

Brief accompanying Evidence Report 118

TURNING THE TIDE: THE ROLE OF COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Empowerment of Women and Girls

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The IDS programme on Strengthening Evidence-based Policy works across seven key themes. Each theme works with partner institutions to co-construct policy-relevant knowledge and engage in policy-influencing processes. This material has been developed under the Empowerment of Women and Girls theme.

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Overview

The case study discussed in this Evidence Report explores the value and limitations of collective action in challenging the community, political, social and economic institutions that reinforce harmful masculinities and gender norms related to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). As such, the concept of structural violence is used to locate SGBV in a social, economic and political context that draws histories of entrenched inequalities in South Africa into the present. The research findings reinforce a relational and constructed understanding of gender emphasising that gender norms can be reconfigured and positively transformed. We argue that this transformation can be catalysed through networked and multidimensional strategies of collective action that engage the personal agency of men and women and their interpersonal relationships at multiple levels and across boundaries of social class, race and gender. This collectivity needs to be conscious of and engaged with the structural inequalities that deeply influence trajectories of change. Citizens and civil society must work with the institutions – political, religious, social and economic – that reinforce structural violence in order to ensure their accountability in ending SGBV.

Background and rationale

South Africa, a democratic parliamentary republic since 1994 and formally classed as a middle-income country, has among the highest rates of inequality in the world. Economic inequality and high unemployment relate to legacies of colonialism and apartheid that maintain poverty and marginalisation. It is in the context of socioeconomic inequality that South Africa bears witness to an epidemic of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV): in the Western Cape, 39 per cent of women have experienced some form of SGBV in their lifetime. South Africa's rate of rape, as a particular form of SGBV, has been found to be one of the highest in the world. The violent punishment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) persons is also of critical concern.

The widespread violation of people's rights, particularly linked to their gender and sexuality, runs alongside an attempt in policy to respond to SGBV; South Africa has implemented a raft of progressive and comprehensive laws, policies and support systems. Looking to the implementation of policy, several integrated approaches exist that involve both government and civil society in dealing with the prevalence of SGBV at national and provincial levels. Despite these efforts legal responsibilities on SGBV are not adequately met. In response, civil society has called for an effective National Strategic Plan (NSP) on gender-based violence. South Africa's experience with HIV has shown that an NSP can be an important tool to gain the political commitment and funding required for a multisectoral response to address large social challenges.

The Evidence Report draws on the notion of structural violence to bring into perspective a long and deep history in which violence was closely tied into a particular order in which gender, race, class and sexuality were normatively constructed and enforced. Within these constructions harmful interpretations of masculinity are recognised as endorsing the use of violence as a gendered practice. An aim of this study, and one of the major challenges in post-apartheid South Africa, is identifying those actors and institutions responsible for the proliferation of these historic forms of structural violence in their contemporary form as SGBV. In turn, the case study aims to understand some of the ways that people are working collectively, to challenge these inequalities and forms of violence through their interpersonal relationships and collective and political action.

In this research, we explored the intersection between politics and power, social norms, and networks of actors to try and understand how transformative social change to end SGBV can be achieved. The research questions for this study are twofold:

1. What are the perceived structural factors (social, political, economic) that contribute to people's experiences of SGBV?
2. How do (i) individual agency of men and women, and (ii) collective political actions (public, institutional, etc.) interact to engage certain kinds of processes that aim to prevent and address SGBV?

Overall, the study was conducted with the aim of providing insight into how citizens and civil society organisations find meaningful ways to engage with each other, and with the government, to challenge oppressive social norms and structures and to build transformative strategies to end SGBV.

Methodology

This study used a multi-layered research methodology in order to generate policy-relevant research that was empirically grounded and action-oriented. The participants of this research study were diverse actors engaged in the issue of addressing SGBV in the Cape Town metropolitan area, and the Matzikama municipality of rural Western Cape. The methods themselves were established to ensure that the research process was responsive to emerging policy dynamics linked to the development of an NSP on gender-based violence. Furthermore, we formulated the study with the aim that it would be empirically grounded and ethically accountable to those people with whom we worked and who are addressing SGBV in their everyday realities. This was achieved through the use of dialogic and open-ended research instruments that supported participants to shape the direction of the research from the outset. An inductive and comparative approach to analysis, based on grounded theory, allowed the research material to be developed into findings through an iterative and consultative process. The research was conducted July–November 2014. The findings are based on three interlinked strands of research: digital storytelling and collective analysis with 11 participants identified as community activists; qualitative research, through key informant interviews with 26 stakeholders dealing with SGBV; and policy engagement through a stakeholder dialogue event with 35 participants.

Findings and discussion

South Africa's past is perhaps at its most harmful, and most visible, in the legacy of violence that its citizens continue to embody in their everyday lives. It is therefore impossible and even dangerous to de-link SGBV, as a very specific form of violence, from the broader dynamics of socioeconomic inequality that still characterises the lives of the people involved in this study. The first section of our findings describes how the persistence of this inequality was inscribed into the very spaces – townships, homes, bodies – in which most of the participants lived. This inequality, and the multiple forms of violence they experienced as a result, was articulated in particular by the community activists with whom we worked. The participants detailed the extent to which racial inequalities embedded in South Africa's history, emerged in the present, for example in the form of ongoing economic struggle. A particular set of normative gender roles were articulated, in relation to these structural dynamics. Migration, for instance, was expressed as an action taken by men in order to earn money to support their families.

The study findings also make visible the role of formal institutions and leaders in failing to address, or sometimes in maintaining, structural inequalities that underpin SGBV. These institutions include political institutions, such as government departments and the judicial system, as well as religious institutions and leaders. Participants explained that without

providing clear leadership on gender justice, and without transforming government departments to better respond to SGBV, the government would continue to fail in its attempt to promote gender equality. Political institutions, particularly those related to law enforcement, were also described in the study as negligent or ill-equipped to deal with the needs of people experiencing SGBV. The participants in the study described, too, how religious leaders used their power to sanction heteronormative relationships and sexist characterisations of men and women's 'roles'.

The findings demonstrate that gender transformative collective action can provide an opportunity for different actors and organisations to work together across social issues towards change, bringing alliances and partnerships between people and across organisations. The strategies for change outlined within this case study are framed as gender transformative approaches, because they seek to change gender roles and create more respectful and egalitarian relationships. These initiatives emphasise the full participation of men, whose role is seen as essential in the transformative process. Further, community-led initiatives that work at the personal and political level providing support structures and spaces to engage diverse stakeholders have the potential to transform attitudes, behaviours and mechanisms that support male dominance and power. Collaborations between organisations and institutions can enable coordination across interventions engaging different ecological levels and addressing the multiple intersecting influences to reduce and prevent violence.

Pragmatic limitations to collective action, and to social transformation, were also raised through the case study and relate, specifically, to a lack of funding for those organisations working to provide resources to people affected by SGBV. Most often, it was those same organisations that did not have funding, who were doing the work of government departments in providing support to survivors of SGBV. The work of civil society organisations has not only been to provide this basic support, but in South Africa, it has also historically been to call on the government to be accountable to and take greater responsibility for the wellbeing of its citizens.

Policy and practice recommendations

Citizens' initiatives and social activism

- It is important to recognise informal ways of collective action in people's lived realities. Continued work is needed with communities to understand their innovations in addressing gender inequalities and to mobilise this knowledge into policymaking.
- Collective action (informal and formal) does not necessarily translate into a 'gender transformative' collective or movement; citizens and affiliated organisations need to invest in the work of gender equality. In doing so the political power dynamics of challenging patriarchal privilege must be recognised.
- Working with citizens to develop and share practical legal knowledge about their rights, and avenues for recourse and resources on SGBV is crucial to enable them to shape and hold accountable the policies and programmes that affect their lives.
- Sustainability of collective action in ending SGBV at the community level is important; more understanding is needed on what drives citizen action, enables ownership of the process of change, and the resources needed to support this.
- A focus on mobilisation has highlighted the significance of engaging with men and women in positions of power and holding them to account in their responsibilities for working to end SGBV; as power holders in these contexts, men have an important role to play in holding each other accountable on gender equality.

Civil society partnerships

- Partnerships across social movements working for gender equality – engaging men, women, LGBTQI persons – are important for accountability within movements. Furthermore, these relationships can enable collaborative learning on gender issues and help ensure a collective response to SGBV that promotes social justice for all.
- A clear vision and purpose needs to be built for gender transformative collective action. Where this reflects a partnership between state, social actors and citizens, then possibilities of accountability and work to enable citizen action and rights claims at the local level will be strengthened.
- Civil society needs to develop clearer strategies and policies for mediating and linking across actors to strengthen networked ways of working to address SGBV across multiple levels and social and political spaces.

Government institutions

- Recognising citizens and civil society organisations as effective partners in ending SGBV, working collaboratively to support policy reform on the issue of SGBV, and importantly in enabling effective implementation.
- Political decision-makers and champions are critical for driving institutional change. Entrenched patriarchy in political and religious institutions needs to be challenged in order for these institutions to more effectively address the root causes of SGBV.
- Multi-sectoral consultations and citizen participation are required to develop and implement a fully-costed and funded National Strategic Plan to end SGBV that aims to fill the existing gaps in: laws and policies, services for survivors of SGBV, funding for strategies that prevent violence, and oversight and impact mechanisms.
- The government needs to make information on SGBV funding more transparent (including funding criteria, recipients and budgets). Ideally, this information should also be made available retrospectively, for organisations to be in a better position to lobby national and international donors for funding.

International community

- International donor agencies must meaningfully engage in learning from specific country contexts, to develop agendas on SGBV that can be sensitively, and effectively, implemented.
- The international community can play a role in ‘the collective’, as part of a global alliance that supports and enables national-level, contextualised responses to SGBV.
- Using the effective work being done by collective actors at local and national levels to contribute to the global dialogue and frameworks on ending SGBV.