



13 September 2022

## The Shadow Pandemic of GBV | Galvanising the Private Sector's Commitment to Change in South Africa

Reflecting on the past two years since the Covid-19 pandemic began, and more recently with South Africa's annual observation of Women's Month in August, gender-based violence (GBV) remains a profound and widespread problem across the country. GBV impacts almost every aspect of life, disproportionately affecting women, gender diverse persons and girls. Often referred to as the Shadow Pandemic in the context of Covid-19, this scourge is systemic, as well as deeply entrenched in institutions, cultures, and traditions in South Africa.

**There are many different definitions of GBV, but it can be broadly defined as: "Violence that occurs as a result of the normative role and expectations associated with each gender, along with the unequal power relationships between the expectations associated with different genders, within the context of a specific society<sup>[1]</sup>."**

### Understanding Systemic Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

A recent article in the Economist "Societies that treat women badly are poorer and less stable" explains why oppressing women is not only detrimental for women, but for men and wider society too.<sup>[2]</sup> Patriarchal power structures dominate many societies, in which male leadership is seen as the norm, with men holding the majority of

<sup>[1]</sup> [Gender-based violence in South Africa – Understand – SaferSpaces](#)

<sup>[2]</sup> [Economist \(2021\): Societies that treat women badly are poorer and less stable, Available online: https://econ.st/3KIEHyN](https://econ.st/3KIEHyN)

power. Patriarchy is a social and political system that treats men as superior to women – where women cannot protect their bodies, meet their basic needs, or participate fully in society.

Ultimately, gendered power inequality, rooted in patriarchy, is the primary driver of GBV. A belief in male superiority can manifest in men feeling entitled to sexual interactions with women, strict reinforcement of gender roles and hierarchy (including punishment of transgressions), women having low social value, power and autonomy as well as associating masculinity with the control of women.

GBV is a profound human rights violation with major social and developmental impacts for survivors of violence, as well as their families, communities, and society more broadly. On an individual level, GBV leads to psychological trauma, and can have ongoing psychological, behavioural, and physical consequences for survivors. In many parts of the country, there is poor access to formal psychosocial or even medical support, which means that many survivors are unable to access the help they desperately need.

### **GBV in South Africa and the Role of the Private Sector**

Societies free of GBV do not exist, and South Africa is no exception. Although accurate statistics are difficult to obtain for many reasons (including the fact that most incidents of GBV are not reported), it is evident South Africa has particularly high rates of GBV, including VAWG (violence against women and girls) and violence against the LGBTQIAP+ community.

GBV in South Africa has exacerbated the economic divide, crippling access to the modern innovations available to support women. Preventing and responding to GBV is both a human rights imperative and a multi-layered economic issue. GBV creates barriers for economic opportunity and growth; impacts the world of work; and can be an unintended consequence of economic inactivity. With GBV presenting as a societal challenge, the burden of solving this crisis is therefore shared. While the immediate affects may be social, the long-term impacts of a failing society are also economic. Thus, while the private sector is not immune to the impacts, it can act as a catalyse and key agent for change. Particularly, in engaging various stakeholders to fundamentally address GBV in organisations as well as across broader society.

Greater commitment is required to help improve the status of women in society, we simply cannot afford to continue to receive commitments based only in rhetoric. Practical solutions must be provided, with a clear course of action as to how measures are going to be implemented.<sup>[3]</sup>

At the NBI, our focus on gender-based violence has continued to gain momentum in driving a multi-partner and multi-sectoral approach through the existence of NBI's GBV Community of Practice, which aims to collectively identify and implement interventions that contribute to the practical eradication of GBV. Our GBV work responds to the view that GBV is a human rights issue, and we encourage South African companies to play a cohesive and active role in eradicating this shadow pandemic. Business has a strategic role to play in seeking solutions to these problems, by declaring a 'zero tolerance' approach to GBV in all its forms, whilst also strengthening existing interventions through collaboration and accountability.

This area of our work is consistently developing, with the objective of supporting the alignment of the **GBVF National strategic Plan (2020 – 2030)**. Recognising that GBV is a social crisis, includes understanding the full extent to which it negatively impacts other social structures, including the economy, and that inaction comes at a cost. A recent study on "The costly impact of GBV - Private Sectors Perceptions and Realities in South Africa"<sup>[4]</sup> assessed that these costs are based on the combined losses of income generation, opportunities, and taxes, as well as the cost to society of providing health, justice, and social services in response. In reflecting on the cost burden, it is clear why GBV is both a social and economic malaise.

<sup>[3]</sup> [Red flags raised over GBVF Private Sector Response Fund \(iol.co.za\)](https://iol.co.za)

<sup>[4]</sup> [The Costly Impact of GBV – Private Sector Perceptions - Shared Value Africa Initiative \(svai.africa\)](https://svai.africa)

NBI's corporate GBV focus and strategy, rely on:

1. Developing appropriate responses, dialogue, and support for companies to understand and address issues of GBV within their organisational contexts, value chains and broader society.
2. Ensuring that companies are intentional about harnessing a multi-stakeholder approach at a broader level, in order to take ownership and commit to not only policy interventions, but also taking concrete steps to address matters of GBV in the workplace.
3. Companies facilitating important GBV dialogues with their senior leadership and
4. Companies providing capacity building to close existing gaps in their interventions, in order to generate impact driven initiatives and results.

**Companies interested in learning more about NBI's Gender-Based Violence pathway (and participating in the NBI's Gender-Based Violence Community of Practice Forum) are encouraged to contact:  
Bridgette Mdingayi (Head: Social Transformation): [BridgetteM@nbi.org.za](mailto:BridgetteM@nbi.org.za)**

<sup>[1]</sup> [Gender-based violence in South Africa – Understand – SaferSpaces](#)

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