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# What has happened since the Gender Summit?

As South Africa is waiting for implementation of the national action plan on the ground, Dr Hibist Kassa outlines the background.

*The momentum built up following the 2018 march to the Union Buildings demanding action against Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (GBVF), and the Gender Summit that followed, appears to have petered out. We now have in place a National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide ... but where is the legislative framework that was promised more than a year ago to support it? Gender activists say COVID-19 and other factors may have slowed the process, but it is the ministry that has put on the brake.*

It has repeatedly been warned that the COVID-19 pandemic, jobs bloodbath, economic recession and militarised response to the lockdowns has amplified the scourge of Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (GBVF). In May 2020, Lifeline reported that during lockdown, GBVF cases had increased by 500%. Women and children continue to be slaughtered.

This ongoing atrocity comes from a violent society that demands urgent state intervention. Those on the frontlines providing urgent services and shelters for women in crisis have been non-governmental organisations who are overstretched and underfunded. Survivors of abuse seeking justice

continue to face further obstacles, including secondary victimisation from the police and judiciary. The scale of the crisis has required coherent state response in the form of a national strategic plan. For years, women's organisations and activists have called for such a policy intervention in South Africa.

In 2018, #TotalShutDown mobilised women across the country and led a march to Sandton, the hard heart of corporate South Africa. The movement demanded that corporations fund programmes to intervene in GBVF. This occurred in the midst of a pogrom targeting migrants, drawing attention to a violent society in decay. #TotalShutDown activists, undeterred by police harassment, waited until late at night to speak directly to President Cyril Ramaphosa in Pretoria. The activists placed their safety at risk to submit their memorandum directly to the President at the Union Buildings (Rise-Up Against Gender-Based Violence, 2018). The demands included a call for a Gender Summit and a review to answer why there has been such a policy failure to tame the scourge of violence. Out of this process, a National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NSPGBVF) was developed (RSA, 2020). Among its policy instruments is the setting up of a Council.

Two years after the release of the Gender Summit Declaration (RSA, 2019), the state has led coordinated interventions to address the

unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, with health workers (predominantly women) as frontline defenders. However, the "other" pandemic, of GBVF has not seen similar urgency. Oxfam South Africa has shown how women health workers face risks of violence while providing services in health facilities and during travel to work (Mthathi, 2020). In particular, community health workers face multiple threats – from violence and infection while visiting the homes of patients.

There is now a NSPGBVF in South Africa. This finally promises a specific policy framework on GBVF agreed upon in April 2020. However, it has still not been supported by a budget, and on the ground frontline service providers who run shelters are running out of money to keep their doors open for survivors who manage to escape their abusers. Chronically over-stretched and under-funded, they are struggling in a period when their services are needed even more urgently. Even though a R1.6 billion fund was allocated specifically to the fight against GBVF (RSA, 2020a:3), the organisations providing these crucial services have not been paid anything.

Civil society organisations are clear that it is only when the National Strategic Plan is backed by a legislative mechanism that there can be transparency and accountability in implementation. Instead, the Department of Women, Youth and



Persons with Disabilities is pressing forward with the creation of a Board of Trustees, which appears to maintain an opaque process that is not backed by a legislative instrument (PMG, 2020 and Call to Action Collective, 2020).

Drawing on the above, civil society has been engaging with the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities to ensure that implementation of the National Strategic Plan is backed by a transparent and accountable legislative mechanism. Yet activists have said public engagements have been constrained by online platforms where virtual room settings restrict participants from knowing who is present in the meeting, let alone directly communicating with each other. It is also concerning that participants are unable to engage directly with organisers in a dynamic and robust manner. These restrictions could not have been imposed if in-person meetings had been possible.

*New Agenda* republishes below the Rape Crisis Trust Statement that was

issued on 22 October 2020, in response to perpetual government deafness. A linked statement by the Call to Action platform echoed the same concerns (Call to Action Collective, 2020). The Call to Action process had been guided by a rigorous 12-week programme in which there was a careful assessment of all the dimensions of the NSPGBVF. As an educational online platform, it also created space for reflection on the proposals to be put to government. However, the continued contestation over accountability and the form of institutions being fashioned remains unaddressed.

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