

# South African paradox

By [Dr Nadine Lake](#), issued by [University of the Free State](#)

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The transition to democracy in South Africa has been characterised by an uphill battle towards equality. Inequalities shaped by race, gender, and class politics have been amplified since the outbreak of COVID-19. While South Africans initially thought they might be spared the devastation wrought by the virus, it is now certain that nobody is immune, regardless of race, class, age, gender, or social location. In an unprecedented manner, South Africans have become accustomed to hearing from government through President Cyril Ramaphosa's state addresses on COVID-19 and its spread throughout the country. Although the initial national addresses were regarded as a panacea for some in a time of uncertainty, they are increasingly considered ignorant of broader human rights and the future of the populace. The South African situation is different from those struggling with the pandemic in the Global North, because of structural inequalities that have exacerbated an already precarious outlook on the economic and social stability of the country.



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## Gender-based violence needs immediate attention

In addition to recently emphasising a zero-tolerance attitude towards corruption in South Africa, President Ramaphosa surprised the nation when he emphasised that our country is dealing with two pandemics. First, COVID-19 has laid bare the slow pace of economic transformation and a crumbling health infrastructure. Second, gender-based violence has emerged as something that needs immediate attention. While it is true that gender-based violence has been and remains a burning issue in the country, it is important to identify the paradox that exists between the liberal agenda couched in the language of women's rights on the one hand, and the blind eye turned towards slow economic transformation and high unemployment on the other. This emphasis on a liberal political agenda during a time of crisis is not new and has formed part of what we have come to know as political pinkwashing in Western democracies. Pinkwashing has been defined as a practice whereby states seek to create a more positive image of their nation, government, and human rights record, among other things, by speaking about and promoting LGBT rights (Lind, 2014, p. 602). While the African National Congress (ANC)

may not be ready to fly the rainbow flag, it is worth noting the tensions between human rights and women's rights, which have become part of political discourse, or more accurately, politicking.

## GBV and rape culture part of the social fabric

South Africa is reported as the country with the highest rape statistics in the world. In 2018/2019, the South African Police Services reported 52 420 cases of sexual offences. Non-profit organisations such as the [One in Nine Campaign](#), however, highlight that only one in nine women report a sexual offence, and therefore a realistic estimate is likely much higher than the recorded statistics. Furthermore, according to a survey conducted by the South African Medical Research Council, one in four South African men have admitted to committing rape. These statistics demonstrate that gender-based violence and rape culture form part of the social fabric and that women are disproportionately affected by violence. In the first week of the South African lockdown, more than 87 000 cases of gender-based violence complaints were reported. One of the rape cases that received prominent media attention during the first phase of the lockdown, was that of a police officer who raped his wife. The Minister of Police, Bheki Cele, quickly gained the reputation of a rape apologist when he stated that the man who raped his wife was her husband and not the police, because he was not in a police uniform, and the rape did not happen at the police station. This absurd response reinforces common rape myths and reduces the seriousness of sexual offences. Although opposition political parties such as the Democratic Alliance (DA) have called for the removal of Minister Cele, who was deemed unfit for office, these calls have fallen on deaf ears. The message conveyed is that men in positions of authority are exempt from punishment and speak and act with impunity when it comes to sexual violence.

## #MeToo

Gender-based violence and rape is not specific to South Africa. The normative position of violence against women is widespread and deeply entrenched in institutions, cultures, and traditions worldwide. Movements such as #MeToo, which emerged in 2017 as an outcry against sexual violence and abuse, gained rapid momentum and started to see the prosecution of sexual predators such as Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein in the United States. The global solidarity against sexual abuse shown by women on social media has shown that relentless pressure on patriarchal systems forces accountability, and refuses men permission to perpetrate violence against women with impunity.

As we reflect on Women's Month 2020 in South Africa, it is necessary to observe a moment of silence to victims of sexual abuse and femicide. We pay respect to Fezekile Khuzwayo, Uyinene Mrwetyana, Tshegofatso Pule, Naledi Phangindawo, Nompumelelo Tshaka, Nomfazi Gabada, Nwabisa Mgwandela, Altecia Kortjie, and Lindelwa Peni, and the many other women who have suffered misogynistic violence. Women's Month provides us with the opportunity to take hands and speak out against the micro-aggressions and brutal acts of gender-based violence that should not form part of what we define as a truly democratic South Africa.

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