

Abuse of women and children : Could our leaders be part of the problem? – Tshego Motaung



#totalshutdown marchers (PHOTO: [Daily Maverick](#)).

“Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another” – These are some of the inaugural words that Nelson Mandela spoke as he took office in 1994.

At that moment, the nation’s hope for a better life was high as the war against the oppressive system of apartheid was finally won – so we thought.

It is very unfortunate that in a country that has been through such a difficult past, we find ourselves once again confronted by yet another form of evil and oppression – manifesting in the form of violence against women and children.

According to the World Health Organisation the broad definition of abuse includes five subtypes, namely physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and negligent treatment, emotional abuse, and exploitation.

Our nation has been inundated with headlines of reports of rape, sexual harassment, domestic violence cases. This has reached crisis levels that saw women #totalshutdown march across the nation on August 1. Sadly, two days later another young life was lost when Khensani Maseko committed suicide after she was raped at Rhodes University.

While Madiba's words still ring fresh in our memories following the Mandela 100 commemorations, one cannot help but wonder what went wrong? How did we come to this place where we don't seem to care about the cries of our children and women?

Could our leaders be part of the problem?

The New York Times recently published an article titled "South Africa Vows to End Corruption. Are Its New Leaders Part of the Problem?" The article is focused on Deputy President David Mabuza and the allegations of corruption that took place under his watch as Premier of Mpumalanga – with the authors basically questioning whether the country can win the fight against corruption when leaders like him, implicated in corruption allegations could rise to the highest positions of power.

This question, I felt, could be asked of the country's efforts to fight rape and the abuse of women and children.

Just over 10 years ago, we witnessed the humiliating case of Fezekile Kuzwayo, who we got to know as Khwezi. She was sadly vilified for laying rape charges against former President Zuma by his supporters. Her home was burnt down and she was forced to leave the country for safety. Zuma was eventually acquitted of those charges and South Africans later elevated him to the position of the country's number one – as president.

The trauma and humiliation she went through was enough to send a clear message to other young women not to even think about laying charges after being raped, especially if it involved powerful politicians and men of influence.

Another story of rape emerged last year in December, when Jackie Phamotse finally spoke out about a gang rape that took place when she was only 17. This delegation of rapists was led by a man who was then a powerful politician in the Free State, and a Deputy Minister at the time she finally spoke out. Like Khwezi, Jackie and her family were also harassed, and she had to live in a safe house after receiving numerous death threats. Others questioned her motives for only speaking about this now, saying she was just seeking attention to boost her book sales.

Another leader, Danny Jordaan, SAFA President and former mayor of Nelson Mandela Bay, also stands accused of rape and sexual harassment by two women.

And how can we forget the story of Minister Manana who remained a member of Parliament even after he was convicted of assaulting two women.

These are just a few cases among many – whose victims we will never know.

The most painful thing about Khwezi – who grew up in exile surrounded by leaders of the struggle, who are among the leaders in our country today – is that she was raped at least three times when she was 5, 12, and 13 by those she regarded as fathers. These horrific incidents are detailed in a book about her written by veteran journalist Redi Tlhabi.

In a discussion about the book, former Intelligence Minister, Ronnie Kasrils, said on Radio 702 that incidents of sexual abuse within the ANC were always swept under the rug to protect the public image of the liberation movement. “Had the ANC dealt with the culture of sexual abuses during its years in exile, the party would have succeeded in dealing with sexual predation,” he said.

Jackie also documented the details of her rape experiences in her book BARE, where she also exposed the dark side of the

lives of powerful politicians and businessmen, and the unspoken costs of the “blessers” lifestyle that she escaped. In an interview with eNCA she also speaks of cult-like behaviours that these leaders engage in – like mutilation of young girls’ body parts or sleeping with young virgins to gain power

Sadly, despite all these horrible reports of what our leaders have done, the focus somehow always shifts from the fact that women and young girls are abused and raped, to what they are wearing, and to even questioning their motives for speaking out.

The need to confront the crisis

We can no longer shy away from the fact that we are in a crisis. It has been encouraging to hear men speaking out and marching against violence against women and children. In a discussion about the effectiveness of marching against abuse, one person raised a very important point, saying ultimately this subject is a matter of the heart. The work that must be done is more inward than going to the street.

Perhaps it is time for our leaders to pause and begin to do the work of the heart – because corruption, deceit and lies are all matters of the heart. While our constitution remains the best in the world, it is not able to override hearts that are bent on wickedness.

We need more than just lip-service or good speeches on this subject; urgent action is required to send a clear message that this can no longer be tolerated – especially at leadership level in public service.

It should not be acceptable that men who have abused women are somehow rewarded by the system and continue to rise to higher positions in government.

A nation that is not able to protect women and children, is a nation that gambles with its future. Failure to address this

at leadership level will limit the ability of the nation to win the fight against abuse.

We need to get to a place where we can say boldly: "Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of women and children."