

Female mayors critical in creating safer cities for women and girls

By **Lebogang Lechuba**

Three of SA's eight biggest municipalities (Ekurhuleni, Nelson Mandela Bay and Joburg) elected women mayors three weeks ago.

This moment was huge for me as a young black woman and exciting in that one can start imagining what these cities will prioritise now that women are at the helm.

As an urban planner, I for one wish at the top of the agenda is urban safety. I've been working in the built environment for 14 years and I've been at the SA Cities Network for the past one-and-a-half years.

I've noticed that we talk about urban safety a lot and what always comes across is that perhaps we don't have enough women with a seat at the table to make decisions on making cities safer.

I have lived in Johannesburg all my life and when I think of it, there's never been a time I've ever truly felt safe.

I know how to navigate the city for sure, but it gets to a stage where you get tired of surviving in your city and wanting to thrive in it. I have carried my keys in my hand like a weapon. Locked my bag in my car boot because that's the "safest" space in my car. I have had to negotiate what I wear in certain public places to avoid harassment.

I have asked a security guard to walk me to my car – hoping he, too, would be "a safe man." When do women catch a break and just be respected and safe citizens? The problems of women

Citizens need to thrive not survive

and safety are worldwide, the urban landscape is a violent and discriminatory place for women and girls. Designing urban spaces with a gender perspective helps identify the diversity of interests, daily experiences and social realities that can drive the agenda on more equal and inclusive cities, free of violence against them.

According to United Cities in Local Government, about 20% of mayors worldwide are women. While overall global

numbers of female participation in politics are rising, there is a lot of work to be done. Women also make up more than half the world's population and are often disproportionately impacted by crime and violence.

Their leadership and participation is therefore critical in creating safer cities.

In building back better, the world needs women's leadership. Cities and local communities are a fundamental to fast-tracking actions towards

a more inclusive, equitable and sustainable future for all.

The need for gender-sensitive planning cannot be emphasised enough; so rife is this problem globally that it is goal 5 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which focuses on gender equality and goal 11 that aims to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. The clock is ticking to achieve these goals, but time continues to run out on improving conditions for girls and women in SA cities.

Research has shown that when women ascend into leadership roles, they bring

an experience into government that leads to gender-inclusive public policies, economic growth, safer environments, infrastructure development and overall improvement of quality of life for both men and women.

Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo introduced the "15-minute city", making urban living and travel more efficient. The plan advocates for people's workplaces, schools, recreational centres, cafes, restaurants and the stores they shop in all be within a 15-minute walk or short bike ride from their home.

As a result, more people and eyes are on the street, making the city feel safer.

The mayor of Bogotá, Claudia López, presented the first Block of Care in the city – an innovative and unique model in Latin America, to relieve women of the burden of care that for decades has been on their shoulders.

Dr Mpho Phalatse, the DA's candidate, was chosen as mayor of Johannesburg, SA's largest city and economic hub, while party colleague Tania Campbell was appointed to the industrial centre of Ekurhuleni. Nelson Mandela Bay municipality also has a female mayor in Eugene Johnson of the ANC.

Let's give these new leaders all our support and hold them accountable for the development of women in society. When we invest in women, the returns are multiple, across the board.

■ Lechuba is South African Cities Network's marketing and communications manager



Dr Mpho Phalatse was chosen as executive mayor of the City of Joburg, the country's largest city and economic hub. / GALLO IMAGES / SHARON SERETLO