

SOUTH AFRICA'S GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE CRISIS

Statement by the JESUIT INSTITUTE

The Jesuit Institute is appalled and deeply concerned by the Gender-Based Violence in our country. This has been highlighted again in the past two weeks, by devastating events dominating the headlines.

A 22-year-old pregnant woman, was kidnapped and gang raped on her way home from work in the Johannesburg inner city. Lerato Tambo Moloi was stoned to death after she had been sexually assaulted. The LBGTI community believe this is an incident of so-called "corrective" rape where a woman is targeted because she is a lesbian. Two young women from KZN, Popi Gumede (24) and Bongeka Phungula (28) who were living together in Zola, were murdered and may also have been raped. Three-year-old Courtney Pieters was raped twice and murdered by a supposed family friend. A young woman, Karabo Mokoena (22), was murdered and her body burnt by her ex-boyfriend.

Because of the recent media attention, we know the names of these women. The experts, however, say that this kind of violence is ubiquitous. On social media, in response to these incidents, many women have shared horrific experiences of abuse, often suffered at the hands of their partners. According to Childline, one in three young people experience a sexually abusive incident, most often by someone known to them. Sonke Gender Justice says that femicide in South Africa is five times the global rate.

There are multiple social factors which create the context for this kind of violence. South Africa's history is one in which the dignity of men and women was systematically undermined. One consequence of this may be that many women came to expect the abuse inflicted on them. Simultaneously, some men who feel disempowered, may seek to gain an interior sense of power by abusing those more vulnerable than themselves, namely women and children. We are also grappling with poverty, drug abuse, a 'culture of violence' and a society which is deeply patriarchal. The sexist and offensive posters which were held up at a residence event at the University of Pretoria recently, are indicative of a culture which denigrates women and sees them as sexual objects.

The situation also points to a moral and spiritual bankruptcy in our society in which the value placed on human life, and women's lives in particular, has been eroded. The fact that people can inflict such torture and harm upon another human being, and sometimes on someone they claim to love, can only be the result of a deeply distorted sense of self and the dignity of the other.

As faith-based organisations we need to work together to provide support to women, children and men affected by sexual violence. We need to create a counter-culture in which the dignity of each person, created in the image and likeness of God, is seen and honoured. We need both to act by challenging the status quo and by working to address the multiple root causes of Gender-Based Violence within society and within our own organisations.

Furthermore, we must critically examine the often-patriarchal church language we use and the ways in which women are often treated in church contexts as this too contributes to a culture in which Gender-Based Violence can flourish. We need to pray for all those affected by Gender-Based Violence and for the conversion of those, whose sense of self has become so distorted, that they have lost all sense of the value and dignity of the other.