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NEVA MAKGETLA: The sting of casual racism and sexism

We need to change the systems that entrench inequalities and limit opportunities for the majority of South Africans

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In a meeting, if a man faces unfair criticism for some argument, he probably just figures it was either part of cosmic unfairness or a misunderstanding. For women, though, the reality is always that it is likely to be at least in part discriminatory. And far too often, when it affects another woman – especially young women of colour – it's blindingly obvious that they are being marginalised or silenced.

This kind of discrimination, which doesn't use openly hateful words or overt insults, is often hard to pinpoint even for those on the receiving end. But it is effectively the leading edge of systemic sexism and racism, as insiders with power and privilege casually disempower, marginalise or undermine people from historically oppressed groups – which in SA mostly means black people, especially women and working-class people.

Microaggressions of this type often seem trivial: my boss still can't remember how to pronounce my name; any time I say anything, I'm told I'm too emotional or talk too much. At the presentation, why did they attack my ideas so viciously? Why did they only direct questions to my (white, male, older) colleague?

People who suffer such microaggressions often blame themselves for disproportionate anger, for not just brushing off insensitivity or insults. But microaggressions hurt so much because they are only the tip of an iceberg – a

manifestation as well as a reinforcement of deep-seated economic and social structures that effectively block some groups of people from opportunities, marginalise their voices and make them doubt themselves.

The alignment of economic inequality with race and gender is a more obvious outcome of these discriminatory systems. Less than one in 10 South Africans are white, but they make up 45% of the richest 10% of households and 2% of the poorest 60%. In 2017 of 4,000 company directors in a sample of just over 300 listed companies, more than half were white men while one in seven was a black woman. Of their CEOs, 80% were white men, and only 2% black women.

Discriminatory systems entrenched under apartheid in SA generate far more unequal economic outcomes than in peer economies, as well as increasing the harm from microaggressions.

In the mid-2010s in SA, the best-paid 1% of workers got 20% of all wages; in comparable economies, they took home between 5% and 10%. The ratio of the 10th percentile to the 90th percentile of wage earners in SA was almost 20 to one; for other upper-middle-income economies it was around five to one.

Access to economic power is similarly unequal. In 2015, more than 700,000 companies registered for company income tax in SA; 630 of them accounted for two-thirds of the total revenues raised. Just 20 companies held three-quarters of the assets of all companies with a primary listing on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.

If the economy and society were more equitable, microaggressions would be less prevalent and painful. The privileged would have less power to inflict them, and they would not compound people's daily experience of economic and social injustice.

Ultimately, ending discrimination needs more than a condemnation of blatant cases of hate speech. We need to analyse and change the systems that entrench inequalities in income, wealth, skills and experience and limit opportunities for the majority of South Africans.

A central question is how to prevent managers and other people with power, whether in business, education or government, from taking decisions that systematically disadvantage and close off opportunities for the majority.

That requires more transparency and accountability to historically disempowered groups, whether defined by race, gender or class. A culture of respect and equal opportunity necessitates systematic changes to transform unequal and often arbitrary systems of management, production and ownership in both the private and public sector that have changed far too little since the end of apartheid.

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