

# Social media outrage is non-existent for millions of victims

AS WE WATCHED the prosecution and defence wrap up their arguments in aggravation and mitigation of sentence of former DJ Donald Sebolai last week at the high court sitting at Palm Ridge, we saw renewed media interest in gender-based violence.

Sebolai will be sentenced on March 4. The reality is, however, that this kind of media attention is low-profile and often silent for many victims of violence at other times of the year. We only see attention when the victim or perpetrator is high-profile or the case is particularly shocking or disturbing.

Yet, gender-based violence is the norm. Headlines, opinion pieces and social media-driven outrage are virtually non-existent for the millions of women who experience gender-based violence.

We know that three women, like Sebolai's victim Rachel "Dolly" Tshabalala, are killed by their intimate partner every day. Devastatingly, South African women are more likely to be killed in their homes by someone they know than by a stranger:

Soul City's gender-based violence study, conducted by Tshwaranang, also reveals that violence against women is widespread and that overall, Africa has some of the highest rates of physical and sexual intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence in the world. About 45.6 percent of women in Africa experience one or more episodes of one or more of this type of violence in their lifetime compared to a global average of 35 percent.

In South Africa, women between the ages of 16 and 24 are more vulnerable to gender-based violence than older women, and this violence is most likely to take place in the home.

Overall, 34.6 percent of rapes are committed by relatives and intimate partners, breaking the myth of stranger violence. This contributes to the low rate of reporting of gender-based violence with an estimated 56.2 percent of rape victims not reporting the offences committed

against them.

Our current response and prevention strategies are skewed towards ensuring a justice-system-based solution. Yet despite the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998 and the Sexual Offences Act 32 of 2007, women are still unable to access legal support when they need it and for most, their physical and mental health needs go unmet.

In turn, gender-based violence cases are not prioritised in the justice system, instead marginalised as "domestic incidents" to be resolved by the family even as the government publicly makes commitments to "fighting the scourge".

Soul City's research reviewed the state's response to gender-based violence in terms of its laws, policies, programmes, services and the manner in which they are provided and prioritised.

We noted the absence of laws and policies, delays and lack of enforcement and

implementation of existing laws and policies. In addition, there was inadequate or no resourcing of programmes and services by the state. These limitations have had a negative effect on victims both in terms of available treatment after abuse and when attempting to seek justice or redress.

It is clear that we lack the ability to implement the existing laws and policies to protect women and girls and that we lack the funds and capacity to provide comprehensive services to survivors of violence.

This lack of a comprehensive response begins when victims of violence arrive at health centres.

A response to gender-based violence should go beyond just treating injuries and also include a forensic examination and documentation of the trauma, tests for both pregnancy and HIV, the provision of post-exposure prophylaxis for sexually transmitted infections, emergency contraceptives and counselling referrals to social services.

Police stations are not just a reporting

site. Indeed, we would expect them to provide a supportive environment and, where necessary, assist survivors to apply for protection orders as provided for in the law. The police have a duty to safeguard the survivor; remove weapons from the perpetrator and arrest the perpetrator where needed.

In addition, social agencies need to provide psychosocial support services such as shelter, counselling and rehabilitation, if required. All these institutions should work together to prevent gender-based violence by conducting ongoing community awareness programmes.

In working together, we can end the culture of impunity where (predominantly) men believe their acts of violence can go unpunished – and they can get away with the murder of a woman or a girl just because she is a partner or a relative.

We need to go beyond applying a plaster over what is a very deep and wide wound. It starts with giving life to our constitution that promises equal rights for all – an equality of respect, care and recognition

that is supposed to apply every single day of the year. If state institutions are not aware of their responsibility to ensure this equality every day, and if they provide services that do not recognise the needs of 50 percent of the population, then we have to remind them of this obligation.

We all have a role to play in making sure the country responds to gender-based violence with greater urgency. While we can start in our homes and families, it is just not enough.

We need to ensure that laws, policies and programmes exist beyond the paper on which they are written. This is the only way to realise justice for survivors and prevent further violence. This is the only way to send a clear message to perpetrators that gender-based violence will not be tolerated. This is the only way to begin to create a South Africa free of gender-based violence.

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