

EXCHANGE PROGRAM

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

3RD EDITION * PRETORIA * 2025



**Our Constitution's Promise: Realising Gender
Equity (Everyone's Fight, Everyone's Right)**

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Pretoria, 5 December 2025

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is one of the fundamental pillars of social justice, economic growth, and sustainable development. Gender equality is not only a moral and ethical obligation but also a practical method to improved productivity, enhanced healthcare, and promotion inclusive governance (World Bank, 2012; UNDP, 2016; Kabeer, 2012). It also plays an essential role in breaking the cycle of poverty and inequality, which is central to the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). By addressing gender disparities, societies can unlock the full potential of all individuals, contributing to broader social cohesion and economic prosperity. In countries like South Africa, where progressive legal frameworks coexist with persistent social inequalities, continued reform is essential to ensure that gender equality translates into tangible outcomes (United Nations, 2015; South African Government, 1996).

South Africa's commitment to gender equality is rooted in the Constitution of 1996, which enshrines equality as a fundamental right and prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, and other characteristics (South African Government, 1996). This has resulted in South Africa being often regarded as a continental leader in human rights and equality (Bennett, 2006). This constitutional protection underpins several key laws that directly address gender injustice such as the Bill of Rights which guarantees the protection of fundamental human rights, with a strong emphasis on non-discrimination and equality (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996); the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000) which seeks to eliminate gender-based discrimination and promote equality (South African Government, 2000), and aligns with South Africa's commitments under international instruments like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (United Nations, 1979).

The journey towards gender equality in South Africa has been long and challenging. Under apartheid, women, particularly black women, faced severe discrimination and oppression (Gouws, 2005; Vogel, 2018). The end of apartheid in 1994 marked the beginning of a new era, where the rights of all citizens, regardless of gender, were to be protected and promoted

(Schoeman, 2007). Since then, the country has steadily developed one of the world's most progressive legal and institutional frameworks for protecting and advancing the rights of women and gender-diverse people. These legal and institutional frameworks aimed to correct centuries of institutionalised oppression that had disproportionately affected Black women, who were uniquely marginalised at the intersections of race, gender and class.

Despite notable gains in policy development, legislative reform, and representation of women in public life, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, and gender inequality remains profound (Schoeman, 2007; Moyo, 2018; Rabe, 2021). Women continue to face systemic barriers in economic, political, and social spheres; gender-based violence persists at epidemic levels; and patriarchal values remain deeply embedded in community and institutional structures (Gouws, 2005; Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2016; Vogel, 2018; Rabe, 2021). Therefore, the gap between constitutional ideals and lived realities highlights the complexity of achieving substantive gender equality.

This research paper investigates gender equality in contemporary South Africa by examining historical foundations, assessing progress, analysing key challenges, and evaluating existing initiatives. It includes a dedicated analysis of the role played by the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA), whose oversight functions support gender-responsive governance. By doing so, the paper identifies pathways for strengthening gender equality interventions and realising South Africa's constitutional commitment.

DEVELOPMENT

1. Historical Context: Gender, Apartheid, and Inequality

To understand gender inequality in South Africa, it is essential to consider the historical backdrop of apartheid. Gender inequality in South Africa has roots in patriarchal societies and was exacerbated by colonial rule and the legal, social, and economic discrimination of the apartheid era (1948-1994) (Walker, 1990; Vogel, 2018). During the apartheid period, women, especially Black women, faced compounded oppression based on race, class, and gender, including restrictions on movement, limited job opportunities, and a lack of political representation (Gouws, 2005; Schoeman, 2007). While post-apartheid legislation has aimed to address these issues, challenges like high rates of gender-based violence, economic disparities, and deeply entrenched biases persist (Friedman & James, 2003; Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2016).

Black women played a crucial role in anti-apartheid resistance, exemplified by the 1956 Women's March against pass laws (laws requiring them to carry reference books) (Zondi, 2021). Yet, despite their political activism, gender inequality remained pervasive even within liberation movements, reflecting broader patriarchal culture (Ramphela, 1996; Nyamnjoh, 2020).

The democratic transition brought renewed attention to gender equality. The Constitution of 1996 entrenched equality as a fundamental right, while institutions such as the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) were established to promote and monitor gender transformation. However, the legacy of apartheid continues to shape economic and social inequalities, creating structural barriers that disproportionately affect women—particularly those in rural areas or informal employment.

2. Legislative and Policy Framework for Gender Equality

Post-apartheid South Africa has developed one of the most comprehensive gender-equality legal frameworks in the world. Key legislation includes:

2.1 The Constitution

The Constitution 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 (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). It goes beyond formal equality by requiring measures that promote substantive equality, acknowledging that historical injustices require corrective interventions.

2.2 Employment Equity Act (1998)

The South African Employment Equity Act (EEA) of 1998 aims to achieve workplace equity by eliminating unfair discrimination and implementing affirmative action measures to correct past disadvantages (Tshandu, 2000; Human Sciences Research Council, 2003). It prohibits discrimination based on factors like race, gender, age, disability, and others, and requires employers to promote equal opportunity in all employment policies and practices (Nicol, 2008). The Act also mandates that certain employers implement affirmative action plans to ensure equitable representation of previously disadvantaged groups in all occupational levels (Kahn, 2017).

2.3 The Domestic Violence Act (1998)

This progressive law addresses domestic abuse by enabling protection orders and expanding the definition of violence to include emotional, economic, and psychological harm, which is recognized as a serious and pervasive issue within the country (Van der Merwe & Joubert, 2024). This progressive law enables victims of domestic violence to obtain protection orders and ensures that the police have a duty to assist in their enforcement (Mohlala, 2023).

2.4 Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination (PEPUDA) Act (2000)

This Act aims to end unfair discrimination and promote equality, as guaranteed by the Constitution. It prohibits unfair discrimination and harassment on various grounds, such as race, gender, and disability, and makes hate speech illegal. The act establishes "Equality Courts" to hear discrimination complaints and is considered a key piece of legislation for achieving a more just and democratic society (Swart, 2020). It plays an essential part in the government's broader strategy to eradicate systemic inequalities and promote human dignity across South Africa's diverse communities (Khumalo & Patel, 2021).

2.5 National Policy Framework on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide

The National Policy Framework on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (GBVF), also known as the National Strategic Plan (NSP) on GBVF (2020–2030), is a comprehensive, multi-sectoral framework designed to end gender-based violence and femicide in South Africa. It was adopted in 2020 and is built on six pillars: Accountability, Prevention, Justice, Response, Economic Empowerment, and Research. These pillars guide the coordinated efforts of government, civil society, and the private sector to create a unified national strategy for combating GBVF (South African Government, 2020). The plan aims to create a cohesive, national strategy for addressing GBVF by coordinating the efforts of government, civil society, and the private sector. By focusing on prevention, accountability, and comprehensive victim support, the plan seeks to create a society where gender-based violence is eradicated and gender equality is realized (Flicker & Johnson, 2021; Mbeki, 2020).

2.6 Gender-Responsive Budgeting and Procurement

South Africa's gender-responsive budgeting and procurement strategies aim to achieve gender equality by ensuring that financial allocations and procurement processes do not perpetuate gender inequality but actively work to reduce it. The government's strategy involves implementing the Gender Responsive Planning & Budgeting Framework (GRPBMEA) to mainstream gender into all government planning and budgeting, while also using procurement regulations to provide opportunities for women-owned businesses and historically disadvantaged groups (Baden, 2020; Molyneux & Stout, 2021).

The Medium Term Development Plan (MTDP) 2024–2029, which aligns with the 2021 Women's Charter for Accelerated Development and the National Development Plan 2030, emphasizes a comprehensive approach to gender transformation. According to the National Treasury (2021), this plan requires that all government departments, across national, provincial, and local spheres, integrate gender considerations into their policies, budgets, and programs (known as gender-responsive budgeting).

While these frameworks provide a strong foundation, their effectiveness depends heavily on implementation, monitoring, and enforcement areas where South Africa faces significant challenges (Pillay, 2020; Swartz & Kallaway, 2022).

3. The Status of Women in Contemporary South Africa

Despite major advances, women in South Africa continue to face inequality across multiple dimensions.

3.1 Economic Inequality

Women, especially Black women, are disproportionately affected by poverty and unemployment. They dominate informal sectors, face gender pay gaps and have limited access to capital and financial services. Moreover, the burden of household and care responsibilities further restrict their economic participation (Maharaj, 2021; Nkabinde & Van der Walt, 2020).

The Quarterly Labour Force Survey published by Stats SA on 13 May 2025 provides important insights. In Q4 2024, Black Africans faced an unemployment rate of 37% which is higher than the national average of 32.9% and higher than other population groups. Black African women were reported to have the highest unemployment rate at 39.8%, while White males continued to have the lowest unemployment rate at 8.6%. The unemployment rates in the Q4 2024 survey reflect the same trend established over the past 10 years (Statistics South Africa, 2025). These disparities highlight why it is necessary for employers to take affirmative action steps (Hassim, 2021; Mkhize & Zulu, 2020).

The MTDP 2024-2029's primary focus on economic empowerment is on correcting the gender bias in economic participation. Interventions include (South African Government, 2024; Patel & Dube, 2021):

- Promoting women-owned businesses, particularly Black African women industrialists, through targeted support and leveraging the Public Procurement Act.
- Addressing the high rates of women's unemployment and ensuring equal pay and promotion opportunities.
- Improving women's access to finance and credit, without the need for collateral or linkage to marital status.

3.2 Political Representation

Although South Africa is among the global leaders in women's political representation, patriarchal norms within political parties and institutions often undermine women's influence. Representation does not automatically translate into transformative policy.

Women's political representation in South Africa has seen both progress and setbacks, with a notable decline in the National Assembly from 46% in 2019 to 43% in the post-2024 election government, despite earlier gains attributed to the ruling party's quota system (Matlala, 2021). While the cabinet has seen 40% women and other indicators like female leadership in mayoral and speaker roles show progress (Hassim & Bawa, 2022; Gouws, 2023), the recent decline in parliamentary representation highlights challenges like the lack of gender quotas in new coalition agreements and the impact of violence against women in politics (Gouws, 2023).

3.3 Education and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) underrepresentation

Girls and young women in South Africa have made strides in education, yet remain underrepresented in STEM fields due to gender stereotypes, limited mentorship, and institutional barriers (Mouton, 2023). The Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA) has responded by engaging schools to promote STEM and providing teachers with tools to improve STEAM education (ECSA, 2023). As a result, female engineering representation has grown, with women making up 15.82% of ECSA's practitioners in 2023/2024, rising to 18.66% by 2024/2025, showing meaningful progress toward gender inclusivity (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2024).

3.4 Health and Reproductive Rights

Access to sexual and reproductive health services in South Africa remains uneven, with significant disparities across regions. Women continue to face challenges including high maternal mortality, increased vulnerability to HIV, and limited access to specialized health services, particularly in rural areas (Peltzer et al., 2021). Despite policy advancements, inadequate infrastructure, socio-economic barriers, and gender inequalities limit women's access to reproductive rights (Zuma, 2023).

3.5 Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a major issue in South Africa, with high rates of femicide, sexual assault, and domestic violence undermining women's safety. Weak policing, low conviction rates, and stigma perpetuate the cycle of abuse. A recent Human Science Research Council (HSRC) survey found high victimization rates among Black African women and women with disabilities, highlighting physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. In 2024, the HSRC hosted a webinar on GBV and femicide, focusing on vulnerable groups, including women with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ women, Black African women, and older women (HSRC, 2024; Nkabinde & Mthembu, 2023).

The HSRC survey (2024) found that 33.1% of South African women over 18 have experienced physical violence, 25% have faced emotional abuse, and over 50% have experienced controlling behaviors. Additionally, 12.5% have suffered financial abuse, and 9.8% have been victims of sexual violence. In response, the MTDP commits to preventing violence against women and girls, strengthening the GBVF Council's mandate, and ensuring a more sensitive justice system for sexual offense victims.

4. Government-Led Gender Equality Initiatives

Government plays a central role in advancing gender equality through institutional structures, policy frameworks, and targeted interventions.

4.1 National Gender Machinery

This includes the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE), the Department for Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, gender focal points in departments, and parliamentary committees. These structures are responsible for mainstreaming gender across government work.

4.2 Women Economic Empowerment (WEE) Programmes

Government efforts to empower women economically include grants, entrepreneurship training, targeted procurement policies, and programmes aimed at integrating women into high-growth sectors such as technology, agriculture, and manufacturing.

4.3 National Strategic Plan on GBV and Femicide

This multi-sectoral framework aims to reduce GBV through prevention, justice reform, service delivery improvements, and community mobilisation. Although comprehensive, implementation is hindered by limited resources and weak institutional coordination.

5. The Role of the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA) in Advancing Gender Equality

While gender equality is not AGSA's primary mandate, the AGSA advances gender equality through its internal human resource practices and, externally, by auditing the performance and compliance of government entities responsible for implementing gender-related mandates, the institution plays a vital role in holding government accountable for gender-related commitments. AGSA's oversight strengthens gender-responsive governance and ensures that gender-equality initiatives are funded, implemented, and monitored effectively.

5.1 Strengthening Gender-Responsive Governance through Accountability

Through financial and compliance audits, AGSA ensures government departments:

- adhere to gender-related legislation
- meet employment equity and transformation targets
- implement gender-responsive budgeting
- direct procurement resources to women-owned businesses

By flagging failures, AGSA pushes departments to fulfil their gender obligations.

5.2 Performance Audits Focused on Outcomes Affecting Women

The AGSA increasingly evaluates the effectiveness, not just the legality, of public spending through performance audits. These audits assess the outcomes of government programs in areas such as women's healthcare, social protection, education, and services for GBV survivors. By doing so, they provide valuable evidence on whether government initiatives are making a tangible impact on improving women's lives.

5.3 Supporting Gender Equality through Institutional Culture

AGSA promotes gender equality internally by advancing:

- women's representation in leadership
- diversity in the auditing profession
- equitable workplace practices

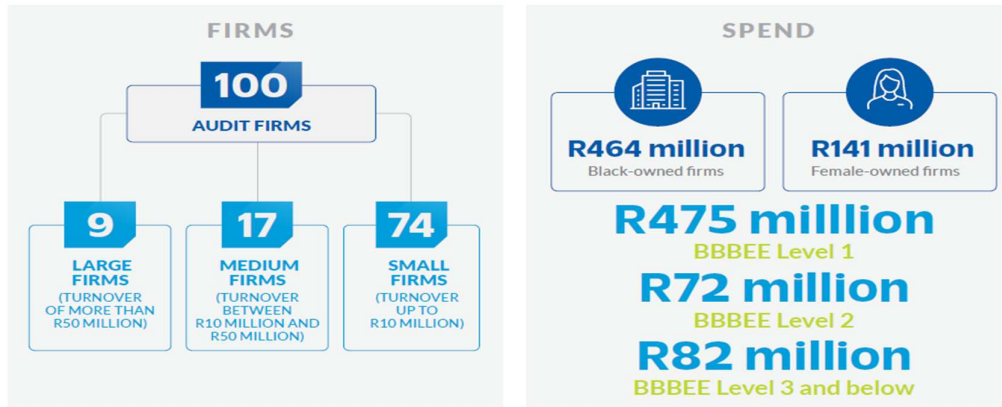
Its internal transformation supports national goals of increasing women's leadership in public institutions.

The AGSA has its first female Auditor-General of South Africa (**Tsakani Maluleke**), who was appointed in December 2020. She is the first woman to hold this position in the supreme audit institution's history and also previously served as the first female Deputy Auditor-General.

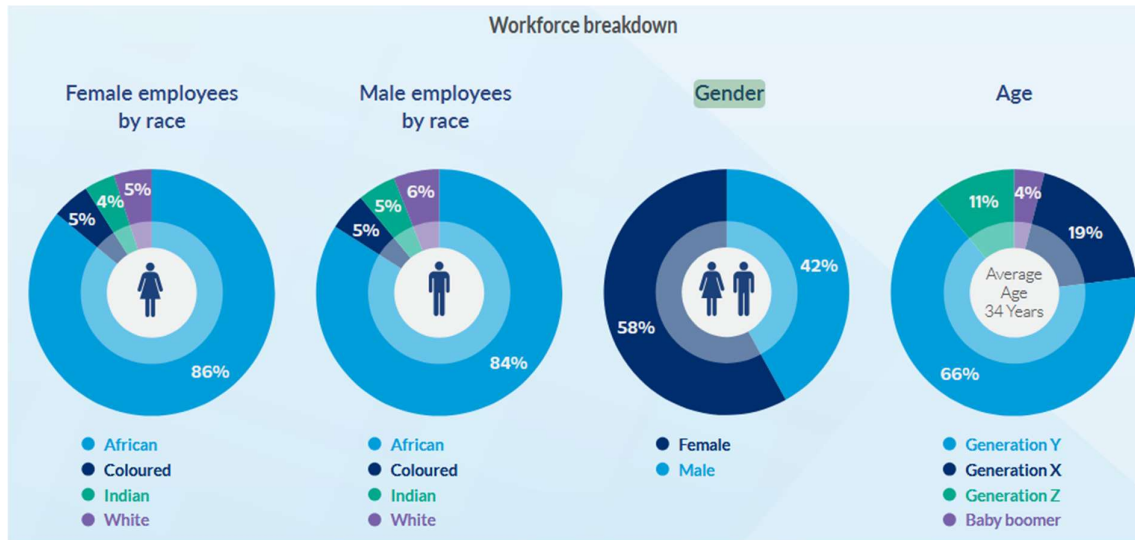
The AGSA in partnership with FASSET, AWCA, and Duke Corporate Education has introduced the Women Leading in the Public Sector Programme. This programme is designed to empower and elevate women in public sector leadership roles, offering world-class development opportunities and a platform for impactful growth. The goal of this programme is to build a powerful peer network, sharpen leadership capabilities, drive systemic change, and equip women with the skills and confidence to assume senior public sector roles.

As part of its business model, during the 2024/25 financial year the AGSA reported that it outsourced some audit work to supplement its capacity and the small to medium firms that audit on their behalf are referred to as 'contract work creditors' (CWC). AGSA's choice of outsourced partners reflects both their capacity-building and transformation principles, which include developing and advancing black chartered accountants. The office appoints these firms transparently based on their size, location, expertise and work quality. Outsourced work includes pre-issuance reviews, regularity audits, information systems audits and secondment of experts to assist with the regulatory and performance audits. (AGSA 2025)

Outsourced partners



The 2024/2025 integrated annual report of the AGSA highlighted that the AGSA attained a broad-based black economic empowerment level of Level 1. As year three of the five-year employment equity plan concluded, the AGSA's female representation was at 58%, compared to the country's economically active population 44,6%. Males make up 42%, lagging behind the national average of 55,4%. This area will remain a focus for the organisation, to get the organisation in line with national figures. Another area of improvement noted by the organisation is the under representation of African females at executive and senior management. Similarly with the number of Coloured and Indian males as well as females at other levels. Addressing these areas of concern is important for both the organisation's compliance with the amended Employment Equity Act (which states that designated employers must align their employment equity plans with newly gazetted five-year sector targets by 31 August 2025) and its own transformation principles.



5.4 Oversight of GBV Funding

Given the GBV crisis, AGSA audits:

- funding for the GBV National Strategic Plan
- resources for police and justice-sector interventions
- grants for shelters, safe houses, and support services

These audits help identify mismanagement, ensuring resources reach survivors.

5.5 Combating Corruption that Disproportionately Harms Women

Corruption weakens public services often relied upon by women—such as healthcare, social grants, and housing. AGSA’s exposure of irregular expenditure protects essential services, indirectly supporting gender equality.

5.6 Informing Parliament and Civil Society

AGSA’s reports provide crucial insights into gender-related governance failures. Civil society organisations rely on these findings to advocate for better gender policies and hold officials accountable.

Through these functions, AGSA plays a foundational role in ensuring that gender equality is not merely a policy ideal, but a measurable outcome.

6. Civil Society and Community-Based Organisations

Civil society remains a powerful engine for gender transformation. They contribute to gender equality through a wide range of activities, including advocating for policy change, providing direct services to survivors of violence, running empowerment programs, and monitoring government accountability.

6.1 Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR)

Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) is an independent South African public interest law organization that provides free legal services to vulnerable individuals and communities. LHR uses the law to advocate for social change and uphold constitutional rights through public interest litigation, casework, and advocacy.

6.2 Oxfam South Africa

Oxfam works on women's economic justice, political participation, and GBV prevention, with an emphasis on intersectional inequalities.

6.3 Women'sNet

Women'sNet promotes digital literacy and access to online platforms, enabling women's participation in civic life and empowerment through information.

6.4 Grassroots Activism

Movements like #TotalShutdown have been instrumental in pressuring government to act on GBV, showing the power of collective mobilisation.

7. Academic and Research Initiatives

Universities and research bodies provide essential support to gender equality.

7.1 University of Pretoria (UP)

UP runs programmes such as Women Leadership Programme (WLP) and WISE-UP (Women in STEM), supporting women's representation in leadership and technical fields.

7.2 Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)

HSRC conducts research that informs policy and provides evidence on gender disparities in education, employment, health, and justice.

7.3 Campus-Based Gender Units

Multiple universities offer institutional support for survivors of GBV and lead gender transformation programmes on campus.

8. International Organisations and Partnerships

International bodies support South Africa through funding, expertise, and capacity-building.

8.1 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

The UNDP implements its programs in South Africa by partnering with the government, private sector, and civil society to achieve national development priorities like poverty reduction, inequality, and unemployment. Key areas of implementation include inclusive economic growth (e.g., skills training, business development), governance (e.g., supporting elections, public service reform), and environmental sustainability (e.g., renewable energy, biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation). Additionally, the UNDP works closely with the South African government to align with the country's national development priorities, including the Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP) 2024-2029, assisting in areas like gender-responsive governance, women's leadership training, and institutional reforms (UNDP, 2023; Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2023).

8.2 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in South Africa works to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe, and every young person's potential is fulfilled. They focus on advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender equality, and youth empowerment, while promoting population data and demographic research to support sustainable development. UNFPA supports reproductive health services, rights education, and GBV prevention.

UNFPA collaborates with the South African government, civil society, private sector, and other UN agencies to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those focused on health (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), and partnerships (SDG 17). Through evidence-based advocacy, UNFPA champions the rights of women, girls, and young people, contributing to national policies and programs aimed at leaving no one behind. Their mission is to create a South Africa where individuals, especially women and youth, can lead healthy, dignified, and productive lives, free from inequality and violence (UNFPA, 2023; United Nations, 2023).

8.3 Other Global Actors

UNICEF, WHO, and global foundations contribute to education, youth development, HIV prevention, and community health programmes targeting women and girls.

9. Key Challenges to Achieving Gender Equality

Despite various initiatives, significant obstacles continue to hinder progress toward gender equality in South Africa:

- **Weak Implementation:** Policies often fail due to underfunding, slow institutional processes, and a lack of political will (Mkhize & Zulu, 2022).
- **Patriarchal Norms:** Deeply ingrained cultural beliefs about gender roles influence relationships, workplaces, and institutions, perpetuating gender inequality (Chowdhury & Dube, 2021).
- **Economic Inequality:** Women remain overrepresented in low-paid jobs, informal work, and unpaid care labour, limiting their financial independence and career advancement (Barker, 2023; Hassim, 2022).
- **GBV Crisis:** South Africa's gender-based violence rates are among the highest globally, severely undermining women's empowerment across all spheres of life (HSRC, 2024; Mkhize, 2023).
- **Rural–Urban Divides:** Women in rural areas face limited access to essential services, education, justice, and economic opportunities, exacerbating gender inequalities (Dlamini, 2023; Smit & Oosthuysen, 2022).

- **LGBTQIA+ Discrimination:** Despite constitutional protections, queer and gender-diverse individuals continue to face violence, exclusion, and systemic discrimination (Grant, 2023; Botha & Mthembu, 2022).

10. Discussion: Policy vs Lived Reality

South Africa's gender equality framework is world-class on paper, yet lived experiences show persistent disparities. This gap stems from:

- poor implementation
- patriarchal institutional culture
- inadequate resourcing
- weak monitoring and evaluation
- socio-economic structural barriers

Institutions like AGSA help narrow this gap by strengthening accountability, but deep societal transformation is essential.

11. Recommendations

To strengthen gender equality efforts, South Africa must:

- **Fully Fund and Implement Existing Policies:** Including the GBV National Strategic Plan, gender-responsive budgeting, and economic empowerment initiatives.
- **Expand Economic Opportunities:** Provide more support for women entrepreneurs, improve credit access, and promote participation in high-growth sectors.
- **Transform Social Norms:** Increase investments in education, media campaigns, and community programmes addressing harmful gender norms.
- **Strengthen Justice System Responses:** Improve policing, prosecution, and survivor support services.
- **Enhance AGSA's Gender-Focused Audits:** Encourage AGSA to deepen its gender-responsive auditing and publicly highlight gender-related governance failures.

- **Promote Intersectional Approaches:** Address the unique challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ persons, rural women, migrant women, and persons with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

Gender equality in South Africa is a complex, evolving effort marked by historic progress but persistent challenges. The country has established one of the world's most advanced legal frameworks for gender rights, yet practical realities reveal gaps driven by cultural norms, economic inequality, and systemic violence. Government, civil society, academia, and international partners contribute significantly to the struggle for gender justice.

The Auditor-General South Africa plays a crucial, often overlooked role by ensuring accountability, auditing gender-related spending, preventing corruption, and monitoring compliance with equality commitments. This oversight strengthens the foundation for gender-responsive governance and ensures that gender initiatives translate into meaningful outcomes.

Ultimately, achieving gender equality demands more than progressive laws, it requires societal transformation, consistent political will, and robust institutional accountability. Only through combined efforts across all sectors can South Africa realise the constitutional promise of equality and build a society where all individuals, regardless of gender, can participate fully and thrive.

South Africa's journey toward gender equality is ongoing. Continued collaboration among government, NGOs, communities, and individuals is essential to building a society where all people regardless of gender can live free from violence, discrimination, and structural inequality.

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