

# Gender Based Violence in South Africa: Interview with Bernedette Muthien

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[BERNEDETTE MUTHIEN](#)

Interview conducted by [Annika Schall](#)

Bernedette Muthien, Executive Director of the South African NGO [Engender](#), speaks to Annika Schall about gender based violence, its root causes and possible solutions.

## **Question 1: What are the most common forms of gender based violence in South Africa and what are its root causes?**

When we talk about forms of abuse it ranges from battery to family murders where men kill the women and all the children - everyone in the entire house is murdered. South Africa has high rates of rape as well. For example women who are perceived as a threat to the system get raped. So if you are a single woman who refuses to marry or to have children you expose yourself to gender based violence and rape. If you are a lesbian especially a masculine looking lesbian, or if you are a gay man who looks more feminine, you will expose yourself to rape. Anything that is not gender conforming will be susceptible to rape. Men get raped opportunistically as well.

So when we discuss forms let's just try to understand how the violence works: Gender based violence obviously occurs based on gender and the root cause of all violence we would argue is patriarchy. It precedes all the economic systems we know today: it precedes capitalism, socialism, etc. And patriarchy has been around for thousands of years depending on the history of colonization of the region. In some regions of the world patriarchy has been around for 5000 years; in others more like 2000 years. What patriarchy does is it uses violence in general to control people and gender based violence specifically to control people. This can be seen by looking at child rape and child sexual abuse. When a child is raped, then that person is marked by that rape for the rest of their lives. Sometimes they themselves become perpetrators. In other words, if you rape a child, you have that person incapacitated for almost the rest of their lives. It can become an incredibly powerful source of control, and then you have an automatic cyclic existence of rape: generation after generation gets raped. I become a parent, I rape my child - it perpetuates itself and the mechanisms of control become almost unconscious. It is a system to maintain control over people, and women in particular.

**Question 2: When it comes to gender based violence and sexual violence in particular, statistics indicate a high level of these crimes in South Africa. Why do you think that is?**

As I've said, the root cause of all violence and all gender based violence in the world, and in South Africa as well, is patriarchy. This violence, borne out of patriarchy, exists all over the world. In 2005 two main organizations did multi-country studies to show the extent of violence against women: one was the World Health Organization, and the other one was Amnesty International. Results showed that violence against women is endemic. Women are not safe in any part of the world, whether it be Bloemfontein, Bombay or Berlin. So that is compounded by various other things like economics, what social class you come from, in what region you live, all kind of things; sexual orientation, sexual preferences etc. All these parameters reflect and compound your vulnerability to various forms of sexual violence. When it comes to South Africa it may seem that there is a much higher rate of violence against women and violence in general than in the rest of the world. But because there are no reliable statistics that one can compare with the world over, we cannot accurately say whether this is true or not. What we can say is that we track records very well here. Our Medical Research Council is run quite well. Several years ago their research showed a femicide rate where a female is murdered by a male partner every 6 hours. So we can say that South Africa gathers our statistics well, so we do have better records than other places. But another fact about South Africa is that we are a post-conflict society. For 300 years we had colonialism and slavery, then we had about 50 years of Apartheid and both of these were extremely brutal periods and the impact it had on the indigenous people was horrific. So we live in a society that is still suffering from these centuries of conflict and violence. It is no surprise that violence can still be found in the society to such a very large extent. It is compounded by economic issues - we have a lot of people living in poverty. Many people are of the opinion that the population is poorer now under democracy than it was under Apartheid, and the state fails in its welfare services. People are dying waiting in line for public health care. So given all these things, and the fact that we have a culture now where people think that like in a soap opera they can make a lot of money in a nanosecond by doing armed robbery for example. An attitude that screams - easy money. A philosophy of live fast, die young. These are some of the issues that we face, now I cannot say that South Africa is a particularly evil country, but I can say that we document extremely well.

**Question 3: A lot of these records might be misleading because many offences are not even reported to the police. Why do victims decide not to report?**

For a number of different reasons. When we have a situation where the police or the criminal justice system is not responsive, people are going to be reluctant to report. When you call the police and you say "my husband or my boyfriend is beating me! Come and rescue me!" and they say "No, it's a private matter, we cannot intervene" then you are not going to bother calling them next time. Sometimes the police brutalize the caller. There are instances in South Africa and elsewhere where a woman who got raped and then sought

help from the police was raped by the policemen again. So there are lots and lots of reasons why reporting might be problematic or might be low.

The kind of legislation that we have in South Africa like the Domestic Violence Act of 1999 (DVA) is very progressive but at the same time our judicial system, especially the police, are not often not aware of the DVA's provisions. They do not know that they are by law compelled to follow a system that tells them exactly what to do and how to behave, and how to help complainants. They cannot tell me it is a 'private matter' and I must sort it out with my husband.

**Question 4: Since the end of Apartheid how has the South African government dealt with the problem?**

It is a complicated question and I do not want to attack my government unnecessarily, but I believe our government is a patriarchal institution. The political party that comprises the government, and all other political parties for that matter, serve patriarchy. The political party the government is made out of has a women's league, which has paid lip service to gender issues and women's concerns. They are there to support the President and the political party and not to push gender issues or any issues in general, because their members care for political positions and for power. So if I am in the women's league and I want to be a minister or get another fancy job or if I want to benefit from politics, then I have to support the patriarchal institution. In return patriarchy will keep me around because it wants people to support it. So I do not think we have the political will around gender issues. I think we have become even more archaic than before in regard to the extent to which it now has become normalized to have more than one wife, for example. Various other things have become normalized. The President speaks on national television during a talk show and says how grateful he is that his daughter is getting married, because a woman is not a woman until she is married and has children. I think things are not getting better and a reason for that is a lack of political will which compounds the lack of resources available. We have gender NGOs and such NGOs are being forced to close because of a lack of funds. Engender now operates in my home - we do not have an office anymore, we even had to stop our landline. You get squeezed by patriarchal institutions in order to stop your work. But we simply cannot stop our work, with or without funding.

**Question 5: What needs to be done to make sexual violence a less prevalent topic in South Africa and what would you wish for in the future?**

We need to do many different things and no solution is easy or simple. We need resources and we need political will. We need to go from door to door, speak to women and men and children. We need to work with people's mindsets in the same ways we worked against Apartheid very effectively. We need to show how an archaic patriarchal outlook harms women and men and how we can make a better world for everybody. We absolutely do need ways for people and communities to survive economically. Not in the sense of

becoming a lawyer, a doctor or a laborer, but employment in the sense of where people are engaged in constructive work in a community, where they are engaged in what we call in Africa ubuntu, which is about a sense of community, a sense of belonging, looking after one another. We really need to reclaim this ubuntu to show that we are dependent, and can rely, on one another.

I would like to continue to have hope. We must try and find hope for what we do and it would be good if we could continue to do the work we do – To find more and more people using cooperation rather than competition, and if more and more men come along and say “We have to construct better models of masculinity, better ways to relate to one another”; more and more women saying, “I do not want to be a victim. I want to take my own agency and power but I don’t want to be like Margaret Thatcher either. I want to be a woman who is not patriarchal.” and women coming together, working with one another, that could be very wonderful. A world beyond the shackles of patriarchy.

The views expressed in this interview are the interviewee's own and do not necessarily reflect Fair Observer’s editorial policy.