



Briefing Paper 526

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Transgenerational Trauma and Gender-Based Violence

"We, the children, we are definitely suffering the most from it. We are traumatised ... I will suffer from it maybe for the rest of my life. The impact it will have on me will last forever. Because of that there are also some psychological impacts on my life".¹

1. Introduction

The term 'transgenerational trauma' describes how historical trauma can affect the lives of members of families and communities across multiple generations and impact on their health, well-being, behaviour, self-esteem and genetics.¹ These traumatic effects frustrate the healthy functioning of generations of survivors, who become similarly alienated and marginalized. The familial trauma is repeated and, often unconsciously, handed down to the next generation. While everyone is susceptible to transgenerational trauma, there are specific populations that are vulnerable due to their particular histories. This is particularly the case with gender-based violence.²

2. The Gender-Based Violence and Femicide National Strategic Plan

The National Strategic Plan (NSP) was commissioned following the Presidential Summit on the matter in 2018. It was published on 11th May 2020 at the time when it was becoming clear that the lockdown imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 had resulted in a shadow pandemic of gender-based violence (GBV). South Africa has one of the highest rates of violence against women and girls in the world, and a femicide rate that is five times the global average, with an

estimated ratio of 12.1 victims per 100 000 of population each year. South Africa's GBV statistics are equal to a country at war.³

The NSP aims to provide a multi-sectoral, coherent strategic policy and programming framework to strengthen a co-ordinated national response to the crisis of GBV and femicide by the government, and by the country as a whole. The strategy seeks to address the needs and challenges faced by all, especially women across age, sexual orientation, sexual and gender identities; and by specific groups such as elderly women, women who live with disability, migrant women and trans women, who are all affected and impacted on by the GBV scourge in South Africa.⁴

In their seminal response to GBV, the US Catholic Bishops' Conference recognized that the violations of sexual and domestic violence are bodily, psychological, and spiritual.⁵ They continue to define domestic violence as "any kind of behaviour that a person uses to control an intimate partner through fear and intimidation. It includes physical, sexual, psychological, verbal, and economic abuse. Some examples of domestic abuse include battering, name-calling, and insults, threats to kill or harm one's partner or children, destruction of property, marital rape, and forced sterilization or abortion."⁶

3. Structural and Interpersonal Violence

Children grow up within the context of structural and physical violence. They learn how to be in the world by watching how the adults in their world relate to each other and to children; this is particularly the case within the home. Children brought up in an environment where any form of abuse is common (this includes ridicule and other forms of verbal abuse), may grow up to regard this as 'normal', as they do not have the maturity or experience to interpret this experience differently.

Learned beliefs, behaviours, and patterns that become engrained often mask intergenerational trauma. Domestic violence is learned behaviour. Child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr Gayani de Silva observes that "men who batter learn to abuse through observation, experience, and reinforcement. They believe that they have a right to use violence; they are also rewarded, that is, their behaviour gives them power and control over their partners."⁷ There is general sense of male sexual entitlement and male dominance which is regarded as normative.

The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the situation as measures aimed at limiting the spread of the coronavirus have often led to greater social isolation and economic insecurity, making women more vulnerable to violence in the home. GBV has increased significantly, so much so that President Cyril Ramaphosa has termed it the second or shadow pandemic, and crime statistics for the last quarter of 2020 showed a massive increase in violence against women and children.⁸

4. Historical Trauma

Those have endured systematic violence and dispossession; enduring poverty; institutionalized racism; and extreme inter-personal violence, experience trauma that extends from one generation to the next.

"Research indicates that the consequences, such as gender based violence, crime, substance abuse and community violence in the form of gang violence are all forms of internalised oppression which has also been transmitted intergenerationally. In addition, the perpetuation of socio-economic and psycho-socio challenges such as overcrowding, poor housing and poverty continue to contribute to the

transgenerational transmission of trauma. The process of transmission must be interrupted with meaningful interventions which empower individuals, families and communities to challenge the dominant narrative in a manner that allows for individual healing as well as contributing to the development of healthier families and communities".⁹

Dr Cyril Adonis emphasises that

"Apartheid, as a systemised and institutionalised process of race-based discrimination, exploitation and oppression, left in its wake a deeply traumatised society. Many feel that this collective trauma has not been sufficiently addressed and that this has rendered the peace achieved after Apartheid's demise increasingly fragile. In addition to this, we are reminded that traumatic memories affect not only those who have personally experienced conflict and violence, but also future generations through what is known as intergenerational transmission of trauma."¹⁰

While apartheid is over, South Africa remains a deeply violent, unequal society where racism still casts long shadows and patriarchy endures. There is a predominant sense of powerlessness and helplessness that stems from the inability to deal effectively with the traumatic psycho-social and socio-economic impact the violations of the past. The indignity of the conditions in informal settlements, poor levels of service delivery, and the hopelessness of unemployment make it very difficult to transcend transgenerational trauma and this continues to play itself out in GBV on the bodies of girls and women.

In their study, *Addressing the Intergenerational Transmission of Gender-Based Violence: Focus on Educational Settings*, Perlson and Greene argue that

"The effects of exposure to intimate partner violence and aggression between parents and child maltreatment reach beyond childhood, affecting relationships in adolescence and adulthood. Intimate partner violence and child maltreatment are linked to depression and fear, and later forms of anti-social behaviour, including bullying, re-victimization for girls, use of aggression and dating violence in relationships for boys, and adult perpetration/experiences of intimate partner violence. In addition, children in households where intimate partner violence

occurs have emotional and behavioural problems which affect their education, leading to general delinquency, school dropout and teen pregnancy—and later intimate partner violence perpetration or victimization.”¹¹

This is similarly the case in other countries which have experienced colonization and dispossession, as in this account regarding the First Nations in Canada:

“They have vastly more children in care facilities, more youth committing suicide, more adults in the criminal justice system, more women being abused, more alcoholism, more homelessness, and more unemployed. The intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous Peoples with its attendant psychological and social problems, not least a collective loss of pride and self-respect... denial of basic rights; repression of culture and language; destruction of family units.”¹²

It also needs to be noted that intergenerational trauma is manifested not only at the emotional and psychological levels, but also at a physical level.¹³

Adonis argues that the extent to which “bearing witness would result in secondary traumatising and emotional and psychological symptomatology in the participants is related to the level of attachment or closeness they have with the primary victims of the trauma.”¹⁴ The impact of centuries of unaddressed trauma can impact the DNA and behaviour for generations to come.¹⁵ The history of South Africa is replete with terrible violence and trauma. The lived reality of so many remains untransformed, and deep-rooted feelings of humiliation, dispossession, and deprivation remain.

5. Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Torture

The Trauma Centre is based in Woodstock, but it has outreach offices in Delft, Kraaifontein, Manenberg, Bishop Lavis, Bonteheuwel, Langa and elsewhere. Among the challenges experienced are that police stations are not “victim friendly”; some do not have a room set aside for counselling and, although Delft has a special room, it is cold, dirty and unwelcoming. A volunteer says: “Delft

and Kraaifontein have a lot of sexual abuse cases. I actually started to feel so traumatised by the numbers. The level of trauma the children and young people are experiencing in these areas is too much. I have also started suffering from second-hand trauma because of these cases.”¹⁶

Marguerite Holtzhausen speaks about situations where children have been through terrible things. She mentions a case where, “after we told the parent that their child was sexually abused, their response was ‘*I am so relieved, I thought it was something worse!*’” Murder and rape have become normalised. GBV is endemic, gangs rule the streets, and the drug trade flourishes. This results in extreme social alienation, fear and distress. “We need caring communities. When people have gone through a traumatic experience, for example rape, you will find that the victim is shamed in the community or that the perpetrator is still free in the streets. We need to stop judging and start supporting each other.”¹⁷

Lavender Hill community member Sheila Jacobs writes very movingly of the interaction she had with some gang members in the area:

“Here there are a lot of different gangs. We also have lots of shooting and innocent people get killed. Two of the Corner Boys came to me. They became gangsters due to problems from their homes and how they were brought up, because parenthood plays a big role in a child’s life. One of the boys could tell me why he became a gangster. He grew up with his uncles in a *shebeen*. He had been shot and wanted motherly advice...They just don’t know how to handle their problems and have no one to support them. That’s where this gangsterism comes in. The gang is an alternative family and support.”¹⁸

6. The Criminal Justice System

Victims of GBV do have recourse to the criminal justice system. However, many victims experience secondary victimization by both the police and the courts, which discourages reporting and may lead to the withdrawal of the case. Recently public hearings were held on what were termed ‘the Gender Based Violence Bills’. The purpose was to amend the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998 and the Sexual Offences and Related Matters Act 32 of 2007, which includes the National Register for Sex Offenders (NRSO). While the criminal justice

system plays an important and necessary role in the prosecution and punishment of these crimes, its role is not transformative. Correctional service facilities are overcrowded and lack the resources to make meaningful therapeutic interventions. There is a high incidence of recidivism, and it is a source of great community anger that many gender-based crimes are committed by offenders who are on parole. It is hoped that the proposed amendments will provide better tools for the South African Police Services and the prosecuting authority to better address these crimes with a victim-centred approach, closer supervision of those on parole, an effective register for sex offenders, increased social crime prevention teams, and appropriate sentencing which involves therapeutic interventions as a way of preventing recidivism.

All of these approaches focus on what should happen after an incident of GBV has occurred. However, as we have seen above, it is necessary to understand the violence experienced across a lifespan, and the structural pathways between childhood abuse and trauma and the subsequent perpetration of inter-personal violence, in order to develop strategies and programmes that interrupt the cycle of the transgenerational impact of GBV.

7. The Importance of Positive Discipline

Rev Patrick Godana talks about the importance of the first five years of a child's life and the importance of positive parenting as opposed to corporal punishment.¹⁹ Positive discipline is not only about not using corporal punishment; it is about providing a consistently nurturing and containing environment that is as predictable as possible. Children who are able to explore and experiment with boundaries within a safe, secure environment are less likely to experiment or engage in risky behaviour in adulthood, as they are 'self-contained'. The positive discipline approach has much to teach parents too. It focuses on the positive, and it encourages self-reflection, consistency, flexibility and reliability. It results in more conscious use of language and an awareness of the way we as parents and caregivers deal with anger and frustration. It helps us to model the kind of behaviour that we would like our children to emulate. It provides perspective and reminds us to listen to the child's perspective. In short it is about more conscious and creative parenting.

Furthermore, the positive discipline approach serves as a reminder to parents and care-givers that children are physically small and weak, that they are vulnerable to abuse both emotionally and physically, and that the society in which children are reared is characterised by extraordinarily high levels of inter-personal violence, from which the domestic sphere is in no way exempt.

8. Alternative Approaches

It is crucial to stop the cycle of ongoing trauma and abuse, and such efforts require a great deal of support and encouragement. Dr De Silva points out that "support groups, financial support, housing support, health care, education, nutritional support, community resources, spiritual connections, and individual therapy will all need to be addressed for successful cessation of generational trauma."²⁰

So much trauma is held in the body. Marguerite Holtzhausen talks about the importance of alternative therapies to help *release* that trauma.²¹ Dance, yoga, mime, drama, and music are all useful in relieving tension. Arts and crafts can play a healing role too. In a collection of memoirs, *Women Surviving Lavender Hill*, seven women share their experiences of GBV in a facilitated writing process using methods including body mapping, mind mapping, angel cards, reflections, guided meditations, outings, and photographs.²²

The Butterfly Art Project trains, mentors and supports adults working with children in marginalised communities, bringing psycho-social support through art. The project offers safe learning spaces and opportunities for children to explore, experience and develop creativity, to acknowledge and find appropriate ways of dealing with emotional hurt and pain, and to heal through their classes.²³

The 'Ntsika yeThemba' (Pillars of Hope) Project teaches young men to redefine masculinity through mentorship in an outdoor-based education project. The whole aim is to form male activists who stand up for the rights of women, to create an equal society, and to create an entire generation of men who are changing the narrative. Their motto is "Pillars of hope, defenders of women, and leaders for an equal society."²⁴

Sonke Gender Justice recognises that "effecting sustained change to gender roles and relations

requires addressing the forces that shape individual attitudes and community norms and practices – traditions and cultures, government policies, laws and institutions, civil society organisations, the media and the family – as well as underlying economic, political and social pressures.”²⁵ The organization works closely with a range of organisations and individuals including women’s rights organisations, social movements, trade unions, government departments, sports associations, faith-based organisations, media organisations, university research units and human rights groups, to facilitate effective responses to gender-based violence.

In a recent dialogue on GBV policy, community safety was discussed, and it was concluded that

“Community safety is about ensuring that women, children and all vulnerable groups feel safe from violence and crime through the promotion of social cohesion and law enforcement so that all who live within and on the borders of communities are ‘free from fear’. Safety is central in preventing and reducing GBV. Safety is about ensuring the physical, psychological, and material protection of the health and well-being of individuals and the community. It is a basic human right and need in everyday life, so all people can grow and develop themselves to their full potential.”²⁶

Also, as scientific research develops and understanding grows of how trauma negatively impacts our DNA, it is “discovering how intentionally healing the trauma through methods such as cognitive behavioural therapy can help reverse the negative impact.”²⁷

9. The Past in the Present

On the 25th anniversary of Chris Hani’s death on 10th April 2018, his daughter, Lindiwe Hani, pointed out that there are historical events, deaths, tragedies and losses that must be remembered.²⁸ In the report by the South African Human Rights Commission, *The Battle against Forgetting: human rights and the unfinished business of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, the commissioners point to the issue of justice in societies in transition and ask the question: “How do societies where human rights violations were perpetrated in the past move

forward to a new future that will allow for reconciliation and transformation”?²⁹

The constitutional entitlements of so many have yet to be realized. Service delivery protests are testament to community anger and hopelessness. It is very difficult to transcend the trauma of the past in a present that so closely resembles the past. Recently, Zonga Mokgatle, one of the Uppington 26 sentenced to death in 1989 after the murder of a municipal policeman,³⁰ inked out the image of his face on the Uppington 26 monument. He explained his action on social media by saying, “I didn’t fight to get a monument, I fought to get a better life... which is a decent job.”³¹

10. Conclusion

In June 2020 the SACBC Justice and Peace Commission issued a statement saying that “We believe that recovery from being violent is possible. Change is possible. The Church must hold us accountable for what we do. It must lead perpetrators to get the help they need. We must also work towards the healing of the victims. Our work must be to educate and to prevent GBV. We as Church have contributed to this scourge through our denial, our silence, our resistance and our lack of preparation”.³² The statement continued: “The SACBC Justice and Peace Commission continues to thank all the Justice and Peace activists and many other people of goodwill across the country who continue to fight this scourge and [who] are assisting survivors to seek justice. In our activism, we are reminded of the words of Pope Francis in his New Year Address in 2020: ‘Women are sources of life,’ he said, ‘yet they are continually offended, beaten, raped, forced into prostitution and forced to suppress the lives they carry in their wombs. All violence inflicted on women is a desecration of God.’ We will continue to work for the prevention and restoration of the social fabric, which includes pushing for change in toxic masculinities and social norms that drive gender based violence perpetration.”³³

Only then will we be able to break what Professor Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela calls the ‘Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition’.³⁴

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¹ While some of the literature distinguishes between transgenerational and intergenerational violence, the terms are used interchangeably for the purposes of this paper

² On 20th May 2021 the SACBC Parliamentary Liaison Office hosted a webinar on 'The Impact of Transgenerational Trauma on Gender Based Violence'. The webinar was addressed by Ms Marguerite Holtzhausen, the Executive Director of the Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Torture; and the Rev Patrick Godana from Sonke Gender Justice

³ https://www.one.org/international/blog/gender-based-violence-ngo-cape-town-2/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIub2lvYap8QIVDI7tCh1aVQ_REAMYASAAEgKdR_D_BwE

⁴ <https://www.samrc.ac.za/sites/default/files/files/2020-05-11/NSPGenderBasedVF.pdf>

⁵ 'A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women' UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, 2002

⁶ <https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/when-i-call-help-pastoral-response-domestic-violence>

⁷ <https://www.health.com/condition/ptsd/generational-trauma>

⁸ <https://www.ebnet.co.za/single-post/shadow-pandemic-doesn-t-have-a-vaccine>

⁹ <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/58914693.pdf>

¹⁰ http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1445-73772016000200005

¹¹ <https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CARE20GBV20and20Education20Report20FINAL20WEB.pdf>

¹² <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-06-14-when-genocide-hits-home-my-hometown-was-an-integral-part-of-canadas-attempt-at-cultural-erasure/>

¹³ http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1445-73772016000200005

¹⁴ http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1445-73772016000200005

¹⁵ <https://www.healthline.com/health/parenting/epigenetics-and-the-black-experience#Our-ancestors-trauma-lives-on>

¹⁶ <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/cape-town-trauma-centre-overwhelmed-case-load/>

¹⁷ <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/cape-town-trauma-centre-overwhelmed-case-load/>

¹⁸ 'Women of Leap', Sheila Jacob in 'Women Surviving Lavender Hill: 7 Women write about their stories of surviving abuse and violence'. New World Foundation, 2017

¹⁹ SACBC Parliamentary Liaison Office hosted a Webinar on 'The Impact of Transgenerational Trauma on Gender Based Violence'

²⁰ https://www.health.com/condition/ptsd/generational-trauma?hid=&did=371728-20210427&utm_campaign

²¹ SACBC Parliamentary Liaison Office hosted a Webinar on 'The Impact of Transgenerational Trauma on Gender Based Violence'

²² 'Women Surviving Lavender Hill: 7 Women write about their stories of surviving abuse and violence'. New World Foundation, 2017

²³ <https://www.butterflyartproject.org/training>

²⁴ <https://www.one.org/international/blog/gender-based-violence-ngo-cape-town->

²⁵ <https://genderjustice.org.za/about-us/about-sonke/>

²⁶ Community Safety to Reduce Gender-Based Violence Policy Dialogue, 25th June 2021

²⁷ <https://www.healthline.com/health/parenting/epigenetics-and-the-black-experience#The-path-to-healing>

²⁸ <https://ewn.co.za/topic/lindiwe-hani>

²⁹ https://www.saha.org.za/publications/battle_against_forgetting_human_rights_and_the_trc.htm

³⁰ The group was sentenced in terms of the 'common purpose' doctrine. The sentences sparked international protests and were overturned on appeal in 1991 and commuted to periods of imprisonment.

³¹ <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/former-political-prisoner-scratches-out-his-image-upington-26-monument>

³² <https://sacbc.org.za/catholic-church-justice-and-peace-commission-calls-for-an-end-to-the-pandemic-of-violence-against-women-and-children/>

³³ <https://sacbc.org.za/catholic-church-justice-and-peace-commission-calls-for-an-end-to-the-pandemic-of-violence-against-women-and-children/>

³⁴ <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/ebb45867-5aee-445a-b1f9->

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