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EMPOWERED: Members of the group Ilitha labantu marched to Gugulethu police station against women and child abuse recently.

PICTURE: DOMINIQUE OKUHLI

How violence can impact economy

Women's limited economic opportunities linked to cycle of abuse, writes Matokgo Makutoane

VIOLENCE against women and girls (VAW) is not only a human rights issue: it is a barrier to economic empowerment and eradicating poverty. When women become victims of violence – economic, physical or emotional – their ability to create economic opportunities is severely curtailed. Expectations of how to behave, notions of masculinity and “strong” males as well as dealing with the after-effects of a violent interaction all limit her ability to make the most of economic opportunities. In 2012, Gender Links found that 77% of women in Limpopo, 51% in Gauteng, 45% in the Western Cape and 36% in KwaZulu-Natal had experienced some form of gender-based violence (GBV). It is widely recognised that women's economic empowerment is a prerequisite for sustainable development. Yet young

Statistician-general, Pall Lehohla, recently said that young people between the ages of 15 to 24 remain vulnerable in the labour market with an unemployment rate of close to 56%. This translates to about 3.3 million young people between 15 to 24 years of age without employment and other economic opportunities. Their plight is deepened by a low economic growth which means more positions are being frozen within the workplace with limited skills for entrepreneurship. Women experience challenges in virtually every aspect of the economy. Add into this mix the challenge of gender-based violence and women are further pushed away from the opportunities for growth. Not tackling violence against women has a huge opportunity cost – not only for the women who are survivors of such outrages but also for the country's economy. VAW comes at a cost to women,

– the economic impact of gender-based violence in South Africa” conservatively estimated that

The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation's (CSVR) 2016 research *Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in South Africa: A Brief Review* notes that lack of economic independence among women is a key driver of GBV as they struggle to leave abusive relationships due to their economic dependence. “The current South African social and economic conditions, including the impact of the global financial crisis, make it difficult for many men to achieve ‘complete’ masculinity, such as securing jobs, marrying, fathering children or establishing their own households,” notes CSVR, adding that in this context GBV becomes a prominent mechanism through which to reinforce male power and authority. Violence not only drains resources that can be used for growth, but also had the additional costs of coping with such violence. It means shifting scarce resources

the costs of dealing with VAW. The costs of violence are direct and indirect, as well as an opportunity cost where we might be deprived of choices we don't even realise are available. For example, the UN Population Fund acting executive director, Natalia Kanem, says Africa can expect a demographic dividend when we create opportunities for everyone to participate in the economy. She describes the demographic dividend as the economic boost that happens in a country when you have more people in productive working ages employed and contributing to the economy compared to the categories of young people or elderly who are dependants in economic terms. “You have to equip people to be able to be productive members of a society, and this means education is very important. Adolescent girls, in particular, should be equipped to reach their potential by re-

regard the need to ensure that women are included in the economy and ensure that they are able to access economic benefits. Violence against women does not just drain limited resources in the economy. VAW further marginalises women from economic opportunities, increases poverty and perpetuates a cycle of economic dependence that makes women reluctant to leave their abusers. We must help women grab economic opportunities if we truly want to break the cycle of abuse and make inroads against poverty. Empowering young women is not a quick and easy task but requires a holistic approach, good policies and political will. It needs to recognise an integrated approach that sees VAW as both an inhibitor of growth and a symptom of the problem. We must embrace innovative approaches and partnerships to scale up