

## “Coloreds” and Other South Africans Speak Out Against Affirmative Action

**By: Evan Barton** Edited by: Aisha Mohammed

Leslie, a “colored” woman who runs a non-profit outside of Durban, doesn’t think affirmative action is a good thing. “The Equity Act,” she said, “is now in effect to address the wrongs of affirmative action.”

Officially titled the [Employment Equity Act](#), it was put in place in 1998 in order to encourage employment opportunities among all non-white racial groups, which were limited in their economic mobility during apartheid. All historically disadvantaged non-whites are



legally black in South Africa, and colored people – a sort of catchall group made up of people of mixed-race – are included with Indians and Africans as designated “black people,” qualifying for affirmative action and economic empowerment initiatives. In a country where 80 percent of the population is African, however, and white people still control most of the economy, colored people often feel marginalized.

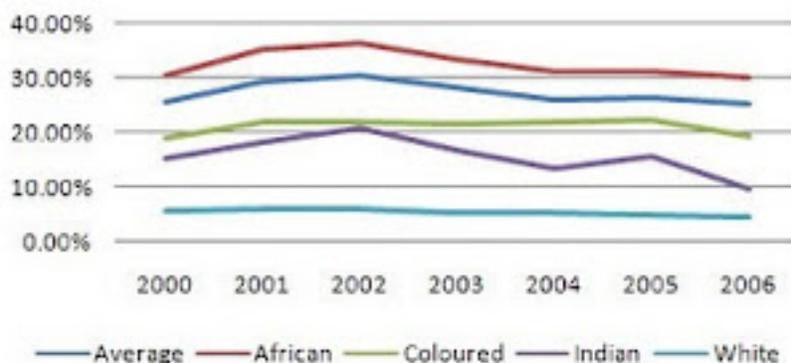
“During the apartheid era, colored people were not white enough. Now, colored people are not black enough,” Leslie said. The Equity Act was established in part to ensure that employers hire

people from all the country's historically disadvantaged groups, including women and people with disabilities. Employers are encouraged to make hiring choices with respect to the percentage of different races in their region. However, Leslie suggests its execution is far from perfect. "The Equity Act is a good plan, but the implementation of it will always be difficult to manage at the local government level," she said.

In Durban, South Africa, where the majority of people are Zulu and colored people make up only a small percentage of the population, many colored people feel frustrated with the post-apartheid government. "Nothing has changed for us," notes Zane Scullard, a welding inspector from Kwa-Zulu Natal of Indian and English heritage. "What happened in the apartheid era was that people had to work very hard. We were the builders – the people who did construction work. Now that the government has changed, affirmative action doesn't apply to us even though initially it meant all different types of people of color. At the moment nothing is happening for us. Affirmative action only applies to black people."

Leslie also said that colored people are limited in the amount of economic opportunities available to them. "Affirmative action was designed to correct the past mistakes, but it's working against colored people," she said. "In the past, there used to be job reservation for white people. Now, it actually seems to be the reverse. Now it's actually, literally, job reservation for black people. A colored person is at the bottom of the food chain, so to speak." She suggested that if eight black people – and by black she meant members of an African tribe – were applying for a job, along with two colored people, then the two colored people would almost never get the job over the black applicants.

## Official Unemployment rate in South Africa



	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Average	25.5%	29.2%	30.2%	28.0%	26.0%	26.4%	25.2%
African	30.4%	35.5%	36.4%	33.4%	31.1%	31.1%	30.1%
Coloured	18.8%	21.8%	22.1%	21.5%	21.7%	22.3%	19.4%
Indian	15.1%	18.2%	20.9%	16.8%	13.4%	15.6%	9.6%
White	5.8%	5.9%	6.0%	5.1%	5.3%	4.9%	4.4%

In many ways, colored people are caught in the middle of the racial history in South Africa. Neither black nor white, they received more privileges during apartheid than the black majority, though still less than the whites who dominated both the government and the economy, and had access to the best educational opportunities.

South Africa on the whole is becoming increasingly disillusioned with affirmative action. Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe spoke on behalf of President Zuma last February when he said that economic transformation has been "frustratingly slow at times."

"In the main, the story of black economic empowerment in the last 15 years has been a story of a few individuals benefiting a lot," he added, speaking to the [Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment Council](#) (BBBEE) in Pretoria.

Initially, [Black Economic Empowerment](#) (BEE) sought to address the dilemma that, although a majority-black government was in place after the 1994 democratic elections, the economy was still dominated by whites. The government initiated shareholding

agreements and well connected ANC members like Patrice Motsepe – now a billionaire mining tycoon – were able to buy ownership into many of the country's industries, although these deals did little to address the systemic poverty faced by the majority of the country's black population.

"We are not here suggesting that it is wrong for black people to be wealthy," Motlanthe asserted, although he hopes Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment will assure prosperity for everyone in the coming years.

Owen Crankshaw, a sociologist specializing in racial inequality at the [University of Cape Town](#), thinks improving the education system will do more to alleviate ongoing racial inequality than affirmative action could. "

Clearly what's wrong with the system at the moment is that education for people from low-skilled families is just not working," he said. "The educational system in primary and secondary schools is just hopeless for working-class people. There's a big school shortage, and that's putting limits on how many black people from poor backgrounds can be upwardly mobile into middle-class jobs."

Crankshaw implied that affirmative action may actually push people into jobs that they are not prepared for, although he admits that he has not seen much research on this topic outside of the media, and given the overall skill shortage in South Africa, it is unclear whether white labor could meet the demand.

Jeremy Seekings, a political scientist at the University of Cape Town, was more frank in his denunciation of the program as a South African cure-all. "You could deport every single white person in South Africa and give their jobs to unemployed South Africans and you still wouldn't have enough jobs left over to give every unemployed person a job." He suggested that an increase in the demand for unskilled labor would decrease unemployment in South Africa.

Both Seekings and Crankshaw emphasized the black middle-class, which has seen significant growth since the end of

apartheid. The middle-class in Johannesburg is 34 percent black, for example, and the number jumps to 50 percent if colored and Indian people are taken into account. This is a substantial increase since 1991, when only 23 percent of the Johannesburg middle-class was black (including Indian and colored people).

Despite the growing black middle class, endemic poverty still persists among many of South Africa's non-white people. "Not only black people are poor here," Scullard notes. "Black people, colored people, Indian people are also poor. Only white people are not poor in this country. There's no poor white people here. No white squatter camps in South Africa."