

SYNOPSIS

Gender based-violence (GBV) continues to be highly prevalent in South Africa despite an increase of responses, particularly in recent times when the country experienced an outburst of incidents in the wake of Covid-19 pandemic. GBV is a social cohesion problem requiring holistic approaches to end it. A multi-stakeholder approach is prudent in addressing this 'second pandemic'. The civil society organisations (CSOs) in South Africa have been active in developing measures and procedures for preventing and countering GBV through collaboration with the government, relevant international agencies, victims and their families, and other local supporting agencies. Although they have been very active in building a cohesive community, they have faced various challenges hindering their ability to achieve the goal of ending GBV.

This thematic paper examines the role of CSOs in promoting primary prevention of GBV and social cohesion countering in South Africa. The paper identifies the various roles CSOs play in the prevention phase of GBV. The thematic paper highlights notable progress, gaps and key challenges experienced by CSOs in responding to these issues. Finally, the paper proposes some best practices and recommendations and solutions in promoting primary prevention and social cohesion. This thematic paper is a basis and part of the efforts to fight GBV and is targeted at different actors, including the government, civil society, policy makers, the private sector, funders, as well as community members, who are working tirelessly to find ways to improve the justice system.

BACKGROUND

South Africa is red flagged for its prevalence of gender-based violence regardless of the efforts to fight the scourge. In recent years, the GBV phenomenon has taken a new dimension. There is a high rate of femicide, raping of minors and the rapid assessment conducted by Masiphephe Network reveal a high rate of incest crimes in some parts of the country. Mpumalanga province was noted to have a high rate of such crimes. Harmful social norms that need primary prevention include norms on women's sexual purity, protecting family honour over women's safety, and men's authority to discipline women and children. To evaluate the impact of GBV prevention programs, our team sought to develop a brief, valid, and reliable measure to examine change over time in harmful social norms and personal beliefs that maintain and tolerate sexual violence and other forms of GBV against women and girls in low resource and complex humanitarian settings.

GBV primary prevention includes programs that seek to facilitate change by addressing the underlying causes and drivers of violence against women and girls at a population level. The Department of Arts and Culture defines **social cohesion** as the degree of social integration and inclusion in communities and society at large, and the extent to which mutual solidarity finds expression itself among individuals and communities¹.

In terms of this definition, a community or society is cohesive to the extent that the inequalities, exclusions and disparities based on ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, age, disability or any other distinctions which engender divisions distrust and conflict are reduced and/or eliminated in a planned and sustained manner. Community members and citizens should be active participants working together for the attainment of shared goals designed and agreed upon to improve the living conditions for all.

¹ What is social cohesion and what is the department doing to promote a cohesive society?, South African Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, 2020, accessed from <http://www.dac.gov.za/content/2-what-social-cohesion-and-what-department-doing-promote-cohesive-society>, accessed on 01 October 2022.

Numerous CSOs both locally and internationally have a long history of countering and preventing GBV in South Africa to promote social cohesion. Among other forms of violence, GBV is the most that civil societies are keenly interested in tackling due to the fact that it is an act that is targeting the vulnerable people that cannot retaliate, protect themselves and, to a larger extent, struggle to pursue justice. In 2014, in a series of coordinated actions, more than 30 organisations both local and international challenged the government, demanding an action to develop and fully fund a National Strategic Plan (NSP) on GBV. With their power to influence, in 2015, a five year (2015-2020) strategic plan was developed and funded – although with limited funding.

The NSP was reviewed in 2020 with an outcry from CSOs who demanded an NSP that is:

- fully costed and commits significant new resources
- developed through an open, inclusive and consultative process and
- creates real accountability by reviving and reconstituting the moribund National Gender-Based Violence Council.²

In August 2018, the CSOs played an influential role and thousands of women marched to the Union Buildings (under the banner **#TotalShutDown**) and expressed their concerns about the alarming levels of GBV despite the government's promises of protection through the legislative frameworks. In November, the very same year, the national government in partnership with various civil society organisations held a National Gender Summit to address challenges faced by women, particularly GBV. The National Gender Summit³ now runs every year which opens an opportunity to share experiences and find collective solutions to end GBV in communities. The recommendations of the summit guide the government and the relevant role players in policy making. For decades, CSOs continue to make strides in advocating, intervening, collaborating and implementing GBV responses and social cohesion.

Annually, CSOs, come together to commemorate the 16 Days of activism against GBV. In South Africa, CSOs have been instrumental in ensuring that prevention of GBV is not just a 16-day activity, but a daily conscious duty by all citizens in what is now known as 365 Days of Action. This activism approach promotes activity from grassroots linking it to policy making. The 365 Days of action include community marches against all forms of GBV and dialogue to promote social cohesion.

In recent years, civil society has scrutinised GBV occurring in the name of religion and tradition. Some key milestones in this aspect include the demand to name and shame perpetrators through an offenders register as per the GBV summit, support of GBV victims as they seek justice in the courts and marches against well-known religious figures.

CSOs have taken centre stage in promoting social cohesion and preventing GBV in tertiary institutions. While cases of GBV in these institutions are on the increase, CSOs have called the academic institutions to strengthen policies such as sexual harassment and improve infrastructure such as lighting in these institutions whilst suspending the perpetrators.

² The National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide, Government of South Africa, 2020, accessed at https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202006/stratplan-gbvs.pdf, accessed on 01 October 2022.

³ The Report of the Presidential Summit against Gender-based Violence and Femicide, Government of South Africa, 2020, accessed at <https://justice.gov.za/vg/gbv/GBV-Summit-Report-2018.pdf>, accessed on 01 October 2022.

THE ROLE OF CSOs IN PRIMARY GBV PREVENTION



Figure 1: A model showing the role of civil societies in the prevention and countering for gender base violence.

The role of CSOs in primary GBV prevention include organising campaigns, training, peer-to-peer education, or by including a gender equality dimension in all aspects of education policies.⁴ Their role is also to provide accessible information about what gender-based violence is, about its different forms, possible remedies and existing support measures are also critical.

Some examples include:

- **Advocacy:** In wake of the year 2014, GBV cases mushroomed and became the subject of daily report in South Africa. Various international organisations began to sponsor local organisations that run programs and activities to curb GBV and bring about social cohesion in the country. CSOs continue as frontiers in contributing towards the primary prevention of GBV through advocacy. Various civil society organisations such as those constituting Masiphephe Network, and sometimes in collaboration with Adapt and Sisonke Gender Justice, often conduct provincial dialogues to understand the root causes of GBV in the communities where the organisations work. These dialogues have been impactful in developing research agenda to inform the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence.
- **Intervention:** Some CSOs play an intervention role in assisting GBV victims to pursue justice. Organisations such as Thuthuzela Care Centres amongst others provide victims with support for relieving them against psychological trauma and social stigmatization. International organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch amongst others often intervene in preventing, monitoring and unveiling GBV cases in the country. International CSOs such as USAID, UN Women, Action Aid, UNICEF, WHO, amongst others continue to play a crucial role in

⁴ Prevention of gender-based violence, Council of Europe, 2021, accessed from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/prevention-of-gender-based-violence>, accessed on 17 March 2022.

providing resources such as funding, shelter, clothing, medicine and food items for victims of GBV. In some cases victims get financial assistance to pursue their studies and small business.

- **Collaboration:** While there are only a few civil society organisations mentioned in this paper, there are many more that also participate in countering and preventing GBV. Both international and local organisations often collaborate on a timely basis, where international organisation provide funding, and sponsorship for training programs, and physical activities towards enlightening the society on the evil act of GBV, as well as the measures of assisting the victims. Through collaboration with local CSOs, several hundred attempted cases of rape are averted, reported and addressed in the competent court of law where the perpetrators are sentenced accordingly while the victims are taken care of through special support programs.
- **Action:** The CSOs continue to collaborate in acting against cases of GBV. They take proactive measures in gathering evidence rich data each year. This kind of data is useful in developing action plans towards preventing GBV. In 2020, Masiphephe Network after its policy dialogues across Gauteng, KZN and Mpumalanga provinces managed to develop action plans following the thematic areas raised in those deliberations. Some international organisations often conduct polls in collaboration with local organisations. For example, the NOI polls revealed that only 33% of rape cases are officially reported.⁵ These statistics are a lens through which CSOs recognise the need to actively get involved in the process to support victims and raise awareness on the need to report GBV cases. Some organisations have even taken a step further to help victims to pursue the justice system up to the prosecution stage.

Some of the social cohesion strategies are implemented by CSOs fighting discrimination on the basis of gender, race, age, tribe or nationality; addressing social exclusion and inequalities that exist at community and societal levels.⁶ Some CSOs have been involved in social cohesion promotion through building social capital (i.e., networks of relationships, trust and identity between and within different groups of society) and by enabling upward social mobility. Social cohesion has been met with challenges of economic empowerment as South Africa faces high levels of unemployment, influx of immigrants and high crime levels amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

The power dynamics that destroy social cohesion are immediately shown through GBV and low levels of 'community spirit'. A threatening result of a lack of social cohesion is an increase in community conflicts which are sometimes spewing in national level conflicts or full-blown wars. The struggle for resources at household, community and societal level also contribute towards social cohesion decay.

THE STRUGGLE IS REAL

There are various studies and research undertaken with the support of the civil societies showing the ugly face of GBV nationwide. Some of them, although anecdotal, reveal that most of GBV cases are either not investigated or unreported due to various factors,

⁵ Police and courts must do more to reduce gender-based violence, Relief Web, 2020, accessed at <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-africa/police-and-courts-must-do-more-reduce-gender-based-violence>, accessed on 01 October 2022.

⁶ Building Social Cohesion in the midst of conflict, Search for Common Ground (Search), 2017, accessed at https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SearchForCommonGround_Building_Soc_Cohesion_Final_report_Dec2020.pdf, accessed on 01 October 2022.

including, the failure of the law enforcement, social stigma, the fear of the perpetrator, as well as stereotyping. Although the CSOs continuously try to respond to such issues, particularly the criminal justice issues, they continue to face challenges that deprive them of playing their role in preventing GBV at a primary level.

Lengthy law enforcement on GBV cases as well as other legal aspects makes it difficult for the CSOs to help the victims of GBV to fight for justice. In other cases, the victims face secondary victimisation when trying to report incidents to the police. In other cases, the perpetrators are apprehended and subjected before the law but the “chameleon-links” style of South African judicial system, where money determines the outcome, makes it difficult for many GBV cases to reach the prosecution stage.⁷ This discourages the civil societies from pursuing the cases to their logical conclusion in addition to the lack of cooperation from the families of the victims.

While the effort of the CSOs is highly recognised, it is simply not enough. Both the government, the justice system and communities also have a role to play particularly in increasing resources as most CSOs are underfunded and struggling to provide vital services to the victims. With the high rate of GBV crimes, there are some gaps hindering the civil society in achieving the goal of ending GBV in South Africa. Amongst others is the issue of working in silos, personal interests, and the failure to tackle the issue at a local level.

CSOS' WORK DURING RESTRICTIVE COVID-19 CONDITIONS

During the stringent lockdown measures, GBV in South Africa exploded like a bushfire in with various reports showing high profile cases nationwide. The CSOs, both at a grassroots level and international were on the frontline in their communities and played a key role in raising awareness about the increase in cases and providing support for victims of sexual assault.

Civil societies shared their experiences and success stories on how to carry out their activities during the restricted movements. Various organisations had to think strategically and many of them with their advocacy efforts strengthened the responses for victims and survivors of GBV. For example, mobile phone hotlines and website chat functions were set-up quickly to help victims remotely. CSOs also partnered with the private sector, government and individual activist to amplify awareness about GBV.

THE WAY FORWARD

This thematic paper recommends, among several others, that CSOs should broaden their activities to integrated multi stakeholder/institution in their advocacy. These kinds of partnerships and collaborations allow for proactive strategies towards preventing GBV at a primary level as well as countering and sanctioning the perpetrators. CSOs such as Human Rights Watch, Corruption watch and many more in the legal space should work tirelessly with the law enforcement to advance the system and ensure that GBV matters are precise, easily pursued and comprehensive in addressing the plight of the victims. With their power to influence, CSOs should pressurize the government when there are delays in implementing laws and policies to curb GBV.

⁷CORRUPTION IN UNIFORM WHEN COPS BECOME CRIMINALS, Corruption Watch, 2019, accessed at <https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Police-sectoral-report-June2019.pdf>, accessed on 1 October 2022.

CONCLUSION

South Africa is one of the countries where the cases of GBV are unbearable and terrifying. President Cyril Ramaphosa dubbed it “the second pandemic”. Organisations, such as Interpol, have called South Africa “the rape capital of the world”. Despite such highlights, CSOs are instrumental in their quest for countering and preventing GBV and they bear the brunt of responding to gender-based violence even with limited resources. GBV is a social phenomenon that requires a collective action from various actors. While the government has a Constitutional obligation to address gender-based violence in a strategic, coordinated and funded manner, the CSOs are recognized as the pillar that can mount incessant pressure on the government to prioritise GBV.

There is need to improve recognition of community-based organisations which are usually at the coal face of GBV occurrence. Increased funding and resourcing, including through communication and outreach vehicles, is essential. The collaboration between the South African Police Services, (SAPS) and CSOs is essential. A database of CSOs working on primary prevention as well as treatment and response of GBV should be readily accessible by the police as well as the community. Local social workers and ward councillors need to be involved in the grassroot aspects of GBV prevention. The work by grassroot level CSOs needs to be complimented by the policy level work through dialogue, and collaboration at national, regional and international events.