

Bouncing Back and Developing Elasticity During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring Intergenerational Partnerships and Interventions Among Grassroots Women's Organisations to Address COVID-19 Related Challenges in Rural Western Cape, South Africa

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“With the emergence of collaborative efforts between younger and older communities in online spaces, we see the power of intergenerational cooperation. When we coalesce to discuss solutions and mobilise together, there are new and reimagined opportunities to wield our collective knowledge and resources to tackle COVID-19 and other systemic injustices of social exclusion and power.” (Sato, 2020)

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified pre-existing inequalities and social challenges that have existed for many decades. Poor communities, rural women, farm dwellers, the elderly, and youth are some of the sectors most acutely impacted by the pandemic. The pandemic has had an acute impact on women and fractured the relationship between adult and younger women. The prediction is that, in a crisis situation, the social cohesion between generations will weaken as the different interests of the two groups come to the fore. The assumption that young and adult women are automatically at loggerheads and that their interests are irreconcilable in such contexts has been refuted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper outlines interventions by two organisations and highlights how young and older women have worked together to build platforms for resilience for high risk communities during the pandemic.

Social, Economic and Political Context

As elsewhere, women in South Africa bear the brunt of the impact of COVID-19. The National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey estimates that three million people in South Africa lost their jobs during the initial lockdown period between February and April 2020. According to government reports, women accounted for two-thirds of this total, although they make up half the workforce. Job losses impacted the poor and vulnerable to a greater degree, with the poorest ten per cent experiencing the greatest percentage of over 55% reduction in employment. Recent research shows that the percentage of people who ran out of money for food in 2020 had likely increased from 25% to 47% in South Africa. The percentage of “children going hungry over the past seven days” was also expected to nearly double from 8,0% to 15,2%.

- The national economy is expected to contract by at least 7,2%.
- Due to higher levels of inequality, which contributes to increases in violent crime, we could see murder increase by 3,45% to 3,75% solely due to COVID-19.
- Non-profit organisations are reporting an increase in gender-based violence (GBV) reports since lockdown eased and a change in the nature of reports: more aggressive behaviour due to increased stress.

Who We Are

Ubuntu Rural Women and Youth Movement (Ubuntu) is a non-profit organisation that has operated in rural communities in the Western Cape since 2011. Sisterhood Movement is a movement by young women and teen girls established in 2016. Ubuntu Founder and Coordinator, Wendy Pekeur, started the voluntary project which had no funding and no paid staff for eight years. Since 2019, a paid administrative assistant has been recruited, but the bulk of Ubuntu’s paralegal work, is done by Wendy Pekeur. Vainola Makan co-founded the Sisterhood Movement with teen girls from a farming community. The movement has led several programme interventions over the past six years, including leadership development at youth camps, Youth Day events, human trafficking, entrepreneurship, environmental programmes, as well as understanding feminism and gender training. The girls in the Sisterhood Movement have also run annual community projects with the support of the Ubuntu Coordinator. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, Ubuntu and Sisterhood

Movement worked with young women and teens who have been part of these two organisations for the past couple of years. The younger women tended to be out-of-school youths, unemployed students, and matriculates and teens who were in school but had attended no school during the first months of lockdown due to the closure of schools, compared to 50% attendance when schools reopened. These young women from the communities saw the lack of access to information about government support as well as the lack of literacy skills to access this support, and expressed an eagerness to support those who needed assistance in this regard in their free time. We allowed them to be involved as volunteers on specific tasks while the adult women took charge of other tasks.

Human Rights Defenders in a Time of COVID-19

Chapter 2 of the South African Constitution, which is the cornerstone of our democracy, provides that: “Everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food and water.” To give effect to this right, Parliament enacted the Water Services Act 108 of 1997 which places a duty on all spheres of government to ensure that water and sanitation services are provided in a manner which is efficient, equitable, and sustainable. COVID-19 exposed the inequalities that exist in many communities where food and water are scarce resources. We found that the lack of these resources had a great impact on people’s right to live dignified lives. To mitigate the effects of water scarcity, we intervened in four communities, ensuring people enjoyed fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution. The interventions led by the older women included engaging municipalities, disaster management on a local level, escalating to Provincial Government when responses were slow, and, in one instance, engaging the National Minister of Rural Development and Land Reform for a speedy intervention. Several communities that were without water at different times in the lockdown have been assisted. Some of these communities had been without water for some time and the reasons for the lack differed from place to place. We realised the importance of engaging different spheres of government to ensure that the right to water was achieved. Access to water was restored in two communities and water was delivered as the need arose in two other communities. Women, who carry a greater burden of household duties and preparing meals, now had the comfort of water in proximity. With the high levels of GBV in South Africa, we realised the risks when women have to fetch water far from their homes and worked to address them.

Access to Food and Dignity in a Time of COVID

“How can I live a life of dignity when I have to beg to stay alive?” This was a powerful rhetorical question posed by Gertruida Baartman, a former seasonal farm worker from a rural town in the Western Cape. This question is pertinent when we try to understand women’s relationships to land and food in South Africa. In a country that has one of the highest levels of inequality in the world, hunger is a reality for many. People who live below the breadline struggle to make ends meet. COVID-19 further worsened the hardships of many women like Gertruida. Their movement was restricted as they found themselves unemployed and far removed from shopping malls and urban centres. Food parcels and humanitarian support became a new way of surviving the pandemic. They had to travel long distances to the farm gates to collect the hampers. They did not complain though. “We do not know what we would have eaten if it was not for the food hamper”, is the story we heard in many places. Something that seems so insignificant became an important part of Herstory in lockdown. Ubuntu Rural Women and Youth Movement held workshops on food sovereignty and women’s access to land in this period and older women assisted more than 300 women with seeds. These women used the seeds to start or expand new household food gardens and two communal gardens. The women had lots of indigenous knowledge on growing crops which they learnt as children and brought to bear on the garden projects. A lot of seed sharing as well as crop sharing has also happened, where the women share their produce with others.

Running Soup Kitchens

With support from foundations and private donors, as well as proceeds from the household food gardens, 18 women volunteered to run several soup kitchens across four different communities. Older women aged between 35 and 55 were in charge of running the soup kitchens which were able to feed approximately 2,000 people daily. They prepared and served the meals. The younger students and unemployed youth volunteers assisted by sanitising people and ensuring social distancing at the food lines.

Support for the Unemployed

We supported hundreds of workers who lost their jobs in this period. Our activities, led by the older women, included assisting with Unemployment Insurance claims,

engaging employers when there was non-payment and, finally, tracking to ensure that employees did get the monies due them. There were many good moments when workers finally received their monies after long processes and frequent disputes. There are also cases that were never resolved, where no answers were offered as to why no monies were paid out. Employers claimed they applied, but the Department of Labour system either did not find the employees registered in their system or the applications were still pending. Labour broker workers e.g., cleaners, seasonal workers, and migrant workers, were among those workers who did not receive answers. Seeking answers on the Minister of Labour's Facebook page or with the Department of Labour officials still did not lead anywhere. We are still bringing pressure to bear on the relevant authorities, knocking on different doors and reporting those employers who are in violation of labour laws.

Accessing the R350 COVID-19 Grant

Students and unemployed youth aged between 18 and 24 focused a lot of their energy on assisting with the registration of unemployed citizens for the government R350 COVID-19 social relief grant. Having been trained on how to apply for the grant and armed with mobile phones which allowed them to fill the application form online, young women volunteers worked diligently. Finding some people with no identity documents and no bank accounts, they worked tirelessly to register everyone so they could have access to the funds. Hundreds of applicants received the grant. The long lines at Post Offices, including people queuing overnight, showed the great need people had to access the grants as this was the only source of income they could have. More than 1,000 people were assisted and received the grant in this period. The youth were keen to assist, as they were told at the beginning of lockdown that older people were more at risk of contracting the Coronavirus. By doing this work and helping older people, they were not only aiming to get people an emergency income, but also to save lives.

Support for Those Locked Down with Their Perpetrators

Rural women face multiple burdens, due to the fact that they are women, the fact that they are black, and as a result of their marginalisation. The lockdown came with many challenges, as some women were now stuck with their abusers behind closed doors. Police stations were a no-go area, and one court had a notice stating that

no protection orders would be given if there was no case number and no physical violence. We know this because we were part of a group of young and older women from civil society who did court monitoring.

Our first intervention involved a mother with three minor children. Receiving death threats and fearing for her life, she made a choice to get out of the situation she was in. Although we discussed her escape, she changed her mind on the day of the escape because it was not yet safe to do so. Eventually, we found ourselves leaving home in the early hours to pick her and the children up at a place that she earmarked. As two women driving alone, we were not sure if it might be a hoax or whether it would be safe, having no permit to be on the road and still taking a chance as we needed to make sure a mother and her children were safe. We found them dressed in pyjamas and masks at a nearby school. The little one, a girl five years old and clearly talkative, kept us occupied as we drove to the nearest police station, awaiting the social worker who could assist the family to be taken to a safe home. Three hours later, screening was done, all necessary forms completed, and we saw her and the children off to the most amazing home for abused women and their children. “You should be strong leaders one day”, we said to the two young girls, who reluctantly waved goodbye to us.

The second case soon followed, then two more. One case involved orphans who were left to fend for themselves. Women in communities started to take in temporarily women who needed a refuge while we were engaging shelters and the police. This was to ensure that the woman was safe while the necessary processes were followed. Much needed to be done; women and children were the ones suffering most, having to leave the place they called home in order to be safe from harm. Law reform and action on the part of all stakeholders is urgently needed.

While the older women focused on retrieving women and children from violent situations and finding them alternative accommodation, the students worked on a campaign. The Sisterhood teen girls launched their GBV campaign on 16 June -Youth Day in South Africa. They engaged girls to discuss the importance of eliminating violence against women and girls. They went further in getting 50 girls from different rural towns together to talk about the danger of human trafficking on International Day of the Girl Child. The girls engaged and shared stories. A self-defence and safety demonstration was a key part of the session. The girls decided to go out into more communities to share the knowledge. They all decided on a safe word, which was aimed at protecting themselves. They learnt the important

helpline numbers for human trafficking and child abuse. These girls eventually participated in an annual girls' camp focused on the theme "Developing leadership among young women to mitigate the impact of Covid on young women".

Building Capacity with Community Leaders: Paralegal Training

An important part of the work during COVID-19 was to train women in different communities around their constitutional, health, domestic violence, labour and land rights. This work, led by the older women, was important to enable women, both young and old, to know their rights and to be able to exercise them, especially at a time when Labour Centres were closed due to COVID-19 cases, dispute resolution offices were under lockdown, and there was an extreme backlog of cases. These women were able to advise others, make referrals and, where possible, deal with matters themselves. It lightened the burden of the core team, who were stretched, as they did not have to respond to each and every case.

Documenting Experiences

One of the leaders of Sisterhood embarked upon a women's support group with community champions to support each other with regular Zoom meetings. In a unique methodology that suited the circumstances of COVID-19, some members of the women's support group agreed to conduct interviews with women in their community or hold a focus group observing social distancing to eventually compile their stories of triumph and hardship during COVID-19. Younger and older women who were part of the women's support group assisted with the interviews. The motto for all of us was that, given the isolating impact of the social distancing regulation on women, this was more than just an interview and had the potential to be the only conversation where someone was really interested to hear what it was like for the interviewees to live through the COVID-19 pandemic. This documentation is currently being edited into a book that will be titled "Web of Life Disrupted".

Conclusion

The above-mentioned interventions demonstrate the endless innovative opportunities for intergenerational solidarity actions and the importance of bridging the age divide during emergencies and crises. Instead of being simply victims of the COVID-19 pandemic, grassroots women displayed leadership and tenacity. They were at the

forefront of shaping and driving change in their respective communities towards efforts at building resilience. It is these unsung heroes whose voices and work need to be shared and amplified.

References

Sato, Mayumi. 2020. "Bridging the Divide: An Intergenerational and Intersectional Response to COVID-19 in the Age of Information." *Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness*. 8 September. Available at <https://www.socialconnectedness.org/bridging-the-divide-an-intergenerational-and-intersectional-response-to-covid-19-in-the-age-of-information/>