

QUICK BRIEF 2020



19 June 2020

Reflections on systemic racism and inequality by NBI's CEO, Joanne Yawitch.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic during the first half of 2020 has exacerbated inequalities and amplified social disparities. These difficult times pose powerful challenges but more importantly, they demand great responsibility from us all.

The tragic and senseless killing of George Floyd by police officers on 25 May 2020 in the United States sparked global outrage, suggesting that millions around the world are standing up to the current levels of inequality.

However, as I've watched the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement gather momentum across the globe, I've wondered why our country hasn't seen the mass demonstrations that we have witnessed in so many other parts of the world especially when the issues they raise are so powerfully present and so unresolved in our local context. They have however, dominated social media and many of the postings speak of the worlds of pain that accompany so many South Africans on a daily basis. And while there have been marches and demonstrations in South Africa, they have also been small. Remarkably, this includes the fact that when South Africans like Collins Khosa are brutalized and killed by the police and army – we do not rise up in outrage.

The massive inequities laid bare by the coronavirus pandemic have caused numerous commentators, including those in the BLM movement, to draw correlations between the systemic impacts of racism and the disproportionate toll of the coronavirus on marginalised communities. Sadly, racism is not the only societal disorder that has come to the fore during these unprecedented times.

Incidences of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) have escalated under lock-down conditions. In South Africa, the endless scourge of violence against women has once again been thrown into the spotlight with the murder of the heavily pregnant Tshegofatso Pule. The horrendous murders of numerous women and children just in the past few weeks, have brought to the fore the fear that accompanies all women, to varying degrees, in our society. In his COVID-19 update to the nation on 17 June 2020, President Ramaphosa condemned the brutality against women and children across our country, highlighting GBV as an equally dangerous pandemic.

As a society, we have reached an existential crossroad – it is simply abhorrent for us to continue along the same trajectory. So how do we address systemic racism and inequality? There is no easy answer to this question. However, it is clear that the time for talking is over and that now the responsibility of taking action rests upon each and every one of us.

From the NBI's perspective, providing solutions to these grievous issues are central to our vision and purpose of striving for a more equal, inclusive and cohesive society. To this end, we seek to tackle inequality and discrimination from multiple angles. Given that businesses operate within society, companies are not immune to the social issues that continue to plague our country. This means that eliminating racism and Gender-Based Violence are not only the responsibility of each and every individual, but also every company.

The NBI's work includes programmes that address these issues. Our Social Transformation work addresses issues of inclusion and inequality and seeks to find collective responses by corporate South Africa that will result in inclusive and equitable workplaces. We are also doing substantive work on the gender pay-gap and are engaged in consultations with our members to identify where best practice exists in relation to addressing GBV. We are finding that few companies have found ways to integrate this issue and to work with both their workforce and the wider society. There are however, a few notable exceptions and we will profile their work in the coming months, in order that we learn by sharing. Many companies are beginning to engage with the question of their responsibility in relation to GBV and we are ready to work with them. Our Gender-Based Violence Pathway works with South African companies to not only address their thinking and responses to eradicating GBV, but challenges organisations to extend the current scope of their initiatives. Through this approach, we intend to develop a set of tools and guides that will make it easier for companies to develop meaningful responses.

In order to tackle all types of inequality, discrimination and exclusion in the workplace, including racial exclusion, the NBI's work on creating more inclusive cultures is directed at working with our member companies to generate an Inclusivity Blueprint. This approach builds on best practice, stimulates new thinking, and provides guidance to companies. The Inclusivity Blueprint incorporates tools that allow for company assessments, based on a transformative maturity curve that addresses accountability, transparency, support mechanisms, recourse, justice and access to information.

Whatever conversations are held and tools developed, significant change will not happen without bold, decisive leadership. This is a focal point of all our work and was strongly emphasised in our recent webinars on Gender-Based Violence, which we co-hosted with the Shared Value Africa Initiative.

Given the NBI's constituency, the coronavirus is only one of a number of pandemics affecting our country. In order to fundamentally address racism, Gender-Based Violence and inequality in all its manifestations, we need to challenge unethical leadership, and avidly support bold leadership, to ensure corporate South Africa enacts real change.

The National Business Initiative is committed and determined to support our members to achieve these outcomes and we trust that you will join us in this work.

To find out more about the NBI's Social Transformation work, please contact: BridgetteM@nbi.org.za



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The National Business Initiative (NBI) is an independent and voluntary coalition of South African and multinational businesses launched in 1995 by the then President, Nelson Mandela

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