

EVENT

Webinar: Our Voices Matter – The Impact of the Lockdown on Gender-Based Violence (7 September 2020)

Wilson Macharia

On 7 September 2020, the Socio-Economic Rights Project at the Dullah Omar Institute (DOI) hosted a webinar to assess the impact of the South African national lockdown on gender-based violence (GBV). The webinar was moderated by Gladys Mirugi-Mukundi of the DOI. In her introductory remarks, she reminded the participants that South Africa commemorates August as 'Women's Month', which draws attention to important issues that women still face, such as domestic violence, discrimination, harassment in the work place, equal pay, and lack of education. The Declaration on Elimination of Violence against women defines 'violence against women' as any act of violence that results, or is likely to result, in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women. These includes threats or acts of coercion against women.

Women's Month in 2020 was commemorated during the Covid-19 national lockdown. During this period, GBV and femicide cases increased tremendously. This sparked mass protests in July, when women called for justice for victims. As a result, Women's Month was dominated by dialogues on enhancing the government's response to GBV and how to increase access to justice for victims and survivors of GBV. Unfortunately, people living in informal settlements, who are the most affected by the lockdown, were not involved in these discussions.

The panelists in the webinar shared their experiences during this period, in their capacities as community members and leaders, and as organisations that work with communities in informal settlements. In so doing, they provided information to back up what most women already know and build a solid foundation to further engage men from a policy and governance perspective, particularly about their role in making communities safe places for women and children.

The first panelist, Yolanda Anderson, is a community leader in the Overcome Heights informal settlement, which hosts more than 48,000 people. According to her, the initial stages of the lockdown saw a reduction of the number of GBV cases in the community. This could be attributed to the ban on alcohol consumption and the presence of the police and the military in the community. From the cases witnessed, it appears that financial dependency and other family responsibilities make victims remain in abusive environments.

Unfortunately, victims of GBV seldom reported cases to the police for fear of being arrested for flouting the lockdown restrictions. When GBV cases are reported to community leaders, the leaders intervene, and where necessary refer the victims to NGOs in the community or in other communities. Increasingly, the community leaders have identified safe houses in which the victims of GBV can be accommodated for 24 hours. Often, the victims are accommodated in a different section of the settlement, away from the area where they were abused.

Anderson noted that despite the intervention by the community leaders, the final decision on the actions that should be taken lies with the victims. In concluding her reflections, she said her main concern was that most of abuses against women during the Covid-19 period were perpetrated by the police and the military.

The second panelist, Kyle Cupido of the NGO Where Rainbows Meet, pointed out that GBV cases increased significantly during the lockdown period, especially after the ban on alcohol consumptions was lifted. In his view, the community leaders have a major role to play in addressing GBV cases, particularly through identifying their root causes. As a community organisation, Rainbows has a good working relationship with the community police and involves them in seminars, including those on GBV. It also works with other entities, including civil society and companies, that can assist in addressing GBV. Cupido emphasised the need for further collaboration between organisations that work in the communities.

The third panelist, Mymoena Scholtz, also of Where Rainbows Meet, pointed out the factors that hinder the effective address of GBV in the communities. These include strained resources and lack of community shelters for housing the victims of GBV. Additionally, the call centre that was set up by the government during the Covid-19 period is not effective. Where there are mechanisms that can be employed, too much bureaucracy is involved, which in turn limits access to such mechanisms. She indicated that where necessary, personnel from Rainbows host the victims of GBV, which is difficult due to limited resources. She concluded by emphasising the need for the establishment and resourcing of community shelters for hosting victims of GBV.

The fourth panelist, Annah Moyo, works at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV). She said that during the Covid-19 period the victims of GBV were in the constant presence of their abusers, which added another layer of vulnerability. The limitation of movement meant that victims of GBV could not travel to safer places, join support groups, or report GBV cases where law enforcement agencies are a distance from their households. Moreover, most places where women would find safety, including workplaces, social groups, and other public places such as churches, were no longer available. The loss of income in some households has also led to an increase in abuse.

Moyo noted that there is little knowledge on mechanisms for addressing GBV amongst persons in informal settlements. Such information is often disseminated through social media and other electronic platforms, which are out of reach for the majority. As such, it has been easier for community leaders to intervene directly and assist the victims of GBV. The danger that arises is that the community leaders employ a humanitarian approach, which often leaves the perpetrators to go scot free. CSV works with community psychosocial supporters who respond to GBV incidents and refer the victims to other support systems. In conclusion, Moyo pointed out that CSV has a toll-free number and other social media platforms that people can use to access the Centre's clinicians and services.

The fifth Panelist, Namuma Mulindi of Sonke Gender Justice, said that 2,300 complaints related to GBV were reported within the first three days of the lockdown. Most of them were from places with a high prevalence of poverty and households where women were the breadwinners before the lockdown. The GBV hotline set up by the government was overwhelmed by the large number of calls. For communities in informal



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settlements, access to electricity and data is also limited, meaning that they could not access critical information on GBV. Even before the pandemic, there were challenges regarding the systems in place to address GBV. Covid19 has exacerbated the situation and further exposed their ineffectiveness.

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Mulindi said the causes of GBV are poverty, alcohol abuse, patriarchal gender norms and the exposure of children to abuse in their households. She noted that people in informal settlements have been working together to assist the victims of GBV from within community settings. While this is commendable, it indicates that the government is not giving enough attention to addressing GBV. In conclusion, Mulindi emphasised the need to address GBV from the home structure, which can be achieved by identifying the root causes and dealing with them.

During the question and answer session, the need for collaborative efforts between different entities such as NGOs, law enforcement agencies, local governments, provincial departments of social development, and churches was highlighted. Commendably, more men are actively involved in addressing GBV issues in the communities. Nonetheless, there is still a need for buy-in from the community. A number of policy measures to curb the abuse of alcohol and drugs in the community were also proposed by the panelists. These include regulating the sale of alcohol and drugs, training communities on their rights, securing their involvement in the formulation of the policies, and implementing existing policies.

In her concluding remarks, Gladys Mirugi-Mukundi said it was clear from the presentations that GBV has gone beyond the family setting. There is interplay between

individuals, communities, and social, economic and religious factors – factors that need to be addressed head-on. Notably, instead of offering much-needed protection, law enforcement agencies have been a danger to the victims of GBV. To address such issues, conversations on curbing GBV must continue.

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