

3rd Annual Paddy Kearney Memorial Lecture

26 August 2021 – On-line

Co-hosted by Denis Hurley Centre, Durban University of Technology, Gandhi Development Trust and Phoenix Settlement Trust.

Lecture by Fr Michael Lapsley SSM

Healing Old Wounds of Women and Men to End Gender Based Violence and Femicide

Today's Lecture is to reverence the memory, celebrate the legacy, and find the inspiration for today, from the witness of Paddy Kearney. I am humbled and honoured to be asked to give this Paddy Kearney Memorial Lecture

I recall hosting an evening with Paddy at the Anglican Chaplaincy of the University of Natal soon after Diakonia was founded in 1976. When I returned from exile 16 years later Paddy was still going strong. He lived out his faith in a commitment to social justice, quietly leading and mobilizing the Christian community together with strong interfaith partners as Director of Diakonia which later became the Diakonia Council of Churches.

When the violence, looting and destruction unfolded recently, I am sure many of us asked ourselves, how would Paddy Kearney have responded. As the film we watched indicated, Paddy would have acted collectively to help stop the violence and address the root causes, inspired by his faith in a God of liberation.

Just a few weeks before his death, Paddy had gladly agreed to serve on the advisory committee of the Institute for Healing of Memories in KwaZulu Natal. That is why I know that Paddy would have been committed to healing the new wounds, especially in relation to the horror of what happened in Phoenix, as well as the older unhealed wounds of racism and obscene inequality that characterizes our society.

The spirit of Paddy invites us to have a sober, steady, and a compassionate voice, helping us to imagine and act together to create a shared future. While short in stature, Paddy was a moral giant and a role model for yesterday and today

My topic for tonight is Healing Old Wounds of Women and Men to End Gender Based Violence and Femicide

On one occasion I was in a healing of memories workshop in Hawaii. Myself and my colleague were the only two men present. Women told stories of gender based violence and abuse, crossing generations. At one point I felt moved to say "I feel guilt and shame as a man for what you as women have experienced at the hands of men". One of the women began to cry. She said it was the first time in her life that she had heard a man apologise for the pain she had experienced as a woman.

The violence of men against women represents the oldest unhealed wounds in human history.

According to UN Women, globally, an estimated 736 million women—almost one in three—have been subjected to intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life (30 per cent of women aged 15 and older). It has existed since time immemorial and has increased exponentially in this time of COVID 19.

Even before Covid 19, gender based violence has been of epidemic proportions in South Africa. As President Ramaphosa said

“South Africa holds the shameful distinction of being one of the most unsafe places in the world to be a woman. We have amongst the highest rates of intimate partner violence, and recently released data from Statistics SA show that rape and sexual violence have become hyperendemic. This is a scourge that affects us all: young and old, black or white, rich and poor, queer or cis, rural or urban. It pervades every sphere of our society. Women and girls are being abused, assaulted and murdered in our country every day - at the hands of men. We are in the throes of a deep crisis that must be brought to a decisive end” – Mr Cyril Ramaphosa – National Strategy on GBVF

Just for a moment let me go back in time a little

As a response to what was then the forthcoming Truth and Reconciliation Commission, some of us created an experiential process which we called a Healing of the Memories Workshop. Our focus at the beginning was with the psychological emotional and spiritual wounds caused by apartheid. Over the last 20 years, the Institute for Healing of Memories (IHOM) has offered workshops in 5 continents

In a healing of memories workshop, all the participants are invited to share their life stories. The two most frequent themes of peoples stories across the world have been childhood trauma and gender based violence. Gender based violence is an issue for the whole human family but very especially for us here in South Africa.

Fatima Swartz, program director of the Institute has noted:

"This moment in history is calling for an extraordinary effort to stem the continued, sustained and escalating onslaught on the life and wellbeing of women and children at the hands of men. We are called to act on multiple fronts to change the reality for woman and children today, tomorrow and for years to come.

As we hold men accountable for their actions, we also need to create the space for men to reflect on their life journeys. What has brought them to where they are now? At the start of a healing of memories process we ask people to reflect on how the history of the country has affected them? The violent behaviour, attitudes and actions of men has a long history. The efforts to change the trajectory has never been as urgent as now. An integral part of that change is the healing journey of men.

During the Healing of Memories healing process, we ask people to reflect on three questions to assist them to take one step towards their healing. What did you do? What was done to you? What did you fail to do? Men have a story to tell. The IHOM creates safe spaces for men to share their stories, to lift the veil on secrets kept, hardships endured, pain inflicted and to acknowledge wrongs that has been done. It seeks to assist men to take responsibility for the choices made, where possible to make amends and become active participants in building a better world.”

As an Institute for healing of memories we launched a campaign At the Hands of Men in November 2020. While it is true that women can abuse and be violent against men, the overwhelming proportion of violence is by men against women

We deliberately focused on men. Even in the language we use about gender based violence it is spoken of in the passive voice without mentioning the victimiser who are most frequently, men. We partnered with organisations of women who have been abused by men. However this particular media campaign focusses on men who are or have the potential to be either perpetrators or activists against GBV.

The Institute commissioned graphic artist Rudi Oosterwyk to produce posters to provoke debate in relation to gender based violence and femicide. Please look carefully at the posters you will now see and allow yourself to be challenged and provoked to act.

A press release of the Institute in November 2020 noted:

“The campaign is geared towards contributing meaningfully towards the eradication of Gender-Based Violence, Femicide, and Human Trafficking globally with our partner organizations on the continent, North America, and Asia. More importantly, we also aim to contribute to the HEALING of survivors.

Through our engagements on the continent what has emerged is that GBV has a strong link to cultural beliefs and practices e.g. marriage customs or the belief that sexual intercourse with a virgin heals HIV, and so on. Although this myth has been slated by medical experts, the reality is that it persists within our society today.

Forced virginity testing also happens in countries on the continent including South Africa. It is a form of abuse and a violation of human rights.”

People living with disability are much more prone to violence and abuse than their able-bodied peers. We must come to a point where we strive and envision a culture in which we are all safe, empowered, and free from violence in all its multiple facets.

Many women who have been violated as children speak about how they tried to tell a parent and they were shut down. The victim was blamed for being the victim. This then severely damaged their relationship most often with their mothers, for decades and sometimes forever.

It is common knowledge that the lockdowns in relation to Covid 19 led to a spike in gender based violence across the world. In the United States, #Me Too became a viral hashtag following the New York Times and New Yorker investigations into the sexual misdeeds of Harvey Weinstein. Women across the world spoke out in increasing numbers about what they have endured at the hands of men.

What has most often happened in private, came into the public domain. Some women who come to our healing of memories workshops tell us that it is the first time to speak about what they endured. When women are attacked, the moral order is inverted. Women tell us how important it is that they are listened to and that they are believed.

Here in South Africa, the Me Too reverberated with Jennifer Ferguson laying a rape charge against Danny Jordaan, 24 years after the alleged rape took place.

Transgendered people and lesbians, especially black lesbians, here in South Africa, suffer rape and murder at the hands of men.

What is the root cause of Gender Based Violence?

My friend Chris Ahrends says:

“My view is that the root of all systemic violence as we know it today, lies in patriarchy, which is the continued domination over the many institutions of life, including religion, education, economics, family life, especially Caucasian patriarchy. We need to undermine it, deconstruct it, replace it in its entirety..... Let's start with Christianity...”.

I asked my face book friends what they thought were the most effective antidotes to gender based violence.

Sello Moshoeshe said: “The issue of masculinity needs to be addressed time and again, to reinforce the idea of a man whose manhood is not based on violence.”

Much has been written about toxic masculinity. Some of the examples we can think of may be very close to home

In a patriarchal society, women as well as men, have internalized a patriarchal narrative that blames women for being violated. I am sure we can all recall examples where this has happened.

Jennifer Henry says: “We need a movement of male allies, working collaboratively with women leadership, but dedicated to working with men directly. I imagine grandfathers dedicated to eradicating male violence and male clergy confronting the ways in which religion implicitly or explicitly degrades and denies an understanding that women are made co-equally in the image of God.”

The Omotoso trial yet again showed the nation, the kind of humiliation and degradation women have to undergo in the courts to be able to get justice. Little wonder that women who have been raped, in the majority of cases, do not press charges.

What is the opposite of toxic masculinity? Or, conversely, what does healthy masculinity look like?

From early childhood, boys and girls have to be helped to discover healthy ways of expressing their emotions especially anger. Men are violent towards women as an expression of their anger. Anger is the tip of the iceberg. Below anger there are many other emotions, especially issues around powerlessness, emasculation, self worth, and vulnerability. In many countries, I have visited, I am told that men don't cry. Then we have a healing of memories workshop and many of the men cry their hearts out, often for the first time in their adult lives. As much as women do, men need safe places where they can deal with what we carry inside ourselves in ways that don't cause further harm to ourselves or others.

Levi Singh stresses the importance of Comprehensive Sexuality Education for children and adolescents. “Most of the data we have of properly implemented, science based CSE show that in countries where children and young people access CSE, lower levels of violence is observed, an uptake in health seeking behaviour, as well as better general understanding of concepts such as consent.”

Dr Molefi Manoto argued that socialism is the antidote where the burden of social expenditure or cost of living is evenly distributed. To put it another way, only by dismantling patriarchy and creating a society where there is more equality and gender equity in particular, will we eradicate gender based violence.

All the interventions of The Institute for Healing of Memories including in relation to Gender Based Violence are aimed at Prevention or Advocacy, Healing and Empowerment. We have 4 Patrons, 3 of whom are women.

Kirsty Sword Gusmao is the Former First Lady and founder of the Alola Foundation in Timor Leste which focusses on the empowerment of women and girls.:

“Traditional Timorese societal norms and an entrenched patriarchy along with trauma associated with conflict and violence in its past, place women at risk of experiencing gender inequality and gender based violence. Family violence was the single most reported crime throughout the period of the UN Transitional Administration and continues to be rife today in spite of a 2010 law defining it as a public crime.

The case presently before the courts of an American paedophile priest accused of systematic sexual abuse of minors over many decades highlights the difficulties faced by the country’s most vulnerable citizens, namely its girls and young women, to report and prosecute crimes committed against them by powerful men. The pressures upon them to remain silent are enormous. In fact, silence is the preferred option of many Timorese boys and girls, men and women experiencing violations of their human rights, particularly when the perpetrator enjoys political or some other form of power and when reporting the violations may lead to loss of employment and/or privacy.”

Just recently Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand and former Administrator of UNDP was a signatory to an open letter to Facebook, Google, TikTok and Twitter CEOs calling on them to tackle the abuse of women on their platforms.

“38 per cent of women globally have directly experienced online abuse. Better tools are needed to manage safety and report abuse.

The social media giants mentioned above made commitments to action on online abuse against women at the #GenerationEquality Forum recently, but effective actions must now follow words.”

HRH Maria Teresa, the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg set up an organization called “Stand, Speak, Rise up” to continue the fight against sexual violence in conflict zones. Specifically it is fighting to stop rape as a weapon of War.

“Even if we cannot end war, we can and must end rape as a weapon of war”

The campaign to end the violence against women and girls is predicated on the view that a better world is possible.

We envision and strive for a world where the feminine and masculine in all human beings will be celebrated.

Father Michael Lapsley, SSM
Founder of the Institute for Healing of Memories