

# We need 365 Days of Activism to keep women and children safe

By **Luyolo Mphithi MP** – DA Shadow Minister of Women, youth And Persons with Disabilities

**Note to Editors:** *The following speech was delivered in Parliament today during the debate on 16 Days of Activism of no violence against women and children.*

To the boy child, to the men, many of whom had to grow up before their time. Who had to adapt to dominant narratives of manhood when dad left. Men and boys who never got to understand their feelings or even express them. Mostly in a society that does not encourage boys to talk. Growing up with fathers who were emotionally absent, strict, less tolerant and less reasonable. Many of us had to step up and be the man at a very early stage but we need to understand there were behaviours that we learnt that was not okay. Things that felt okay because they were always done. It's vitally important that we talk and ask each other: *eh dawg ugrand? Bafo o sharp?*

We must not stop there, we must interrogate what Makhosazana Kubeka states in her thesis so significantly that young men are caught between what their parents and societal role models have taught them regarding their role as men, and the changes in gender relations prevailing in South Africa today.

The Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities has blue ticked the most vulnerable people in this country. The New Dawn has not answered to the calls for crucial programmatic changes that centre around the boy child. There has been no meaningful reform or successes that this government can claim in the fight against gender-based violence. The fact that South Africa is the most dangerous country in the world for women signals a government out of touch and severely impaired with a lack of leadership.

And so the most pertinent question remains what have you done? What claims will you make on this podium here today?

When we ask how the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities has been able to provide strategic leadership, coordination to government departments and the country in mainstreaming support programmes for women? They tell you about the New Dawn. When we ask about what successes have been made in the past 3 years? They tell you about the webinars they host or attend. Perhaps the simplest action is to start fixing the department's website which currently does not even work.

My colleague, Honourable Andrew Whitfield, earlier this year highlighted how the crime stats show that 58% of GBV dockets have not been finalised for more than a year. The backlog in DNA testing will delay justice for the thousands of victims of violent crimes. This erodes the principle of consequences for criminal behaviour and creates an enabling environment for violent criminals to thrive.

In this house, we are fortunate to worry about legislation while unfortunately women and children have to worry about whether they will survive tomorrow or not. This government

has failed to uphold the rights of individuals whether it be through the attainment of justice, security or safety. We must hold its failure as its biggest indictment.

This is why, my colleagues and I, Honourable Sharif and Hononourable Ngcobo travelled to 8 provinces in two months visiting support centres, Thuthuzela Care Centres speaking to social workers, healthcare workers and doctors. To understand the realities faced by these frontline workers.

In the Free State at the Tshepisoong Victim Empowerment Centre, we found files that were laying around across the office without security. In Ethekwini, we found the GBV cars donated by Germany gathering dust and not assisting the victims who are deep in the rural areas and are unable to get to these centres. In Middleburg, Mpumalanga, we visited a women's shelter that didn't even have security at the gate because they could not afford it. This puts these women at further risk of being attacked by their perpetrators. In Limpopo, when we arrived at the Thuthuzela Care Centre we found a lady whose face was slashed during a rape and her only reliance was on a heavily under-resourced Thuthuzela Care Centre.

I raise their experiences today so that you know the true extent of the government's failure on the ground.

What we need now is to provide rapid and comprehensive responses to all forms of violence against women. We need to address the backlog of GBV cases, the delays in DNA testing and the unavailability of rape test kits at some police stations. The Justice Department has a huge role to play in ensuring that all crimes against women and children attract harsher sentences. It's clear that these centres struggled with access to rape kits, toilet paper, forensic nurses and medical supplies. Perhaps the government can start with those things. The basic things.

Activists on the ground are telling us that it is not enough to have gender-based violence as a line item in an annual report or having GBV as rhetoric in the speeches we hear day in and day out. They want to know where is the money and the resources to keep women and children alive. They don't care anymore and they shouldn't care about being respectful and palatable.

And so today as the DA, we join with those voices to remind this house that if government continues to fail to empower, equip and stack up the resources to support the NGOs, community organisations, support groups, health workers and social workers they are obsolete. The DA takes this moment to remember those we have lost and calls upon all men to rise up, not only with their words but with their actions for 365 days of activism.