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Community partnerships key in preventing violence against women and children



Professor Shanaaz Mathews
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Photo: Je'nine May/UCT

Professor Shanaaz Mathews, the director of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Children's Institute, dedicated her inaugural address as a full professor to the women and children who have lost their lives to violence. Her lecture titled, "Preventing violence against children and violence against women: Mapping intersections and finding solutions in the Global South", focused on how beyond legislation, transformative community partnerships are needed too.

Mathews has tackled tough issues, and interviewing men in prison convicted for killing their partners was a means to deepen her understanding of the causes of men's pathways to violent behaviour, she said. "Women need to be at the centre to bring about change, but we must take men along on that journey. Legislation is not enough to shift women's experiences."

The evidence shows multiple pathways: gender inequities and patriarchy in South Africa combined with the prevailing socio-cultural context "provides the space for men to be violent" towards women. Guns, alcohol and drugs are also drivers.

The stories were familiar; childhoods that were “rough” and “hard”. Men got little positive attention from their mothers, while fathers were absent or emotionally uninvolved, which profoundly affected the way men viewed themselves. Without other role models, many sought affirmation outside the family – in gangs or criminal activity.

“Immediate long-term and cumulative effects of violence on children extends through early childhood, primary school, adolescence, adulthood and to their own parenting. It impairs cognitive development, and produces poor school outcomes, delinquent behaviour, risky sexual behaviour, substance abuse, mental health problems, and increased aggression.

“This intergenerational cycle is deadly. These pathways must be disrupted,” she said.

One example is Mosaic, with offices in Ottery, Mitchells Plain, Philippi and Paarl. Their mission is to reduce abuse and domestic violence through holistic, integrated services for women and girls. The aim is healing and empowerment through support services, access to justice and training; a “continuum of care”.

“It’s where we see how our research translates into practice and how best to implement it in a community,” said Mathews. “This means that it’s not just an academic response but an intersectoral feminist approach with women and children at the centre that can be adapted by individual communities.”

Mathews outlined a six-point call to action: invest resources to build a rigorous evidence base; prioritise the implementation of legislation and national action plans; strengthen programming across the prevention and response continuum; promote partnerships between researchers and practitioners; challenge and change norms and behaviour that drive violence and; build the next generation of engaged scholars to tackle the complexities of real-world problems.

After [more than three decades of work](#) targeting violence against women and children and a raft of globally recognised research in the field Mathews has influenced legislation that protects women and children. She was co-principal investigator on the national study on Femicide in South Africa (1999 and 2009), which flagged the country’s shameful intimate femicide rates; her work resulted in changes in the laws governing corporal punishment and; she led the first national study on child homicide that provided the first estimates of fatal child abuse and showed weaknesses in the criminal justice system with cases falling through the cracks and perpetrators not being held accountable.

Mathews’ academic reach also saw her appointment to the [Lancet Commission on GBV and Child Maltreatment](#), set-up by the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet* with the aim of providing recommendations that change health policy or improve practice. And she is also an International Advisory Board member for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Innocenti Research Office’s Multi Country Study on the Drivers of Violence.

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