



## COVID-19 and Gender-Based Violence: Towards a Religious Response

### SUMMARY NOTES OF THE MAIN POINTS EMERGING FROM THE FIRST FAITH LEADERS' WEBINAR

Our Police Minister has called on all South Africans to report abuse, after over 2230 cases were reported to the helpline in Week 1 alone. No religion condones violence in the home. But often we as religious leaders do not know how best to respond – even more so now that families live in isolation.

More than 60 religious leaders and survivors came together in a webinar to share questions and experiences about how to respond to GBV in the context of COVID-19 and the Lockdown.

These notes pull together the main points raised in the presentations, questions and comments, and the text chat.

#### Main Points Raised by Speakers:

*Rev Bafana Khumalo, Pastor, ELCSA, WWSOSA ManCom member and Co-Founding Director, Sonke Gender Justice and MenEngage*

*– on the call on religious leaders to respond to GBV in this time of COVID-19 and the Lockdown, and what tools we have to do so.*

- Faith leaders are called upon to respond to what Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the GS of UN Women has termed the 'shadow epidemic' of gender-based violence
- Gender cannot be tackled in isolation, because all forms of oppression and abuse are interlinked, whether it is racism, prejudice against LGBTIQ or disabled people, or abuse of the environment
- We have to raise our voices in solidarity with those suffering in unsafe homes and to support them to access help
- Social Solidarity with survivors, but also all those engaged in GBV work, and to support families and communities
- Need to make creative use of social media to do this
- As faith leaders we need to communicate more consciously with our people in this time of social distancing
- We need to share messages of hope during these difficult days – a theology of hope (e.g. during the exile, some Jews who had remained in Egypt were losing hope; a prophet rose up who went out and bought land – as a symbol and message of hope to the people that THERE IS A FUTURE).
- Let us share today and into the future a variety of strategic ideas.

*Ms Nompilo Gcwensa, Chairperson, Phephisa GBV Survivors' Network*

*-on what a survivor trapped in a violent home might need most from their faith leader/s.*

- There is still inadequate information on COVID-19 especially to the rural areas, and to the elderly, who end up not complying with hygiene and distancing standards; inadequate or partial information breeds fear and panic;

Management Committee: Chair: Rev Phumzile Mabizela; Deputy Chair: Rev Bafana Khumalo, Treasurer: Mr Simon Read; Members: Ms Patricia Sibanyoni, Ms Saydoon Sayed Nisa, Ms Nompilo Gcwensa (Survivor Organisation Representative), Mr Vernon Hammond, Ms Lyn van Rooyen (Communications Consultant); Ms Amy Leigh Benn, Ms Ntwenhle Majosi, Ms Xana McCauley, Ms Maramuke Matumaini (Survivor Organisation Representative). Coordinator: Ms Daniela Gennrich.

- There is inadequate GBV information - about how to seek help and who from under Lockdown. Many women are stuck in abusive households and are scared for their lives, but also scared to report;
  - Story – a survivor who escaped and was running to the nearby police station, but was stopped by police and forced back home, without being given a safe space to explain why she was out; and her situation is naturally worse now.
- Please use many public channels to communicate with ordinary people who do not have access to social media – RADIO is particularly important – faith leaders speaking out against GBV and about COVID-19 on radio would have a widespread impact, even during broadcasts of church services.
- Survivors need a way to call faith leaders to intervene, particularly when the normal channels fail. Many survivors still trust faith leaders over Government officials.
  - Is it possible for the faith leaders to have a HELPLINE – WhatsApp and SMS – that survivors can call for special intervention – either just counselling if they choose to remain, or help to find alternative shelter if they need to get to safety?
- Food shortages make women and girls more vulnerable to abuse – some cases in Durban city and Pietermaritzburg city, where men with money are offering to buy women food in exchange for daily sex; in some households the men with money withhold sex until they receive sexual favours.

RESPONSES:

- Hunger vs safety – this can lead to people breaking conditions of lockdown and putting themselves at risk.
- The above factors emphasise the importance of linking survivors to social services who can meet their needs – important to share key helpline numbers with survivors, and with families and communities in general.

*Ms Ebon James DeKam, General Secretary for the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone (CCSL), and core group member for the Pan African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network (PAWEEN).*

*-On lessons learnt when she led the CCSL in the implementing diverse activities to counter and defeat the effects of civil war, natural disasters and the Ebola Virus Epidemic.*

- Traditionally in Sierra Leone (SL), women have accepted beatings as a sign of love – but after the civil war, women became stronger and more confident and many resist it now;
- Shelters are no longer used in SL, because women who go there are stigmatized, and survivors are usually advised to stay with extended family members - would this work in SA? (Text responses indicate probably not because most families stigmatise women who report their partners.)
- Prevention is critical, even now. Religious leaders can play a vital role – but they need to build trust with survivors.
- One way is to collaborate with government service providers, and organisations working on GBV at the highest level. This is very important.
- It is vital that religious leaders bring messages of hope.
- Also agree that the use of local radio is a critical medium for faith leaders to get these messages out there.

## PARTICIPANT QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS:

(Spoken and written in the chat):

1. How can one **make GBV visible**, now that people are isolated in their homes? Violence is increasing, but less is known, because of the stresses and isolation of the Lockdown.

RESPONSES:

- Use of radio is critical; Male faith leaders to address men in their homes, about dealing with their issues without harming their loved ones.
- Important to reach men; there was a suggestion to set up WhatsApp groups for men, to talk through their challenges.
- Prepare guidelines for families; how to cope better under lockdown, how to talk about their irritations and frustration and not allowing tensions to build up, which can lead to violent outbursts. Get these messages out on social media and radio.
- Faith leaders get the message out there that not all households are families –what constitutes a family, and that a real family is a 'domestic church'.

2. How can **churches set up shelters for domestic violence survivors** and obtain temporary permits?

RESPONSES:

- An application to the DSD is required – to obtain status as a WHITE DOOR CENTRE (temporary shelter). CONTACTS:

Siza Magangoe, Department of Social Development [SizaM@dsd.gov.za](mailto:SizaM@dsd.gov.za), 084 581 4116

Zubeida Dangor, National Shelter Movement, [Zubeida@nisaa.org.za](mailto:Zubeida@nisaa.org.za), 083 289 9818

3. Reinforce the importance of **building strong relationships** between religious leaders, organisations working on GBV and survivors – and the need to find ways during lockdown.
4. Another way to look at **GBV is as a new Syndrome** – that it is a psychiatric condition that also needs psychiatric / psychological response –
- RESPONSES:
- Agree, and it can manifest among women in anxiety symptoms and panic attacks.
  - There is a need for counselling interventions – how can religious leaders, who are already trained to offer counselling support, be integrated into support systems as counsellors?
5. Survivors often end up staying in abusive relationships because of financial dependence; Is it possible for the faith sector to establish a **Fund to support survivors** to access shelter and food for themselves and their children? This would mean that more women would come forward.
- RESPONSE:
- This is an issue to take up to various religious initiatives, such as those led by SACC and KZNCC.
6. **Faith leaders need to speak in public** to counter the shaming of women to who report their partners, and to refuse to buy in to protecting abusers – as it increases the psychological and the economic hardship of survivors.
7. Another form of **GBV that is hidden** – has been the refusal of employers to allow domestic and other menial workers to get home to the rural areas to be with their children. They are now stuck in little rooms in the city, instead of safely with their children at home.
8. **Support groups** are incredibly important, as a way to channel information, and to be able to hear from those suffering abuse in their homes.
- RESPONSE:
- GBV forum in Diepsloot and Phephisa Survivors Network – possibilities for collaboration and solidarity?

9. Most religious leaders are **men**, but most members are women – and most men are not within the church – so **how can religious leaders play a useful part?**

RESPONSES:

- Religious leaders can go out to where the men are – shebeen, sports games, taxi ranks, etc,
- Start support groups – or interest groups – with men in the churches,
- A useful resource: ASIKHULUME: SIZWANE – A Dialogue Tools for Religious leaders who want to learn from Survivors. Download the PDF at [www.wwsosa.org.za](http://www.wwsosa.org.za)

10. **Working with men** is critical – but how to do this effectively?

RESPONSES:

- GBV is often related to low self-worth among men – how can faith leaders reach men to grow a healthy relationship with themselves and thus others?
- Possible men's groups established by faith leaders? (Online, as above?)
- Several participants are involved with men – (Sonke, Lydia, Siphon, Cardinal) and call for men's groups to be included in discussions between stakeholders towards solutions.

11. Several proposals were made for this webinar to lead to a **JOINT FAITH LEADERS' STATEMENT** to be made public and to invite others to join a larger faith movement for change in the faith sector.

RESPONSE:

This was the outcome of a previous face-to-face conference of about 100 faith leaders and survivors on 20<sup>th</sup> February in Durban.

The statement is available at <http://www.wwsosa.org.za/content/new-kairos-make-your-voice-heard>

Several participants went to this site and read and endorsed the statement immediately.

## ACTIONS TO EMERGE FROM THIS WEBINAR:

### A. FAITH LEADERS' STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT

Participants were invited to sign the Faith Leaders' Statement (above) and to forward the link to many other faith leaders they know – to open up discussions and grow a strong faith movement for an end to Gender based violence.

Invitation from Pontsho Segwai (World Vision South Africa):

*It would be good that by the time it is sent out to government, it goes out with endorsements from faith-based organisations, councils, etc in addition to the individual signatures*

### B. POSSIBLE COLLABORATIVE INTEREST GROUPS:

*A number of shared themes emerged during the chat and vocal discussions.*

*It is proposed that future Webinars might usefully be around specific areas of interest.*

*These include the following.*

**Participants who are interested to participate in one of the interest groups below, are invited to write to Daniela at [coordinator@wwsosa.org.za](mailto:coordinator@wwsosa.org.za) or call 0845810622.**

1. Faith Leaders Speaking Out: to take forward some of the recommendations made in this webinar for faith leaders to become much more visible and audible in aligning themselves in

support of survivors, and working alongside other stakeholders to speak out preventatively and also respond swiftly and appropriately to specific cases.

CONVENOR: (VOLUNTEER)

MEMBERS:

2. Develop Guidelines for faith leaders, and for survivors, for responding to crisis cases

CONVENOR: (VOLUNTEER)

MEMBERS:

3. Faith leaders responding to needs related to Food and Hunger

CONVENOR: (VOLUNTEER)

MEMBERS:

4. Psycho-social support

CONVENOR: (VOLUNTEER)

MEMBERS:

5. Shelters

CONVENOR: (VOLUNTEER)

MEMBERS:

6. Working with Men

CONVENOR: (VOLUNTEER)

MEMBERS:

*C. JOIN THE MOVEMENT*

To become an active member of WWSOSA and receive information, notices of further meetings and access useful skills support or resources, join WWSOSA:

<http://www.wwsosa.org.za/content/member-registration-and-update>