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**Press statement: South Africa's efforts to break intergenerational cycles of harm must treat violence against women and children as interconnected crises – new Children's Institute (UCT) research publication**

Cape Town, 4 November 2025 – There is increasing global evidence that violence against women and violence against children are deeply interconnected. These forms of violence often co-occur in the same households, share common risk factors and are perpetuated by societal norms that legitimise or tolerate violence.

Yet, South Africa's programmes, research and policies on violence against women (VAW) and violence against children (VAC) have historically been siloed – with different strategies, terminologies, and lead agencies.

The findings of the *South African Child Gauge 2025,* released today, argue that South Africa must adopt an integrated approach to address the needs of both women and children affected by violence, and to break the intergenerational cycle of harm.

The *South African Child Gauge 2025* highlights promising practices – such as gender-transformative programming – that can help promote healthier, non-violent relationships in families, schools and communities. It also identifies opportunities to strengthen systems by providing trauma-informed and family-centred services to prevent the intergenerational transmission of violence.

"In every country, violence against women and children carries profound individual, social and economic costs. The long-term effects on individuals are devastating: children who experience violence face a higher risk of mental health issues, substance abuse, and chronic health conditions. They also struggle with learning and socialisation, hindering their future potential," explained Lucy Jamieson, Senior Researcher at the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town (UCT). "Violence places an enormous burden on the health, social services and criminal justice systems. Violence against children was estimated to cost nearly 5% of South Africa's gross domestic product in 2015."

The Children's Institute has published the *South African Child Gauge* since 2005 to track the realisation of children's rights to support evidence-based policy and programming. The 2025 edition, with its focus on the intersections of violence against women and children, is edited by Lucy Jamieson, Prof Shanaaz Mathews, Prof Mercilene Machisa and Lori Lake.

**What is known about the extent of violence against women and children in South Africa**

Women and children's experiences of violence are rarely isolated events. Experiencing violence in early childhood – including witnessing it – increases the risk of girls becoming victims and boys being perpetrators of violence, later in life. It also raises the risk of children using corporal punishment when they become parents – driving an intergenerational cycle of violence.

- 24% of women ages 18 and older have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, according to the National Gender-Based Violence Prevalence Study.[i]
- 42% of children have experienced some form of maltreatment (sexual, physical, emotional abuse or neglect) by an adult who was supposed to take care of them.[ii]

Community-based studies show violence is more prevalent in townships and rural areas, where children repeatedly experience multiple forms of violence in homes, schools and communities.

**Common risk factors for violence against women and children**

The common risk factors that drive both violence against women and against children include gender inequality, male dominance, relationship conflicts, lack of responsive institutions, weak legal sanctions against violence and the harmful consumption of alcohol and drugs.

"Violence against women and violence against children are driven by a web of interrelated factors such as childhood trauma, observing violence in the home and community that leads to learned behaviour, all increasing the likelihood for victimisation and for perpetration, and the displacement of aggression," explained Prof Mathews, of UCT's Faculty of Health Sciences.

Communities have a role in addressing the intersections of violence against women and children by challenging harmful societal norms. "Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold power and authority, supported by societal norms and behaviours that favour men, normalise the use of violence and marginalise women and children," explained Prof Machisa, Senior Specialist Scientist, South African Medical Research Council. "Achieving lasting change in harmful social norms requires ongoing participatory community engagement with all members – including faith leaders, traditional leaders, men and boys – with a priority given to amplifying women's and children's voices. Communities can challenge harmful social norms by creating safer spaces for dialogue and developing strategies that strengthen social cohesion and support for affected women and children."

A 'life-course perspective' is critical in understanding the intersections of violence against women and children as it highlights the prevalence of different forms of violence at different stages of life and how these types of violence reinforce one another across the lifespan. For example, when a woman experiences intimate partner violence during pregnancy it increases the risk of depression, anxiety and stress, as well as suicide attempts, and the poor mental health can continue after her child is born and then compromise the bond between mother and baby. It is therefore crucial to intervene early to break the cycle.

**Violence is preventable, but government needs to invest in transforming gender norms, trauma-informed care and integrated services**

Gender-transformative programmes challenge the harmful beliefs used to justify violence and promote more caring and equitable relationships. This includes parenting programmes that expressly tackle violence and challenge harmful gender norms, include men as partners and promote shared caregiving and decision-making.

To work effectively at the intersections of violence against women and children, we need to:

1. Recognise that violence against women and against children are interconnected.

2. Intervene early. "It is crucial to intervene as early as possible to prevent further harm. This includes intervening early in the first 1,000 days of life – and even before violence begins by addressing the structural drivers," said Tracey Henry, CEO of Standard Bank Tutuwa Community Foundation. Maternal and child health services provide a cost-effective way to intervene early in the life course to identify and support women and children at risk.

3. Embed violence prevention and response into existing systems and services including health, education, social development and justice – to extend reach. Schools, for example, can model non-violence in the classroom by using positive discipline, and include lessons on healthy relationships, gender equality and conflict resolution in the curriculum. "It is also essential to include digital safety and media literacy in school curricula (and policies). Technology is expanding the reach and impact of violence. Digital platforms intensify risks, perpetuate and mirror the types of violence against women and children that occur offline," said Dr Linda Ncube-Nkomo, CEO, Nelson Mandela Children's Fund.

4. Respond to the needs of both women and children simultaneously through integrated services to ensure that everyone affected by violence gets the help they need. For example, when a woman is abused by her partner, her children also need counselling.

5. Adopt a trauma-informed approach to ensure that women and children feel safe, supported and in control. Caregivers of abused children may need extra support as this can trigger memories of their own experiences of violence.

6. Ensure that programmes include both men and women (also boys and girls) and actively challenge and transform harmful gender norms that justify the use of violence to resolve conflict or enforce discipline and control. "Many boys are silent witnesses to domestic violence and internalise harmful gender norms. They benefit from safe spaces where they can confront traditional views about men and fathers and explore positive masculinities grounded in care and respect," said Nicky Le Roux, Senior Programme Officer, Office for Southern Africa, Ford Foundation.

"Intervening early to break the cycle of intergenerational violence alleviates the burden on health, social and criminal justice services. It also enhances human capital and social cohesion, while boosting economic development. Hence, UNICEF advocates for the budget allocation for prevention to be increased and prioritised as response services are," said Irfan Akhtar, UNICEF South Africa Deputy Representative. "Adopting an integrated approach to violence against women and children avoids duplication, saves costs and ensures that no one is left behind."

**ENDS**

The *South African Child Gauge 2025* is published in partnership with UNICEF South Africa; Nelson Mandela Children's Fund; DSI/NRF Centre for Excellence in Human Development, University of the Witwatersrand; The LEGO Foundation; Standard Bank Tutuwa Community Foundation; and Ford Foundation.

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[ii] Burton P, Ward C, Artz L. *Optimus Study South Africa: Technical Report Sexual victimisation of children in South Africa Final report of the Optimus Foundation Study*. Zurich. 2016.