



The Signs of the Times: Gender-based Violence, Corruption, Poverty and Inequality¹

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown imposed to contain its spread have compounded the vulnerability and inequality of women. Women make up more than half more than half the population yet they are systematically excluded from the mainstream economy; have little access to property; seldom receive equal pay for equal work; and are often reliant on the informal sector, which limits their access to employment contracts and the Unemployed Insurance Fund. Tragically, women and girls are victims of gender-based violence, and far too many are locked in poverty. While the Constitution asserts the equality of all South Africans, patriarchy prevails.

The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World urged the 'Reading of the Signs of the Times' and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.² This method and guide has steered the social teaching of the Church ever since. It prioritizes respect for human life and dignity and a focus on the common good, as well as economic and fiscal policies which are conducted with the interests of all people in mind. The question to be asked is: "Is the economy working for the people or are people working for the economy?"³ Is the value of women's work acknowledged?

2. How do we Protect Human Life and Dignity?

Collins and Wright suggest that there are three kinds of justice: **Commutative Justice** requires fairness in all agreements and exchanges between individuals and groups; **Distributive Justice** requires that the allocation of resources such as

income, wealth and power be evaluated in light of its impact on the poor whose basic needs are unmet; and **Social Justice**, which requires a duty to organize a society's economic institutions so that basic primary and material needs are met, and so that each person can contribute to society in ways that respect the dignity of their work and freedom.⁴

We are living in uncertain times which require ethical leadership, political accountability and compassion. In 2004 the U.S Catholic Bishops' Conference emphasized that

"In times of terror and war, of global insecurity and economic uncertainty, of disrespect for human life and human dignity, we need to return to the basic moral principles. Politics... should be about fundamental moral choices. How do we protect human life and dignity? How do we fairly share the blessings and burdens of the challenges we face? What kind of nation do we want to be? What kind of world do we want to shape?"⁵

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed the race, gender and class fault lines in our country as never before. Accordingly, the questions posed in 2004 could not be more relevant today.

3. Moral Responsibility and the Economy

Collins and Wright suggest that the "the dignity of the human person, experienced in community with others, is the yardstick against which all

aspects of economic life must be measured.”⁶ The Constitution sets out basic human and economic rights. Economic injustice can contribute to various forms of discrimination and destructive social and personal behaviour. To inform these rights, cohesion should exist in the conduct of business between: (i) individuals; (ii) government and the public sector; and (iii) the private sector. All of these institutions interact and contribute to the operation of the economy. Each of these groups must uphold these rights in their conduct of business, and principles of social justice should inform the conduct of these enterprises. Policy reform could drive these changes.

Recently, the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference declared that “Anti-corruption institutions continue to be compromised and made less effective by patronage politics and blind allegiance to political actions.”⁷ Furthermore, Pope Francis commented that “the corruption of the powerful ends up being paid for by the poor.”⁸ Maladministration of public funds can undermine social cohesion and solidarity.

The sudden advent of COVID-19 has turned the world upside in a very short period of time. The pandemic has changed the way we celebrate and how we grieve. It has separated us from family and friends. It has changed the way some people work and it has made it very difficult for others to work at all. Unemployment has escalated, causing widespread hunger. We struggle to find social cohesion in a time of social distancing. An already unequal national situation has been made much worse by the realities of COVID-19. The decline in the household income of so many has resulted in cutbacks on food, medication, heating and clothing. These difficulties in meeting basic needs create social and economic instability as well as personal distress. Lockdown level 1 and the advent of the ‘new normal’ is confronting us with huge challenges.

4. The Feminization of Poverty

Women have borne a disproportionate burden of the lockdown. They have been responsible for the care of children in small spaces during the prolonged closure of public schools, as well as ECD and partial-care centres. Many have been unable to work as they have had the responsibility for the care of children, older family members and those with disability. They have been expected to take on an educational role for which they are ill

prepared. Many are sole bread winners and dependent on the informal sector. There is an increasing feminization of poverty and this has severe intergenerational consequences for their children – who grow up locked in poverty.

The devastating consequences of the lockdown have confronted us with the reality that our present system of social grants is inadequate. Those between the ages of 18 and 59, many of whom are young and unemployed, do not qualify for a social grant. There has been discussion regarding the introduction of a universal Basic Income Grant (BIG) as a poverty alleviation strategy and to try to bridge the ever widening income gap between different groups of people in our society. Poverty is everywhere and impossible to ignore, while widespread corruption contributes to the deprivation that results in poverty, inequality and malnutrition, maladministration.

5. Violence against Women and Children

President Cyril Ramaphosa has said, “At a time when the pandemic has left us all feeling vulnerable and uncertain, violence is being unleashed on women and children with a brutality that defies comprehension.”⁹ The lockdown has brought the abuse of women and children into sharp relief. In order to address such abuse it is important to develop a full appreciation of the interaction between poverty, racism, sexism and patriarchy. We need to understand the power dynamics involved and to develop methods that *disrupt* gender inequality, poverty and patriarchy. Domestic violence is both intergenerational and trans-generational. Men who are abused as boys are more likely to be violent as adults. Child-care practitioners from the organisation Africa Tikkum suggest that

“To solve the crisis of violence against women we need to look to boys’ experience of childhood in South Africa. Behaviour disorders that lead to violence in later life are already present at the age of 10. This is not to say that all boys who experience abuse become violent. But if we want to heal our communities we must turn our attention to cycles of abuse that begin at a very early age. [...] It is therefore crucial that the persistent nature of violence is recognised. If we want to improve the safety of women, we must begin

with the protection and safety of all children from harm as a matter of priority.”¹⁰

Domestic violence is endemic; home for so many women and children is the most dangerous place to be. It is clear that patriarchy remains the dominant narrative. The trauma of domestic violence, which includes economic/financial abuse, casts long shadows into the future and devastates families and communities. According to a recent Institute for Security Studies (ISS) Report, children who grow up in households where they are exposed to violence are more likely to use, or become victims of, violence later in life. What happens at home has serious implications for the larger society and for the future.¹¹

6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown are leaving an indelible mark on all South Africans. The economic and social devastation experienced by so many might not have been anticipated, but there can no longer be any papering over the cracks. While some have been more badly affected than others, no one has been exempt. Food prices have escalated so that, while there is plenty of food available, many are unable to afford it. Families are in trouble and in desperate need of economic and social support. As journalist Ferial Haffajee has put it,

“one of the better gains of the democratic era is that people have been lifted from extreme poverty through a mixture of social support, better primary healthcare and employment equity policies. But Covid-19 may have reversed these gains, creating a landscape that once again looks like an apartheid schema of deep cleavages of race and class with black rural poverty.”¹²

Nelson Mandela talked about a Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP) of the soul.¹³ We might well remember the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”¹⁴

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¹On 10th September 2020 the Catholic Business Forum hosted a Webinar focusing on *‘The breakdown of business ethics and morals in pursuit of greed and instant wealth.’* The main speaker was Minister of Women, Youth and Persons with Disability Maite Nkoana-Mashabane. Other speakers included representatives from the Moral Regeneration Movement; the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities; the National House of Traditional Leaders; and the SACBC Parliamentary Liaison Office.

² *The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*, 1965

³ *‘The Moral Measure of the Economy’*, Collins C and Wright M, Orbis Books, 2007

⁴ *‘The Moral Measure of the Economy’*, Collins C and Wright M, Orbis Books, 2007

⁵ U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*, 2004

⁶ *‘The Moral Measure of the Economy’*, Collins C and Wright M, Orbis Books, 2007

⁷ <https://sacbc.org.za/catholic-church-appeal-to-president-ramphosa-to-abandon-politics-of-expediency-and-appeasement-and-restore-public-trust/13495/>

⁸ Pope Francis, 19th December 2015

⁹ <https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramphosa-south-africa%E2%80%99s-response-covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic-17-jun-2020>

¹⁰ Africa Tikum seeks to provide education, health and social services to young people and their families in South African townships. Their main goal is to create a sustainable future for the youth of South Africa.

¹¹ <https://issafrica.org/issa-today>

¹² <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-09-30-post-covid-economy-resembles-a-post-war->

¹³ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/marthe-muller/the-unfinished-business-of-south-african-women-towards-a-feminis-a-21875315/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ

¹⁴ Isaiah 58:10-12