

Ending the cycle of gender-based violence

This means interfering in 'family affairs' to say it's wrong, personally, collectively and repeatedly, or child witnesses will continue to turn into adult perpetrators, writes Savera Kalideen



THERE are myriad reasons for South Africa's high rate of gender-based violence. But it is increasingly clear that the violence itself perpetuates more violence: Children who grow up in homes with gender-based violence are more likely to be perpetrators or victims of such violence.

One out of two women in Africa is likely to be a victim of violence. In South Africa, gender and sexual violence is so widespread that it is increasingly "unacknowledged, normalised and under-reported", according to researchers.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) notes that South Africa has one of the highest rates of violence in the world in a deadly cocktail mixed with high alcohol consumption and HIV prevalence.

Yet only an estimated one out of nine cases of sexual violence are reported to police, although some estimates are as high as one out of every 20 cases. Why? One reason is that the perpetrator is often known to the victim, as either intimate partner, family member, friend or neighbour, teacher or other community leader.

Gender-based violence occurs across class and cultures, however in the context of marginalised women such as illegal immigrants, orphans and other vulnerable children, refugees, sexual minorities and people living with disabilities, reporting is far more difficult.

Shame and self-blame is something that also decreases reporting.

But another major barrier to reporting is a lack of faith in the justice system where it is not unusual for victims to suffer secondary trauma through delays and insensitive treatment by both police and health workers.

However, our belief of gender-based violence as a "family affair" most appropriately responded to behind closed doors has the greatest impact. We teach children that such violence within families, by one parent against another, by a sibling against a niece or nephew, is a private matter that must be addressed internally.

Too many times, what children see and learn from this is that the violence must be ignored and the perpetrator does not have to change their behaviour. Instead, the victim must both find ways to survive with the experience of violence and co-exist with the perpetrator because he is family, the breadwinner, the father or the brother. The list of reasons for compromise is endless.

This culture of silence is supported by impunity for the perpetrator within the legal system. Soul City research showed that in 2012/13, 4669 (7 percent) convictions were secured out of 66387 sexual offences cases reported. Fewer than one in 10 led to a conviction. With statistics like these, how can victims be expected to continue to report the human rights violation that is gender-based violence?

Our research, "Understanding Gender Policy and Gender-based Violence in South Africa", which was conducted by the Tshwaranang Legal Advocacy Centre, noted that individual or intrapersonal drivers of gender-based violence centred on gender norms and values that predispose women to abuse and men to be perpetrators. This included an environment in which such violence is witnessed in childhood and then perpetrated in adulthood.

Men who witnessed and experienced violence in childhood were more likely to be violent towards their partner, notes the research. Other research by the Medical Research Council showed that experiences of violence in the home in childhood teach children that violence is "normal" in certain settings. In this way, noted the research, men learn to use violence and



SPEAKING OUT: Ilitha Labantu, Sonke Gender Justice and the Garden Boyz rallied community members from Heideveld, Gugulethu and Mannenberg to stand against violence. It's this outspokenness that is needed to break the cycle of violence, says the writer.

PICTURE: THOMAS HOLDER

women learn to tolerate it or, at least, tolerate aggressive behaviour.

Out of the home, the preservation and perpetuation of patriarchal values institutionalises such behaviour. Research in 1999 found that one in five women in the Eastern Cape believed violence against women to be acceptable. They believed a woman must be subservient to her husband or boyfriend, punished by him, and that men own women. They also believed men are entitled to sex and interpreted being beaten as a sign of love.

These behaviours are reinforced from adolescence, starting a cycle where young men are allowed to believe they can't control their sexual urges and that women and girls are responsible for controlling them. Sexual violence is then regarded as a strategy to remind girls and women of their "place" if they became too independent.

Controlling behaviour by intimate partners has also been found to be a driver of gender-based violence. Women's acceptance of such acts of control which often, over time, lead to violence has been shown to be the result of deeply rooted socio-cultural norms and practice.

The evidence shows women are more susceptible to violence in male-dominated family structures.

It is true that women and girls are not the only victims of gender-based violence. But in South Africa, they are the vast majority who experience such violence.

It is true that we need to deal with the systemic issues that promote violence such as unemployment, poverty and increasing alienation in our society. But these are not the only drivers of gender-based violence, nor are these the only circumstances in which gender-based violence occurs.

Like excessive alcohol consumption, gender-based violence too is a commonality we share as South Africans. There is no race, religion, or rural-urban divide here; it is painfully universal.

This universality of gender-based violence demands similar action from the government, civil society, families and communities.

From our perspective, there are two obvious starting points: The first is a review of the Domestic Violence Act that goes beyond an assessment of what is not working and looks at a detailed financial plan to implement it.

The lack of this financial plan has hampered implementation of the current legislation since it was passed in 1998.

Second, we need a national strategic plan to address gender-based violence in a multi-pronged manner that involves

all government departments and the full range of organisations in society. This is not a battle that can exclude the religious sector, cultural organisations, sports organisations or educational organisations. This is a battle that must take place at every level of society beginning with the individuals in a relationship to the policy makers who must make policy that protects and honours the integrity of each person in that relationship.

It is only through comprehensive and collective action that we can ensure the child who witnesses violence today does not become the perpetrator of violence tomorrow.

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