
THE LENS

THIS MONTH'S EDITION

Sober reflections on Women's Day

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SOBER REFLECTIONS ON WOMEN'S DAY

August 9th is Women's Day in South Africa. We have a public holiday to acknowledge the role of women in the past and present, but as each year goes by there seems less and less celebrate.

The hollow words of rhetoric around the progress that has been made and the way in which our society commemorates women is contrasted by the reality of the violence that women face every minute of every hour, of every day, of every month, of every year. The relentless drum of insecurity and fear means that women are in a constant state of fight, fright or freeze. Homes, neighbourhoods, public spaces and work places are not safe. There is hardly a moment to breathe, relax and feel secure.

According to Afrobarometer (2021), the overwhelming majority of people in the country believe that domestic violence is a criminal matter, requiring involvement of law enforcement agencies (72%), however, it seems that more than one in four people (26%) believe that domestic violence is a family matter. In a population of 60 million people, that equates to over 15 million people who would rather deal with the matter within the family structure than going to the police.

While there is a generalised sense of insecurity, women are more likely than men to feel unsafe in their own neighbourhoods (63% vs 56%).

Year on year the situation is perceived to worsen. It is difficult to tell because so much violence goes unreported. To complicate matters further, there are also differing understandings of what constitutes domestic violence. Some years ago while conducting research in a Cape Town community, the women reported that domestic violence was not an issue. Later on, however, they spoke of being beaten up by their partners. In their understanding, this was not domestic violence.

Even with the vagaries surrounding statistics, neither they nor anecdotal evidence show signs of the epidemic of violence against women abating, nor even flattening out.

The situation is made more complicated since South Africa also experiences low levels of trust. This deficit manifests itself in the low levels of trust that we have for different sectors of society and indeed in the lack of trust for institutions themselves. In terms of which institutions are trusted the SABC is the most trusted (52%), while religious leaders come in fifth (40%), the police eighth (37%), the legal system thirteenth (35%) and national government fourteenth (34%) (South African Reconciliation Barometer, 2021). The increasing disillusionment with government based on service delivery (or lack thereof) and corruption have only added further fuel to the fire.

However, all is not lost. While these numbers are low, they are also not significantly different to the data collected in 2019. SARB also showed that while the majority of South Africans were adversely affected by the Covid pandemic, that there was trust in the government's response (over 50% of the population).

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Looking at the institutions that are trusted, such as the SABC and religious leaders, there is an opportunity to reach a wide audience. Most people in South Africa claim some religious affiliation, and the reach of the SABC through its television and radio channels, means that these institutions which still have some measure of trust, can be used as vehicles for public education, outreach and support.

There are moments of joy and hope, which should not be overshadowed by the enormity of the task ahead. The fact that we have a legal architecture which allows us to pursue offenders needs to be acknowledged and all efforts to strengthen it, needs to be encouraged. Our women's sports teams are shining on the world stage – the power of sport to unite is immense and should not be underestimated.

We also have a group of strong and resilient young women to take the baton forward. They will hopefully stand on our shoulders and stand tall.

The views and opinions expressed in the article are solely that of the author, and not the IJR.

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