**The Institutions of Higher Learning are under siege**

South African institutions of Higher Learning are overwhelmed by profound inequalities and high level of gender-based violence challenges which cut across race and historical background. It is well known that gender-based violence (GBV) is a scourge in South Africa. A 2015 report by Tswaranang Legal Advocacy Centre (2015) in Gauteng notes that, in relation to GBV “justice is an aspiration” but not a reality for the women of South Africa. The events that have unfolded in 2018-2019 made us the country to come to terms in realising the extent of the scourge and the intensity of the battle that lies ahead.

Statistics South Africa reports that between 2008 and 2015 unemployment rates were constituently higher for women and men. This confirms the rate of dependency of women to men and this make it difficult for women to resist gender-based violence. This reality is not located in the community but has managed to spread to our institutions of Higher Learning where most students are underprivileged women from poor upbringing. This historical background exposes them intensely to gender based violence.

It is of major importance to mention that challenges facing women at the institutions of Higher Learning are progressively escalating in an alarming rate. The vulnerabilities and risks experienced by women in institutions of Higher Learning both as employees and students is an ongoing phenomenon which continue to display them as victims and their bodies turned into crime scenes. This type of abuse happens despite the existence of international, regional and national legislation like The Beijing Platform For Action (BPA) the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against women (CEDAW), African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (PEPUDA) and SADC Protocol on Education and Training 1997 to name a few.

As per article from Maverick dated 26 March 2019 academics from tertiary Institutions around South Africa have written to Minister of Higher Education in March 2019 calling for action o sexual offences that occur on University campuses. Academics highlight abuse of sex for jobs or marks at universities. This phenomenon which is as old as the hills is in addition referred to as campus sex currency.

The Commission for Gender Equality in the 2018/2019 report on Gender Transformation in Tertiary Institutions has listed media reports and incidents that has sparked concern, and in includes:

* Sex for marks allegations in some institutions
* Allegations of sexual harassment at institutions of higher learning

The Rhodes University sexual harassment matter is not the countries first experience on the subject. In an academic study that was published in 2007, titled “The Habitus of the Dominant: Addressing Rape and Sexual assault at Rhodes University, it was noted that sexual violence as a distinct and incurring problem. Within the study, reference is made to a 1991 SRC report which claimed that over half the student population found campus unsafe at night and 12% did not walk alone after dark., CGE took cognisance of students calls to eradicate the scourge of rape at the institutions.

The scenario we are faced with as a nation is that dreams and virtues of women at the institutions of Higher Learning are lost in the periphery and radically plundered. The innocence of our young women at these institutions of learning is radically stolen and under siege. The young women left home for a better life and future opportunities, most are young naïve and inexperienced. First time in their lives they must face life outside the comfort of their families. This is a new confusing period of indecision, moving outside the comfort and security of their homes to face the world which is often cruel and uncertain, it is now that they learn how harsh, complex and dangerous life is. They soon realise that It’s a warzone out there which leaves no causalities. What make this picture worse is that people are watching in silence going on with their daily lives without any motivation or driving force to act or turn around the situation.

University of South Africa (UNISA) Bureau of Market Research have developed a research article titled “Exploration of the Blessers- Blessee Phenomenon Among Young People in Gauteng. According to the research article the Blessers -Blessee phenomenon is basically a transactional sex which has several similarities and benefits with prostitution. This transaction involves non marital sexual relations which is characterised by financial gains, agreed rewards and incentives. The Blesser- Blessee does not necessarily involve total strangers it in addition exist between girlfriend and boyfriend. The ongoing exchange of gifts and tokens for sex is in fact part of a broader set of obligations that might not involve a predetermined payment (Hunter 2002).

Literature review indicates that the involvement in transactional sex is often motivated by basic survival and subsistence needs such as the need for shelter, food and clothes. The involvement of young people with older partners may and may not include the above stated reasons. Research in circulation put on top of the problem financial gain as the root cause and motivation for transactional sex between young women and older men.

The institutions of higher learning are a hunting ground for blessers and all types of perverts. The exchange taking place has all forms of risks and challenges. It is argued that poverty is the trigger to this action and exchange but in most cases the trigger is the competition amongst the young women. They pursue fake lives and portray something they are not, and which is out of their league and social status. Their intrinsic motivation is pure greed and self-love. The fact that students continue to pursue lifestyles, luxuries they cannot afford or pay for is the part of the problem This type of behaviour confirm that we are a society in a crisis and our moral fibre has totally decayed in some of the young citizens.

The Youth Research Unit at the Bureau of Market Research embarked on an intensive research of the Blesser-Blessee phenomenon, the main aim of the unit was to investigate the motivating factors, participation and consequences of this phenomenon. The research conducted confirmed among other things that this happens among all races and this is multifaceted and includes different levels of involvement. My take on the matter is that it does not matter which form or shape the Blesser-Blessee phenomenon takes, it is a true sexual exploitation and gender-based violence at its best. The sad part about this phenomenon is that it challenges and compromises the societal moral fibre and principles and further puts all forms of risks and sickness to the participants that continue to indulge on it.

The Blesser-Blessee phenomenon is growing in an alarming rate. The students are faced with a challenge of a profession that is as old as the hill’s prostitution. Prostitution is rife at these institutions of learning. To feed their greed they engage in unwarranted behaviour and activities just for the love of money. This is an exchange of sexual favours for resources and service rendered. The social economic situation present in higher institutions is a breeding ground and incubator that leads the youth astray. The young women themselves have a tendency of grooming and recruiting each other, for them this is a game with benefits with detrimental and life changing consequences.

It takes a nation to raise a child, what are we saying as parents and elders of the community because this is happening right under our noses. What is more disturbing and a national emergency which really need a state of emergency is the scourge of gender-based violence in these institutions. Gender based violence disregards humanity and it is a threat for social justice. Our young women in other isolated instances are exposed to sexual harassment and are further subjected and expected to trade sex for a good mark to advance to the next level and be one step closer in achieving the ideal preferred goals. We need to instil the culture, values and self-respect and the zeal to avoid such temptations. All these tendencies lead to women becoming objectified and viewed as a resource commodity or a means to an end.

Men at these institutions make the life of the women excruciatingly painful and insurmountable. Women are further exposed to rape and gang rape while travelling from the hostels to the classes and campus library at night. Some young girls have lost their virginity under difficult painful and inhumane circumstances. We have reported cases and incidences of such learners whose innocence was stolen in a radical and barbaric manner and approach. What make it worse the same young men will spread rumours and make mockery of the victim of rape and that is secondary victimisation and abuse. Our young men resort to contact crime and rape because of the patriarchal nature of their upbringing and society, patriarchy dictates a position of power for males at the expense of their gender counterpart. The power struggle and dynamics found in our society enhances the need for brute force and physical domination. Often enough women in this situation are found helpless and weakened due to their physical structure and biological make up and eventually women fall prey and victim to femicide.

Femicide is an intentional brutality and killing of women and young girls based on their gender. This term was first coined in 1992 by Diana Russell’s and American Activist and an English Activist Jill Radford in their definition they wanted to draw a distinction and differentiate between femicide from common homicide to avoid gender neutrality by emphasising that femicide is a gendered form of killing.

South Africa has attracted a lot of international attention and scrutiny due to a huge volume of killings targeting women and this happen all over including the institutions of Higher Learning. Femicide is another excruciatingly painful chapter in the lives of women in general and young women at the institutions of higher learning. Women are not safe in their homes, in the community, in the workplace and some were raped and killed right in their places of worship. We have reported incidences where women were kidnapped and human trafficked right in the places of worship. Young women at the institutions of higher learning need to apologetically state that “My body is my body and it is not a crime scene, hands off my body” Women live in fear of both the known and the unknown due to the high levels of rape and femicide.

As a community we need to be tolerant towards rape victims and survivors and vehemently change our attitude and work towards supporting them rather than blaming or shunning them. It is imperative that institutions of higher learning must have gender sensitive programs and safety policies for students and the university community.

Our learning institutions need Gender Based Violence policy, Sexual harassment policy, prohibited substance policy, pregnancy on student’s policy and Discrimination policy. Establishment of Committee dealing with gender-based violence within campus SAPS personnel or someone with security background included.

The recent violence against women in the country is without a doubt a stern reminder that the scourge of gender-based violence was not correctly addressed in the past and it demands our attention, not only as a community but also as a country and subsequently the international communities. Speaking and moving decisively is of paramount importance. Just voicing out without an action is a fruitless endeavor. Gender based violence is a serious threat to security and peace. Let us fight for the human dignity of women. Real men don’t rape, and fake men must understand that No means No and silence should be respected as a No. Awareness is very crucial and a strategic tool towards the elimination of gender-based violence. My advice to our communities is “Don’t look away act against abuse”. Report all cases and suspicion of violence against women.

Our children in general and young women in particular are our future and a valuable asset and must be treated as such No compromise! Our former president Nelson Mandela once said “Our children are our greatest treasure. They are our future. Those who abuse them tear at the fabric of our society and weaken our nation “

Commissioner Lindiwe Ntuli-Tloubatla

Commission for Gender Equality