

Mapping Gender Norms in Public Social Media: A South African Study

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Gender-based violence (GBV) is a human rights issue of global concern that has far-reaching health, economic and social consequences for all societies. GBV occurs in online and offline spaces and while both women and men experience GBV, women and girls experience the highest levels of violence (Abdool, 2021; Crooks 2017; South African Government, 2021). Unequal power dynamics in relationships produce and reinforce GBV on an interpersonal level, while structural forms of GBV – unequal political, economic and social systems – normalize the subordination of women and fuel interpersonal forms of violence (Machisa, Christofides, & Jewkes, 2016; Montesanti & Thurston, 2015). These intersecting levels of GBV have significant consequences for women, their children, families and communities across the world (Ellsberg et al., 2008; World Health Organization (WHO), 2016).

In South Africa, GBV is rife, and it is a major obstacle to the achievement of peace, gender equality and social cohesion (Joyner, 2016; WHO, 2016). Due to widespread underreporting and low prosecution rates, available statistics fail to adequately reflect the true extent of GBV. However, between 2019 and 2020 alone, the South African Police Service (SAPS) reported 53,293 sexual offences while 2,695 women were murdered in South Africa (2020). Global research has confirmed that direct experiences of violence in childhood are known to drive an intergenerational cycle of GBV (Carlson, Ikenberg, & Vargas, 2018; Schmidt, Kolodinsky, Carsten, Schmidt, & MacLachlen, 2007). The cycle of violence is perpetuated through unequal gender norms and reinforced through the attitudes and behaviors an individual learns through their exposure to specific family and community environments in childhood (Bandura, 1997). Consequently, boys who experience GBV and domestic violence, tend to display misogyny, negativity and anger toward women as adults. They are also more likely to try and control their

partners and to be perpetrators of GBV in adulthood (Cunha & Gonçalves, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2007).

This concept of cyclical violence links to Bronfenbrenner's well established ecological model, which acknowledges that a person's behavior is influenced by their interaction with their physical, social, economic and political environments (2001). Accordingly, conflict, post-conflict and high-violence settings are known to give rise to multiple forms of trauma (Machisa et al., 2016). This was evident in South Africa recently, where cases of GBV escalated radically in response to the Covid-19 crisis, particularly during the 'hard lock down' of 2020, when many women and girls faced confinement with abusive male relatives and partners (Dlamini, 2021). Moreover, in June 2020, following the return to lockdown "level three" in South Africa, when alcohol sales reopened and a greater freedom of movement was allowed, femicide and GBV escalated to an even more alarming level. During this period, we received daily reports of women and girls who were being brutally abused and murdered at the hands of men. Tshogofatso Pule, who was eight months pregnant when she was stabbed to death and left hanging from a tree, is one horrific example (BBC News, 2021).

Many South African expressed their feelings of hopelessness and frustration with GBV on social media by sharing stories of violence and by tagging their posts with hashtags such as, "#MenAreTrash". This is a key example of the increasingly important role that social media plays in our everyday lives. Virtual communities and networks offer individuals opportunities to interact and to find solidarity by sharing experiences, information, ideas and interests (Munzel & Werner, 2013; Obar & Wildman 2015). The number of social media users is rapidly growing and so is the amount of time that people spend on social media sites. For example, by October 2020, there were over four billion social media users in the world (Kemp, 2021). In the same year, the number of social media users in South Africa increased by 14% from 22 to 25 million people (Park, 2021). Interestingly, South Africans spend an exceptional amount of time on social media – an average of 3.2 hours a day, compared to the global average of 2.4 hours (Park, 2021).

This rapid growth in social media usage in South Africa presents a valuable opportunity for researchers to learn more about social dynamics in this setting. Here, we report on an ongoing project, piloted in 2020, where we apply advanced social media analytics to investigate the workings of gendered discourses and attitudes in real time and to challenge the cycle of GBV in collaboration with male change agents through online dialogue.

Given our interest in the intergenerational cycle of violence, we explore linkages between children, parents and gendered discourses.

Methodology

Overlapping project phases: Our project has two overlapping phases: Research and Engagement. Here, we share results from our preliminary social media research. While this first phase of the project is more research-focused, the research team will continuously conduct social media analytics over the 12-month life span of this project and will use these findings to inform our online dialogue facilitation. Moreover, the dialogue facilitation team will continue to share insights from their work with the research team to enrich the knowledge generated through this work.

Analytic process: There are four distinct phases in social media data analysis. These are: discovery, collection, preparation, and analysis (Stieglitz, Mirbabaie, Fromm, & Melzer, 2018). The first step in our data discovery phase was to draw up a list of keywords. The research and dialogue facilitation teams contributed to this list collaboratively through a shared spreadsheet. To create this list, the research team drew on existing knowledge, and conducted desktop research, a literature review and a review of social media. Concurrently, three dialogue facilitators recorded insights and keywords gained through exploratory dialogue facilitation. Given our interest in the intergenerational cycle of violence, we focused on identifying which linked to social dynamics between children, parents and gendered discourses. Our final keyword list comprised 52 words in isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, English, and slang. We entered this list of words into a social media analytics tool called "Brandwatch" and conducted a search of gendered discourses and attitudes on public social media between 9 December 2021 and 8 February 2022. Next, we "collected" the resulting data and "prepared" it for analysis by refining the query. This was achieved by removing "catchall keywords" and adding keywords.

The final step was data analysis. We applied thematic analysis, which involves studying the emerging patterns in the data and exploring how units of meaning connect to form themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis can highlight individuals' perspectives, ideas and experiences, and can be used to generate fresh insight into the social dynamics behind human behavior. Accordingly, we analyzed the collected data thematically to interpret the data and to gain insight into dominant themes and trends. The final step in our analysis process involved checking, refining and reviewing each theme and naming these categories to link to the specific data.

Sharing the results. When presenting thematic analysis results, researchers ostensibly share direct quotes from their interactions with participants to ensure there is a close connection between what the participant meant and the interpretation. In our study, we focused exclusively on content that is publicly available. Nonetheless, we are aware that the boundaries between public and private are dynamic and often blurred in the social media space (Markham, 2018). For example, although social media users may consent to sharing their content publicly and with “third parties” at the point of sign up (Samuel, & Buchanan, 2020; Williams, Burnap, & Sloan, 2017), they may not agree to their words and personal identities being subject to academic scrutiny and publication. Therefore, to ensure our research is ethically responsible and that we protect the privacy of social media users, we do not include any traceable quotes from social media (Williams et al., 2017).

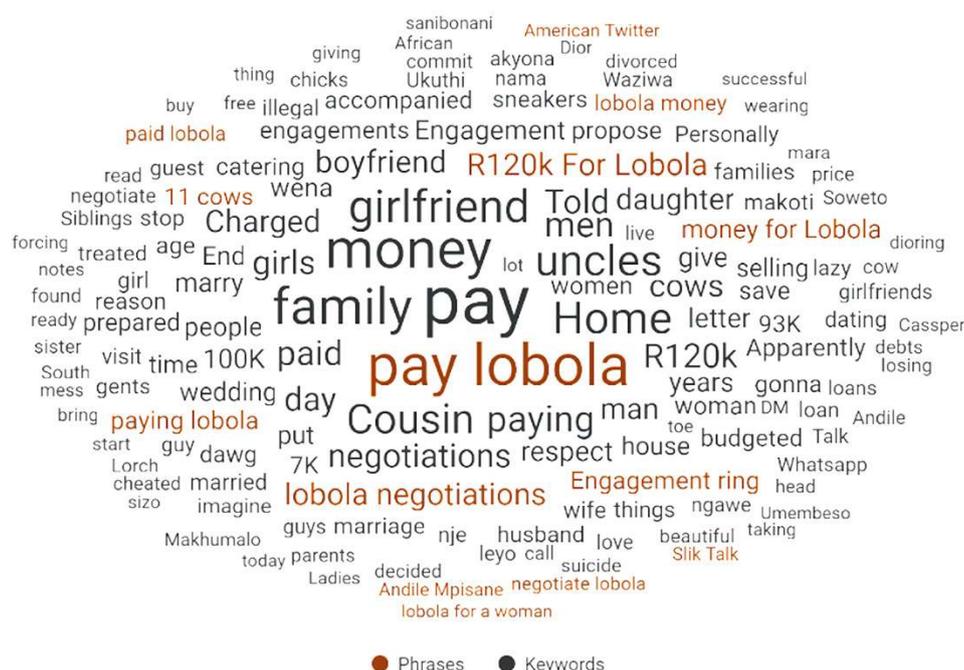
Findings

Our query on Brandwatch resulted in three dominant themes, which we present below through graphical representations and narrative summaries. The Word Clouds we use offer visual representations of the most prevalent words within the specified date range, while the narrative analyses provide a thematic overview of the conversations taking place on public social media.

Theme 1: Lobola in Contemporary South Africa

Background. “Lobola” is the isiZulu word for a longstanding bride wealth tradition used to form marriages and unite families in many Southern African communities (Malesa & Sekudu, 2021; Yarbrough, 2018). Historically, lobola involved the exchange of cattle, principally from the head of the groom’s family to the head of the bride’s family. Socio-economic changes introduced by capitalism and apartheid have altered this cultural practice over time (Hunter, 2010). For example, families have become more dependent on wage labor and less focused on agricultural capacity and cattle (Carton, 2000; Hunter, 2010). Therefore, contemporary lobola practices ostensibly involve a cash payment or a combination of cash and cattle. Grooms increasingly assume responsibility for this payment, which usually amounts to several thousand dollars (Hunter, 2010).

Lobola emerged as a dominant theme in our analysis of public social media. Our Brandwatch search resulted in a total of 47,876 mentions over our specified time period. Below, we present these results in graphical format and outline six interrelated subthemes which relate to the topic of lobola.



Thematic analysis

Subtheme 1: We don't want flowers. We want lobola. Many female social media users expressed positive sentiments towards lobola and spoke about this customary practice with a sense of warmth and pride. A number of male users shared personal stories and explained that marriage, for them, was a space for love and for children. There were also female social media users who stated that they prefer men to pursue marriage negotiations with their parents rather than offering gifts of clothes, money or flowers. These individuals advocated for the continuation of this practice, stating that this tradition serves to foster stronger connections between families and is indicative of the man's financial readiness for a family.

Subtheme 2: Why should we pay lobola? In some conversations, we found media users who were more critical of the practice. These users pointed to the financial issues that have arisen as a consequence of the monetisation of this tradition in the context of a struggling economy. These discussions revolved around the intense difficulties young men face nowadays and the mounting pressure they feel from their families to get married and pay their own lobola. A number of contributors spoke about how young men are faced with the stress of paying back loans, supporting extended families and paying to support their children.

Subtheme 3: Let's "vat and sit." Social media users discussed how lobola could be negotiated differently to make it easier for young couples.

For example, partners could choose to have a long-term committed relationship without being married. This practice is referred to in colloquial terms as “vat and sit,” which means to take a partner (“vat” means “take” in Afrikaans) and settle down together (literally “sit”). Some suggested that couples could save and pay for lobola together or could consider marrying at a later stage, when a man is more financially stable. Yet others warned against the consequences of not paying lobola or of a bride helping her husband to pay these costs. These consequences included the potential danger of upsetting the ancestors and inciting their wrath.

Subtheme 4: Playing gender roles. A number of social media users questioned the place of lobola in relation to gender equity. For example, while some male contributors questioned how families could demand lobola for a girl who isn’t able to cook or clean, certain female social media users objected to being viewed as a man’s property. There were also contributors who objected to the societal pressure on men to bear the financial burden of relationships and to pay lobola in a context where men also contribute to domestic duties and many women earn salaries.

Subtheme 5: Do you want a divorced daughter or a dead daughter? A selection of conversations revolved around the relationship between lobola and intimate partner violence. Individuals discussed whether lobola can be repaid if a husband is abusive. Many users advocated that it is better for parents to repay lobola and support a divorce, than to allow her to suffer abuse at the hands of her husband. For this reason, a number of female discussants noted that accepting a high value lobola is dangerous. It is safer for parents to accept a lower amount which can be repaid more easily if a husband “starts acting up.”

Subtheme 6: Why pay for community meat? Many of the online discussions around lobola highlighted the intersection between gendered discourse and sexual intercourse. For example, one male social media user expressed reluctance to pay lobola for brides who were not virgins. They questioned why they were expected to pay for a girl who has been used “for free” like “community meat?” Others drew comparisons between lobola and exchanging money for sex, arguing that women need to understand that sex will always be attached to money. It makes little difference whether one calls it “*mavuso*” or “*lobola*.” ***Mavuso*** is a colloquial term used to refer to the money a man pays a woman after spending the night together.

girlfriend allowance as a form of caring for your partner and helping her to honor her commitments and duties.

Subtheme 10: *If I pay, I can cheat.* Some male social media users felt that 'money can buy anything' and that monogamy could not be expected of them if they were up to date with their financial contributions.

Subtheme 11: *Women must stand for themselves.* The theme of girlfriend allowance led to discussions regarding gender equality in relationships. Some social media users felt that equality is the priority and questioned how women can still expect this monthly stipend when we are trying to dismantle patriarchal gender norms. In addition, we found many male social media users questioning the validity of this practice, particularly when both partners in a relationship are earning. This sentiment was echoed in many tweets made by women, who argued that men also have their own needs, responsibilities and goals and should not have to continuously pay for their girlfriends to buy new clothes and do their hair. "What about 'boyfriend allowance?', these men and women questioned.

Subtheme 12: *I can't afford girlfriend allowance.* In conversations around girlfriend allowance, numerous individuals made reference to the very high unemployment rates and argued that it is often difficult for men to provide financially. These conditions place stress on relationships, particularly for unemployed men, who feel they can no longer afford to date girls.

Theme 3: ATM (Automated Teller Machine) Dad

Background. ATM Dad refers to fathers who provide financially for their children without being physically or emotionally present in their children's lives. Conversations on public social media explored both sentiments towards men who are providing financially for their children and the need for men to be more involved in their children's lives. There were a total number of 1,021 mentions over our search period. Below, we present these results in graphical and narrative format.

Subtheme 16: I want to see my child! Many male social media users spoke about the question of child access. These individuals often blamed this lack of access on their troubled relationship with the child's mother, who was seen to deliberately block paternal access. These difficulties were particularly pertinent for unemployed fathers, who felt alienated from their children due to their financial circumstances. In response to these tweets, other male users emphasized that a child '*needs*' their father and encouraged men to "go back and fight" for access to what is biologically theirs, urging fathers not to be "pushed away" by bitter and resentful ex-partners.

Discussion

Our social media analysis of gendered discourses in public social media resulted in three overlapping themes and sixteen related subthemes. Below, we unpack these results and discuss how they relate to common threads in writings about GBV in South Africa and beyond.

The discussions presented in the first subtheme (We don't want flowers. We want lobola) are indicative of a wider cultural framework which legitimises lobola as a central marriage tradition in the post-apartheid context (Hunter, 2010). In these online texts, lobola is seen to unite families, to imbue a sense of dignity and to facilitate commitment in relationships. Rather than criticizing the toll of lengthy lobola negotiations, proponents often praise this "waiting period" as a "test of intended husbands' emotional commitment and financial discipline" (Yarbrough, 2018). This uncritical support has allowed this practice to persist despite the significant societal shifts.

The economic impact of lobola is evident in the conversations around the second subtheme (Why should we pay lobola?), where men highlight the financial difficulties they face in a climate of widespread inequality, free-market capitalism and high unemployment rates. These conversations reflect the impact of the changing nature of lobola discussed above (Carton 2000; Hunter 2010), and link to other studies on lobola, which reveal a causal link between the current economic challenges men face and the declining rate of marriage in South Africa (Posel, Rudwick, Casale 2011; Yarbrough, 2018). For example, in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, where lobola receives wide support, marriage rates are remarkably low (Posel & Casale, 2013). This evidence had led scholars to argue that this central pillar of marriage is now "its greatest obstacle" (Yarbrough, 2018, p. 649).

Subtheme three (Let's "vat and sit") highlights how many young couples are seeking new ways of being together, such as cohabitation

out of wedlock, or saving together to pay lobola. These trends of pooling finances to pay for bride wealth are evident in studies conducted in neighboring countries, including Botswana (van Dijk, 2017). While couples can encounter certain criticism when attempting to circumvent lobola, in some cases, these joint financial efforts increase the wife's status and her negotiating power in the marriage (Guvuro & Booysen, 2019). These findings relate to an argument made by Yarbrough that "dyadic narratives of marriage increasingly circulate alongside "traditional" extended-family narratives, especially among the young women who strongly support lobola while yearning for gender-egalitarian marriages" (2018, 647).

This emphasis on gender equality is important when one considers the social media conversations highlighted in Subtheme five (Do you want a divorced daughter or a dead daughter?), which link lobola to intimate partner violence. This association is evident in wider studies, where female participants suggested that lobola could legitimize abuse by husbands (Rudwick & Posel 2014). Moreover, a qualitative study conducted by Malesa and Sekudu found that lobola can lead to a husband's violation of his wife's sexual and reproductive health rights, including sexual coercion, and the prevention of contraception (2021). Nonetheless, these authors view this as a misinterpretation of lobola, since this tradition does not make a husband the owner of his wife's body. Rather, this custom legitimizes a husband and his extended family's ownership of the children born from this relationship (2021). Malesa and Sekudu further argue that in the past, lobola could prevent violence by encouraging families to gather together to solve problems like domestic abuse (2021). Nonetheless, the social media conversations in Subtheme five remind us that financial issues, such as the obligation to repay lobola if a wife returns to her family, can limit a woman's agency to remove herself and her children from abusive relationships.

Many of the online discussions around lobola highlighted the intersection between gender norms and sex, including the cultural valuation of female virginity (see Subtheme six). Moreover, some individuals stated that women need to accept that sex will always be attached to money. This sentiment connects to the predominance of transactional relationships in South Africa (Stoebenau, Heise, Wamoyi, & Bobrova, 2016). In addition to relationships based on girlfriend allowance, there are "blessers" – rich men, who "bless" their women with gifts in exchange for sex and companionship – and "sugar daddies" – older, wealthy men, who exchange sexual relations with younger women and girls for material goods/cash (Duby et al., 2021). It is also important to highlight that the majority of young adults engaging

in these practices learn about these trends from social media and also use these digital platforms to find new partners (Moodley & Ebrahim, 2019). While the first two categories are widely written about, very little formal literature exists around the allowances that many girls and young women currently demand from their peer partners.

These three forms of transactional relationships connect to an overarching concept of “provider love,” which is grounded in the gender discourse of the male provider. The work of Mark Hunter, a social geographer, has shown that many African women today view monetary assistance as a form of love (2010). Although these extra-marital sexual partnerships are premised on material exchange, they are distinct from formal sex work, since they occur within the context of relationships and often also include an emphasis on companionship and emotional exchange. The male perspectives offered in our social media study are important, since many investigations into provider love are drawn from research with women and girls, and do not reflect male perspectives “around gift giving, the expectations or obligations they might feel as “providers” or their opinions on transactional sexual encounters” (Duby et al., 2021). This is one of the areas where this study can make an important contribution to understanding obstacles to peace in the context of personal relationships in South Africa.

As is evident in the results above, girlfriend allowance has sparked many debates on social media ever since the term was invented. While this practice may be regarded by some as a demonstration of love or care, it is also linked to a desire to move from a lower to higher economic status, a trend which is also known as “upward mobility,” (Ranganathan et al., 2018). For example, research conducted in South Africa revealed that girls and young women who engage in transactional sex “have higher odds of consuming items for entertainment that might also lead to risky sexual behaviours and HIV acquisition” (Ranganathan et al., 2018). This is concerning, since our results suggest that men who are up to date with their allowance payments feel no obligation to promise monogamy. Thus, while girls may exercise agency at the early stages of choosing a man, once the allowance is paid, their agency diminishes (Ranganathan et al., 2018). Therefore, this practice can be seen to perpetuate a particular gendered discourse which reproduces unequal power structures and gender role expectations [Hoss & Blokland, 2018]. It also indicates how men can harness “provider love” to attract and control female partners, and to hold the reins in sexual decision making (Stoebenau et al., 2016). This has serious consequences for young women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights, including

their susceptibility to HIV infection and ability to walk away from abusive relationships (Duby et al., 2021).

Our results suggest that girlfriend allowance has become widespread and that men who are unable to afford these 'gifts' may find themselves without a partner. This causes feelings of frustration and failure, which can contribute to misogyny and violence. These sentiments are salient in social media discussions around our third theme: ATM fatherhood. Notions of fatherhood in South Africa have always differed from nuclear family norms due to traditions of extended family living structures and the enduring legacy of the colonial migrant labor system. However, the number of Black children living without their biological fathers is rising (Makusha & Richter, 2012), and the State of South African Fathers (SOSAF) recently reported that almost 70% of Black South African children currently reside in homes without their biological fathers (2021). This report details the crisis of absent fathers in the country, defining 'father absence' as "fathers (whether biological or social fathers) who are physically **and** economically **and** psychosocially absent from their children" (Van den Berg, Makusha, & Ratele, 2021, p. 5).

This trend of absent fathers corresponds with the high number of single mothers in South Africa, which is close to 40 percent, the highest rate in the world (Human Science Research Committee (HSRC), and South African Race Relations Institute 2018). This trend intersects with the declining marriage rates cited above, and the predominance of dysfunctional and conflict-ridden relationships. Moreover, conversations with men cited in the recently published State of South African Fathers (SOSFA) Report, and the discussions about blame highlighted in Subtheme fifteen, suggests that some fathers do not have sufficient contact with their children due to a lack of effective conflict management and resolution mechanisms with partners and ex-partners (Van den Berg et al., 2021).

Research shows that single mothers in South Africa are at greater risk than men of losing their income and that over half struggle to meet household expenses (HSRC, 2021). All fathers who are financially able to pay maintenance are legally obliged to do so, "but in South Africa there have been challenges in implementing this law and holding fathers accountable" (Duncan, 2011). In this context, one can understand the emphasis on cash payments from fathers highlighted in the social media discussions cited above. However, financial restraints can limit a father's access to his child, particularly when a maternal family insists on the payment of cultural penalties. These penalties often include **lobola** and the payment of "damages" (known as **inhlawulo**, in isiZulu), which applies

when a man has disrespected the family by impregnating his girlfriend out-of-wedlock (Van den Berg et al., 2021). While some have found the custom of *inhlawulo* may strengthen bonds between families and improve paternal- child connection and care, marginalised men often cite unpaid, or incomplete *lobola*; and unpaid or incomplete *inhlawulo* as reasons for not having access to their children (Van den Berg et al., 2021).

Men who fail to acknowledge paternity and to pay the required penalties are often dismissed as irresponsible and useless (Nduna & Jewkes, 2012). This assumption of failure connects to prevailing gender norms, including the traditional role of the male provider highlighted in the social media conversations cited above. This social norm effectively curtails the development of alternative gender roles for women and men alike (Centre for Social Development in Africa (CSDA) & Sonke Gender Justice, 2013), leads to anger and frustration and has been identified as one of the key structural drivers of gendered socio-economic power disparities in the region (Sikweyiya, 2016; Van den Berg et al., 2021).

The SOSFA report indicates that men who are unable to conform to successful provider expectations, often retreat from their children's lives, limiting their emotional connection and engagement (Van den Berg et al., 2021). While it is better for a child not to live in the same household as a violent father, the widespread trend of absent fathers in South Africa has significant "consequences for families and for society as a whole" (CSDA & Sonke, 2013, p. 3). For example, fathers who are more involved in their children's lives are more likely "to find and maintain employment, and make more significant sacrifices in their lives to ensure they are able to contribute financially" (CSDA & Sonke, 2013, p. 24). In addition, children who grow up with an absent biological father are known to display more behavioral problems and to experience more life trauma and distress compared to children who grow up residing with both parents (Sikweyiya, 2016; Van den Berg et al., 2021). Growing up with an absent father is also a risk factor for GBV perpetration by boys/men and increases a girl's likelihood of experiences dissatisfying and violent sexual relationships (Sikweyiya, 2016). Therefore, to break the intergenerational cycle of GBV, we need to transgress patriarchal and capitalist constructions of masculinity and embrace other forms of father love and father care (Van den Berg et al., 2021).

Conclusion

It is imperative that all citizens realize their basic human right to live in a safe society, without fear of violence and crime. Targeted responses are needed to intercept the cycle of intergenerational violence by dismantling harmful gendered discourse and practices through open dialogue. Given the pervasive nature of GBV in South Africa, these interventions need to work on a mass scale.

GBV thrives in silence, and social media can play a major role in exposing the gravity of GBV and unpacking the attitudes, circumstances and practices that drive it. Moreover, in these stressful and uncertain times of Covid-19, where human interactions are limited due to health concerns and economic restrictions, it is vital that interventions reach people in their everyday spaces and in their homes. This is where mass media and social media interventions can play an important role.

Our in-depth analysis of gendered discourses in public social media over two months offered critical insight into the workings of misogyny in South Africa in real time. Our preliminary results suggest that an overemphasis on the male provider role curtails the development of alternative gender roles for women and men alike. This has serious consequences for gender equality and the emancipation from violence in South Africa.

The work we present is limited by the brief period of research. However, over the coming months, we will continue to conduct social media research and will feed these findings into the engagement phase of our project. In this phase, we will identify men who stand against GBV, recruit them as allies, train them in online dialogue facilitation and support them to create safe spaces where men can come together to share their experiences and to develop solutions to the critical issue of GBV in South Africa.

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