WOMEN'S HUMANITARIAN VOICES:
Covid-19 through a feminist lens in
SOUTH AFRICA
The Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN) is a member-based network of grassroots and national women’s rights organisations (WROs), regional networks, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and individuals working to strengthen the agency and amplify the voices of women in emergencies, and transform the humanitarian system into one that is guided by feminist principles.1

South African FHN member, The Living University (TLU),2 led research in South Africa to better understand the context-specific impacts and challenges faced by grassroots women’s rights organisations in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the feminist solutions and community-based responses that have been developed and taken up by WROs throughout the crisis.3

The research conducted in South Africa highlighted the need and will for women to tell their stories. Women felt their inclusion in this report was an opportunity for connection with communities, and women near and far. TLU has used this opportunity to tell these women’s stories with the hope that the readers imagine the solutions and recommendations become a reality; that the reading becomes a collaborative act toward real change and limitless possibility.

Key findings

Covid-19 has deepened the pre-existing systemic gender injustice in South Africa, exposing and highlighting the violent way in which women are being abused. Despite the worsening situation for women in South Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic, Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) have not been able to access available humanitarian aid. Government systems and solutions to the pandemic have, in all cases investigated, been an obstacle to meeting the needs of the most vulnerable women.

The women that have taken part in this research exemplify indomitability in the face of adversity. For many of the respondents Covid-19 has been an opportunity to network, collaborate and to collectively mobilise resources and support and pooling expertise. It has been an opportunity to generate greater empathy between genders. Where government has failed

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Recommendations

1 The South African government must empower women by prioritising economic and agricultural opportunities to allow them to be self-sufficient; promoting and supporting female collectives and recognising the important role that arts and culture play in building confidence, self-esteem and a sense of purpose.

2 The South African government must make the implementation of legislation that protects the rights of women more accessible to the most vulnerable. They must promote the creation of safe spaces that attend holistically to the needs of women and children contending with Gender Based Violence (GBV).

3 The international community must recognise that South Africa is suffering a war on women, and direct humanitarian assistance to CBOs working at the front line. Support from the global community must be shaped by the women who need the resources and are designing the solutions, and the expertise and resilience of these women and their organisations must be recognised.
communities, citizens have become active in supporting however they can. The creative arts have been recognised as a tool for reflection, training and cultivating change. Women have created safe spaces for each other. Self-reliance through small scale farming and entrepreneurial innovation is a growing trend.

INTRODUCTION

TLU makes accessible teaching and learning from cutting edge disciplines, both ancient and new, to those who need it most. We draw on eclectic sources of wisdom and knowledge to custom design experiential processes that emphasise the power of Attention, Empathy, Creativity and Imagination to challenge and change, generating new possibilities for action and activism. Our mission is to have an impact in activating global community and intelligent activism.

The Living University applies feminist principles in designing solutions to the many challenges faced in South Africa and globally. During the Covid-19 pandemic, schools and universities were closed and young people had no access to education or to their daily school meal. In response to this need, TLU shifted its focus to humanitarian work, recognising the opportunity to work with young people; to provide them with nutritious food and access to progressive education and social technologies (usually only accessible to more privileged sectors of South African society) to support their empowerment.

TLU is also a community of storytellers and recognises the power of the Story; how they are created and told, and how these narratives shape the world and experience of many. The stories we tell determine how we act. This research has been an opportunity for women and activist feminists to tell their stories and hear the stories of their fellow activists, in effect, continuing the work of shaping the overarching narrative of a generation of experience.

TLU focused on two key geographical areas for this research; the rural midlands of the Kwazulu Natal province (an inland region beginning at Pietermaritzburg in the South and ending at the foothills of the Drakensberg mountain range in the North - a vast tract of farmlands, traditional villages, small towns, and informal settlements); and the peri-urban areas of Cape Town in the province of the Western Cape. Qualitative data was collected through face-to-face interviews which were digitally recorded. The process was repeated with 11 women; 7 from the KwaZulu Natal (KZN) Midlands area representing a rural experience; and 4 from the areas in and around Cape Town representing an urban context. In addition, a focus group was conducted in the KZN midlands. An important part of this research is comparing the experiences from rural and urban South African contexts, in terms of the challenges faced and feminist solutions implemented.

TLU chose individuals and organisations that represent the diversity of the South African context. This includes: organisations specifically set up to feed and care for people during the pandemic; organisations and individuals caring for children; organisations providing maternal health care; programmes and arts activists using the arts to empower and bring about social change; organisations dealing with the effects of human trafficking; organisations providing education and support to disabled young women from disadvantaged backgrounds and organisations and individuals providing safe empowering spaces for women.
Context

In South Africa, women – particularly black women – enjoy the least economic advantages. Women make up a disproportionate section of the unemployed and the least-paid jobs as domestic and farm labourers. They often also earn less than men for doing the same work. South African women, particularly those suffering economically disadvantaged situations in historically disadvantaged communities, also contend with infamously high rates of rape and equally unacceptable rates of domestic violence. As stated by Bower: ‘to be a woman in South Africa is, for far too many, to be poor, disempowered, and vulnerable to appallingly high levels of sexual violence’. GBV is often linked to alcoholism, a serious and ubiquitous issue in our communities. Even though the government-imposed lockdown in South Africa banned the sale of alcohol, women continue to report that the added frustration of not being able to buy alcohol has caused men to become more aggressive and abusive.

Legally, women fall under the protection of the full range of rights guaranteed in the South African Constitution. Despite a progressive legal framework, South African women are often under the unjust economic, social and often psychological and physical control of men and it is the most vulnerable women who are usually unable to access the protection of the Constitution.

Many women in South Africa are subjected to discriminatory customary practices and are not aware of or do not understand their rights under the Constitution. Customary law and its application form a nebulous area of the judiciary involving a system of customary courts and community councils, run by traditional leaders who are predominantly male. For example, according to customary law women are not allowed to own or inherit land unless they are married or in the care of a man (an unmarried woman who wants access to land has to find a man such as a brother or family member to secure it for her). This is particularly unjust as the majority of households in disadvantaged communities are headed or run by women, even in cases where a man is the primary ‘bread-winner’.

As of 2018, the proportion of female-headed households in South Africa was 42.6%. Female-headed households are more likely to have low incomes and to be dependent on social grants. Respondents have seen an exacerbation of these gendered disparities during the pandemic, resulting in women being even more vulnerable to extreme poverty. Many women can only find work in the informal sector, affording them no safety net when work is not available. Most domestic workers have been unable to access relief schemes such as the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), as less than 20% of domestic workers are registered by their employers. Domestic workers who are registered have experienced difficulties accessing the funds they are entitled to.

It is evident that the Covid-19 pandemic has deteriorated a historically poor situation of injustice against women, especially for those at the most economically challenged end of the spectrum. For many there has been a reported increase in tensions, insecurity and distress that have manifested in a widespread increase in GBV. The Gender-Based Violence Command Centre (GBVCC), received between 500 and 1,000 calls a day from women and children confined to their homes since the country-wide lockdown began on March 26, 2020. Before the pandemic, it was estimated that South African women are five times more likely to be killed by GBV than other women worldwide. The Covid-19 pandemic has separated survivors of abuse from social networks, as well as from the services that could support them.

The Government response to the Covid-19 pandemic has focused on relief for small businesses in the form of development grants, tax relief measures, debt relief and resilience funds. The social development department provided social relief of distress grants (350 ZAR (South African Rand)/23 USD (United States Dollars) per eligible person per month) from May to October 2020. Only South African citizens with a valid ID number/document, permanent residents and refugees registered with home affairs were eligible. Applicants had to prove that they were unemployed; not receiving any other
type of grant; and show proof of residence. Applications had to be made electronically/digitally. Those already receiving child support received an additional 500 ZAR from June to October 2020. The department of social development also partnered with the Solidarity Fund, NGOs and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) to distribute food parcels. Applications for food parcels also had to be made digitally.12

A Solidarity Fund was designed to mobilise and coordinate financial contributions from South African and international individuals and businesses. The Solidarity fund has a humanitarian pillar to address the consequences of the lockdown specifically with respect to food instability and the increase in GBV. Food relief was allocated 320 million ZAR with Phase 1 targeting 280,000 households and Phase 2 supporting 135,000 households. In addition, the fund pledged to support a further 47,000 households of which 66% were female headed households/subsistence farmers in rural areas across South Africa.13

GBV was allocated 17 million ZAR in Phase 1 to respond to the increase in GBV with three focus areas: scale up the national GBV command centre; support 78 existing shelters and 55 care centres; implement a communications campaign to disseminate critical information. Phase 2 pledged 75 million ZAR to GBV service providers. In national communications the fund recognised the importance of CBOs stating: ‘…the vast majority of services related to GBV are delivered at community-level, often by small CBOs. The Fund wishes to provide direct support to these organisations, which often struggle to access funding from established donors for a variety of reasons.’14 Criteria for eligibility included having a valid Non-profit Organisations (NPO) certificate number or valid Public Benefit Organisation (PBO) letter; 6 months of bank statements; evidence of a track record in dealing with GBV; a founding document and ID and proof of residence of board members, directors or trustees. Successful candidates would be required to submit financial and evidence-based reports after three months and six months. As this particular funding came from the UK government, reporting requirements were aligned with UK government regulations. Applications were open for 4 weeks only from 22 October – 18 November 2020.

The research included the following individuals and their respective organisations or initiatives:

**Rural: KwaZulu Natal, Midlands**

**Nokuthula** is a community leader in Lidgetton. She works for St Raphael’s Anglican Church centre as a carer, is a Sunday school teacher and runs a feeding scheme for young children (Angel Ruth’s Soup Kitchen) from a renovated container at her home premises. Before the first Covid-19 lockdown, Nokuthula cooked three times a week for approximately 35 specific children in need. The Covid-19 pandemic required her to feed more than twice as many children (regularly up to 80, but also in excess of that as no one is turned away) five times a week. During the level 5 lockdown she was supported to do this with donated private resources procured from her personal network in the more privileged communities in the Midlands.

**Ntombifuthi** operates a crèche in the informal settlement of Crystal Springs, Lidgetton West. She is an Early Childhood Development (ECD) practitioner and single mother to two children. She is currently putting herself through a yearlong course (interrupted by Covid-19) to allow her to obtain formal ECD qualifications. Before Covid-19 Ntombiuthi cared for approximately 20 children, between the ages of one and five years old, five days a week from 7.30am until 13.30pm. Meals were not provided to the children. When the schools were closed, many children had their main daily meal taken away and had nothing to eat. Ntombifuthi undertook to feed up to 100 children and youth from her community, five days per week.

**Robyn** is the founder of Action in Isolation, which was formed in quick response to the initial lockdown and restrictions, set at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Robyn, who usually works in marketing in the education sector, was immediately compelled to take action when schools were closed indefinitely. Schools being closed meant that a large majority of the poorest households would lose a meal a day (per child) which was being provided at school. Robyn tapped into her network to aggregate efforts and resources to provide relief for children and their families. Action in Isolation went from working in two communities to comprising seven feeding centres in seven different communities, feeding hundreds of children daily.
Rural: KwaZulu Natal, Midlands (continued...)

Alison is the founder of Khulisani, a 51% black female owned Qualifying Small Enterprise (QSE). Khulisani is run entirely by women and provides fully sponsored accredited training in Agriculture to 145 learners (living with disabilities) a year from disadvantaged backgrounds. Khulisani is also involved in a number of community outreach projects which include sustainable living projects such as their Molweni Vegetable Gardens (where a group of unemployed rural women were assisted to establish community vegetable gardens); community youth projects; and their upliftment of rural community projects which provide good nutrition and access to education for marginalised rural communities. Alison also owns a successful dairy farm (Farm2you) which works hand in hand with the Khulisani agricultural academy.

Nobuhle works at Action in Isolation. She is a recent graduate in the Media Arts and assists Robyn with all operations. She is the daughter of a domestic worker who describes her own experience and exposure to education as atypical.

Gail is the managing director of Ethembeni (isiZulu, meaning Place of Hope). Ethembeni was set up in 2000 as a social outreach programme supporting people living with HIV and AIDS. Given the large number of single mothers and young mothers in the communities they work in, their work has focused largely on supporting women and their children through their maternal health programme.

Makhubalo and Lungile are the founders of Ubuntu Nest which aims to create spaces for conversations that generate empathy and connection and transfer of knowledge. Ubuntu Nest has launched and runs the Young Authors Book Initiative (YABI) - a project for young writers in the KZN Midlands designed to inspire imagination and hope in the youth and their communities. YABI aims to give young people a sense of purpose, facilitating their taking initiative in finding solutions for their lives through the development of their writing. The majority of the young people YABI works with are young women from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Our Focus Group consisted of 3 women who in their overlapping networks connect and meet with larger groups of women (predominantly from privileged backgrounds in the South African and KwaZulu Natal context). They have, by their own accounts, been involved for many years in activism regarding GBV and the many discussions on how to respond.

Urban: Western Cape, Peri-urban Cape Town

Mama Mickey is the founder of Yiza Ekhaya, a community project in Kuyasa, Khayelitsha that offers food, care and daytime shelter for children and adults with chronic illness. Yiza Ekhaya feeds approximately 200 children breakfast in the morning before they go to school, 350 children lunch after school and 165 vulnerable adults daily. While Yiza Ekhaya have a list of community members registered to receive food, they also do not turn away anyone who is hungry. Yiza Ekhaya offers after-school care for children, endeavouring to equip them with life skills.

Astrid works with Vheneka (Shona, meaning to illuminate) which is a shelter that provides medical care, psychosocial support services as well as a culinary school that develops skills and access to the job market for 12 women who have escaped human trafficking. In addition, they support a further 27 women as ‘outpatients’ supporting them with monthly stipends, food, and educational materials. Astrid noted the terrible situations that many of these women found themselves in during the lockdown – having no option but to go home to their abusers or pimps.

Roseanne describes herself as a Nurse and Nursing Educator. She worked in a Maternal Obstetric Unit in Hanover Park in the 1980s, during the height of Apartheid, understanding the profound impact of the quality of maternity on the human potential to break life cycles of poverty and violence even at a genetic level. She worked primarily with vulnerable young mothers/teenage girls who had dropped out of school. These teenage girls themselves were living at home with single mothers who were doing their best to cope with poverty, fulfilling the roles of both primary breadwinner and caregiver. Rosanne, from personal experience, attests to this being a very challenging combination of roles. Rosanne has returned to impoverished Hanover Park which is beleaguered by gang activity and violence, and started a young mother’s group - Girls Matter. Girls Matter meet weekly and is a space where the young women can be themselves and connect with other young mothers in a safe supportive space, facilitated by Rosanne. By focussing on mental health and wellness, Girls Matter is invested in these girls being better mothers to break the cycle of poverty and violence.

Yandi is the founder and operations manager of Masi Creative Hub in Masiphumelele informal settlement. Masi Creative Hub was founded in 2017. The organisation works to provide a safe, supportive and educational environment where community members can use the power of creativity and art to overcome their daily challenges. As of 26 March 2020, when the national lockdown started in South Africa, they have been running a feeding scheme for young children up to Grade 5. They have seven feeding stations and provide approximately 1,100 meals per day. Their volunteers also assemble 140 vegetable boxes a week and deliver them to elderly people in the community. Masi creative hub has an income generating women’s empowerment project; creating art from waste and cleaned recyclable material.

‘The children of Lidgetton are seen, heard and fed by Nokuthula'. Photo courtesy of sixfacecreatives.
The challenges and solutions listed below form an interlinked matrix, where factors and conditions work together or separately in different combinations and configurations. For instance, teenage pregnancy is linked to GBV as well as provision of education and to lack of economic opportunity. However, these headings are lenses to look at the overall experience rather than create discrete categories that diminish the complexity of the challenges being faced or the interdisciplinarity of the solutions.

Lack of funding and resources

South Africa has numerous foreign aid programs (including humanitarian aid). However, there is a lack of a central implementing institution or a reporting mechanism which makes it difficult to ascertain the full picture of South Africa’s aid programs. This research reveals that grassroots WROs and women-led CBOs have no access to foreign humanitarian aid.

The Solidarity Fund’s humanitarian pillar was ostensibly created to make funding available to CBOs dealing with GBV and humanitarian relief efforts, but very few of the interviewees were aware of this. They intimated that had they been aware of the funding, it was likely that the criteria for application and for reporting would have been a barrier to them receiving this support. Girls Matter, for example, do not enjoy resources being readily available or accessible with funders insisting on financial accountability and diligence that requires more time and expertise than is available to Roseanne - her focus and expertise being in the humanitarian aspects of the work. While the need for such accountability is understood, the point is made that small projects like Girls Matter – where one person drives an entire operation – are not able to meet the criteria of donors, despite the fact that these are the projects that are most in need of funding and support. She notes that individual and institutional donors often prefer to give material resources rather than commit to paying salaries, for instance, which would go much further to facilitating that Roseanne devote her time, skill and experience to doing this work. Illustrating another issue connected to this type of material support and charity, Roseanne is reluctant to give hand-outs to the young women she works with, having established very early on that as long as she was the source of hand-outs, a more holistic role of mentor and advisor became compromised because the group remained unempowered, turning to her to provide material resources (nappies/food). Roseanne asserts that it is important to foster self-worth in these young women and for that to be effectively done, they must not be rescued, rather they must develop and exercise authority and accept that only they can be the true experts of their lives.

In addition to not receiving humanitarian aid or government support, most CBOs included in the research also have limited or no support from NGOs or INGOs. The one in most dire need is Crystal Springs Crèche, where Ntombifuthi operates from a tiny makeshift corrugated iron and board shelter. The construction has no running water, not enough blankets, books or toys. Ntombifuthi neither has a first aid kit, nor the resources to properly implement Covid-19 hygiene protocols.

‘They call Cape Town the Mother City’ – Girls Matter provide healing space for young mothers in the ganglands. Photo courtesy of Intombi Pictures.
In the example of Yiza Ekhaya, restricted space makes social distancing impossible and only a limited number of children can be accommodated in the afternoons. There is no space for women and/or children to stay if they are in need of shelter or safety from situations at their homes. Mama Mickey gave the example of a grandmother in the community being raped daily by her son-in-law which went without intervention due to her daughter being caught up in alcoholism. After reporting the case to social services in the hope that they would intervene, Mama Mickey discovered the grandmother had died. Mama Mickey has been asked by the children she cares for in the afternoon if they can remain with her and avoid going home, opting even to sleep on the floor for lack of space. She confesses to being reluctant to ask them why they are so desperate to not be at home because she is exceedingly aware that Yiza Ekhaya does not have the resources to provide them with appropriate time, care or space for their relief and rehabilitation. Many situations and suspicions of GBV go uninterrogated due to the knowledge that resources will not be available or accessible.

In many cases material support, donated by concerned members of the privileged local communities, mainly in the form of food, was made available to CBO’s during the government lockdowns. Ubuntu Nest, expressing a sentiment prevalent across the sample group, acknowledges the value of peoples’ most basic needs being met, while strongly holding that interventions for justice need to be deeper than ‘making soup’, and that a lot of energy and expertise is being ‘dissolved’ by meeting nutritional needs only on the physical level. For instance, the lack of support or priority for the Arts as a vehicle for change presents a major challenge to the efficacy and sustainability of programmes like YABI and Masi Creative Hub, who are trying to address the systemic issues we face by cultivating, and innovating solutions and practices with creativity and imagination being powerful elements of doing so.

**Distrust of and lack of recognition from the government**

None of the CBOs included in this research received any recognition or support of any kind from the government. In most cases, attempts were not even made to access support from the government. The general position with regard to this finding can be characterised with mistrust.

Astrid from Vheneka describes a complete lack of interest from government bodies in assisting them or seeing their plight, citing the following as examples: they have made an application to the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) to accredit the culinary training they offer, but have received no acknowledgement or response after more than two years; when a family member of one of their social workers tested positive with Covid-19, Vheneka immediately requested tests for their staff from local government departments and hospitals, but were refused.

By all accounts government mechanisms and practices have not meaningfully aided WROs in providing adequate services and relief to women and children in need, and in certain cases even presented barriers to doing so. Robyn, from Action in Isolation, cites navigating local government politics and the related social hierarchy as the most challenging aspect of their work. Refusing to engage with political agendas has resulted in the organisation being denied practical access to a number of communities by local leaders or officials.

During the government-imposed lockdown all organisations responding to the dire issues that were arising, or exacerbated, due to the Covid-19 pandemic were required to have a permit to operate in their target communities. The permits were only issued for specific areas and times with no useful rationale. Regardless of whether they had a permit, organisations hoping to distribute assistance found themselves ‘locked’ out until they developed relationships with local government officials, often sycophantic.
one of the 22 areas that make up Khayelitsha. She relates how her own granddaughter, who is well known in the area was raped by a man in the community. And that another child went missing for 3 days, only to be discovered chopped up in a black rubbish bag and disposed of close by to Yiza Ekhaya.

It emerged from the focus group that the policing and legal systems appear to be unsympathetic and inefficient, often impeding women’s experience in opening cases or seeking justice. In addition, affected women need time and money to travel to police stations and courts to present their cases/have their voices heard. Most cannot afford this.

Roseanne from Girls Matter described how the Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the situation for women in Hanover Park. Of a group of 15, two young women were affected by violent domestic abuse, one was admitted to hospital after a suicide attempt and a further two were evicted from their homes. In one instance the young woman was allowed to stay in the home only because Girls Matter’s intervention meant that the household would receive food parcels. “It is an example of how girls become transactional objects,” offers Roseanne, “readily thrown out or subjected to abuse when they are no longer perceived as a resource.”

In another instance, a young girl being abused reported the abuse to her granny who refused to confront the male abuser because of his being the only earner in that household. Roseanne, being well connected with social workers in the area, arranged for a space in a safe house for this young woman. It is Roseanne’s opinion, which outlines another challenging associated dynamic, that despite the abuse she was subjected to, the girl chose to continue to stay at home because she would rather be abused than not belong (being new at the safe-house or being acknowledged as being a victim of GBV).

All of the rural KZN respondents said there are extremely limited resources for women who need to escape GBV in the rural and semi-rural areas. Shelters are often too far away and costly to get to and there are no crisis centres. Without these options, the majority of rural women are forced to accept their lot.
It was reported by every respondent that where basic services do exist, such as at schools and medical clinics, they are restrictively under-resourced and hence not adequate. It is the common experience in the sample group that Government clinics do not have sufficient resources to provide any kind of psychosocial support to women suffering GBV. Ethembeni actually receives calls from government clinics to provide such support to the women in their care. Furthermore, the local schools call Ethembeni to intervene when their learners fall pregnant. Ethembeni will provide holistic support for the young girls, engaging their family systems and, wherever possible, ensuring that they are not thrown out of the house, which is a common repercussion. For these young mothers, who can be as young as 13 years old, the Ethembeni maternal health programme/centre represents the only safe space they can access.

While urban areas do have more organisations and services for women in need, they are reportedly insufficient and currently overrun due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, according to Vheneka, these do not have the necessary skills, understanding and expertise to properly support victims of human trafficking. By 2010 there was only one shelter, accommodating up to 20 women, for all victims of human trafficking in South Africa. The legal system is also not properly equipped to deal with trafficking cases and there is a lack of reliable reporting.

As a safe haven for women, children and vulnerable community members, Yiza Ekhaya’s lack of space makes social distancing impossible and severely restricts the number of bodies that can be accommodated there during the daytime. While there is a strong need and will, there is no space for women and/or children to stay overnight should they be in need of shelter or safety from situations at their homes.

Psychological and social support is an important component of the survival, healing and coping of women experiencing GBV. Lockdowns and social distancing during this pandemic have estranged many women from the structures and mechanisms that were supporting them. In South Africa online platforms are not available to the majority of women in need due to high cost and a lack of reliable internet connection. Where they have been available, they are reported as being an inadequate substitute for face-to-face, in-person interaction.

**Crime**

Crime presents a dilemma in each of the communities that were investigated as part of this research. Poverty, poor service delivery and lack of access to resources couples with alcohol and drug addiction to contribute to various crimes and criminality. Street drugs that are available (Whoonga) are highly addictive and destructive physiologically and socially.

Young women living in the ganglands of the Cape flats are highly vulnerable to being manipulated and/or put into service by gang members - often forced to hide drugs, to be drug mules and to store drug money or weapons.

Human trafficking is a reality in South Africa that many do not acknowledge or understand the extent of. Astrid of Vheneka described the human trafficking network as highly organised and dangerously effective in procuring victims and forcing them to remain in their service. She described how women are moved around between ‘user-groups’; their families and children threatened if they try to escape or attempt to get help. Astrid made it clear that the women who are trafficked come from a wider range of backgrounds than what is assumed, citing an example of a mother and wife who was lured to Johannesburg’s Park Station with a job opportunity that held the promise of supporting her family and children, only to have all of her papers taken from her the moment she arrived to meet her would-be employers, and an ordeal of indentured criminal labour begin.

**Teenage pregnancy**

All of the respondents highlighted teenage pregnancy as one of the most pressing and ubiquitous issues facing young women in South Africa, particularly those from
disadvantaged backgrounds. There is a disproportionate number of young, often single, mothers without access to resources or education. Many school-aged girls get pregnant and drop out from school, struggling to find employment and to raise their children, often lacking the support or even the presence of the fathers. Many of these young mothers have their children live with their own mothers or grandmothers, resulting in many elderly women caring for a number of children (siblings and cousins) by themselves. Sex is not a subject healthily spoken about in families, which contributes greatly to making young girls vulnerable. Respondents felt that the pandemic has increased young women’s vulnerability since they have nothing to do during the day. Many young women feel despondent and pessimistic about a future with prosperity or possibility, often becoming [sexually] involved with an older man who can provide access to material benefits, which can be as basic as food. The overwhelming prevalence of teenage pregnancy has led to it being accepted as normal in many rural and urban communities in South Africa, sustaining and perpetuating the cycle of poverty down the generations.

**Food insecurity and unemployment**

The onset of Covid-19 and the accompanying lockdown protocols has caused and deepened issues of hunger across the country, especially as children were no longer attending school, the source of the only reliable meal of the day in many cases. GroundUp reports that more than 19,000 schools and 9.7 million qualifying learners depend on the school feeding programme.16

This is illustrated by Yandi’s experience in Masiphumelele, Cape Town – children were no longer attending school, they had no food, no masks and were completely unsupervised during the day. She describes the local recreational park being full of children from 9am, with children starving and crying, and in her words, “bothering each other because their stomachs were empty.” She reports that they had no access to basic hygiene materials such as soap. Yandi put out a desperate call on social media, to raise awareness of the situation and for support to feed and supply the children with masks and soap. Yandi describes the subsequent response as being a wonderful example of humanitarian aid from individuals, since she was able to source materials and food exceeding her expectations through private donations. This outpouring of donations allowed the initiative to quickly grow, requiring Yandi to request the use of a kitchen at a local school to make use of the food donations. She recruited 46 local women who, cooking in rotation, began feeding 1,080 children 5 times a week. Yandi has identified at least 100 of the 1,080 whose needs are the most desperate, ensuring that they are fed on the weekends too. It is agreed that hunger is generally concomitant with the other issues being faced by women and their children.

**Lack of positive role models and development of self esteem**

The respondents unanimously expressed concern that young boys and girls, particularly in underprivileged South Africa, generally do not have positive male role models. Many children of single mothers do not know who their fathers are, which is another abnormality accepted due to its familiarity. This is a major contributing factor to a widespread sense of apathy amongst youth and young adults. Positive perceptions of masculinity and femininity, including the relationship between genders are not supported by popular mainstream culture, in spite of rhetoric.
While the government issued promises to supply food parcels to communities in need, the successful distribution required co-ordinated, well-monitored efforts. Corruption Watch reports that, while some of the food parcels reached their targets, for many other communities, the needs of the poor and hungry remain unmet because of greed and corruption.17

Both interviewed organisations distributing food in the KZN midlands area stated that they are not aware of any distribution of food parcels by the government. Members of these organisations have observed that this unfulfilled expectation of relief from the government has led to resentment and jealousy when certain community members do manage to receive relief while others do not since the distribution of resources that is being achieved has not been able to cover everyone in need. This has manifested as conflict within communities.

Unemployment is a well-known challenge in South Africa. This issue is observed to be particularly demotivating for disadvantaged young people as they witness their parents, usually mothers, desperate for money and food for themselves and their families. In rural areas, especially where foreign migrants are working without papers or permits, labour law violations are rife, with women again being the most vulnerable. One of the respondents noted that women are consenting to work for as little as 40 ZAR per day (where the minimum wage for farmworkers in South Africa was 18.68 ZAR per hour in 2020). Many more South Africans face unemployment as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown protocols.

Lack of the right kind of education

The majority of respondents believe that education is key to breaking the cycle of gender injustice in South Africa. For parents to better support their children they also need access to education, skills and opportunities.

Furthermore, respondents reported that children and youth are not receiving the kind of education that encourages expression and allows them to question and challenge, developing authority within themselves. The directors of Ubuntu Nest noted that girls’ voices are often absent in the male-dominated school environment. There is very little opportunity for young people to express themselves authentically in this environment, particularly when that lies outside the popular or mainstream culture of the school or society at large. Based on their experiences thus far, Ubuntu Nest asserts that girls are exhibiting more readiness for their intervention than boys, that is to say the girls want their stories to be heard.

It emerged from interviews that life skills are no longer prioritised or even included in many school curricula. Where they are included, they are often taught ad hoc by a teacher without the necessary training and skill to adequately address the issues and challenges, let alone trauma, that learners face. Furthermore, respondents have reported schools being resistant when so-called outsiders offer talks or interventions.

While demands on parents, particularly where they are mostly young single mothers, can be extreme, it is unanimously agreed that their participation in their children’s education and development is essential for real change to take effect.

The Ethembeni team recognises the importance of the role played by mothers in supporting their daughters to break the cycle of teenage pregnancy by talking to them about sex and even accompanying them to the clinic to obtain contraception (young girls going to the clinic alone are often stigmatised by clinic sisters). To these ends they facilitate mother and daughter workshops.

YABI devotes itself to engaging young girls’ parents, encouraging them to ensure the girls in their programme have enough time, and necessary relief from household chores to write and to support reading as a habit (especially in relation to the perceptions of the duties and responsibilities of boy children in the home).
FINDINGS: WROs FEMINIST SOLUTIONS

Solidarity building
This research concludes that nearly 100% of respondents providing solutions to the challenges presented by Covid-19 and lockdowns in both rural and urban areas are women. They, in turn, report that nearly 100% of all the solutions they are observing in the field are being initiated and implemented by women.

All of the organisations that responded to form this research, are founded by independent women (and one atypical married couple) who have defied the patriarchal hegemony of South African society. Some are survivors of GBV and rape. Some have survived the trauma of their vulnerable family members being raped. All have supported women who have experienced GBV and/or rape. Descriptions of each of them typify strength, resilience and a strong motivation to fight for gender justice, as well as having to practically tend to basic needs in their environments. These respondents concertedy assert that with enough confident, brave women from every background standing together in solidarity, the patriarchal hegemony of socio-economic systems can be deconstructed and replaced with equitable ones.

The pandemic has alerted many more people to the violent abuse of women and human rights in our communities. Those less likely to have taken action before the pandemic, have been compelled to become involved in supporting their communities during the pandemic. The pandemic has highlighted the potential we have to mobilise and distribute resources and support where necessary. Organisations that were ‘working in silos’, that is to say, largely in isolation from each other, found ways to work together during the lockdowns. Gail, from Ethembeni, gives this example: government permits were only applicable to certain areas at certain times, which was not practical for Ethembeni, whose efforts support people from a number of separate communities. Yet by collaborating with other organisations who had permits for complementary areas and times, they were able to meet the needs of all of their beneficiaries. These organisations are continuing their relationship of sharing resources and expertise.

Access to networks
Analysis of the research makes clear that it is the personal networks [of women] of the CBO founders/leaders that determine the resources that are made available to them. Where respondents’ networks have included women from educated and privileged backgrounds, more resources have been made available and directed towards them, particularly in the relief context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Women who participated in this study from historically privileged backgrounds and described their education as good, were much more easily able to generate resources. For example, in February 2019, Vheneka was able to open due to the help of donated legal and financial services which they were

‘Leading Women out of Trauma into Joy and Dignity’
– The women who seek refuge from prostitution and trafficking at Vheneka are held by an incredible team lead by Social Worker Vulyolwethu and Home Mother, Amanda. Photo courtesy of Vheneka.
able to procure from their networks, forging organisational partnerships. In the case of Khulisani, the founder has the necessary skills and support to innovate and implement a business model that allows corporate clients to support Khulisani learners financially - receiving in return the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) points required by the government which increases their overall viability and profitability. Corporate sponsorship has meant that the learners at Khulisani Agricultural Academy continued to receive online training as well as their monthly stipends despite restrictions during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

Empowering women

Every respondent stressed the importance of women learning skills, trades and expertise; building their self-esteem and confidence to enable them to start their own projects or find employment which will afford them independence. Women are vulnerable because they have restricted or no means to earn and be self-reliant. Young mothers need the opportunity to continue their interrupted education. The broad view amongst respondents is that more empowerment and self-esteem for women is integral to changing the way things are in the world for the better.

Spaces like Yiza Ekhaya, Khulisani and Masi Creative Hub give young women, in particular, an opportunity to learn creative and practical skills, work together and succeed for themselves. The craft project of the Creative Hub is a small business run entirely by women making crafts from recycled waste materials. Yandi mentors these women, encouraging and empowering them to make their own business decisions. 10% of all sales go to the kitchen and the other 90% go to the collective who decide how to best use it in the interest and development of their business. Yandi is of the clear opinion that this initiative cannot stop here. The skills the women learn must be transferred to other members of the community so that the entire community is uplifted. Yandi has determined to develop and tap into her networks, both locally and internationally, to get buyers for the crafts made by the collective as well as increase the scope and range of activities and disciplines on offer at Masi Creative Hub.

Opportunities created by the pandemic: addressing gender stereotypes

While most respondents cited gender inequality as worsening during Covid-19 lockdowns, Ubuntu Nest opines that with lockdowns came some opportunities for greater empathy between genders as many men took the opportunity to experience and understand the work women generally do in the household. In some households’ women became sick and men had to take responsibility for caring for the family in ways that are generally considered feminine. For the first time in some communities men were seen hanging washing and cooking for the family. This might have presented a moment for more people to be grateful – an opportunity for men to ‘hit the reset button’, i.e. to redefine the narratives that restrict them from participating more fully as human beings in their own family lives, and in society at large.

In South Africa it is predominantly men who are in positions of power and privilege. “When a local male counsellor speaks, the community listens,” substantiates Nobuhle. It was proposed that counsellors [local officials] use their influential voices to challenge gender injustice and to promote respect for women, and that more men in general need to take responsibility for holding other men accountable for their part in the inequality of women in our society.

It emerged repeatedly in the research that men in South Africa have a narrowly defined set of behaviours that are considered acceptable and encouraged. For instance, while they can connect with friends through sport, it would likely be considered shameful to cook for those friends. Men are not encouraged to show vulnerability, to express sadness, or to share their feelings in general unless they fit a predefined image of masculinity. This was made most apparent to Ubuntu Nest, when they produced a play about a male character seeking romantic love, portrayed as vulnerable and expressing his feelings and perspective sensitively.
to receive a very small amount of money. In addition, criteria exclude a significant number of vulnerable women such as those without an ID or work permit, proof of address or who cannot prove that they do not have an income. It has largely been citizen activists, therefore, who have come forward to meet the most basic needs of fellow South Africans. The Khulisani/Farm2You story is a good example of a business taking responsibility for their community without prompting from authorities. With the arrival of Covid-19 in March 2020, their usual deliveries of milk to schools and businesses were abruptly stopped because of the government-imposed lockdown. The team immediately responded by making amasi (cultured milk) from their fresh milk which was then distributed directly to communities in need. Amasi is a highly nutritious, much-loved dairy staple of many communities in South Africa that does not require refrigeration, making it very viable in the context of providing food relief in the least advantaged and most remote communities. Farm2You has partnered with citizen community leaders to distribute the amasi to those most in need.

The directors of Ubuntu Nest strongly expressed the opinion that the South African government should stop talking about the problem of GBV, particularly in the media. Makhubalo was asked why he had chosen to write ‘such a Eurocentric play’ – indicating that such a perspective and voice could not have a place in our African context, and pointing to the continued complications of gender through colonialism. Ubuntu Nest went on to outline the need for men, particularly if they are black, to be freed from the gender role they have been ‘assigned’ so that their vulnerability, morality and humanity can be celebrated. Men and boys need to be included in the conversations and the activism around GBV, as collaborators and equal agents of change.

To this end Ubuntu Nest facilitates the male half of their partnership to talk to young men bimonthly through a local radio station broadcast – challenging them to be socially responsible and encouraging positive, more balanced masculinity. Ubuntu Nest is also initiating a series of workshops called MANVERSATIONs aimed at empowering young men through conversation and solidarity to define and embrace respect for themselves and particularly for women.

**Active citizens**

Many communities did not receive food parcels and the systems disbursing social grants have required a lot of administration.

The directors of Ubuntu Nest strongly expressed the opinion that the South African government should stop talking about the problem of GBV, particularly in the media.
Makhubalo, in particular, feels that it is of no help to continually point out to people what they are experiencing as their daily reality; that it gives people a false sense of hope that the government is actively working to stop the violence and rights abuse, but in his opinion, the talking and rhetoric is not followed by action. Makhubalo and Lungile are in agreement with other respondents in their assertion that Civil Society must act, saying: “We must help ourselves and our communities. We must create our own spaces separate from political agenda.”

It has been widely internationally recognised that small scale farming is the future for a sustainable world. The UN Commission on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) reported that organic and small-scale farming is the answer for ‘feeding the world’. Yandi and her team are not only growing food for themselves and the many children they feed; they are donating surplus food and supporting their community to grow food. Initiatives like theirs must be recognised and supported with materials, tools and training. Their innovation needs to be prototyped in other communities. Vheneka has expressed their need to incorporate growing food into their model, which would work hand-in-hand with the culinary training they offer. Nokuthula, with the invaluable help of her mother, manages a food garden at her home premises that goes toward feeding her family and community and which she would like to develop. Ntombifuthi’s crèche premises makes allowance for a food garden which has fallen into decay and disuse, lacking the resources and attention required to produce sufficiently. Ubuntu Nest has devoted part of their physical premises to the small-scale production of food.

The creative arts

Three of the respondents emphasised the importance of the Arts as an interdisciplinary vehicle for healing, development and education. In one case, Nokuthula specifically expressed a desire and need for the performing arts to be more available to her community to give the children a means of expression and collaboration not currently, or historically, available to them; that the inclusion of the arts would facilitate many other aspects of what she is trying to achieve. She gave the example of observing her children during collective Arts activities being a reliable means of identifying problems with individual children. In the other cases of Ubuntu Nest and Masi Creative Hub, the interviewees are artists, innovatively using the arts and related disciplines, to teach, develop and uplift. Each of the three advocates the cultivation of empathy and ubuntu in our society. Ubuntu is the indigenous concept of humanity that says, ‘I am because You are.’ This cultivation can be best achieved through the Arts, according to Ubuntu Nest, who believe that opportunities went unrecognised during the Covid-19 lockdowns for artists, in particular, to engage more deeply and confront the issues affecting our society. Ubuntu Nest responded to the lockdown by writing, directing and producing a play exploring the gender divide. The performance was available for viewing online. Furthermore it emerged that the Arts disciplines worked well as a means for training and disseminating information and changing entrenched behaviours.

Safe spaces

All of the organisations that participated in this research are physically providing safe spaces for women (and men) to challenge GBV.

Vheneka claims that it is their holistic approach to caring for survivors of human trafficking that makes them effective in working with these women. Astrid asserts that while there may only be 12 women currently living at Vheneka, their
rehabilitation will be comprehensive and they will become potent agents of change when they eventually leave. The importance of the depth of this kind of programme, despite it not having a broad reach, must be recognised and supported.

Yiza Ekhaya successfully cares for large numbers of vulnerable women and children in Khayelitsha during the day, highlighting a pressing demand in the community for such safe spaces. They need more space and resources to offer more comprehensive, holistic, and longer-term solutions, especially for women and children experiencing GBV and abuse. More space would allow Mama Mickey to facilitate women in the community coming together to learn skills and build businesses together, collectively caring for their children while becoming economically independent.

In the story of Girls Matter, Roseanne returned to Hanover park to start a young mother’s group, initially to see if she could help the girls get back into school. It quickly became apparent that what she thought the girls needed was not how they defined their needs. They did not want to go back to school as they felt they had already missed so much and did not want to return to a lower grade than their former peer group, which would demand resilience and healthy self-esteem. In addition, they were living in large families with no income, choosing to work even though their unskilled labour was not likely to be well-paid. Roseanne let the girls guide her to discover that their most pressing need was a safe space where they felt they belonged and could create a new and safe peer group. These young girls are stigmatised for having children. They lose their peer group when they drop out of school. In Hanover Park they cannot move around the community freely because of delineations of gang territory. While the Girls Matter model works, Roseanne is working alone and in need of funding that values her time and expertise and will allow her to employ and train more facilitators to play the role she is playing to proliferate the model, so that it can be tested and evolve in other communities.

The focus group discussed solutions that they have found to be innovative in the South African context. This included solutions where physical safe spaces are not available, mentioning #SAwomenfightback – a closed Facebook group, operating nationally, to which women can report if they have been abused. In turn, the online community can support them with information, even sourcing and providing accommodation for them from within the group where possible. This group has also provided women with an information vault app, a safe digital space where documents can be saved that could assist in the arrest or prosecution of an abuser or someone threatening abuse. Should something happen to the concerned woman, SA Women Fight Back can gain access to the vault in the complainant’s stead, through a court order. No information in the vault is linked to the victim’s mobile device in any way, ensuring their safety.

’Sustainable Food Security is Quality of Life’ – TPumla, one of the many vulnerable pensioners in Masi. Photo courtesy of Masi Creative Hub.
This research has identified that a humanitarian system of aid is not available to women and girls in South Africa, despite an entrenched patriarchal landscape with high levels of poverty, crime and violence. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated gender injustice, making women even more vulnerable. While the government attitude indicates that addressing and preventing further GBV is of national priority, it would appear that many organisations on the ground have received no funding from the Solidarity Fund. Added to this, CBOs report that government bureaucracy and politics present a hindrance and barrier to the impact and overall success of their work. Progressive legislation, which protects the rights of women is rendered out of reach for those most in need. There are a disproportionate number of single teenage mothers, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and vulnerability for [underprivileged] girls in South Africa.

Despite the challenges it is strong, independent and resilient women from all backgrounds who are challenging gender injustice and providing support for women and children in need. The Covid-19 context has encouraged and facilitated the working together of WROs, emphasising that collaboration creates greater possibilities for building solutions. The pandemic has induced more men to step up as positive role models, challenging traditionally oppressive male roles. Organisations are involving parents in their children’s development. Citizens have taken the opportunity to take responsibility for their fellow South Africans, becoming activists in the struggles against injustice and inequality. Organisations are recognising and using the Creative Arts as a tool for expression and education and a vehicle for effecting real change. WROs are creating safe spaces for women within the means available to them. Small-scale farming is becoming a productive reality in some communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this research the following is recommended:

1. The global community must recognise the war on women in South Africa. Covid-19 has, in this respect, been an opportunity for South African women’s struggle to be emphasised. The international community must recognise the crises faced by women in South Africa as requiring humanitarian attention, funds and resources which must be directed to support those women working at the front line and grassroots level, on their own terms, in the fight against gender injustice.

2. The humanitarian system must understand that there is no working ‘one size fits all’ approach. The time and cost implications, monetary and human, to fight this war, is not easily measured. Best practice depends on the context. The international community needs to understand the unique complexities of problems facing women in South Africa, even where the problem appears similar to elsewhere in the world.

3. International and local donors, including government bodies, must make funding applications and reporting accessible and applicable to grassroots workers. It must not remain that funding opportunities recognise on paper how valuable the work of CBO’s is, and yet continue to prescribe application and reporting criteria that necessitate an administrative burden on CBOs, diverting attention and human resources from the work they are being
funded to do. Subjecting grassroots CBOs to stringent, inflexible reporting requirements should be deemed unfair where it impinges on their ability to effectively do the work.

4 Those wanting to join the fight against gender injustice and support survivors must recognise women as experts in their own lives. All of us wanting to help and change the lives of women need to adopt and encourage a trust that these women can be the ‘experts’ of their own lives. A safe space needs to be created for women to be asked what they need, and for them to develop the confidence and authenticity to give an answer.

5 International and local donors, including government bodies, must ensure services and funding are inclusive, recognising that rural areas are often the most disadvantaged. Similarly, organisations working with small numbers of women must not be excluded from funding opportunities. Quality should be valued as much as quantity, depth as much as breadth.

6 International and local donors, including government bodies, must support the development and sustainability of holistic safe spaces for women providing services that ensure physical, emotional and mental health.

7 The South African government must insist on progressive education including addressing issues of sex, gender and issues of GBV and young women and men must be included in these conversations. Those making the space and giving training need to be skilled and have the appropriate tools to effectively facilitate these interventions. This must be included and prioritised in the overall education curriculum. Creative and performing Arts can play a more crucial interdisciplinary role in our education system to cultivate the society we want.

8 South African legislation and its equitable implementation must be made accessible to the most vulnerable women. Progressive legislation alone is not enough to protect and empower women in South Africa and guarantee their rights.

9 Local communities, the national government and the international community must recognise and be willing to learn from the expertise and resilience of female-led CBO’s, who in the face of extreme obstacles remain motivated and innovative. The women-led CBO’s included in this research, and others like them, should be provided with a pathway to lead the Covid-19 pandemic response rather than suffer being side-lined with no support and no decision-making power.

10 National socio-economic strategies must centre around the economic empowerment of girls and women in South Africa, focusing on the training, skills and entrepreneurial opportunities to become financially independent and generative. Plans need to be holistic, taking into account the need for mentorship, childcare, and psychosocial support to allow women to succeed in becoming self-reliant and independent from men.

11 The global community must recognise the transformative role that art and culture can play in empowering and inspiring women in South Africa and around the world. Where poverty and violence are prevalent, the Arts as an interdisciplinary vehicle for cultivating change can play a key role in generating confidence, self-esteem and self-reliance but also, improve the function of other methodologies and strategies.

‘Teaching the Value of Real Wealth’ – Mama Mickey nourishing her veggie garden and community. Photo courtesy of Green Home.
REFERENCES

1 Retrieved from: https://www.feministhumanitariannetwork.org/
2 For more information visit: https://www.thelivinguniversity.com/
3 For brevity, organisations have primarily been referred to as WROs throughout this report, though in some instances CBOs has been used, as some respondents define themselves as women-led CBOs.
7 Stats SA: 2018. Quarterly labour force survey—Quarter 2: 2018
12 Retrieved from: https://solidarityfund.co.za/
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Cover image: ‘Masking up with Love’ – Mama Mickey, Grandmother to all at the Yiza Ekhaya Soup Kitchen, a lighthouse for the Kuyasa, Khayelitsha community. Photo courtesy of Intombi Pictures.

Contributing organisations include:

Intombi Pictures: intombipictures.com
Action in Isolation: actioninisolation.co.za
Ethembeni: ethembeni.co.za
Khulisani: khulisani.co.za
Ubuntu Nest: facebook.com/UbuntuNestZA
Masiphumelele Creative Hub: masicreativehub.org
Yiza Ekhaya: yiza.greenhome.co.za
Vheneka: vheneka.org
Girls Matter: girlsmatter.org.za

FEMINISTHUMANITARIANNETWORK.ORG