

Let's build 'positive peace' to erase our legacy of violence



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Our violent past, horizontal inequalities and compromised human dignity are at the root of our violent nation and, ultimately, gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF). To quote Steve Biko: "The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed."

An oppressed mindset lingers for decades after the oppressor is gone, stripping the oppressed of their dignity and self-belief – this transcends generations. Unless this is confronted and the pain healed, human dignity will not be restored.

According to the 2018 Global Peace Index, South Africa is one of the most violent and dangerous places on Earth. In its 2021 report, South Africa was second

only to Namibia in terms of countries with the largest proportion of people who have experienced violence themselves or know someone who has. The culture of violence, legitimised and institutionalised as apartheid's form of coercion, is still prevalent. While no group is spared from our violent culture, it is vulnerable groups that most often bear the brunt. Scholars and sociologists describe three forms of violence in society. According to Johan Galtung, founder of the Journal of Peace Research, these are:

- Direct violence, which includes violent crime, rape and murder;
- Structural violence, which is entrenched in unequal power relations within society that are still along racial and gender lines (among other social attributes); and
- Cultural violence, a social culture of discrimination and institutionalised patriarchy that fosters violence against women.

According to sociology professor Lindy Heineken, the three forms of violence are interlinked and mutually reinforcing. However, structural and cultural violence are at the root of all types of violence. Addressing them, instead of only focusing on direct violence, may lead to sustainable peace. Structural and cultural violence widen inequality, and this has a direct bearing on human dignity. Horizontal inequality, which is experienced between groups

defined by characteristics such as gender, race, disability or sexual orientation, discriminates against marginalised groups and violates their human rights.

Legislation that seeks to redress the imbalances and discrimination of the past and present is not enough on its own.

An intersectional and systemic approach applied consistently across sectors and communities is required to eradicate horizontal inequality. Hierarchies of human value affect human dignity and go against the universal declaration of human rights, which is based on a principle that all human beings are equal and deserve equal respect and equal access to opportunities, with equitable support based on each social group's need.

Galtung is also credited for the concept of "positive peace", defining this as the absence of indirect and structural violence. Positive peace is further explained as the attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies.

The Institute for Economics and Peace, a global think-tank, outlines eight pillars of a positive peace framework: well-functioning government; sound business environment; equitable distribution of resources; acceptance of the rights of others; good relations with neighbours; free flow of information; high levels of human capital and; low levels of corruption.

Gender equality is mainstreamed in all the pillars and is depicted as the floor of the house of peace. High levels of positive peace occur where attitudes make violence less tolerated, institutions are resilient and more responsive to society's needs, and structures create an environment for the nonviolent resolution of grievances. It is clear that achieving positive peace requires a multipronged approach by different sectors, prioritising equitable human development across the board.

Human resources are the greatest resource of any nation. Ensuring the healing of minds that were battered by past injustice and addressing continuing prejudice against some social groups is a good starting point in building a proud, self-reliant nation.

There is no human dignity in poverty. There is no positive peace where there is horizontal inequality. The violent nature of our society in general, and in terms of GBVF specifically, cannot be eradicated without addressing all the root causes. We need to invest in healing our nation and restoring human dignity in each one of us.

*Dlamini is chair of the GBVF Response Fund, a private sector-led initiative aimed at supporting implementation of the national strategic plan on GBVF by raising financial and other resources for organisations working to tackle the prevention of GBVF