

Preventing Violence Against Women and Children in South Africa

By Chandre Gould, Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding Scholar

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South Africa is one of the most violent countries in the world with a national rate of 34.1 homicides per 100,000 people in 2017.¹ Despite dramatic gains made since the transition to democracy in 1994, the country has not overcome apartheid's legacy of injustice and structural violence, as inequality, poverty, and unemployment remain racialized. Violence against women and children (VAWC) is especially pervasive and damaging. Research shows that family-level conflict and violence—including sexual assault and child abuse—is self-reinforcing in that exposure to violence as a child can lead to the perpetration of more violence as an adult.² It also increases the risk of re-victimization.³

Violence against women and children imposes massive costs on South Africa, both directly on the health, child protection, and criminal justice systems, and indirectly on the overall economy. A conservative estimate of the total annual cost comes to around R266 billion (about USD \$22.47 billion or approximately 7 percent of South Africa's GDP).⁴ Pervasive violence and trauma inhibit growth and development, undermining South Africa's ability to meet the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.⁵

A growing body of evidence on effective interventions shows that violence against women and children can be prevented. South Africa is well-positioned to take a global lead in using this data to implement policies that could significantly reduce the country's violent crime rates.

How has South Africa Responded?

The government has already passed a number of laws and policies designed to reduce violent crime, including sexual violence against women and children, intimate partner violence, and child abuse or neglect.⁶ The *National Crime Prevention Strategy* (1996), the *National Development Plan 2030*, the *Integrated Urban Development Framework* and, most recently, the *White Paper on Safety and Security* (2016), all emphasize the need for both an effective criminal justice system and social programs that address underlying risk factors. Yet, despite this strong policy response, why is VAWC still so prevalent?

The Inter-Ministerial Committee on Violence Against Women and Children identified some of the state's shortcomings and challenges in a diagnostic review published in 2016. The review found that most laws and policies are not costed before they are promulgated, with the consequence being that there are not enough human or financial resources to implement them. In addition, relatively little money is allocated to services that prevent and respond to violence compared to that spent on law enforcement.⁷ The review found that social workers, police, health workers, and other state employees who respond to violence were poorly managed, received little training, and sometimes suffered vicarious trauma. Large caseloads increased stress, making the workers often seem insensitive or harsh.⁸

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A lack of political leadership has exacerbated these problems. Politicians facing public pressure to fight crime look for quick fixes. Their tough-on-crime rhetoric does not acknowledge social factors, such as entrenched poverty and inequality, which help drive and sustain violent crime. Few publicly speak about the problem of domestic violence against women and children. Civil society proponents of prevention programs have also failed to offer a clear set of solutions.

The South African government has acknowledged its shortcomings and developed a plan to improve the situation. In addition, the 2016 *White Paper on Safety and Security* provides clear guidance on responding to VAWC. Other factors may also help the state fulfill its commitments:

- **Good data:** South African researchers have produced sophisticated qualitative and quantitative studies on the nature and extent of violence, and the factors that drive it.⁹
- **Evidence-based strategies:** Researchers and practitioners have identified interventions that reduce intimate partner violence, child abuse and neglect, as well as promote positive parenting.¹⁰
- **Inter-sectoral cooperation:** The Dialogue Forum for Evidence-based Programs to Prevent Violence Against Women and Children provides a mechanism for collaboration and knowledge sharing among public, private, and non-profit entities.
- **Private sector buy-in:** A few South African companies realize they can increase worker productivity—and benefit the wider society—by making parenting and other primary violence prevention programs available to their staff.¹¹

Policy Options and Recommendations

1. For the South African Government:

- Ensure effective program implementation:** To ensure effective implementation, the presidency could champion the *White Paper on Safety and Security (WPSS)*. Further, it is important that the National Treasury cost the implementation of the WPSS in order to determine and enable proper budget decisions. Implementation efforts of the WPSS could be mainstreamed in departmental planning and reporting processes, including strategic plans and annual performance plans.
- Establish the National Crime Prevention Center:** As proposed in the WPSS, the Center's functions could include supporting the large-scale implementation and sustainability of evidence-based VAWC prevention programs.
- Incentivize private sector efforts:** The National Treasury would do well to explore ways to encourage corporations to establish workplace education and training programs to prevent domestic violence and promote positive parenting. One incentive could include allocating Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) points for these programs.ⁱ
- Award existing efforts to prevent violence:** The South African government hosts a large number of high profile national and international events for business and policymakers. The government could consider offering awards to those companies that demonstrate their commitment to addressing violence against women and children, either through their business practices or through corporate social responsibility investments.

2. For NGOs, Researchers, and Donors

- Increase cross-sectoral collaboration:** Researchers and implementers from universities and NGOs should collaborate with the Departments of Health, Social Development, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, and Basic Education, to develop, test, and implement programs that address multiple risk factors for violence, and can be integrated into existing government systems or private sector efforts.

ⁱ BBBEE points were introduced to promote the racial transformation of the private sector and of the economy to redress racial inequality and injustice in South Africa. Companies that seek to do business with the government are required to provide proof that they are meeting the transformation requirements.

b. Engage with other countries to share knowledge, information, and good practices: The international community and donors could consider promoting and enabling engagement between countries that have committed to be Pathfinders under the Global Partnership to Prevent Violence Against Children. Pathfinders commit to achieving ambitious goals over a limited time period towards achieving a reduction in violence against children and realizing Sustainable Development Goal 16.2.¹²

For an in-depth analysis of violence prevention in South Africa, specifically cross-sectoral collaboration and current efforts see the accompanying Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding Research Paper No. 21 by Chandre Gould.

Chandre Gould was a Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding Scholar from February to May 2018. She is a Senior Research Fellow for the Justice and Violence Prevention Program at the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa.

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One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20004-3027

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 202.691.4118