

Herd solidarity: A vaccine for the shadow pandemic of gender-based violence

By [Professor Francis Petersen](#)

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This Women's Month, the focus regrettably but rightfully falls on gender-based violence during lockdown. But unlike Covid-19, the GBV pandemic already has an effective treatment against it. And our schools and institutions of higher learning have a vital role to play in administering it.



Professor Francis Petersen, rector and vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State

“A war being waged against the women and children of our country.” That’s how President Cyril Ramaphosa recently referred to the scourge of gender-based violence that seemed to mirror the disconcerting spike of our infection rates over the lockdown period. In the first three weeks of lockdown, more than 120,000 victims called the national helpline for abused women and children – double the usual volume of calls.

President Ramaphosa’s ‘war’ reference is quite appropriate. Global Peace Index statistics show that violence in South Africa is similar to countries at war or in conflict. When it comes to female victims, the figures almost defy comprehension:

Close to 3,000 women are murdered in South Africa every year. This means that a woman is murdered roughly every three hours in our country. About 110 women are raped every day. About one in three South African women experience abuse by an intimate partner in their lifetime.

A tale of two pandemics: Similarities

President Ramaphosa mentioned that the two pandemics are very different ‘in nature and cause’. Yet, there are some striking similarities.

The first is that they both affect everyone. Although South Africa’s femicide rate is about five times the global average, it is by no means a phenomenon unique to our country. The United Nations refers to a ‘shadow pandemic’ plaguing all of the 90 or so countries that opted for lockdown, as everywhere women with violent partners were isolated, separated from people and resources that could assist them.

Another similarity lies in the devastating consequences of both pandemics. Not only do they cause victims to suffer; it always circles out wider, posing a threat to the people around them.

With both pandemics, there is a huge responsibility on governments to ensure that their citizens are protected. But there is also an equally pressing duty on citizens to look out for one another.



Tavern Dialogues initiative launched to address GBV in townships

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A tale of two pandemics: Differences

On the other hand, apart from nature and cause, there are marked differences between the two pandemics:

While words such as 'novel' and 'unprecedented' are used to describe Covid-19, terms such as 'entrenched' and 'enduring' are commonly associated with gender-based violence.

It is a scourge that has been with us for a very long time.

Sadly, there also seems to be a vast difference in the perceived urgency to address the two pandemics. While the government implemented far-reaching and immediate measures and strictly monitored adherence in an attempt to curb the one, the effective application of laws and policies to curb the other just doesn't seem to get off the ground.



Hope is an action. These are the women leading us forward

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A known treatment for GBV

With any pandemic, the main concern, of course, lies in finding a treatment. And while the search is furiously on for a Covid-19 vaccine, there seem to be general consensus that a major part of the solution for the GBV pandemic has already been identified.

It lies in one simple word: Respect.

Mutual respect as a countermeasure for twisted views on paternalism, toxic masculinity, and subservience that often lie at the root of abuse in our country, and self-respect as a countermeasure to alcohol and substance abuse that regularly go hand in hand with GBV incidents.

Respect is, however, not a remedy that can be forcefully injected into an ailing society. Respect for oneself and for others has to be patiently cultivated from an early age in order to become part of a population's DNA.

The ideal, of course, is that respect be taught at home. But in South Africa's sad reality of vast domestic problems and social issues, respect is something that young children so often see very little of. Another stark fact is that close to two thirds of children in our country grow up without a father in the household. This is placing immeasurable pressure on our society's women, who have to act as both caregivers and breadwinners, often bravely struggling to intercept the absence of a male role model.

Broken households simply cannot be fixed overnight. And this is where educational institutions need to urgently step up to the plate. One of the things the Covid-19 pandemic has clearly illuminated in our country, is the vital and multi-faceted role of our educational institutions. They are so much more than just centres where academic knowledge is transferred. So often they are the places where social and psychological needs are identified and addressed. In many cases, they are the glue that holds communities together.



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Vital role of schools and higher education institutions

As educational institutions, we should embrace this role and more urgently than ever focus on instilling a culture of respect

in our students and learners.

We deal with young people at a time in their lives when they are particularly susceptible to influence. What they learn while passing through our doors and over our campuses will help determine the type of adults they eventually become.

We have a window of opportunity to guide them. And here lies the crux: Respect is a lesson that should not only be taught. It should also be shown.

Two years ago, the University of the Free State (UFS) established a Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) made up of business units across the university's three campuses, which works according to a set process flow to provide legal, medical, and counselling services to victims of gender-based violence, primarily aimed at minimising trauma for the victim. The SART has been playing a significant role to support victims – and in this way, also easing the minds of families and friends of victims that the university cares and has processes in place.

I have often advocated that institutions of higher learning should be small microcosms of an ideal society, where respect, tolerance, and social justice permeates every aspect of our operations. The same is true for our schools.

We need to show our learners and students what an ideal society should look like. They need to see it in all our operations, policies, and actions.

They should experience it in the fair manner in which we deal with transgressions; in the absence of bullying and favouritism; in workplace policies that promote wellness in a way that exudes care; in the way we encourage and facilitate dialogue, encouraging divergent views to be aired in a safe atmosphere of respect and tolerance.

In short, our educational institutions should be spaces where the participation of members and stakeholders is valued in ways that grant the dignity and worth of all individuals and communities.

Respect is contagious

What these past couple of months have also painfully taught us is that it is not only viruses that can spread like wildfire through communities. Fear, suspicion, and uncertainty are equally contagious. But so is kindness, acceptance, care, and respect.

What is needed is for educators everywhere to embrace the fact that respect should form the bedrock of our teaching efforts.

Unlike other pandemics, the victim base for gender-based violence cannot progress organically to a state of herd immunity. Left unattended, this 'shadow' pandemic will simply become worse and worse.

To curb it, we need to make a conscious decision to root out the various forms of inequality that still exist in our society and replace it with mutual respect. And we need to concentrate our focus on our schools, universities, colleges, and training centres.

We need herd solidarity to guide our youth away from gender-based violence. Only then will we have a fighting chance to overcome it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Francis Petersen is a chemical engineer, rector and vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State.

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