

# voices



## ACTIVISM

# Solutions FOR THE COMMUNITY, BY THE COMMUNITY

Men are often the problem, which means they have to be part of the solution, and this starts with how we socialise our children, writes **Sazini Mojapelo**

femicide and violence against women and girls, was evident when civil society organisation We Will Speak Out SA piloted violence-free zones in KwaZulu-Natal. Violence “hotspots” were identified using data collected by rapid response teams, community dialogues took place and “community engagers” were recruited.

These engagers undertook safety audits and participated in the establishment of the violence-free zones. They assisted in branding the areas as violence-free zones (by adding signage at entry points and on taxis) and conducted door-to-door campaigns to promote the participation of residents.

The outcome of this pilot project speaks for itself: by the end of the first year in December 2021, the rapid response teams had supported 1 542 violence survivors and their families. During the post-pilot focus group discussions We Will Speak Out SA held with community members, social workers, the police, staff from the Thuthuzela Care Centres and survivors, the organisation gave various examples of how the work of the response teams and active citizens had brought about positive change.

Another step towards addressing this social ill is for the communities to agree on the social norms, as these anchor our actions and expectations of permissible behaviours in a group. Norms provide the fabric of society and how we interact with one another.

Increasingly, several global research programmes are now targeting the transformation of the social norms that justify and sustain the acceptance of violence against women and girls and femicide.

In countries such as Bangladesh, families have shared beliefs and unspoken rules that both proscribe and prescribe behaviours that implicitly convey that femicide and violence against women and girls are acceptable, even normal. This includes social norms pertaining to sexual purity, family honour and men’s authority over women and girls in the family. Some men believe that male dominance and entitlement are the norm. They believe that domestic violence is a private matter that happens behind closed doors and is therefore acceptable.

These are some of the patriarchal norms that we must change. Men are often the problem - and therefore they have to be part of the solution. This is about not just changing men’s thought patterns, but also addressing the underlying trauma creating those norms.

Violence in our homes remains one of the most prevalent and persistent social ills facing women and girls in our country. Yet home is where the heart is and it’s also the first place where girls and boys are socialised and learn gendered attitudes, norms and expectations.

These are potentially limiting for both sexes, but have a particularly significant impact on the girls, their self-esteem and their expectations for the future. That’s why we have to start the conversations about gender roles early on, and challenge the features and characteristics assigned to men and women in our homes, in our schools and in our places of work.

Mojapelo is the interim CEO of GBVF Response Fund1

**T**his year started on a difficult note as we face challenges ranging from the ongoing energy crisis to the rate of unemployment approaching 33%. State-owned enterprises are struggling to pay debts, many homes remain without basics such as electricity and water, while inflation and food prices have soared. It is estimated that a basket of basic goods now costs 13.5% more than a year ago, with warnings that consumers should expect even higher prices in the first quarter of this year. About 13.8 million people are living below the poverty line of R663 a month.

Persistent and chronic forms of poverty contribute to people’s failure to access basic necessities such as nutrition, health and education. To end violence against women, we need to identify the contributing factors. And poverty, while often overlooked, is an important factor.

South Africans are frustrated. The links between poverty, inequality and the higher risk of exposure to violence and femicide are undeniable. A lack of economic resources makes women as well as members of the LGBTQ+ community particularly vulnerable to violence.

Poverty creates patterns of violence that become self-perpetuating, making it extremely difficult for victims to extricate themselves. When unemployment and poverty affect men and their dignity, some express their feelings of hopelessness by asserting their masculinity through violent means.

### CHANGING CULTURE

While raising awareness, instilling norms and changing culture are key parts of the solution, this must be done in tandem with work to lift South Africans out of poverty. And to do this, community participation has a huge role to play. And men need to be part of the solution.

The value of mobilising communities, specifically unemployed men, to become actively involved in these efforts lies in their mobilisation to reimagine their futures, taking ownership and addressing issues of public concern while creating an alternative for themselves.

It may promote a sense of belonging and wellbeing, help them set goals and improve their skills and, most importantly, give them a sense of purpose.

Recent media reports have highlighted various instances when communities came together to find solutions to their challenges.

One such example is of a community in Limpopo that could no longer wait for its streets to be paved. They decided to do the job themselves, a move that drastically enhanced their pride.

In the Free State township of Matwabeng in Senekal, community volunteers also took matters into their own hands, revitalising their town by tidying gardens, repainting road markings, cleaning up public areas and repairing more than 400 potholes.

In addition to nation-building, active community participation also offers a key to creating just and safe communities.

South Africans are frustrated and the links between poverty, inequality and the higher risks of exposure to violence against women and girls, and femicide are undeniable.

The community structure is one of the most powerful tools of the anti-violence movement. While communities can shame, victim-blame or prescribe harmful gender roles, they can also empower women, collaborate on the prevention of violence and interventions, help challenge preconceived ideas and collectively shape new norms of gender democracy.

The sad reality, however, is that in a country where very few trust the police, communities have resorted to vigilantism to “fill the gap” left by unsatisfactory law enforcement. The challenge is how to address vigilantism in a way that balances a non-negotiable respect for human rights with the need to respond to pressing community order and security concerns.

I agree with Mary Nel, a senior lecturer in public law at Stellenbosch University, who argues in her doctoral study that vigilantes may indeed be willing to abandon their violent means of problem-solving and work in partnership with a formal criminal justice system

committed to addressing the issues of crime and disorder in a community-responsive, inclusive, respectful and restorative manner.

### COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Community education is therefore extremely important. Awareness-raising sessions empower communities to not tolerate femicide and violence against women and girls, and to hold the perpetrators of these crimes accountable. They empower family members to speak up and send a clear message that they will not tolerate such behaviour.

This permits neighbours to clearly articulate that enough is enough and violence is not acceptable. It also enables community leaders to agree on a system of sanctions against the perpetrators. A sterling example, which showcases the value of a whole community approach to prevent (or reduce) the prevalence of

”

The sad reality, however, is that in a country where very few trust the police, communities have resorted to vigilantism to ‘fill the gap’ left by unsatisfactory law enforcement