

Women and Children in Violent South African Townships

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Introduction

Women and children, as victims of violence, are a barometer of the pervasive "culture of violence" in our society. They are a tragic indicator of the extent to which violence has come to permeate the very fabric of our society. The ultimate irony is that this "culture of violence" is making itself quite apparent at precisely that point in time when the prospects for peace and of negotiated solutions appear to be more attainable than ever before in the history of apartheid.

The speech by the State President in opening parliament on February 2, 1990, promised an era of peace and raised the prospects of a negotiated settlement for all South Africans in the not too distant future. It raised the hopes and expectations of South Africans most of the way across the political spectrum. However, in many respects, this flattered only to deceive, as the ghost of apartheid returned to haunt its creators – and the rest of us along with them. The legacy of political repression, a contracting economy and job market, inadequate educational opportunities and racial and ethnic division, had for decades generated deeply rooted divisions within our society. These divisions were merely exacerbated by the political contest heralded by intense competition for seats at some future negotiating table.

More than anything else, apartheid bequeathed to South Africans of the 1990s a culture of violence and a deep rooted fear – based on a series of hostile, racially-based stereotypes withing largely segregated, defensive, yet volatile communities. Decades of government ideology entrenched these hostile stereotypes through systematic and violent repression and by investing banned organisations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan African Congress (PAC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) with the status of an illegalised and criminalised "external enemy". We had a border which separated "us" from "them", and a full scale "border war" to demonstrate the fact. From at

least the mid-1970s, government rhetoric, although desperate to address the perception that the country was confronting an intensifying civil war, effectively reflected this reality. "Total onslaught" symbolised the militarist ideology of an externalised enemy which threatened the security of the state and of white political power and privilege.

But February 1990 was supposed to have changed all this. The political process was to be "normalised" and the prospect of peace appeared to be just over the horizon. Not quite. Instead, the prospect of transition brought with it the deep-rooted fear and uncertainty which in any society tends to accompany dramatic social change. However, for South Africans, this was accompanied by the fact that four decades of divide and rule ideology suddenly had to be confronted – and such an entrenched political culture does not easily disappear.

This was a political culture which had become inextricably interwoven with the themes of violence and political intolerance. On one hand the state had demonstrated for decades its legitimisation of violence as a means of maintaining political power, whilst on the other, resistance movements legitimised and popularised violence as an appropriate means to attaining change. The mobilising slogans of the day were "ungovernability" and "people's war". In short, violence became a socially sanctioned mechanism for resolving conflict and for attaining change.

In a society as thoroughly politicised as South Africa, this style of politics inevitably "spills" over into other dimensions of society as people seek to resolve their social, economic and domestic problems and disputes. It is as a result of the consequent excessive social, political, criminal and domestic violence in South African society that it has become possible to talk of a "culture of violence". This is not a term that should be used lightly, yet it has been bandied about by analysts of the South African context without much content being invested in it.

The result of this entrenched political culture has been a dramatic escalation of violence in almost all dimensions of society – within the community, the workplace and the home. Not only has this been a quantitative increase in levels of violence, but has also seen a qualitative shift in the forms and brutality of this violent conflict as well.

In many respects, the legalisation of the previously banned political movements has replaced the "external enemy" with an "enemy within". The symbolic return of the exiles, far from undoing the past and paving the way to reconciliation, for many South Africans (victims of decades of apartheid's ideology) merely substituted the external enemy with an "enemy within".¹

The consequence seems to have been a kind of "political introversion" as the country has turned in on itself, tearing at its own bowels in an attempt to purge itself. In this context, South African society in the post-February 1990 phase had become dominated by insecurity. Violence has become a primary resort, rationalised almost inevitably as a "defensive" response. This is very evident at the political level where, from the AWB

Commandos or the South African "Defence" Force on one other hand, to the ANC "Defence Committees" or Inkatha impis on the other, politically motivated perpetrators of violence almost uniformly argue that they are acting in defence of their community, in defence of their ideology or in defence of "state security". Of course this begs the question: if everyone is acting in self-defence, then where and who are the real aggressors? But more importantly, this defensive over-reaction is symbolic of the fear and insecurity which embroiders every dimension of South African society confronted by the inevitability of fundamental social transition.

The shift in the form of politics (or "introversion" of the political process as I have called it) and, indeed, of political conflict within the country during the last year and a half, has had a pervasive social and psychological effect as well. The social-psychological trauma which accompanies the uncertainty of transition is often most dramatically experienced by those confronted with a loss of control in society. The frequent consequence is displaced aggression – expressed outside of the formal political or economic realm. The victims of this displaced aggression are often those who are most vulnerable in society and over whom control is most easily, symbolically reasserted. They are often women, children or elderly people who are subject to violent abuse, both within and outside of the private domain of the domestic arena.

Contextualising Domestic Violence

The process of transition in South Africa – a whole society experiencing dramatic change – has therefore generated deep-rooted insecurity which, coupled with the hostile stereotypes ingrained by apartheid, has translated into widespread social fear and a sense of loss of control. Yet the sources of frustration and concern are themselves often perceived as being beyond the reach of those subject to them. The political process which generates uncertainty and insecurity is enduring and beyond the control of the average "person in the street". Similarly, the experience of a contracting economy with its inevitable consequences of businesses going insolvent and increased joblessness, leaves those affected feeling helpless and out of control. Even if the sources of these problems are easily identifiable as the government, the captains of commerce and industry, the liberation movements or the trade unions, they would still be inaccessible to the average South African seeking to redress his or her problems.

The absence of accessible targets for this growing social aggression often results in it being displaced to arenas removed from its immediate source of origin. Most often we can trace this displaced aggression to the home environment. The expression of frustration and aggression in the domestic arena is easily facilitated by the seclusion of this "private" realm from the public eye and from public scrutiny. It is within the privacy and seclusion of the domestic environment that frustrated and emasculated men symbolically reassert their control within that one realm in which (in highly patriarchal society) they still traditionally

hold sway – within heterosexual relationships and within the family. For the women and children who live in it, the homestead thus takes on a deceptive duality: sanctuary, haven and place of security on one hand; and potential prison and/or torture chamber on the other. Understandably within this context, the victims of this displaced aggression are usually those structurally weaker members of the society over whom men can most easily reassert their control: women, children and the elderly.

To merely exclude violence of this sort from our definition of political violence in this period of our history, would be to deny the fundamental nature of the power of relationships which are being violently played out in this arena of society. Furthermore, it would also belie the pervasive social effect of more narrowly defined political processes. Indeed, it is argued here that the dramatic increase in violence against women, children and the elderly (as well as in violent crime more generally) in the course of the past two years, is an excellent barometer of the social and political dislocation of a society in transition, as well as of the "introversion" of political conflict in South Africa. If this is true, then the indicators I am about to discuss are of great significance.

It must be emphasised that the statistics and illustrations which follow are not exhaustive but are merely indicators. They do not themselves prove the trend that has been outlined and all the accuracy-related problems associated with criminological statistics of this sort, such as under-reporting, etc. are especially problematic when we consider the issue of violence in the home or of violence against women and children. It is precisely this sort of violence, within marriages or relationships and within the confines of the private arena, that is so frequently deemed to be no more than normative domestic conflict. Neighbours very willingly look away, the police claim they cannot intervene, and the victims are often too vulnerable to the power of their tormentors to take any action themselves. What follows is consequently no more than the tip of the iceberg – and our analysis must be tentative, as it is only based on what we can see and leaves us unable to even speculate on that which remains invisible.

Violence Against Women

The National Institute for Crime Prevention and the Rehabilitation of the Offender (NICRO) estimates that only one in 20 rapes are reported in South Africa. On this basis it is estimated that as many as 300 000 women are raped each year.² More conservative sources suggest that there are 63 rapes per 100 000 people in South Africa.³ Despite reports by the South African Police which suggested that the national incidence of rape decreased by 0.67% (137 fewer cases) from 1989 to 1990,⁴ the Minister himself reported that in 1990, rape of "young girls" increased by 23% above the 1990 figure.⁵ The increase in rape statistics for Johannesburg alone (excluding Soweto and Randburg) during this period was 33%.⁶

If the real extent of rape is often invisible through these sorts of statistics, then even more "normative" forms of domestic violence such as wife battery are nearly completely hidden from our view. This phenomenon is best indicated by the title of Erin Pizzey's book on the subject: *Scream Silently or the Neighbours Will Hear!*⁷

At the other end of the scale, however, are even more brutal and particularly public forms of violence against women. A dramatic example is the phenomenon of "witch burning" described by Ritchken.⁸ He notes that this generally occurs in rural communities and appears to be associated with political and economic conflict which leads to scapegoating of vulnerable or marginalised individuals such as women and the elderly. According to Ritchken, witch burning has been on the increase in rural South Africa since 1985.

More generally, women tend to be the most victimised sector of communities ravaged by war, yet this often takes forms of sexual violence more brutal than we realise. The following description of women as victims of the "Natal War", are drawn from the work by Vogelmann and Eagle:

During the war the incidence of sexual abuse has risen. There have been several reports of demands for sex [in exchange] for protection, both within the ranks of organisations and as trade-offs with the other side or security force personnel. (Personal Account P.M.F.)

The incidence of rape has also increased despite a recognised reluctance on the part of women who report it. (Daily News, 12/06/1990)

Recently, soldiers of 32 Battalion have been charged with an attempted rape and several incidents of

sexual harassment that have occurred. (Sunday Tribune, 12/05/1990)

Women are regarded as property: D cited a case where a comrade justified a rape by his side because it was done in revenge for a rape committed by the other side.⁹

Violence against women in South Africa has been described by Eagle and Vogelmann as "endemic". From this it is clear that violence against women, usually taking the form of sexual harassment, is widespread, deeply entrenched and increasingly considered normative rather than deviant. It is arguable that violence against women has in fact become part of the "culture of violence" in the wider society, in that it has increasingly been subtly sanctioned by society.

Sexual violence and harassment of women takes many forms. The dramatic experiences of rape, wife battery and other forms of physical abuse are merely at the most extreme end of this spectrum. Violence against women is a much more pervasive and comprehensive problem which intrudes on the social, sexual and psychological dimensions of most women's lives. For this reason, solutions to the problem must go well beyond a legal process, whether punitive or preventative. Women need to be empowered. This is primarily a social and educational process.

Violence Against Children

The devastating psychological effects of township violence on young children has been well documented in various sources. For many of these children the current wave of township violence, rather than presenting a new phenomenon, is merely experienced as a continuation of violence that has been experienced over the last decade at least. Yet in its increasingly arbitrary, unpredictable and internally divisive nature, the recent wave of township conflict generates even greater levels of anxiety and insecurity which cannot be psychologically rationalised. This is compounded by the fact that the experience of this violence is seldom isolated, but tends to operate as a source of continuous stress.¹⁰

Children's psychological responses to this political violence are varied. Gibson, Mogale and Friedlander, in an examination of pictures drawn by children from Alexandra, set out some of these responses. They identify on one hand a process of denial:

A similar sort of explanation might also be used to account for the emptiness and rigidity of some of the pictures. These showed stereotypical stick figures, faces empty of facial features and houses empty of people. It was as if children have been afraid to fill in the empty spaces of the pages for fear of filling it with their fear and then, of course, having to confront this fear themselves. From another perspective the faces with no eyes or ears may represent the children's reluctance to see or hear what is happening around them. The denial was also expressed in more conscious forms. An adolescent girl drew flowers on the street of Alexandra. "There are no flowers in Alex," she says, adding that she wanted to draw them anyway ...

In yet another case, ... the adolescent comments on her drawing of Alexandra:

"In Alexandra there are many great things ... they've built new schools, houses and streets." There is no mention of the violence in her commentary and no sign of it in her drawing. This young girl says she would like to be a model when she finishes school and draws her picture with a road reaching off the edge of the paper, perhaps reflecting graphically her escape out of the reality of the township and into a more pleasant fantasy world. The level of denial being

exercised in this case becomes even more evident when on discreet questioning, it appears that this girl personally knows two people who have been killed in violence in Alexandra.¹¹

Another illustrative response outlined by Gibson Mogale and Friedlander is that of "distancing":

One child demonstrated a similar kind of distancing, but in this case as a wish rather than an actuality. She lives on 11th Avenue, a street fairly close to the hostels from where much of the violence emanates. Her picture, however, was, as she clearly told us, of 16th Avenue. This street, only a matter of five blocks from her home, seems to represent for her a possible sanctuary.¹²

The authors of this paper go on to identify even more extreme responses of depression, hopelessness and fear expressed most graphically in one picture where the child drew a stick figure saying through a voice bubble: "Please don't kill us!"¹³

I believe that these rather lengthy quotes are essential, as they allow these brutalised children to speak for themselves – in a context where they are socially voiceless and in which it is only bland statistics which set out the extent of their victimisation. As loudly as statistics speak, they cannot say what these children themselves have said.

According to the Minister of Police, reports of serious assault of children under 14 years of age increased by close to 55% in 1990 when compared with the previous year.¹⁴ Although statistics for South Africa are unavailable, international statistics show that 97% of abusers are men and that 92% of their victims are young girls. There is no reason to doubt that the figures would probably be the same in this country and figures in a demographic study conducted by the Durban Child Welfare Society reflect much the same trend.

Black South African children and youths are predominant not only as victims, but also as perpetrators or violence in our society. As such they are the most symbolic measure of the enduring extent of frustration experienced within the township community. More than any other sector of society, they have been historically marginalised by apartheid, leaving them as alienated outcasts within their own wider society. Black township youths have historically been excluded from the key sources of power and authority in the society: they have been excluded from the empowering educative process as a result of the Bantu Education system; they had been left politically voiceless through exclusion from any political rights and they have been marginalised from any source of wealth creation and economic power through increased joblessness within a contracting economy. Particularly for young post-adolescent males, this leaves them frustrated, emasculated and generally disempowered. This is not a "lost generation" as some have described it (as if this group of people independently lost their way) – rather it is a generation of young people who have been actively marginalised and brutalised by their society. It is no surprise that they present as the primary perpetrators as well as victims of violence, both criminal and political.¹⁵

Mokwena notes that the increase in youth violence in the township context has most notably been accompanied by a further increase in violence that is directed against young women by these young marginalised male youths.

When you leave your child alone in the home, she is not safe. And in the street, she is not safe. And in the school, she is not safe. There is nowhere that she can walk and be safe. Girls are afraid somebody in a car will stop them and say "get in". When they walk in the street they are raped by men with guns. Sexual abuse happens so much that some students stop going to school.¹⁶

Quoting Swift, Mokwena goes on to argue that the violence against young women occurs, in part, within the framework of a male dominated society. "Men have been taught to define their power in terms of their capacity to effect their will, especially over women, with or without the consent of those involved. This is an integral part of a society which prescribes different gender roles: a society where young males are taught to be assertive and masculine, and women are expected to be subordinate and submissive. It is a context in

which young black men grow up to see their mothers and other women living under the dominion of their fathers and other adult males."¹⁷

In South Africa apartheid has compounded this dynamic through the creation of powerlessness and impotence which imposes a form of "inferiority complex" upon its victims. Black males of all ages have to deal with their inferior status, often experience this as emasculation, in society and in the workplace where they are treated as "boys". This is also compounded by deteriorating social and economic circumstances which lead to high unemployment. For many of these men, work is inextricably tied to gender expectations and their experiences of masculinity. Unemployment is thus experienced as a personal rather than a social failure. As a consequence of these factors violence is often used as a means of increasing self-esteem. Women, as less powerful persons, become the victims of displaced aggression, the victims of a symbolic reassertion of masculinity and control.¹⁸

In the past two years, in the context of increasing township conflict, the phenomenon of the "jackroll" menace has emerged. This refers to the undisguised use of sexual violence (in particular gang rape) against young women in the township by young armed males.

Case:

Isabella, a 17 year old student in Soweto. She says: "I am afraid of the jackrollers.They are affecting all of us as girls. We are not safe anymore. We can't even walk in the streets without being harassed by hooligans."¹⁹

Young township-based women are thus victimised both directly and indirectly. They have to be ultra cautious about their movement, what they wear and which places they visit. These added restrictions help to further entrench their own sense of inferiority and marginalisation.

Violence Against the Elderly

Statistics for violence against the elderly are essentially inadequate, but the trend expresses itself on the pages of our newspapers on a daily basis. Those statistics that are available are usually regionally or racially specific and are therefore very patchy. For example, 688 white people over the age of 50 reported that they were attacked in their homes in 1990, compared with 476 in the previous year. This represents an increase of 44.5%.²⁰ What is clear is that elderly people are "easy" victims of both violent crime and racially motivated attacks (such as attacks on elderly black people in Welkom during the racial tension in that

town in the course of 1990). Recent media coverage has also focussed attention on the vulnerability of elderly couples in rural homesteads. The regular violent attacks on elderly white farmers is the shocking manifestation of this.

Family Murders

The experience of loss of control which has been discussed, is often particularly stark for white South Africans who are used to exclusive access to political and economic power and who experience this power in the world simply slipping away. In this respect, there is probably no form of domestic violence which is more symbolic of the trends that have been outlined above than the ultimate reassertion of control by men over their women and children through the unique phenomenon of family killings.

Here again, the statistics are misleading, for crime reports do not distinguish between the murder of a spouse or child and the wiping out of a whole family. As a result, the statistics which are available for family killings are probably dramatically deflated. Even these are not readily available for the year 1990. However, it is reported that 233 people died in family murders from 1986 to 1988, during which period there was approximately one family killing per month.²¹ Of the 126 reported family killings between 1983 and June 1988, only two involved black families²² and 90% involved Afrikaans-speaking families.²³ However, one report suggests that 13 black families were involved in family murders in the second half of 1991 alone.²⁴

The latter development is significant in that it suggests that the anxiety and social dislocation felt by black families during this time of massive social changes and civil war is increasingly played out in the form of displaced aggression within the family. This may culminate in a desperate attempt to assert the ultimate control over one's domain – the (male perpetrated) family murder.

Violence Against Domestic Workers

Violence in the domestic arena is also of particular significance where it takes the form of racial violence as well. Evidence suggests that 1990, particularly after February 2nd, saw a remarkable increase in violence by white home-owners directed against their black domestic workers. **Motsei** argues that this violence is particularly symbolic of white South Africans' insecurities in a period of political flux and uncertainty where the most "dangerous enemy" was the "enemy within" – those black South Africans who had easy access to their white oppressors.²⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion it is argued that the problems of domestic violence and the brutalisation of women and children cannot, except at very grave risk, be relegated to a structural problem within the environment of the homestead. It is intimately related to levels of violence in our society more generally – a society grappling with the legacy of apartheid and the fear-instilling process of socio-political transformation.

As such, legalistic solutions, although necessary, are by no means sufficient. There is much more that needs to be done. The first and most obvious requirement is the establishment of a system of victim aid. Not only does this treat the short term problems, but it deals with the long-term imperative as well. We have to do no more than consider the high proportion of child abusers who were themselves abused as children, to realise the long-term imperative of victim aid. This must be legal, psychological and physical and, perhaps more than anything, it must be easily accessible in the form of a social welfare net to catch those who are marginalised by society.

From this point on, we need to turn our attention to the vital need for social reconstruction of our society: the building of a credible law enforcement agency for a new South Africa which can win the trust of the community and inhibit legal "self-help" in the form of revenge and retribution; educational programmes designed to empower rather than oppress; the rebuilding of local-level organisations capable of exercising discipline and political tolerance in the cut and thrust of the political process. Most importantly, we need to generate a democratic culture to replace the culture of violence which dominates our past and present ... as the only possible path to national reconciliation.

Notes:

¹ For a more extensive discussion of this analysis, see Simpson, G., Mokwena, S. and Segal, L., "Political Violence in 1990: The year in review", in Robertson, M., (ed.) *Human Rights and Labour Law Yearbook: 1991*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press (1991).

² Vogelman, L. and Eagle, G., "Overcoming Endemic Violence Against Women in South Africa." *Social Justice*. Vol. 18, Nos. 1-2, pp. 209-229 (1991).

³ *Cape Times*, 10/10/1990.

⁴ *Financial Mail*, 15/02/1991; *The Star*, 28/01/1991.

⁵ Vlok, quoted by *Radio 702 News*, 03/04/1991.

⁶ *The Star*, 20/02/1991.

⁷ Pizzey, E. *Scream Silently or the Neighbours Will Hear*, Marmondsworth: Penguin Books (1981).

8 Ritchken, E. "Rural Political Violence: The meaning of the anti-witchcraft attacks", Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation seminar paper, No. 5, June 1989.

9 Vogelmann L., and Eagle, G. Op.G cit., p. 13.

10 See Gibson, K., Mogale, N., and Friedlander, R., "Some Preliminary Ideas About the Meaning of Inkatha Violence for Children Living in Alexandra." Paper presented to the Eighth National Congress of the *South African Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*, September 12-14, 1991, University of the Witwatersrand. This section is heavily reliant on Gibson, Mogale and Friedlander's work.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

14 *Radio 702 News*, 3/04/1991.

15 Mokwena, S., "Living on the Wrong Side of the Law". In Evenett, S. And Sisula, F., *Black Youth in Crisis: Facing the future*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg (1992)

16 Mary Mabasa interviewed by Diana Russell and quoted in Mokwena *ibid*, p. 28.

17 *Ibid*, p. 29.

18 *Ibid*, p. 30.

19 Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Soweto April 1990, quoted in Mokwena, *Ibid*, p. 31.

20 *The Star*, 28/01/1991.

21 See Valla, V., "Family Murders in South Africa", Psychology Hons. Paper, University of the Witwatersrand, unpublished (1988); also *The Star*, 18/11/1988; and 22/11/1988.

22 Valla, V. *Ibid*.

23 *The Star*, 26/06/1988; and 06/08/1988.

24 *Weekly Mail*, Feb. 1-7, 1991.

25 Motsei, M., "The Best Kept Secret: Violence against domestic workers", Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Seminar No. 5, 25 July 1990.

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