

WOUNDED LEADERS AND WOUNDED LEADERSHIP

POLICY PAPER

"We must also recognize our own wounds as a nation. We must acknowledge that we are a society that is hurting, damaged by our past, numbed by our present and hesitant about our future. This may explain why we are so easily prone to anger and violence."

– President Cyril Ramaphosa, during Winnie Mandela's funeral



Constitution Hill is a living museum that tells the story of South Africa's journey to democracy. The site is a former prison where world-renowned people were incarcerated, including Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Joe Slovo, Albertina Sisulu, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela.

INTRODUCTION

This policy brief discusses the concept of wounded leaders and leadership and how the work of transformation and effective leadership is undermined when leaders take up positions of authority without being aware of their own past traumas and thus making decisions based on their woundedness. There is thus a need for leaders to become more self-aware in regards to their own traumatic experiences and undergo a healing process to address their trauma if they are to lead effectively and become carriers of peace and prevent cycles of atrocity.

SUMMARY

Africa has been a site of a number of atrocities, brutality and violence. From slavery and the slave trade to colonialism that swept across the continent to the red terror atrocities in Ethiopia to the genocide in Rwanda to apartheid in South Africa and the numerous conflicts, civil wars, and repression, the continent has had its fair

share of brutality. The picture painted above reflects Africa's experience with brutality, oppression, and violence – one that has left a trail of collective trauma and wounding that, when left unresolved and unaddressed through collective and individual processes of healing, can lead to potential threats to peace and post-conflict/post-violence reconstruction and development efforts.

The work of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) shows that societies that have experienced violence and violations through conflicts, oppression, and a brutal, violent past often face serious challenges in rebuilding the institutions that promote human rights, social justice, and development. A key component of post-conflict and post-oppression societal reconstruction is leaders seriously addressing the legacies of conflict and trauma – which in most African contexts has not happened. While many countries have transitioned from conflict, wars, and repression to democratic societies, they still exhibit a wounded psyche that is embedded in their institutions and commonly exemplified by their leaders.

When it comes to leaders, woundedness and unresolved trauma stemming from a past characterized by violence and brutality can easily morph into harmful ways of addressing leadership responsibilities and responses. Leaders who are “wounded” must first process their own trauma before they can effectively lead their traumatized nation or manage a traumatized workplace.

The main findings of our work reveal that there is a need for leaders to become aware of their own traumatic experiences and undergo a healing process to address their trauma if they are to lead effectively and become carriers of peace. This greater self-awareness allows leaders to identify when their own trauma stands in the way of their intended leadership actions and outcomes. Once leaders can identify the triggers and unconstructive responses to stress and difficult situations, they are more capable of making decisions based on their own transformational visions and institutional goals. Such leadership is also capable of recognizing the trauma in others and facilitating spaces and processes that can effectively contain and guide the expression of unresolved trauma and prevent future violence and violations. Such containment and guidance is needed both within institutional cultures as well as communities.

The Concept of Wounded Leaders and Wounded Leadership

“Wounded leaders” refers to leaders who occupy leadership positions that require positive performance, dealing with difficult situations when they themselves are traumatized, and harbor unresolved trauma stemming from their past experiences. When it comes to resolving conflicts, solving complex and delicate problems, and making decisions that facilitate peaceful outcomes, leaders who have not addressed their own trauma tend to act out in anger and frustration, often responding in outbursts that only make the situation worse. Behavioral characteristics of wounded leaders within institutions, communities, and family settings include:

THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE FOR JUSTICE, TRUTH, AND RECONCILIATION

In 2014, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) launched the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth & Reconciliation (GIJTR), a consortium of nine international organizations focused on offering holistic, integrative, and multidisciplinary approaches to issues of truth, justice, and reconciliation. GIJTR works primarily with local populations, civil society organizations, survivors, and governments to develop transitional justice approaches that are victim-centered and collaborative and support dignity, respect, inclusion, and transparency in societies emerging from conflict or periods of authoritarian rule. Since its founding, GIJTR has engaged with people from 72 countries, worked with 681 civil society organizations, conducted 323 community-driven projects, and documented more than 5,040 human rights violations.

For more information, please visit gijtr.org.



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- Leading from a place of anger and pain
- Intolerance of dissenting opinion
- Demanding loyalty and obedience
- Inability to regulate emotional responses
- Refusal to acknowledge own limitations
- Lack of awareness of how trauma shapes their responses to stress and triggers
- Reliance on authority and control to direct behavior and achieve goals

KEY FINDINGS

CSVSR's 33 years of work in the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services and transitional justice and violence-prevention fields provides a number of key lessons when it comes to unresolved trauma, particularly that of leaders who lead from their wounds. The following key lessons stem from our work in South Africa and on other conflicts in Africa and beyond:

1. When we put leaders on a pedestal – amplifying their heroism during difficult times – and downplay their own need to heal from past trauma, as many African countries have done with liberation-struggle stalwarts in positions of power in government, large corporations, and other key institutions at the national and community levels, we fail to expose them as leading from their wounds (i.e., their trauma).
2. While we often refer to vulnerable, unarmed civilians during times of conflict, repressive regimes, and crisis as the victims of these incidents of violence, the actual victimization of both leaders and those who risk their lives for greater ideals and transformation is often covert, their trauma trivialized – both to themselves and to their people – as they move up the leadership ladder. The reality is acts of heroism and victory often come at a cost. A good example is the fight against colonialism on the continent and apartheid in South Africa, where leaders who are currently in power underwent traumatic experiences. While they are heroes today, they are also victims in need of healing. Women soldiers were raped as “bush wives” by their male counterparts – an experience not spoken about by those women victims who returned as heroines of the liberation struggle. Men and women alike experienced tremendous loss. Some saw their family members killed maimed or even killed in front of them. Others were themselves severely tortured after becoming political prisoners. The euphoria of gaining independence and freedom from colonial rule blinded societies to the traumas that those who were at the forefront of delivering this freedom went through.
3. When wounded leaders make decisions informed by their own unresolved trauma and pain, they are unable to achieve their vision and thus undermine their own effectiveness.
4. Wounded leadership can also result in institutional cultures that discourage innovation, initiative, and open communication, in addition to stifling the capacity of institutions and communities to come to terms with trauma at the individual and collective levels.
5. Workplaces and institutions that have great potential to do good and facilitate transformation and development can easily trigger or further entrench unresolved trauma, undermining the ability of institutional staff to achieve institutional goals when a wounded leader is at the helm.

CASE STUDY

SOUTH AFRICA

The majority of South Africa's institutional leaders, from both the public and private sectors, have a lived experience of the country's traumatic past. They have been raised in a society subjected to a history of colonial oppression and systematic racial dehumanization. Most have experienced violence directly in their communities, schools, and families. South African leaders who were active in the pursuit of national liberation, in particular, were subjected to state violence in their fight against apartheid. Many of these leaders and activists had themselves worked within authoritarian and militarized institutional structures, but the essential skills and organizational cultures that were key to survival under apartheid are now constraining factors for effective leadership in a democratic society.

After 1994, when South Africa gained its freedom from apartheid, these wounded leaders stepped into positions of authority within the very institutions whose authoritarian culture and systems were inherited from the apartheid state. While the leadership and the bulk of the staff of these institutions have changed since then, unresolved trauma has continued to influence policy and implementation at a range of levels, ultimately undermining the goal of realizing the society envisioned in the South African Constitution.

The failure to deal with this legacy of collective and individual trauma, particularly at the leadership level, is key to understanding why South Africa struggles to translate strong laws and policies into effective implementation, resulting in high levels of political and criminal violence, soaring rates of sexual and gender-based violence, high levels of unemployment (especially among youth), high levels of corruption, and increasing levels of inequality. This confluence of trends has led to increasingly negative risk assessment studies of South Africa's developmental trajectory. The most recent, widely cited risk assessment finds that "South Africa's performance on a range of social, economic and governance measures [has] deteriorated more in the past 12 years than [that of] any other nation not at war."



Image by Ashim D'Silva



Image by John Paul Henry

In the words of Mamphela Ramphele, in her summation of the psyche of the nation, “We are a wounded people who are in denial about our wounds. It is this denial that makes us over-sensitive to criticism and unable to learn from our mistakes to improve our performance on the governance front.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of our contexts are wounded contexts, led by wounded individuals who exist in wounded communities and societies, and are leading wounded institutions. The need for trauma-informed leadership, or leadership by leaders who are aware of their own trauma and how it can impact their effectiveness and success, cannot be overemphasized. Addressing this trauma in leadership is key both to transformation and positive change among societies, communities, families, and individuals and to preventing violence. In family, community, institutional, and societal settings, leaders who are aware of and addressing their trauma are empowered to create positive and peaceful relationships and environments, have the ability to contain their own emotional reactions as well as those of others, and are able to handle contradicting and uncomfortable messages and feedback.

Leaders who have dealt with their own traumatic experiences find themselves more at peace, their leadership style characterized by their ability to:

- embrace the uncomfortable but necessary process of healing;
- hear, acknowledge, and accept dissenting viewpoints; and
- work on their inner selves while pursuing other goals.

However, when leaders’ work resolving their own trauma is not done, they remain trauma carriers, their leadership often characterized by the following traits:

- They are easily triggered.
- They are unable to contain or regulate their own emotions.
- They are unable to contain or regulate the emotions of others.
- They make decisions from a position of being wounded, not from an objective viewpoint.
- They are unable to tolerate contradicting or opposing viewpoints.

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2. *Unlocking Us* (Brene Brown)
3. *Super Soul* (Oprah Winfrey)
4. *Infinite Potential* (Deepak Chopra)
5. *Self-Healers Soundboard* (Dr. Nicole LePera)



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