

## A New Kairos? Make your voice heard!

### Statement of Concerned Faith Leaders on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Femicide

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” **Archbishop Desmond Tutu**

*We, a group of about 100 concerned South African faith leaders from diverse faith communities, including sexual and gender-based violence survivors, met in February 2020 in Durban. At this meeting, we considered what it would take for us to respond more effectively to the epidemic of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)<sup>1</sup> and femicide in our country.*

*This was before the COVID-19 became a pandemic also reached our shores. We held back from publishing this call on the faith community because of the urgency of the disaster response.*

*As the realities of the surge in gender-based violence under the lockdown increasingly become known, this Call is more urgent than ever. Acting in response to violence has become more difficult under COVID-19, even as many more homes and communities have become unsafe for women and children.*

*But act we must.*

*So we are sharing our Statement, in the hope that it might be endorsed by many, many other faith leaders and may form the basis for an ongoing campaign to open conversations that lead to powerful joint action for a better world. COVID-19 has opened a window of opportunity for us – let us take this opportunity and step out of our known ways of ‘doing faith’, together.*

***We are now inviting all faith leaders to join with us to declare the following, to sign the statement below and commit yourself (and your congregation if you lead one) to concrete action.***

We *realise* that:

- the draft National Strategic Plan on SGBV and Femicide does not acknowledge the important role of faith communities and faith-based institutions in the response to SGBV & F;
- despite our doctrinal differences, people of faith agree on many important matters;
- as faith communities, we need to be ready to contribute meaningfully to advancing the objectives of the National Strategic Plan on SGBV and Femicide.

We *ask* ourselves

- what it would take to achieve this?

We *agree* that:

- **SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IS A SIN-**
- all forms of SGBV, including femicide, are a sin against humanity and also against God since all human beings, regardless of gender, are made in God’s image
- SGBV is also a criminal offence.

We *acknowledge* that:

- as faith communities, whether churches or others, we have often been complicit by our silence about its occurrence, and by our inaction. In many cases, fear of causing division in our communities or offending the powerful causes this silence and lack of action
- our sacred texts have often been misquoted and misused to entrench socio-cultural norms that promote gender inequality and undermine the dignity and agency of women
- our structures have also unwittingly or deliberately excluded women from key decision-making processes that affect all genders.

### We confess that:

- we have not acted decisively enough in dealing with sexual offences by our religious leaders, whether ordained or lay.

We further recognise that:

- SGBV is multi-dimensional and impacts on the lives of women, children, people with disability, LGBTIQ people and men who do not fit social norms, and
- SGBV is influenced by many factors like poverty, racism, hopelessness and substance abuse, **and now the stresses of COVID-19.**

*In spite of the concerns and challenges, we believe that faith communities and faith institutions have a valuable role to play in addressing sexual and gender-based violence, and that excluding this sector will make any plans less effective.*

As concerned people of faith, we *ask* that:

- government expedites the implementation of the National Strategic Plan to end Gender-Based Violence and Femicide, **and ensures it is responsive to the new realities under COVID-19.**
- adequate resources are committed to this important task, and that accountability measures are kept in place to ensure that these resources are responsibly managed
- the crucial role of faith communities and faith leaders is acknowledged and accurately reflected in the operationalisation of the NSP and activities to address SGBV & F.

As people of faith, we jointly and severally *commit* to the following concrete and practical actions:

1. We *allow* people to speak and act for themselves. This means:
  - Listening to the voices of survivors, and women in general, to better understand the consequences of SGBV & F
  - Involving men and boys to be part of the solution, including calling out behaviours and attitudes that demean women's dignity, condone violence or stigmatise SGBV & F survivors
  - Being open to participatory programme planning and research processes and ensuring that we are accountable to those who are most vulnerable to abuse
2. We *support* leaders who are speaking up against sexual abuse in our faith communities.
3. We *address* any reported incidences of SGBV & F in our faith communities in accordance with the relevant policies, with respect and without any attempt to silence those reporting.
4. We will *work with* other faith communities (regardless of our doctrinal differences), Government departments, NGOs, the Private sector and support groups to
  - analyse the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in our country, as it unfolds.
  - learn from others,
  - improve our practice and
  - share whatever resources we can

to support diverse initiatives to improve integrated services to meet diverse needs in different contexts.

Finally, we agreed to *hold* one another *accountable*, by:

1. Documenting our work and reporting on progress to each other, based on storytelling and building a shared evidence base,
2. Provide meaningful support to survivors in worship venues and online spaces as need arises,
3. Creating joint learning platforms to re-examine our use of our sacred texts and develop more appropriate theological approaches in the current context, and
4. Opening safe spaces to reflect on our work together, learn from our mistakes, and improve the impact of our work.

**[1]** SGBV includes all forms of sexual assault, as well as intimate partner violence (physical, economic and psychological), sex trafficking, sexual harassment, female genital cutting, teen pregnancy and early marriage (before age 18).