FEATURE

The Missing Rungs on South Africa's Housing Ladder

Nobukhosi Ngwenya

Introduction

South Africa is in the throes of a housing crisis, despite having implemented what is arguably one of the largest national housing programmes in the Global South. Bearing the brunt of this crisis are women, particularly survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). Effectively rendered homeless as they flee from abuse, survivors of GBV, mainly women (and oftentimes their children), are thrust into a system that requires them to leap from emergency shelter to permanent housing even though they might not be financially ready to do so.

This requirement, as the article argues, points to the fact that the South African housing ladder is missing several rungs – and these rungs are crucial for the fulfilment of women's housing rights.

The article begins with a discussion of the scourge of GBV which highlights that the manner in which key policies and pieces of legislation are implemented gives rise to siloed responses to GBV. The result of this siloing is that women, the primary victims of GBV, do not receive timeous access to key services, including housing.

The article goes on to discuss the missing rungs on South Africa's housing ladder, before concluding with a discussion on the 'housing first' approach – an alternative approach to addressing not only housing for survivors of GBV, but also homelessness more broadly.

South Africa's scourge of GBV

At the dawn of democracy, South Africa was facing a housing backlog of about 1.5 million households (Mngeni & McKinley 2021). This inherited backlog stemmed from centuries of land dispossession and displacement, which was often enacted violently both by the colonial and apartheid governments. The backlog has been compounded over the years since then by steadily increasing population growth, by slowing rates of affordable housing delivery, by housing financialisation – that is, the treatment of residential properties as investment vehicles (Cook & Ruming 2020) – and by a continuingly siloed policy response to GBV.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has described the prevalence of GBV in South Africa as a 'second pandemic'. According to UN Women (2023), one in five women in South Africa have experienced intimate partner violence; countless others have experienced violence by men they do not know. These statistics make South Africa one of the countries with the highest rates of GBV in the world.

Whilst some strides have been made towards comprehensive strategies, such as the National Strategic Plan on GBV and Femicide, responses to GBV remain largely the responsibility of the Department of Social Development and the Department of Justice, despite the failure of the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998 to allocate these departments specific responsibilities (see Mpani & Nsibande 2015).

This has resulted in GBV survivors not being able to access key services, such as housing, timeously. This is also true for the question of access to alternative, short- to medium-term accommodation by GBV survivors.

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Short- to medium-term accommodation: The missing rungs

There are varying levels of housing access. These range from no access, (that is, homelessness) to informal access, be it either through rentals in backyard dwellings or in informal settlements. The next level is that of rental in the formal housing market. The highest level is housing ownership. Each of these levels is a rung on the housing ladder, as it is sometimes referred to. The premise of the housing-ladder theory is that as a household's economic circumstances improve it will be able to move up to a higher rung on this ladder. That is, as a household's income improves, it will be able to trade up from cheaper to more expensive housing options (Lemanski 2011). Conversely, as its income decrease, the household moves down the ladder (Morrow-Jones & Wenning 2005).

It bears noting that the housing-ladder approach is one that has not been explicitly adopted in South Africa's housing policy environment. Rather, it is implicitly alluded to in the aforementioned pieces of legislation, frameworks and policies, which make provision, to varying extents, for the establishment of shelters. It is also alluded to in these documents' insistence that people be moved through different types of temporary housing – safe spaces, emergency shelters, secondary shelters, transitional housing – and ultimately into permanent housing, even though some of these rungs are missing.

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The inherent value of shelters, as the second-lowest rung on the ladder, cannot be understated, as a report by Shukumisa (2016) on Thuthuzela Care Centres found. Shelters offer 'women with emergency accommodation, shelters met women's basic needs, provided physical and psychological safety, meeting much needed care and support for women and their children' (Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities 2020: 31). However, there are not enough shelters to meet demand (The Cradle of Hope 2023). Furthermore, there is not enough alternative accommodation, namely in the form of transitional housing, to accommodate women once they leave shelters.

This is concerning, as 75 per cent of women who leave shelters, particularly those in rural areas, have to return to live with their abusers due to the unavailability of alternative accommodation (Shukumisa 2016) or to the desire not to lose tenure security in social housing (Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance 2020). Whilst some countries have programmes that enable women who choose to remain in their homes to do so safely, in South Africa no such programmes exist. Neither the South African Police Services' family violence, child protection and sexual offences units, nor housing providers (read 'landlords') have the capacity to remove perpetrators from properties even in instances when women have obtained protection orders. However, as Artz & Jefthas (2011) note, magistrates do not always grant all the conditions that survivors ask for in court orders, particularly ones to do with the removal of a perpetrator from the home.

Thus, there are several gaps in the response that impede the country's ability to move from the initial emergency response (that is, shelter placement) to placement of women in longer-term, safe, and permanent accommodation. This gap stems, broadly, from the lack of a policy on homelessness at the national level.

Social development policies provide for the development of safe spaces, including shelters, to which survivors of GBV and, generally speaking, those who are homeless, can be accommodated. These spaces offer short- to medium-term accommodation of approximately 3–6 months at most. But once women leave these shelters, there is not enough transitional housing where they can live until they can access permanent accommodation through the Department of Human Settlements.

Transitional (read 'temporary') housing is 'temporary accommodation for people who are in transition between homelessness and permanent housing' (Chenwi 2007: 4). Considered internationally to be a form of special-needs housing, transitional housing arrangements typically consist of short-term rental accommodation. They are designed to accommodate individuals who are at risk of becoming homeless until such time as they are able to secure permanent accommodation through housing-subsidy programmes that facilitate individual housing ownership. However, as noted, this type of housing is scarce in South Africa.

Considering that many women are at their most vulnerable point in life financially when they leave shelters, what this means is that the majority cannot afford to move

into market-priced rental accommodation whilst they 'wait their turn' to secure their own permanent housing through the national housing programme. As there is not enough subsidised or affordable secondary shelter or transitional housing, most women are left with the stark choice between accepting homelessness or returning to the unsafe homes from which they tried to flee. Women's rights to adequate housing are thus significantly undermined in the process. This is a status quo we can reasonably expect to continue in the light of both the fiscal crunch and a revealing comment made by the Minister of Human Settlements, Mmamoloko Kubayi (2024), during a televised interview: 'When the Constitution says people have a right to shelter, it's not because it says it must be done by the government.'

An alternative approach: The 'housing first' model

Given the urgency of the two crises – the GBV crisis and the housing crisis – and the realisation that South Africa's housing ladder is missing several rungs, we are presented with an opportune moment to reflect on alternative approaches.

The 'housing ladder' model is to be contrasted with the 'housing first' approach, the origins of which can be traced to the Beyond Shelter programme in Los Angeles in the United States. This programme, which began in 1988, coined the term 'housing first' to refer to the 'rapid re-housing of homeless families by minimising the use of shelter and transitional housing in order to quickly place families into permanent housing' (Waegemakers & Rook 2012: 5).

In brief, the housing-first model seeks to move individuals, particularly those who have been homeless for long periods, into subsidised permanent housing; such housing is linked to either on- or off-site social support services. At the heart of the approach is the belief that individuals should have access to permanent homes first, without any preconditions attached. This moves us away from the prevailing line of thought which holds that most individuals who are in need of housing are in that position because they lack the skills or mental wellness to participate gainfully in the economy and access housing on their own (Waegemakers & Rook 2012).

The approach has been adopted in New York and Finland, where the number of individuals experiencing long-term homelessness dropped significantly. In Finland, for instance, the number of individuals facing long-term homelessness dropped from 3,500 to 1,000 between 2008 and 2020 (Juhila, Raitakari & Ranta 2022). The majority of those who were housed through this approach have remained stably housed, and their overall health has improved. These cases also illustrate that moving individuals into permanent housing – as opposed to shelters – as a first step is less expensive than initially housing them in shelters and safe spaces.
Thus, given that South Africa's current housing-ladder model is impaired by the fact that the 'ladder' is missing a few rungs, the housing-first approach is appealing. The question then is: What would it take to shift to such an approach?

The first step is to develop a comprehensive national policy on homelessness. This policy should explicitly adopt a housing-first approach. It would also be the basis for coordinated effort between the departments of Human Settlements and Social Development to ensure that their respective budgets and projects are aligned to improve delivery of housing for vulnerable women as they make move out of safe spaces into permanent housing. Of course, this speaks to broader questions about the pace of housing delivery in the country and, inter alia, the quality of housing. However, such a discussion lies beyond the scope of this article.

Conclusion

As Minister Kubayi noted during the debate on the 2024 State of the Nation Address, the South African government has delivered approximately 4.8 million housing opportunities since 1994 and made significant strides in addressing the country's inherited housing backlog. However, many people remain at the bottom rung of the housing ladder by virtue of being homeless. In turn, many of them people are women, and, of these individuals, one out of five has experienced GBV.

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Although measures are in place to provide short-term accommodation for survivors of GBV, the allocation of responsibility for short-term accommodation to the Department of Social Development and for medium- to long-term accommodation to the Department of Human Settlements has given rise to a significant gap in the state response – a gap that requires GBV survivors to leap from short-term to permanent accommodation. This is a leap that too many women cannot make.

As Rust (2006) notes, the South African housing ladder is also missing several additional rungs. Whilst the focus of this article has been on the lower rungs on the ladder, it must be highlighted that should women manage to make the leap into home ownership and move into the middle-class, there are further gaps they need to overcome at that level. This is due to supply shortages in the formal housing market, which caters primarily for the high and luxury end of the market. This means that women will continue to face challenges even as they move up the property ladder once their salaries increase and their households grow.

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