

No Longer Hopeful: South Africa's Endless Battle Against Gender-Based Violence.

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Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) is rife in South Africa with women and girls being disproportionately affected. In fact, South Africa has the distinction of being one of the most unsafe places for women in the world. It holds the infamous titles of a femicide nation and rape capital of the world. GBV in South Africa has even been described as a pandemic by the current president, Cyril Ramaphosa. This clearly signifies the widespread occurrence of GBV in the country. The efforts of the State and various stakeholders to curb it have not been successful as GBV remains on the increase and as such, citizens have lost hope in the State's ability to curb or eradicate it. They have seemingly lost trust in the state's capability to eradicate GBV and feel that they must step in themselves to deal with the GBV crisis. A trust crisis has thus emerged, wherein citizens, in particular women, have lost trust in the capacity and commitment of the state to protect them from GBV. This loss of trust and feelings of hopelessness by citizens with regards to the State's handling of GBV should be given the attention it deserves. This paper thus prioritises this issue and places it at the centre of this research inquiry. It explores citizen's loss of trust in the state's capacity and commitment to curb GBV in South Africa and in doing so, teases out GBV's deep entrenchment in the South African society and the state's non-winning battle to combat it. It further outline strategies that can be employed in curbing GBV. The paper is underpinned by the hopelessness theory as it lends an understanding of citizen's loss of trust in the State with regards to gender-based violence. Data was drawn from secondary sources. The paper allows for an academic engagement with GBV in South Africa and provides a platform to explore the trust crisis.

Key words: Gender Based Violence, Femicide, Trust Crisis, Women, Hopelessness, South Africa

Introduction

Gender Based Violence (GBV) is rife in South Africa, and women are predominantly the victims. It is deeply entrenched in the South African society and women and girls are targeted in a seemingly endless GBV cycle (Okparinde and Matsha, 2021). Efforts taken by the government and other stakeholders to curb GBV in South Africa have not yielded any meaningful impact. This explains why GBV remains prevalent. This paper explores the prevalence of gender-based violence in South Africa. Most importantly, it examines South Africa's non-winning battle against GBV and citizen's loss of hope in the government's capacity and commitment to win the battle. A content analysis research methodology is employed. Content analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing, examining, and interpreting printed and electronic documents to extract meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This method permits researchers to study and make sense of accessible written documents. Data was thus collected through various secondary sources such as journal articles, statistics reports, police reports and newspaper articles. This paper is underpinned by the hopelessness theory which posits that repeated exposure to uncontrollable and aversive environmental stimuli leads gradually to the belief that the aversive situation is inescapable, and a sense of helplessness ensues regarding the situation (Liu et al, 2015). Hopelessness theory enables an understanding of citizen's loss of trust in the state's capacity and commitment to fight against GBV and the formulation of the opinion that they should enter the fight for any meaningful change to happen. This however has not deterred them from still engaging with the state and making demands. The next section highlights the prevalence and persistence of GBV in South Africa over the years.

Prevalence of GBV in South Africa

GBV in all forms is prevalent in South Africa and is on the rise. These include domestic, physical, emotional, economic, sexual violence and femicide, with sexual and physical violence being the most common. The consequences of GBV are profound as it has negative physical and psychological consequences of GBV for women's health and well-being (CSVR, 2016). The costs related to GBV are high, not only for women who have experienced GBV but also for families, the society, and the country. The high rate of GBV increases the expenditure of the various government departments that assist victims of GBV such as medical facilities, the police, shelter homes for victims of GBV and the court (CSVR, 2016). Other negative impacts of GBV are the loss of productivity due to women missing work or resigning because of the physical or psychological effects of GBV which in turn leads to loss of tax revenue. (CSVR 2016). The children and

families of abused women or women killed by their partners are also badly affected and may require services that increases the expenditure of the state.

South Africa has notoriously high levels of violence against women (Gows,2023). George (2020) states that each year, approximately 200,000 South African women report some type of violent physical attack against them to the police. In fact, more than 40% of South African men interviewed disclosed being physically violent towards a partner, and 40%–50% of women interviewed identified as victims of some type of intimate partner violence (George, 2020). The South African police crime statistics which cover the period between April 1, 2018, and March 31, 2019, reveals an increase of reported GBV cases compared to previous years (Oladimeji and Osunkunle, 2023). Citing a report by the South African Police Service (SAPS), Okparinde and Matsha (2021) reports rising GBV cases from 50 108 in 2017/2018 to 52,420 in 2018/19, most of which were rape cases. According to Gows (2022), and reported by the Country's police services, rape in South Africa is systemic and endemic. There were 42 289 rape cases reported in 2019/2020, as well as 7 749 sexual assaults which translates into about 115 rapes a day (SAPS,2022). From October to December 2021, there were 11 315 rape cases that were reported, which equates to 123 cases per day on average (Oladimeji and Osunkunle, 2023).

South Africa has one of the highest rape statistics in the world, even higher than some countries at war (Gows, 2022). During the release of the second-quarter crime statistics for 2023/2024, Police Minister Bheki Cele stated that the country recorded 10,516 rapes, 1,514 cases of attempted murder, and 14,401 assaults against female victims in July, August, and September. In the same period, 881 women were murdered (South African Government, 2023a; Felix, 2023). Rape is the most common crime committed to women and girls, followed by murder and attempted murder in South Africa (SAPS, 2022). According to Van Dieman (2022), the quarterly report by the Minister of police on crimes committed from January to the end of March 2022 points to a sharp increase in the reported number of people – especially women and children – who were murdered and raped in South Africa. The 2023 World Population Review ranks South Africa among the top six countries with the highest femicide rates worldwide. According to George (2020), the female homicide rate in South Africa is roughly 24.6 per 100,000 population—nearly six times the global average.

SAPS crime statistics (2022) covering July to September 2023, states that the rate at which women are abused, violated, and killed in South Africa remains worrying and unacceptable. Over 13 000 women were victims of assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm between July and September 2022 and a total

of 1 277 women were victims of attempted murder, with 989 women murdered during this reporting period (SAPS, 2022). Over 10 000 rape cases were opened with the SAPS, during this period (SAPS, 2022). As per the Police Minister's report, between April to June, 855 women were killed, and over 11,855 cases of gender-based violence against women were reported, including 9,516 cases of rape (Human Rights Watch, 2023). On this same note, Cruywagen (2023) also attest that in the first three months of 2023 alone, 10, 512 women were raped, 1,485 experienced attempted murder, 969 women were killed and over 15,000 women were assaulted. The above statistics is evident that GBV against women is stubbornly high and persistent in South Africa. This in turn has led to citizens' feelings of hopelessness in the State's ability to curb it. This is discussed in the next section.

Hopelessness and Despair

It must be noted that the government has made some strides in addressing GBV. For instance, on the 1st and 2nd of November 2018, a Presidential Summit against Gender-based Violence and Femicide (GBV) was held in Pretoria. The summit was primarily an outcome of the mobilization efforts by women living in South Africa who, on 1 August 2018, marched in all the nine provinces to express anger against the increasing levels of gender-based violence and femicide in the country, and the ineffective justice system over the past years (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2024). The Presidential Summit against Gender-based Violence and Femicide is the President's response to this demand and is considered a historical turning point as it provided an opportunity for government, civil society and social movements to work together to eradicate gender-based violence and femicide in South Africa (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2024). In response to the gender-based violence and femicide crisis following the historic 2018 Presidential Summit, a Gender-based Violence and Femicide National Strategic Plan (GBVF-NSP) was produced by the Interim Steering Committee (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2024). Published in 2020, the NSP seeks to provide a multi-sectoral, coherent strategic policy and programming framework to strengthen a coordinated national response to the crisis of gender-based violence and femicide by the government of South Africa and the country as a whole (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2024). The National Strategic Plan on Gender- Based Violence and Femicide (NSP GBVF) was signed into effect by the President on 31 April 2020. In order to uphold the principle of accountability, and call those tasked with implementation to accountability , President Cyril Ramaphosa convened another Presidential Summit on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide on 1-2 November 2022 (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2024). This summit provided the opportunity for feedback and accountability

for issues raised in the last summit and an assessment of the impact of programmes and how to amplify programmes that are making a difference (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2024). Evidently, the state has made some effort, but based on the ever-present high rate of GBV in South Africa, it is clearly not enough and there are perceived notions that the state/government is not competent to curb it.

As far back as 2007, Vetten (2007) laments that there is an alarming laxity of various governmental parastatals in eradicating GBV and that there is an unpreparedness (and or unwillingness) of the departments of health, justice, and social development to deal with it (Vetten, 2007). At the 2022 presidential summit on GBV and femicide, some of the speakers expressed their dissatisfaction with the state's handling of GBV. One of the speakers even stated that he was skeptical of data presented by the police (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INS8U7Gy1tU&t=1334s&ab_channel=SABCNews). In fact, Oparinde and Matsha (2021) notes that there is a perceived neglect on issues related to GBV, both at a local and national level, and in several government parastatals, such as the South African Police Service (SAPS). Gordon and Collins (2013) reports that the lack of care and support from police and safety officers has contributed to the distrust in the government because of the misconceived and misplaced belief that sexuality is a personal and private matter that should not be spoken of in public and that a woman's sexual experience is shameful, whether chosen or not. There have been several marches calling the government to action. Placards mocking the negligence of government have been often used in these marches. An example is a placard stating - *Welcome to SA, where economic investment matters more than dying women* (Oparinde and Matsha, 2021). Another example is - *In my country, it's easier to get raped than a job* (Oparinde and Matsha, 2021). There is a sentiment that GBV is not in the priorities of the South African government as the rate of GBV remains unabated, with perpetrators often getting off with light punishment. Placards are also used that highlight the constant fear and exposure of South African women to GBV through statements such as - *We should not need protection to exist or survive in our streets and home* (Oparinde and Matsha, 2021).

Mhlangulana and Tjemolane (2022) express their frustration with the continued violation of women and children in South Africa at the hands of men and the perceived deafening silence on this. They reiterate the issue of South Africa being a country with a high prevalence of rape cases and high rates of femicide and argue that it is important to humanise actual GBV events and the experiences which involves reporting and serious legal consequences imposed on all the perpetrators. They further lamented the fact

that in South Africa, violence is constantly directed at women and children's bodies despite much work being done around gender and sexual justice (Mhlangulana and Tjemolane, 2022). Mhlangulana and Tjemolane (2022) points out that cases are often underreported, and the statistics do not accurately describe the true gender-based violence scourge. They opined that citizens hover between hope and despair: hope when reading responses and actions where people show rage and concern about the prevalence of GBV and despair when the rage and conversations die out without any tangible actions or responses. To address GBV in South Africa, several interventions have been implemented by the Government to make it easier for victims to attain a protection. These strategies involved adopting the National Strategic Plan on GBVF 2020 which is a 10-year roadmap that was adopted in April 2020, the amendment of the 1998 Domestic Violence Act (in September 2020), the amendment of the Criminal Law which include sexual offenses and other related matters, the Domestic Violence Amendment Act as well as the Criminal Law (Forensic Procedures) Amendment Act amongst others (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Furthermore, President, Cyril Ramaphosa promised that the government will set aside R1.6-billion to address this scourge (Gcubule, 2022). The R1.6-billion plan was to cover five areas: access to justice (R394.8-million); changing norms and behaviours (R179.2-million); urgent response to victims and survivors of gender-based violence and femicide (R517-million); strengthening accountability and architecture to respond to gender-based violence and femicide (R20-million) and interventions that facilitate economic opportunities for women, which had no budget (Gcubule, 2022). Despite the above laws implemented and funding allocated towards this pandemic, GBV is continuously on the rise in South Africa, thereby requiring all stakeholders to actively engage in fighting this scourge.

There are various reasons why the Government's efforts to address GBV in South Africa is failing. Firstly, South Africa is a patriarchal country, which has resulted in many cultural and traditional events being entrenched in patriarchy, and in turn has resulted in the reinforcement of men's power over women, (Govender, 2023). For example, during media reporting of GBV cases across the country, more emphasis is placed on the victim (women) rather than the perpetrators. This is seen in reports such as 'a woman has been raped' rather than 'a man has raped a woman' which shows how media reporting has also placed serious emphasis on the inequality power dynamics between men and women in South Africa (Govender, 2023). Furthermore, the governments have lacked the ability to effectively address GBV because even when laws aimed at protecting women against this scourge are in place, they are tied up with gendered power relations that are deeply entrenched in the South African culture (Govender, 2023). This is seen in cases whereby the woman is seen as a man's possession due to the lobola

culture whereby a man has paid a bride prize for the woman. This therefore has resulted in the South African community perceiving GBV as part and parcel of their daily life with very limited or no effort at all from the Government to address this pandemic. In addition to that, the Government has struggled to address GBV, as the justice system and police tend to subtly shift blame to GBV victims instead of perpetrators when GBV cases are reported. This is generally observed in cases whereby victims are questioned on the reasons why they were alone, why they were travelling so late at that time and why were they wearing what they were wearing” (Govender,2023). In fact, Kiewit (2020) states that the South Africa legal system has been put on the spotlight for many years in terms of its failure to effectively address gender-based violence crimes against women and children. Kiewit (2020) cites the early release and parole of criminals who end up committing further violence against women and girls which he views as a dismal failure of the South African Government to protect women and children in South Africa. Finally, lack of accountability from Government on taxpayers’ money allocated towards the fight against GBV has also resulted in failure to effectively fight against GBV. For example, three years after the rape and murder of a University of Cape Town student (Uyinene Mrwetyana) shocked the nation, there is no evidence that the government has ever allocated or spent, the R1.6-billion that was supposed to address the pandemic of gender-based violence and femicide (Gcubule (2022). Thus, although funds from taxpayers’ money are being set aside to address various issues around gender-based violence such as ensuring that GBV victims access the required support and justice and strengthening the response to gender-based violence amongst other issues of concern, yet none of these areas were addressed despite all the funds being exhausted (Gcubule ,2022).

According to Human Rights Watch (2021), the South African government has ratified international/regional instruments and passed national laws to mitigate against violence of women (Human Rights Watch, 2021). However, despite these and promises for a national strategic plan to address gender-based violence and femicide, the government has still failed to provide necessary funding for related services and shelters (ibid). This has been attributed to inadequate funding. In fact, it was noted that the government’s under-investment in curbing GBV has contributed to its high rate in the country. Other problems cited apart from budgetary constraints include lack of cooperation among government departments and a lack of support for victims in reporting violence and access to courts and shelters (Human Rights Watch, 2021). There is a sense of apathy as the NSP GBVF is not the first plan to have been adopted by the government in its response to gender-based violence and all those plans have failed due to lackluster implementation (Ndashe, 2022). Attention is also called to the silence of the government in

instances when some high-profile leaders have made statements that trivialized GBV and engaged in GBV related acts (Ndashe, 2022). This is viewed as a lack of commitment of the state in curbing GBV. From the above discussion, citizens have undoubtedly lost trust and hope in the state's ability to curb and eradicate GBV. Having discussed the nation's lack of trust in the state to curb GBV, it is important that this paper explore strategies that will aid in redeeming this trust and curbing the violence. One way that South Africa can progress in curbing GBV is by learning from countries like Norway that have minimised GBV incidences. This is discussed in the recommendation section along with other broader recommendations.

Recommendations

Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims at significantly reducing all forms of gender-based violence and related death rates for all member states (United Nations, 2023). One of the countries which has been successful towards achieving this goal is Norway (Rodríguez, 2021). In 2021, the homicide rate in Norway was reported at 0.6 per 100,000 inhabitants per year. Furthermore, Norway has taken a lead in the fight against GBV. For example, in 2019, Norway hosted an international conference on 'Ending Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Crises' in Oslo. Working in partnership with UNFPA, Norway has made it a priority area to increase awareness of GBV and improve support for survivors of sexual violence. This is evident in Norway's Action Plan for Women's Rights and Gender Equality in their Foreign and Development Policy (2023–2030). This plan outlines several priorities (See Action Plan for Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Norway's Foreign and Development Policy (2023–2030)). South Africa can adopt and commit to some of these priorities in the Norwegian Action Plan for Women's Rights and Gender Equality (2023-2030) as they are the very areas where South Africa has experienced the most struggles in the fight against GBV. For instance, priority area 1 requires 'contributing to comprehensive and coordinated initiatives to combat harmful practices, with the aim of preventing violence and protecting and aiding survivors'. Currently in South Africa, most survivors of GBV have reported facing negative treatment and harsh judgement from police officers when they attempt to report a rape case as they have been "questioned on the reasons why they were alone, why they were travelling so late at that time and the type of clothing they had on' (Govender, 2023). There is a lack of a comprehensive and coordinated initiative to combat such harmful practice within the various government departments and the community at large. This in turn fuel perpetrators to engage in GBV practices.

The seventh priority in the Norwegian Action Plan for Women's Rights and Gender Equality (2023-2030) calls for "strengthening the interaction between groups working for freedom of religion and

belief and those working locally, nationally and internationally for gender equality and diversity in gender and sexuality'. Whilst the South African government has made efforts to engage with various stakeholders, there is a need to strengthen the interactions between them. This requires the country to engage several stakeholders including religious organisations as well as 'freedom fighters' organisations. South Africa could benefit by upholding this priority in her fight to curb GBV. Furthermore, priority 9 of the Norwegian Action Plan for Women's Rights and Gender Equality (2023-2030) calls for 'Integrating information and knowledge about harmful practices in comprehensive sexuality education both in and out-of-school'. This requires every governmental department within South Africa to allocate a unit whose main function is to provide education and disseminate knowledge on Gender Based Violence to ensure that citizens and those living in the country are informed on GBV and its harmful effects. South Africa could also emulate the Norwegian Government's commitment in ensuring that annual reporting is collaboratively prepared through consultation between relevant departments. (Norway's National Action Plan, 2023). A mid-term review is scheduled in Norway's National Action Plan for 2026 to serve as a management plan tool for potential adjustments to the Action Plan and a final evaluation is planned for 2029, to allow results to inform the formulation of a new action plan in 2030. Such strategies can be employed by South Africa to gain some level of success in its fight against GBV.

As it is apparent that the government is not winning the fight against GBV in South Africa, it is evident that the fight requires a concerted effort by all stakeholders such as the state, the media, educational institutions, religious institutions, communities, civil societies, public and private sectors, artists, academics, and all individuals. Saying this however does not absolve the State from its duties to protect its women from GBV. It is recommended that the state embark on an aggressive campaign. This should include stricter and harsher sentences for gender-based violence perpetrators such as life or long-term jail sentences, chemical castration and public naming and shaming. Such strict sentences and harsh punishment can deter perpetrators from committing GBV acts. Active engagement with boys and men is also recommended and this could be done by all stakeholders. There is a dire need to engage with boys, to deter them growing into men who abuse and violate women. Furthermore, since men are the main perpetrators of GBV in South Africa, programmes should be designed to enable them to embrace non-violent methods of interacting with women. Intensified media campaigns countrywide is also recommended to increase awareness on gender-based violence and promote prevention initiatives. It is further recommended that GBV task teams be created and established in

all workplaces, educational and religious institutions and in communities. This team should be tasked with identifying GBV practices and mandated to make formal complaints to the appropriate channel. It would in essence serve as a watchdog and this may deter the perpetration of GBV in various spheres. It is recommended that starting from primary school level, learners should be compulsorily instructed about GBV, its effects and its violation of human and women rights. If children are exposed to such instruction, there is a high chance of them desisting from such practices when they grow up. Finally, South Africa could benefit from exploring and adopting strategies from countries that have minimal GBV cases, such as Norway.

Conclusion

As documented in this paper, gender-based violence is rife and persistent in South Africa. Despite the various interventions that have been put in place to fight GBV in South Africa, the number of women who fall victims to this pandemic is increasing year after year. The nation has thus lost hope in the ability of the government to bring about a lasting and practical solution to this challenge and have concluded that they must undertake the fight for any meaningful change to happen. The fight against GBV thus needs a concerted effort by all. This however does not absolve the South African government from its responsibility and the state should take strident measures to fight this scourge and gain the confidence of the people. There is thus an urgent need for the South African government to be committed to this fight and also learn from other countries that have succeeded in decreasing GBV rates like Norway.

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