



"Women's work" without electricity or running water in the house is hard labour. This can make women sick

Women's health depends a lot on their living conditions. The truth is, says *Khosi Xaba*, oppression makes you ill. The question is: can oppression be prevented?

OPPRESSION MAKES WOMEN ILL

South African women experience oppression through apartheid laws, at home and at work. Anger, frustration, helplessness, fear, a bad self-image and resentment are just a few of the negative feelings resulting from oppression. These feelings can result in physical illness like headaches, sleeplessness and stomach pains.

All over the world, those who

suffer most from poverty are women. Men may live with women in poverty, but women are hardest hit because of how work is divided between men and women in society.

It is women who have to make the fires, cook the meals, feed the children, clean the house, wash the dishes and wash and iron the family's clothes. All this is hard labour.

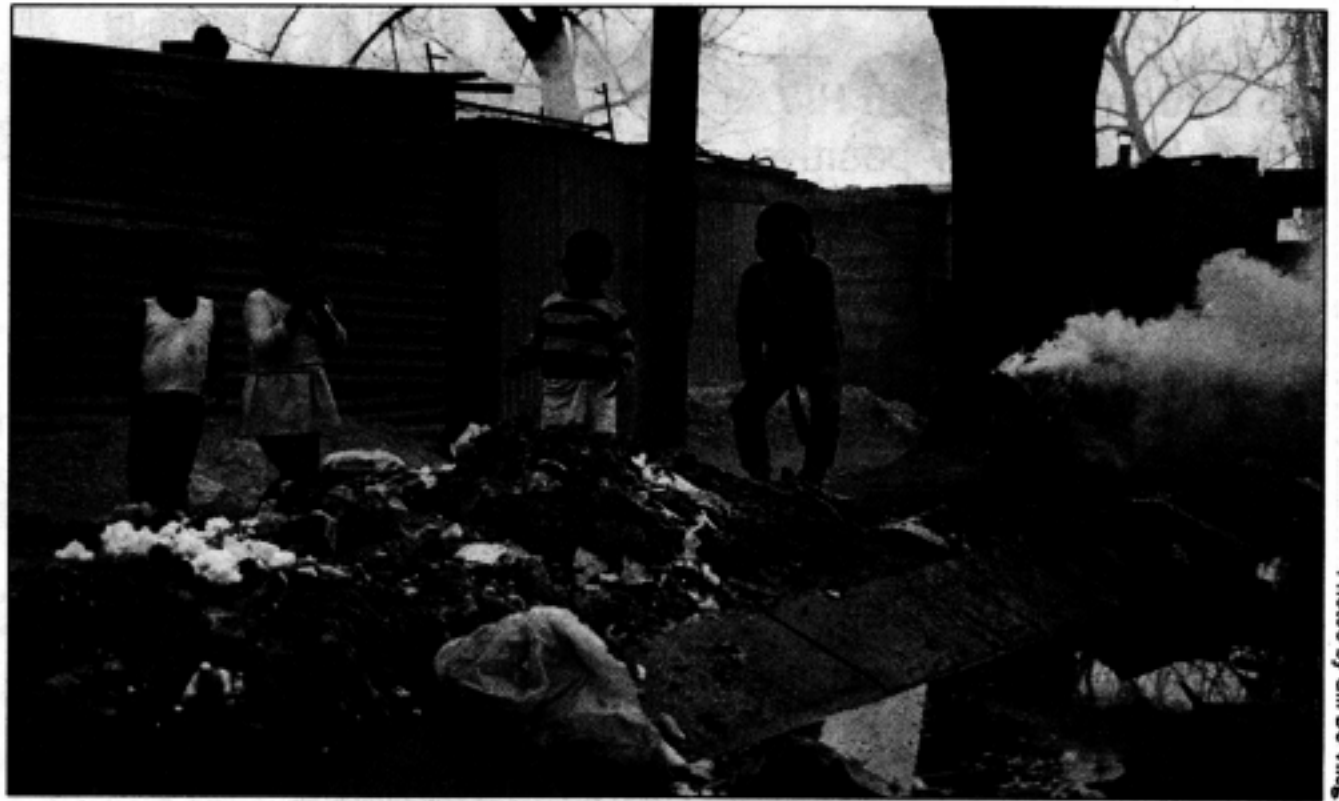
Managing a poor home is harder than managing a wealthy one. It takes longer and needs harder work. Just think about the amount of work needed to make a cup of tea in a home without electricity or running water.

However, this "women's" work is not usually recognised as hard labour. The illness related to this work is also not seen as serious.

Apartheid gave whites a very high standard of living and made millions of black people, especially black women, very poor. In rural communities, squatter settlements and even townships, living conditions are extremely unhealthy. This is because people do not have proper housing, clean water, sanitation or enough food. There are no clinics or hospitals in many communities.

Many diseases are caused by poverty. In South Africa, illnesses like tuberculosis (TB) and malnutrition (lack of a balanced diet) kill many more blacks than whites. More black children die before their first birthday than white children. More black women die of diseases related to pregnancy and child-bearing than white women.

The illness in poor communities places an extra burden on women. It is women who look after the sick and give them physical and emotional support. This damages women's health



Photos by Gill De Villiers

Women suffer stress when their children get sick because of unhealthy living conditions

even more. It raises the question: who cares for women when they are sick?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) guides countries around the world on health matters. The WHO defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, not just as the absence of disease. Health must be recognised as a human right. One of the first steps is for women to

have the chance to learn to read and write.

Improving the health of black women in South Africa cannot happen without improving their living conditions.

Khosi Xaba works at the Women's Health Project, Centre for Health Policy, Wits University, 7 York Road, Parktown, 2193

Telephone: (011) 647 1111 ●

HOW TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S HEALTH

Development programmes

The government must set up programmes which help get rid of poverty. These programmes should ensure healthy living conditions, including proper housing, clean water and sanitation. They should also help women earn a decent living.

Training and education

Women need skills and knowledge to take part in improving their living condi-

tions. Opportunities for training and education will give women a chance to get jobs, earn more and pull themselves out of poverty. Training and education should also help women improve their self-image, learn to be assertive and fight against anyone who tries to take away their dignity. All this will improve women's health.

Primary health care

The focus should be on

preventing disease by creating healthy living conditions and through education. Spending money on educating people about how to be healthy is better than using the money to cure diseases when people are already sick.

Clinics and hospitals

Everyone should be able to get to clinics and hospitals easily and to afford the health care they provide. ●