

https://dspace.org/

Deserving and undeserving women: A case study of South African policy and legislation addressing domestic violence

Vetten, Lisa

2014-06-19
http://hdl.handle.net10539/14807

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Deserving and undeserving women:

A case study of South African policy and legislation addressing domestic violence

Abstract

High levels of domestic violence are a prominent feature of post-apartheid South Africa and stand in stark contrast to the prominent image of South Africa as a country committed to gender equality. Both the state and women's organisations have mobilised around the issue, drafting law and policy responsive to the problem, as well as initiating a host of campaigns and other interventions intended to combat the problem. Yet these have been to limited effect; domestic violence persists. To explore this conundrum, this dissertation details state and women's organisations' responses to domestic violence between 1994 and 2011 in two ways: it reviews the plethora of state documents issued during this period (ranging from correspondence to legal decisions); and presents the findings of 30 interviews conducted with senior representatives of women's organisations, the bureaucracy and the legislature. Its shows how high-level policy commitments have been leached of their transformatory content over time through changing notions of gender equality and discursive shifts emphasising women's vulnerability and neediness. Also identified are policing discourses which characterise domestic violence as petty and women as undeserving of assistance. The increasing articulation of domestic violence with familialism, moralism and traditionalism is also highlighted. Drawing on post-structural arguments, I set this discursive milieu against the backdrop of a state comprising an ensemble of institutions with conflicting interests and working in disconnected ways, contributing to the unevenness in implementation and the depoliticisation of policy-making processes. These strange and anti-political spaces contribute to the demobilisation of the domestic violence sector I argue, in combination with the delegitimisation of feminist discourse. Organisations have achieved very few gains in the last decade and become focused on the implementation of the Domestic Violence Act (116 of 1998). It is this interaction between discourse, state institutions and their practices, as well as weaknesses and challenges within the domestic violence sector, that contributes to the conundrum identified by the study.