

Without interventions, nothing will change in GBV

Analysis

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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.

In May 2017, Karabo Mokoena became the latest face of South Africa's gender-based violence (GBV) epidemic. She was killed and her body burned 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 that this time something might change. But nothing does in a country marked by unusually high levels of rape and femicide.

There is little fluctuation in these statistics, which are reported annually by the South African Police Services. What this means is that without political will, a change in the sensationalism and narratives around the reporting of gender-based violence and men's greater involvement as allies with women when it comes to gender based violence, nothing will change.

Bad reporting, bad use of words

One of the problems is how violence against women is reported. A 2011 study by 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,



UNITED: Men will have to speak out to other men who are contributing to the rape culture to address other men's perceptions and stereotypes about women's sexuality. PICTURE: AFP

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 longer incarceration and retributive justice, rather than interventions in the society at large that produces violent men.

In the absence of interventions, women vent their frustrations and pain in Twitter hashtags like #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' 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.

Lack of political will

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 his then minister of women, youth and people with disabilities to spearhead

the initiative. But after the country's 2014 elections, 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 proportions of gender-based violence.

What needs to change

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 it. Men have an important role to play in this struggle.

Men will have to speak out to other men who are contributing to the 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 interventions, the problem of sexual violence will not stop. Karabo Mokoena's name will be joined by hundreds more on a never-ending list of loss and brutality.

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