

BlindSA Women's Month Launch

05 August 2020

“Gender Based Violence: Resources available to blind and partially sighted women affected by GBVF”

By

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Members of the Executive Committee of BlindSA

Leadership from around the country

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to commend the leadership of BlindSA for this initiative of formally launching your Women's Month programme, despite the significant technological and communication challenges the COVID19-Pandemic pose to your constituency and the country at large. This is the sign of leadership – where we find innovative ways of getting done what must be done irrespective of the prevailing circumstances.

I am particularly encouraged by the focus you have given your Women's Month Programme, i.e. Gender-Based Violence and Femicide as it affects blind and partially sighted women, and that this is the beginning of a year-long programme that will entrench the combatting of GBVF in amongst your member organisations.

I have been requested to focus this keynote address on the resources available to blind and partially sighted women affected by GBVF. To ensure that resources are relevant and adequate, we must first have a shared understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of the context.

It is important to acknowledge that every single citizen and resident of our country, on the continent, in the world is affected, either as a predator, a perpetrator, a victim, a survivor, a passive by-stander or by extending support or services to survivors and/or perpetrators of GBVF.

We must acknowledge compounded marginalisation experienced by many blind and partially sighted women if we are to honour the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Call that we **Leave No-One Behind**.

Our interventions should be sensitive to the fact that not all women or young people are affected equally by poverty, patriarchy and under-development.

Evidence shows that young black women with disabilities living in rural communities are mostly at risk of not accessing basic health care, attending and/or completing school, finding ways of sustaining themselves and their families, and are therefore often mostly at risk of gender-based violence.

As we mobilise resources and develop programmes, it is critical to put in place specific measures to protect women with albinism, who, due to their visual impairments, constitute a particularly vulnerable sub sector within your constituency.

Women with albinism are often trafficked by syndicates, attacked by community mobs and killed by their partners, spouses, uncles and even fathers. We need to re-write their stories to reflect not only killings for muti-purposes, but in the context of femicide.

Similarly, the vulnerable situation that blind and partially sighted young girls and boys find themselves in are under-resourced boarding facilities at special schools. What is required is the infrastructure build program so as to ensure norms and standards for safety and well-being.

A specific challenge we have noted in the disability sector, is poor representation of young people between the ages of 20 and 30 years. This is evident even within your leadership structures. I call on the BlindSA leadership to pay particular attention to self-representation of this age group as you roll out your campaign over the next year.

This year, we commemorate Women's Month and Women's Day under difficult circumstances of COVID-19 which brought about the National State of Disaster, where inequalities have been sharply propelled to the fore.

As the department we interrogated and took seriously the criticism against the department's response to Covid 19 as articulated in the newspaper article of the 23 May 2020 by Mr Jace Nair CEO of Blind SA. He was quoted as having said amongst others, the department was not serious about tackling issues faced by persons with disabilities.

Reference was made to the webinar engagement of the department and it was said it failed to address the fragmented and uncoordinated approach by government on the impact of Covid19 especially with regard to persons with disabilities.

As the department we responded by forming partnerships with UN Agencies, such as, UNFPA, Footprint Foundation, Langelihle Youth Foundation and WaterAid Southern Africa. We also partnered with a private International Company Proctor and Gamble. All these partnerships were mobilised specifically to support persons with disabilities, the donation consisted of, food parcels, sanitary towels, pampers, masks, soaps, social distance demarcation stickers.

In 2015, government released the white paper on the rights of persons with disabilities which is currently being implemented by different departments on a limited scale.

As the department, we have engaged our legislature especially the Portfolio Committee of DWYPD informing them that the department will appreciate their support in fast tracking the white paper on the rights of persons with disabilities into a law.

The objective of the legislation is to domesticate all international protocols affecting persons with disabilities (AU protocol on Disability for Africa, AU convention on the rights of persons with disabilities). This is to promulgate domestic law for general application in South Africa, which can be enforced by the courts with remedies and penalties attached to it.

The Disability Rights Legislation will seek to protect and promote the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities and prohibit any form of discrimination against any person based on their disabilities. It is envisaged that the bill will have reached the stage of a disability rights act and will be in our statute books by the end of the 2021/22 financial year.

This year is also the 25th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform of Action; the 20th Anniversary of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security as well as the end of the African Union Decade of the African Women.

We will celebrate this year's Women Month under the theme: **“Generation Equality: Realizing Women's Rights for an Equal Future”**. The concept of Generation Equality is a global campaign and links South Africa to global efforts to achieve gender equality by 2030.

Together with civil society we are establishing Action Coalitions which will work to drive visible change for women in our country. We see this initiative of Blind SA as entrenching a special coalition, forging partnership with government as a whole to achieve ultimate freedom for the sector.

The Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities plays an important role in the mainstreaming of gender, youth and issues affecting persons with disabilities. Our focus continues to be on inter-sectionality, because women, youth and persons with disabilities continue to face multiple forms of deprivation in our society.

While government is introducing a range of relief measures, it is critical that women's access to government social and economic relief programmes are inclusive of blind and partially sighted women in particular.

I must reiterate that our country is facing a double pandemic of COVID 19 and Gender-Based Violence and Femicide, which has continued to raise its ugly head in our society.

President Ramaphosa publicly condemned the prevalence and brutality of Gender Based Violence in society. He called for gender equality and women empowerment, inclusive of the empowerment and liberation of young women and women with disabilities.

The Presidency launched the Gender-based Violence and Femicide National Strategic Plan in April 2020 after an extensive consultation and participation process. Thank you to the men and women participating in this meeting for your contributions to ensure that the GBVF-NSP is not disability-neutral, but that it throughout the document highlights the needs, rights and interventions necessary to ensure that our GBVF programmes also reach and benefit your constituency.

It is important that you study the GBVF-NSP alongside Pillars 1 and 2 of the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, so that we ultimately ensure that no blind or partially sighted girl or woman is left behind, and that blind and partially sighted men equally participate actively in creating safe environments in which everyone can thrive.

The devil often is in the detail, in particular when working towards zero exclusion and full participation of all persons with disabilities. As government we therefore rely on your knowledge, wisdom, programmes and partnership as we collectively implement both the GBVF-NSP and the WPRPD.

Whilst it is government's responsibility to ensure that the services and programmes we roll-out to respond to these policy documents, are accessible to everyone, it is civil society's responsibility to provide guidance, to advocate, to participate and to monitor.

The participation and guidance from the sector assisted government in ensuring that the GBV Command Call Centre has enabling measures in place to ensure that persons with disabilities have a dedicated SMS line, and that Deaf women are able to access counselling and support via Skype video calling.

The Department of Justice and Constitutional Development will, during the current financial year begin the process of translating the guidelines for disability access to courts and the justice system that has been developed in partnership with the disability sector, into policy.

The South African Police Services has approved their Disability Guidelines and Integrated Action Plan for Policing for Persons with Disabilities. Again, this would not have been possible without the active lobbying and support provided by organisations such as BlindSA.

Last year already, R1.6 bn was identified from different department through the process of re-prioritisation to further mitigate the risk of GBVF and to fund programmes that are meant to strengthen the Criminal Justice.

The Department of Justice is in the process of reviewing the following acts, Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act Bill, Domestic Violence Amendment Act Bill and Criminal and Related Matters Amendment Act Bill. The intention is to improve our conviction rate and sentencing because we all know justice delayed is justice denied

As a country we must continue to strengthen the Men's Movement so that men can play a meaningful role in ending GBVF and contribute to behaviour change and the breaking of stereotypes towards the goal of gender equality.

We all need to continue to put an eye on law enforcement agencies as they sometimes find it difficult to collect evidence on grounds that blind women and women with mental and intellectual disabilities are not able to identify the perpetrators or make a case to testify in court for purposes of convictions. As an unintended consequence, their cases are often withdrawn or struck off the roll by the courts.

Information about Gender-Based Violence and Femicide must be provided to blind women in accessible formats e.g. (braille, daisy, text to speech). The call centres that are currently available can be accessed for 24 hours to assist with Social Workers and Police.

We will continue to develop national consensus around gender policy priorities and programmes to advance the gender agenda by 2025 and by 2030.

I am calling upon change makers of all ages and genders to tackle the unfinished business of empowering women. We can achieve this through a multi-generational campaign, under the slogan: “Be a part of the generation that ends gender inequality”.

As we confront Gender-Based Violence and Femicide, we must agree that the fight is bigger than government and require collective societal commitment.

We call upon our communities to join and help us eradicate this pandemic. We further appeal to families and communities to come together against this scourge to expose perpetrators and not turn a blind eye. Anyone who harms someone else must face the full might of the law.

This year’s women’s month’s celebrations will include participation of various stakeholders including stalwarts of our liberation, keynote address by the President of the Republic of South Africa and other cultural activities.

As the country continues to battle the COVID-19 pandemic, we continue to support persons with disabilities in their endeavour to adhere to the Covid 19 regulations, like access to masks, sanitising regularly and washing of hands with soap and observing social distancing. Admittedly, persons with disabilities require extra support given their limitations to function independently.

As I conclude, I would like to request from the BlindSA constituency –

Firstly, please participate in the GBVF fora, structures and programmes of other civil society organisations to ensure that your voices and your experiences are heard.

Secondly, tell, record and publish the stories of blind and partially sighted children and women who have survived or were killed as a result of GBVF; tell the stories of blind and partially sighted men who have stood firm and took action in protecting the women and children in their communities. Ensure that these stories shape society's thinking, understanding and action against GBVF.

In line with the principle of **leaving no one behind**, I once again commit the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, to ensure that whatever we do, we will include the disability sector. As your champion, I will speak up, I will speak out, and I will ensure that action is taken when the rights of blind and partially sighted children and women to safety and equality are violated.

Together we can.

Together we will.

Together we must.

I Thank You!!