwe, a charity that aids women who have been raped.<sup>39</sup>

## **VI. Sexuality and reproductive rights**

### **Although abortion is legal, barriers to safe services continue to exist.**

The Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act, enacted in 1996, legalized abortion in South Africa. Some studies cite a 90 percent decrease in mortality among women who had abortions following its enactment.<sup>40</sup>

But despite the law, barriers to accessing safe abortion services continue to exist. According to a qualitative study by the World Health Organization, barriers include “provider opposition, stigma, poor knowledge of abortion legislation, a lack of providers trained to perform abortions, and a lack of facilities designated to provide abortion services, particularly in rural areas.”<sup>41</sup>

In their meeting with Angelica Pino of the Sonke Gender Justice Network, a nonprofit group that works throughout Africa to promote gender equality and prevent the spread of HIV, delegates learned of South Africa’s high abortion rate. Pino explained that one contributing factor is the country’s high rate of teenage pregnancy, which results from the increasing trend of older men targeting young girls and teenagers as sexual partners.

### **Contraceptive use remains low.**

The South African government supports family planning services; contraceptives are provided free at all government medical facilities.<sup>42</sup> According to a qualitative study by the World Health Organization, however, contraception in South Africa is viewed as a failure—“failure of the public-health sector to provide effective services and failure on the part of clients to use contraceptives correctly and consistently.”<sup>43</sup> Study participants agreed that contraceptive services were essential to the health of women. Yet they acknowledged significant barriers to making widespread contraceptive use a reality, including little or no contraceptive counseling, limited contraceptive choice, and judgmental attitudes.<sup>44</sup>

## **VII. Media**

### **Despite some progress, women remain underrepresented in the media.**

A study conducted by the South African National Editors Forum found progressive movement toward achieving gender balance in newsrooms. The study revealed that there are nearly equal numbers of women (45 percent) and men in newsrooms. But women—and especially black women—are still scarce in senior and top management positions.<sup>45</sup> On average, women earn 20 percent less than men do in newsrooms; black women earn 25 percent less than white men earn.<sup>46</sup>

### **When women are portrayed in the media, stereotypes prevail.**

Maureen Isaacson, assistant editor for the *Sunday Independent* (Johannesburg), stated in an online discussion conducted by the United Nations that “repeatedly we are told that sex, or the depiction of women as sex objects, is ‘what the readers want.’ Stereotypes of the dancing, open-mouthed female are given half a page of broadsheet, at least.”<sup>47</sup> Isaacson added that in South Africa, women have risen to the top of all professional fields, yet their faces are seen and their voices heard less than those of their male counterparts.<sup>48</sup>

The delegates witnessed this portrayal of women during their visit. While meeting with staff at the Southern African Media and Gender Institute, delegates learned of the lack of media coverage of women. They also discovered that South Africa's largest publication, the *Daily Sun*, places a picture of a naked woman on page 3 of each issue to help sell papers.

## Questions for further discussion

This paper presents major findings from the AAUW delegates' visit to South Africa. The discussion does not end with the delegates' return to the United States.

A main goal of the delegation was to bring these research findings home to help seed further dialogue about the barriers facing women and girls in South Africa. Some key questions will guide further discussion of issues that affect achievement of a global community of women:

- How can women and girls break down traditional sexist behavior and gender roles that pervade South African society?
- How will the country's HIV/AIDS epidemic continue to affect gender equality in South Africa? What can be done to protect women and girls?
- What steps can be taken to help form a coordinated women's movement in South Africa?

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<sup>2</sup> Parliament of the Republic of South Africa. "Parliament Supports the 16 Days of Activism." [www.parliament.gov.za/live/content.php?Item\\_ID=667](http://www.parliament.gov.za/live/content.php?Item_ID=667).

<sup>3</sup> "Jacob G. Zuma." (April 2011). *New York Times*. [topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/z/jacob\\_g\\_zuma/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/z/jacob_g_zuma/index.html).

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of State. (2011). "Background Notes: South Africa." [www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2898.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2898.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Mathonsi, C. (2011). "Gender Policy in South Africa." *Perspectives*. Heinrich Böll Foundation.

<sup>7</sup> Department of Labour. (2010). 10th CEE Annual Report 2009–10. Pretoria: Department of Labour.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.; "Women in South Africa: Walking Several Paces Behind." *The Economist*.

[www.economist.com/node/17204625](http://www.economist.com/node/17204625).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Development Programme. "MDGs in South Africa." [www.undp.org.za/millennium-development-goals/mdgs-in-south-africa](http://www.undp.org.za/millennium-development-goals/mdgs-in-south-africa).

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<sup>13</sup> "Women in South Africa: Walking Several Paces Behind." *The Economist*. [www.economist.com/node/17204625](http://www.economist.com/node/17204625).

<sup>14</sup> Department of Labour. (2010). 10th CEE Annual Report 2009–10. Pretoria: Department of Labour.

<sup>15</sup> Maarten van Klaveren, M., et al. (2009). *An Overview of Women's Work and Employment in South Africa*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.

<sup>16</sup> Department of Labour. (2010). 10th CEE Annual Report 2009–10. Pretoria: Department of Labour.

<sup>17</sup> Potter, M. J. (April 21, 2009). "South African Women Gaining Larger Share of Political Leadership Roles." [www.mott.org/news/news/2009/genderlinks.aspx](http://www.mott.org/news/news/2009/genderlinks.aspx).

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