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Tackling Gender-Based Violence this Women's Month: The Role of the Private Sector

South Africa is currently being devastated by numerous pandemics, with gender-based violence (GBV) as one of the worst. While this is not a new pandemic for South Africa, it has been severely exacerbated by COVID-19. The latest reports show a significant spike in GBV incidents as of April 2020 and the crisis requires an urgent and thoughtful response. 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.

While Women's Month has come to symbolise many things, it has its roots in the 9 August 1956 march of 20 000 women from all over South Africa, to the Union Buildings in Pretoria. These women handed over thousands of petitions to protest against the horrific Apartheid "Pass Laws" and stood in silence, before singing the now famous words: "Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo" (When you strike the women, you strike a rock). This act of solidarity and protest is commemorated annually. However, the sad irony of this statement is that women are not rocks but flesh and every single day across South Africa they are struck and they bleed.

During Women's Month 2019, South Africa reached a supposed tipping point with the brutal rape and murder of University of Cape Town student Uyinene Mrwetyana, in her local post-office. The protests sparked by Uyinene's murder gave hope that maybe there would be change. Fast forward to the onset of COVID-19 and the endless scourge of violence against women has once again been thrown into the spotlight with the murder of the pregnant Tshgofatso Pule in June 2020.

Despite decades of protests against all kinds of discrimination against women, gender-based violence and rampant gender inequality continue. Civil society and women's organisations have campaigned tirelessly, yet South Africa still maintains the highest femicide rate in the world. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that 12.1 in every 100 000 women are victims of femicide in SA each year. This is five times higher than the global average of 2.6 in every 100 000 women.

As we enter Women's Month, it is vital to reflect and critically engage on gender issues of violence, exclusion and marginalisation that have been exacerbated since the national lockdown.

The Role of Business in Addressing Gender-Based Violence

Finding ways to address this grievous issue is central to the National Business Initiative's (NBI) vision and purpose of striving for a more equal, inclusive and cohesive society. Given that businesses operate within society, companies are not immune to the social issues that continue to plague our country. A KPMG study estimated that gender-based violence costs the country over R28.4 billion per annum, amounting to 1% of the gross domestic product.^[1] These costs are based on a collation of loss of incomes, opportunities, taxes, health, justice and social service costs.

Companies from a range of sectors are beginning to engage with the question of their responsibility in relation to GBV. The NBI's Gender-Based Violence Pathway work engages with South African companies to not only address their thinking and responses to eradicating GBV, but also challenges organisations to extend the current scope of their initiatives. Through this we intend to develop a set of tools and guides that will make it easier for companies to develop meaningful responses.

At this critical time, it is important that corporates take a clear, public and deliberate stance of zero tolerance on GBV, both in the workplace and in society. By taking up this leadership role, businesses position themselves to positively use their power by engaging internal and multi-sectoral initiatives, which seek to prevent and eliminate GBV. These can include:

- Providing infrastructural support and assistance to social institutions (such as health, women's shelters and other related organisations) in their provision of services for GBV survivors.
- Encouraging more rigorous data collection and research on the prevalence of the issue.
- Reviewing existing company structures to accommodate staff at various levels, i.e. transport provision for shift work.
- Taking a collective approach as a sector in combating GBV by engaging and supporting national strategic plans on the topic

The call to action from the NBI to corporate South Africa is to join us as we stand with the women of South Africa.

For more information on the NBI's Social Transformation unit and Gender Based Violence (GBV) Pathways work, please contact Bridgette Mdangayi (BridgetteM@nbi.org.za)

^[1] KPMG Human & Social Services, "Too costly to ignore- the economic impact of gender-based violence in South Africa, 2014, KPMG. Available: <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/za/pdf/2017/01/za-Too-costly-to-ignore.pdf>



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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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^[i] KPMG Human & Social Services, "Too costly to ignore- the economic impact of gender-based violence in South Africa, 2014, KPMG. Available: <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/za/pdf/2017/01/za-Too-costly-to-ignore.pdf>