

Gender violence is a crisis, says Ramaphosa, as activists look for action

By Greg Nicolson and Chanel Retief • 29 March 2019

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa speaks during a question and answer session in parliament, Cape Town, South Africa, 14 March 2018. EPA-EFE/NIC BOTHMA Less

Reactions

President Cyril Ramaphosa acknowledged the brutal reality of gender-based violence on Thursday as he pledged to tackle the scourge. It's time to stop talking and start acting, said civil society groups.

Earlier in March 2019, Rakgadi Mohlahlane attended a workshop on gender-based violence (GBV) with prosecutors, police officers, civil society members and healthcare workers in Johannesburg.

A doctor described the pathology of sexual offences — where to look for evidence of violence and how long it lasts. How can we preserve evidence if we're attacked, someone asked.

Mohlahlane, a member of the Stop Gender-Based Violence Campaign, stood to speak. "I'm just so sad," she repeated, "to live in a country where we have to prepare to be raped."

President Cyril Ramaphosa on Thursday said the country was in crisis. He was signing the declaration against GBV and femicide in Booyens, Johannesburg, and urged society to fight for the rights of women. "Right

here, today, we are turning the tide,” said Ramaphosa. “So many of our country’s women face a reality of harassment, of abuse and of violence. Our nation is facing a crisis. Our women no longer feel safe in their homes and on the streets. Rape, abuse and sexual assault are rampant, often committed by those closest to them. Gender-based violence impacts us all.” The declaration emerged from the National Summit Against GBV and Femicide, held in November 2018 in response to marches across the country under the banner of #TotalShutdown. Thursday also saw the launch of the new Booysens Magistrate’s Court, which houses the 84th Sexual Offences Court established since the specialised courts were [reprioritised](#) in 2013. Ramaphosa sat in on a case. A teenage survivor recounted how a perpetrator raped her. She told the court how many times he raped her and described how he attacked her. She could identify him if he was in court, she said, speaking in-camera. “Today begins a new era in our determined struggle to rid our society of gender-based violence and femicide,” the president later said. Ramaphosa signed the declaration on behalf of the South African government before representatives from civil society groups including #TotalShutdown, Call for Action, Gender Links and the National Shelter Movement joined him. Under the declaration, stakeholders commit to establishing a national GBV council within six months. At least 51% of its members must be from civil society. Within those six months, a plan on GBV will be developed, which appears to follow the model set by the national strategic plan for HIV, TB and sexually

transmitted infections. The declaration commits to developing programmes to challenge patriarchal norms, reviewing laws related to GBV and adequately resourcing the various interventions. “We intend to implement what we set out in this declaration,” said Ramaphosa. “We will require significant resources if we are going to end gender-based violence in our country,” he added. In February, activists [criticised](#) Finance Minister Tito Mboweni’s 2019 Budget Speech for failing to mention gender issues. Ramaphosa also appeared to endorse decriminalising sex work, stating that stakeholders would develop a decriminalisation policy. The event was attended by Minister of Justice and Correctional Services Michael Masutha, Minister of Women Bathabile Dlamini, Minister of Public Works Thulas Nxesi and Minister of Higher Education and Training Naledi Pandor. Pandor lauded Ramaphosa’s efforts. “This is the first time a president has made such a commitment in South Africa,” she said. A group of academics wrote an open letter to Pandor on Saturday [highlighting](#) issues of sexual violence and sexual harassment on campuses. Pandor said on Thursday it was “most shocking”, but is yet to respond publicly to their concerns. Civil society representatives and activists welcomed Ramaphosa’s speech, but want to see the commitments implemented. Wits University GBV researcher Lisa Vetten said there were stalled attempts in 2013 to start a national GBV council. “What can we learn so that we do not let the same mistakes happen again, because we now seem to have some political will to reinvent the wheel?” she asked. “There has been no

critical analysis as to why those things don't work," Vetten added. The Stop Gender-Based Violence Campaign's Mohlahlane, who lamented the reality of violence at the workshop earlier in March 2019, said declaring GBV a national crisis was "a huge step". Mbali Mngomezulu from Black Womxn Caucus agreed: "He finally declared gender-based violence a crisis, which was long awaited." Advocate Brenda Madumise, convener of the Interim Structure on GBV, established after the November national summit, said: "We have heard the president saying the same thing, maybe more emphasis this time. For us, it's about implementing this declaration with understanding, dignity and integrity. "The declaration is quite comprehensive and integrated. It deals with prevention. It deals with accountability. It deals with support. It deals with laws and policies. It deals with resourcing," she added. Madumise said co-ordinating efforts under a national council was critical. "One of the biggest challenges for government is that the Department of Women doesn't know what the Department of Social Development is doing. Department of Justice does not know what the Department of (Social) Development is doing." Rebecca Mort, women's health and empowerment programme coordinator for the Women on Farms Project, also highlighted the declaration's emphasis on collaboration. "It's a very important platform and useful platform where it's not government making decisions remote from the concerns of survivors of gender-based violence." As Vetten pointed out, this isn't the first time such programmes have been proposed. Civil society

representatives said they would closely monitor the declaration's implementation. "As much as we sit around the same table, that does not mean we have lost our voice and our urgency outside that table. I think it just requires holding government accountable as always," said Mort. Mngomezulu said there had been encouraging developments since the GBV summit, but new accountability mechanisms needed to be established to ensure the national council met its targets. "Look, it's an important start, but we will see how it will continue," said Vetten. "Because many things in South Africa have been started in relation to gender-based violence since 1994. The problem has been sustaining them." Mngomezulu added: "A key indicator will be what happens after the elections." Leaders at the event spoke with urgency. Ramaphosa said, "the cancer of women abuse has no place whatsoever in our homes, in our communities, in our churches, in our schools, on our streets and in our villages, towns and cities". But activists and survivors, like the teenager who testified in court on Thursday, live with abuse's prominent place in society and have reason to doubt the president's commitments. "It's a start, but let's see what comes next," said Vetten. **DM**