YOUNG WOMEN SPEAK OUT!

Stories of the challenges women face in society.
In the South African context, there are many people who feel that their voices are unheard or deliberately silenced.

Ubumbano Voice is a tool developed by ACT Ubumbano to raise the voice of people who are fighting for their dignity, for justice. It is a platform for community activists to share stories, resources and information, and to support local communities and organisations in their struggle for change.

Young women’s voices are particularly silenced. This is a group that is very vulnerable to poverty, unemployment, HIV and gender-based violence. Ubumbano Voice, with the support of activists, provides the opportunity for young women to share their stories. In a series of interviews, young women were specifically asked what challenges they face as young women in their communities. This booklet is the result of these interviews, and of extracts from stories posted by women on the App.

The lived experiences and challenges these young women face can be stark and even overwhelming. It is important that we remember that this publication is about young women talking about their own lives, but it is not the complete story of their lives.

Why then is it important that these stories of challenges are published and find a wider audience?

It shows that people, in this case young women, can tell their own stories – they don’t need others to speak on their behalf, to claim to be “a voice for the voiceless.”

Telling your own story is often the first powerful action step towards change. Naming the issues can provide the opportunity to learn from it and see new opportunities. Voice is more than just theory, it is action.

For these reasons, this publication does not attempt to analyse or find solutions – it simply creates an opportunity for unheard voices to be heard.

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**BACKGROUND**

“There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”

— ARUNDHATI ROY

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**ABOUT ACTUBUMBANO**

ACT Ubumbano is a collective of organisations, churches and community groups that provides space for activists to reflect on their social justice practice, and to see where they can support community struggles by listening more closely to the voice of those who fight for their dignity. It convenes the Solidarity Hub, which brings together all who are committed to critical reflection on their work. The Ubumbano Voice App is the result of these reflections and is intended to support voice as action – by supporting those most affected by injustice to write their stories, and then amplifying them through the platform that is the Voice App and Website. Connections are made and solidarity is built between communities who can share their experiences and link up for greater social justice action.
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POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Poverty and unemployment are major factors that undermine young women and are often seen as the root cause of the problems they face.

“We have no money for even the basic stuff such as sanitary pads,”

“No Money for the Basics

“Poverty plays a big role, it makes us young women want to escape it to survive, even if it means selling our souls. We have no idea what human dignity is; dignity is foreign to us.”

“We have no money for even the basic stuff such as sanitary pads,”

“Many young women are forced to assist their parents, especially when the father is not present, to look after their siblings, to provide food, school uniforms and other needed things.”

“Asked if it (violence against her) was the first time, the victim said no and she did not report it because she was afraid of losing her home, considering that she is financially dependent on her husband.”
BOYFRIENDS WITH MONEY AND OLDER MEN

“Many of us rely on our boyfriends with money for basic things. Some continue toxic relationships simply because the man can provide for their needs.”

“The big challenge we face is unemployment. Most of us young women we are unemployed, which results in some of us dating older men to provide for them.”

“Young women date older men because we are not working, and at least we will be taken care of.”

“A man buys a woman drinks at a tavern or even buys them food. Then they think that they are already dating and that the woman is his property.”

“Dating older men makes it better to get what we need, such as clothes, toiletries and other stuff.”

JOBS FOR SEX

“A lot of time, when we are looking for work, there must be an exchange for sex for a woman to be employed. The pressure is great because the unemployment rate is very high.”

“It is hard to get a job if you don’t know someone. If that someone is a man, then he proposes sex.”

“After grade 12, I did an administration course at a college. Due to a lack of work, I had to go and work as a domestic. I heard that our municipality had a post for admin. I applied and was called for an interview. A man called me saying I should come to his office. He told me that there is “nothing for mahala”, it’s a “table interview”, or I pay R2500. I pleaded - saying I won’t sleep for work. Please, wait for me to get paid so that I will pay you. The guy refused and insisted on sex. At first, I was tempted, but then I refused. I did not want to lose my dignity and suffer the danger of sexual diseases.”

SEX-WORK

“Many young women end up in prostitution, even staying with an older man for regular payments is a form of prostitution.”
“Unemployment pushes or drives young women to prostitution in and around Diepkloof - to either get drugs, alcohol and other needs. Many women end up being victims because of unemployment”.

YOUNG WOMEN IN SMALL BUSINESS

“Women try hard to get an income through small business activities. But it is hard, most times they fail”

“The biggest challenge I face as a young woman growing up in my community is having my voice heard. Most people think I’m too young and all that I wish to see happen or change is just a dream, meaning they tend to doubt my capabilities. The lack of support structure with regards to turning an idea into reality becomes a challenge just because I’m a young woman.”

“Women find it difficult to set up their own small business. They get no support from government.”

I had a daughter; the father was present for 6 months after she was born and suddenly disappeared from our lives. I, who didn’t even know where to get money for milk and diapers, she barely had clothes and shoes, I looked at her and asked her what she did to deserve this? ...I left I went to the Xiquelene market (in the city of Maputo), found my sister-in-law selling sanitary towels and asked her how she did it to get the towels, she explained to me and said let’s sell together. I accepted. I had a little money saved, I started the dressing and diaper business, but even so, I was ashamed to be traveling, because I was ashamed of the people who knew me, so my cousin helped the business to grow. When the business went on, my mother looked at me with different eyes”

Tive uma filha, e o pai dela so esteve presente so por seis meses apois o parto e derepente desapareceu das nossas vidas. E eu, que nem sabia onde conseguir dinheiro para comprar leite e fraldas, a bebe que nao tinha roupa nem sapatos. Olhei para ela e perguntei o que tinha feito para merecer isso. Levantei me e fui ao mercado de Xiquelene ( aos a redores da cidade de Maputo) onde encontrei a minha cunhada vendendo toalhas sanitarias e perguntei a onde teria encontrado mercadoria, ai explicou me e sugerir que eu vendesse com ele. Aceito a offerta. Tinha algum dinheiro guardado comecei com negocio fraldas e gases sanitarios. Mesmo assim eu tinha vergonha de viajar por ai, com vergonha de me cruzar com pessoas enquanto vendia. Entao a minha prima ajudou na venda e o negocio foi crescendo. E a minha mae começou a ter um olhar diferente.
“Even if one starts a small business of selling at a street corner, the JMPD (city police) will be there to harass people who are trying to build something for themselves. They have their possessions taken from them. If the government could protect and respect the rights of people selling in the street corners and pavements, then many people would create employment for themselves.”

“Regardless of age, can the doors we knock on as young people be open with limited red tape. We are trying to change our own place, can we get the support we need from the community at large, particular us young women.”

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THE POVERTY TRAP

“Poverty is more than just a lack of income or not working. Lack of resources causes one to think passively, includes shame and limited access to education.”

“"Our parents can hardly afford money for us to go to school. We end up spending weekends in the taverns. We sleep with different men in exchange for alcohol and money. We end up contracting diseases and having children we cannot support.”

“What makes my anxiety react terribly, is that due to high unemployment and lack of secure space, I might never reach my goals - which will assist me in uplifting this community - or be able to leave this non-developed and depressing community that continues to limit young people’s potential and expose them to more drug abuse and crime.”
EDUCATION

Education is often suggested as a solution to many of the challenges young women face, but this often brings its own challenges.

PRESSURE ON STUDENTS FROM POOR FAMILIES

“Braamfontein (in Johannesburg) is mainly schools and universities. Most of the young woman are from poor families and parents can’t afford anything. They are here to get education, and lucky to get scholarships or bursaries. There is peer pressure and competition; while others can afford to buy those expensive clothes and phones, there are others who can’t, and they really feel the pressure. In order for them to have those things they end up dating older men(“blessers”). They get what they want, but there is nothing for free.”

“Even when we get educated it’s not for us, but it’s about “living the life”, get a job, buy a townhouse, a car, and hanging with your own”.
“Growing up without a father tends to make us look for our fathers in the men we date. And mostly it is men that will repeat the cycle from their upbringing/ background. We get involved with men that leave us too, and we have to raise the children on our own.”

SCHOOL DROP-OUTS

“Despite teachings at school that has to do with life skills to make a young woman choose a better way of living, many young women still get caught in a situation that they are promised money by their boyfriends to only sleep with them and don’t use protection.”

“The department of education has introduced life skills in schools as part of the curriculum, the department of health and other organisations have been involved in educating young woman about safe sex, condom use, STI’s and pregnancy. Despite that effort, young women drop out of school because they are pregnant. Some young as 15-16 years reported that the father of their babies are the same age, while some said they have older boy friends.”

“Many of the young women end up dropping out from school because they are ashamed to be seen pregnant at that age. Although self-discipline is there, it depends how it is used to be able to safeguard themselves from being teen mothers as well as single parents at that age. They end up giving up school, having low self-esteem and being depressed because of the situation that they are now - single parents and teens. They think that there are no more opportunities for them because they are drop-outs. One mistake that many of the parents make is not to talk with these young women, so that what they learn or are taught at school should be built inside and that self-discipline should be released from within.”

FAILURE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

“We are all made to believe that education is the key, by our parents and the government, but in reality, that’s not true. You go to school and waste around 15 years with the hope that when you finish school you’ll be employed, and you’ll take care of yourself. After graduation, you become excited and say, ‘I won, I have the key with me’, but when you go knock on the door, the door slams on your face. The world is looking up to you to excel, but how do you excel when you have a key that doesn’t open the door in front of you? You become frustrated, in the sense that “Boom!” you choose a short cut that takes you to the deep end - which is drugs - just to shift your focus and think it’s an easy way. You don’t have any more answers to your peers because they dropped out from school, but you kept going until to the last bit (graduation). They still say the same thing: ‘You thought you were better than us, but look now, you are educated but we are in the same WhatsApp group. We all not working despite the fact that you are a University graduate.’ We drink together we might as well look out for a Blesser (sugar daddy) to buy us alcohol and drugs - we feed our cravings in exchange for sex.”
FAMILY PRESSURES

“There is pressure from the family for us to get married, forcing you to end up staying in abusive relationships”.

“Growing up without a father tends to make us look for our fathers in the men we date. And mostly it is men that will repeat the cycle from their upbringing / background. We get involved with men that leave us too, and we have to raise the children on our own.”

“Then there is pressure from families we come from that we make something of ourselves and take care of our children.”

“There is pressure from the family for us to get married, forcing you to end up staying in abusive relationships”.

“There is pressure to keep up with statues, whether parents can afford it or not, pressure to date certain types of guys in order to keep up with statues.”

SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS

“My biggest fear is the peer pressure that we are facing as young women. The picture they have painted for a good(perfect) woman is too artificial yet relevant in this age and date. I fear that we in the danger of losing self-respect because we have to try so very hard to be relevant. The social networks which are meant to be for communication they are so hurtful and abusive because of bashing and body shaming.”

LACK OF INFORMATION AND PERSONAL CONFIDENCE

“There is pressure from the family for us to get married, forcing you to end up staying in abusive relationships”.

“Some young women lack ambition due to lack of information. They have limited information. They don’t open their minds to the possibilities that await them out there.”

“The lack of self-confidence has made a lot of us fall victim to falling pregnant at young ages; old men take advantage of our vulnerability and family situations.”

“According to what I’ve seen and chats I’ve had, broken families and underprivileged homes contribute somewhat to peer pressure effects, young women all want to feel like they are worth it and unfortunately, for most, they are taught to find their worth in things and not self. Self-identity isn’t even a concept to many of these young women, their family doesn’t encourage them to be proud of their being. Society only escalates the damage that is mostly created from the home space’.”
“Lack of tangible role models; the unlimited and uninterrupted exposure to media is crazy. The media is controlled and so is the audience. We are exposed to one kind/type of role models, not very much options. Education/information is not fashionable enough.”

“As a modern woman who still has big dreams, I’m faced with a lot of stressors such as responsibility both at home and work, single parenthood and being an effective community member. I want to be successful; I want to reach my goals; I want to be strong and still remain feminine. Having realized the challenges facing women all over the world meant that I sometimes wonder if my voice will be loud enough for me to be heard, wondering if I won’t be taken for granted just because of my vulnerability or background.”

THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

“Okay there is a lot facing young African woman, nje!

- Identity - no one seems to really know who they must be these days cause the are so many types of persona that you as a person are allowed to be these days.

- Culture - nowadays it’s okay not to follow your culture but follow the fake distractive one instead of our true African cultures.

- Searching - too many are looking for love, looking for peace, some are looking for their biological bloodline so they can find purpose.

Running - away from responsibility, from self and many are running away from their true calling.”

“Growing up as a young woman in my community has been difficult for me as an individual. This is because there were no support structures/developmental spaces available for young women trying to find their feet in this broken society. I was longing to have a space where women can gather together to talk about issues affecting them and give each other support. I personally had issues of self-identity. I was yearning for a platform where I could feel like I belonged, where my issues are understood no matter how delicate they may be and where I’m given tools to develop myself so I can be the best version of me.”

POSITIVE ROLE MODELS

“Lack of tangible role models; the unlimited and uninterrupted exposure to media is crazy. The media is controlled and so is the audience. We are exposed to one kind/type of role models, not very much options. Education/information is not fashionable enough.”
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

“By far, the biggest problem that women face is the violence of men.”

PATRIARCHY

“Most young women in townships are victims of patriarchy (the belief that men are superior and must be obeyed). Men always have an upper hand and subconsciously women assume or feel they should settle for the lower hand.”

“I live in the rural area, and my biggest challenge growing up in my community is that men are superior to women. The idea that women can’t stand in some meetings - even in family meetings.”

“When men feel that they are not in charge, they become angry.”

“My husband is jealous because I run a small business. He sees this as an insult to him. He calls me names; says I am stupid. But if I don’t do anything, he still calls me stupid. Even when they, my kids, find jobs, they are stupid. The problem is that he is cheating and does not provide for the family.”
VERBAL AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE

“The personal challenges that I face is verbal abuse in my relationship. I am verbally, emotionally abused by someone I trusted that he will protect, love, respect and honour me, no matter the situation.”

“Many young women suffer from psychosomatic illnesses and devastating mental problems like post-traumatic stress disorder because of domestic violence. They find it difficult to function in their daily lives. I remember a young woman that I interviewed at the place of safety for child and women abuse. She mentioned that it is so difficult for her to sleep without taking tablets because she constantly has nightmares, always jumpy when she hears the bang sounds. She isolated herself from friends and family members because she feels that they always judge her and take decisions for her. She feels worthless and is always in bed.”

BREAKDOWN IN TRUST IN RELATIONSHIPS

“As a single unemployed parent who is doing everything in her power to raise her kids, it is hard to trust anyone these days - be it in a relationship or even looking for work. Men in high positions take advantage of the troubled women looking for work, because whoever conducting the interview may take advantage of the situation.

“I am afraid of committing myself in a relationship as I am afraid of what may happen to my kids, and safety for my kids is very important.”

“With a lot of pain, I was taken by my father, with no one to help me and no voice to shout and mainly because we were alone, since that day my world changed, I was groundless, my life was over. I keep this secret until today, not least because there is no way to forget it, because in addition to having this mark on my heart, I also have it in my hands (a son who should be my brother). I had this son away from everything and everyone, because I disappeared right after my father’s barbaric act, I left my areato Maputo without a penny.”

Com tanta dor, o meu pai agarrou me, sem ninguem para me ajudar, ninguem para pedir socorro mesmo se gritasse principalmente porque estavamos sem algures sozinhos, e desde desse dia a minha vida mudou e fiquei sem chao e a minha vida estava acabada. Guardei esse segredo ate hoje, ainda mais porque nao ha jeito de esquecer, para alem disso ter me mercado no meu coracao, tenho nas minhas nao maos (um filho que devia ser or meu irmao ). Tive o paryo do meu filho longe de todos
“Young women and girls remain the society’s most vulnerable group of people with more risks of getting HIV infected, getting abused and having less economic opportunities which can lead into wrong relationships and making uninformed choices.”

LACK OF RESPECT FOR WOMEN

“Women face difficult challenges daily. Women live a critical life daily no matter age, height, strength, power, money or no money. None the less a woman should be respected, loved, protected and appreciated. Women are targets of most men in an abusive relationship - she is not valued, respected, and many end up killed because of love by boyfriends, husbands, even relatives.

NO SAFETY FOR WOMEN

“Every morning it’s a struggle to go and wait for a bus in a bus stop. I always feel like a target; you can never be sure that you are safe enough. Reading and hearing about a missing person always questions my safety in this country”.

“The biggest challenges I face is the lack of secure spaces for me as a young woman to engage with other women, a place to gym safely, no recreational infrastructure and the high drug usage which I experience every day within my surroundings.”

“There’s no safety for women, regardless where they are - be it at home, inside the house, with doors locked. Anything can happen and most women kill men to protect themselves. If a woman is raped, men say it is because she exposed her body, that’s why she was raped. Men think they own a woman’s body.”

“My biggest fear is experiencing a burglary again due to crime or being robbed of my belongings, as I have experienced such.

“Being sent to the local tuck shop to buy bread has become scary because these days you go to the shop and there is a group of boys sitting there blocking the way - just to body shame us and touch us in an inappropriate way.”

“Some young women fear to date young men because the rate of young women being killed by their partners is getting higher each and every day, and some of these men abuse them physical and emotional.”

e de tudo porque logo que o meu pai fez o seu acto barbarico desapareci sem nenhu dinheiro e fui parar na cidade de Maputo.
LACK OF SAFE SPACES FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN

"I am fearful because our environment is cruel. Even in our yards we can be raped. When a child is playing and you do not see her, you are scared because even a neighbour is not trusted anymore."

NO SAFETY FOR “STRANGERS”

“The biggest challenge I face as a young woman in the community is xenophobia and insecurity. It was a very terrifying time of my life personally for me; I didn’t understand why we had to fight each other instead of uniting as Africans.

The second biggest challenge is insecurity. Human trafficking is becoming as familiar as the back of my hand. Girls are just getting stolen from all over, and not much is being done. There are no more safe places for us young women, even our homes are being invaded.

The third is rape. The rate is getting higher and higher each passing second. I feel like we are not being valued and respected like we should."

DRESS AND MALE HYPOCRISY

“Men can move around with a short and a vest, but if it’s a woman wearing in that manner, negative words will be uttered that draws attention. I lost a friend killed by her husband on their 10th anniversary, there is a lack of safety, we need urgent reaction to women’s cries.”

“And the way a woman dresses does not say she is looking for sex or wants to be raped. This does not say men can do as they want with women!”

ALCOHOL ABUSE AND VIOLENCE

“Alcohol abuse has become a fashionable thing in our communities. That always creates a problem whereby many young women are raped and some of the young women are found dead after being raped, thrown in fields, or wherever.”
FAILURE OF THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

“Those who raped are given bail, and no one thinks about the victim. I sometimes ask myself if there’s justice in this country or even laws in this country. Who do they protect because, looking at GBV, it is committed daily against women and children no one talks about women problems in homesteads?”

“You could see anger on her face before she started talking. She said in their kasi they are scared for their lives and don’t feel safe. The abuse of woman and children is so rife in their area and the justice system fails them. When they report cases of abuse the perpetrators will be walking the streets the following day. They even lost trust in the police because it seems like they don’t care about victims of GBV.”

“And some young women are being hunted by the ex-boyfriend with a weapon. There’s no safety for them. Although they may have opened a case for abuse or applied for a protection order that is not enough because injustice is what they face. The law is always on the perpetrators side, no matter the type of institutions. Hence many of the victims are afraid to speak because they fear for their lives.”

“She experienced her first domestic violence at the age of 6. When her father constantly physically abused her mother in her presence she cried, and she was also assaulted by him. She tried all the avenues; a case was opened, and she got a protection order, but the perpetrator was not arrested. These are the main reasons why victims had lost hope in the criminal justice system, and they feel helpless and depressed.”
A lot of us young women get into drug usage to let go of the pain we carry. Our actions are sad and irresponsible especially when there are children, we need to take care of.

SEARCH FOR ESCAPE

Quick fix, we want things, and we want them now, and that has caused us to be lazy, all thanks to media sensationalizing everything. Good honest living seems to be boring; everything is about what people think – about peers.”

“Alcohol, “ukugroover”/ nice time is more important.”

“A lot of us young women get into drug usage to let go of the pain we carry. Our actions are sad and irresponsible especially when there are children, we need to take care of”

“Unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse seem to be the ones destroying our youth. In this kasi there are so many young women who are not working and as a result they feel bored. When weekend comes, they will go out and meet some guys who buy them alcohol. The problem is that they will walk alone late-night, drunk. As a result, they exposed themselves to the danger of being raped or killed.”
SUICIDE

“The pressure we young women face pushes us in the direction of suicide.”

“The challenges we have are teenage suicide, teenage pregnancy, girls dating older men. The hunger for success, studies, peer pressure and cyber-bullying lead to many young women leads to having depression. Many of them have attempted suicide, others have suicidal thought and few of them succeed.

EARLY PREGNANCY AND HIV

“Having a child at a young age is a major problem for young women. Young women experience a lot of pressure from boyfriends and older men for unprotected sex. They do not appear strong enough to resist this pressure. The result is that their education comes to an end; they have greater financial burdens and risk STIs and HIV.”

“The worst part is that they leave school because they are very shy, and their partners continue with their education while they are sitting at home. You lucky if you only get pregnant. In some cases, it is a double blow because they find out they are HIV positive.”

“The hurting part is these young women know what must be done, but because someone has uttered the word ‘money’ then everything stops. They forget that what was taught in class for life skills goes together with self-control or self-discipline. If none of these are remembered in the heat of the moment, that’s when many of the young women find themselves in a situation that is uncalled for and become parents at an early age.”
WHERE TO FROM HERE?

We have listened to the voices of these young women and it can seem overwhelming. The question is what to do next. How do we tap into these stories and bring change?

The Ubumbano Voice App Guide says this:

A
n injustice reported,

a story told,

our feelings and facts recorded,

this is a first step to

beautiful,

powerful,

community action for change

The young women told the stories of their challenges. What must we do?

• Get the messages flowing. Share the stories in the spaces where it is important for them to be heard. Make them so loud that they cannot be ignored.

• Walk alongside young women as they search for solutions
• Support and encourage local actions for change. Connect with other individuals and communities and journey together.

• Collaborate in advocacy campaigns to bring structural, lasting solutions to the challenges.

Together we can ensure that the voices of these young women are no longer unheard or deliberately silenced, but rather form the basis for change.

If you want to get involved in the Ubumbano Voice programme, email info@actubumbano.org.
Perguntada se sra a primeira vez a ser violentada, a vitima respondeu que não era e naodenunciou as autoridades porque tinha medo denperder a sua casa. Tensonem cosideraçao que ela e financeiramente dependente do marido.