

02 FEBRUARY 2016, THE STAR

The high cost of gender-based violence

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VIOLENCE against women is widespread and studies suggest Africa has some of the highest rates of physical and sexual intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence in the world.

Almost half of African women experience one or more episodes of violence in their lifetime compared to a global average of 35 percent.

A Medical Research Council study in South Africa showed that one in four women had experienced physical violence while another showed 50.3 percent of female homicides were a result of intimate partner violence.

Gender and sexual-based violence in South Africa is widespread and increasingly normalised and under-reported.

Our unacceptably high level of vio-

lence does not only bear a social and moral cost.

According to the KPMG report "Too costly to ignore – the economic impact of gender-based violence in South Africa", it costs the country between R28.4 billion and R42.4bn a year.

This represents between 0.9 percent and 1.3 percent of our GDP respectively.

And while the economic cost is heavy, there is a greater emotional and psychological cost paid by individuals and families in the present and in the future in terms of lost opportunity as a result of healing required for the survivor or self-esteem of children battered by exposure to the violence.

Gender-based violence requires a costly public health response that diverts much-needed funds from other critical areas of health such as health promotion and increased provision of emergency

services, for example.

The KPMG report shows clearly how gender-based violence drains national resources – it presents a direct cost to the survivors as well as to business, government and civil society.

"Costs include health, justice, and other service costs, lost earnings, lost revenues, lost taxes, and second-generation costs, which is the cost of children witnessing and living with violence, which may lead to increased juvenile and adult crime," says KPMG.

The cost estimate of this study was based on prevalence rates of between 2-3 women out of 10 experiencing gender-based violence within a given year.

Clearly, gender-based violence cannot be regarded as a private matter when

these public costs are borne by the taxpayer and so many state resources are required to address each instance of violence.

While the financial costs are enormous, we cannot overstate the psychological, physical and emotional cost borne by survivors and their families. This kind of violence has been shown to create an inter-generational cycle of violence that will continue into the future unless we intervene now.

A woman who has witnessed violence in childhood is three times more likely to be a victim of violence in adulthood. Estimates of pain and suffering were not included in the KPMG analysis but an Australian estimate of these costs found that they represent an alarming 44 percent of the total cost of

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violence.

Soul City's recent research report, "Understanding Gender Policy and Gender-Based Violence in South Africa", notes that children who are exposed to gender-based violence are more likely to be perpetrators themselves when they are older, or to enter into relationships in which they become victims of violence themselves.

Research also points out that children from households with violence are likely to have lower educational levels than children whose homes are free from violence.

Surely these current and long-term costs cannot be ignored? The cost of gender-based violence is an assault on our constitutional right to life and liberty, security and physical and mental integrity.

It is an assault on our right to health and well-being and our dignity as a people. It robs our children of safety and security

in their homes and models behaviour that is harmful to them and to their future families.

If this argument is not compelling enough, the financial cost should galvanise the state to take action to prevent violence – if only to reduce the monetary spend on addressing gender-based violence after it happens.

In the language of economics, there is a cost-benefit to addressing gender-based violence, and it is an opportunity cost to continue to let it happen without intervention. Let's use those wasted financial resources early to build violence prevention skills instead of using them to pick up the pieces of broken hearts and broken lives when it is all too late.

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