LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Powerful Discourse: Gender-Based Violence and Counter-Discourses in South Africa

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Abstract: The issue of gender-based violence (GBV) against women in South Africa is prevalent in mainstream and online social media. Women and girls are targeted in what is seemingly becoming a prolonged cycle of GBV in the country. Human rights activists, organisations, and political leaders condemn this violence through various platforms, including the media. Civil society in South Africa have organised and mobilised marches and protests, tirelessly speaking out against the issue of violence against women in the country. The focus of this study is to explore and analyse how counter-discourse has been used against GBV in the country and used to reject commonly held assumptions about GBV. Through the purposive sampling of selected posts/placards used during marches and protests collected from online sources, this article examines how language is being used to combat and expose the issue of GBV and how language, when used mindfully and purposefully, could be a crucial tool in curbing GBV, including femicide, abuse, assault, rape, and violence, amongst other crimes.

Subjects: Language & Linguistics; Sociolinguistics; Interdisciplinary Language Studies
Keywords: gender-based violence; counter-discourse; language use; South Africa

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence, hereafter referred to as GBV, has been and continues to be a social ill with far-reaching repercussions. Mahlori et al. (2018:1) state that GBV is one of the most pressing social issues affecting South Africa. While GBV is a world-wide phenomenon, the Human Rights Watch (2010) labelled South Africa the “rape capital” of the world. In this study, South Africa is the only

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The paper underscores the critical issue of gender-based violence in South Africa. There is an urgent need for everyone in the country to actively take a stand against this social menace for it affects all of us, and it is equally important to launch academic inquiries from various disciplines to better understand the phenomenon and dynamics at play. It is within this context that this study examines the role of language/discourses and the way it is used in the context of gender-based violence in South Africa. Through an examination of counter-discourses (produced in opposition to, and as an alternative to mainstream discourse), we argue that the conscious use of language in a counter-discursive manner is key to raise awareness about gender-based violence.
country of focus, given the spike in recent years of reported and mediatised cases of GBV, and on a more practical level, given that the authors both live in the country. South Africa has one of the world’s highest rates of GBV, including homicide, rape, and intimate partner violence (Matzopoulos et al., 2019:382). Gqola (2007:118) further argues that GBV in South Africa is omnipresent and commonplace and is normalised through the dominant public discourse.

Many studies have addressed the issue of GBV from diverse perspectives. In many of these studies, GBV has mostly focused on cases of GBV against women, suggesting that women are more at risk of GBV than men. However, as argued by Thobejane et al. (2018:1), men often do not speak out about their experiences of violence due to the stigma attached to them being victims of such violence; but this is not to assume that women are the only victims of GBV. Although men are also victims of GBV, available evidence suggests that the frequency, severity, and intensity of such violence is much greater for women than men (Ali, 2018: 4). Zain (2012:132) defines GBV as an extreme manifestation of gender inequity, often targeting women and girls because of their vulnerable position in society, which is reinforced and perpetuated by structural patriarchy. GBV can take many forms, including psychological, physical, or sexual abuse, and has lasting impacts on the survivor’s physical and psychological health. Drawing from the foregoing, our understanding of GBV in this paper is premised on violence against women.

Recent studies, such as that of Beyene et al. (2019) among others, have mostly considered GBV a public health issue. However, it could be argued that while GBV is indeed a public health issue, it is equally a social one, given its prevalence today and its hitherto impact on society and the people who live in it. GBV should not exclusively be considered through the health or human rights lenses, but also through a multisectoral approach if we are to consider it to be a social issue. In a study examining nursing students’ discourses on GBV using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Maqubbar et al. (2018) note that participants consider GBV to be a serious social issue needing attention, and moreover needing a multipronged and multidisciplinary approach. This article aims to address GBV from a linguistic perspective by analysing the discourses on GBV circulating in the media, understood as the ways in which language is used in messages circulating to mobilise and organise against commonly held assumptions on GBV that perpetuate the status quo.

Language has the potential to unite, but also to divide. Language possesses the power to influence, through the ways it shapes and is shaped by culture and society. In support of this, Gadamer (1975) argues that language is central to human understanding, as it is through speech that one can bridge the distance between differing horizons of understandings. Language and communication are, therefore, at the centre of human knowledge and understanding. The power of language and the language of power, in this case English, speak to the conundrum facing multilingual South Africa; how language is used to shape public opinion and discourse, and what language exercises hegemony over others, with all the ramifications this may have for the languages and discourses that are thus marginalised. The pre-colonial importance of speech was central in shaping public discourse and worldviews and could be reminiscent of the art of rhetoric (in the Aristotelian sense), whereby language is used as a form of persuasion with a potential to inform the way we view and speak about the world around us. Language and communication are indeed central to the human experience, to borrow Mkhize and Ndimande-Hlongwa (2014).

The way in which we use words and language influences and is influenced by how we understand and perceive the world around us. Several authors have likewise stressed the power of language and discourse, both spoken and written, including Foucault (1970), Fairclough (1989), Van Dijk (2006), and Wodak (1995), to mention a few. Fairclough’s seminal work, *Language and Power* (Fairclough, 1989) argues that the use of language in the everyday context (discourse) has the power to construct reality and influence our worldview, in other words that language is power and has the potential to maintain or challenge power relations in society. He further establishes a clear link between power structures in society and the discourses shaping or challenging the status quo (in the latter case, counter-discourse).
Building on Fairclough’s idea that discourse shapes reality and perception, this article discusses the voices of resistance and opposition in the struggle against GBV in South Africa from a discursive perspective, drawing from linguistic tenets and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Fairclough understands discourse as a social practice made visible using language, which is underpinned by ideological and structural power relations (Fairclough, 1989). This article seeks to understand these social practices in the context of GBV in South Africa, and in doing so, bridge the gap caused by the sparsity of CDA research on GBV in developing countries (Dunne et al., 2006). This article will critically engage with specific examples of discourses and counter-discourses emerging in response to the way GBV is discussed in the public domain and through media, including social media.

Mosha’s (2013) Discourse Analysis of Gender-based Violence in Contemporary Kiswahili Fiction: A Case Study of Selected Novels of the Past Three Decades (1975–2004) and Young Tanzanians’ Interpretations analyses the textual representation of GBV in Kiswahili novels, revealing the dominant male power as a cause of violence against women depicted in the novels, coupled with issues such as cultural practices, poverty, alcoholism, male sexuality, and uncontrollable jealousy. She argues that the discourses produced in some of these novels tend to exonerate abusers while vilifying the survivors of such violence, hence concluding that the textual representation of GBV in Kiswahili novels failed dismally in challenging the dominant discourses that maintain oppressive power relations in Tanzanian society. Mosha furthermore rejects all forms of discourse that maintains the status quo in relation to violence against women, at once emphasising alternative ways of understanding and discussing GBV. Mosha’s (2013) work focuses on the counter-discourse that condemns the perpetrators of violence instead of vilifying survivors of violence, thus reaffirming the connection between language, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 1989).

2. Reflections on gender-based violence in South Africa

GBV is widespread in South Africa. As per a report published by the South African Police Service (SAPS) and acknowledged by the Institute for Security Studies, GBV is defined as a criminal act that can include the following offences: rape, sexual assault, incest, bestiality, statutory rape, and the sexual grooming of children (The Citizen Newspaper, 2019). The report, which covers the period between 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019, reveals an increase of reported GBV cases compared to previous years. The number of reported sexual offences increased to 52,420 in 2018/19 from 50,108 in 2017/18, most of which were cases of rape. The rate of sexual offences increased from 88.3 per 100,000 in 2017/18 to 90.9 per 100,000 in 2018/19. Reported sexual offences in 2019/2020 again increased to 53,293 reported cases.

The increase in reported cases is seemingly paralleled by the growth of the number of cases of GBV in South Africa. Given the social stigma and misperceptions associated with GBV, which are increasingly challenged and rejected through counter-discourse, as will be seen later in this article, it can be assumed that there are thousands more cases going unreported. A series of GBV cases, including femicides, prompted outrage and calls to action from various sectors of society. A series of senseless killings, assaults, rapes, and cases of abuse in recent years shocked the nation at grips with frightening levels of violence inflicted on women. Hundreds of women have been brutally assaulted and murdered at the hands of men in South Africa over the years. Some of these women made the headlines; others were privately mourned. Justice was served in some cases; in other cases, perpetrators are carrying on with their lives, while some cases were simply never reported. With South Africa being infamously earning of the status of ‘rape capital of the world’, our collective voices and outrage must be amplified, and activism, care, and support are needed from all sectors of society to bring about change as well. Research and analysis enable a better understanding of the phenomenon and have the potential of informing our responses to it. From the vantage point of linguistics and language studies, it is befitting to envisage how the power of language can be harnessed to combat GBV and counter the discourse and social structure that normalises or naturalises it. SA Women Fight Back, one of many GBV activist groups active in South Africa, keeps an updated and ever-growing list of South African women who were brutally
assaulted and murdered in the country in recent years. The list and group can be found here: https://www.sawomenfb.co.za/.LinkManagerBM_FN_AUTOSIUQ8ZmS

3. Conceptual disposition
This study is underpinned by the theory of counter-discourse. Foucault (1970) broadly explains counter-discourse as aiming to represent the world differently. When those who are normally spoken for and spoken about begin to speak for themselves, they create a counter-discourse, which is an act of resistance against the power oppressing them (Foucault, 1970). Counter-discourse opposes the focus that seeks to present alternative understandings of a given social issue. In a similar vein, Feltwell et al. (2017) found that counter-discourse activism on social media allows for the expression of people’s identities and voices to be heard. Furthermore, counter-discourse as a social practice seeks to propose alternative discourses, over and above opposing a dominant one.

Terdiman (1985:149) argues that the paradigms of social representation are at stake in this discursive struggle. He states that, “the objective of counter-discourses is to represent the world differently not simply by contradicting or negating its assertions, the power of the dominant discourse lies in the codes by which it regulates understanding of the social world. Counter-discourses seek to detect and map such naturalized protocols and to project their subversion”.

Building on Terdiman’s (1985) understanding of counter-discourse, this article explores counter-discourse on GBV as a “dissident voice”, as Jabri (1996:159) refers to it. Bakhtin (1981:294) explains that, with references to counter-discourse practices, “the word in language is half someone else’s. It is from there that one must take the word and make it one’s own”. As such, certain discursive instances can be reversed or countered to suggest a meaning and discursive output that we desire.

Burney (2012:107) argues that, “a counter-discourse is a form of deep resistance that speaks through creativity, words and actions, deliberately negating the dominant discourse. It is a re-inscription, rewriting and re-presenting to reclaim and reaffirm certain phenomena”. Burney’s explanation bodes well for this study. She recognises counter-discourse as a form of resistance through different forms, which could be words or actions, and which could also be creative. By implication, our understanding of counter-discourse includes rebuffing one-dimensional predominant social assumptions. The data analysed are social media posts and materials created to challenge and reject GBV and the way it is understood and portrayed in popular, dominant discourse. The materials counter the dominant discourse on GBV, whereby violence against women is normalised through the ways in which the message is framed, and the language used, as discussed further below. Reframing how we speak, and importantly who speaks about a social issue, serves to either challenge, reject, or reaffirm the status quo. This study seeks to understand how GBV activists and survivors of such violence frame their experiences and understanding, speaking to power in an act of resistance, to borrow on Foucauldian’s terminology.

4. Methodology
The research behind this article originates from an umbrella research project entitled, ‘Powerful discourse—language use and gender-based violence in South Africa’. The project was motivated by the alarming rates of GBV in South Africa and, from a scholarship perspective, by the need to produce more research on GBV to better understand the dynamics at play which reinforce or disrupt this cycle of violence. The research project focuses on GBV occurrences from a discursive perspective, and the sources of data are social media posts and materials created to denounce and oppose GBV and discourse thereof.

The study employs a qualitative approach, using the desk-study technique. It deploys a purposive sampling technique, which is useful for being able to select data that fits within the population parameters. In this study, data was gathered with specific criteria in mind. The samples
were selected through an internet search using the key-phrase ‘Gender Based Violence in South Africa’. More than 47,700,000 results were listed, linking to civil society and non-governmental organisations’ websites, and posts on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. The posts and materials were purposively selected based on their contextual and thematic relevance to the focus of this study and the situational contexts surrounding GBV in South Africa. In narrowing down the revealed results, an inclusion criteria method was deployed following a quick inspection of the accessible data. Among the factors considered were that: (i) the data must condemn GBV; (ii) the data must include written or visual texts that conspicuously point to GBV; and (iii) the data should be in thematic alignment to the study. The data revealed by the search came from two sources, namely social media posts and physical materials (e.g., placards), and were relayed through social and online media.

The issue of GBV is discussed from various perspectives, including the lack response and action on the part of the government; the unsafe nature of South Africa; the defence or denial of the magnitude of GBV; the need to unanimously speak against GBV; and respect for fellow human beings and women, among others. In this light, a thematic grouping of these posts and materials was done and the data analysed in terms of their contribution to the counter-discourse informing the voice of resistance to GBV.

5. Counter-discoursing gender-based violence in South Africa: a thematic view
This section focuses on how resistance against GBV is voiced as a means of counter-discourse. The understanding of the term “resistance” in this paper is located within Mbembe’s (1992) philosophical ideology of resistance as cohabitation rather than oppositional confrontation; a position reminiscent of Terdiman’s view that counter-discourse goes beyond opposing dominant discourse (Terdiman, 1985).

The researchers discuss the selected posts and materials in relation to their discursive importance, underpinned by the notion that these counter-discourses have the potential to challenge the course of the GBV social pandemic. While realities from society are weaved into the analysis, existing literature adds credence to the argument. As noted by Herrera (2017: 4), neglecting the situational context of a discourse means disregarding the specific conditions where the discourse took place, be they social, historical, or cultural. In the same vein, for this study, neglecting the analysis of the counter-discourses produced in relation to GBV implies a negation of the existence of GBV as a social issue, and of resistance to GBV. Herrera (Herrera, 2017:4) argues that the quality of a text can be taken as the quality of a fact, which suggests that discourses produced in a society are credible representations of reality.

The analysis of counter-discourses produced in the frame of GBV in this article follows Macgilchrist’s (2007: 74) insights on Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA), which argues that counter-discourses can be tools for those wishing to counter and reject what they see as questionable dominant messages. She describes five strategies for contesting the dominant discourse, which is the nucleus of counter-discourse, namely logical inversion, parody, complexification, partial reframing, and radical reframing. The first strategy is the one employed in the material selected for this study. Logical inversion involves countering a dominant discourse and perspective with logical arguments, for instance, pointing out factual and probing evidence and correcting a misguided perspective.

5.1. Resisting the denialists and defenders (victim-blaming)
“Victim-blaming” is a general term used to describe a situation where the victims are blamed for the events they experienced. “Victim-blaming” in discourses related to GBV tends to implicate victims and posit them as responsible for their own safety, with little or nothing being said about the perpetrators’ actions. This myth, one of many “rape myths”, is reinforced by mainstream media reporting (Schwark & Bohner, 2019). The meaning attached to the term “victim”, to label people who endured GBV and abuse, is increasingly considered problematic and replaced in activists’ and
allies’ vocabulary with the term “survivor”, which reverses the power balance. While the term “victim” equates the existence of a person to their experience with trauma and places them in a position of vulnerability, the term “survivor” implies a future ahead. It is within this premise that we argue for the term “survivor” in such contexts instead of the term “victim”. Schwark and Bohner (2019) point out that the choice of using either “victim” or “survivor” does impact on the “judgements of blame”, whereby the women portrayed as survivors were viewed in a more positive light in their study. Men interviewed in their study, however, tended to explicitly blame survivors, while implicitly blaming victims (Schwark & Bohner, 2019).

Gordon and Collins (2013:98) argue that through victim-blaming women are made to feel responsible for protecting themselves against GBV and are as answerable for GBV as the perpetrators, thereby suggesting that they are expected to develop and follow precautionary strategies to avoid attacks launched against their bodies. Victim-blaming and self-blame are common experiences for women who have been subjected to sexual violence (Gravelin et al., 2019). The tendency to blame women for GBV is widespread in the dominant discourse, through the way a message is formulated for example. Often, the blame is attributed to survivors of rape rather than perpetrators (Grubb & Harrower, 2009), and women are significantly more likely to receive blame when they are sexually assaulted (Perrott & Webber, 1996).

In a Twitter post made by the South African Government (see Figure 1), the myth of “victim-blaming” is enacted. The original message, “Violence and abuse against women have no place in our society. Govt is calling on women to speak out, and not allow themselves to become victims by keeping quiet. Women who speak out are able to act, effect change and help others” was revised by activists, as seen in the annotations in Figure 1. The reformulated message read as, “Violence and abuse against women have no place in our society. Govt is calling on men to speak out, and not allow themselves to create victims. Men who speak out are able to act, effect change and help others”. The counter-discourse thus created clearly reverses the balance of power and shifts the responsibility towards men. The passive voice and use of transitive verbs where “women” is the subject of the verbs is changed into an active voice, with “men” being the subject of the verbs, directly linking them to their action.

In the original post, in Figure 1, the burden is put on the women, even though the government was trying to show support for the victims with its messaging it inadvertently ended up exonerating the perpetrators. The word “women” is mentioned thrice, while the word “men”, referring to the perpetrators, is not mentioned at all. This suggests the overt and covert implications of victim-blaming. Calling upon women to protect themselves gives the notion that, although men will continue to perpetuate these crimes, the advice of the government is for women to protect themselves, leaving men to carry on with their behaviour. Even more disconcerting is that the post specifically calls on women to speak out against the crime they are a victim of, implying that the key to stop GBV lies with them.

The original message in Figure 1 absolves men from any form of responsibility regarding GBV. This is reminiscent of Gordon and Collins (2013:100) position that, “investing in a discourse of women’s responsibility and as a result an implicit victim-blaming discourse rationalises and excuses gender-based violence”. They argue that the discourse of women taking responsibility is filled with contradictions because, on the one hand it communicates the need to be security-conscious, while on the other it reinforces a victim-blaming discourse, thus, normalising GBV. Furthermore, as pointed out by Gqola with specific reference to the South African context, “We often place so much pressure on women to talk about rape, to access counselling and get legal services to process rape, but very seldom do we talk about the rapists. We run the danger of speaking about rape as a perpetrator-less crime” (Gqola, 2015:7). She further points out that such rhetoric is counterproductive, amongst many other things, as there is no point in inviting women to lay charges when successful prosecution rates are so low (Gqola, 2015:27).
Discourses reinforcing GBV, whether directly or indirectly, evidently pose a threat to society. First, the risk of normalising the behaviour implies that sexual violence, and violence, will continue unchallenged. Second, such discourses imply a lack of awareness of the pressing need to combat GBV, thus, placing women in an eternal state of unrest as they must be vigilant around everyone and in every situation. Stanko and Radford (1996) also intimate that these types of discourse will continue to fuel women’s anxieties and alertness as part of their daily life. By implication, every encounter for a woman is fraught with the potential for violence which she is expected to protect herself from. This female fear factory […] relies on the quick, effective transfer of meaning (Gqola, 2015:78), through which myths reproduce and permeate the dominant popular discourse. To counter this discourse poses a threat as the system seeks to silence survivors and the threat of rape itself is perpetuated as an effective way to remind women that they are not safe and that their bodies are not entirely theirs (Gqola, 2015:79). The often-violent repression of demonstration, for example, the use of state violence against people partaking in marches and protests against GBV, speaks of this deeply entrenched systemic repression of voices rising against GBV.

Another widespread rape myth that underpins the discourse of GBV is the misconception that the clothing worn by a woman causes rape. To counter this discourse, men, and men alone, are univocally denounced as the perpetrators. Hence, the counter-discursive message displayed in Figure 2 is that “Rape is never the victim’s fault, clothing is not consent”. This counter-discourse rightfully places the sole responsibility of the action on men, categorically rejecting the belief that the choice of clothing resulted in the crime and that it was the survivor’s fault. These are examples of rape myths that are prevalent and perpetuated in the media (Franiuk et al., 2008:287) which eventually enter public consciousness and public discourse. Counter-discouraging these deeply entrenched myths is essential to the fight against GBV as Gqola (2015:143) posits:

“Rethinking and debunking rape myths is an important part of the conversation of how to bring down the rape statistics and how to create a world without rape. Addressing them allows us to move closer to a world in which rape is taken seriously, where survivors can be supported and recovered and where rape is dissuaded rather than excused.”

Because of the constant repetition of these myths, to a point where they are taken as true, women consciously or unconsciously live their lives according to a “rape schedule” by changing their behaviour to avoid GBV and subscribe to new behaviours, such as changing the kind of clothes they wear, their movements and use of public spaces, and who they interact with.
Another form of counter-discourse is what Plantin (1996:21) refers to as a “peripheral discourse”, which opposes a hegemonic discourse. He goes further to establish a counter-discourse as a discourse of opposition/contestation that responds to dominant, hegemonic discourses.

The transfer of meaning by reframing the government’s message (Figure 1) beckons a need for unceasing counter-discourses until they permeate public consciousness. And in so doing, change how we think; for example, by permeating public consciousness with counter-discourses, there is a possibility of reframing the normative and making new norms. As a counter-discursive response to a problematic mainstream discourse, activists debunked several myths by revising the message and creating new meanings, to communicate that men are the perpetrators of GBV, and that men themselves need to take full responsibility for their actions and need to put an end to them. Having countered the original discourse, the revised post in Figure 1 received more attention than the original. Such is the power of language and, by extension, counter-discourse. As Gould (2016:3) also observes, counter-discourses can be used to reduce the social impacts of violent acts. Put more explicitly, counter-discourses offers an opportunity to constantly re-evaluate and dismantle long held prejudiced beliefs and assumptions with the hope of changing certain public perceptions and, ultimately, behaviours.

Discourse can be employed to reinforce behaviour, capitalising on the power of language. Through a relativist-social, constructionist, linguistic approach, Eaton (2019:187) demonstrates how language constructs, empowers, disempowers, and positions the issue of blame in sexual violence through the way it describes and constructs GBV. A conscious, mindful, and correct use of language is critical to reverse the misconstrued social perceptions and myths regarding GBV. As such, much needed counter-discourse is constructed and aims to expose, oppose, challenge, and reject GBV.

Figure 2. Calling out the perpetrators.
5.2. Challenging governmental neglect

Although the rights to safety, security, dignity, and protection are entrenched in the South African Constitution and a panoply of legislation, GBV is still prevalent. Amongst others, Eyewitness News (2020) reports a 1.7 per cent increase in reported cases in the year 2020. Among such pieces of legislation that are aimed at safeguarding security and safety from violence are the 1998 Domestic Violence Act (Government Gazette, 1998); the 1998 Maintenance Act (Government Gazette, 1998); the 2011 Protection from Harassment Act (Government Gazette, 2011); and the 2012 Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act (Government Gazette 2012). While these read well on paper, they seemingly have done little to curb GBV. Mathews and Abrahams (2001) acknowledge that, although the Domestic Violence Act is clear about the role of law enforcement officers, many police officers are reluctant to assist victims of GBV as they see these cases as a private, domestic matter. The laxity by various governmental parastatals in working towards the eradication of GBV is alarming. For example, the unpreparedness (and/or unwillingness) of the departments of health, justice, and social development negatively affects the implementation of support services as envisaged in the Acts (Vetten, 2007).

There has been a perceived neglect on issues related to GBV, both at a local and national level, and in several government parastatals, such as the South African Police Service (SAPS). In fact, the perception that GBV is dangerously becoming normalised is made evident when survivors of GBV believe that reporting cases will yield little or no results besides triggering further trauma. The implicit maintenance of the status quo lets GBV go unabated. Gordon and Collins (2013:101) reports that the lack of care and support from police and safety officers has contributed to the distrust in the government because of the misconceived and misplaced belief that sexuality is a personal and private matter that should not be spoken of in public and that a woman’s sexual experience is shameful, whether chosen or not. The perception that anything remotely referring to sex, including sexual violence, is a private matter should be rejected as it misleads in the understanding of what is GBV, what causes it, and how it can be challenged and curbed. The ensuing silence on incidences of GBV does nothing to address the problem, hence the importance of counter-discourses such as those illustrated in Figure 1,2,3, and 4.

Figures 3 and 4 make satiric mockery of the South African government by first suggesting that it is more interested in securing economic investments than it is interested in the lives and safety of women. Secondly, they do so by stating that even with the attention given to the economy, the rate of rape cases is higher than available jobs. GBV is seemingly not in the priorities of the South African government, with the topmost preoccupation with economic investment trumping a basic need, and constitutional right, such as the need for safety and security. Exposing and denouncing these widespread perceptions is important to awaken and challenge the government, reminding authorities to avoid lop-sidedness in governmental responsibilities. While economic investment is
of course important, a comprehensive response against GBV should equally be enforced and prioritised.

5.3. The adverse effect of silence
The magnitude of GBV in South Africa calls for the public to also develop and adopt counter-discourses that condemns it, starting from their immediate surroundings, including in their families and communities, both in private homes and public spaces. In fact, this is everyone’s responsibility, whether man or woman.

Figure 5 clearly emphasises the importance of speaking out against GBV as it is more costly to be silent; in other words the stakes are too high. The silence on the issue implies that one is either accepting GBV as normal or denying the far-reaching consequences of GBV. Gordon and Collins
(2013) also agree that the silence surrounding GBV continues to be widespread in South Africa despite the extensive media coverage of some particularly gruesome cases. Being silent means that men continue to perpetrate GBV unchallenged, and that survivors of such violence are expected to also remain silent in accepting their fate. A vital step in the fight against GBV is to break the culture of silence and dismantle popular misconceptions and myths on GBV, which is precisely what such placards and posts as those selected for this study are doing.

In Figure 6, the fact that GBV has become a norm in South Africa is denounced. The recognition of this fact is the first step in taking a clear stance against GBV and is one of the changes of ideology and/ or behaviour that can be brought about by counter-discourse. By discursively opposing and rejecting GBV society are not only raising awareness against the issue but are also condemning men perpetrating or excusing GBV or remaining silent thereof, while at the same time calling for a safe society for all, which cannot be achieved without prioritising the issue of the safety of women. In what Puigvert et al. (2019:361) refer to as “communicative orientation”, they opine that consistently opposing discourses against GBV can have a huge social impact. They agree that these counter-discourses have the transformative power of putting an end to GBV, just as Bartlett (2012:7) stresses that counter-discourses are, “those discourses that aim to challenge dominant discourses as a means of changing the status quo”. What the message in Figures 5 and 6 demand of all of us is more than not turning a blind eye. These mindfully crafted messages call on us to see, expose, care, and speak out against cases of GBV that occur every day around us. Discourse, and in this case counter-discourse, is indeed a social practice embedded in institutions and power relations that can shape behaviour and ways of seeing the world around us.

5.4. Taking matters into our hands
Again, the notion of counter-discourse is exemplified in Figures 7 and 8, reminiscent of Bartlett’s (2012:7) understanding that such counter-discourses, “resist the hegemonic social structure and its associated discourses”. The message that women need to protect themselves against GBV is problematic and misleading, and denounced as such. It once again implies that men have nothing to do with the act and are not responsible for their own actions, and that over and above bearing the physical and psychological impacts of such violence, women should also bear the responsibility of eradicating it.

The placards in Figures 7 and 8 above also call for solidarity, while also pointing out that GBV is so widespread that everyone knows someone who knows someone, if not being a survivor themselves. The call to acknowledge the extent of the problem asks for a change in the way one views and understands the problem, which can in turn bring change in behaviour. The statement that, “We should not need protection to survive in our streets and homes” (Figure 7) furthermore points to the fact that women in South Africa live with the constant fear of GBV, which in the long-term
affects the way girls and women use public spaces and experience everyday life both in their private and public.

6. Conclusion
This study set out to investigate counter-discourses in the frames of GBV in South Africa. In the struggle against GBV, counter-discourses make meaningful contributions in debunking myths, widespread beliefs, and encouraging change in perception, and most importantly have potential to lead to action. Importantly, counter-discourses, such as those formulated in the images selected for this study, warn against complacency, and call on all of us to remain vigilant against the trap of normalising GBV or perceiving it as something that does not affect everyone. GBV affects each one of us. Given the power of language and words, mainstream discourses, as a social practice, should be carefully crafted to avoid implicitly and/or explicitly perpetuating myths and problematic assumptions about GBV and survivors thereof.

The notion of resistance presented in this article stems from the use of counter-discourse to fight against GBV, whereby messages are formulated to expose the gravity and prevalence of the problem, call for the recognition of alternative ways of seeing the world from the point of view of women and survivors of violence, and ultimately call for action in changing the perpetrators’ mindsets and behaviours. The analysis of the posts and placards selected for this study are underpinned by Macgilchrist’s (2007:74) insight on logical inversion, which suggests countering a situation by arguing for an alternative reality.

One of the main messages expressed through counter-discourses adopted by GBV activists call for putting the blame and responsibility of GBV squarely on perpetrators, countering the widespread discourse whereby women ought to protect themselves and “fix” a problem they have not created in
the first place. The message is clear; the change of behaviour needs to come from men if society is serious about putting an end to GBV and the climate of fear that ends up being internalised by women and normalised by society. Language is indeed powerful. As the analysis of Figure 1 showing a post from the government of South Africa shows, for example, a well-intentioned message of support clumsily formulated can send the wrong impression and inadvertently perpetuate commonly held myths and beliefs. The courage, dedication, and hard work from GBV activists and survivors, and those walking alongside in solidarity, need to be celebrated and replicated for counter-discourses to become the mainstream discourse on GBV. Only then will society see a real change, making South Africa a safer place for all. Listening and amplifying the voices opposing and denouncing GBV is one step in the right direction, as what the nation needs beyond conscientisation is action. Words matter, and how one uses them matters even more.

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