

South Africa's femicide shame

Without urgent intervention, the seemingly endless list of brutality and loss will go on, writes **Amanda Gouws**

VALENCIA Farmer was 14 years old when she was brutally gang-raped and murdered. She was stabbed 53 times. That was in 1999 and her killer was only sentenced for the crime 17 years later.

Sihle Sikoji was 19 years old and some men didn't like the fact that she was a lesbian. So they stabbed her to death with a spear.

Anene Booysen was gang raped and disembowelled in 2013. Less than a month later athlete Oscar Pistorius shot and killed Reeva Steenkamp through a closed toilet door.

Just this month, Karabo Mokoena became the latest face of South Africa's gender-based violence epidemic. She was killed and her body was burnt beyond recognition, allegedly by her ex-boyfriend.

People remember these gruesome cases that end up on newspapers' front pages. These women's stories come with a flare-up of societal outrage, protest and collective introspection. Then South Africans live in hope for a while, believing this time something might change. However, nothing does, in a country marked by unusually high levels of rape and femicide.

There is little fluctuation in these statistics, which are reported annu-



Minister for Women in the Presidency Susan Shabangu has shown little will to genuinely tackle gender-based violence.

PICTURE: SIYABULELA DUDA

ally by the SAPS.

What this means is that without political will, a change in the sensationalism and narratives around the reporting of gender-based violence, and without men's greater involvement as allies with women when it comes to gender-based violence, nothing will change.

One of the problems is how violence against women is reported.

A 2011 study by the Tshwaranang Legal Advocacy Centre found that court proceedings got a lot of media

coverage if they met a simple, grisly requirement: They should be brutal and shocking.

Brutality may capture people's attention, but a lot of discussion around gender-based violence in South Africa is devoid of contextual analysis.

This comes with consequences. It normalises violence and narratives are produced in popular reporting that don't help society identify the right interventions for dealing with violence. People come to think that

the solution to gender-based violence lies in greater incarceration and retributive justice, rather than interventions with society at large that produces violent men. In the absence of interventions, women vent their frustrations and pain in Twitter hashtags such as #MenAreTrash. These stigmatise all men as contributing to gender-based violence.

As I perused the newspapers, online reporting and Sunday papers after Mokoena's death, I read the

word "scourge" several times. This creates the impression that violence is visited upon us like the plagues in the Bible, without us knowing who is doing it or why.

It makes the perpetrators of violence invisible. It also suggests that there's a cure, if we just wait long enough. This type of reporting encourages short-term responses but not immediate committed action and interventions.

When Booysen's killer applied for bail, the then-minister of women, youth and people with disabilities, Lulu Xingwana, shouted "all rapists must rot in jail".

During Pistorius's trial the governing party's women's league echoed this sentiment.

It is clear from these remarks that the governing ANC sees higher incarceration rates as the solution to rape and femicide. Its members' oft-repeated cry of "rot in jail" also suggests that rehabilitation is not viewed as a priority. The problem is that this response individualises the challenge of violence.

It focuses on individual perpetrators without attempting to understand the very complex social conditions in South Africa that contribute to men's violent behaviour. These conditions include colonial and apartheid histories of violence, endemic poverty, substance abuse, deeply held patriarchal attitudes about women's place in society and the emasculation of unemployment when men measure their worth through work, or an absence of it.

These issues all beg for solutions on a collective level. Without that sort of intervention, gender-based violence will continue unabated.

There is also a visible absence of political will to fight these kinds of crimes. After Booysen's murder, enraged South Africans called for a national council on gender-based violence to be formed.

President Jacob Zuma agreed to this and asked then-minister of women, youth and people with disabilities to spearhead the initiative.

But after the country's 2014 election the ministry was closed down.

Now women's issues are represented by a single minister in the Presidency, and there's no sign of the council that was promised.

Susan Shabangu, who is the Minister for Women in the Presidency, has not demonstrated much will to genuinely tackle gender-based violence. She recently described Mokoena as weak, saying this caused her death.

Here we see the lack of political will to deal with sexual violence: the minister has not initiated any interventions or projects to deal with the country's outrageous proportion of gender based violence.

South Africans are frustrated.

Some express their feelings of hopelessness around violence on social media, tagging posts with #MenAreTrash. This is an example of women finding solidarity in their victimisation through telling their stories of sexual violence. These stories must be told and heard because they show how vast the problem is and how women rarely speak out.

But this particular campaign also stigmatises all men as deviant. Many men may react by becoming defensive.

Potential allies are alienated. Gender-based violence will only diminish if men and women unite to fight against it. Men have an important role to play in this struggle. Men will have to speak out to other men who are contributing to rape culture. They must start to address other men's perceptions and stereotypes about women's sexuality.

They must call out men who believe women can be beaten to "discipline" them, or who refer to women as "sluts" when they do not like their behaviour.

Without intervention, the problem of sexual violence will not stop. Mokoena's name will be joined by hundreds more on a never-ending list of loss and brutality. – The Conversation Africa

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