

Budget Speech by Hon Sophia Swartz ^{MP} ^{Sumpo}

In the midst of all of the economic and political issues we as a country face, I do not think we could ever over emphasise the importance of social issues within our communities. One of the social issues which I remain passionate about, is that of gender inclusivity at all levels. This is a social issue which affects all sectors of society, but my focus is centred on our youth, who remain an important group in our society.

Many efforts have been made around the idea of youth inclusivity in empowering our youth and specifically the most disadvantaged, the girl child. And the reason why we cannot shy away from the fact that the girl child is the most disadvantaged, is because plagues such as teenage pregnancies and consequent school dropouts affect the girl child primarily. Things such as single parenting affect the girl child primarily. It becomes so important at this point that our young boys and girls are sensitise with these issues. Somewhere our boy children will have to take responsibility and join in the fight against these gender imbalances.

We have succeeded in the efforts of creating platforms for the robust engagement on youth issues, but I must say, we have failed in providing these platforms in the areas in which they are needed most and to the groups which are affected most by these social plagues. It is enough that platforms to hear youth views are exclusionary. We cannot have these forums and events in areas where those directly affected are not able to even attend, to begin with. It is time that we take these platforms to our people. Let us take them to the neighbourhoods where these issues are most prevalent. Let us take them to the regions in which they are most prevalent. Let us start hearing from our people.

When it comes to the corporate social responsibility of entities in the private sector, more emphasis needs to be placed on what they are doing to break social ills such as Violence and Gender-based violence specifically as this remains an issue we cannot hide from. It is very disheartening to see many corporate bodies donate maize-meal and see this as them doing enough for our communities. Somewhere we need to draw the line and have mechanisms in place to ensure that relevant social problems are dealt with in a tangible and long- lasting, impactful manner.

Moreover, our laws need to truly start reflecting what it is we value as a society. It truly hurt me to read about the young girl who was married off by her parents at the age of eight. These are one of the examples where our customary laws clash with our civil laws and it is important that we as lawmakers start debating these issues and making our position clear on these issues.

On a personal level, we need to start taking personal responsibility and take seriously the role that we have in our communities. We need to start driving change, in our personal and professional capacities. Positive role-modelling is one of the ways in which we can do this as individuals. Let us start holding ourselves accountable to making these social changes.

As a collective, we need to start unlocking resources for the implementation of programmes which will keep our youth off the streets. Initiatives such as educational youth resource centres, environmental clubs and the likes. Let us start being creative

in our efforts to keep our youth away from that which perpetuates the gender imbalance. Let's take a radical approach in tackling these social ills. It is time we recognise the dire need for social programmes which keep our youth away from engaging in ills such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse etc. And the time is now.