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## **Universities must act in concert against gender based violence -- among other social ills plaguing South Africa**

Universities South Africa (USAf), together with all its member institutions, is deeply distressed by news of the gruesome death of a young woman and student at one of its member universities. However, USAf refuses to respond by just “condemning” this act – deserving as it might be of the harshest form of contempt.

“If we want our society to change for the better, we need to respond differently to the decay that we’re increasingly witnessing in our society,” Professor Ahmed Bawa, CEO at USAf, stated today. “Universities need to lead South Africa towards that change. It is not enough for our institutions of higher learning to simply recognise the prevalence of gender-based violence. They have to act to change the culture that generates such violence against women and children.”

No one walks into a post office anticipating to perish there, Prof Bawa went on to say. Uyinene Mrwetyana is therefore forgiven for walking into one by herself -- like anyone else would. “A post office is a space for public service that no one associates with danger. Yet, the Clareinch post office is the place where this young woman met her untimely and gruesome death. Mrwetyana died at the hands of a deeply cruel and perverted man who appears to have planned his action in pursuit of sexual gratification at all costs.” The USAf CEO said the fact that this happened in a post office means women and children in our society are not safe anywhere.

“This tragedy is a clarion call for all men in our society to take a stand and be counted,” Prof Bawa declared. He said that regrettably, the 42-year old man arraigned for this act is not unique. According to a news report published in September 2018, South Africa has been dubbed the world’s rape capital<sup>1</sup> on account of its rising rape statistics. In cases where the victim is likely to identify the perpetrator, the modus operandi is to fatally silence them. “In our view, prioritising sexual gratification over human dignity and life borders on serious psychological dysfunction. When that happens as often as we see it happening in this country, it should become a matter of national concern. The 42-year old man linked to Uyinene Mrwetyana’s murder is a symptom of the deeply sick and cruel society that ours has become. This murder reminds us of the importance of men in our nation taking a stand and actively contributing to the cultivation of a more caring society.”

Prof Bawa said some chronic social ills start in the smallest unit of society – the family, where parents fail to parent children, leading to youngsters being let loose into society. “Such ills manifest in utter disrespect to teachers and all other forms of authority. Other symptoms are total disregard for the potential consequences of our choices and actions. The most common occurrence is the motorists we see daily, jumping red lights with impunity on public roads. We see it in individuals misappropriating public funds without batting an eyelid. It also manifests when organised groups shut down our universities, public services and cities at a drop of a hat. Ultimately, this boils down to utter disregard for the rule of law.

“As the university community, we must seriously raise the bar in performing our role as the conscience of society. Unless we act collectively and as a matter of urgency, our country will continue to sink into an abyss – out of which we may never escape.”

As an example of one programme, Prof Bawa cited USAf’s collaboration with Higher Health (formerly HEAIDS) in pursuing policies and actions to address the scourge of gender-based violence in South Africa.

In the context of all of this, “we wish to extend our deep condolences to the Mrwetyana family; Uyinene’s peers, lecturers and professors; the entire student body and the Executive Management of the University of Cape Town,” Professor Bawa stated. “Our condolences also extend to young women at other institutions and in the rest of our society. As we commend the South African Police Service (SAPS) for arresting the suspect in this regard, we now trust the legal system to see this case to its appropriate conclusion.” He went on to say that our government, together with the SAPS, have to recognise this tragedy as a clear indication of a deep national crisis that must be responded to, as a matter of urgency.

“In conclusion, we implore our universities to stand up and become catalysts for positive change in our beloved country. The scourge of violence and lawlessness in South Africa is rearing its head in many forms which warrant serious contemplation by all sectors of our society.”

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<sup>i</sup> Surge in sexual assault and violence has led to South Africa being dubbed ‘the rape capital of the world’. Accessed via: <https://southcoastherald.co.za/314591/surge-sexual-assault-violence-led-south-africa-dubbed-rape-capital-world/>

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