



Faith ACTION
to end Gender-Based Violence

STATEMENT



Faith Action to End Gender Based Violence and Femicide 2023

INTERFAITH Statement for the Commitment to Action Campaign

**WE WILL
SPEAK OUT**  **SA**
FAITH COMMUNITIES ENDING SEXUAL AND
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE



In partnership with
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REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



We, a group of concerned values based and faith inspired mobilizers, scholars, activists, survivors and servant leaders of South Africa's diverse faith communities held a consultative workshop in August 2023 in Benoni, to learn from one another.

We considered responding more courageously, effectively and with greater unity to gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF)[1] in our country. We agreed to draft a preliminary Joint Statement of Commitment and invite others to declare the following with us:

1. We witness the realities of GBVF –

The high levels of gender-based violence in South Africa are well known and indisputable: South Africa is widely known as the 'rape capital of the world', with the highest rape statistics of any country that is not actively at war. According to the crime statistics for the period April 2022 to March 2023, as many as 118 rapes were reported per day in South Africa and almost 11 women were murdered per day, constituting a 20% increase on the previous year - and 33% of these were murdered by their intimate partners. The COVID pandemic has certainly contributed to these high statistics, with the number of children born to teen mothers in South Africa's most populous province, Gauteng, having jumped 60% since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. But these statistics hide the ghastly realities of the human cost in the lives of victims, survivors and their families, as well as the fragmentation of communities and the impact on the economy of our country.

Since over 85% of South Africa's population adhere to a religion, it stands to reason that gender-based violence is a lived reality for high numbers of our members, and we have to admit that religious institutions are unfortunately not exempt from GBVF.

2. We agree that:

- a. gender-based violence in any form is never excusable and is contrary to the will of God;
- b. our diverse sacred texts agree that all human beings have been created with equal dignity and that humans are part of the reflection of the living God active in all of life;

3. We admit that:

- c. we as individuals and as communities of faith have not done enough to bring an end to this pandemic that is destroying lives, families, faith communities and society as a whole;
- d. we have sometimes, by our inaction, our silence, misuse or misunderstanding of sacred texts and religious practices, been consciously or unconsciously complicit in contributing to the scourge of GBVF.

4. We note the national context:

- a. South Africa's President, Cyril Ramaphosa, has recognised that GBVF has reached pandemic proportions in South Africa
- b. After years of civil society advocacy, the April 2020 launch of a National Strategic Plan on GBV and Femicide (NSP-GBVF) marked a historic milestone in the struggle and pursuit to end gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) in South Africa.
- c. The NSP explicitly refers to the critical role of the faith sector as part of the solution highlighting the faith sector as a key stakeholder, to "mobilize through faith dignity, humanity, ubuntu, social justice and gender justice", and to "harness their capacity as agents of social norm change", as part of the whole-society approach envisaged in the NSP.

- d. The 2022 National GBVF Summit has agreed on key Resolutions proposed by a Faith Sector Action Caucus, which commits the faith sector: "to establish shared ethical values founded on standards for mutual accountability within the faith-based sector and build its capacity to (i) support survivors of GBV against perpetrators; (ii) dismantle patriarchy from religious teachings and practices, whilst integrating more women into senior leadership roles; and (iii) strengthen spiritual healing and restorative justice, whilst eradicating all forms of spiritual abuse." (pages 5 and 7)

5. We recognise that:

If we are to meaningfully confront the scourge of gender-based violence in South Africa, the root causes need to be interrogated. It is not enough to alleviate the symptoms. Violence emanates from deeply rooted biases, norms and stereotypes that cause structural psycho-social unequal gender dynamics that have become normalised as 'the way the world is and should be'. As a custodian of social norms and attitudes, the faith sector thus becomes a particularly relevant stakeholder in primary prevention interventions.

Why a Joint Statement of Faith?

The Statement below is shared in the hope that many other faith leaders might endorse it and that it may form the basis for an ongoing campaign to open conversations that lead to powerful joint faith-rooted action for a better South Africa and world.

We invite all faith leaders to join with us to declare the following, to sign the statement and to use it to guide concrete actions in all faith communities to make every neighbourhood and every home a safe place for all. We join together inspired by our faith to pray, to speak, and mobilise people to action.

At the same time, we recognise that we have a personal and collective responsibility to BE safe spaces and be role models of the kind of values, social norms and practices needed to create the kind of society we are striving towards.

¹People involved include scholars, activists and leaders from the following faith traditions (in alphabetical order: Baha'i; Brahma Kumaris, Christian (3 traditions, led by SACBC, SACC and TEASA), Hindu, Muslim, Traditional Healers (including those from African Traditional Religions, under Ikhwelo), and to a limited extent, Jewish.

²Department of Women, Youth and People with Disabilities, August 2023. "Treating GBVF as a Second Pandemic" Presented to the faith sector for discussion in a webinar in August.

³Save the Children, cited in the above presentation in August 2023.

THE IDEALS FOR WHICH OUR FAITH TRADITIONS STRIVE

Our Shared Core Values

We recognise the great diversity and uniqueness we possess in light of our many faith traditions. Even though we disagree at times, we also recognise our humanity, and family resemblances. These differences and resemblances are reflected in our beliefs about the Divine, the sanctity of our sacred texts, our religious practices, our holy days, our ethics that guide us to live honourably, our prayers, worship and service.

As a community and part of one human family we possess the following common values and ideals which guide us:

- LOVE is the Golden Rule which is lived out as the basic ethic that we should treat all with empathy, care and understanding for all is the shared foundation of all faiths.
- ONENESS: we need each other in order to survive and thrive;
- EQUAL DIGNITY of all God's creation requires an intentional focus on EQUITY;
- PEACE requires both JUSTICE and MERCY in order for restorative healing to take place.

These common values can be summed up by our common South African philosophy of UBUNTU- a way of being that celebrates that all humans are deeply interconnected and that encourages generosity of spirit, enables belonging and inclusivity.

Our Stance on Violence and Gender-Based Violence

We recognise that we have also contributed to the current crisis through our own woundedness as a result of our personal and communal traumas that are linked to our history of apartheid, colonial and patriarchal oppression and violence, which robbed us all of our dignity and self-respect. We are therefore dependent on God's mercy, light, truth and love that restores our self-respect and dignity, so that we are able to offer the hope and healing that we are called to speak into the situation, places and lives of people who have been dehumanized by GBVF. Bearing this in mind, and building upon our faith in God's universal grace:

We strive to nurture mutual respect, to act justly with compassion and humility, and to speak the truth even if it is costly. Our beliefs sustain the dignity and equality of all human beings. Therefore, any form of harm, injury, discrimination or violence including gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) have no support or justification in any of our faith values.

We seek to offer safety, refuge and healing. We teach about forgiveness, mercy and serving each other especially those who are marginalised and vulnerable.

We hope to lead by example, to model the change we want to see in our actions, and courageously challenge and overcome those things that we know we must not accept.

In our relationships with survivors of GBVF, we seek to provide a safe, empathetic trust-building space that is survivor-centred and offers access to various forms of healing and opportunities to reclaim our value and worth. We intend to open up all taboo topics related to sexuality, gender, violence, stigma and related topics, in order to bring hidden things to light in the interests of prevention and healing.

It is our hope to help perpetrators while also holding them accountable, in recovery and rehabilitation, without disregarding the need to restore dignity and wholeness to survivors. As the spirit of Ubuntu extends forgiveness and mercy to wrongdoers in the community, we seek to provide courageous and truthful spaces that promote understanding and support for healing, in the interests of restorative and transformative justice.

SHORTCOMINGS – Admissions, Confessions, Acknowledgements

As a people of faith, we recognise that, despite our shared life-giving values and principles, we have not made a meaningful impact on reducing the high incidence of Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (GBVF), both within our religious spaces and in our communities, which are looking to us to make a difference.

Love for God and others is central to all our faiths and yet we are failing to love our neighbour as we should. We concede that prayer, religious teachings and worship are inadequate without decisive action to prevent gender-based violence in all its forms, and offer healing and restoration to those whose lives are destroyed by it. In the words of a survivor:

“We need more than prayer.... stand with us when we need you. That way we will know that God is alive. God is not only in teaching, worshiping and singing, but God is in our lives.”

We acknowledge that, as faith communities:

- We have often been complicit by our silence and by our inaction.
- Our collective silence as people of faith has led to a culture of silence and secrecy in relation to GBVF, and growing stigma and discrimination against survivors and even their loved-ones. In some ways, we might be said to have been enablers, passive bystanders and or even perpetrators.
- We confess that we have not been as vocal against this scourge, as we could and should have been, nor have we been the accessible safe spaces we profess to be. In many cases, fear of causing division in our communities or offending the powerful causes this silence and lack of action.
- Our words and actions have fallen short:
- We acknowledge a long history of misuse or misinterpretations of our faith and our sacred texts that have led to violence and dehumanization of people based on: race (slavery, apartheid, colonialism); gender (patriarchy, sexism); disability (albinism, non-verbal and non-mobile people) and sexual health (prejudice against those living with HIV and those whose sexuality does not conform with ours).
- We confess that there are interpretations of our faith and sacred texts that:
- provide justification for beliefs and practices that sustain and legitimate gender inequality, which is the root cause of GBVF;
- do not sufficiently engage with fundamental issues, including: original language (translation); context; literary genre; the social status of the interpreter of religious texts (their gender, race, class etc.);
- fail to confront and interrogate ‘texts of terror’ used to justify submission of abused women
- Over centuries, we have unfortunately planted inequity and inequality, discrimination and injustice. We are reaping the fruits thereof in the form of South Africa's rampant gender-based violence and femicide, and an inability of service providers to respond appropriately due to their own religious and cultural socialisation and bias.

- Many of our structures have also unwittingly or deliberately excluded women from key decision-making processes that affect all genders.
- We have not taken time to understand the underlying causes of GBV:
- Some of our diverse teachings and practices unwittingly or knowingly maintained patriarchy and toxic masculine ideals that have been shown to do harm to men as well as perpetuating GBV. Men, like women, have feelings - they too cry and we acknowledge their emotions and vulnerability. Failing to validate these can lead men to 'explode' and do irreparable damage to themselves and their loved ones.
- Gender-based violence is multi-dimensional and impacts on the lives of women, children, people with disability, LGBTIQ people and men who do not fit social norms, and it is influenced by many factors like poverty, racism, hopelessness and substance abuse. Not recognising this has limited our ability to contribute to effective GBV prevention.
- On the other hand, some of us may have protected perpetrators while stigmatising those who reported their actions, ignorant that this is a form of secondary abuse.
- GBV is not just 'out there' and we also have to look within:
- We acknowledge that our faith and spiritual spaces have not always been the accessible safe spaces we profess to be. We have not acted decisively enough in dealing with sexual offenses by our religious leaders, whether ordained or lay.
- Many of us fail to recognise and address the extent of harm caused by ignoring the cases of GBV perpetrated by some of our leaders and members against women and girls, and increasingly men and boys too. This has allowed the cancer of GBV to spread amongst us and to all areas of society.
- Our collective silence has done much harm:
- Our normalised culture of silence and secrecy has lent impunity to perpetrators and perpetuated stigma and discrimination against survivors and even their loved-ones.
- We lament the role we have played in silencing survivors - adding to their trauma through our disbelief, demanding patience in the face of suffering, forcing forgiveness 'because it's the right thing to do', and through our lack of continuous, sustainable support towards deep healing and restoration.
- At the same time, we do recognise that God, the Almighty, the Healer, is at work amongst us:
- We celebrate those who work selflessly and tirelessly to root out the cancer of GBV in our midst. We recognise that many amongst us are speaking out and taking action as survivors and allies in solidarity with survivors, preaching and teaching about building harmony and healing, and offering healing ministries to the traumatised, dispossessed and bereaved as a result of GBV.
- We also recognise that this very statement, this journey of building a faith movement to end GBV, is a response to God's call, and is itself a work in progress.
- Nevertheless, we acknowledge that we have much to learn:
- Our efforts are often short-lived because we have failed to collaborate with each other as well as other stakeholders. Moreover, our attempts at dealing with GBV issues have often tended to be reactive, lacking a focus on prevention and proactive programming. Accountability management, where it exists, has been hampered by ineffective processes and lack of political will amongst leadership.

PRACTICAL TRANSFORMATIVE COMMITMENTS

Change is inevitable, transformation is a choice.

Going forward, what is required of us? In spite of these concerns and challenges, we believe that faith communities and faith institutions have a critical and valuable role to play in addressing gender-based violence and femicide. So we have asked ourselves what is required of us for such a time as this, to respond more effectively and courageously to the GBV pandemic in our country.

In response, as people of faith, we jointly and personally commit to the following concrete and practical actions:

1. We will now be vocal without fear of causing division or offending the powerful because we understand this silence enables violence to continue.
2. We commit to amplifying religious texts that promote ideals of dignity, gender equality and justice and engage with interpretations of texts that have been used to support patriarchy, violence and dehumanisation based on race, gender or ability.
3. We will nurture men and dismantle toxic masculinity by normalising the expression of healthy emotion, supporting everyone's feelings and vulnerabilities. We know that validation is essential to avoiding explosions of anger that cause irreparable violence to self and society.
4. We will promote care-giving environments in schools and in diverse family settings.
5. We will prioritise the protection of vulnerable groups including women, children, people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ and men. We will stop protecting perpetrators and stigmatising those who report. This is secondary abuse.
6. We will act decisively and systematically against perpetrators including religious leaders and stop asking survivors to be patient and forcing forgiveness. We demand accountability.
7. We commit to overcoming our prejudices and inaction. Ignoring poverty, racism, substance abuse and mental health problems has hindered prevention and contributed to GBV for too long. It is enough.
8. We will support and increase efforts to offer healing and service ministries to the traumatised, dispossessed and bereaved who have suffered from GBV.
9. We will create an enabling environment for people to speak and act for themselves. We will listen to survivors, to women and the marginalised, involve men and boys as part of the solution while also calling out behaviours and attitudes that demean women's dignity, condone violence or stigmatise. We will stay open to participatory programme planning and research processes ensuring accountability to those vulnerable to abuse.
10. We will support faith leaders who are speaking out and acting and will work alongside one another by speaking out when we encounter violence in private and public spaces. We will contribute to public forums and media spaces on equality and justice based on sacred text so that religion is increasingly associated with justice, gender equality, inclusion and non-violence.
11. We will ensure adequate resources are allocated to reflect that we prioritise transformative action and are able to equip ourselves and our faith communities to make a decisive difference.



12. We will collaborate with each other. We will communicate, consult and share prevention programmes, leadership training, counseling services and resources across faith communities,
13. Government, NGOs, the private sector and groups in a spirit of unity. We are ready to learn from one another, improve our practices and support diverse initiatives as part of a whole-society approach to healing and building a healthy and safe community. It is only by working together that we can establish sustainable peace and economic stability at every level of society.

Finally, we remain steadfast in the promise of a true democracy and in the spirit of unity and the need for contextually-appropriate action, we commit to continuing to build a united and active interfaith collective for mutual support and to hold one another accountable.

To translate our hopes and ideals into decisive action through proactive policy development we will:

- a. Set up accountability mechanisms where we as faith leaders can hold each other accountable for just relationships, and establish mechanisms for dealing with GBV internally and in our broader collective forums. This may involve developing or reviewing institutional gender and safeguarding policies and structures, and establishing one to guide our collective work; Establishing structural mechanisms that have a mandate to put in place effective sanctions as needed. Providing meaningful support to survivors in worship venues, and being open to their inputs about what is needed;
- b. Establish justice desks led by combined teams of women, men, youth and children in faith sectors to engage survivors and perpetrators, shape responses, provide meaningful support structures for healing and accompaniment as well as structures that have a mandate to put in place effective sanctions as needed. This will help us break the intergenerational trauma that has led to the ongoing cycles of violence.
- c. Actively encourage women's participation in leadership and decision-making processes. As equals we can better consult, find solutions and form policies beneficial to all.
- d. Address any reported incidents of GBVF in our faith communities in accordance with the relevant policies with respect and without any attempt to silence those reporting.
- e. Create joint learning platforms to re-examine our use of our sacred texts and our religious practices, and developing more appropriate theological approaches in the current context;
- f. Document our work and reporting on progress to each other, based on storytelling and building a shared evidence base;
- g. Open safe and courageous spaces to reflect on our work together, learn from our mistakes, and improve the impact of our work.

We believe that through our shared hopes and ideals, by acknowledging our shortcomings and committing to this decisive course of action, we can establish UBUNTU in our Rainbow Nation and transform into a CULTURE OF PEACE. You are invited to join this Campaign and add your name and commitment to this Statement for the Commitment to Action to End GBVF in South Africa.

<https://www.wwsosa.org.za/interfaith-action-to-end-gbv-statement-and-campaign/>
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"to establish shared ethical values founded on standards for mutual accountability within the faith-based sector and build its capacity to (i) support survivors of GBV against perpetrators; (ii) dismantle patriarchy from religious teachings and practices, whilst integrating more women into senior leadership roles; and (iii) strengthen spiritual healing and restorative justice, whilst eradicating all forms of spiritual abuse." (NSP Summit Resolutions, pages 5 and 7)