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**THE PERCEPTIONS OF SOUTH AFRICANS ON THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL  
FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN THE CONTEXT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

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## DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I, **Sello Sele**, declare that this dissertation is my original work. This work has not been previously submitted in whole or in part for the award of any degree. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in this thesis from the work, or works, of other authors has been attributed and has been cited and referenced in accordance with the requirements of the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria.

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Date: 07-06-2024

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore the views of South Africans on the impact of digital feminist activism (DFA) in addressing violence against women (VAW). It particularly focused on the #MenAreTrash DFA because of its significant influence across various social media platforms, especially Twitter (now X), between 2017 and 2020. To achieve its aim, the study focused on the following objectives: To critically evaluate the relevance of social media platforms as modern-day public spheres that facilitate activism against social issues such as VAW; to understand the rationale of the #MenAreTrash social media narrative and the logic behind the #NotAllMen counter-discourse; to conduct an in-depth exploration of the perceptions and attitudes of South Africans regarding the #MenAreTrash DFA; and to identify and analyse the challenges and barriers that may have interfered with the optimum performance of the #MenAreTrash DFA and to provide potential solutions for these.

Theoretically, this study was grounded in the feminist perspective, public sphere and communicative action theory, and counter-discourse theory. The feminist perspective provided analytical tools for understanding VAW from a woman's standpoint. The public sphere and communicative action theory was used to assess the efficacy of social media in facilitating DFA. Lastly, counter-discourse theory was used to analyse the acts of resistance towards the #MenAreTrash DFA as exemplified by the #NotAllMen social media hashtag.

This study adopted a qualitative approach to social inquiry. It drew data mainly from semi-structured in-depth interviews with 24 individuals who held varying views on the #MenAreTrash DFA. A non-probability snowball technique was used to recruit participants. These in-depth interviews were supplemented with secondary data sources in the form of multimedia sources.

Key findings indicate that social media platforms serve as modern-day public spheres where societal issues such as VAW can be addressed. The #MenAreTrash DFA successfully occupied these platforms to raise awareness and challenge patriarchal norms that contribute to VAW, rape, and femicide and lend women a voice to share their experiences. However, the inherent limitations of using social media platforms to address VAW through DFA also emerged from the data.

While a major achievement of the #MenAreTrash DFA was to raise awareness on VAW, rape, and femicide in South Africa and to spark engagements on social media around these issues,

this initiative was deemed unsuccessful in influencing behavioural change in men that could lead to a decline in incidents of VAW and related issues. The major limitation in this regard was attributed to the controversial slogan ‘men are trash,’ which was perceived as a dehumanising and unfair generalisation of men and created feelings of alienation and worthlessness among men.

The study identified challenges and barriers that may have impeded the effectiveness of the #MenAreTrash DFA in bringing desired social change. These obstacles are categorised into external and internal factors. The former comprises the challenges caused by factors outside the DFA, and the latter includes those originating from within the formation itself. To overcome these setbacks, the study consolidated recommendations to address some of the challenges identified.

Overall, the study emphasises the need for broader, more nuanced, and inclusive strategies where everyone can make a meaningful contribution to mitigate VAW, rape, and femicide and ultimately advance gender equality in the South and beyond.

**Keywords:** digital feminist activism (DFA); violence against women (VAW); gender-based violence (GBV); #MenAreTrash; #NotAllMen; counter-discourse; South Africa

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY .....	i
ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	v
LIST OF ACRONYMS.....	ix
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Introduction .....	1
1.2 Background to the Study .....	1
1.3 Problem Statement.....	6
1.4 Research Questions.....	7
1.5 Research Aims and Objectives .....	7
1.6 Rationale of the Study.....	8
1.7 Theoretical Approaches.....	8
1.7.1 Feminist perspective.....	9
1.7.2 Public sphere and communicative action theory.....	15
1.7.3 Counter-discourse theory.....	18
1.8 Thesis Outline.....	21
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	22
2.1 Introduction .....	22
2.2 Digital Feminist Activism in Context .....	22
2.3 Digital Feminist Activism and Violence Against Women.....	28
2.4 Digital Feminist Activism and Violence Against Women in South Africa .....	30
2.5 Resistance Towards Digital Feminist Activism: Backlash and Counter-discourses	34
2.6 Factors that Interfere with the Functioning of Feminist Activism .....	37
2.7 How Can Digital Feminist Activism Be Enhanced?: Support and Allyship.....	41
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....	46
3.1 Introduction .....	46
3.2 Philosophical Standpoint.....	46
3.3 Research Design .....	47
3.4 Data Sources .....	47
3.4.1 In-depth interviews.....	48
3.4.2 Secondary data analysis.....	48
3.4.3 Study participants.....	49

3.4.4	Data collection .....	50
3.5	Data Analysis.....	51
3.5.1	In-depth interviews.....	51
3.5.2	Secondary data .....	52
3.5.3	Triangulation.....	52
3.6	Trustworthiness and Credibility of Data .....	52
3.7	Researcher Positionality in the Study .....	53
3.8	Ethical Considerations .....	54
<b>CHAPTER 4: SOCIAL MEDIA AS A PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL FEMINIST ACTIVISM .....</b>		<b>56</b>
4.1	Introduction .....	56
4.2	Strengths and Benefits of Social Media as a Public Sphere.....	57
4.2.1	Pedagogical value of social media .....	57
4.2.2	Social media as a conduit between online and offline engagements .....	58
4.2.3	Social media as a means for self-expression and freedom of speech.....	59
4.3	Shortcomings and Limitations of Social Media as a Public Sphere .....	61
4.3.1	Misinterpretations and misunderstandings on social media .....	62
4.3.2	Social media censorship .....	64
4.3.3	Lack of communicative action on social media.....	66
4.3.4	Intrinsic limitations of social media as a public sphere.....	67
4.4	Social Media Activism .....	70
4.4.1	Positive impact of social media activism.....	70
4.4.2	Social media activism and anonymity .....	75
4.4.3	‘Slacktivism’ and ‘clicktivism’ social media activism.....	77
4.5	Discussion and Conclusion.....	79
<b>CHAPTER 5: EXPLORING THE #MENARETRASH DIGITAL FEMINIST ACTIVISM: COUNTER-DISCOURSES, PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES.....</b>		<b>86</b>
5.1	Introduction .....	86
5.2	Defining #MenAreTrash Digital Feminist Activism .....	86
5.2.1	The meaning of #MenAreTrash: Patriarchy, male privilege and domination, toxic masculinity, sexism, misogyny, and rape culture .....	87
5.2.2	#MenAreTrash: “It is not an individual attack on men”.....	90
5.2.3	#MenAreTrash: A cry for help.....	92
5.3	Objectives of #MenAreTrash .....	93
5.3.1	Awareness raising.....	94
5.3.2	Holding men accountable .....	96

5.3.3	Gaining visibility.....	96
5.3.4	Creating conversations and engagements .....	97
5.3.5	Intentional element of discomfort in the #MenAreTrash construct .....	99
5.4	Perceptions of the Impact of #MenAreTrash .....	101
5.4.1	Views on the attitudes of men towards #MenAreTrash .....	101
5.4.2	Views on call-out culture and cancel culture.....	106
5.5	Resistance Towards #MenAreTrash Through Counter-discourses .....	116
5.5.1	Views on counter-discourses: Support for #NotAllMen .....	117
5.5.2	Views on counter-discourses: Disapproval of #NotAllMen.....	120
5.6	#MenAreTrash construct: A Proper Way to Address Men? .....	123
5.7	Was #MenAreTrash Digital Feminist Activism Successful in Fulfilling its Purpose and Objectives? .....	127
5.8	Discussion and Conclusion.....	131
<b>CHAPTER 6: CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS AFFECTING DIGITAL FEMINIST ACTIVISM AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS .....</b>		<b>141</b>
6.1	Introduction .....	141
6.2	Challenges and Barriers to Digital Feminist Activism: External and Internal Factors	141
6.2.1	External factors .....	141
6.2.2	Internal factors .....	146
6.3	Potential Solutions to the Challenges and Barriers Affecting Digital Feminist Activism.....	157
6.3.1	Digital public pedagogy.....	158
6.3.2	Communicative action.....	160
6.3.3	The extension of digital feminist activism to grassroots levels .....	162
6.3.4	Cognitive authority.....	164
6.3.5	Models for integrating men in feminist activism .....	166
6.3.6	Strengthening the institutional response to violence against women.....	168
6.4	Discussion and Conclusion.....	170
<b>CHAPTER 7: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>		<b>178</b>
7.1	Introduction .....	178
7.2	Summary of Key Findings .....	179
7.3	Study Limitations.....	186
7.4	Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Future Research.....	187
7.4.1	Recommendations for policy .....	187
7.4.2	Recommendations for practice.....	188

7.4.3	Recommendations for future research.....	189
7.5	Conclusion.....	189
	REFERENCES .....	191
	APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	208
	APPENDIX B: ETHICAL APPROVAL .....	211
	APPENDIX C: INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM .....	212
	APPENDIX D: LETTER FROM LANGUAGE EDITOR .....	215

## **LIST OF ACRONYMS**

DFA	Digital Feminist Activism
VAW	Violence Against Women
GBV	Gender-based violence
DIY	Do It Yourself
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/questioning, Asexual
MRA	Men's Rights Activism
NUM	Ni Una Menos
SAPS	South African Police Service
SRC	Student Representative Council
UCT	University of Cape Town
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
US	United States
WHO	World Health Organization

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction

South Africa as a country is faced with many societal challenges, not least of which is the high prevalence of violence against women (VAW). Although this challenge is considered a global issue, VAW in South Africa is rampant compared to other countries (Gevers et al. 2013). This makes the country extremely unsafe for women to live freely as democracy dictates. In efforts to mitigate VAW and the related issues of rape and femicide, South Africans have resorted to social media platforms such as Twitter (now X) to raise awareness, confront patriarchal practices harmful to women, pursue justice, and communicate critical messages related to VAW. This contemporary method of activism is known as digital feminist activism (DFA). Against this backdrop, this study explored the role and impact of women-led social media activism, particularly the #MenAreTrash social media hashtag, against VAW. In extension, the study took an interest in investigating the controversial nature of this DFA and how this controversy shaped the overall purpose of the cause itself.

## 1.2 Background to the Study

VAW is defined as a condition in which women experience “physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (UN 1993). In its most extreme form, VAW can lead to femicide, which is the intentional murder of women because they are women (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2012). VAW is one form of gender-based violence (GBV), which refers to all forms of violence directed against a person based on their gender (WHO 2021). The concepts of VAW and GBV are used interchangeably throughout the thesis, particularly in the findings, because of the everyday usage of GBV to refer to violence perpetrated against women. This study recognises that the concepts of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ have been extensively researched and debated. Previous research indicates that the understandings of gender are less static and binary than they were in the past (Schudson et al. 2019). However, it is commonly acknowledged that most people, including media, still use these terms in their traditional sense in everyday conversations and discourses about GBV or VAW. Given this context, this study uses the concepts of ‘men’ and ‘women’ loosely to refer to cis-gender men and women, in order to reflect the mundane usage and understanding of these terms by broader society. These are individuals whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Previous studies acknowledge VAW as an internationally recognised social issue that cuts across all socioeconomic classes, racial groups, cultures, and religions, and occurs in both developed and developing nations, although its forms, frequency, and extent may vary from one country to another (Radzilani-Makatu 2019; Muluneh et al. 2020; Wane et al. 2020; Enaifoghe et al. 2021). For instance, women in developing countries experience significantly higher rates of GBV than those in developed countries. The WHO shows that the prevalence of physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner among women in developing countries is estimated to be 37%, compared to 23% in developed countries (UN Women 2022). The lower rates in developed countries can be attributed to their stronger and more comprehensive legal frameworks available to protect women from GBV, which are lacking in developing countries (UN Women 2019). VAW in developing countries is further compounded by several intersecting factors that include socioeconomic disadvantage, lack of education, gender inequality, and sexuality, among others (UN Women 2019). However, regardless of the comparative differences in the prevalence of VAW in developed and developing worlds, the issue remains a challenge throughout the globe. A population-based study conducted by the WHO (2021) across 161 countries reveals that between 2000 and 2018, one in every three women experienced physical or sexual violence (or both) perpetrated by their intimate partner, non-partner, or both. The World Economic Forum (2019) also notes that 87 000 women and girls were murdered worldwide in 2017, according to UN data; about half of these women were killed by their partners or relatives.

VAW has far-reaching impacts on the general wellbeing of the victims and those around them. Physical abuse, for example, is linked to negative health outcomes such as reproductive health problems and long-term physical injuries (Shamu et al. 2011; Simister 2012; Karim and Baxter 2016; Werwie et al. 2019). The effects of abuse can also result in psychological disorders, such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and suicide ideation. (Beyene et al. 2019; Kempen 2019; Werwie et al. 2019). Another form of VAW is sexual abuse, which is associated with unwanted and unplanned pregnancies as well as sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS. Moreover, VAW has economic and social impacts on the victims. On an economic level, a victim of abuse can lose a job due to frequent absenteeism and reduced levels of productivity at work (UN Women 2019), and they are often incapacitated to generate their own income or make decisions regarding their livelihoods (Werwie et al. 2019). On a societal level, victims may experience social stigma, and ridicule, as well as a reduced ability to take part in social activities (Wane et al. 2020). It was also found that when women experience violence, the

effects extend to society at large, harming some of the most important social institutions like family (Simister 2012). For example, according to Simister (2012), VAW can destabilise family structures, making children who witness women in their lives being battered susceptible to emotional damage and behavioural problems such as crime and truancy. Such children are also more likely to become victims or perpetrators of violence as they see violence as ‘normal’ (Siziba 2020).

The ubiquitous nature of VAW throughout the world has prompted numerous attempts and interventions aimed at preventing this social issue. It has been over four decades since different stakeholders actively embarked on initiatives aimed at addressing VAW (Sithomola 2020). In the 1970s, campaigns and feminist movements laid the foundation for activism around the world (Sithomola 2020), and later, international organisations such as the WHO and other UN agencies came to recognise all forms of GBV as a serious offence against basic human rights (Heise et al. 2002). It is to this end that Target 5.2 of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) urges UN Member states to “eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation” by 2030.

The use of traditional media as well as digital media has played a significant role in terms of how advocacy messages related to VAW have been communicated, disseminated, and used to mobilise activists and ensure that their voices are heard (Sener 2021). The advent of the internet, and in particular, social media has effected activism against VAW in significant ways. This is demonstrated by the global emergence of DFA, also known as online feminism or hashtag feminism. Broadly defined, DFA involves “harnessing the power of online media to discuss, uplift, and activate gender equality and social justice” (Martin and Valenti 2012, p.6).

DFA is deeply rooted in feminist ideology, which can be described as both a belief in and a movement for the advancement and emancipation of women and has its central focus on the system of patriarchy. In its inception, feminism progressed through three main phases, known as ‘waves’. First-wave feminism was marked by activism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and its primary focus was advocating for women’s suffrage and legal rights (Schrupp 2017). While key issues in first-wave feminism were mainly the enfranchisement of women and their property rights, second-wave feminism drew attention to issues of sexuality, reproductive rights, and *de facto* inequalities (Powell 2013). Third-wave feminism, also known as intersectional feminism, emerged in the 1990s and sought to address the shortcomings identified in the second wave.

Critics accused the second-wave feminist movement as largely a project that benefitted White middle-class women in Western countries while neglecting the concerns of Black women, lesbians, immigrants, and religious minorities in the same countries and other parts of the world (Osborne 2001).

Another feminist movement that emerged around 2012 has been considered by some authors as the fourth wave of feminism. It was within this wave that DFA came to the fore. A central focus of this wave is, among other issues, sexual harassment, body shaming, rape culture, femicide, and toxic masculinity (Baumgardner 2011; Martin and Valenti 2012; Munro 2013; Bertrand 2018 cited in Sener 2021, p.2). Although it surfaced in 2012, this feminism gained major traction in 2017 through the hashtag #MeToo that followed the allegations of sexual assault against a movie producer by American actress Alyssa Milano (Mendes et al. 2019) #MeToo as a social movement was founded by rape survivor and activist Tarana Burke in 2006 before it became an internet sensation (MeToo 2022). Its mission was to bring together resources and support for victims of sexual violence in America (MeToo 2022). Today, #MeToo is widely used to address all forms of VAW, especially sexual violence, by sparking public debates on social media platforms (Sener 2021). This movement led to the rise of similar movements in countries experiencing high prevalence of VAW and femicide. Examples of these include #NiUnaMenos (Not one less [woman]) in Argentina, which extended to Uruguay and Chile; #8M (8 March 2017) in Spain; and #MenAreTrash in South Africa (Puente et al. 2021). As Puente et al. (2021, p.296) puts it, “these hashtags have the ability to organize, mobilize, revitalise, and unite positions in an unprecedented feminist political call to action”.

While the contribution made by DFA to address VAW is recognisable and praiseworthy, South African scholars like Makama et al. (2019) argue that these movements have failed to bring men in the country into discourses surrounding VAW. They further contend that #MenAreTrash, for instance, has never been progressive in establishing allyship with South African men as far as VAW is concerned. Instead, it gave rise to a ‘war of sexes’, broadly defined as conflicts and disagreements between men and women (Makama et al. 2019). The concept of ‘war of sexes’ was originally used by bell hooks (1984) to underscore that the strong desire and ambition of feminists to confront patriarchal structures in society made it seem like they declare a war between sexes. Indeed, more often than not, DFA have met some form of resistance and defensive behaviours from men and their supporters (Flood 2019).

When #MenAreTrash surfaced on various social media platforms in 2017 as one of the mechanisms to speak against the seemingly ignorant attitude of South African society and its lack of awareness of the VAW pandemic (Mushomba 2020), numerous social media users jumped on the bandwagon for support. On the other spectrum were those who rejected the labelling of #MenAreTrash by using the #NotAllMen social media hashtag. The main issue raised by the proponents of the #NotAllMen hashtag was that men were being unfairly targeted as a homogenous group of abusers (Dadas 2017), and for this reason, the #MenAreTrash hashtag was accused of being a separatist movement (D'Avanzato et al. 2021). hooks (1984, p.33) avers that it is typical of separatist feminist movements to regard “all men as enemies of all women” and “the subjugation or extermination of men” as a solution. Moreover, South African scholars like Sanger (2019, p.71) contend that digital feminist practice “inadvertently works against hard-won gains made by feminists” in the context of the global South. This raises questions about the ability of DFA to engage men on the issue of VAW.

While there has been an ongoing debate about whether men should be alongside women to combat social ills like VAW, a significant number of scholars believe that the inclusion of men in the feminist agenda can be progressive (hooks 1984; Ratele 2018; Boonzaier 2014; Shefer et al. 2007 cited in Makama et al. 2019, p.63). This understanding comes from the fact that despite decades of efforts by women-led organisations to prevent VAW around the world, there has been no significant decline in incidents of VAW and femicide (Graaff 2017). During the UNESCO conference in Kinshasa in 2011, a concern was raised by some of the leaders that low inclusion or no inclusion at all of men in the preventative efforts against VAW undermines the cause (Freedman 2011). According to Gevers et al. (2013, p.16), “achieving gender equality and equity is not only about women’s representation and participation, but also about women’s and men’s attitudes, constructions and performances of gender through masculine and feminine identities”. This assertion signifies the importance of concerted efforts by all people, regardless of their gender, to combat all forms of VAW. However, this is highly unlikely to materialise at the most optimal level and pace if women-led initiatives to confront social injustices do not function effectively.

With this context, this study sought to explore the perceptions of South Africans on the impact of #MenAreTrash DFA in confronting and responding to the issue of VAW. South Africa is a relevant context within which we can gain rich insights into the dynamics of contemporary feminist movements in general since DFA has thrived and proven to be effective in bringing attention to VAW and related issues in the country.

### 1.3 Problem Statement

In the wake of high incidences of VAW, rape and femicide, South Africa saw the emergence of DFA on social media, particularly Twitter, between 2017 and 2020. In this context, the #MenAreTrash social media hashtag was used as a mechanism to confront these issues. This hashtag surmounted to an online social discussion that exposed issues related to gender inequality, toxic masculinity, rape, VAW, and femicide (D'Avanzato et al. 2021). As aforementioned, #MenAreTrash was not fully welcomed by some South African social media users. To express their disgruntlement, they reacted with the #NotAllMen hashtag as a symbol of counter-discourse, among other forms of resistance. A qualitative study conducted by D'Avanzato et al. (2021) on the #MenAreTrash DFA revealed that 31% of Twitter comments expressed discontentment with the hashtag on the premise that it is too generalising and unfair and that it undermines the existence of non-violent and pro-feminist men. Therefore, #MenAreTrash was deemed as alienating to men as allies in addressing VAW and as too complex to be effective. Further critics aver that the movement reinforces the binary view of men as villains and women as victims, and consequently, recreates the notion that women's and men's problems are discrete, whereas in actual fact, the experiences of women are interwoven with those of men (Tamale 2011 cited in Makama et al. 2019).

Studies that focus on the emergent DFA against all forms of VAW have been conducted in the US (Dadas 2017; Flood 2019; Dejmanee et al. 2020), Spain (Puente et al. 2021; Willem and Tortajada 2021), Turkey (Sener 2021), Argentina (Puente et al. 2021), and Kenya (Wasuna 2018). Many of them are centred around how women effected activism against VAW using online platforms in particular parts of the world (Puente et al. 2017; Wasuna 2018; Dejmanee et al. 2020; Storer and Rodriguez 2020; Puente et al. 2021); how feminism is embodied on digital platforms (Jackson 2018; El Asmar 2020; Willem and Tortajada 2021); and what are women's experiences – both the challenges and benefits, with online platforms (Megarry 2014; Dadas 2017; Nyabola 2018; Kurasawa et al. 2021). There is also a notable growth in the number of studies scrutinising, evaluating, and assessing the effectiveness of contemporary feminist projects in dealing with VAW (Prasad et al. 2020; Portillo 2021).

Despite the growth in global literature on DFA, South African scholarship has devoted little attention to this area of research. The majority of South African studies have focused predominantly on the nature and prevalence of VAW in the country and the mechanisms to prevent it (Karim and Baxter 2016; Lince-Deroche et al. 2018; Kempen 2019; Ofana 2019;

Enaifoghe et al. 2021), with little to no discussion of the role of DFA. While there exist a few studies that have explored the #MenAreTrash from various perspectives (Makama et al., 2019; Sanger, 2019; D'Avanzato et al., 2021; Oparinde and Mantsha, 2021), no scholarly work exists that provides a comprehensive and balanced analysis of the views, attitudes and thoughts of South Africans towards the #MenAreTrash DFA and how these perceptions have influenced the discourse surrounding VAW. It is against this backdrop that this study aimed to critically explore the views, thoughts, opinions and attitudes of South Africans towards the #MenAreTrash DFA, with a particular focus on how these perceptions shaped the discourse around VAW. It employed multiple theoretical approaches to offer a holistic account and understanding of the issue under study.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

The study attempted to answer the following main research question that arose from the research problem: What impact did the #MenAreTrash DFA have on addressing VAW in South Africa? The following sub-questions gave further direction to the issue under study:

- To what extent are social media platforms relevant as modern-day public spheres in which social issues such as VAW can be addressed?
- What are the perceptions and attitudes of South Africans on the role of the #MenAreTrash DFA to address the issue of VAW?
- What are the main premises of the #MenAreTrash and #NotAllMen standpoints in relation to the subject of VAW in South Africa?
- What are the prevailing challenges and barriers that may have impeded the effectiveness of the #MenAreTrash DFA, and which strategies could be adopted to overcome these obstacles?

#### **1.5 Research Aims and Objectives**

The general aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of South Africans on the impact of the #MenAreTrash DFA to address VAW. The study had the following specific objectives:

1. To critically evaluate the relevance of social media platforms as modern-day public spheres that facilitate activism against social issues such as VAW;
2. To understand the rationale and key tenets of the #MenAreTrash social media narrative and the logic behind the #NotAllMen counter-discourse;

3. To conduct an in-depth exploration of South Africans' perceptions of and attitudes towards the #MenAreTrash DFA; and
4. To identify and analyse the challenges and barriers that may have interfered with the optimum performance of the #MenAreTrash DFA and to provide potential solutions for these.

## **1.6 Rationale of the Study**

The current research study seeks to contribute to the existing body of literature within the context of the rising influence of social media usage to grapple with social injustices experienced by women. Further contribution will be made to digital sociology as a novel sub-discipline of sociology that focuses on how contemporary societies' lives and behavioural patterns are influenced by various technologies. On the societal level, exploring the responses, attitudes, and reactions South Africans show towards digital feminism can help assess the (in)effectiveness of the current work of feminist activism in eradicating VAW and perhaps also devise ways in which improvements can be made. Lastly, the study serves to support Millennial Development Goal 3, which aims to promote gender equality and empower women. The assumption is that if all forms of VAW are eliminated through the execution of various approaches that include effective DFA, it will provide a solid foundation for realising gender equality. This Millennial Development Goal is linked to the South African Bill of Rights, which among other things, highlights that everyone should be equal before the law and should have the right to life and human dignity. This study thus holds relevance to both national and international commitments to eradicate VAW.

## **1.7 Theoretical Approaches**

This study draws on the feminist perspective to explain and understand VAW from women's vantage point, while it also borrows from Jurgen Habermas's theory of public sphere and communicative action and Michel Foucault's theory of counter-discourse. The integration of these three theoretical approaches was considered important in order to analyse the views on VAW from multiple perspectives, with the intention to unpack its complex nature. Relying on only one theoretical approach was thus considered insufficient for providing a comprehensive understanding and analysis of the issue under study.

### *1.7.1 Feminist perspective*

Feminist theories came to the fore as a body of knowledge and thought that attempts to develop an understanding of women's conditions and to articulate justice from a women-centred perspective (Gardiner 2005). The pioneers of these theories were inspired by questions generated by feminist political movements and made it their business to amplify women's voices through research (Akerly and True 2010). As a political movement, feminism's main objective is to challenge and confront what it perceives as the oppression of women by men in various areas of life (Inglis and Thorpe 2012). In many ways, this oppressive social order is centred around inequalities between genders since men tend to possess more social, economic, political, and cultural resources than women (Abbott et al. 2005; Inglis and Thorpe 2012). The most important discovery of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the premise that women's position in society is not naturally determined but rather socially structured and culturally reproduced through patriarchy (Inglis and Thorpe 2012). Therefore, women's emancipation from patriarchal domination is possible if the structures that perpetuate it can be transformed or dismantled.

Akerly and True (2010) posit that when a researcher applies feminist theory to a particular project, they should be mindful that it is not the insights of any school of thought that are significant but rather the feminist debates. For instance, although second-wave feminism in the 1960s consisted of diverse movements, these groups shared certain ideologies that directed their vision. These included the understanding that 'the personal is political', which is the argument that those issues previously considered private, and therefore, non-political, were in fact, fundamentally political (Abbott et al. 2005; Inglis and Thorpe 2012). By this they meant that the everyday encounters and experiences of women within their domestic settings should be treated as matters of public concern. Given this context, this study employed three main feminist theories, namely liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, and radical feminism, to draw on their diverse perspectives on VAW. Doing so allowed the researcher to categorise, contextualise, and eventually, analyse the participants' accounts in accordance with these theories. Collectively, these schools of thought attempted to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the participants perceive, conceptualise, and conceive of VAW and related issues in the South African context.

### *1.7.1.1 Liberal feminism*

The central issue in liberal feminism is equality between men and women. The proponents of this branch of feminism seek to identify existing inequalities between men and women since it is perceived that men enjoy certain privileges of which women are deprived (Gardiner 2005; Inglis and Thorpe 2012). Early liberal feminism focuses on the advancement of women's political rights, economic rights, equal pay legislation, and the promotion of an institutional culture in which there is mutual respect between the sexes (Inglis and Thorpe 2012). Although progress has been made in achieving some of these goals, women still face some injustices that stem from gender inequality.

Liberal feminism has adopted from liberal political thought the idea that men and women are the same in terms of the human capacity to act and think rationally. Observable differences between the sexes are not naturally determined, and instead, are products of socialisation or 'gender-role conditioning', which is described as the conditioning of individuals to the roles, expectations, and behaviours that society prescribes for males and females (Abbott et al. 2005; American Psychological Association 2022). This means that women's subaltern position in society is a result of socially constructed barriers that can be deconstructed. To emancipate women, feminists like Betty Frieden (1963) and the National Organisation for Women (established in 1996) declared that laws that give rights to women must be passed and those that are discriminatory be outlawed (Abbott et al. 2005). Along with this, they believed that people should be educated on flawed prejudices held against women in order to remedy gender discrimination (Gardiner 2005). According to liberal feminists, if we are to promote gender equality, there needs to be a reformation of the basic structures of society without making any revolutionary changes (Inglis and Thorpe 2012). This reform ought to be realised through parliamentary and legal means rather than through other non-established ways.

When it comes to the issue of VAW, liberal feminism declares that women should be freed from violence and the threat thereof. Violence and the threat of it deprive women of dignity and a sense of self-respect, and ultimately, restrict their activity in the public sphere because of fear of being harmed (Baehr 2021). According to Cudd (2006 cited in Baehr 2021, p.1), VAW functions to unfairly disempower and oppress women. Arguably so, the alarming rate of VAW and femicide incidences do instil immense fear into South African women to exercise their right to freedom of movement, among other things. In extension, this fear limits their agency in various spheres of life. Thus, feminist protests such as #MenAreTrash were initiated to

pressurise the justice system and the government to decisively deal with VAW. This is in the view that the state constantly fails to protect women despite the law recognising their rights to be protected against violence (Baehr 2021).

In the context of this study, the views that are likely to be aligned with liberal feminism may place more emphasis on the role of the legal system in confronting VAW and perhaps how this institution can be transformed in order to protect the rights of women to live freely without constant fear and suspicion. Although liberal feminism seems to have a clear strategy on how women can be emancipated from their dire condition, critics accuse this school of thought of a lack of radicality and a failure to acknowledge that the status quo and social order are configured in a way that privileges men (Inglis and Thorpe 2012).

#### *1.7.1.2 Marxist feminism*

Marxist feminism has its origins in the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on the economic relations between dominant and subordinate social classes. Although Marx did not show interest in the contribution of the capitalist system to the oppression of women, his colleague, Engels, wrote about the role of capitalism in ensuring women's economic and political domination by men in his work *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884). He asserts that the nuclear structure of family was formed to fulfil the needs of the capitalist system (Engels 1884). Since men strived to pass on their property to their rightful and legitimate heirs, this meant that they needed to exercise a certain level of control (by assigning women the role of domestic work) over women in marriage (Abbott et al. 2005). In this sense, women experience a 'double oppression' as it was perpetuated by both bourgeoisie and/or proletarian men.

Given this context, Marxist feminism adopted Marxist theory in efforts to provide an explanation for the subordination and exploitation of women, especially in capitalist societies. Marxist feminists asseverate that successive 'modes of production' were not only structured to exploit the subordinate class but were also a social arrangement through which women were/are controlled, both in terms of their reproductive capacities and work (Inglis and Thorpe 2012). This aligned with the notion of Marxism that analyses social orders based on the exploitation of the subordinate class by the ruling class (Inglis and Thorpe 2012). Although men experience direct and overt exploitation, women experience it differently. For instance, while capitalism exploits men by paying low wages, women do not receive any payment for doing domestic work. As such, a capitalist system relies on women working for free in the home (Giddens

2006). Marxist feminism further notes that the capitalist societies of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century systematically excluded women from participating in the public sphere, such as politics and ‘productive work’, with the intent to confine them to the private sphere in the domestic settings (Inglis and Thorpe 2012; Ferrante 2016). Hence, this theory views the problems of women as rooted in the exploitation of women by all men.

Although Marxist feminist theory cannot make a direct link between VAW and the capitalist system, it argues that the patriarchal devaluation of women places them in a marginalised position of violation and victimisation (Martin et al. 2006). According to Schwendinger and Schwendinger (1983 cited in Martin et al. 2006, p.321), women are likely to be susceptible to violence due to the social and economic instability inherent in capitalist societies. The previous study reveals that low wages is one of the factors responsible for the ‘feminisation of poverty’, which is when women in labour are still more likely than men in labour to live below the poverty threshold (Martin et al. 2006; Ferrante 2016). For instance, when comparing the average annual consumption expenditure between men and women in South Africa, Statistics South Africa (2011) shows that men usually have a higher average (R89 371) than women (R51 528) in this aspect. This is one of many indicators that reflect women’s economic precarity. As it pertains to this study, Marxist feminism can shed light on the role of economic exclusion, vulnerability and the powerlessness of women in maximising the probability of being abused and violated by men.

Like broader criticism of Marxism, Marxist feminism is often accused of providing a too narrow focus on issues that only have to do with work and economy (Inglis and Thorpe 2012). By so doing, the theory downplays the gendered oppression of women and reduces it to categories of Marxism. Moreover, it fails to account for patriarchal relationships in non-capitalist societies, and it does not take into consideration the specific location of women in developing societies (Abbott et al. 2005).

### *1.7.1.3 Radical feminism*

Unlike liberal and Marxist feminist theories, which are developed from other bodies of mainstream social, political, or cultural theory, radical feminism is feminism in its purest form. This theory is sometimes referred to as ‘gynocentrism’, which is a perspective that emphasises women’s differences from men and defines its political agenda mostly in relation to the valorisation of women’s social and cultural constitution as different, and vehemently rejects humanist approaches that underpin liberal feminism (Abbott et al. 2005). According to Abbot

et al. (2005), a humanist perspective emphasises sameness rather than difference between men and women in terms of human capabilities. Gynocentrism, on the other hand, argues for “the existence of a female or feminine nature that has been concealed and/or distorted throughout history; one that needs to be liberated and revalued” (Abbott et al. 2005, pp.31).

The central issue in radical feminism is the premise that men are responsible for and derive benefits from the exploitation and oppression of women (Abbott et al. 2005; Gardiner 2005; Giddens 2006; Inglis and Thorpe 2012). This branch of feminism perceives patriarchy as a trans-historical and universal phenomenon and can be used to explain power relations between men and women (Abbott et al. 2005; Giddens 2006). The term patriarchy is defined by radical feminists as a system of universal male supremacy and female subordination (Abbott et al. 2005). Patriarchal dominance is inherent in all social institutions and is not merely rooted in work and economy, as Marxist feminism argues but also in the organisation of family, politics, and the media, to name a few (Giddens 2006). According to radical feminism, whether they realise it or not, the interest of all men is to maintain patriarchy, and for all women, the interest should be the rejection and overthrow of patriarchy (Inglis and Thorpe 2012).

Radical feminism is also known for embracing the idea of ‘sisterhood’, which is the notion that all women, irrespective of their historical, national, cultural, racial, or ethnic differences, are subject to men’s oppression (Inglis and Thorpe 2012). This, however, is not to homogenise the experiences of women or to ignore power differences among their groups. Instead, it is a way of perceiving women as a class and a unifying mechanism that is pivotal for political activism towards women’s emancipation (Grosser and Tyler 2021). Intertwined with the idea of sisterhood is the political strategy known as ‘consciousness-raising’. The importance of this political strategy lies in its ability to reveal to women how they were/are dominated by social institutions and processes that were all created to serve men (Akerly and True 2010). Nowadays, feminists rely on social media for consciousness-raising, particularly in the context of pervasive acts of violence and femicide against women globally. Feminist scholars like Ahmed (2017) observe that feminist protests against VAW have gained momentum in recent years around the globe, and the #MeToo movement in the US and the #MenAreTrash DFA in South Africa are examples of that.

In contrast to other forms of feminism, radical feminism has been at the forefront of confronting the issues of VAW. Radical feminist theory employs the concept of ‘male dominance’ to analyse VAW and sexual violence (Grosser and Tyler 2021). In this instance, male dominance

is a system in which all men in their individual capacity dominate all women (Grosser and Tyler 2021). However, Grosser and Tyler (2021) argue that the idea of conceiving of men as a dominant social class is to believe that all individual women are merely helpless victims. This conception is false and misleading. While we can agree that structural dominance exists, this does not equate to complete lack of agency by women. Consciousness-raising in early radical feminism and contemporary feminist activities are proof of agency that women have. To add, while all men are part of the dominant system, there is a hierarchy of power relations among them wherein some men are more dominant than others. Nevertheless, Gardiner (2005, p.36) maintains that "...men as a group benefited from the subordination of women as a group, despite the great disparities that existed in the advantages accruing to individual men or subgroups of men in relation to other men and to women".

According to radical feminist theory, VAW and social construction of sexuality are two central domains through which male dominance and the oppression of women are maintained (Grosser and Tyler 2021). Biological arguments previously attributed 'male' violence to nature. A platitude explanation in this regard is that men are naturally aggressive, which implies that men have limited or no control over their aggression. However, radical feminism rejects this perspective vehemently on the basis that VAW is socially constructed and, as such, can be deconstructed (Abbott et al. 2005). Gender norms, which are the results of social construction, portray women as property and sexual objects. This creates a culture in which aggression, sexual intimidation, and violence are normalised (hooks 1984; Martin et al. 2006). Radical feminists see this condition as a form of social control that also enables women to live in fear, despite not having direct experience with violence (Grosser and Tyler 2021). In her book *Female Fear Factory*, Gqola (2021), a South African feminist scholar, describes South Africa as a place that has become one in which women are trained to fear for their safety due to pervasive patriarchal violence in the country.

Furthermore, patriarchy is perceived as the primary stratification system that keeps women from equal access to resources. Consequently, women inevitably rely on men for physical and economical protection (Martin et al. 2006). In radical feminist thinking, this is a system of social control over women from which all men benefit.

Radical feminism as a school of thought is trusted to help understand and analyse the views, sentiments, and ideas which inform DFA in South Africa. The mere fact that the Men Are Trash slogan is a direct reference to men is a strong suggestion that patriarchy is held

accountable for VAW. Conceiving VAW in this way is in line with radical feminist perspective. Thus, the theory was considered highly relevant for conceptualising the perceptions of the participants. Despite its tremendous contribution to understanding and analysing the underlying forces of oppression, subordination, and violation against women, objections are raised to radical feminist arguments. Firstly, the idea of the domination of men over women is overstated, partly because of the failure to recognise the different social positions different men occupy in power structures (Inglis and Thorpe 2012). Secondly, the tendency to claim that patriarchy is a universal phenomenon that has existed throughout history and across cultures disregards historical and cultural variations across different societies (Giddens 2006). Lastly, radical feminism tends to discount the role of factors like nationality, social class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexuality, which mould the patriarchal experiences of both men and women (Abbott et al. 2005; Giddens 2006).

The following subsections focus on the theorisation of social media and its role in shaping and directing contemporary feminist activism against VAW. The focus is also on how social media facilitates debates that challenge feminist activism.

### ***1.7.2 Public sphere and communicative action theory***

Jurgen Habermas's original conceptualisation of the public sphere refers to an instance in which private people congregate together as a public to regulate against the civil authorities by engaging in a critical debate over political and state affairs (Susen 2011). Access to the public sphere is, by principle, open to the entire citizenry (Adut 2021) and is neither a subject of institutional control nor dominated by private interest (Fuchs 2014). The 'public' in public sphere refers to all those who are directly and indirectly affected by consequences of sociopolitical transactions to such an extent that it is deemed crucial to care and pay attention to those consequences (Dewey 1927 cited in Johannessen et al. 2016, p.214).

Although Habermas's notion of the public sphere was initially focused on politically relevant contexts, this theory can be applied to other areas of life (Iosifidis 2011) that propel people to converge for the purpose of addressing any given issue of public concern. In order to identify and confront any issue of public concern, citizens need to unite to constitute civil society, that is, a composition of associations, organisations, and movements that in their private life listen to social issues that they will later bring to the public sphere (Matingwina 2018).

The notion of the public sphere has been reconsidered owing to the emergence of the internet and other online media. These platforms embody new spaces where crucial dialogues can take place. Scholars such as Fuchs (2014) and Butsch (2007) recognise the role of social media in providing spaces for ordinary citizens to engage in critical discussions on matters of public concern. Social media therefore exemplify the modern-day media form and meet the requisites of a public sphere (Johannessen et al. 2016; Kruse et al. 2017) and are already used as spaces for public debate and social change (Iosifidis 2011). This study theorises the social media platforms such as Twitter, as public spheres through which ordinary citizens can engage each other on pressing issues in society, in this case, the scourge of VAW in South Africa. As the main social group affected by violence, women adopted social media platforms to embark on protest action under the hashtag #MenAreTrash. They took their woes to the public sphere of social media with the cognisance that VAW transcends individual private lives and ought to be treated as a social issue. By so doing, they were reifying and demonstrating the fundamental principle of ‘the personal is political’, which was central in second-wave feminism.

According to Habermas, the cornerstone for a public sphere is the existence of what he calls ‘communicative action’ (Bolton 2005). This is the process by which understandings and definitions regarding situations are developed and a plan of action is devised by agreeing on such terms (Bolton 2005). Communicative action is considered to be the process that involves both speakers and listeners who criticise and substantiate validity claims, state their disapproval, and achieve an agreement (Kaye 2014). Thus, the primary concern in communicative action is to promote common understanding in a group and to further endorse cooperation among the participants. According to previous studies, social media platforms have limited civil discourse (Kruse et al. 2017), and as a result, communicative action is compromised. In the context of VAW discourse on social media like Twitter, a lack of communicative action is apparent and manifests itself through the occurrence of a ‘war of sexes’, a concept originally associated with hooks (1984) to refer to a conflict between men and women on gender issues (Makama et al. 2019). Also, open participation on social media can lead to anarchy when there are no rules of conduct that enable a structured conversation (Iosifidis 2011). Be that as it may, communicative action as an essential feature of a functional public sphere can still be restored on a social media platform. For instance, Twitter allows users to create live audio conversations for open, authentic, and honest discussions on any topic of interest. This feature is known as ‘spaces’. Spaces are structured in such a way that a conversation can be joined by those who intend to engage on the topic in a meaningful way,

and a host sets the rules for the engagement. In this way, communicative action can be maintained.

Furthermore, Habermas asserts that there should be strict criteria for an effective public sphere. Building on Habermas's original work, Dahlberg (2001 cited in Johannessen et al. 2016, p.215) identified the following six conditions for a functioning public sphere: 1) It must be autonomous from state and economic power; 2) It should be based on a rational-critical discourse, where participants are engaged in reciprocal critique of normative positions that are criticisable rather than dogmatic claims; 3) Participants must be reflective and critically examine their cultural values assumptions and interests as well as the larger social context; 4) Participants must attempt to understand the argument from the other's perspective; 5) Each participant must try to make known all information relevant to the particular problem under consideration; 6) Everyone is equally entitled to introduce and question ideas and issues.

However, Splichal (2006, p.698) regards these criteria as representative of the 'strong' public sphere as it was only concerned with freedom of the press in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The 'strong' public sphere represents a past society in which the majority of participants were the bourgeoisie and working class (Iosifidis 2011b). As such, the critics point out that in the information society (modern society), we have all become citizens of the media, which means we need to allow a variety of voices and forms of communication to be part of a public sphere (Johannessen et al. 2016). This is, as Splichal (2006, p.698) calls it, the 'weak' public sphere. Based on this view, Trenz and Eder (2004 cited in Johannessen et al. 2016, p.215) outline the following four ideal types of the functional public sphere that are reflective of contemporary society:

- **Discourse-based**, which means a space for free thought and discussion;
- **Based on protest/activism**, where typically groups of like-minded people discuss, for example, strategies for protest;
- **Based on social mobilisation**, such as social media campaigns; and
- **Based on consensus**, where there is little disagreement, and people support each other.

These ideal types are said to be an extension of the original criteria for public sphere and fits better with the complex and diverse society of today (Johannessen et al. 2016).

Although the original criteria for a public sphere are deemed by critics as no longer relevant to today's society, the researcher believes that some of its aspects can still be applicable in contemporary contexts. Therefore, this criterion along with the one presented earlier by Trenz

and Eder (2004 cited in Johannessen et al. 2016, p.215) were considered in tandem for analytical purposes in this study. One of the concerns of the current study was delving into participants' thoughts regarding the relevance of social media as a public sphere where citizens can engage and debate each other critically on issues of public concern (in this case, VAW) to reach progressive solutions. Connected to this is an interest to know if social media platforms are configured, organised, and used in such a way that they allow DFA to thrive and be effective in serving its intended purpose. The relevance of social media as a public sphere in which productive engagements can succeed and activism against VAW be impactful, were determined by the degree to which the participants' views align with the criteria for a functional public sphere as outlined above.

While the theory of public sphere helps us understand and conceptualise social media as the space in which people congregate to debate and engage on matters of public concern, it does not account for the conflict that arises when the participants do not reach a consensus. Hence, the following subsection focuses on counter-discourse theory to try to explain the controversial aspect of DFA as it transpires in the public sphere of social media.

### ***1.7.3 Counter-discourse theory***

Counter-discourse theory has its origins in the work of Michel Foucault. In his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language* (1970), Foucault (1970) argues that counter-discourse is created when those who are usually spoken for and spoken about begin to speak for themselves. In other words, counter-discourse emerges as a form of resistance when existing circumstances present themselves as oppressive to those who experience them. The seemingly voiceless begin to speak a language of their own making and begin to oppose the power that seeks to oppress them (Moussa and Scapp 1996). bell hooks describes such reactions of speaking up after having been silenced as to "talk back" (Moussa and Scapp 1996, p.90).

Foucault employed the notion of counter-discourse to explain a practical engagement of the masses in political struggles through the use of language as an act of resistance towards authoritative discourses (Moussa and Scapp 1996). Although authoritative discourses have the power to influence society, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) contend that complete dominance is not always possible but that there is usually a gap through which marginal discourses can break in. The existence of this gap indicates that there is a constant struggle for dominance (Macgilchrist 2007). For, instance, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the feminist discourse challenged the mainstream view that only men are fully competent to vote.

Acts of counter-discourse can be performed by various social groupings that include activists, social campaigns, community members, and political organisations by spreading their message with the aid of mainstream media such as newspapers, television and radio (Feltwell et al. 2017). It also has been evident that social media platforms offer new spaces for counter-discourses (Mwangi et al. 2018). Previous studies (Burney 2012; Oparinde and Matsha 2021) acknowledge how women have used activism and theory to produce counter-discourses across different historical points to resist patriarchal hegemonic discourses that worked to oppress women. Oparinde and Mantsha (2021) claim that messages, actions, and understandings pertaining to VAW in South Africa are framed by the government and society in such a way that they incline to normalise the injustice to which women are subjected. For instance, society sometimes tends to hold victims responsible for their own safety while ignoring the role of the perpetrator; this is known as victim-blaming. On the other hand, the government encourages women to speak out on their abuse and victimisation instead of calling men to speak against VAW (ibid.). Oparinde and Matsha (2021) regard these kinds of messages as hegemonic discourses that downplay the gravity of VAW and further marginalise women in South Africa. Although women have always been agents of counter-discourses in the face of patriarchal hegemonic discourses aimed at oppressing them, this study recognises how a feminist discourse occupies a dominant position within the context of DFA in terms of how VAW is perceived, understood, and interpreted in society.

During the period of 2017–2020, the #MenAreTrash DFA gained traction across various social media platforms in order to raise awareness and hold men accountable for VAW and femicides in South Africa. Although the intention behind the concept of #MenAreTrash was crucial in the pursuit of justice, some South African post-colonial feminist scholars contend that this notion carries a harmful insinuation that portrays men, especially Black men, as inherently toxic, barbaric, violent, and murderous (Makama et al. 2019; Sanger 2019). This contention was proven valid as some people took to social media to express their discontent with #MenAreTrash on the basis that the hashtag is more likely to divide than unite (Mushomba 2020; D'Avanzato et al. 2021). #MenAreTrash as a mechanism and strategy to address VAW using social media as a tool unfortunately incited conflicts, particularly between men and women. hooks (1984, p.33) stated the following:

In their eagerness to highlight sexist injustice, women focused almost exclusively on the ideology and practice of male domination. Unfortunately, this made it appear

that feminism was more a declaration of war between the sexes than a political struggle to end sexist oppression.

In other words, the strong insertion of a feminist voice denouncing VAW and other women's struggles can sometimes be interpreted, received, and perceived as a form of attack and resentment rather than a demonstration of activism. It can be said that the #MenAreTrash DFA is an example of this. Due to their widespread and dominant message that sought to portray South African men in a certain light within the context of VAW, the #MenAreTrash DFA was met with counter-discourses that worked to neutralise it.

Despite the various ways in which #MenAreTrash was rejected, a more direct and logical counter-discourse to this DFA was the #NotAllMen hashtag. In essence, those who aligned themselves with the hashtag acknowledge VAW as a social crisis that should be dealt with in every way possible; however, they believed that #MenAreTrash carries a perilous message that declares all men as inherently violent and murderous (Makama et al. 2019; D'Avanzato et al. 2021). This over-generalisation was therefore considered unfair and, to some extent, has the potential to discourage and alienate men from demonstrating their much-needed solidarity and support to women in their struggle against VAW.

Owing to its influence on and off social media, the #MenAreTrash DFA established itself as a dominant discourse that worked to propagate and even popularise a particular narrative about men and their relationship with VAW. However, a gap in this discourse was revealed. As such, the #NotAllMen hashtag emerged as a counter-discourse attempting to address this gap by feeling the need to represent men's perspective on VAW discourse. As Oparinde and Matsha (2021, p.4) put it, "counter-discourse opposes and shifts the focus away from a dominant discourse and seeks to present alternative understandings of a given social issue". In other words, the goal of the #NotAllMen proponents was to re-frame the narrative about their implication in VAW by seeking to identify other ways of perceiving the issue. The challenge, however, is that any act of resistance or refusal to agree with a feminist narrative is often interpreted as a backlash or misogyny as evident in previous studies (Jordan 2016; Puente et al. 2017), and the #NotAllMen social media hashtag is a typical example of that. While it is true that online misogyny and backlash against DFA exist, this study conceptualised #NotAllMen as a counter-discourse whose purpose was to re-frame what it viewed as a hegemonic discourse (#MenAreTrash). In this study, the counter-discourse theory was useful to help identify and contextualise accounts that contradict the notion that #MenAreTrash. By

doing so, the study sought to move beyond mantra explanations that see any challenge or resistance to the feminist narrative as anti-feminist or any other act of malice.

## 1.8 Thesis Outline

In addition to the introductory chapter, the thesis is organised in the following seven additional chapters:

- **Chapter 2** provides a comprehensive overview on the evolution of feminist activism through its various waves. It then explores the relationship between DFA and VAW both in the global and local contexts. Possible reasons and causes behind the resistance towards DFA are also discussed, with a special focus on a counter-discourse of the #NotAllMen social media hashtag. The discussion further looks into the obstacles that interfere with feminist activism and approaches to deal with them.
- **Chapter 3** provides a general overview of the methods and techniques employed to address the study objectives.
- **Chapter 4** explores the relevance of social media platforms through which social issues such as VAW can be addressed. It also determines the degree to which these platforms serve as modern-day public spheres.
- **Chapter 5** critically explores the meanings, definitions, and descriptions attached to the #MenAreTrash social media hashtag. It then examines its objectives and finds out to what extent participants believe these objectives were successfully fulfilled. It also delves into the core of this study, which was to explore the perceptions, thoughts, and attitudes towards the #MenAreTrash DFA. This section also focuses on the role of resistance towards #MenAreTrash through counter-discourses, particularly the #NotAllMen hashtag. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to gain insights into the impact of this DFA in addressing the issue of VAW.
- **Chapter 6** examines the challenges and barriers attributed to the perceived shortcomings of the #MenAreTrash DFA. It then identifies potential solutions to some of those obstacles.
- **Chapter 7** concludes the study by summarising the key findings of the study and presenting recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

# CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of existing evidence and insights pertinent to the issue under study. It situates the South African DFA within broad global and historical contexts. In doing so, we get to understand the trajectory and development of DFA in South Africa as well as its relation to DFA in other parts of the world. The chapter begins by providing a historical background of feminist activism, discussing the progression of various waves of feminism over time. It then looks into the correlation between DFA and VAW, specifically how digital tools are used to advance social justice for women worldwide and in South Africa. Resistance towards DFA is discussed with a focus on the possible reasons and causes for its occurrence. A discussion further explores the literature on the obstacles that make it difficult for DFA to thrive as it should. The last part of the chapter provides an overview of the approaches and models proposed by previous studies, which offer insights into how feminist activism can be improved in order to continue to fight VAW and eventually realise gender equality.

## 2.2 Digital Feminist Activism in Context

To understand the renaissance of feminism in this age, a historical perspective is essential to both highlight the continuities in feminist activism and sharpen comprehension of the contextual and temporal differences across movements. In the extract below, Molyneux et al. (2021, p.1) underscore this point:

History matters and ideas and demands for social justice endure across both time and place. They are passed on from generation to generation, if in refigured form. If we want to understand this long evolution and the particular dynamic of what might be termed the New Feminism, we need to turn to an analysis of the context in which activists work and form their priorities while also understanding the global ‘travelling’ character of movement ideas.

While the background section in Chapter 1 (Section 1.2) provided a brief overview of the waves of feminism; this section presents a more detailed discussion of feminist activism development and dynamics across time, space, and contexts.

In July 1848, the first organised feminist movement was formed (Pruitt 2022). Its aim was to secure and guarantee women full rights as citizens, especially the right to vote and to own

property (Diamond 2009; Munro 2013). This became known as the first-wave feminism. The early movements of feminism started with the Seneca Falls convention in Baltimore, and later spread to the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland (Molyneux et al. 2021). Militant campaigns that involved violence characterised the activists within this wave in the struggle for suffrage (Molyneux et al. 2021). Molyneux et al. (2021) bring to our attention that not only did the first wave associate with the struggle over suffrage and property ownership but also focused on other issues such as demands for an egalitarian family structure, equal pay, and access to higher education and professions. Eventually, the Declaration of Sentiments was signed by the attendees to affirm some of the rights that were fought for (Pruitt 2022). With a few exceptions, the movements in this wave were small in scale and also lost their dynamism in subsequent decades.

In the early 1960s, a more expansive and international movement gradually developed (Molyneux et al. 2021). This was the second-wave feminism. The phrase ‘the personal is political’ was coined by feminists associated with this wave with the intention of bringing to light the impact of sexism and patriarchy on every aspect of women’s lives (Diamond 2009; Munro 2013). They sought to call for a re-evaluation of traditional gender roles and the eradication of sexist discrimination in society. In her work, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan (1963) argues that women are aggravated by their confined roles as wives and mothers, and that gender roles must be done away with. The vast majority of second-wave feminists comprised women in the workforce and higher education, and like their forbearers, they were radical and critical (Diamond 2009; Molyneux et al. 2021). Their radical ideas were inspired by the Civil Rights movement in the US, anti-apartheid political movements in South Africa, and the Vietnam war (Pruitt 2022; Molyneux et al. 2021). However, second-wave feminism treated women as a homogenous group and ignored the very factors that made them different in terms of their social locations (Munro 2013). In particular, the movements were criticised for catering to the needs of privileged White women over those of Black women (Pruitt 2022). Because of this shortcoming, Black feminists, which include bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Audre Lord, highlighted various experiences and priorities of Black women in their writings (Molyneux et al. 2021). In *Ain’t I a Woman* (1981), bell hooks shows how Black femininity is devalued and women of colour side-lined by the mainstream feminist movement (Munro 2013). In this seminal book, hooks maintains that such exclusion reinforced racism and classism within the movement (Munro 2013). The work of the aforementioned feminists can be said to have paved the way for third-wave feminism.

Having emerged in the early 1990s, third-wave feminists focused mainly on issues of sexuality and subjectivity independent of traditional family structures (Diamond 2009). Most influential to this feminism was the academic research of queer theory. According to this theory, gender and sexuality are fluid categories and thus, cannot be simply reduced to binary understandings of ‘male’ and ‘female’ (Munro 2013). Queer theory moved in tandem with social actors that consisted of Black feminists, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and many other LGBTQIA+ activists who organised each other to demand their rights and recognition in society (Molyneux et al. 2021). ‘Intersectional feminism’ is the concept associated with this wave and is used to signify the multiple ways in which women are oppressed (Pruitt 2022). Like its precursors, third-wave feminism drew criticism as it was accused of focusing its attention on individual freedom, unlike the second-wave, whose debates were centred on treating private issues as political (Munro 2013). Due to its micropolitics, some critics argue that this movement makes it difficult to enable change on a larger scale (ibid.). Nevertheless, the third-wave is said to have influenced the dawn of fourth-wave feminism (Molyneux et al. 2021).

The so-called fourth-wave feminism is characterised by the usage of internet tools to raise awareness, share stories, and organise collective actions channelled towards addressing issues that affect women in general. Although critics reject the idea of fourth-wave feminism on the premise that high usage of the internet is not sufficient to delineate a new era, others are of the view that the shift to the internet in practising feminism, *per se*, marks a new epoch (Munro 2013; Pruitt 2022). Unlike the previous waves, this brand of feminism has created a global community of feminists with common interests, sentiments, and experiences. Its most defining feature is DFA, broadly defined as the acts of “harnessing the power of online media to discuss, uplift, and activate gender equality and social justice” (Martin and Valenti 2012, p.6). Although DFA surfaced in the early 2010s and has been active ever since (Molyneux et al. 2021), its origins can be traced back to early 1990s when women were using online forums, newsgroups, journals, and blogs as platforms through which they raised their opinions and issues that affect them (Martin and Valenti 2012; Sener 2021). Today, young women rely mainly on social media spaces such as Twitter for activism. This generation of women activists is regarded as “tech and communications-savvy” (Kabira et al. 2018; Molyneux et al. 2021, p.14). Understandably so, they are the first generation that has grown up entirely in the internet era. Munro (2013) refers to a study conducted by Columbia University’s Barnard Centre for Research on Women around 2013 that reveals that women who are between the ages of 18 and 29 are frequent users of social media sites. The number of women who use these digital platforms has been

increasing over time (Munro 2013). The evidence also reveals that there is a growing uptake of social media in the geographical areas where VAW is prevalent. For instance, India (23.6 million) is ranked third, Brazil (19.5 million) is ranked fourth, and Turkey (16.1 million) is ranked seventh in the world rankings in terms of using social media for DFA (Statista Research Department 2022).

The power embedded in DFA is its ability to mobilise the masses to take political action at an unprecedented speed and magnitude. #MeToo, for instance, had a global impact that reached beyond Hollywood and invited thousands of women to share their sexual harassment and abuse stories on digital platforms. Thus, digital media turned into a 'hotline' where women can direct their problems, share sentiments and thoughts, and congregate with others who have similar experiences (Dawson 2020; Sener 2021). By narrating personal stories and experiences as collective struggles, DFA highlights the interplay of the individual and the collective, as noted by Baer (2016). Beyond just sharing their stories and experiences, DFA empowers women to challenge issues of sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, disclose online sexual harassment and abuse, and engage in online feminist 'call-out culture'. This practice involves confrontations that can be directed at individuals, social groups, institutions, or organisations on social media. Those who are 'called out' are exposed for their unacceptable actions or words, which may be associated with sexism, abuse, racism, ableism *inter alia* (Mendes et al. 2019; Kurasawa et al. 2021; Sener 2021). In addition, DFA embraces the struggles that transcend women-related issues, such as rallying behind anti-racist and environmental justice campaigns, LGBTQIA+ movements, and politics (Molyneux et al. 2021). Molyneux et al. (2021) acknowledge the presence of such influence in the preceding waves but argue that their impact was not as prominent and militant. Therefore, DFA is used in such a way that previously marginalised groups get to have a voice on the matters that affect them. Kabir et al. (2018) state that while feminists of colour or those who were not affiliated with any organisation have always been active in supporting feminist projects, their voices have been subjugated by highly structured, well-resourced, and predominantly White, middle-class organisations. However, digital media, has neutralised this imbalance by enabling any social group of women to participate in feminist activism.

Popular among digital activists is the use of the hashtag (symbol #) that helps users classify their content and create a stream of ideas and thoughts around the same topic. Through the hashtags, followers are able to discover the information they are searching for relatively faster (Kabira et al. 2018). The functionality of the hashtag lies in its efficacy in generating online

debates and dialogues around a particular public issue (Mendes et al. 2019; Orth et al. 2020). The study by Mendes et al. (2019) shows that through online participation, girls and women expose, critique, and educate the public about VAW, sexism, misogyny, and rape culture. The element of digital platforms as spaces for knowledge production on feminist-related matters is recognised among scholars. For instance, Sener (2021) reminds us that revolutionary feminists like bell hooks underscored the importance of learning about the concepts of patriarchy, male dominance, and sexism as they manifest in women's everyday lives. As such, online feminist networks offer pedagogical spaces for many women to learn without undergoing formal education like in the past (Martin and Valenti 2012). These educative practices and connective learning are referred to by Mendes et al. (2019, p.108), as some sort of “digital public pedagogy”.

Based on the context provided, DFA can enable activists to achieve any of the following objectives (Kabira et al. 2018, p.1):

- **Awareness/advocacy** to create public awareness around a particular issue in order to resolve or address it;
- **Organisation/mobilisation** serves to call people for a particular action; and
- **Action/reaction** to respond and react to the issue of concern.

By engaging in those practices, digital feminists execute what Jane (2017 cited in Sener 2021, p.2) calls ‘digilantism’ and ‘DIY justice online’, which is, in part, a response to a lack of institutional solutions (Storer and Rodriguez 2020). Digilantism is loosely translated as internet vigilantism, while DIY is an abbreviation for ‘Do It Yourself’ (Kurasawa et al. 2021).

Although DFA has been praised for its admirable work, there are flaws to this feminism. Firstly, several authors use the terms ‘slacktivism’ or ‘clicktivism’ to denote that online activism does not really involve any significant effort since the users only have to ‘like’ or ‘retweet’ a post. ‘Likes’ are a form of social media engagement that allow users to interact with updates and show they approve of what has been shared. A retweet, on the other hand, is a re-posting of a tweet. Twitter’s retweet feature helps the poster and others to quickly share a tweet with all of their followers. Even though users may feel socially engaged, the minimal effort required to use social media functions does not result in any meaningful social change (Harlow and Guo 2014 cited in Storer and Rodriguez 2020, p.161). Barassi (2015) argues that activism thrives on a combination of action on the ground, face-to-face interactions, deliberations, discussions, and confrontations to foster strong sociopolitical bonds. Sener (2021) adds that in

contrast to face-to-face awareness campaigns, social media do not guarantee collective identity formation and may only serve as self-help mechanisms for users (Barassi 2015).

Secondly, contemporary feminism is characterised by the ‘digital divide’, which is the gap between those with regular, effective access to digital technologies and those without it (Molyneux et al. 2021). Since DFA is often the preserve of young women, feminist discussions that transpire on digital platforms are often concealed from those who are not really active on social media (Munro 2013). Due to this, a divide may arise between older and younger feminists as the new generation of feminists unknowingly hides its politics from its older peers. On the other hand, the older feminists are accused of failing to properly recognise DFA, especially since many of them are academics and are in a position to research and publish (Munro 2013).

Thirdly, Sener (2021) points out that, *inter alia*, online solidarity can be constrained by neoliberal individualism. According to Baer (2016, p.30), when DFA takes place within a neoliberal context, it translates into individualisation and privatisation of politics, which “have led to commodified private micro-rebellions rather than collective resistance”. This suggests that the claim that DFA makes the personal political, is not always the case.

Fourthly, as innovative as they are, digital feminist movements are unsustainable. More often than not, these movements are not affiliated with larger organisations with adequate resources, and as such, their potential to make a significant impact is limited (Martin and Valenti 2012). Also, Martin and Valenti (2012) point out that, since online organisers are in direct competition with one another for the scraps that come from third-party ad companies or other unsustainable ways to bring in revenue, they become vulnerable, ineffective, and risk burnout.

Lastly, although DFA is regarded as more egalitarian and non-hierarchical than traditional feminist movements in terms of participation, research by Schradie (2018) shows that there exists inequality in DFA. Schradie (2018) asseverates that groups that are more hierarchical and bureaucratic possess resources that enable them to develop and maintain online engagement more effectively. As such, these differences highlight the presence of a ‘digital activism gap’ within the feminist practice (Schradie 2018). A digital activism gap pertains to disparities in access, skills, empowerment, and time needed for activism along with the organisational resources. These factors lead to high online participation costs for working-class groups.

All in all, while a large corpus of literature puts more emphasis on the tremendous social impact of DFA, the challenges and flaws inherent in this phenomenon are understated. For this reason, this study attempted to address that lacuna, particularly in the South African context.

### **2.3 Digital Feminist Activism and Violence Against Women**

While the previous section provided a broad discussion of the nature of DFA, how it is practised, and its implications, this section seeks to demonstrate how digital tools have been used to address VAW and other social injustices against women in global and local contexts. This was achieved by examining DFA formations that have had a significant and measurable impact and influence in society.

Needless to say, one of the most prominent DFA projects is the #MeToo movement (Dawson 2020). Like other similar movements, #MeToo attracted attention to the pervasiveness of various forms of VAW and the institutional unresponsiveness to these injustices. The research by Bogen et al. (2019) on #MeToo reveals that the victims and survivors of VAW used the hashtag as a support forum to share and document their own experiences and ultimately offer advocacy-based solutions to this issue. Before this movement became a Twitter sensation in 2017, it existed merely as an activist movement established in 2006 by activist Tarana Burke through the non-profit of Just Be, Inc (MeToo 2022). Burke initially shared the MeToo message on the MySpace social networking site in an effort to show support to survivors of sexual violence (MeToo 2022). It was not until October 15, 2017, that public awareness of MeToo exploded across social media platforms, particularly Twitter, following *The New York Times* report on allegations of sexual harassment against popular American producer, Harvey Weinstein (Bogen et al. 2019; Dawson 2020). At the time, the Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano, who was a victim of sexual harassment, encouraged women who were also victims of assault or harassment to reply with a #MeToo tweet (Dawson 2020). In the next 24 hours, the 'Me Too' phrase was tweeted more than 500 000 times and used by 4.7 million people on Facebook, and within 45 days, #MeToo was posted over 85 million times by users around the globe (Sayej 2017 cited in Bogen et al. 2019, p.8261).

Other than the #MeToo movement, several authors share a recognition that the '*Ni Una Menos*' (NUM) movement (translated as 'Not One Woman Less') in Argentina made a remarkable contribution to the development of DFA (Puente et al. 2017; Chenou and Cepeda-Másmela 2019; Fuentes 2019; Averis 2021; Puente et al. 2021). NUM egressed in March 2015 in Argentina following the murder of a nineteen-year-old woman, Daiana García (Fuentes 2019).

The tweet by Argentine journalist Marcela Ojeda which read “Actresses, politicians, artists, entrepreneurs, social leaders ... women, all women, bah ... aren’t we going to raise our voice? THEY ARE KILLING US” mobilised nationwide rallies in less than a month on both social media platforms and in the streets (Chenou and Cepeda-Másmela 2019). Like other digital feminist movements, NUM sought to address the atrocious incidents of VAW and femicide in Argentina. For the most part, the organising of this movement as the leading social organisation in the cause is the result of a lack of institutional response to VAW and femicide (Chenou and Cepeda-Másmela 2019). The mass protests compelled the then presidential candidate to pay attention to the woes of the movement and support them in the best way possible (ibid.). The following five demands were presented to the Macri government by NUM as delineated by Chenou and Cepeda-Másmela (2019, p.6): 1) The implementation of a national plan to combat VAW as per 2009 law; 2) The warrant of access to justice for victims; 3) The creation of a Single Official Register of the victims of VAW; 4) The extension of sexual education, and 5) Protection for victims. Despite such a well-developed plan of action, it was reported that the government had done little to commit to these demands (Chenou and Cepeda-Másmela 2019).

As time went by, NUM opened itself to transnational synergies and alliances with the aid of social media. The hashtag #NiUnaMenos enabled international activists to show solidarity with the Argentines while also helping reveal the prevalence of VAW in other parts of the world (Fuentes 2019). For instance, Puente et al. (2021) declare that an ‘International Women’s Strike for Life Without Violence’ on March 8, 2017, in which 50 countries participated was inspired by #NiUnaMenos. Otherwise known as 8M, this global protest was organised on social media by Spanish activists upon realising that 872 women were murdered by their partners between 2003 and 2016 (Puente et al. 2021). Though #NiUnaMenos inspired several movements worldwide, it also drew influence from movements in other countries. For its second march in June 2016, NUM adopted #VivasNosQueremos (translated as #WeWantOurselvesAlive), referencing the previous march against VAW held in Mexico on April 24 (Fuentes 2019). Then, on October 19, NUM initiated #NosotrasParamos (translated as #WomenStrike) and #MiércolesNegro (translated as #BlackWednesday) hashtags, which were inspired by the Polish women who had just organised a strike using #BlackMonday against a proposed abortion ban (Puente et al. 2021). Ultimately, these movements are said to have been striving to undo what Fuentes (2019, p.241) refers to as the “pedagogy of cruelty” that stems from machismo, patriarchal violence, and misogynist culture, especially in Argentina’s context.

## 2.4 Digital Feminist Activism and Violence Against Women in South Africa

DFA in South Africa has its roots in student activism across all universities in the country. It started in 2015 when students used social media hashtags linked to demands for the decolonisation of South African universities (#RhodesMustFall<sup>1</sup>), changes in language policy by scrapping Afrikaans as the language medium of instruction at the Stellenbosch University (#OpenStellenbosch), and demand for a zero percent fee increase for the 2016 academic year as well as free tertiary education (#FeesMustFall). It was during this time that students also began social media protests that later translated into marches. Examples of these include #EndRapeCulture and #RUReferenceList. #EndRapeCulture consisted of mainly African women who protested against the seemingly normalised sexual violence on university campuses (Gouws 2018; Orth et al. 2020). Similarly, #RUReferenceList served as a call-out mechanism for alleged rapists and sexual offenders who were students at Rhodes University. ‘RU Reference List’ was the list that contained the names of men who were well-known for raping female students at Rhodes University (Gouws 2018). According to Gouws (2018) and Orth et al. (2020), these protests were a clear demonstration of students’ discontentment with institutional hesitancy to act against rape and sexual assault on campuses and the university policies that may indirectly be contributing to the issue. Although these protests originated from specific South African universities, they later gained traction in other universities with the aid of social media and as well as traditional media, such as television news, radio, and newspapers. The use of social media hashtags particularly attracted attention and sparked debates on Facebook and Twitter among South Africans. Therefore, the role of student activism proved crucial in setting a tone for DFA in the country.

The period between 2017 and 2019 marks a significant DFA zeitgeist in South Africa following a series of rape and femicide incidents that caught media attention. These events include the murders of Anene Booysen, Karabo Mokoena, and Uyinene Mrwetyana, to name a few. Anene was a 17-year-old girl who was raped and brutally murdered in 2013 in the small town of Bredasdorp in the Western Cape province of South Africa (Boonzaier 2017; UN Women 2018). Four years later in 2017, a man named Sandile Mantsoe was found guilty of dismembering and burning the body of his ex-girlfriend, Karabo, whose remains were found by a passer-by in

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<sup>1</sup> A demand for the removal of the gigantic statue of Cecil Rhodes on the University of Cape Town campus. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Rhodes played a dominant role in Southern Africa as an imperialist, businessman, and politician, annexing vast tracts of land.

Lyndhurst, Johannesburg (UN Women 2018). These incidents and many others that did not receive media coverage propelled thousands of women in South Africa along with UN allies to embark on protest action on 1 August 2018 (UN Women 2018). This protest was organised under the #TotalShutdown hashtag, and the intention was to elicit a government response to VAW (UN Women 2018). In 2019, a similar protest occurred outside the Cape Town International Convention Centre in response to the rape and murder of Uyinene, a 19-year-old student from the University of Cape Town. Uyinene was raped and murdered in the post office by Luyanda Botha, who was employed as a teller at the Clarenreich Post Office in Claremont. The cases of VAW and femicide cited herein created a necessary condition for the eruption of the #MenAreTrash DFA across various social media platforms.

As aforementioned, the #MenAreTrash social media hashtag became a centre of controversy due to the literal meaning of the hashtag itself. While there are few qualitative studies focusing on the #MenAreTrash phenomenon, none of them provide extensive elucidation about the meaning of the hashtag. However, there are a handful of writings that attempt to provide the meaning, purpose, and intention behind #MenAreTrash. For instance, a dissertation *Interrogating the Narrative “#MenAreTrash” in Namibian Women’s Spoken Poetry with a Focus on Gender-Based Violence* by Mukufa (2020) explores the concept of #MenAreTrash in a relatively detailed manner. Mukufa (2020) argues that the use of the ‘men are trash’ phrase is a 21st-century way to denounce the oppressive nature of patriarchy. She further maintains that “this term helps to ease into the conversation because saying that patriarchy is oppressive is a narrative that is exhausted yet to no avail” (Mukufa 2020). In other words, women had to find another way to re-articulate and re-invigorate a discourse about the impact of patriarchal effects in society. In the same vein, Aphane (2017) states that #MenAreTrash was used as a mechanism to confront the political, social, and economic systems that privilege men over women in South Africa; the privilege that men abuse to violate, rape, and murder women.

Like the #MeToo movement, some authors (Matebese 2017; Mukufa 2020) state that the #MenAreTrash DFA served as a platform through which many women shared their stories of abuse and victimisation at the hands of men. Mukufa (2020) avers that a social media hashtag like #MenAreTrash gives women who are unable to speak up an opportunity to do so without fear of being silenced. Through the #MenAreTrash hashtag, women call out men on misogyny, VAW, catcalling, psychological abuse, toxic masculinity, rape or the attempt of it, and femicide (Mukufa 2020). According to Dr Schalk Engelbrecht, the Chief Ethics Officer at KPMG South Africa, it is justifiable to shame men as a collective due to the heinous crimes they commit

against women, as stated in his opinion piece on the Daily Maverick online newspaper (Engelbrecht 2020). That is, they need to be called-out. This view aligns with Mukufa's (2020) perception that the so-called fourth-wave feminism has empowered women with enough confidence to speak and write against their injustices.

In providing clarity on what the #MenAreTrash DFA was trying to achieve, Matebese (2017) and Aphane (2017) make it known that the message is not that every living man is, in essence, trash, nor is it directed at specific men. This DFA is also not a reflection of bitterness and vengeance by women, according to Matebese (2017). She asserted the following:

[#MenAreTrash] does not only apply to men who abuse and kill women and children but also applies to those men who cat-call women and are complicit when it comes to the injustices women experience in the workplace, men who listen to stories of woe about the female lived experience but still do nothing about it because, "It's not my problem, it wasn't me so, I did nothing". (Matebese 2017)

Correspondingly, Engelbrecht (2020:1) asserts that "values and practices of manliness carry the spores of GBV. I may never have hit a woman, but joyfully partook in lubricious trash talk, or exposed latent misogyny through the dismissive sexualisation of a work rival". In other words, whereas individual men might have never physically abused a woman, they may still have endorsed or engaged in behaviours that perpetuate VAW, such as using derogatory language towards women. As such, VAW is also rooted in everyday mundane attitudes, language, and social behaviours among.

Although the proponents of #MenAreTrash present strong arguments to justify the validity of this DFA, some South African scholars take issue with it and other similar formations from varying angles. For instance, Theodore (2017) accuses South African DFA of assuming a hegemonic position in controlling the narratives, debates, and discourses pertaining to gender. He posits that this tendency usually threatens rather than promote the resolutions for injustices to which women are subjected. For him, slogans like 'men are trash' and 'rape culture' incite gender wars and confrontations instead of cooperation (Theodore 2017). Makama et al. (2019) also believe that #MenAreTrash has not offered any way forward other than to create tension between the sexes. The usage of the constructs of 'men are trash' and 'rape culture' to a certain extent serves to demonise all men as rapists and abusers even though rape, for instance, is not a 'culture' accepted by the majority of men (Theodore 2017; Makama et al. 2019).

Moreover, scholars like Sanger (2019) and Makama et al. (2019) provide a decolonial, African-centred feminist point of view on the #MenAreTrash DFA. In their article *The Danger of a Single Feminist Narrative: African-Centred Decolonial Feminism for Black Men*, Makama et al. (2019, p.64) highlight two dangers associated with the binary construction of men as problems. One of those is having a “conversation about Black men rather than with men”. Sanger (2019) corroborates this view by pointing out that although the #MenAreTrash DFA claims to confront patriarchal structures and VAW, the assertion in its language is that Black men generally are violent human beings ready to devour women. Equally so, previous studies (Gqola 1999; Kimmel and Wade 2018 cited in Makama et al. 2019) accuse both feminist scholarship and masculinity studies of having focused mainly on problematic and toxic aspects of masculinity, especially Black masculinities. This hegemonic narrative not only reinforces colonial, apartheid, and classist stereotypes where Black men in public spaces are perceived with suspicion, and where their profiling is common in middle-class neighbourhood crime watches (Sanger 2019) but also has the potential to downplay the violent acts by men of other races (Makama et al. 2019). As such, Sanger (2019) believes that the #MenAreTrash DFA inadvertently perpetuates apartheid stereotypes and the marginalisation of poor and working-class men. The discussion of male privilege in this regard fails to situate Black men within the stratifications of race and class that continue to influence gender roles and relations (Sanger 2019). Such feminism is, to some extent, myopic in its position.

Projecting on future gender relations in South Africa, Theodore (2017) warns that the type of extremism inherent in formations like #MenAreTrash may lead to the emergence of men’s rights activism (MRA), like those that are based in Western countries such as Australia. MRA consists of a variety of groups and individuals who focus on general social issues and specific government services that adversely impact, or in some cases structurally discriminate against, men and boys. For instance, the Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) movement consists of men who have decidedly distanced themselves from women and their issues altogether as a result of the impact of feminism (Barraclough 2017 cited in Theodore 2017, p.99). The role and impact of MRA will be looked at in the following section in order to contextualise the resistance that the #MenAreTrash DFA encountered.

## **2.5 Resistance Towards Digital Feminist Activism: Backlash and Counter-discourses**

In the early 1970s, young college men in Britain and North America raised the question, “What does feminism have to do with us?” (Messner 2016; Marwick and Caplan 2018). This was in response to the re-emergence of feminism in the 1960s by the Men’s Consciousness-Raising Group and networks. Seeking to work towards positive personal and social change, the leaders of men’s liberation movements promoted the idea of working symmetrically with the women’s liberation movement (Messner 2016). Their premise was that a men’s liberation ideology that underscores potential gains for men is likely to attract more interest to feminism as opposed to the one that positions men as “oppressors whose only morally correct action was guilty self-flagellation” (Messner 2016, p.8). Instead of seeing feminism as problematic, men’s rights advocates acknowledged how patriarchal structures were harmful to women, but also emphasised how in turn, strict gender roles were detrimental, unhealthy, and lethal to men (Marwick and Caplan 2018). This early men’s liberation movement focused on issues such as emotional stoicism, unequal child support obligations, and male-only draft requirements along with social pressures that come with traditional male masculinity (Gotell and Dutton 2016; Marwick and Caplan 2018).

Scholars like Messner (2016), Ging (2017) and Marwick and Caplan (2018) note that by the late 1970s and early 1980s, the men’s liberation movement underwent a schism due to internal disputes regarding beliefs around gender equality. While some men stayed committed to being advocates of gender equality and supporters of feminism, others argued that modern society emasculates men and that men are true victims of prostitution, pornography, dating rituals, divorce settlements, false rape accusations, domestic violence, and sexual harassment (Messner 2016; Marwick and Caplan 2018). A group of men who can be thought of as anti-feminists claimed that sexual violence, like domestic violence, is a gender-neutral problem and that feminists should be held accountable for society’s blasé attitude to men’s victimisation (Gotell and Dutton 2016).

Messner (2016) points out that the 2000s saw the political economy starting to favour women along with the widespread awareness of the institutionalisation of women’s rights, and increased visibility in higher education, popular culture and politics, among other things. This, however, created fertile ground for a resurgence of MRA. While feminism succeeded in advancing women’s lives in various ways, the flip side was that there was no corollary

movement to represent men (Messner 2016). Because of this, men's rights advocates perceived the potential suffering of men. Today, MRA is more visible and effective on the internet and is also known as the 'manosphere'. The main objective of the manosphere is to raise awareness on men's issues, while others tend to rally against feminism (Messner 2016; Schmitz and Kazyak 2016; Ging 2017). This formation is composed of groups that include men's rights activists, pickup artists, MGTOW, incels (involuntary celibates), and father's rights activism, and they all share a common view that feminist discourse is hegemonic (Marwick and Caplan 2018). While they are often regarded as fundamentally anti-feminist, some of these contemporary men's movements aim to highlight the seemingly overlooked misfortunes and agonies men experience, including violence perpetrated by women. The documentary *The Red Pill*, directed by American feminist and filmmaker Cassie Jaye, shows the issues that MRA attempt to address. Cassie's initial motive behind the production of this documentary was to prove that MRA consisted of hateful and bigoted men, but by the end of the documentary, her perceptions towards MRA had changed. The shift in perceptions was due to an acknowledgement that men also experience abuse and other misfortunes, such as male suicide, workplace fatalities, high-risk jobs, and child custody battles (Mushomba 2020).

The #NotAllMen social media hashtag emerged as some sort of MRA, which was a salient and direct resistance towards #MenAreTrash. This hashtag served as a retort to the #MenAreTrash narrative, viewing the labelling of 'all men' as unfair, and 'trash' as offensive and dehumanising (Mushomba 2020). Others viewed this labelling as an example of online gender-based violence (Mushomba 2020), which is ironic considering that the very existence of #MenAreTrash is to eradicate violence. There are few South African studies that examine various forms of resistance encountered by DFA; for example, a qualitative study on #MenAreTrash Twitter content reveals that 27% of the users are in support of awareness raising about VAW but are against the use of the hashtag as the mechanism to disseminate the message (D'Avanzato et al. 2021). The main concern with the #MenAreTrash DFA in this regard is its simplistic approach of generalising men and masculinity as toxic. Similarly, the discomfort with generalisation is further expressed in a *Slate*<sup>2</sup> podcast interview conducted by Aymann Ismail (2020) among four Muslim men. One of the interviewees stated that Muslims deal with a lot of generalisation, which is unsettling when people expect them to be accountable for atrocious acts such as terrorism that are committed by other Muslims (Ismail 2020). As a result,

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<sup>2</sup> The US daily magazine on the web and podcast network. Founded in 1996, it is a general-interest publication offering analysis and commentary about politics, news, business, technology, and culture.

those who already suffer from this generalisation based on their ascribed social status (religion in this case) can feel even more prejudiced.

Section 1.7 of this study conceptualised the resistance towards men as acts of counter-discourse. According to Foucault (1970), counter-discourse arises when those usually spoken for and about begin to speak for themselves. The salience of a counter-discourse is well presented by D'Avanzato et al. (2021) who found that 31% of Twitter users believe that the existence of non-violent men renders the #MenAreTrash narrative invalid. Twenty-two percent of Twitter users focused on the role that women and society at large have in socialising men to be violent (D'Avanzato et al. 2021). The premise put forth in this regard is that most boy children are raised by their mothers, and if these children are not socialised properly, they are likely to turn into violent men. According to a survey by the Department of Social Development (2021), 41.4% of children in South Africa live with their biological mothers compared to only 3.3% who live with their biological fathers. This evidence underpins the assumption that mothers play a crucial role in the upbringing of their children. More examples of counter-discourse include a sub-set of Twitter users who pointed out that #MenAreTrash dishonours men who were previously harmed in the process of trying to protect women who were being victimised (D'Avanzato et al. 2021). The research further shows that the bellicose nature of DFA entrenched pro-sexist ideas and behaviour among the participants. Similarly, the study by Kosar (2020) reveals that the participants who seemed to be anti-feminist became even firmer in their views by implying that feminist ideas are invalid and dangerous. This attitude was also common in the study by D'Avanzato et al. (2021), whereby 10% of Twitter users saw an opportunity to 'troll' the supporters of #MenAreTrash (especially women) by, for instance, insinuating that they would end up alone without love and affection because of their attitude.

There is a significant body of scholarly work that focuses on key themes surrounding DFA. These include the recognition of social media platforms as tools used to address issues of VAW and gender equality, (Martin and Valenti 2012; Munro 2013; Puente et al. 2017; Kabira et al. 2018; Dejmanee et al. 2020; Molyneux et al. 2021; Puente et al. 2021) as well as advancing the feminist agenda (Jackson 2018; El Asmar 2020; Willem and Tortajada 2021). Other studies highlight the benefits and challenges encountered by women in online spaces (Megarry 2014; Dadas 2017; Mendes et al. 2019; Kurasawa et al. 2021; Sener 2021). However, there is a dearth of research that evaluates the (in)effectiveness of DFA and the extent to which it is able to fulfil its objectives. As such, there was a need for this study to explore that aspect of DFA.

## 2.6 Factors that Interfere with the Functioning of Feminist Activism

Previous sections emphasised the significance of DFA in employing various strategies to address factors that contribute to VAW. However, previous research reveals that despite its effectiveness, DFA also encounters hindrances that undermine its efficacy (Megarry 2014; Dadas 2017; Nyabola 2018; Kurasawa et al. 2021). These obstacles are multifaced and complex in nature and include online harassment, online misogyny and sexism, digital violence, backlash, toxic masculinity, anti-feminism, and the reluctance of some individuals to identify as feminists (Megarry 2014; Puente et al. 2017; Sener 2021). For instance, Simões et al. (2021) argue that while digital platforms are crucial in affording women new ways for political expression, they also opened pores for sexism online, which poses challenges for feminist activism. Other studies reveal the prevalence of digital violence directed at feminist activists both online and in physical contexts. In this sense, digital violence is regarded as an extension of the violence women experience in their daily lives (Estrada 2023). According to a study done in Mexico, there is a prevalence of digital violence manifested through harassment, threats, and the sending of images with explicit violence intended to silence women from engaging in online protests or on the streets (Estrada 2023). The study further reveals that the justice system does not take digital violence seriously since it does not cause bodily harm. This shows that major social institutions seem to exacerbate the already existing challenges encountered by feminist activism.

While these studies identify the factors that pose threat to feminist activism, they do not address the barriers that originate from the cause itself. There is also little research on the barriers that cause lack of participation of men in feminist activities and how those can be addressed. However, there is literature available that shed light on the broader factors that may limit and even determine the degree to which men can be involved in feminist issues.

In his book chapter *Who's Afraid of Men Doing Feminism?*, sociologist Michael Kimmel (1998) asserts that it is crucial to find ways to bring men into discourse about gender issues that women have been having for as long as we can remember. This, however, has proven to be difficult to implement certain challenges that can be identified. Foremost, the challenge lies with feminists themselves being dubious and having little or no faith in men's commitment to be involved in feminist issues. According to Kimmel (1998, p.61), for some feminist women, "all men are men, monolithically constructed essences, incapable of change". This is a claim that men are the embodiment of patriarchal oppression, and therefore, cannot be trusted to

renounce the system that benefits them. An important question raised by feminists in this regard would be “If men benefit from the current patriarchy system, why would they seek to change it?”. While this is the right question to ask, it is not always the case that men’s intentions and interests are purely patriarchal or serve to contribute to gendered power and privilege.

Scholars like Kimmel (1998) and Connell (2005) state that there exists a plurality of masculinities in a hierarchy in which some men are disempowered based on factors such as class, race, ethnicity, age, able-bodiedness, and sexuality. The patriarchal system therefore does not benefit all men equally. Kimmel (1998) opines that for men to be profeminist, their experience of powerlessness, based on the aforementioned factors, must be acknowledged. This point is well articulated by Ratele (2018), drawing from bell hooks, when he asserts that many men are unimpressed by feminism in the same way feminism does not take an interest in their weaknesses and traumatic experiences. For instance, manuals about what men ought to do when raped, assaulted, and maltreated by their parents or partners are not readily available, and this is because the attention is largely focused on men who assault, rape, and kill (Ratele 2018). It seems that to feminists, recognising men’s powerlessness translates to undermining women’s pain.

Another challenge that stems from feminism itself is that while some feminists believe that the movement should be broad enough to accommodate men who are motivated to take a profeminist stance, others argue that feminism should focus on the experiences, knowledge, and understandings of women, and the structural forces that oppress them as a group (Kimmel 1998; Hebert 2007; Kretschmer and Barber 2016). Those men who claim to be profeminist are intruders; that is, they interfere with the only spaces meant to empower women, according to sceptics (Digby 1998). By entering these spaces, men are further accused of speaking for women and even attempting to take over during feminist events to attract attention for their participation (Kimmel 1998; Kretschmer and Barber 2016). In a sense, such men might not be genuinely interested in the core issues of feminism, and instead, they participate for their own self-serving purposes (Baily 2012). Hebert (2007) adds that such intolerance to partnering with men leads to a tendency to view men as merely a problem that needs to be solved as opposed to acknowledging them as potential partners in the eradication of problematic masculinities and patriarchy. The absence or little presence of men in women’s struggles, however, cannot yield any meaningful results. Changing problematic patriarchal norms and attitudes requires partnerships and collaborations with men since they possess the ability to expose, confront, and oppose their peers (Hebert 2007).

Additionally, Baily's (2012) study titled *What Happens when Men Get Involved in Feminism: Contemporary Mixed-Gender Feminist Activism in England* highlights that when women participants were asked about how they feel about men's engagement with feminism, they stated that men were only tolerated to participate just to show some degree of fairness and equality. Apart from this expression of moral fairness, they also expressed apprehension about losing power due to the involvement of men as this might result in the de-radicalisation of feminism (Baily 2015). Tolman et al. (2019) also reported that feminists fear that men's participation might diminish their leadership in the feminist movement. For that reason, collaborating with men is perceived as an act of oblivion and naivety for it carries the potential to excuse men's role in committing acts of VAW and re-centre the concerns of men (Casey et al. 2017). Pertinent to this problem is the ambiguous position that men are afforded within feminism. It is unclear which contribution men can make to feminism and to what extent their views matter within feminist discourse (Crooks et al. 2007; Crowe 2011). It is true that the input of men on feminist issues may hold relatively small value considering that the main objective is to advance women's interests; as such, women are likely to hear from other women rather than from men. Ratele (2018) notes that in the context of South Africa, the feminist project lacks a sharp vision, strategy, or language with which men, especially young Black men, can be conscientised towards harmonious gender relations. Instead, the currently existing form of feminism is the one that "has a shadowy image of young men. It appears to be uncertain about the kind of future it has for them" (Ratele 2018, p.96). Given the context of the identified constraints, it is clear that men who are willing to be profeminist can only do so to a certain degree due to limiting factors emanating from feminism itself.

While there are barriers that originate with feminists' attitudes and tendencies regarding the place of men in the feminist agenda, the focus now shifts to the psychological and social barriers that make it difficult for men to fully support the feminist cause. Perhaps the most obvious challenge, which is more intrinsic than extrinsic, according to Crowe (2011), is that "it is not about them". Crowe (2011) avers that men are used to everything being about them since mainstream discourses mostly accommodate and value male points of view. Different groups of men are accustomed to having access to the privilege of masculine social discourses that place them at the centre of the social world (Crowe 2011). Feminist discourse is not about men, and as such, it appears as somehow hostile and alien to men (ibid.). Congruent with this view, Kimmel (1998, p.67) points out that "if men are redundant, irrelevant, or even insignificant to the feminist project, then the world as we men have come to expect is no longer

a familiar one”. From this perspective, both Kimmel (1998) and Crowe (2011) come to the same conclusion that the sense of alienation men experience from feminism leads to the perception that feminism is against and actively opposed to men.

According to Berkowitz (2004 in Crooks et al. 2007, p.219), when men join forces to end VAW, it means they inevitably contest against the culture that underpins patriarchy and masculinity. Hence, profeminist men are more often than not questioned about their masculinity (Crooks et al. 2007). Kimmel (1998) corroborates this statement with the observation that any man who shows support for feminist principles cannot be a real man but is effeminate or gay in the eyes of other men. He believes this stems from internalised homophobia (Kimmel 1998). Men who are anti-feminist have always questioned the virility and sexuality of profeminist men. For instance, in 1913, Senator Heflin of Alabama made the following statement to make this charge: “I do not believe that there is a red-blooded man in the world who in his heart really believes in woman suffrage. I think every man who favours it ought to be made to wear a dress” (Kimmel 1998, p.67). On close analysis, this statement is flawed in that it appears to promote hegemonic masculinity over social justice. Considering these sorts of patriarchal beliefs that present themselves as social obstructions to supporting feminism, the assumption is that most men are likely to be passive and discouraged to be profeminist. But what sceptical feminists could learn from this is that men stand to lose something when promoting social justice for women: They lose their place in the world of men (Kimmel 1998).

Perhaps the most common of all challenges has to do with being to blame (Crowe 2011; Minerson et al. 2011). While the intention of feminism might be to challenge men to take accountability, some men can interpret this as being blamed for the sins of others. In 2000, Peter D. Hart Inc. conducted nationwide research in the US that involved 1 000 men to investigate their attitudes towards feminist activism (Minerson et al. 2011). The findings showed that 13% of the participants indicated that they are reluctant to support feminist causes because they have been perceived as part of the problem rather than part of the solution (Garin 2000 cited in Crooks et al. 2007, p.219). Similarly, a South African study conducted among young men in the City of Cape Town found that participants were discouraged to take part in feminist campaigns due to being called out on social media for their past actions (Rumbelow 2020). Another South African study among young male university students reveals that during the workshop whose objective was to promote profeminist and egalitarianist values, one participant exclaimed that “feminists do not talk to us”, and another added that “they speak to

us as if they are barking orders at us” (Ratele 2018, p.99). The assertion here is that at times, feminist approaches to men tend to lack diplomacy and tactfulness. Thus, the approach is perceived as more coercive than cooperative. In concluding, although the barriers to supporting feminist activism presented herein are not specific to the context of DFA, they provide insights into what has been identified by previous studies. This review can be used to assess whether these challenges are also common in the findings of this study.

## **2.7 How Can Digital Feminist Activism Be Enhanced?: Support and Allyship**

Kimmel (1998, p.62) said the following about men supporting feminists:

It is in men’s interest to support feminism, that men will actually benefit from their support of feminism ... men’s efforts to end sexual harassment, date and acquaintance rape, to share housework and childcare will enable men to have more fulfilling lives, more satisfying relationships with women, with children and with other men.

This statement highlights the imperative need for the support of women’s struggles, not just for their wellbeing but for everyone’s benefit. Specific to the current study is the implication that concerted efforts from all people, not women only, are vital in overcoming VAW. The potential contribution of social media platforms in this regard is for them to be used in such a way that they will create progressive dialogues and engagements that can translate into viable solutions to VAW. Even though the existing scholarship has not yet come up with models and ideas that can be used to provide guidance on how DFA can be enhanced to better address VAW, previous studies propose frameworks that demonstrate a working relationship between pro-feminists and feminists on the grassroots level. These models and ideas serve as suggestions with which the barriers to supporting feminism identified in the previous section can be overcome.

Kimmel (1998, p.67) proposed the Gentlemen Auxiliary Model which suggests that men should support women, not in a way of occupying a central part but by allowing themselves to be led and remaining accountable to ‘headquarters’. However, he does not demonstrate how this should be achieved. Inspired by Kimmel, Baily (2012, 2015) identifies two broad approaches to integrating men into feminists’ spaces. The first one is what she termed Men’s Auxiliary Model, and according to this model, the role of men is to provide support to women. The principle of the Men’s Auxiliary Model is founded on the notion that women should exercise self-representation and autonomy (Baily 2015); that is, as an oppressed social group,

women should determine the conditions for their own liberation. The second approach is that of an Equal Partner's Model, which suggests that men and women should equally participate in feminist tasks (Baily 2012, 2015). However, the model can be problematic considering that previous research highlights feminists' insecurities regarding equal participation with men in the feminist project. Perhaps the most feasible option in this regard might be what Baily (2015, p.455) refers to as the notion of "men working with other men", in which the task at hand is to work on their own to challenge their privileges and masculinities. Such an approach has the potential to materialise on online platforms where men can create discussion rooms such as Twitter Spaces to cross-fertilise ideas on how they can best support women in their struggles against VAW and other related issues.

Furthermore, Crowe (2011) offers psychological and social attitudes that men can adopt in order to constructively engage feminism. Firstly, he maintains that men need to acknowledge the limits of their knowledge and experiences because they can never fully understand women's experiences simply because they are not women. Instead, men should constantly strive to cultivate close, trusting, and respectful relationships with women. This will enable them to expand their knowledge and understanding of feminist issues. Secondly, Crowe (2011) avers that men who are willing to support feminism should be ready to sacrifice their own interests for the advancement of women. This means, among other things, overcoming the traditional practices of viewing women's existence as a means to serve male desires (Crowe 2011; Minerson et al. 2011). Thirdly, although men are faced with certain challenges that can make it difficult for them to effectively support women in their struggles, Crowe (2011) argues that they can still make a difference, and therefore, men should be able to find a functional role they can perform within a feminist project. According to Crooks et al. (2007), on individual level, men can help reduce VAW by not personally engaging in violence, by intervening against the violence of other men, and by mentoring young boys to instil alternative notions of masculinity into their minds. If men show such initiatives, they can help defy the perception that all men are inherently problematic, and instead be seen as part of the solution to VAW (Kimmel 1998; Crooks et al. 2007). Lastly, men can support women by simply listening to what women have to say about their painful experiences (Crowe 2011). This listening must be accompanied by the willingness to understand and be empathetic. This notion parallels Kimmel's (1998) idea of the Gentlemen Auxiliary Model, that underscores that men should support women by allowing them to lead in their space. Effective listening could be enhanced by taking the responsibility to alter the maladaptive core beliefs some men possess about VAW. Core beliefs

can be understood as a set of principles that people hold that influence their interpretations, emotional responses, and reactions to daily occurrences (Ellis 1996 cited in Crooks et al. 2007, p.226). Commonly held core beliefs include the assumption that VAW is exaggerated, dismissing the issue with the attitude that it is not men's problem but feminists' problem, and pointing fingers at other men as a real problem (Crooks et al. 2007; Minerson et al. 2011). Such beliefs lead to what Crooks et al. (2007) describe as 'cultural inoculation', which is the state in which men are immune to the effects of interventions designed to address them. Therefore, it is crucial to challenge these beliefs as this could make it possible for men to attentively listen to women's woes. In the context of DFA engagement on social media platforms, as women vent their frustrations due to being affected by VAW, men should express compassion and empathy without immediately feeling the need to point out irrationality in the way women express their agony.

Moreover, perhaps as a sidenote for feminists, there needs to be a realisation that the formation of allyship to propagate gender equality and a fight against VAW can be achieved by capturing male audiences' support (Flood and Howson 2015). As such, while it is necessary to harshly reprimand men on their acts of VAW as is the case with #MenAreTrash, it is also advisable to ensure the tone used does not inadvertently alienate and dismiss men from engaging. In this way, men can be willing to be observers and learners of new gender equality skills and ultimately be supporters of the cause. The importance of creating a conducive atmosphere for men to be supportive of a feminist cause is further underscored by Ratele (2018). He accuses the current scholarship, activism, and educational interventions of neglecting young Black men's experiences of vulnerability, insecurity, and fear. There must be a genuine interest in their bodies, ideas, words, and feelings, especially their repressed pain and fears (Ratele 2018). Crooks et al. (2007) maintain that as much as patriarchal dominance is reality, it is also crucial to recognise the dissonance between the power that society has bestowed upon men and their actual lived experience of powerlessness. Therefore, while there is a general conception that men as a group have more power than women as a group (Kimmel 1998; Hebert 2007), it will be helpful to engage them at the level of their lived experiences, which may include feelings of powerlessness (Crooks et al. 2007).

To achieve this, Ratele (2018, p.103) calls for a Situated, Social-Psychological Profeminist Praxis, which is a framework that takes an interest in young men's psychological and social needs while at the same time challenging VAW and other men. According to Ratele (2018, p.105),

Such praxis situates lived experiences as well as cultural and economic structuring conditions at the centre of engagement with men as opposed to imposing the understanding of the activist, researcher, teacher or theorist as to how the world works and what a particular practice means.

The idea here is that when men are situated in their lived experiences, thoughts, feelings, conditions, and relationships, they get to be understood. This way, it also makes it easier for them to understand others' feelings. Ratele (2018) believes that part of why his engagement with UCT male activists on profeminist discourse was unsuccessful is that he may have come with pre-packaged answers for questions that might be raised instead of being open to discussions. In hindsight, he realised that he was imposing the responsibility of creating a non-violent and egalitarian environment with little consideration of the burden (resulting from structural violence from universities, police and military, and state) to which these young men are already subjected (Ratele 2018). All in all, a Situated, Social-Psychological Profeminist Praxis aims to humanise, mould, and conscientise young men to work for harmonious, healthy, and functional gender relations.

The reviewed literature demonstrated how DFA transformed the terrain of feminist activism in addressing the VAW and related issues of rape and femicide. In South Africa, particularly, the #MenAreTrash DFA has proved to have been influential in addressing these issues in South Africa. However, among other things, there remains a gap in understanding the extent to which #MenAreTrash was successful in bringing a desired social change considering its controversial nature. Despite the prominence of this DFA in social media public discourse, previous research reveals limited empirical evidence on broader critical public perceptions and attitudes towards #MenAreTrash and the factors that shape these. To address this gap, the current study adopted a multi-theoretical approach, as shown in the previous chapter, to understand and explore the multifaceted nature of DFA, #MenAreTrash in particular. Unlike previous studies that mainly relied on social media content (posts and comments) to conclude about public perceptions of DFA, this study adopted a triangulation methodological approach which utilised both primary data sources and secondary data sources to capture the full spectrum of the diverse perceptions, views and thoughts of South Africans on the issue under study. This aspect is well elaborated in the next chapter.

In summary, this chapter provided a historical overview of feminist activism in order to lay a foundation for understanding DFA. It then highlighted an interface between DFA and VAW with a special focus on how digital tools are used to uplift, empower, and give a voice to women

worldwide and in South Africa. The chapter further engaged the literature on the resistance towards DFA and the underlying factors for the push-back. It then progressed into exploring the literature on the obstacles encountered by feminist activism and those that originate with it. The final part of the chapter highlighted various approaches that provide insights into how feminist activism can be harnessed and enhanced to function optimally.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to provide a general orientation of the specific research methods and techniques used to achieve the study objectives. It elucidates how these techniques were executed to address the research questions and provides a rationale behind the adoption of the chosen methodology. Furthermore, the chapter describes data gathering techniques, data sources, and the data analysis process. It further deals with issues concerning the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings as well as the positionality of the researcher in the study. Finally, the researcher accounts for the ethical procedures that were adhered to ensure the study was conducted with the outmost integrity.

### **3.2 Philosophical Standpoint**

This study adopted the interpretivist approach to social inquiry. Early interpretative social scientists, that include Max Weber, argued that human ideas, values, and aims meaningfully build social reality, and that human behaviour should be understood and interpreted rather than merely explained and recorded as positivists normally do (Mouton 2001; Babbie 2007). According to the interpretivist viewpoint, we live in a world of multiple and intersubjective realities in which both the social analyst and social actors interpret the events that occur in their surroundings (David and Sutton 2011; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Creswell 2013). Central to this approach is the social analyst's ability to understand and reconstruct the meaning of social life for those being studied through the process called *verstehen* (David and Sutton 2011; Neuman 2014). This is because their worldview is crucial for understanding why they think the way they do. Moreover, instead of ignoring one's own feelings, the social analyst may want to integrate their feelings into the analysis (Marvasti 2004).

The main interest of this study was in the multiplicity and the subjective views of the participants regarding the phenomenon of DFA in the context of VAW in South Africa. The researcher understands their role to be immersing themselves into the participants' experiences and interpretations of the subject matter while also offering their own views and feelings during the analytic process. The overall aim of the interpretivist approach in this regard is to unpack several interpretations in pursuit to understand the differences in meaning constructions and how these shape the realities of the social actors.

### **3.3 Research Design**

Conducting research requires one to make choices regarding the steps to be followed to complete the study from start to finish. These include asking questions based on a theoretical orientation, and selecting what or who will be part of the study, data collection methods, and how data will be analysed and reported (Marvasti 2004; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Creswell 2013). This process is known as a research design. The design of this study is situated within the qualitative framework. Researchers who adopt a qualitative approach to social inquiry should be interested in analysing various social settings and those who inhabit them (Berg 2001). In extension, they should focus on the ways in which individuals organise themselves in their settings and make sense of their milieu through symbols, social structures, and social roles (Berg 2001; Marvasti 2004). Thus, the qualitative approach enables researchers to capture the human experience in a meaningful way.

According to Creswell (2013), researchers who engage in qualitative inquiry usually gather multiple forms of data, such as interviews, case studies, observations, and documents rather than relying on a single source of data. Methodologically, this study adopted a case study approach in order to understand the issue under study in depth. As Yin (2009, p.31), describes it, “the case study methods allow investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events”. The method involves a detailed analysis of a particular event, situation, organisation, or social unit (Babbie 2007; Blatter 2008; Schoch 2020). In this study, the focus was on the phenomenon of the #MenAreTrash DFA in South Africa. The interest was in exploring this issue in its entirety with the purpose of deriving an in-depth understanding of its nature and characteristics. The desire to produce in-depth outcomes from a case study requires that the researcher relies on different kinds of data sources such as interviews, documents, surveys, etc (David and Sutton 2011; Schoch 2020). Hence this study used in-depth interviews and secondary data sources to enhance the quality of the findings.

### **3.4 Data Sources**

The study drew data from two main sources, namely in-depth interviews and secondary data sources.

### 3.4.1 *In-depth interviews*

Research interviewing involves the process of asking people questions while at the same time actively listening to their responses (David and Sutton 2011). In-depth interviews, in particular, are purported to encourage and prompt participants to discuss the issue under study in depth (Cook 2008). These types of interviews are sometimes referred to as semi-structured interviews since they allow participants to expand in new but relevant directions while the researcher retains some control over the direction and content (Cook 2008). The researcher prepares several pre-determined questions that are typically asked to each interviewee in a standardised and consistent order (Berg 2001; David and Sutton 2011). Legard et al. (2003, p.139) describe the role of a researcher as follows:

The interviewer is seen as a traveller who journeys with the interviewee. The meanings of the interviewee's 'stories' are developed as the traveller interprets them. Through conversations, the interviewer leads the subject to new insights: there is a transformative element to the journey.

### 3.4.2 *Secondary data analysis*

Secondary data analysis involves a researcher analysing data that were originally gathered by others as well as existing literary sources that include books, magazines, newspapers, radio, television, and video clips (Ferrante 2016). Secondary data sources can be used for investigating new research questions, extending original analyses, or comparing them to other sources (McGinn 2008). For this study, secondary data analysis served as an auxiliary method to complement the data generated from in-depth interviews. Secondary data sources analysed included previously recorded episodes from the TV programme *Daily Thetha* on SABC 1. The programme is an educational TV talk show that empowers the youth through engaging dialogue. Radio interviews (Madibaz radio in Nelson Mandela University) and podcasts (Big Talk UCT) that contain debates and discussions about VAW in South Africa in general and the role and impact of the #MenAreTrash DFA and other factors around it were also analysed. Moreover, written documents such as online newspaper articles produced by popular media outlets (e.g., Daily Maverick, eNCA, and NewzRoom Africa) in South Africa were also consulted. The choice of this type of sources was informed by the rich information they have on the study topic. This includes information about the reasons for the existence of the #MenAreTrash DFA, its tenets, and views on its critics.

### 3.4.3 *Study participants*

For this study, in-depth interviews were held with proponents of the #MenAreTrash hashtag, its critics, as well as those with balanced views. The aim was to delve into participants' thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions related to the study topic.

Twenty-four individuals from various gender categories were purposively selected to participate in the study with the following basic inclusion criteria:

- **Age:** The participants selected were between the ages of 25 and 34 years. The selection of this age cohort was informed by the fact that it constitutes the highest percentage of social media users (specifically Twitter) in South Africa according to Statista Research Department (2022). However, the researcher was not too strict with the age inclusion criterion as there were participants whose ages were outliers because their knowledge and experience on the subject matter took precedence.
- **Knowledge of subject matter:** The participants had to be aware of the controversial debate that occurred on social media between those who were for and against the #MenAreTrash DFA during the 2017–2019 period. It was expected that through their knowledge, they would be able to provide informed accounts, perceptions, and opinions on the phenomenon of DFA in the context of VAW and the polarity of viewpoints, expressed through #MenAreTrash and #NotAllMen, around it.
- **Educational background:** Participants were expected to at least be in a tertiary institution or be in possession of a tertiary qualification. The assumption was that more often than not, persons who have been re-socialised through formal tertiary education are most likely to be generally knowledgeable, interested, and conscious of pressing issues in society compared to those who have never been exposed to higher institutions of learning.

Participants who met the above criteria were selected using a combination of non-probability purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Researchers who employ the snowball technique are often interested in studying sensitive topics or difficult-to-reach populations (Lee 1993 cited in Berg 2001, p.34). The basic strategy for selecting participants through this technique starts with identifying one or a few people with relevant characteristics and gathering information from them (Berg 2001). The researcher then relies on these social contacts to find others with the same attributes (Lopez and Whitehead 2013). By its very nature, the study topic for this research is sensitive as it requires people to engage with one of the most poignant social

issues. As such, it was not easy to locate individuals who were willing, knowledgeable, and able to engage critically on the impact of #MenAreTrash DFA in addressing the issue of VAW. Nonetheless, to find the appropriate participants for the study, the researcher contacted a few individuals known to him who are well-informed and knowledgeable of the #MenAreTrash DFA. These individuals then identified others who could also provide their views on the subject matter.

#### **3.4.4 Data collection**

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A) designed to provide the researcher with the ability to probe into the issue under study and allow for subjective accounts of the phenomenon from the views of the participants (Kabir 2016). The approach was useful to explore the attitudes and perceptions participants hold towards the #MenAreTrash DFA. In essence, the in-depth interviews were meant to facilitate the achievement of Objectives 1–4 of the study (Section 1.5). Although participants were given the freedom to use any South African official language they were comfortable with, the main language of communication used in the interviews was English.

Instead of following a conventional face-to-face interviewing method, this study used video conferencing platforms (Zoom and Microsoft Teams) for the in-depth interviews. The decision to adopt this approach was influenced largely by the strict Covid-19 regulations, specifically restrictions in relation to travel and physical social interactions, that were in place for much of the data collection phase of the study (June 2022–January 2023). Given these circumstances, the decision to resort to virtual interviewing proved to be viable. Apart from the stated rationale to adopt the web-conferencing applications for interviews, other benefits of using these internet tools included the reduced travelling expenses, easy scheduling of meetings, and the ability to connect with people regardless of their geographical location. The study participants were from the Gauteng, Free State, KwaZulu Natal, Western Cape, Eastern Cape, and Limpopo provinces in South Africa. Moreover, the recording function in the video conferencing platforms was activated with the consent of the study participants to capture their perceptions.

## 3.5 Data Analysis

### 3.5.1 *In-depth interviews*

A researcher that is involved in a qualitative study inevitably engages in some kind of qualitative data analysis (David and Sutton 2011). Given that the purpose of this study was to understand and report the views and perceptions of those being examined, an interpretive approach was deemed ideal for analysing the data from the in-depth interviews. According to Kvale (2006 cited in Ritchie and Lewis 2003, p.202), the following are the different contexts of interpretation in qualitative data analysis:

- **Self-understanding**, which includes the researcher's attempts to summarise what the participants mean and understand about the subject matter;
- **Critical common sense understanding**, during which the researcher relies on their own general knowledge to place the context of the statements within the wider arena; and
- **Theoretical understanding**, in which the researcher uses theoretical knowledge to guide the interpretation.

These criteria were therefore trusted to serve as an important guide to uncover the meanings participants ascribed to DFA and its role in eliminating VAW.

The recorded data from the in-depth interviews were transcribed. The transcripts were then coded based on the themes that emerged from the data. The software ATLAS.ti 23 was used to aid the data analysis process. However, it should be noted that this programme does not necessarily analyse data but rather allows the researcher to store the raw collected data as a single heuristic unit, develop visual networks, and arrange the data into quotations, codes, categories, and themes. For this study, the data were approached inductively wherein the themes were data-driven rather than preconceived. The first step was 'open coding', during which initial categories of information about the issue being studied were formed. Within each category, the researcher examined every single word and sentence to build sub-categories or concepts. This strategy allows a researcher to unpack and decipher the meanings of participants' words and phrases. The second step involved 'axial coding', which entails assembling the categories from open coding to compare differences and similarities between the meanings and organise them into patterns. Lastly, 'selective coding' was employed to develop major themes that capture the perceptions and attitudes of the participants in a

meaningful and clear text. In the end, the researcher provided an interpretation of the data based on the formulated themes.

### **3.5.2 *Secondary data***

A content analysis approach was employed to analyse the data from multimedia sources (video clips, podcasts, and online newspaper articles). This involved the systematic categorisation and counting of text units, audio recordings, and video clips to compress a large amount of material into a brief description of some of its features (Bauer cited in Marvasti 2004, p.90). According to Marvasti (2004), data obtained from these sources can be used to make inferences about public opinions and attitudes. Therefore, these media sources are a reflection of the perceptions of South Africans other than those who took part in the in-depth interviews. In this instance too, the interpretive approach was used to analyse an entire corpus of information by assigning meaning to the statements participants make.

### **3.5.3 *Triangulation***

The initial phase of data analysis consisted of the amalgamation of data generated from in-depth interviews with those obtained from secondary sources. The quotes from these data sources were interpreted in conjunction with each other under a specific theme depending on the research objective they were aimed at addressing. This technique enabled the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of the specific aspects of the issue under study since the data converged from various sources.

## **3.6 Trustworthiness and Credibility of Data**

At some point in the research process, researchers are bound to explain the procedures implemented to ensure the rigour of their work. In quantitative research, this is done by expounding on the validity and reliability of the study. Validity is used to describe whether the research truly measures what it intended to measure, and reliability refers to the degree of consistency of the results over time. Qualitative researchers, however, refer to the concept of trustworthiness to demonstrate the credibility of the findings owing to the unique analytical procedures and strategies they employ to ensure the rigour of the data (Noble and Smith 2015). These strategies include peer debriefing, member checking, and thick descriptions. Researchers must engage in one or more of these methods before presenting their findings.

Peer debriefing includes the researcher calling upon a peer who is not involved in the research project to scrutinise and critique the methods and interpretations (Creswell and Miller 2000). For this study, the feedback from the researcher's supervisor, though not necessarily a peer, was useful to make necessary improvements during the entire research project. The researcher also engaged in member-checking technique. This involves inviting the participants to comment on the raw data or final themes and concepts so they can confirm the credibility of the information they provided (Noble and Smith 2015). This technique was mostly employed during the transcription process and data interpretation phase when the texts seemed unclear. The researcher reached out to the interviewees to clarify and confirm the data captured during their interviews. Moreover, in this study, the researcher used the literal statements of the participants and quotations from transcripts to provide 'rich and thick descriptions' to support the findings (Bashir et al. 2008). Field notes were also used to make constant comparisons between the data and literature to find similarities and differences (Creswell and Miller 2000).

### **3.7 Researcher Positionality in the Study**

One important aspect in social enquiry, which is also related to the issue of validity, is that of researcher positionality in the study. Positionality describes a researcher's worldview and the position they assume about a research task along with its sociopolitical context (Darwin Holmes 2020). Some aspects of positionality are fixed or culturally ascribed, such as gender, race, skin-colour, and nationality, and may predispose a researcher towards a particular point of view (Creswell and Miller 2000). Other aspects such as political views, personal history, and experiences are regarded as more fluid, subjective, and contextual (Darwin Holmes 2020).

The researcher who undertook the current study is a heterosexual South African man who, by default, is part of those that the #MenAreTrash DFA sought to address. Taking this into consideration, a certain level of bias towards the DFA in question could be anticipated. Such bias and subjectivity could mould the interpretation of findings to some degree because researchers are part of the social world they study (Darwin Holmes 2020). To this end, Creswell and Miller (2000) urge researchers to engage in a reflexive approach to allow for a reduction of bias and partisanship. One way of achieving this is to practice what is known as 'emphatic neutrality', which according to Ormston et al. (2014 cited in Holmes 2020, p.4) is the researcher's ability to "strive to avoid obvious, conscious, or systemic bias and to be as neutral as possible in the collection, interpretation, and presentation of data". Pertinent to this research, the researcher strived to be neutral throughout the processes of data collection, interpretation,

and presentation. This was regardless of how much the findings contradicted his beliefs, values, and viewpoints on the issue being studied.

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

While planning and designing a qualitative study, researchers are obliged to consider what ethical issues can emanate during the study and to plan how to deal with these (Creswell 2013). The methods employed in qualitative research, such as probing, for instance, are used to delve deeper into the participants' experiences in order to elicit rich data from them. The subject of VAW is provocative and sensitive one and as such, the kind of data produced in this research was considered personal in nature. Therefore, the researcher adhered to all necessary measures in terms of ethical considerations to ensure this study was performed with the utmost integrity. Foremost, since the entire ethical procedure is a process upheld within a formal context, ethical clearance was applied for through the Research Ethics Committee of the Humanities Faculty at the University of Pretoria. The application of the ethical clearance served to ensure all ethical procedures applicable to the research study were followed and the way they were applied was feasible. The Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the study (Appendix B).

Before the data collection process commenced, information sheets and the consent forms (Appendix C) were sent electronically to all participants for them to grant informed consent to take part in the study. Informed consent entails the participants being given the right to know that they are being researched, why they are being researched, and the right to withdraw at any time, given that the study was voluntary. Consent to record the interviews was also sought from the participants. Since these interviews were virtual, the researcher was responsible for the provision of the means for internet connection for the participants and this was done by purchasing internet bundles for those who needed them.

A debriefing process, which ensured that the participants were aware of the aims of the study and its nature, was conducted. Thus, there was no deception. The confidentiality of the participants was guaranteed by giving assurance that all personal information was strictly protected. One way of protecting the participants' identities was to assign pseudonyms to them when presenting excerpts from the interviews throughout the thesis. To maintain privacy, the web-conferencing applications Zoom and Microsoft Teams were set up in such a way that they restricted the participants from recording the sessions. As soon as the data were gathered, all the recorded material was stored on the researcher's personal computer in a folder that is password protected. The data will also be submitted to the Department of Sociology at the

University of Pretoria for safekeeping for the period of 15 years, as per policy. Moreover, given the sensitive nature of the research topic, the researcher provided the details of provincial LifeLine offices and of the South African Anxiety and Depression Group that were on standby to offer services free of charge in the event that the participants may experience distress during the interviewing process. However, as far as the researcher knows, the participants did not express the need for these services.

## **CHAPTER 4: SOCIAL MEDIA AS A PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL FEMINIST ACTIVISM**

### **4.1 Introduction**

As stated in Section 1.5, one of the interests of this study was to assess the extent to which social media platforms are regarded as effective and relevant tools to engage one another as civil society on pressing social issues such as VAW (Objective 1). In extension, it focused on how activism related to the said issues manifests itself within the domain of social media. To achieve these objectives, this chapter draws on 24 in-depth interviews to explore the concept of social media and the manner in which it presents itself as a public sphere.

The notion of the public sphere refers to a situation in which the people of a particular context gather as a public to engage in issues of public concern. In this research, social media platforms are conceptualised as modern-day public spheres that enable ordinary people to exchange thoughts, ideas, and experiences as well as to debate sociopolitical and socioeconomic issues that affect them, whether directly or indirectly. As has been demonstrated in Chapter 1, Twitter, along with other social media platforms, was adopted by numerous South Africans who together constituted a community of DFA to grapple with the issue of VAW and femicide in the country under the #MenAreTrash social media hashtag. From the perceptions of the participants, the researcher obtained valuable insights into the strengths and shortcomings of relying mainly on social media as the instrument used to address the issue of VAW. The importance of assessing the relevance of social media spaces as public spheres can help determine the different conditions under which social media activism can thrive or become ineffective for a specific purpose.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section highlights the strengths and benefits of social media platforms as arenas for public engagement and activism. The discussion commences by elucidating the pedagogical value of social media, portraying it as an educational platform where specific knowledge is shared and disseminated. The section then delves into the role of social media as a conduit between online and offline engagements. Furthermore, it explores how social media serves as a mechanism through which women amplify their voices to raise their grievances. The second section acknowledges another aspect of social media as a public sphere, namely the shortcomings of these platforms. It dissects the challenges encompassing the issues of social media censorship, lack of communicative action,

and intrinsic constraints of these platforms. In the last section, the chapter scrutinises the aspect of social media activism within the public sphere. It does so by examining the impact of social media anonymity in activism and also looks into the notions of ‘slacktivism’ and ‘clicktivism’.

## **4.2 Strengths and Benefits of Social Media as a Public Sphere**

The original conception of the public sphere as described by Habermas was founded on the principle that it should be accessible to the entire citizenry (Adut 2021). The public sphere should not be controlled nor dominated by private interests of specific individuals, institutions, or organisations. The typical nature of the public sphere of the 18<sup>th</sup> century existed in the physical spaces where citizens could participate in conversations and public debates that concerned them. However, the advent of social media necessitated reimagining the public sphere in a way that would be adaptive to contemporary societies. Hence, several scholars came to recognise social media platforms as public spaces where ordinary people can engage each other on critical issues with the intention of effecting some form of social change (Iosifidis 2011; Fuchs 2014; Johannessen et al. 2016). This means there is recognition that social media platforms afford certain gains and benefits to those who adopt them for the purposes of public engagements, debates, and activism. This section starts off by highlighting the pedagogical value of social media, then looks at the role of social media in bridging the gap between online and offline conversations, and lastly, explores social media as an instrument of empowerment for women.

### ***4.2.1 Pedagogical value of social media***

Mendes et al. (2019) use the term ‘digital public pedagogy’ to refer to the efficacy of social media as sites from which individuals can produce knowledge while at the same time learning from others. This way, though unstructured and informal, the public receives education that is usually produced in formal educational institutions. In the context of feminism, women use online spaces to educate each other about issues of VAW, sexism, rape culture, patriarchy, and male dominance that manifest in their everyday lives (Mendes et al. 2019; Sener 2021). In the current study, the participants highlighted how digital spaces serve as domains in which valuable knowledge and information are exchanged and disseminated. However, this aspect will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6 to fit the context of DFA.

#### **4.2.2 Social media as a conduit between online and offline engagements**

Another strength of social media is its ability to bridge the gap between digital interactions and physical engagements and discussions; that is, there is an interplay between these two contexts. According to Chi, social media is embedded in our everyday lives in the sense that the information and content generated from these spaces form the basis of the conversations we have in person. For Nkanyezi, people convey the conversations they have in their private lives on social media platforms to share the contents of those conversations with others. The purpose of these conversations can be to create awareness around a particular issue, such as VAW. The following are the excerpts that reflect the views of Chi and Nkanyezi:

For me, they [social media platforms] play a vital role because they also play themselves out in our everyday spaces. We get to see how interconnected these two spaces are because when I go to have conversations with people in person in my close circle, you always make reference to some of the things that you encountered on social media spaces. **(Chi; 27 years old; heterosexual woman; master's student)**

So, it's just one way of bringing together live in-person conversations and creating a space for people to share and create awareness. **(Nkanyezi; 28 years old; bisexual woman; researcher and activist)**

The notion that social media is intertwined in the fabric of our lives is further underscored by Seepamedu, a 36-year-old anthropology lecturer. He states that not only does this social media allow people to engage in pressing social issues such as VAW or GBV, but they also present themselves as agents of socialisation. In sociological terms, socialisation is the lifelong process through which members of society internalise certain norms, cultures, values, beliefs, and behaviours of their society or social group. In this sense, the information disseminated among social media users is expected to have a certain influence on them and beyond in order to instil desired values and behaviours, for example, through creating awareness around VAW. The following quote captures his perception:

I think they play a very significant role in allowing people to engage on such issues, especially pertinent issues such as gender-based violence, because social media has opened a platform where most of us, almost our day-to-day life, is partly depending on social media in terms of informing us and that technology also is stretched to our social life. So, our socialisation, most of us, you know takes place on social media and, in this case, is the role of Twitter, and many people on Twitter, even presidents

have Twitter accounts. Celebrities have Twitter accounts, politicians, in general, have Twitter accounts, and even ordinary citizens who are outside these categories also participate on Twitter and Facebook. **(Seepamedu; 36 years old; heterosexual man; lecturer)**

The insights from Nkanyezi and Seepamedu underscore the important role of social media as a conduit between online and offline engagements, particularly in discussions around VAW. Social media discussions and awareness raising serve, to a certain degree, as the agents of socialisation to influence behaviours and attitudes towards VAW.

#### ***4.2.3 Social media as a means for self-expression and freedom of speech***

This sub-theme examines the role of social media, particularly Twitter, in facilitating freedom of speech and self-expression for previously marginalised groups and society at large. Scholars have characterised social media platforms as embodying new spaces wherein crucial dialogues can occur. For instance, scholars such as Fuchs (2014) and Butsch (2007) acknowledge the role of social media in providing venues for ordinary citizens to engage in critical discussions on matters of public concern. In this sense, social media reflects the requisites of a public sphere (Johannessen et al. 2016; Kruse et al. 2017).

The participants Hector, a 27-year-old heterosexual man and software developer; Salvator, a 27-year-old heterosexual man and unemployed graduate; Mandla, a 32-year-old heterosexual man and lecturer; Palesa, a 20-year-old heterosexual woman and student; and Piet, a 27-year-old heterosexual man and university social media marketer, shared their perspectives on how social media platforms encourage these activities. According to Hector, Twitter is a microblog, and as such, it should serve the function of affording freedom of expression and, in this case, the ability to have a voice in issues of concern:

I see Twitter for what it is on an application level. Twitter is merely a microblog, and a blog is an environment where you're supposed to give yourself a voice, right? And that, in my opinion, the perfect place to give yourself a voice on such topics because ... look, it's hard for anybody to come out and be like, "I'm being abused by my partner", for example, or take any activist standpoint if we're being honest. And I think words, like written text, to be specific, is one of the greatest platforms that can help us express that. And now, being able to do it in real-time with voices that can actually help you sort out the actual challenge is vital. **(Hector; 27 years old; heterosexual man; software developer)**

Much like Hector, Salvator believes that Twitter played an emancipatory role in enabling previously marginalised groups (not only women) to express themselves. He further highlights that because of Twitter, diverse views emerge from various social groupings. This produces what Mandla termed “cross-cultural understanding”. Mandla points out that one of the essential qualities of Twitter is its capacity to allow for the production of raw and authentic content. That is, it is not subject to social control or distortion because the discussions contain “contradictions, paradoxes, and differing opinions”. In not so many words, Palesa echoes these sentiments by confirming that Twitter is one social media platform that affords people freedom of expression. Piet similarly endorses social media platforms as conducive spaces to “have these conversations”, meaning conversations that include VAW, since social media makes it easier for users to connect with those beyond their immediate environments. These participants expressed their sentiments as follows:

You know, in retrospect, if you think about before the Twitter age and stuff like that, people could not really express their views like this. And you would always probably have some marginalised people that can't even express how they've been marginalised, for lack of a better term. So, but then, if you look now, you will hear very interesting views and different experiences from different demographics. Even other demographics we didn't even know existed, which on its own is quite interesting that you meet things, and you experience and meet people there on Twitter and other spaces that you didn't even know that you can share views like that, or you didn't even know what such views can be held. Do you understand?

**(Salvator; 27 years old; heterosexual man; unemployed graduate)**

I think they're [social media] very important in the fact that they are very raw, they are not biased. They're open to everyone and in the sense that they have a lot of things: contradictions, paradoxes. And people come in, and they're able to voice out what they think, and you get to get different views from people from different cultures. So, you have people now beginning to learn what we call cross-cultural understanding on some of these issues. So, for me, they're very important in the sense that they are not linear. So, they are quite rich to bring in different views, you know, opposition. They're just reaching for me, actually. They represent what society or human life is. **(Mandla; 32 years old; heterosexual man; lecturer)**

I feel like Twitter makes it very easy to engage with people and express your opinions. So, I used to follow a lot of people who were focusing a lot on things that

are happening inside our country. **(Palesa; 20 years old; heterosexual woman; student)**

They've [social media] done something that physical reality can't do, you know. We are able to engage on a topic from vast areas all at the same time on this one platform. They allow the space for the conversations to be able to be had. Whereas at earlier times, maybe if you wanted to engage in a conversation, you'd have to engage those around, or try to protest outside. So, it makes it much more, I guess, easier. And that's where most people are. So, I think for that reason, it [social media] is a relevant space to have these conversations. **(Piet; 27 years old; heterosexual man; university social media marketer)**

All in all, this section explored the strengths and benefits of social media as a public sphere, specifically in the context of DFA. The participants' articulations underscored the role of social media as a space for 'digital pedagogy'. Here, the social media community disseminates essential knowledge on issues that affect women such as VAW, patriarchy, and gender inequality, to name a few. Digital pedagogy in this regard contributes to informal education beyond formal educational settings. This section also emphasised the role of social media as a conduit between online and offline engagements, particularly in the discourses around VAW. Furthermore, there is recognition that social media such as Twitter, through DFA, serves as a tool for self-expression and freedom of speech, especially for previously marginalised groups. Collectively, the inputs from participants underscore the value of social media to facilitate public engagement, knowledge dissemination, and empowerment of marginalised groups in the realm of DFA.

### **4.3 Shortcomings and Limitations of Social Media as a Public Sphere**

While the focus of the previous section was on the positive aspects of social media as a public sphere, this section discusses the findings that reveal the ways in which these platforms can be dysfunctional. According to Johannessen et al. (2016), to be functional, a modern-day public sphere should first allow free thought and discussion; secondly, it should consist of groups of people with a common goal, such as devising strategies for protesting; thirdly, it should be based on social mobilisation; and lastly, it should be based on consensus. To promote mutual support, there should be minimal disagreements among those who are involved in the discourse, discussion, or debate. Thus, the absence of these principles renders the public sphere dysfunctional and ineffective.

### **4.3.1 Misinterpretations and misunderstandings on social media**

The following excerpts from Chi; Converse, a 31-year-old heterosexual man and lecturer in developmental studies; Kaila, a 20-year-old heterosexual woman; student; and Michelle, a 26-year-old community developer whose organisation works closely with the UN, uncover the challenges of misinterpretations and misunderstandings that can potentially arise from the views they may want to express regarding certain issues, such as VAW. These interviewees were asked whether they usually express their views on sociopolitical issues of the country on social media. Chi answered she is scared that her social media posts will be taken out of context because of potential misunderstandings, and the fear of being misinterpreted prompts self-censorship. In her opinion, the number of characters Twitter allocates for a single post is a major limitation to users broadly expressing their input. In the following excerpt she references a South African Professor, Mamokgethi Phakeng,<sup>3</sup> whose social media post was potentially distorted, which had severe consequences for the professor:

So, when one engages in such topics [such as VAW], you would want to be in person or with people, your close circle, because information easily gets misinterpreted on social media, you understand? Information goes missing. So, you don't want to be misinterpreted. One of the things that you see, I think it was Professor Phakeng, as well, unfortunately for her, she said something which, when I read it, I saw nothing wrong with it. I understood it, right. But because it's social media, and the number of characters is limited, many people chose to read that out of context. So, I'm very cautious when I comment on such things. **(Chi; 27 years old; heterosexual woman; master's student)**

Michelle highlights the potential risk of offending others with her sociopolitical views. She cites the examples of immigration and racism, which are sensitive topics, as some of the topics could trigger others to react negatively to her views. Expressing views on a topic of this nature can easily be misinterpreted and may lead to one being sanctioned by getting 'unfollowed'. As Michelle sees it, people tend not to engage with the text critically to understand the context; instead, they just read and react. Converse expressed a similar sentiment, stating that misinterpreting what others say seems to be a tendency among social media users, and little

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<sup>3</sup> Former vice-chancellor of the UCT, South Africa. Here is the link to the news about her controversial tweet about the student who was allegedly raped on campus: <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/uct-vice-chancellor-apologises-retracts-tweet-questioning-students-agenda-over-rape-claim-20220525>.

effort is made to understand the contexts of content posted by others. Below are the views from Michelle and Converse:

Every year, the Minister comes in and gives the annual budget to us the fiscal policy of the country, and who's contributing to the tax revenue. It's not only South Africans, but also immigrants as well. So, I won't say I'm anti-immigrant. But if I post views about immigrants, it triggers people, and they end up misinterpreting what I'm saying. They don't fully understand the context. And that's another issue I have with social media. When you put a view out there, it is so easy for it to be misconstrued, misinterpreted, or taken out of context without people even engaging in the text. They'll just see, read something, take offence, get triggered and 'unfollow'.<sup>4</sup> So that is part of the reason why I'm also reluctant to put views really out there. Suppose I put views on racism, on White racism. In that case, it might also offend my White friends or White followers because they don't want to be reminded about what their forefathers have done in South Africa and how their descendants, whether it's German descendants, British descendants, all these other settlers who came to South Africa; how they exploited Africans in South Africa.. **(Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer)**

I find that a lot of social media is looking for controversy. So, you say something and a lot of the time, the people who are viewing do not necessarily read your post to make sense of what you are actually saying. It's more about reading your post so that they can express their view of what you're saying. **(Converse; 31 years old; heterosexual man; lecturer)**

Kaila, a 20-year-old culinary student and social media activist, acknowledged the usefulness of social media as a tool for raising awareness and activism. However, she points out that certain demographics may not receive the intended message, well. Like previous participants, she believes this is because they fail to understand the context from which other people speak. Below is Kaila's view:

I think social media, in general, is a good tool for spreading awareness and doing activism. However, sometimes, it can depend on the demographic of the audience that you're reaching. Sometimes, your tweets on Twitter can reach a group of people who don't respond well and are unwilling to open up ... have an open mind and try and understand the other person's point of view. And that's where I think it can get

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<sup>4</sup> The act of delinking one's social media account from that of another user so you no longer see each other's content.

a little bit like ... there's this conflict sometimes. (**Kaila; 20 years old; heterosexual woman; student and activist**)

#### **4.3.2 Social media censorship**

The sub-theme of social media censorship is tightly linked to misinterpretation and misunderstandings on social media. The fear of having one's statements, messages and reactions on sensitive topics, such as VAW, stems from potential misunderstandings and misinterpretations. This leads to the participants feeling censored from speaking their minds freely. A major hindrance in this instance has to do with the institutional affiliation and professional lives of the participants; for example, Chi notes, "I think I am very cautious in that regard because, again, one is censored by the profession that they are in".

Converse and Jabulile, who are both in academia, express concern for putting their reputations and careers in jeopardy if they post content that may potentially be controversial. They both believe that one must be cautious when expressing views on social media. Jabulile opines that reacting immediately to certain news is unsafe since the possibility of saying something irrational is high. Converse's and Jabulile's views are captured in the following excerpts:

It's sort of an image thing where you never really know who's looking at your posts; you never know on which day someone will bring up your post in whatever case it may be because, on these platforms, you normally don't have a space to post your views. So now you're always in defence mode type of thing. So yeah, those are some of the reasons why I don't post much. (**Converse; 31 years old; heterosexual man; lecturer**)

You know what I've learned not to do it in that space, neh? Because firstly, once you put it down, it is there. Secondly, as a person, when something happens, I'm going to react immediately, right? The logic and the reasoning and everything else will come after. So, I would rather not ... before I say something that I feel like is irresponsible, because I'm also taking into consideration my position in terms of, I am a PhD candidate of NHSS, I'm a staff member of the University of the Free State, so all those things I know what I'm representing off, and I'm a Black woman. (**Jabulile; 36 years old; heterosexual woman; lecturer**)

Responding to the question of whether they usually express their sociopolitical views on social media, Michelle and Jessica, like the previous participants, take a careful approach in this regard so for the same reasons as others. However, Michelle and Jessica do not allow their

views to be totally suppressed because of their professional affiliations. Instead, they use certain strategies to share their messages with the audience. Michelle, for instance, ensures that her personal views are distinguishable from those of the organisations she represents. She also rather reposts content from other sources that reflects her thoughts and feelings instead of posting her own content, and in this way, she minimises the potential risks of being embroiled in controversy. Similarly, Jessica, a 19-year-old student model and self-acclaimed feminist, uses euphemisms as a strategy to get her views across. Michelle and Jessica express their views as follows:

I have done it before, but currently, I don't do it because there's been a number of changes in my professional life and in my career whereby I have to take into consideration the brand that I'm representing. Because whenever I publicly disseminate my personal views, it can also be perceived as the views of the organisations I represent. So, before airing a sociopolitical view out there, I do take those factors into consideration. But when I articulate my views and send them to social media or the newspapers, I'll always make it my business to put 'Michelle' at the end. "Michelle is writing in her personal capacity" to make it *clear* that this is not an organisation; this is Michelle's view, you know. [Thinking] I often make short commentaries on social media. Whether it is endorsing LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer] rights, whether it's my view on pro-life or pro-choice sexual reproductive matters, I am pro-choice, so I will post on my Instagram a picture that supports pro-choice, and that speaks to my social political views but that is not necessarily written by me, but that is written by someone else, but I'll share that link and that view on my social media. **(Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer)**

I do, I do. But I do it on WhatsApp, but ... so the thing is with WhatsApp, you can kind of control who sees your statuses, and with WhatsApp, it's a closer community. So, with Instagram, I'm kind of limited because I'm a model and I'm pageant queen, so there are certain views that I can't really put out there. I am a feminist, so some of my views can be seen as too radical. Hence, I kind of hold back when it comes to Instagram because they have a larger audience, and different people can interpret my views differently. So, I tend to euphemise a lot when I post on Instagram. I do still post my views here and there, but I become more euphemistic about it and ... yeah. **(Jessica; 19 years old; heterosexual woman; student, model, and feminist)**

### 4.3.3 *Lack of communicative action on social media*

One of the essential features of the public sphere is ‘communicative action’ (cf. Section 1.7). Ideally, this process involves speakers and listeners who debate, disapprove, and substantiate each other’s claims. The end goal is to reach an agreement that can lead to a solution to the issue at hand. Researchers such as Kruse et al. (2017) found that social media have limited amount of cooperation when it comes to certain public discourse. This then undermines communicative action, which is central to the functioning of the public sphere. The extracts that follow illustrate the lack of communicative action on social media, which sometimes leads to conflict among social groups involved in a discourse. The researcher asked the participants whether they think social media platforms are relevant for engaging other people on social issues such as VAW. This question was posed to determine the relevance of social media in addressing social issues. Answering this question, some participants describe social media, especially Twitter as “a platform where people are just yelling and screaming their own views” and where “they just say whatever they want”. As such, it is not an ideal space for holding civilised conversations. This is according to Sarah in the following excerpt:

[Chuckling] Like yes and no. I think it is a great platform that people can talk on, and it connects a lot of people around the world. But like I said earlier, it’s become a platform where people are just yelling and screaming their own views. And not really talking to each other. It’s more like just a place to express yourself, and not converse, basically. **(Sarah; 23 years old; heterosexual woman; student and tutor)**

In the extract below, Michelle refers to a social group on Twitter than is known as ‘Black Twitter’, which she regards as inconsiderate. Characters such as these has led her to distance herself from social media to avoid being triggered and to react equally inconsiderately.

I’m very reluctant to participate on Twitter, especially Black Twitter, because Black Twitter is so toxic. I’ve seen the type of things they tweet, the things that they say, the views that they disseminate out there. Very often it’s vulgar; That’s why I keep my social media very limited. I can’t afford to expose myself to things I don’t need to be exposed to because I understand the type of person that I am as well. I can be equally nasty, which I don’t wanna be and I don’t wanna show that on social media. And I can also be overly sensitive to matters, so if I can spare myself, then I’ll gladly do so. **(Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer)**

Not only are social media platforms disorderly, but the debates are also “quite emotional”, and people can be affected by the reactions of others, as described by Nondumiso in the following excerpt:

Another reason why I stopped [participating] in those debates, they can get quite emotional. Those debates on those platforms where you find now, you’re so angry at a person that you don’t even know on a personal level, someone that you just met on Facebook, in a comment. Then maybe they react to what you are saying coming from a very ignorant background, or a background that lacks information in terms of maybe some people are saying certain things because of the stereotypes. Some are not even aware of what they’re saying because assume what they’re saying the truth. **(Nondumiso; 32 years old; heterosexual woman; PhD candidate)**

This is attributed to the collective behaviour that is characterised by ignorance and lack of knowledge on certain matters. As such, participants like Piet recognise the drawbacks of having an opinion on issues one does not have adequate knowledge about. He believes that he should avoid topics on which he has limited knowledge:

I think, for one, I try to avoid debates or that conflict of differing opinions. Also, I don’t think I’m ... how can I put it? I know enough, but most of the time, I don’t think I know enough about the issue to speak on it; so, I try to avoid it. **(Piet; 27 years old; heterosexual man; university social media marketer)**

#### **4.3.4 *Intrinsic limitations of social media as a public sphere***

The previous sub-themes indicated that the shortcomings of social media as a public sphere can be mostly attributed to users’ conduct, behaviours, and attitudes. In contrast, this sub-theme looks at the shortcomings of social media itself in how it limits full participation in terms of activism and related activities directed at dealing with VAW. The excerpts from Michelle, Peace, and Philemon shed light on the intrinsic shortcomings of social media, Twitter in particular, as a public space for engaging one another on serious issues, such as VAW. According to the participants, these limitations revolve around the constraints posed by Twitter’s character limits, the nature of social media as an entertainment-oriented space, and the need to explore other platforms in which meaningful dialogues can be had. Michelle believes Twitter is a less relevant platform for engaging in critical public issues and dialogues because issues such as VAW are complex, and thus, require more extensive discussions than

allowed by the 140-character limit on Twitter. Therefore, she endorses physical spaces as the more relevant for meaningful discussions. The following are Michelle's sentiments:

I think currently, where we are as a society, not only as a South African society but as a global society, social media has become a platform where government officials can directly interact with their constituency and with ordinary members of society. I do not think it [social media] *should* have to be the most relevant platform because Twitter in itself, that platform, is quite limiting. I don't think you can give a clear political view and analysis using 140 characters, right? Twitter only allows you to put in 140 words per tweet, you know. Issues of society are too complex for one to work with in a tweet. I believe in community-based dialogue. I believe in dialogue between public institutions and members of society, whether through Parliament processes. So, I don't think that serious issues like GBV have space on Twitter. It's just a place where you can say whatever you want to say, whether that's constructive or destructive; there's no accountability. **(Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer)**

Peace, a 27-year-old student employee, also expresses scepticism about the relevance and compatibility of Twitter as platform on which sensitive issues like GBV can be discussed. She believes that social media in general were primarily created for entertainment purposes, and that the emotions expressed may not be genuine and the information shared often inaccurate. Moreover, she echoes Michelle's sentiments that matters of public concern that include VAW, should be addressed in face-to-face contexts. The following dialogue is an extract from the interview with Peace:

**Peace:** Okay. I don't think social media are relevant, particularly Twitter. I don't think it's a good space or a perfect platform where we can actually discuss the GBV. Why? It's because social media is social media. And in most cases, the information that's been shared on social media, is not true. Right? It's not accurate. And then most of the emotions that are shared on social media aren't real, in most cases as well. And I feel like for the fact that social media was created for entertainment, perhaps to share information as well, but not as sensitive as this one. More especially on Twitter. So, I don't think Twitter is really a good place to discuss this thing. There are other platforms that can be used to discuss the GBV; there are so many things that could be done, bro. Not on social media. Yeah.

Philemon, a 29-year-old investment banking researcher who also happens to be a Facebook influencer, makes an implication that there are alternative platforms where conversations about

VAW can be held. This is because, like many other social media, not everyone is on Twitter, and this means that if this is the main platform where the discourse about VAW transpires, a large proportion of society is excluded. He points out that while Twitter can influence public attitude and opinion about VAW, the main social groups that need this influence are not active on social media, such as people with lower socioeconomic status who live in communities where VAW is most prevalent. He adds that this is not to say that the economically advantaged members of society do not commit VAW, but that VAW is most common in poor communities. This view aligns with Schwendinger and Schwendinger's (1983 cited in Martin et al. 2006, p.321) observation that most women who are susceptible to violence live in economically and socially unstable conditions. The following is Philemon's explanation:

Yeah, to some degree, yes, it's (social media) relevant because Twitter, Black Twitter, it is very influential. But I wouldn't say 100% because many people are not on social media, particularly a lot of people who sort of like have to be addressed in terms of violence against women because if we can be all be aware, we can realise that violence against women, it's also sort of like morphed in our cultural ways in South Africa. And it's also perpetuated or influenced primarily by inequality and poverty as well. So, in many households where people are living below the poverty line, that's where people tend to also experience a lot of violence. I'm not saying that the wealthy don't perpetuate violence gender-based violence. But I just say, predominantly, especially when you get the historical context of South Africa, those are the areas we have to address people, like your taxi ranks where you have to address and help or teach people to unlearn their uncouth cultural ways in which they view women. So, a lot of those people are not on social media. They're not on Twitter. **(Philemon; 29 years old; heterosexual man; researcher and Facebook influencer)**

In summary, this section delved into the shortcomings and limitations of social media as a public sphere, and the sub-themes include misinterpretations and misunderstandings on social media, social media censorship, a lack of communicative action, and intrinsic limitations of social media. Participants revealed the risks associated with expressing their views on sensitive issues such as VAW because of factors such as character limitations embedded in the Twitter application that constrain full descriptive messages, diverse audiences, and different interpretations; all of which can lead to misunderstandings. The data also revealed a lack of communicative action on social media, which is attributed to factors such as toxic behaviour, emotionally charged debates, and lack of information on certain issues. In addition, the section

explored the intrinsic limitations of social media platforms such as Twitter as an ideal platform to critically address the issue of VAW because VAW is a complex issue that requires serious commitment on the macro-societal level, especially by institutions and organisations such as the government.

#### **4.4 Social Media Activism**

Social media as a modern-day public sphere have undeniably emerged as dynamic and influential arenas for feminist activism and beyond. Those who use social media for activism benefit from the affordances these platforms offer. These include speed, immediacy, global reach, and visibility (Mendes et al. 2019). Social media activism further fosters community building and support wherein survivors, advocates, activists, and allies can connect and pool resources and expertise to address VAW more comprehensively (Martin and Valenti 2012). In the same breath, social media activism has been accused of failing to produce meaningful and practical results (Storer and Rodriguez 2020). Some of the reasons cited include the tendency to not make any effort to effect change or what is known as ‘slacktivism’ or ‘clicktivism’ (cf. Section 2.2.).

This section looks at the ways in which social media is used for activism, specifically as it is related to issues that affect women. The ultimate aim was to investigate the impact of social media activism in society. This was done by first discussing the findings on the positive impact of social media activism, then social media anonymity, and lastly, ‘slacktivism’ and ‘clicktivism’ social media activism.

##### ***4.4.1 Positive impact of social media activism***

This subsection presents the findings regarding the positive impact of social media activism, which encompasses social support, empowerment, and justice for women. The findings elucidate how DFA, specifically #MenAreTrash, contributed to a shift in attitudes, provided survivors with a platform to speak out, fostered a sense of empowerment, and prompted increased activism for justice and awareness. Before presenting specific details concerning the positive impact of social media activism, this sub-section offers a general overview of the participants' perspectives on social media activism. The majority of participants recognised the value of social media in raising awareness of VAW and related issues on an unprecedented scale. For instance, Bravo and Piet assert that social media activism illuminated issues of which society had previously been largely unaware or unconscious. Nevertheless, these participants

emphasise that positive outcomes are likely to be achieved only if social media is utilised appropriately, as illustrated in the following extracts:

I think when used properly again, it has a great impact, particularly in terms of awareness campaigns. If I were to touch on something else, for example, the rate of suicide among men, you know, other social ills, people might be oblivious to the challenges that society is facing, and then they get exposed to it on social media, on an informal platform. **(Bravo; 31 years old; heterosexual man; men's rights activist)**

I think it does have an impact in society. I mean there are many issues that have always occurred or been happening in our life world; however, it just wasn't publicised, or it wasn't made public knowledge, you know. For instance, there are so many things that happen in our lives, especially for somebody like me who comes from the township. We've been subject to domestic violence, to the ills of society. I mean, it can be used for the positive, don't get me wrong. I just think, maybe for the example, I wanna use, I'm using the more negative occurrences that cause people to want to share these things on social media. But I think it has its positives and negatives. Let me put it like that. The positive it's that it's made us aware of issues that maybe we were aware of but not maybe to the degree to which really we were supposed to have been aware, and also at the same time, it can be negative in that it allows everybody a space to raise their voice and not everybody who raises their voices are informed enough to be sharing their opinions on certain things. So, I think it has its contradictions, like everything else. **(Piet; 27 years old; heterosexual man; university social media marketer)**

Participants like Philemon and Salvator recognise the impact of social media activism in exposing and eventually expediting the punishment of influential figures in society for their acts of VAW and sexual offences. In connection with this, witnessing social justice take its course against the perpetrators provides confidence, hope, and a sense of collective voice and solidarity among the victims and survivors. However, as influential and impactful as it is, Philemon states that social media activism is not completely effective but serves merely as a mechanism to reach people in real time. Philemon and Salvator expressed their opinions as follows:

Yeah, to some degree, yes, it's [social media activism] very influential. I can make an example when it comes to influential people. Their reputation is bread and butter. So, because of social media, we've seen a couple of influential people fall on their

swords because of some of the things they've done that are related to gender-based violence. So, most definitely, I would very much say that it's very effective. Although, like I said, it's not like 100% effective, but to some degree, it is a starting point because then you're able to reach out to more people within a single point in time, unlike when you have to go from area to area to reach out to people. So, to some degree, it's very influential. **(Philemon; 29 years old; heterosexual man; researcher and Facebook influencer)**

So, it [social media activism] kinda gives other people, victims, survivors, it gives people the confidence that, firstly, "I'm not alone", secondly, "I can speak and at least say something". And people will see and hope that someone out there has experienced something like that, and we would be a collective and have more numbers and actually say something like this". And I think ... I don't know if we were to stretch it, probably these things have been considered in court as well to say, "How can so many people say a certain thing about you, while there's like a huge distance between those people". For instance, speaking of Harvey Weinstein, I forgot the other name. But it's someone of that calibre. They had a case now, a new case in the UK, but that person is actually based in the US, you see. So, I would like to think that it is some of the impact social media has, and to some extent, social media activism when it comes to gender-based violence and stuff along those lines. **(Salvator; 27 years old; heterosexual man; unemployed graduate)**

Other participants highlighted social media's capability to organise individuals into an active social movement that organises protests in the streets. For instance, the renowned #MeToo movement gained its visibility and popularity via social media and eventually had a major influence among women who were victims of sexual violence who then took the protests to offline contexts. These views are reflected in Michelle's and Sarah's excerpts below:

Because an actress was sexually violated by someone, a high-profile person in Hollywood, she went on Twitter and said: "This happened to me", "MeToo". So many other women resonated with it. It got picked up, and many other people started, "Me too, me too, me too". So that's the power of social media, right? It can connect you to a network of people and kind of create a snowball effect. And it can spread like wildfire because the #MeToo movement actually spread. In fact, they went off social media, and it went to the streets. And there were protests, and there was even this protest at the Oscars in Hollywood, one of those Oscar parties, where the actresses were all dressed in Black, specifically Black, to show

solidarity. **(Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer)**

The hashtags alone, it's mad. It's gone from social media, and those things have spilt over into movement. So, when you see people in protest actively holding up a hashtag, you have to ask, "That's something that belongs on social media, but it's here now". I do think it's very prevalent, specifically now. **(Sarah; 23 years old; heterosexual woman; student and tutor)**

The extracts that follow reveal that DFA, specifically, #MenAreTrash provided young women with the confidence to speak up against all forms of abuse to which they are subjected. It created a platform for victims to share their experiences, receive social support, and connect with a network of individuals and organisations willing to assist in terms of providing shelter and resources for those living in abusive situations. Unlike previous generations that condemned speaking up against VAW and treated it as a taboo and a private matter, the DFA made it possible for contemporary society to view the issue as a societal problem. The cognisance that private matters should be treated as public issues is well-reflected in the idea of 'the personal is political', which was a unifying principle during the second wave of feminism (cf. Chapter 2). These are the views of Michelle and Thandaza:

I think one of the impacts of it was that #MenAreTrash kind of gave especially young women the confidence to speak up if they were being harassed or violated in any way. The #MenAreTrash kind of gave them the confidence to air their feelings and their experiences on social media. And in doing so, there's a network of other social media users who are commenting back. And it kind of gave people a little bit more confidence to speak out because previous generations can tell you how it was taboo to speak out on such things. If your husband was slapping you around or hitting you in front of the kids, it was treated more like a private matter. It's a family matter. It's not a societal issue. So now this brought a bit of awakening and consciousness that, no, this is not a private matter anymore. **(Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer)**

In the past, you'll find that an uncle would molest child, and the family would be aware of it. But it would always be kept under wraps because now we need to protect the pride of the family. So back then, a lot of women, I would like to believe, were oppressed, but nothing was done about it. So, they were always told to keep silent. So, looking at now, I think then, these campaigns are trying to break that to say,

“We need to speak out”. **(Thandaza; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; student and volunteer)**

The impact of DFA is recognised in institutions of higher education as it facilitated the exposure of alleged abusers in universities and colleges by publicising their names on a publicly available list. This awareness enabled women to identify potential perpetrators who may be their mentors or teachers, allowing them to exercise caution in their interactions. A notable example of DFA prevalent in South African institutions of higher education is the #RURferenceList, which served as a mechanism to expose alleged rapists and sexual offenders who were students at Rhodes University. The 'RU Reference List' contained the names of men who were known for perpetrating sexual assaults against female students at Rhodes University (Gouws 2018). According to Gouws (2018) and Orth et al. (2020), these protests clearly demonstrated students' dissatisfaction with institutional reluctance to address rape and sexual assault on campuses, as well as university policies that may indirectly contribute to the issue. The following excerpt elucidates the role of DFA in institutions of higher education:

The fact that there now exists a list of known and alleged abusers, especially in high institutions, that makes women aware of the people who might be mentoring them or teaching them or working alongside them. At the very least, they can now know that they can avoid these people instead of being put in yet another unfortunate situation. **(Anne; 23 years old; non-binary person [she/they]; ghost writer)**

Ayanda also emphasises the importance of women having a platform to speak out on their victimhood. Like in the previous accounts, she recognises the role of families in perpetuating the abuse of women within their domestic settings. Moreover, she credits #MenAreTrash for sparking conversations in the country and beyond its borders, which led to actions such as men-led marches in support of women. Ayanda explains her views as follows:

We are talking about it [#MenAreTrash]. We want a voice. We, as women, want a voice. We want to be heard. And I think this has started something that is amazing. There are people who are ... there's a march end of May that is for men who are going to march in solidarity with women who are being abused. There's something being done because this has been going on for far too long. Too many women have been quiet for too many times, even family members when someone who's going through something, you know, you get people who go, “Yeah, *umshado usona* girl, *kuyabekezelwa*” [That's how marriage is, you have to endure it], and people are

tired. We as women want to have a voice and we are getting that. #MenAreTrash everybody in the world is talking about this right now. We are getting a voice, and I think essentially, that's what we wanted. (Ayanda; woman; lecturer; Daily Thetha guest, 2017)

Like Ayanda, Nondumiso believes that because of initiatives like #MenAreTrash, there has been a positive attitudinal shift in the involvement of young men in activism campaigns against VAW, especially in institutions of higher learning. These men are actively participating in marches and awareness campaigns aimed at combating VAW and related issues. This is an indication of growing awareness and a proactive stance to protect women and, by extension, the recognition of these young men's roles as future fathers, brothers, husbands, and uncles. Nonetheless, Nondumiso recognises that "there's still a long way to go" and "we are yet to see in the future, how effective it is in terms of successfully ending GBV in society", as shown in the following excerpt:

Honestly, since the hashtag started in 2017, I can honestly say I have seen a number of men, even fellow students here at the university, who've been at the frontlines of these activist groups that were trying to raise awareness of gender-based violence. I've seen men march on social media. In a way, it had an effect in terms of getting them to be more active and reactive when it comes to protecting women. But not just women. Remember, some of them are going to be fathers in the future, some are brothers, some are husband, some are uncles. So, in a way, it has been effective in raising awareness amongst men. But there's still a long way to go. But at least I can say it's working. It is effective. But we are yet to see in the future how effective it is in terms of successfully ending GBV in society. (Nondumiso; 32 years old; heterosexual woman; PhD candidate)

#### **4.4.2 Social media activism and anonymity**

Anonymity is among other dynamic forces that shape both the empowerment and challenges encountered and perceived by participants in the context of social media activism. The participants shed light on the multifaceted role of anonymity in how social media activism unfolds. Chi and Hector account on the liberating and empowering potential of social media, especially as a tool for activism. Chi views anonymity as a shield that enables people to express their thoughts without being exposed to potential dangers, making social media a liberating tool to voice one's grievances. According to Hector, social anonymity was at some point useful in pursuing justice. He recounts a story about how Facebook was used by a man to threaten a

mother through her child. In this situation, Hector assumed an anonymous identity to help the mother by alerting the justice system of the incident while at the same time ensuring his own safety. As a recommendation, this participant urges digital feminist activists to adopt the approach of social media anonymity not just as a protective measure but also as a deliberate strategy to shift focus from individual attention to collective causes. Hector and Chi explained their thoughts as follows:

Social media has allowed for that space in which people are able to come forward without exactly being in danger because people like myself don't use their real profiles, do you understand? Or real names, to be precise. So that has allowed for us to be able to voice our own concerns. **(Chi; 27 years old; heterosexual woman; master's student)**

I recall there was ... it was earlier last ... [thinking] more or less around this time last year [referring to 2021 around July]. I had a situation on Facebook where there was this lady from my neighbourhood, the kasi [township] I grew up in. She received a very, very uncomfortable message. That message was essentially an inbox on Facebook threatening to rape her three-year-old daughter. Uhm, and this guy was just being persistent, so we hacked him, got his location, sent all the information and the details to the department [of South African Police Services], and my safety in that situation could not be guaranteed if I could not insure my anonymity. So, I feel like, for the modern female activist, anonymity is very important. So uhm, I see the movement of female activism on the social public platform ... yes, it gives them power, but there's also much power in removing your face or your personality from the cause itself and actually moving towards finding the solution without you being the actual face or an actual representing entity of that, but just being a code or a number, or a just a unit of identification, essentially. **(Hector; 27 years old; heterosexual man; software developer)**

In contrast to the previous views and experiences about social media anonymity, Sarah and Converse highlight the challenges and complications anonymity can present. For instance, Sarah referred to what she calls the “veil of anonymity”, which enables freedom of expression without accountability. Below is her sentiment:

But with social media, I think it's because there is this veil of anonymity. You can say whatever you want to. No one's gonna know who you are, basically. It allows people just to say, not listen or talk to one another. **(Sarah; 23 years old; cis-gender woman; student and tutor)**

Like Sarah, Converse navigates the delicate balance between the freedom of expression and the accountability accompanying it around the issues of activism against VAW. He referred to the case of sexual abuse allegations against a South African university professor that was happening at the time of the interview, and how anonymity made it difficult to investigate the matter because the alleged victim concealed her identity, making it difficult to attribute the claims to a specific person. Therefore, as much as anonymity provides a certain level of protection and power, it also raises serious questions about accountability, as explained in the following comment by Converse:

Online people can talk anonymously; they can hide their faces. I mean, just last week or two weeks ago, there were allegations brought by, apparently, a student from one of the South African universities about abuse that they suffered in the university, sexual abuse. There were allegations against the unnamed professor from one of the South African universities. Until now, no one knows who this alleged student is, apart from the people in that university. And there was a lot of noise; it was trending for like two or three days if I'm not mistaken. Again, whether that was an actual case or something different, if you want to investigate and follow up on the entire thing, it's difficult to pin it to a specific person as opposed to knowing that there is a clear organisation or movement that is putting across this information, then someone has to be accountable for it because if we are an organisation that puts out certain information, we make allegations against another organisation, another person, whatever the case might be, then we may have to account for that for we carry the burden of being clear where we get this information from. Whereas, online, again, people can make claims, true or untrue, anonymously. **(Converse; 31 years old; heterosexual man; lecturer)**

#### **4.4.3 *'Slacktivism' and 'clicktivism' social media activism***

The concepts of 'slacktivism' and 'clicktivism' have come to be used as terms to describe forms of online engagement that may lack significant real-world impact in the realm of social media activism. 'Slacktivism' is a portmanteau of 'slacker' and 'activism', while clicktivism is a compound of 'click' and 'activism'. Both terms refer to actions such as using specific hashtags, liking or sharing a post on social media, and signing online petitions, all of which may not lead to substantial, real-world impact. So, the quotations from Anne, Jessica, Nkanyezi, Sarah, and Sipho provide insights into the dynamics of these phenomena by

interrogating the effectiveness of digital activism in translating awareness and other forms of protests against VAW into tangible, offline actions.

The participants show both scepticism and possible enhancements that DFA can make. For instance, Anne, a 23-year-old gender studies graduate and ghost writer, acknowledges the importance of online spaces for sharing experiences as well as building support structures, but she also questions the efficacy of DFA in translating into meaningful real-life interactions. Her scepticism touches on whether this activism genuinely connects with concrete actions and social change beyond the screen. Similarly, Jessica recognises the valuable contribution of DFA but suggests that the current overreliance on social media may not effect the desired results. As such, she calls for a more direct, physical involvement and “being more active on the ground”. The excerpts that follow reflect the perceptions of Anne and Jessica:

So, once again, I think that it kind of opens a space that is needed. I just don't see it making its way off the screen as much as it should. For example, like, sure we can trend hashtags like #MenAreTrash. Women can share their experiences, and that might be like cathartic to them. Like it might help them; it might help them find a community. But if it were to translate into real life, like off the screen, like what are the chances that you'd actually interact with those same people? What are the chances that you're not going to meet someone who's just gonna tell you that your experience is invalid? Like real life is a bit different [giggles]. So, I don't know if, like, these spaces are needed. And they do open up conversation, but I don't think it translates very well off the screen. **(Anne; 23 years old; non-binary person [she/they]; ghost writer)**

Umm, I think it is, uh. But I do think that we can kind of change it up because it's very ... OK, I understand it's social media, right? And its purpose is to raise awareness. But I really do think that we should move into actually acting. I don't know how to put it, but yeah. I do think that it's working and it's relevant. However, we can kind of change up our methods or expand, if I should say, into being more active on the ground. Yeah, if that makes sense. **(Jessica; 19 years old; heterosexual woman; student, model, and feminist)**

Nkanyezi shares similar sentiments to these two participants, but specifically highlights the challenge and difficulty of bringing the conversations about VAW and related issues back to the family context. She explains that “it's very easy to be a digital activist, but bringing these conversations back home is also very hard”.

Moreover, the social media hashtags associated with DFA are seen as merely abstract as they remain confined to digital spaces and do not evolve into grassroots social movements. ‘Slacktivism’ and ‘clicktivism’ are viewed as common in modern-day activism. To illustrate this claim, Siphho, a 27-year-old candidate attorney, draws a historical parallel by asserting that South Africa, once renowned for its militant character during the apartheid era, has seen a shift towards a more passive way of protest action that is, of course, digitally oriented. The following extracts are from Sarah’s and Siphho’s interviews:

They are hashtags that just remain on the internet. They don’t spill over into actual movements in public spaces. And that’s where I think #TotalShutDown, or the #AmINext in South Africa, was such a big thing because they were one of the few hashtags that moved out of social media space. **(Sarah; 23 years old; cis-gender woman; student and tutor)**

South Africa is not really a ... I think it died as years went by because we’re from a military state where there was apartheid and everything. So, we were vocal in the streets back then. We used to be people of action because our lives depended on it. I think as time went by, we sort of laid back and stayed in our sofas and used our phones instead of being out there on the street and fighting the scourge VAW. **(Siphho; 27 years old; heterosexual man; candidate attorney)**

This section explored the dynamics of social media activism with a special focus on both its positive impact and inherent shortcomings. Generally, there is consensus among participants that social media activism has a significant impact on addressing VAW. However, nuances emerged regarding its effectiveness, indicating that social media activism is dependent on its proper use. Moreover, the findings show social media anonymity in online activism has the potential to amplify voices that might otherwise remain silenced; however, it also creates new challenges in terms of accountability. As such, anonymity presents both opportunities and complications in the space of social media activism. Additionally, the findings illustrate the complex interplay between online activism, DFA to be exact, and real-life impact. That is, although online spaces provide certain affordances for DFA, its effectiveness in spurring practical results remains a subject of ongoing debate.

#### **4.5 Discussion and Conclusion**

This chapter aimed to explore the extent to which social media platforms are relevant as tools with which to address social issues such as VAW and whether they serve as public spheres in

which DFA thrives. To achieve its objectives, the chapter examined the strengths and benefits attached to the public sphere of social media, especially in the interest of social issues such as VAW. It then investigated the shortcomings and limitations of these platforms that could interfere with their intended functions, and finally, discussed the dynamics around social media activism as exemplified by DFA.

In terms of the strengths and benefits derived from social media as a public sphere, the main finding was the recognition that digital platforms such as Twitter are instrumental in empowering women as it allows women to voice their woes, views, and opinions on issues that affect them, in this case VAW. Women use social media as a ‘hotline’ to which they direct their problems and also congregate with those who have had similar experiences (Dawson 2020; Sener 2021). In this way, social media are regarded as emancipatory tools from the historical suppression of women’s voices. Several authors note that digital media affords women a position that enables them to confront and interrogate issues such as sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, and online sexual harassment (Kurasawa et al. 2021; Mendes et al. 2019; Sener 2021). Mendes et al. (2019) documented experiences of sexism, misogyny, and rape culture in the US from a website called Hollaback! (now Right to Be)<sup>5</sup>. This is one of many instances where social media tools were used for such purposes.

Although relatively insignificant, some participants also noted an interplay between online and offline contexts in terms of interpersonal engagements on issues surrounding VAW. This means that people bring their everyday conversations about their private lives to social media. They do so to share their experiences, create awareness, and influence behaviours and attitudes towards VAW. The notion of bringing private matters to social media is reflective of Habermas’s notion of a public sphere in which critical engagements unfold (Matingwina 2018). It This theory also aligns with the principle of ‘the personal is political’, which was central in the second wave of feminism (cf. Section 1.7).

As noted earlier, although the power of social media serves various purposes that resonate with the ideals of a functional public sphere, the shortcomings and limitations associated with these platforms were also revealed. The impact of such flaws undermines the credibility of social media platforms as public spheres in which matters of public concern can be dealt with effectively and with precision. According to the findings, misinterpretations and misunderstandings of the views, comments, and posts shared on social media are among these

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<sup>5</sup> <https://righttobe.org/who-we-are/>

shortcomings. This is especially the case when the discussions are centred around sensitive issues such as VAW. Misinterpretations and misunderstandings lead to a fear of self-expression and self-censorship according to the participants. Among the sources of the problem is the tendency to read the content uncritically with little to no effort to understand the actual message being relayed and the character limitation on Twitter. The issue of character limitation on Twitter is also highlighted in a study by Scarborough (2018) on public opinion on feminist Twitter and gender attitudes. The study reveals that this limitation restricts the depth and nuance of opinions, which makes it difficult to understand the context behind tweets.

While misinterpretations and misunderstandings may lead to online conflicts, disputes, and controversies, they can have other far-reaching consequences, such as damaging one's professional life. This is because individuals are usually regarded as the representatives of their workplaces, and therefore, they bear the onus to maintain the integrity of their employers. To avoid the repercussions, the participants employ approaches to prevent them from getting in trouble. Participants' inability to freely express themselves on social media, or 'social media censorship', reveals an indirect institutional control and regulation over people's voices in the public sphere. A study conducted in China on DFA counter-discourse production reveals that the state censored posts that demonstrated resistance towards dominant patriarchal discourses (Wang and Ouyang 2023). According to Dahlberg (2001 cited in Johannessen et al. 2016, p.215), one of the criteria for an effective public sphere is that "it must be autonomous from state and economic power" (cf. Section 1.7). However, the findings of the current study exposes a lack of autonomy on social media platforms. As such, this defeats the purpose of social media as a public sphere and further interferes with full participation in matters of public concern, such as VAW.

Another notable finding is the perceived lack of communicative action online. This deficiency is caused by a variety of factors, including toxic behaviour, emotional debates, and a lack of sufficient information on certain issues. Kruse et al. (2017) confirms that there is a lack of communicative action on social media but cited different reasons from the findings in the current study. According to Kruse et al. (2017) the main reason participants do not engage in communicative action is avoidance of political discourse. The factors that influence this outcome are the fear of online harassment and workplace surveillance, the choice to engage with those with similar views, and the perception of social media as a place for 'happy' interactions (Kruse et al. 2017). Nonetheless, the common finding is that communicative action, which is typical of the public sphere, lacks on social media. Communicative action

depends on the ideals of rational discourse, mutual understanding, and consensus through dialogue (Bolton 2005). However, this chapter showed that social media seem to fall short of these qualities, and therefore, it can be argued that the lack of communicative action on social media has serious implications for the discourse of critical social issues like VAW.

Subsequent to providing a critical assessment of social media's relevance as a modern-day public sphere, the chapter also sheds light on how these platforms shape and influence feminist activism. Additionally, it sought to evaluate the extent to which DFA thrives within these public spheres. There is a notable recognition of the impact of social media activism in terms of addressing VAW. Based on the insights provided, the DFA empowered the survivors, and women in general, to speak out against their abuse and stimulated more activism to seek justice and raise awareness. In the context of institutions of higher learning, young women were able to expose alleged and potential perpetrators who may be their lecturers, professors, or mentors. As noted in Chapter 2, around 2015, young women from Rhodes University in South Africa made a list, famously known as the #RUREferenceList, that contained the names of alleged rapists and sexual offenders (Gouws 2018). This served as an empowering mechanism through which these women found their voice while simultaneously punishing and seeking justice against the perpetrators.

This chapter also highlighted the role of social media activism, with a particular focus on #MenAreTrash in raising awareness; however, more emphasis on enlightening women to recognise VAW in domestic settings as a societal problem. The participant pointed out that historically, VAW was treated as a taboo subject and was kept private in the households. This finding supports the principle that formed the cornerstone of second-wave feminism, which is the acknowledgement that 'the personal is political' (Abbott et al. 2005; Inglis and Thorpe 2012). This is the notion that women's issues, such as VAW, should be treated as societal challenges instead of private matters. This parallel between the principle underlying classical and modern feminist activism highlights the ongoing challenges experienced by women. It also demonstrates the value of the strong foundational knowledge laid by feminists in the past.

The impact of #MenAreTrash was further noted in terms of leading to a positive shift in attitudes, especially of men. According to some participants, #MenAreTrash, in conjunction with other initiatives, including face-to-face talks aimed at protesting against VAW, has contributed to the increased participation of young men in these demonstrations. Similar findings are reported in a study of young men's attitudes towards GBV movements in South

Africa (Rumbelow 2020). The study found that the participants expressed condemnation of GBV against women and also reported a change in their attitudes and behaviours towards and about women. Additionally, they indicated that the GBV campaigns stimulated their interest in learning more about men. It should be noted, however, that this study was limited to young, White heterosexual men in Cape Town, which may not accurately represent the diverse range of attitudes towards feminist-led initiatives aimed at fighting VAW. Nonetheless, the study still provides valuable insights into the impact of these initiatives on attitudinal change among men.

Another notable finding related to behavioural shift among men is the #MenAreTrash DFA enforcing necessary self-introspection among men. This development was attributed to increased awareness of various repercussions that stem from socially unacceptable behaviours and actions, as well as self-reflection on conduct around women. The importance of self-introspection is supported by Greig (2016) in the UN Women booklet on masculinities and violence against women and girls. In this booklet, she posits that a man should “have the courage to look inward and ask himself: ‘What kind of man do I want to be? How much do I care about values of equality, dignity and respect for all people, irrespective of gender identity?’”(Greig 2016, p.61). While this message is delivered with a certain level of courteousness to orient men to self-introspection, the evidence from the data indicated that the #MenAreTrash DFA employed harsh and coercive measures to enforce this result. Thus, the fear of the consequences that may emanate from any malicious or harmful actions towards women appears to be the main driver for self-introspection among men.

The punitive nature of social media activism, especially through DFA, has been apparent, especially in cases involving high-profile individuals. An ideal example would be the strong stance that the #MeToo feminist movement took against the convicted former American film producer Harvey Weinstein who was accused of multiple counts of rape and sexual assault (Bogen et al. 2019; Dawson 2020). Having originated in the US, the #MeToo movement has been credited with spurring the emergence of the DFA in various countries, including Argentina, Mexico, Spain, Poland, and South Africa (Puente et al. 2017; Gouws 2018; Chenou and Cepeda-Másmela 2019; Fuentes 2019; Orth et al. 2020; Averis 2021; Puente et al. 2021). While social media activism has been lauded for its impact on social change, some participants noted that positive outcomes also depend upon the appropriate use of these platforms. Therefore, it follows that for social media activism to be effective, it needs to be executed with greater responsibility and with a clear intention about what it seeks to accomplish.

The chapter also explored the role of anonymity in social media activism, examining both its advantages and disadvantages. Some participants shared their experiences in terms of how social media anonymity allowed them to express their grievances without fear of harm. In this way, online anonymity can serve as a strategy to protest while simultaneously being used as a protective measure from potential harm. Be that as it may, there is also an acknowledgement that the lack of accountability associated with online anonymity can pose threats to the credibility of activism since individuals can make false claims of, for instance, sexual abuse and never be held accountable because of social media anonymity. Previous studies also show the benefits of social media anonymity in the context of DFA; for example, a study in India found that anonymity has been used in the #MeToo movement to allow people to participate in public discourse to maintain safety and protection, particularly for victim-survivors (Ahlawat 2022). This anonymity further enabled individuals to share their experiences on a global scale, thus encouraging more people to come forth without fear. A study conducted in Sweden similarly found that anonymity was used to safeguard personal information and maintain the confidentiality of the individuals who testified against perpetrators of sexual offences (Hansson 2021). However, parallel to the findings in this study, previous research noted that anonymity also presents challenges in terms of the authenticity and credibility of information shared (Smith 2020; Hansson 2021; Ahlawat 2022). These challenges include the manipulation and distortion of truth and the spread of false narratives (Smith 2020). Essentially, while online anonymity presents opportunities for social media activism, as in the case with DFA, it also poses complications in terms of credibility and accountability. Therefore, social media anonymity should be exercised with caution and accountability to ensure positive social change and impact.

Furthermore, while the influence of social media is well recognised, there is an apparent scepticism shown towards its effectiveness in making a real-life impact. Social media activism relies heavily on activities such as creating and sharing posts, signing online petitions, and liking and retweeting the content. Arguably, these forms of engagement, otherwise referred to as ‘slacktivism’ or ‘clicktivism’, involve little effort to perform. Harlow and Guo (2014 cited in Storer and Rodriguez 2020, p.161) argue that although social media activists may feel socially engaged, the disembodied nature of these online platforms barely produces meaningful social change. Activism is known to flourish on a combination of several factors, such as marches, face-to-face interactions, deliberations, and confrontations (Barassi 2015). In the context of DFA, this would mean that there should be a balance between online and offline

engagements in order to produce practical results that can help effectively address and mitigate VAW and related issues.

All in all, the chapter demonstrated the relevance of social media platforms as a public sphere based on the ability to facilitate public discourse, amplify the previously marginalised voices, effect social change to a certain degree. However, these public spheres have limitations, which seem to undermine their qualification as ideal the public spheres. Nonetheless, the chapter concludes by stating that the strengths of social media can be leveraged to harness their full potential to address pressing social issues such as VAW.

# **CHAPTER 5: EXPLORING THE #MENARETRASH DIGITAL FEMINIST ACTIVISM: COUNTER-DISCOURSES, PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES**

## **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter aims to explore the #MenAreTrash DFA. To accomplish this, the chapter begins by providing definitions and interpretations of #MenAreTrash to elucidate how the DFA has been conceptualised. It then identifies the underlying objectives of #MenAreTrash to uncover what this DFA envisioned to achieve. The chapter also explores the perceptions and attitudes of the participants and other voices from multimedia sources towards #MenAreTrash. The focus subsequently shifts to the aspect of resistance and counter-discourses. At this juncture, the chapter examines the views, critiques, and alternative discourses that serve as a justification (and disapproval) for the resistance towards the #MenAreTrash discourse in the context of VAW. Subsequently, due to the controversial nature of #MenAreTrash, the chapter investigates the critical question of whether this construct was an appropriate and effective means to address men on the pervasive issues of VAW. Finally, it seeks to find out to what extent participants think #MenAreTrash was able to fulfil its purpose and objectives.

## **5.2 Defining #MenAreTrash Digital Feminist Activism**

This section focuses on exploring various understandings of the definition of the #MenAreTrash hashtag. It is important to define and explain the hashtag to clarify its intended message. #MenAreTrash has been subject to controversy that led to the misinterpretation, confusion, and dilution of the purported message. To a certain degree, this happened because of a lack of clarity on the underlying message of the hashtag. As such, clarity is essential to ensure consistency in relaying the message and encouraging constructive dialogues. This subsection drew from several multimedia data sources that included podcasts, YouTube channels, television interview discussions, and radio interviews from knowledgeable individuals on the subject of #MenAreTrash, as well as in-depth interviews with the study participants.

### **5.2.1 *The meaning of #MenAreTrash: Patriarchy, male privilege and domination, toxic masculinity, sexism, misogyny, and rape culture***

The following perspectives on the meaning of the #MenAreTrash DFA provide diverse yet interrelated understandings of the subject. These accounts reveal that #MenAreTrash fundamentally confronts mainly the system of patriarchy. Patriarchy is thought of as a system of norms that propagates crimes against humanity that include rape, physical and emotional abuse, and catcalling. The hashtag further speaks to male privilege, toxic masculinity, and the dominance of women by men in all spheres of life. Most importantly, #MenAreTrash emerged as a reaction to alarming statistics of VAW and femicide in South Africa.

In a debate session titled *#MenAreTrash versus #NoOneIsTrash*, guests were invited on a YouTube channel called *Lune* (a programme concerned with issues affecting young people in South Africa) to grapple with the meanings and definitions of the #MenAreTrash narrative and its implications and justifications. According to Buhle, one of the guests, men as a social group are responsible for committing grave acts of abuse against women and children that include rape and physical and emotional abuse as well as seemingly less malignant acts such as catcalling; hence, they are regarded as trash: The following excerpt captures this view:

Okay, so I just want to clarify because I just feel like many people have misconceptions when it comes to the movement of #MenAreTrash. #MenAreTrash is a movement of anti-patriarchy. So, the reason why I stand for #MenAreTrash is simply because we know guys, like, it's mostly men that are committing these crimes against women and children, which includes rape, physical abuse, emotional abuse, any kind of abuse, for that matter. And I just feel like catcalling women, that's like the thing. I feel like every woman has been a victim of being cat-called. And just so many crimes that sort of like solidify my standing, do you know what I mean? So, that's definitely why I'm for the movement. **(Buhle; woman; Lune YouTube channel guest, 2018)**

The following excerpts capture the definitions of #MenAreTrash from an interview survey available on YouTube conducted with students, most of whom are/were leaders, at the University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa. Starting with Seipati, a former Student Representative Council (SRC) president, the focus is on the intersectional nature of #MenAreTrash, which speaks to various aspects of gender inequality, such as male privilege,

gender norms that favour men, and GBV. For Athabile, an activist and ‘fallist’,<sup>6</sup> the hashtag is a provocative statement that serves as a clarion call to the heinous acts of violence committed by men against “all other bodies” that are not necessarily women. These sufferings stem from men’s need to completely dominate, according to Athabile. Another student, Sbongiseni adds that #MenAreTrash is an initiative involving communicative action that aims to produce practical results. She delineates various levels of masculinity that the hashtag speaks, namely, the individual level, social level, and structural level. The following are extracts from this interview:

It’s such an intersectional hashtag that people don’t recognise. And it’s intersectional. They just feel offended, and they take offence at the first sound of #MenAreTrash. But I mean, this topic is huge. #MenAreTrash is speaking to male privilege. And speaking to heterosexual privilege, it’s speaking to gender norms and speaking to GBV, and it’s speaking to, yeah, many things. **(Seipati; female; former UCT SRC President, 2017)**

As an activist, you know, and as a ‘fallist’, how I understand #MenAreTrash, it’s a provocative statement, you know, but more so, it’s a clarion call to the, to the atrocities that, and all other bodies that are not necessarily women, that are suffering under the hands of men. But more importantly, for me, #MenAreTrash is the statement to the entire world on how dominance, you know, and how that men have ... the entitlement of men to say, you know, on how men have become so entitled to the world that they think that it can only be controlled and ran by their rules, when they want to, but at the same time, they can dominate whoever they want, whatever time they want, us as men, myself included. You know, so that’s what I think. **(Athabile; man; UCT student and activist, 2017)**

My views on #MenAreTrash is that it’s a good movement to start a conversation, and hopefully from the conversations it would lead to action. The way I see #MenAreTrash and what it is targeting, I think it’s targeting three different levels of masculinity. I first one being masculinity in terms of each individual person, gender as a man, into acquiring introspection to see what it is they may perpetuate, that is incredibly toxic and oppressive to those gendered as women. I think it also targets men as a collective, the things they do together, and what they allow each other to do. And the silence that they keep when things are perpetuated. And I think that,

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<sup>6</sup> A student activist who is part of the social movement that called for the removal of apartheid and colonial symbols, such as the statue of Cecil Rhodes, in South African universities.

thirdly, is also targeting almost structural oppression and the ways in which structures perpetuate patriarchy, misogyny, sexism, rape culture, and all of those things. **(Sibongiseni; woman; UCT student, 2017)**

One of the guests on Daily Thetha, a South African television show that invites the guests to engage on various issues that concern South Africans, elaborates why every man in society is ‘trash’. He argues that society is structured by a system of patriarchy, which by default, includes all men, but because the system is external to those it privileges over others, it is not their fault. However, perpetuating the system is their fault. Mzwanele, a social commentator and social science lecturer, puts his thoughts as follows:

I think we need to understand as to why all men are trash. And not some men are trash, and some men are not. It’s because of the inherently and systemic patriarchal society that we live in. So, it’s inherent in the sense that you grow up and you’re born in it, and you’re socialised into it. And then it’s systemic because then you go and have this hierarchical system that continuously oppresses the sexual minorities as the two genders... it’s not my fault as a man, by the way. Hence, inherent, and then it’s systemic. If I then, continue to perpetuate this system, then it becomes my fault. **(Mzwanele; man; social commentator and lecturer; Daily Thetha guest, 2017)**

The notion that all men should be considered trash is further illustrated by Chi. She underscores that the very act of overlooking or protecting friends that engage in ‘trashy’ behaviours makes one an accomplice, and hence, ‘trash’. She also expounds how she makes it her duty to conscientise his younger brother on the fact that by virtue of being a man, he is in a position of privilege that women do not have. She explained as follows:

I have a younger brother, and now and again, it’s very important just to remind him that, “This is what your privilege is as a man, right”. He had an incident, and one of the things I raised, and I said, “You’re as trashy as the friend that you are protecting with your behaviour because it’s very important to understand that with every incident that takes place, you’ll still have privilege as a male, right, and encounters as well that take place. It’s women who are experiencing the negative spectrum or the wrath of some of the societal issues that we are experiencing right now”. **(Chi; 27 years old; heterosexual woman; master’s student)**

Perhaps an all-encompassing elaboration of what *#MenAreTrash* is and what it tries to do comes from Lee, a 34-year-old communication specialist at a government entity that focuses

on women, youth, persons with disabilities, and social programming. His explanations capture the notions of all the previous accounts as follows:

I know that many people say that it's just some sort of reaction to ... or someone just sharing the experience of sexual assaults online. But I think, for me, it goes beyond that. It's about a reaction to some of the statistics against gender-based violence that many women face. And I think using the phrase Men Are Trash is a generalisation, but it's one that speaks directly to patriarchy. And we know that patriarchy is largely what women experience at the hands of men, so either through catcalling, either through rape, or other forms of sexual violence or systemic violence. So, it's not to say directly that men are, but to say that the inherited system that men ingrained in them, which is patriarchy, is what is trash. And because patriarchy is the inheritance of men, ideally, that's what men are. Men are patriarchal beings, and this is why the system is trash, and that's why we say that men are trash because of the system that they inherit within them; in a social hierarchy, it leaves women at the bottom of the barrel of oppression. **(Lee; 34 years old; non-binary [they/them]; communication specialist)**

### **5.2.2 #MenAreTrash: “It is not an individual attack on men”**

The viewpoints under this sub-theme converge on the premise that #MenAreTrash is not intended to attack individual men but rather to construe VAW as a societal issue. In other words, VAW and related issues are a reflection of inadequate social structures and norms that perpetuate these issues. As such, the provided insights stress the importance of understanding the hashtag as a call for collective responsibility. Both men and women, in every sense of these categorisations, ought to work together to combat these social ills.

Ratele, Siphon, and Nondumiso underscore the importance of understanding #MenAreTrash as a call to be heeded and answered by society as a collective because VAW is seen as a societal issue as opposed to a “men thing”, as Siphon puts it. Ratele, Siphon, and Nondumiso expressed their opinions as follows:

Well, this is a provocative statement. And I think some of us men take it personally, have responded personally, that it means you are trash. But I've been thinking about people like, you know, Bishop Tutu or Thabo Makgoba (both religious leaders). Clearly the statement #MenAreTrash is not referencing men like that. I don't think one should confine it to the personal; it is a social problem. Women are trying to provoke us to react and respond to the fact that in this country, levels of violence

against women, gender-based violence are unacceptably high, and men have to respond to this. **(Ratele; man; decolonial psychology and masculinities scholar; NewsRoom guest, 2017)**

It's not a men's thing. It's a societal problem that needs all of us to hold hands together. **(Sipho; 27 years old; heterosexual man; candidate attorney)**

So, I think that the main mandate of the campaign is not necessarily to say, now we are at war. What are you doing to actually show us that we are in this war together? It's not just women who are fighting gender-based violence, but it's a societal thing where both men and women are involved in finding a way to end gender-based violence. **(Nondumiso; 32 years old; heterosexual woman; PhD candidate)**

Athabile and Simphiwe share the view that while men may not intentionally and consciously dominate society in ways that are harmful to the wellbeing of others, "overall, the way in which men behave themselves and carry themselves", it is only fit to say men are fundamentally 'trash'. So, while individual men may not exhibit problematic behaviours, they are still embedded in the social system that privileges men at the expense of women, according to the following insights from Athabile and Simphiwe:

When we say #MenAreTrash, then there's a conversation that say #NotAllMen, you know. They are individualising the problem. The issue of domination is not an individual issue as much as one may not necessarily actively and every day consciously trying to dominate people, but then the system as a whole is intended to benefit men in the society that we're living in, and the privilege is there. **(Athabile; man; UCT student and activist, 2017)**

The #MenAreTrash slogan has been a thing for maybe I want to say two years. And I'm not gonna sit here and try to say men are not trash because they are. Having said that though, I just want to make sure that I lay down the foundation, because there is this misunderstanding of what is meant by #MenAreTrash. #MenAreTrash is a blanket statement. But it isn't an attacking statement to everyone in that specific community. So, it's possible that my best friend who's maybe a male isn't trash because he doesn't conduct himself in a way that would warrant me to say that men are trash. But overall, the way in which men behave themselves and carry themselves, we are going to have to conclude that men essentially are trash. From my understanding, at least that's where the whole slogan of men are trash comes from. **(Simphiwe; woman; Necessary Conversations YouTube channel host, 2020)**

For Converse, regardless of nuances in individual conduct, the magnitude of the message of #MenAreTrash outweighs any attempts by men to distance themselves individually. The following is his explanation:

I mean, I've had a couple of conversations about #MenAreTrash with people, and I've always found that the people who defend #MenAreTrash usually say "Look, we're not saying you as an individual person are a problem, but this is something that is so widespread that the weight of men who want to exclude themselves one by one is useless". I don't think society will ever going to agree on every single thing, but the weight of #MenAreTrash is heavier than cleansing our individual names, so to speak. **(Converse; 31 years old; heterosexual man; lecturer)**

### **5.2.3 #MenAreTrash: A cry for help**

This subsection presents the framing of the meaning of #MenAreTrash as a cry for help that echoes the longstanding societal issues in South Africa. It symbolises a collective outcry from women as they grapple with the pandemic of VAW. Philemon states that "it's just such an actual outcry about the situations they're facing".

Anele, a guest at Daily Thetha who is a corporate communications professional and content creator, asserts that #MenAreTrash should be understood in terms of its deeper meaning of a cry for help as opposed to simply perceiving it as a label. Doing so risks desensitising society to the genuine plea of women as they try to say, "*We are dying*". He further draws attention to the fact that this cry pre-dates the internet era; it is an ancient plea that women have been making. Athabile shares the same view and notes that the conversations about VAW and many other gender issues, along with feminist activism, are not a recent phenomenon but are issues with a long history. Anele and Athabile express themselves as follows:

My take based on what the hashtag stands for, #MenAreTrash, what does that hashtag stand for? The hashtag is a cry more than a label. So, in many instances or in the past two years, men have perceived it as a label. And if you reduce it to a label, then we become deaf to the cries of women saying that "we're dying". And we must remember what the campaign stands for, what the hashtag stands for. It is women saying "help". Its women crying out, and that cry is older than the internet. **(Anele; man; corporate communications professional; Daily Thetha guest, 2017)**

But the conversation is old really, you know. It's been happening, back in the days, I think at in the 80s, in London, for instance. **(Athabile; man; UCT student and activist, 2017)**

Ayanda, another guest on the Daily Thetha show, introduces the complex dynamic of trust within households, families and other social institutions. She highlights that the cry for help is complicated by the fact that women may hesitate to speak out against their perpetrators, which may include religious leaders or extended family members like uncles who are traditionally regarded as trustworthy, dependable, as well as providers in various ways. This insight contradicts the notion expressed earlier by Ratele that #MenAreTrash cannot apply to male religious figures who naturally represent morality, decency, and righteousness (cf. Section 5.2.2). Ayanda puts it as follows:

How I understood it as women crying out for help, and we were addressing the behaviour that we are seeing with men. And because families have people that you know, they trust so much, you know, because they do things financially for them. It could be a pastor that we go to the church with, and the pastor comes with groceries and once in a while, you know, smacks the butt, and it starts like that. And if you tell a woman that not all men are bad, now she has a problem with "Are you going to believe me when I tell you it's your pastor?" "Are you going to believe me when I tell you it's my uncle, the one who brings us the bread?" That is the problem with society. **(Ayanda; woman; lecturer; Daily Thetha guest, 2017)**

The focus of this section was to dissect diverse views on the definition and meaning of the #MenAreTrash narrative. The findings revealed that the hashtag serves as an online mechanism that challenges deeply ingrained gender inequalities and further confronts various issues such as patriarchy, male privilege, toxic masculinity, sexism, misogyny, and rape culture. Contrary to being perceived as an individual attack on men, #MenAreTrash is portrayed as a social commentary, statement, and plea for collective efforts to eradicate VAW and related atrocities. As such, the findings call for an understanding that extends beyond individualisation of the problem to orient men to reflect on their collective role in perpetuating social structures and norms that contribute to the prevalence of VAW.

### **5.3 Objectives of #MenAreTrash**

Exploring the #MenAreTrash DFA necessitated understanding its underlying objectives and evaluate its success in achieving them. The insights, gathered primarily from the in-depth

interviews, reveal that most participants believe that the main objective of the hashtag was to raise awareness against VAW. The findings also highlight other objectives, namely garnering visibility on a broader societal scale and perhaps on a global level. Doing so would then catch attention and spark discourse on the issue at hand. Additionally, the findings also point to the aspect of accountability. That is, the DFA was also initiated to hold men accountable for their actions of VAW.

### **5.3.1 Awareness raising**

According to the participants, the primary objective of #MenAreTrash was to raise awareness about VAW in South Africa and beyond. Some participants drew parallels between #MenAreTrash and other similar forms of activism from other parts of the world to illustrate how DFA operates. For instance, Bravo acknowledges the role of this DFA in exposing VAW and sexual offences, which aligns with the broader goals of the #MeToo movement in the US. Similarly, Piet compared it with #BlackLivesMatter to highlight that its main focus was to raise awareness about the killings of Black people in America, which is the same intention that #MenAreTrash has. The following are the accounts of Bravo and Piet:

Okay, I think the formation of the movement, the intentions were noble, and I think it was a just cause that women particularly were taking up because the intention was to expose society to the social ills, when it comes to that aspect of gender-based violence, sexual offences and so forth. Also, part of the intention was to make society aware of perpetrators; sort of a cautionary thing to say, “Be aware when you deal with these individuals, their conduct can be unbecoming”. It is sort of aligned to the #MeToo movement, which I’m sure you’re very, very well aware of. **(Bravo; 31 years old; heterosexual man; men’s rights activist)**

One example I can make, it’s like when they say Black Lives Matter, and then somebody comes to it and says, “No, all lives matter”, right? And it’s like, “No, we’re trying to create an awareness here around this. We know that all lives matter, but this is the awareness we’re trying to make here”. And I understand that the two contexts are different. Right now, I’m talking about Black Lives, and I’m comparing it to a #MenAreTrash, whereby it’s something, I guess, more sophisticated. **(Piet; 27 years old; heterosexual man; university social media marketer)**

Kay, a 26-year-old master’s student, indicate that the focus of awareness raising was on behaviour that is “not welcomed”. The aspect of behaviour was also mentioned by Bravo when

he states that #MenAreTrash sought to say, “Be aware when you deal with these individuals, their conduct can be unbecoming”. Kay’s opinion is as follows:

Okay, the first thing is about creating awareness. I think it was about creating awareness, and also, I can say maybe it’s an alarm to us to say that our behaviour is not welcomed. So, I think that’s what it was about. **(Kay; 26 years old; heterosexual man; master’s student)**

Beyond VAW, Nkanyezi revealed that the objective of #MenAreTrash was also to expose the effect of patriarchy, and she explained it as follows:

So, I think the mission was to create awareness. To help us unpack patriarchy and to show just how much damage is done all around across borders, ages, and nationalities. I think it was meant to be an intersectional movement as well. **(Nkanyezi; 28 years old; cis-gender woman; researcher and activist)**

Some participants also expressed the view that the issue of VAW has received attention prior to the advent of social media, but that initiatives like #MenAreTrash have increased the level of awareness on VAW and related issues. In this instance, the function of the #MenAreTrash DFA was to pressurise institutions such as the government to respond to VAW, femicide, and human trafficking. Moreover, the function of the DFA was to raise awareness on other forms of sexual offences that may be overlooked or unacknowledged, such as marital rape. These perceptions are conveyed in the following excerpts from Nondumiso and Salvator:

It does raise much awareness in terms of the issues that we are facing in society. For instance, let’s take gender-based violence, I think before social media, we’ve been talking about is issue of gender-based violence, but I do not think before social media it received the same attention. But I feel now with the exposure from social media, it also puts pressure on our police services as well as those that are ... or let me say, other stakeholders, right, who are in a space to actually make a difference because of the exposure that we get. Honestly, I think with social media, the awareness that we get from it, when it comes to activism, I think it’s more ... [thinking] How can I say it? I actually promote activism on these social media platforms because without the awareness that they raise, not only about the victims, but the lack of responses maybe from our government that we expect to do something about it actually puts pressure on them to actually do something about the fact that women are dying, or there’s human trafficking... **(Nondumiso; 32 years old; heterosexual woman; PhD candidate)**

I believe they were just trying to shed some light on an issue that we had turned a blind eye to, right. That has been there for years and years. And we've been knowing about it even before the movement. And oh, you know what other interaction I noticed, now that we talk about it, that I recall, that some other people not being aware of the concept of marital rape. And like, I was going through the comments, and I noticed that some of the people did not understand that even with married people, consent is still needed. You get the sense that some of the people don't actually understand that. So that is like, to some degree, a practical example of that movement shedding light onto a certain issue. **(Salvator; 27 years old; heterosexual man; unemployed graduate)**

### **5.3.2 *Holding men accountable***

Apart from awareness raising, another objective of #MenAreTrash was to hold men accountable for their role in committing, contributing to, and perpetuating acts of VAW. For instance, a student in a Nelson Mandela University radio interview believes that #MenAreTrash was used to hold men accountable for the unscrupulous sexual behaviours that have been normalised but that are in fact sexual abuse. Michelle holds a similar belief and thought that the hashtag aimed to “*call out men*”. While the statement is concise, it speaks to the idea of drawing attention to as well as holding men accountable for their behaviours and attitudes that contribute to VAW. The following are the statements made by Student 1 and Michelle:

I think #MenAreTrash is more about holding men accountable for the things which they have normalised, for example, like if people spike your drink or if someone sleeps with you because maybe you are drunk or something. For most guys, it's probably like, “I slept with that girl, she was drunk”, when in fact, that is actual rape because the person was unconscious, and stuff like that. And I feel like most men are outraged by the #MenAreTrash because they actually never want to be held accountable. **(Student 1; female student; Madibaz Radio Opinions, 2017)**

If I have to think of the intended purpose of it, it was basically to call out men. **(Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer)**

### **5.3.3 *Gaining visibility***

Visibility also emerged as another objective of #MenAreTrash, as indicated by Sipho in the following excerpt:

I don't think that without social media, we would actually know about #MenAreTrash because no one goes around in the streets saying, "Oh, men are trash, men are that". If you hear someone say that just know what they have either on Twitter, Instagram, or you know these other social media platforms. So, they are quite important for activism and for the visibility of the movement. **(Sipho; 27 years old; heterosexual man; candidate attorney)**

Litha, a proponent of #MenAreTrash in a debate session hosted on Lune YouTube channel, extends the idea of visibility. He states that the hashtag sought to "gain traction" so people would become more curious to know on what basis are men trash. Below is Litha's thought:

I think the whole idea and what people are trying to achieve with the movement is initially to gain traction; to gain traction by saying men are trash. Now, obviously some people are going to be like, "Okay, what for?" People want to be more informed about what is going to go on ... So, I think it's relevant as more of a marketing sort of thing to actually try and get people to really understand it. **(Litha; man; Lune YouTube channel guest, 2018)**

According to Jessica, #MenAreTrash has been successful in bringing the issues surrounding VAW to the forefront through awareness raising. Her statement, "so that it can be recognised and dealt with", alludes to the need for visibility of this DFA, which was part of its objectives. Jessica elaborate her view in the following excerpt:

I think they've kind of proven themselves in that they are given the awareness that they've raised on certain issues and certain incidences and how they brought those incidences to a platform where they can be recognised and dealt with. I think that on its own makes them relevant. The fact that there's so many people using social media that is a way for us to mobilise people and put push an issue to the forefront so that it can be recognised and dealt with. **(Jessica; 19 years old; heterosexual woman; student, model, and feminist)**

#### **5.3.4 *Creating conversations and engagements***

The insights under this sub-theme collectively highlight the objective of #MenAreTrash to initiate and sustain critical conversations surrounding VAW. Although their viewpoints may differ slightly, all participants indicate that the hashtag served as a catalyst for discourse, whether be it fruitful dialogue, heightened awareness, or sparking uncomfortable yet necessary conversations.

Anele and Masixole are convinced that #MenAreTrash was successful in making people talk about VAW. Masixole underscores that the aim was to not make people comfortable but rather to confront the core issue faced by society, which is VAW. The following excerpts capture Anele's and Masixole's perceptions:

I think firstly, I'll start by saying is that the hashtag in itself achieved its objective. And the objective was to get people talking. **(Anele; man; corporate communications professional; Daily Thetha guest, 2017)**

Generally, I think that it has sparked the discourse whether how people receive this discourse, at the end of the day, we are not trying to make people comfortable in uncomfortable conditions. **(Masixole; man; UCT SRC member and 'fallist', 2017)**

While the role of #MenAreTrash to spark a conversation on social media and in offline contexts is well recognised, merely creating conversations is not enough. Therefore, there is more that must be done, according to Sibongiseni, Nkanyezi, and Athabile described as shown in the excerpts below:

I think that in the space that I've been, it has created a conversation, and I think the dialogue is always a great way to a good change. And I don't think dialogue should just stop a dialogue, which often happens when it comes to movements. We're always discussing things and discussing terminologies that people may be unfamiliar with. **(Sibongiseni; woman; UCT student, 2017)**

It creates awareness, and it creates conversation, whether the conversation is constructive or not constructive. Whether the conversation is based on facts, fiction, myths, accurate information, or fake news. It creates traffic. It creates something. It creates motion for the conversation to continue. So, in regard to gender-based violence, when people share on Twitter...when we create hashtags, that creates conversations.... I think it could do more though. **(Nkanyezi; 28 years old; bisexual woman; researcher and activist)**

I think, you know, I don't know about fruitful dialogue because I don't think that the reward is meant to be fruitful, because I am understanding that the Men Are Trash hashtag is a revolting statement. And it has gained, you know ... for instance, we're talking about it now. We were not going to be talking about it if it had not captured the audience's imagination. And I think that for me, it's just only a beginning because the point is not necessarily really in my understanding to capture

people's imagination as such, but it is to go beyond that, you know, that the society needs to shift from where you're standing, and to begin to imagine the world around you. (Athabile; man; UCT student and activist, 2017)

In reflecting on the insights above, Nkanyezi recognises the technical ability of Twitter to organise the most important news that have caught people's attention through hashtags. She points out that regardless of the nature and outcomes of the conversation produced, the most crucial result is the creation of momentum for continued engagement. For Athabile, while acknowledging that #MenAreTrash has made people engage each other on various platforms, he believes that it is not the end goal but only a starting point. Even the conversation itself is not "meant to be fruitful", given the "revolting statement" this DFA operates under. Thus, there should be a significant societal shift emanating from this implied radicalisation.

### *5.3.5 Intentional element of discomfort in the #MenAreTrash construct*

Another objective, which was also a strategy to raise awareness, gain visibility, and spark a conversation around VAW, was to create a construct that would make people uncomfortable. The #MenAreTrash construct was a deliberate strategy to generate "shock value" and provoke reaction, especially in men. Using provocative statements like #MenAreTrash is purported to captivate people's attention and propel them to engage in a conversation they might otherwise overlook, in this case, a conversation about incidences of VAW and related issues in the country. This is according to Litha in the excerpt below:

This slogan is supposed to have shock value. The whole point of shock value is to get people's attention, and to actually delve into this conversation. If, for instance, people started the slogan "men are not good", would you care? No, you wouldn't? You really wouldn't. The whole point is to get people engrossed in the topic and actually critically analyse what is going on: why are women putting out such a harsh tone when historically, women haven't done that? That's the thing. Rosa Parks<sup>7</sup> sitting on the bench was shock value; sitting on a bench or sitting on the back of the bus, which was only meant for Whites, was shock value. It is to draw people's attention to the greater problem. Your woman at home might not deem you trash, and that's great. But there are other injustices that are happening outside of your

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<sup>7</sup> Also known as 'the mother of the civil rights movement', Rosa Parks was an American activist who invigorated the struggle for racial equality when she refused to give up her bus seat to a White man in Montgomery, Alabama. Her arrest on December 1, 1955, launched the Montgomery Bus Boycott by 17 000 Black citizens. <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/rosa-parks>

home, and that is what it's trying to address. **(Litha; man; Lune YouTube channel guest, 2017)**

Making men uncomfortable with the #MenAreTrash statement links back to another objective discussed earlier, which is to hold men accountable for acts of VAW. This discomfort becomes a catalyst for men and society as a whole to actively engage in the fight against VAW. This view is captured in the following quote by Lee:

I think that the provocation around #MenAreTrash has been an expression that's been successfully used through the hashtag campaign in just making men understand that these are the laid and intrinsic violence that women experience at the hands of men, and also for men to then come on board as a responsibility to protect women from some of this violence. **(Lee; 34 years old; non-binary [they/them]; communication specialist)**

The idea of discomfort is further emphasised by Anele and Nondumiso. They acknowledge that #MenAreTrash creating discomfort and offence are positive outcomes because, as Anele puts it, "offence can be a catalyst for change". Anele and Nondumiso express their views as follows:

The fact that it makes you uncomfortable, it is having an impact. So, at this moment, let's just move away from the defending and everything and just try to better understand what the main objective of the hashtag is itself. **(Nondumiso; 32 years old; heterosexual woman; PhD candidate)**

If the hashtag offends you, that is good because sometimes we need offence because offence can be a catalyst for change. **(Anele; man; corporate communications professional; Daily Thetha guest, 2017)**

To sum up, the primary objectives of the #MenAreTrash DFA that emerged from data include awareness raising, gaining visibility, and sparking conversations. Awareness raising involves gaining traction and reaching a wider online community and beyond to intensify activism against VAW. The aspect of visibility is seen as a strategy to ensure the existence of #MenAreTrash is known countrywide and beyond national borders. In addition, the provocative nature of the hashtag was explained as a deliberate strategy used to incite conversations and engage society on the issue at hand. In extension, the intention was also to hold men accountable for perpetuating VAW and other injustices experienced by women.

## **5.4 Perceptions of the Impact of #MenAreTrash**

It was crucial for this study to explore the views regarding the impact of #MenAreTrash on society to give insights into how this hashtag resonated with different social groups in South Africa and the reasons underlying their responses. While there is a general recognition that #MenAreTrash was necessary to confront VAW, there are also criticisms levelled against the DFA for unwittingly promoting misandry and perpetuating harmful stereotypes about men. Collectively, these findings provide a comprehensive view on the scope of impact of the #MenAreTrash DFA.

### ***5.4.1 Views on the attitudes of men towards #MenAreTrash***

Exploring the views on the attitudes of South African men towards the #MenAreTrash DFA and how they received it was crucial. Firstly, it offers important insights into existing gender dynamics, especially in terms of gauging men's awareness and acknowledgement of VAW and related issues. Secondly, assessing men's attitudes can help us evaluate the effectiveness of the DFA, and can reveal whether the intended messages resonated with the target audience and whether there were any of the attitudinal and behavioural shifts and changes that were hoped for. Lastly, in the instances of resistance to #MenAreTrash, the reasons and motivations behind the push-back can help address the misconceptions and even refine advocacy strategies in the future. This is because positive engagement from men is crucial for the success of feminist movements and campaigns fighting against VAW (USAID 2015; Casey et al. 2017; Greig 2016; Allen et al. 2019; Tolman et al. 2019). As such, gaining insight into the factors contributing to such engagement is pivotal to foster and forge alliances and to break down resistance.

#### ***5.4.1.1 Perceived attack on men***

Responding to the question of how South African men might have received #MenAreTrash, some participants suggest that men felt attacked by the hashtag owing to its perceived broad generalisation of all men as abusers of women. The men, particularly those who regard themselves as good husbands, fathers, and colleagues, must have felt unfairly attacked and targeted by the #MenAreTrash DFA. In this regard, this DFA failed to acknowledge individual differences, which is problematic. Also, the #MenAreTrash hashtag is viewed as silencing those who speak against it because they are, by default, portrayed as trash. The following are sentiments from Siphon and Thandaza:

More than anything, that was received as an attack on men. So, men would feel attacked: “Why am I being called trash if I’m a good husband? I take care of my children. I pay bills. I love my wife. I do all those things”. Then here comes a hashtag that says men are trash, and if you talk against it, it means you are also trash because why would you not just let it move? If a hashtag like this comes, and I’m supposed to take it in, then to me, that’s an attack. It feels like an attack because why would you do that? Let’s just address the whole thing at once. Let’s say, people are trash, because I’ve also received trashy treatment from the ‘other gender’ [women]. Do you see me going, “women are trash?”. No, because I know it’s from both ends ... there are trash on both sides. **(Sipho; 27 years old; heterosexual man; candidate attorney)**

I feel most men, more especially those who know that they are not trash [giggle] they felt attacked. To say how can you classify each and every single man in this country or on this world as trash? How many men have you dated for you to actually put your foot down to say, “No, really, #MenAreTrash”. So, I think for some it was more of an attack. It was an attack, more than anything. **(Thandaza; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; student and volunteer)**

Adding a twist to the narrative, Sunflower posits that, while #MenAreTrash potentially did a good job raising awareness about VAW, it may have had some negative effects as well. It might have caused psychological discomfort for men, especially those who may struggle to express their emotions as effectively on the issue of VAW as women. As such, she asks whether #MenAreTrash is a depiction of some form of “emotional abuse and emotional violence”? She wonders, as shown in the following excerpt:

I think the conversation of #MenAreTrash really did impact or even, potentially stopped a lot of violence that was happening or the emotional abuse or physical abuse that was happening in relationships or around South Africa. But it also opened a lot of windows that are making men question a lot about themselves. And I don’t think it is portraying itself or coming out in a positive light, in any way or form. So, we might be saying that we are tired of physical violence, but now with everything, every other hashtag that’s followed since, are we not now sparking up emotional abuse and emotional violence? You see, it affects a psyche, especially when you’re a man, like an African man. Like these men who were not taught how to articulate feelings and so forth **(Sunflower; 29 years old; heterosexual woman; UNICEF consultant and university resident head)**

#### 5.4.1.2 *Retaliation and backlash from men*

This sub-theme represents the views that suggest there was a backlash from men, including some of the participants, towards #MenAreTrash. For instance, Hector mentions that his initial response to the hashtag was creating another one, #WomenAreTrash, which was a counteraction. His experience of heartbreak that resulted from his romantic relationship with a woman fuelled this reaction. This was seemingly an attempt to prove that women can be as ‘trashy’ as men in their actions. Similarly, Mandla believes that the #MenAreTrash hashtag prompts retaliation by imposing an equally demeaning label onto women. He further states that branding men as trash perpetuates misogyny, and these tensions lead to a loss of focus on the actual purpose of the cause. Hector and Mandla explained their opinions as follows:

I remember involuntarily getting myself into this conversation because I was like, #WomenAreTrash. But then that only came out of me trying to be spiteful and ... heartbreak, you know? **(Hector; 27 years old; heterosexual man; software developer)**

So, I’ve had a problem with that because now you’re sort of calling me to look at myself as trash, whereas I am not violent. Of course, I’m capable of being violent, but if you call me trash, my reaction to that would be violence. I would say very negative things, and then we perpetuate misogynist thing, you know. And I’ll say, “Women are like this”, and then now we begin to lose focus on the movement itself, and we begin to talk to each other about the kind of names that we can give to each other to devalue each other, to misrepresent each other. **(Mandla; 32 years old; heterosexual man; lecturer)**

Responding to the question of how she thinks #MenAreTrash was received by the intended audience like Mandla, Sarah believes that the sweeping statement that men are trash worked against the original purpose of the DFA. She further explained as follows:

...very negatively. I understand that if it’s received very negatively. I mean we are basically saying an entire group of people are trash, and that’s not a nice thing to say to anyone. So, I do think its intention was to get people to listen, but it’s ended up being we’re just gonna call you out. And it’s an expression of anger, and it elicits back in expression of anger. And unfortunately, it’s just from a conversation turned into a very bitter battle of blame, which is never good. **(Sarah; 23 years old; heterosexual woman; student and tutor)**

Contrary to the previous views that hold the DFA itself accountable for the reactions of men to it, Philemon attributes men's backlash towards #MenAreTrash to the natural response of defensiveness to a perceived threat. He believes men, like anyone who is in a position of privilege, defended themselves against the hashtag to protect their position in society. Philemon maintains that the act of defensiveness is influenced by the lifelong process of socialisation of men in terms of their beliefs and value systems. As such, it will take a while to unlearn those aspects of their being. This view is corroborated by Salvator who also acknowledged that men's behaviours and attitudes will not change overnight. Nonetheless, he still believes that the DFA had the desired influence on men and a positive impact on society in terms of sparking a discourse around VAW. The following are the comments made by Philemon and Salvator:

Just like with any other person who's in a position of privilege, the first thing that they [men] do is defend themselves because they don't want to lose that position of privilege. So, I would say it was not received well because it's very difficult to unlearn what you've learned growing up, what was instilled, and what was indoctrinated into you. **(Philemon; 29 years old; heterosexual man; researcher and Facebook influencer)**

Because we're actually speaking about social media, you know, sometimes you can get the sense from a comment that this person is angry, and this person is not going to change their perception anytime soon. But it sparks debate. It sparks debate, and the remorse to some extent will come after the debate, but it wouldn't necessarily just happen abruptly like, "Yeah, no, I'm remorsefully changed my views". We also have to understand that even with people that have obscured and misguided views, it took years for them to actually conquer up those views, right? And they won't happen overnight. **(Salvator; 27 years old; heterosexual man; unemployed graduate)**

In response to a fellow speaker on the Daily Theta television program, Palesa, a South African TV personality, raises a concern about the potential loss of support from men due to the tendency of digital feminists to impose the binary stance of being either for or against the #MenAreTrash hashtag. She argues that the approach used by DFA risked alienating men from the cause while they are the very people who must address VAW. She provides an example of a reformed abuser (a well-known public figure) who turned into a profeminist by assisting victims of VAW through his organisation. Palesa expressed herself as follows:

What about the men that you lose completely? Are we saying the fact that we are crying, it's okay if we lose those people because there's this stance that you're either for it or you are against it? Some men actually become reformed, like Patrick Shai. Look at what his organisation is doing for abused women. His woman chose to stay in an abusive relationship because she wasn't getting help. But her husband became reformed. So, what are we saying about those men? We say men are making it about themselves. No, our cry has made men retaliate. And the one thing we don't want is aggression from the men, the same men that we need. **(Palesa; woman; TV personality and Daily Thetha guest, 2017)**

#### 5.4.1.3 *Introspection among men*

In this subsection, the researcher delves into the perceptions that suggest that #MenAreTrash influenced men to self-reflect. There is a recognition that the hashtag created space for conversation around VAW and led to introspection among men. Men have to question their behaviour and ponder whether they align with the construct 'trash'. In some instances, the deep self-introspection is the result of the coercive nature of the #MenAreTrash DFA. It made men realise that they can be harshly held accountable for their actions, whether through a call-out, a publicised list online, or legal actions. They have become aware of the fitting consequences of their unbecoming conduct and actions. The following excerpts from Bravo, Lee, and Piet illustrate these views:

Like I said, there were spaces of conversations of men. People were sitting back and worried when their name is going to pop up in conversations, particularly those who had something to be worried about. Beyond that point, I think there they altered their behaviour because they now know that someone can go on social media and make a declaration, and you will trend. **(Bravo; 31 years old; heterosexual man; men's rights activist)**

I think we have got to the stage where men have realised that the catcalling that happens at taxi ranks or on various social media spaces is toxic and that they can be held liable for it. So, we see less and less of that because men now know that they can be taken to task through either a list that will be publicised online or through various legislative pieces that women can now go and lay criminal charges against. **(Lee; 34 years old; non-binary [they/them]; communication specialist)**

It did what it had to do, man. It forced us to ask ourselves, "Are we trash?", "Actually, what is trash?" I mean, look, if we were to translate it directly, trash is

*matlakala* [rubbish]. It's like just a piece of shit, you know. **(Piet; 27 years old; heterosexual man; university social media marketer)**

Moreover, the #MenAreTrash DFA is also recognised for creating awareness among men themselves. The results of these are serious behavioural and attitudinal self-evaluation and a careful approach to and conduct around women. This is according to Sunflower in the following excerpt:

I think it created a lot of awareness amongst males themselves to second look or to second guess before they say things or do things. A lot of the times when things aren't spoken about or talked about, people would never know these things exist. **(Sunflower; 29 years old; heterosexual woman; UNICEF consultant and university resident head)**

In summary, the first finding was that the #MenAreTrash hashtag presented itself as an attack on men's identity. It is regarded as an oversimplification of the complexities of individuals and their behaviours. The findings also present a continuum of responses that stress backlash and retaliation on the one hand, and the alienation of men from the feminist agenda of fighting VAW on the other. Lastly, the findings showed a notable impact of #MenAreTrash on forcing much-needed self-introspection among men that led to shifts in behaviours, increased awareness of various consequences of unacceptable acts, and a deeper self-questioning of individual conduct around women.

#### **5.4.2 Views on call-out culture and cancel culture**

In the domain of DFA, 'call-out culture' and 'cancel culture' are some of the mechanisms through which women can confront and challenge VAW and other related social ills that include sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy (Mendes et al. 2019; Kurasawa et al. 2021; Sener 2021). These approaches are rooted in their ability to expose individuals, social groups, or institutions/organisations for their morally unacceptable actions that may be harmful to others. Beyond the aforementioned issues, these strategies can be used to protect vulnerable social groups and stand up against discrimination, ableism, and racism. In the context of #MenAreTrash DFA, call-out culture and cancel culture had a tremendous influence in addressing acts of VAW in South Africa. Studying this phenomenon was vital to provide insights into the dynamics of accountability, justice, and the influence of DFA. Furthermore, looking into these social media cultures led to important thoughts and discussions about fairness, and the dangers and consequences associated with them.

The findings on call-out culture and cancel culture are grouped into three categories based on the attitudes expressed towards these practices. The first category encompasses responses that support and approve these social media cultures, the second category comprises findings that vehemently and mildly disapprove of call-out culture and cancel culture, and lastly, the third category include those that take a neutral stance or display a sense of ambivalence.

#### *5.4.2.1 Approval of call-out culture and cancel culture*

The quotes in this subsection reflect a fervent endorsement of call-out culture as one of the central features of DFA. Call-out culture is viewed as a necessary mechanism to “shame” and “expose” those who engage in abhorrent acts that are detrimental to the wellbeing of women. There is an emphasis on the power of call-out culture to serve as a strong warning and fear-instilling device to ensure potential perpetrators of VAW think twice before committing any act of abuse against a woman. This social media culture also serves to alert women to be careful or to watch out for those men who had been exposed on social media platforms for acts associated with VAW. The following excerpts are the views of Mandla, Anne and Michelle on call-out culture:

The call-out culture, calling out, exposing the perpetrator is very important. I am for that. My view of it is exposing the perpetrator is always the first great step towards realising a solution for the problem of violence. **(Mandla; 32 years old; heterosexual man; lecturer)**

I think it's necessary. Like, if you don't call it out, you're just enabling it. You're just pushing it under the rug. Like you do need to be shamed for things that are like really, really bad. Like we need to bring back shame, like, people need to feel shamed [giggles] when they do something that's just abhorrent. Like, I think that call-out culture is necessary. **(Anne; 23 years old; non-binary person [she/they]; ghost writer)**

In terms of the call-out culture, yes, people must be named and shamed. And in doing so it's also serving as a warning to other members of society and community that: “Look, this person is sketchy. This one is dodgy. Don't interact with this person. Don't really position yourself wherever he is. This person can cause you harm as well”. And the call-out culture I believe will actually instil fear in others who also think it's okay to do wrong and to violate others. **(Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer)**

Call-out culture is also regarded as essential because women have historically always been subjects of oppression, and as such, call-out culture serves as a tool of empowerment and emancipation for women so they can speak out about their abuse. This is according to Hector as shown in the following excerpt:

The call-out culture is perfect. I mean, what do you expect a person who is essentially scared of their partner or whatever man who's making them uncomfortable? Or just, you know, giving them grief? Uh, how do you expect a person who is probably physically stronger than you, who has been socially put as a superior actually, you know? Because we're not gonna dismiss it. Our cultures and our workplaces have made women inferior for a very long time. And we touched on this a few moments ago. I think it's perfect. It's given the woman without a voice an opportunity to be able to say something and also feel safe, you know? **(Hector; 27 years old; heterosexual man; software developer)**

There is also a recognition that not all men are aware of their behaviour towards women, and therefore call-out culture does not only denounce unwelcomed behaviour but also raise awareness among "good" (Jessica) men and mobilise them to confront other men in their social circles. Jessica explains this view as follows:

I think it's important, honestly. I think it's important because if you don't call out men, they remain ignorant and oblivious to what they're doing. And I know there are a lot of men who do not engage in violence against women, who do not ... there are a lot of good men. If I should put it like that, right. But they themselves are so oblivious and so ignorant that they don't call out the men around them. So, I think it was really relevant. I think it's relevant for us to call out men to let them know like ... just for them to be aware of what's going on, right. And I think it was more important for the men who are, quote-unquote, 'good' for them to be aware because I think a man is more likely to listen to another man than a woman. So, if you can mobilise the good men, then I think then we'll be moving towards the right direction. So, I think the call-out culture, I think it's relevant. I definitely think it's relevant because it's us identifying the issue and working towards dealing with it because if we don't wanna identify the issue, then what are we doing? **(Jessica; 19 years old; heterosexual woman; student, model, and feminist)**

Another powerful element of call-out culture, especially as it relates to public figures such as those in the entertainment industry, lies in its ability to strengthen the case against alleged perpetrator(s) through collective voices and support. According to Palesa, it is often a challenge

for a victimised woman to go to the police station alone to report an incident of abuse or rape committed by famous person because she knows could be accused of wanting “fame”. For this reason, call-out culture is regarded as an effective self-help mechanism for victims of VAW. The following is Palesa’s explanation:

Calling out men on social media, I think especially because it’s celebrities, it holds a lot of volume for the women because nobody does ... it sounds so bad, even saying this, but nobody would believe a woman going to the police station and saying that DJ Fresh raped her. They’re gonna say she wants fame. So, I feel like with coming out rather on social media and talking about it on social media is very different because more people are going to come out. **(Palesa; 20 years old; heterosexual woman; student)**

These findings demonstrate varied perspectives on call-out culture to endorse it. The participants underscore the role of DFA in using this culture to effect necessary change and influence behaviours through exposure, shaming, accountability, and awareness raising.

#### *5.4.2.2 Disapproval of call-out culture and cancel culture*

Although call-out culture and cancel culture are often regarded as mechanisms used to expose perpetrators of VAW, empower victims of abuse, and ultimately, promote accountability for such acts, some participants show strong disapproval of these practices for various reasons. The dissenting voices in this subsection provide insights into the potential drawbacks of these closely interrelated DFA cultures by questioning their efficacy and ethics. For instance, Bravo expresses absolute condemnation of call-out culture on the basis that some women may misuse it to make false allegations of sexual assault. Such legally unfounded claims have the potential to destroy the image of the alleged perpetrator. Bravo’s thoughts are captured in the following excerpt:

I’m absolutely against it. I think that culture is disempowering women. You see, the problem with the call-out culture is that we encourage women to make a declaration that may not be founded legally. So, the ‘call-out culture’ is problematic, unless you have a legal case against the alleged. We must be encouraging people to take the legal route, where there’s proper prosecution that can take place for the offenders because now, as Bravo, I’ve been sexually violated, I call out and I say, “Sello has done this to me”, social media goes into a frenzy. Your name is dragged through the mud. If I don’t open a case, then what is to stop me from doing the same act to someone else? Because it’s not just that declaration, but also, it could completely be

false. The reality of it is that we must not always assume that those who declare themselves victims always act in good faith. I know it's not palatable, people don't like to hear it. But false rape allegations are real things that people experience.

**(Bravo; 31 years old; heterosexual man; men's rights activist)**

Michelle echoes similar sentiments by emphasising the role of call-out culture in facilitating false rape and abuse accusations. She refers to the high-profile case of Jonny Depp<sup>8</sup> and Amber Heard, wherein the latter lost after the court proved that her allegations of abuse were unfounded. Such questionable accusations undermine the gravity of real cases of abuse experienced by women, according to Michelle in the following excerpt:

I again don't agree with falsely accusing people of things that they really didn't do. You see, that's another issue that makes call-out culture really difficult. It is when there are instances where there are false rape accusations and false abuse accusations. We've seen it now with the Johnny Depp and Amber Heard trial. She didn't win her case. The court found her version of events to be very questionable, and he won the case. She accused him of domestic abuse, but she couldn't prove it. But she called him out. It turns out that it didn't happen in the way she said it. So that type of instances makes it really difficult for women to even wanna come forward now and want to also speak on their experiences. The ones who are genuinely affected by GBV and actually are victims of abuse, because now there's that counter response from men saying, "No, but she's falsely accusing me of this".

**(Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer)**

According to Peace, a major problem with call-out culture is that it is often used as a weapon for character assassination. This is especially the case among politicians and artists. Like Michelle, she references someone who accused someone of rape, only to confess 20 years later that she was never raped. For these reasons, Peace announces her lack of faith in call-out culture in the following quote:

**Peace:** Zola 7 was alleged to have raped this woman and blah blah blah, right? And after more than 20 years, this woman comes back and says: "No, Zola didn't rape me. It was the manager and the ex-wife who was brought to say that". That's rubbish. A literal one. Because what they're doing is to tarnish other people's images, all of them, and what are they getting in return? They have been paid a

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<sup>8</sup> An American actor and the ex-husband of Amber Heard. Depp sued Heard over an op-ed she wrote in 2018 about domestic violence she claimed to have experienced during their marriage.

measly R5 000 to tarnish somebody's image. So, this call-out thing happens mostly to celebrities. Because people are wicked. I don't believe in it. I believe if you get raped, report the case today. Don't come here after three years because obviously, it's gonna be your word against mine. After three years, will there be a test for medical purposes to know if you've been raped or not? And how do you call out somebody on social media? I personally feel that this call-out thing is just there to tarnish other people's images, and stuff like that. Not all the time though. Others are indeed perpetrators. **(Peace; 27 years old; heterosexual woman; student employee)**

While the previous accounts put more emphasis on call-out culture, the following excerpts provide insights into the interplay between both call-out culture and cancel culture. For instance, there is an observation that call-out culture begets cancel culture, which is deemed the ultimate punishment and social sanction of those it is imposed upon. Cancel culture can lead to job loss and long-term reputational damage. As such, some participants believe that cancel culture instils fear among men because no one would want to suffer its consequences.

Apart from the aforementioned effects of call-out culture and cancel culture, these social media cultures can have negative psychological impacts on those affected. Call-out culture does not leave room for the rehabilitation of perpetrators if they become 'cancelled' because society is more inclined to punish the perpetrators without taking any initiatives to help them see how wrong they were and to make amends. Therefore, this atmosphere can create the necessary conditions for the perpetrators to again commit the same offences for which they were punished. The following extracts from Palesa, Hector, and Lee illustrate these sentiments:

I think the call-out culture is a problem because it leads to cancel culture, and sometimes we are cancelling ... I know this is gonna sound weird, but we are cancelling men who don't have anything to do with what we're talking about because it's [call-out culture] related to a lot of sexual and physical abuse that takes place. So, I just feel like, yes, let's do it, but at what cost? Are we doing it to every man, or are we subjectively saying, "OK, this is the case, and we're calling this out for what it is". Are we calling out rapists? Not all men are rapists, you understand?. **(Palesa; 20 years old; heterosexual woman; student)**

Men are now scared. They understand the power of cancel culture. Call-out culture, I get. Cancel culture is what they fear. Nobody wants to be cancelled. It comes with a lot. You lose your job. You lose the potential to get any other job in the future.

You lose, you lose quite a lot, and I know you're very informed about such. **(Hector; 27 years old; heterosexual man; software developer)**

But also, I find that call-out culture in general is the one that doesn't really give room for rehabilitation. So, it doesn't allow us to rehabilitate the perpetrator in terms of making them understand they're wrong. And also taking them through a process of being better people and reintegrating them back into society. So, it doesn't give us that opportunity, we completely cancel them out, and they fall back into the woodwork and back into the shadows, and ideally don't function as human beings because there's certain psychological aspects that come with cancel culture as well. So, we're ideally taking somebody who's bruised and fragmented back in society bruised and much more fragmented, and ideally, they might repeat the same injustices without really understanding, or taking them through a process of understanding how to be better people. **(Lee; 34 years old; non-binary [they/them]; communication specialist)**

Converse reveals yet another harmful aspect of call-out culture. Like Palesa, he raises concerns about the often baseless presumptions of guilt embedded in this culture. He refers to an instance where a woman created a false story about being kidnapped by posting updates on Twitter to keep the public updated. In the midst of this, the public retaliated against the alleged perpetrator(s) even though the information about the incident was inconclusive. As Converse puts it, this "becomes the challenge with the call-out culture where you have no space to be innocent until it's clear that you are guilty". The excerpt that follows expands on his sentiments:

What I don't agree with on the call-out is this idea of how anyone who comes up and speaks up saying that they're being victimised in any kind of way, suddenly you find these views that believe the victim and retaliate against the alleged abuser before even knowing what has happened, or before it's even proven that this is true, you know? We've seen it happen on social media on a couple of occasions. There was an instance, I think, sometime last year [2021]. There was this lady who posted an entire thing about being hijacked and all these sorts of stories on Twitter, posting updates almost hourly, saying she's been in the boot of her car, only to find out she was lying just to get her boyfriend's attention, and she ended up getting arrested. **(Converse; 31 years old; heterosexual man; lecturer)**

The dissenting voices against call-out culture and cancel culture highlighted a crucial aspect of some of the tactics common in DFA. The findings show that while these practices aim to hold

people accountable, caution, legal rigour, and a balanced approach are necessary to consider the potential risks and false accusations accompanied by these practices.

#### 5.4.2.3 *Nuanced and neutral views on the 'call-out culture' and 'cancel culture'*

The two previous sub-themes focused on polarised opinions on call-out culture and cancel culture, and the current sub-theme covers the spectrum of views that range from nuanced to a balanced assessment of these practices. Instead of showing clear-cut approval or disapproval, this collection of views highlights the dual nature of these cultures. They acknowledge the role of call-out culture and cancel culture in seeking justice and empowering the victims of VAW while also pointing out the risks associated with false accusations and the potential to exploit these cultures for personal motives. For instance, in the extract below, Chi recognises the influence of the call-out culture to serve justice for women affected by violence; however, she also expresses concern about how some women can distort the truth by making unfounded accusations that can result in the loss of livelihoods and the destruction of the lives of those being targeted. She put it as follows:

The call-out culture has proved itself very useful because to a certain extent, there are women getting justice. And we've seen how the justice system has failed us, alright. And to a great extent, that's what it has done. It has offered those women justice, but we've also seen the implications of that. We've seen how the truth is always manipulated. And we can never take away the fact that the truth has been manipulated. A lot of people lost their livelihoods because of the call-out culture and with very little truth to it or with very ... I can't say evidence because at some point, you know, memory retention takes place, and at some points evidence is lost, right, or it's not there because it's only there for a certain period. But there have been situations that were greatly misunderstood, and call-out culture was used, you understand? To ... I don't know, destroy another individual's life. So yeah, I'm in between when it comes to the call-out culture. **(Chi; 27 years old; heterosexual woman; master's student)**

Kaila also acknowledges the repercussions of using call-out culture to make false accusations. However, unlike Chi, whose concern is the impact of unfounded accusations on alleged perpetrators, Kaila's concern is how it can affect the credibility of the #MenAreTrash DFA when it becomes undermined and discredited. Despite recognising the potential misuse of call-out culture, she asserts that the frequency with which this misconduct occurs "is far, far less than the number of times a woman has been harassed in the workplace, or like in her daily life,

or in their personal life and that has gone unconvicted and unreported and unpunished”. In this sense, the misuse of call-out culture is not that significant, according to the following explanation by Kaila:

When it comes to false accusations and using the movement (#MenAreTrash) to do that, I would say that’s an incorrect thing to do. It’s not right because it kind of trivialises the movement and what puts it down, and then the general public doesn’t take us seriously anymore. But I think that the general public also needs to understand that the ... just statistically, the number of times that has happened, is far, far less than the number of times a woman has been harassed in the workplace, or like in her daily life, or in their personal life and that has gone unconvicted and unreported and unpunished. So, it’s not as big of an issue as what the movement is about in the first place. **(Kaila; 20 years old; heterosexual woman; student and activist)**

Call-out culture is further recognised for its potential dangers to those who may use it inappropriately. When a powerful and resourceful person is being called out, the accuser may face serious legal consequences. This could be the case regardless of whether the powerful individual being accused is guilty or not. An extreme turn of events could be when a person doing the calling out resorts to suicide because they are not believed. Nonetheless, call-out culture remains an effective mechanism through which female victims of abuse find justice. These insights are captured in the following experts from Salvator and Sunflower:

I think my answer is that there are always pros and cons to things. Yeah. On the flip side, honestly, what I’ve noticed is that the people that have been called out in most cases are powerful people, people that have money, right. And people that have resources, guilty or not, they’ll use those resources, right? So, to some extent, there’s the risk of that, that of the person using those resources, and coming after you, you know, and it’s happening at that scale, publicity. You’ve heard people actually committing suicide at the end of the day because of not being believed. Guilty or not, but there’s that risk. **(Salvator; 27 years old; heterosexual man; unemployed graduate)**

There’s a good part of call-out culture, and there’s also a bad part of call-out culture. The repercussions that it could have, not only on the person you’re calling out, but also on you. There’s a person that’s tweeting about something that isn’t true. We’ve seen it many times where famous people have taken people to court for calling them out with their name for defamation of character and so forth. But I think there’s so

much power in the call-out culture that it's giving victims, that ... you know, when you look back at it. It's like, the other day, I spoke to one of the lecturers and she was basically molested by her own professor at that time. But she kept quiet about it. We're talking about these gender things, and we're talking ... we're talking, she's like, "If I were born today in these times, I probably would have felt like it's okay for me to post about this, to talk about my story and so forth". **(Sunflower; 29 years old; heterosexual woman; UNICEF consultant and university resident head)**

In addition to the previous insights, the conversation about call-out culture is broadened by introducing another layer to it. Seepamedu and Siphso argue that since violence can be experienced by people of all genders, it means call-out culture should extend beyond just being used by women, and men who experience abuse at the hands of women should also resort to calling them out. Below are the views of Seepamedu and Siphso:

It's [call-out culture] a very important one, and I think it's necessary. I think it needs to be appreciated mostly by men than ever. I don't think this is a struggle for women alone or by women alone. For them to call out is to say, "this is a serious social phenomena affecting everyone". So, it's a very significant one in my view. I think that it has to be institutionalised, and it must be compulsory for every citizen. But I also think that the focus should not be about a call-out on men, but I think the call-out on men should give a space for men to express themselves. I mean, you see, for example, people post on TikTok, post on Facebook, videos where they've been beaten by females, where they've been beaten by their partners, destroying their properties. So, that is also another form of violence ... and men getting killed by their immediate partners. **(Seepamedu; 36 years old; heterosexual man; lecturer)**

I think it's a good initiative. But I don't think these two intertwine because calling out someone doesn't need a hashtag for me. That's just my humble opinion. If someone is an abuser, call them out. If someone is not behaving, by all means call them out. It shouldn't be exclusive to women, first of all. It shouldn't. So, hence my confusion with this #MenAreTrash because everyone is trash, by the way, in our own way. **(Siphso; 27 years old; heterosexual man; candidate attorney)**

The insights provided under this sub-theme illustrate the intricate nature of call-out culture through the contrasting opinions that reveal its duality. At the same time, these perspectives paint a comprehensive picture of this social media culture to show, on the one hand, the empowerment of victims and, on the other, the risks, implications, and potential misuse.

In summary, the findings presented in this section presented varied viewpoints on the cornerstones of DFA, namely call-out culture and cancel culture. Some views endorse the role of DFA, like #MenAreTrash, to be used tactically to expose, shame, and enforce accountability on those accused of wrongdoings. Other views reveal that while these practices aim to hold people accountable, there is a need for caution, legal rigour, and a balanced approach that takes into consideration the potential risks and false accusations. Moreover, the nuanced, neutral, and ambivalent voices illustrate how complex call-out culture is.

### **5.5 Resistance Towards #MenAreTrash Through Counter-discourses**

Although #MenAreTrash became influential and instrumental in terms of responding to incidents of VAW and femicide in South Africa, it has also seen a certain level of push-back and resistance through counter-discourses. One major form of resistance against #MenAreTrash was the counter-discourse of #NotAllMen. This counter-discourse is primarily rooted in the rejection of the sweeping generalisation implied by #MenAreTrash that brands all men as inherently violent, abusive, and murderous towards women. In this regard, the hashtag is perceived as unfair as the construct ‘trash’ is deemed dehumanising and offensive. The perspective of #NotAllMen frames the use of the words ‘men are trash’ as an example of online gender-based violence (Mushomba 2020). This creates an ironic tension given that #MenAreTrash itself aims to eradicate violence by one gender against another. Moreover, #NotAllMen serves as a linguistic resistance against the authoritative narrative embedded in #MenAreTrash. This signifies a reclaiming of agency and voice or ‘talking back’, as bell hooks calls it (Moussa and Scapp 1996, p.90).

One of the interests of this study was to explore the logic behind counter-discourses against the #MenAreTrash DFA, and in particular, the #NotAllMen social media hashtag. To achieve this, the participants were asked to provide their general view on this counter-discourse and to state why they deem it reasonable or not. The in-depth interviews were supplemented by insights from multimedia sources. This section consists of two parts: The first part focuses on the findings that show support for counter-discourses, while the second part delves into the narratives that condemn this resistance.

### 5.5.1 Views on counter-discourses: Support for #NotAllMen

The accounts in this subsection offer diverse perspectives on the justification for the resistance towards the #MenAreTrash DFA through counter-discourses, particularly the #NotAllMen hashtag. Some participants hold that, due to its disruptive nature, activism is bound to encounter opposition from other formations. In this sense, resistance is considered an inevitable part of activism. They argue that in the context of #MenAreTrash, resistance was warranted as there were instances in which the DFA was thriving through the fabrication of false allegations of VAW and rape. Therefore, counter-discourses were used to disrupt this trend, among other reasons. Counter-discourses are also regarded as necessary as they can be used to test the validity of claims made by the mainstream discourse, #MenAreTrash, in this instance..

Additionally, given the democratic context of South Africa in which the protest action enacted by #MenAreTrash transpired, opposing views are allowed, regardless of how sensitive they may be deemed. Moreover, the participants believed that resistance provides an opportunity to delve deeper into discourse, particularly that of #MenAreTrash, that transcends mere verbal and textual expressions. These views are reflected in the following excerpts from Bravo, Kay, and Nkanyezi:

I think it was justified. The nature of activism is that it does not happen without resistance. Such is the nature of it because it's disruptive in its nature. But in the same breath, I believe that those who then led the #NotAllMen movement were justified because of the unfortunate cases where there were no grounds for many allegations. Now, when there's a movement of that nature that's gaining traction, and in between, there are false allegations, then you are justified to create a movement that counters that one to ensure that it comes to an end. **(Bravo; 31 years old; heterosexual man; men's rights activist)**

Yeah, it was reasonable. The reason I'm saying it was reasonable is I think every debate should have an opposing side to actually test how effective the other one is. How much research the other side conduct to actually come up to say, "all men". So, I think it was reasonable. Also, we live in a democratic country where opposition views are welcomed, but sometimes they are very insensitive. But they are welcomed at the end of the day. **(Kay; 26 years old; heterosexual man; master's student)**

I welcome resistance because it gives me something to work with. So, if you say that when I tell you the colour red is actually blue in disguise, and you say: "No, it's

not”. It gives me a platform for us to engage honestly or however we’re going to engage academically, or *bojwala-cally*<sup>9</sup>, after wine and drinks. It helps us engage on a different level to freshen up the conversation more because it just takes the hashtag [#MenAreTrash] into something deeper than what it is, which is just words. So, when you then challenge me, either I tell you, “Fuck off, go do your reading and hear what sources say”, or I engage you, or I just remind you that what you’re doing right now is exactly what this hashtag means. Women are carrying the world on their back, and men just want to ride along. So yeah, for me the resistance was important. **(Nkanyezi; 28 years old; bisexual woman; researcher and activist)**

Michelle expresses further justification for counter-discourses and contends that counter-discourses such as #NotAllMen and #NotInMyName<sup>10</sup> were well within their rights to resist the over-generalisation implied by #MenAreTrash supporters and advocates. Michelle averred the following:

[Thinking] I think it was justified, right? And I believe that if there’s a certain view being disseminated about men and all men in society who disagree with that view are able to prove that they are not that kind of men, that they are not trash. Of course, they should be given the freedom to express their resistance as well in the form of #NotInMyName and #NotAllMen or whichever name they prefer to operate under. And I think it is justifiable for them to do so because the reality is that not all men are trash. And to say men are trash is then also to generalise and to assume that all men are trash and all the future men that will still be born, or little boys who are growing up towards becoming men, are now also automatically trash by virtue of them being men. That, for me, is unreasonable. **(Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer)**

Michelle further notes that the men who are part of counter-discourses are those that are diplomatic and family-oriented, and not those that are “angry and bitter at women and who now want to suppress women, then dismiss them”. She explains as follows:

My thing is with #NotAllMen are trash or #NotInMyName, those are movements that are not what I’ve picked up about them is that they are not bitter men. Those groups of men are family men. Men who are also serving in the church ministries as

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<sup>9</sup> South African vernacular adverb to refer to doing things while under the influence of alcohol.

<sup>10</sup> A civil activist movement that challenges violent masculinities in South Africa. The #NotInMyName movement was started by a small group of concerned South African citizens who wanted to reach out to men to come forward and be the voice of change in the context of VAW and similar injustices. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/not-in-my-name-south-africa-civil-rights/>

well, you know. A lot of them are very diplomatic, I picked up. (**Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer; italics added for emphasis**)

Other reasons for the resistance demonstrated by the #NotAllMen hashtag are that, firstly, there is a natural tendency to defend oneself when under attack, in this case, the defence was against the branding of every man as trash, and secondly, in reality “not all men are trash” (Palesa). There are many good men in terms of their conduct towards women, and these men live with and among the very people who perpetuate the idea that men are trash. Not only that, but there are real-life situations in which men have condemned and even pursued justice against other men who were accused of abusing or violating their partners. Therefore, such contexts contradict the notion that men are fundamentally trash. Lastly, once again, the misuse of the #MenAreTrash to victimise innocent men justifies the existence of counter-discourses such as the #NotAllMen hashtag. These sentiments are illustrated in the following excerpts:

When you are under attack, my brother, you ...you ...you [stuttering] ... even though it's not the best defence you may come up with, but you are sort of forced to defend yourself. Not all men are trash was a movement in response to #MenAreTrash because there's a huge number of men that are good men, generally good men. I'm surrounded by them. Even now in my life, I'm surrounded by them. That's the thing that we never wanna discuss. The people who are perpetuating the idea that men are trash have received good treatment from many men out there. You understand? And then we never wanna delve into that because it goes against the hashtag [#MenAreTrash]. (**Sipho; 27 years old; heterosexual man; candidate attorney**)

It's reasonable because not all men are trash. Let's just take, like any court case where it's dealing with a man who physically abused his wife. You find another man fighting against what this man is doing. [...] So, when this whole understanding of #NotAllMen comes forth, you get an understanding that we can't go and put all men under the #MenAreTrash hashtag when not all men are doing what these other men are doing. (**Palesa; 20 years old; heterosexual woman; student**)

A common thread in this discussion is the belief that resistance towards #MenAreTrash in the form of #NotAllMen is justified. Some see resistance and opposition as an inevitable element of activism, especially in liberal states such as South Africa, and some appreciate counter-discourses as opportunities to have meaningful engagements and clarifications. Furthermore,

there is also strong disapproval of the message embedded in #MenAreTrash, which may be destructive to those it implicates.

### **5.5.2 Views on counter-discourses: Disapproval of #NotAllMen**

This subsection delves into the multifaceted views surrounding the counter-discourse of #NotAllMen, focusing on expressions of disapproval and criticism of its intent. The views presented share a common sentiment that the #NotAllMen counter-discourse sought to deflect attention from the core issues #MenAreTrash was trying to tackle, and in the process, invalidated the experiences of women affected by VAW. The following quote by Chaze, a writer for a South African hybrid newspaper, *The Mail & Guardian*<sup>11</sup>, strongly rejects the counter-discourses against #MenAreTrash:

I think that #MenAreTrash is a very beautiful expression of my daily feelings. So yeah, when people want to try and divert, say, misogyny is trash, therefore, trying to group all men together is problematic, and we must be so sensitive towards all of these men, like that doesn't really mean anything to me. **(Chaze; woman; The Mail & Guardian contributor, 2017)**

Both guests from the Lune YouTube channel, Buhle and Litha express the flaws embedded in the 'Not All Men' narrative. Buhle highlights that to say "men are trash" speaks to a broader social issue of VAW that men as a gender are responsible for and does not single out individual men. In the following excerpt, she explains how #NotAllMen detracts from the main focus:

I wanted to say that saying men are trash isn't victimising. It's not singling out a man and who he is and whatever. It's singling out what men have done in general. Hence, saying that "not all men are trash" is basically you as a person, silencing other people from the main topic at hand because I think what they want to say is that, like he [Litha] said it being a traction ... we all know that not every single man is trash. We know that there are people who are good, who carry themselves right, who don't commit these crimes that men have been convicted for and stuff. But saying that "not all men are trash" you are just taking away from the importance of the message, and I feel like as a man who is not trash, you should be for it [#MenAreTrash], standing with the people who are saying that men are trash to shed

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<sup>11</sup> The Mail & Guardian is a South African weekly newspaper and website published by M&G Media in Johannesburg, South Africa. It focuses on political analysis, investigative reporting, Southern African news, local arts, music and popular culture. <https://mg.co.za/>

light on the thing that they've been doing. **(Buhle; woman; Lune YouTube channel guest, 2018)**

Litha poses the following thought-provoking question:

What are you gonna tell the girl who has been taken out of school at 12 by Boko Haram? Are you gonna be like, "Not all of us are trash though"? No, you don't want to say that. She wants to hear that you are for her and that you are actually doing a real thing. You are invested in the safety of this person because equality is what brings humanity together right now. Is that our call to arms? **(Litha; man; Lune YouTube channel guest, 2018)**

Converse explains as follows, the problem of singling oneself out as not a problem, such as an abuser, instead of discerning VAW as a broader issue of focus.

The problem is that, in my view, it tries to ride the wave of the #MenAreTrash because the point, in my understanding, is not necessarily actually to say every single man does this, but it's to show how widespread it is. But the counter-narrative of saying 'not all men', I think it's a defence that comes from a place of wanting to, in a crowd of 1,000 angry people, paint yourself as one who's not angry, but you're sitting with the angry people. You're sitting with the violent people who are destroying things, and you want to say, "I may be with them, but I'm not one of them in terms of my behaviour". And I think that becomes a challenge because then you are looking out for yourself as opposed to thinking about the general public, who should be one benefiting from the #MenAreTrash. **(Converse; 31 years old; heterosexual man; lecturer)**

Simphiwe and Sbongiseni also share the sentiment that the #NotAllMen counter-discourse digressed from the main issue. They explain their views as follows:

What I see happening though, is that the conversation is being shifted from men being trash because of their actions. However, it's a generalised statement to all men are trash because you have one or two or three or maybe 500 that don't act in the manner in which you are classifying those who are trash. That sort of invalidate the statement of saying that men are trash, which, I guess, cool, kind of makes sense, but that's detracting from the message of the initial campaign. **(Simphiwe; woman; Necessary Conversations YouTube channel host, 2020)**

So now, with the not all men are trash, whether that's true or not, that's debatable, but what it does is that it illegitimizes and digresses from the actual issue, which is

that people, gendered as men, perpetuate violence and oppressive actions behaviours and attitudes. **(Sibongiseni; woman; UCT student, 2017)**

Chi, Jessica, and Lee further emphasise the role of #NotAllMen in invalidating the atrocities women suffer at the hands of men. For instance, Lee echoes the sentiments of Buhle and Converse by stating that “men are trash” is not to regard men as ‘trash’, but it is an indictment of patriarchal structures. Lee further points out that simply claiming that not all men are abusers and murderers of women without making any concrete effort and allyship in the struggle against VAW is futile. Chi, Jessica, and Lee explain their views as follows:

To say #NotAllMen, you’re invalidating the experiences of women, right? You’re invalidating the losses that women have encountered. And what you are saying is the toxic behaviour that we are encountering is not as bad as you guys are making it out to be? I am here. I am here, even though I’m not saying anything, but I am here. **(Chi; 27 years old; heterosexual woman; master’s student)**

I feel like it was aimed at, what’s the word? Invalidating women’s experiences. Like I said before, the #MenAreTrash movement for me was women voicing out their experiences and voicing out how they felt, right? Now, when you say #NotAllMen in such a moment, I really felt like it was invalidating women’s experiences and what they were trying to say, and they were not hurt. So, I do think that it was relevant. **(Jessica; 19 years old; heterosexual woman; student, model, and feminist)**

So, I think #MenAreTrash is not an indictment of men but rather of patriarchy, and I think I’ve said this earlier on as well. So, the phrase ... and I know that a lot of men, after the #MenAreTrash, they started coining the phrase that ‘not all men’. And I think, for me, this invalidates the woman’s lived experiences. I think that’s just a semantic waste of time for men to say that ‘not all men’ if they are not pouring into the courtrooms to ensure that women’s lived experiences do not continue at the hands of the system that ideally has infringed on them. **(Lee; 34 years old; non-binary [they/them]; communication specialist)**

This section presented the views on the resistance towards #MenAreTrash through counter-discourses, particularly the #NotAllMen hashtag. The focus was on the views that support and disapprove of this hashtag. Those who support #NotAllMen regard resistance as a natural element of activism and feel that counter-discourses stimulate critical engagements and clarifications around the issue at hand, in this case, the #MenAreTrash narrative. Moreover,

there is a strong condemnation of #MenAreTrash owing to concerns about the potentially destructive message it contains, which in some instances, was weaponised to the detriment of innocent men. For the latter, the common argument is that the hashtag deflects attention from the core issues raised by #MenAreTrash, which undermined the urgency of addressing VAW. The premise is that the #NotAllMen counter-discourse attempted to shift the focus towards individual concerns rather than addressing broader social structures such as patriarchy, which are central to the VAW discourse.

## **5.6 #MenAreTrash construct: A Proper Way to Address Men?**

The #MenAreTrash DFA gave rise to an interest in the construction of the phrase ‘Men Are Trash’. It was of interest in this study to delve into the pivotal question of whether the use of this arguably assertive and provocative construct was a proper or effective way to address men about VAW. The inquiry into this matter was prompted by the need to unravel the dynamics around the implications, effectiveness, and appropriateness of resorting to such language and rhetoric driven by the urgency to address VAW.

The element of language in activism is crucial since it has the potential to shape discourses or narratives, and even more so, influence public perceptions. The confrontational nature of the phrase ‘Men Are Trash’ warranted thoughtful consideration on whether the narrative served its intended purpose of facilitating constructive dialogues, engaging men in a meaningful way, and encouraging collaborative relationships to mitigate VAW. Another consideration was the question of whether this approach risked alienating the very social cohort it sought to engage and mobilise to advance the cause. Therefore, these cogitations served as the impetus to explore various insights surrounding the construction of #MenAreTrash and its impact and role in addressing men on the issue of VAW. The findings reveal dichotomous takes on the issue: On one hand, there are compelling justifications for why the construct is proper, and on the other hand, there is a notable condemnation of the narrative.

Those who supported the construct of #MenAreTrash argue that the use of this phrase was a final resort following the failure of diplomatic means to address VAW. They maintain that, like any other protest action, #MenAreTrash must have undergone a negotiation phase that failed, and hence, the ultimate measure was to launch a provocative form of activism. In this sense, the packaging of the phrase is justified since those affected have the right to choose how they want to express their grievances. Litha and Philemon had the following insights:

When people have discussed this one-on-one with actual people or those who are transgressing against them, it hasn't clearly worked. That's why people are taking such drastic measures. Drastic times call for drastic measures, and women are only doing this because they feel like there's no other way. **(Litha; man; Lune YouTube channel guest, 2018)**

Like with any other form of protest, there is no better way of going about protesting, except the one that the victims of abuse feel it's right for them, you see. We can't speak for them and say, "No, you are supposed to go about this way, and not this way". Remember, it's just like any other form of protest; by the time people get to a point where they're taken to the streets and protesting, it means the negotiation stage has failed. And then the conflict continues to boil over to a point where it sorts of bursts into those protests and outrageousness we see on social media. So, I think at that point, it's sort of too late to say people should have gone about it this way, or they shouldn't have gone about this way when they're now enraged, understand? **(Philemon; 29 years old; heterosexual man; researcher and Facebook influencer)**

While engaging with fellow guest speakers on the Daily Theta television show, Anele dismissed critics of #MenAreTrash. Like Philemon, he argued that "you cannot tell people how to mourn" just because one feels offended. According to Anele, dictating how women should mourn is an endorsement of patriarchal dominance, and he further explained as follows:

I would like to disagree with my sister Palesa and also with my brother who was there previously, Mamabolo, when they were actually saying that the labelling or the packaging of the movement in itself was wrong. I disagree with that simply because you cannot tell people how to mourn. The hashtag is a cry for mourning. You killed one of my own. That's what it stands for. And now you are coming back to me and telling me how to cry, how to mourn, because you are going to get offended. We're missing the point. Because if we were doing that, then we're actually still promoting patriarchy. **(Anele; man; corporate communications professional; Daily Theta guest, 2017)**

As aforementioned, there were also dissenting voices that questioned the efficacy and morality of the #MenAreTrash construct. They contend that the inherent unsavouriness associated with the construct 'trash' may have unwittingly undermined the objectives of the #MenAreTrash DFA. Specifically, one of the concerns is that the constant exposure to the three-word mantra (Men-Are-Trash) carries the potential to cause a negative psychological impact on men because

it is likely to impede rather than encourage positive change. The following is the opinion of Neo on the Lune YouTube channel:

You see, I understand the whole movement behind it. I just think the three-word, the marketing, is wrong basically because ... and I'm speaking to another man on the other side: If you had a woman every single day that labelled your mistakes and said you're trash, would that motivate you to become better, really? Or would that be a motivation to stay that way? Those three words, will they help you? It doesn't matter what the meaning behind it is. [...] So, it's dangerous because once you think like that, there's no willingness to get better. I don't wanna get better if I know this is what I am, and everybody keeps telling me this is what I am. **(Neo; man; Lune YouTube channel guest, 2018)**

Neo's sentiments were echoed by Lerato, the host and director of the Lune YouTube channel. Lerato contended that this wording does not make her feel any safer just because it is harsh and bold. She also argued that labelling men in this manner is morally wrong in accordance with God's will and teachings. From a theological point of view, humans are bestowed with the power to speak things into existence through their words; put differently, to constantly tell others that they are trash only reinforces that idea. In sociological terms, this notion is known as self-fulfilling prophecy. The following is a dialogue between Lerato and a guest on the Lune YouTube channel:

**Lerato:** I don't feel safe just because of this hashtag. I don't think that just because of this hashtag, that means, "Oh my word. No one's gonna touch me. No one's gonna do anything to me"

**Litha:** [Speaking at the same time as Lerato] What would have rather done?

**Lerato:** I think if we were to speak about these issues differently, I don't know how I can solve what is going on with men, let me say. For sure, I don't know how. But all I'm saying is this type of wording I think it's destructive. It's destructive because if you were to think... okay, so you are Christian, right?

**Litha:** Yes, I am.

Do you believe that your words have power? Do you think that you need to be careful about the things that you say? And that you can speak things that you have authority over this earth? [Litha nods his head to agree] So, if you think that, and if God has placed us here, if we're to say, "We see this happening, God", and we continue to reinforce that with our words and say, "Yes, it is", and we say "Amen"

to the things we're basically saying, "Yes, they are trash, yes, they are this and this". That's not part of his will. I think that it's okay for us to go and be like, "God, look at what's happening". He doesn't even label us by our mistakes. **(Lerato; woman; Lune YouTube channel host, 2018)**

Some critics considered the choice of words (Men Are Trash) as "arguably the worst approach" because of its degrading nature (Hector). Not only is it degrading, but it is also "a major generalisation" that makes it hard for men to engage with it (Hector). There is also a strong emphasis on the importance of using language and naming things in a manner that would not have drawbacks. In this regard, a more cautious approach in naming the DFA could have worked better. According to Sarah, "people can talk about what it really is about, and not necessarily just see it as a pure attack". The following is how Hector, Mamabolo, and Sarah express their opinions:

Honestly, I think it's arguably the worst approach. Semantically, it's degrading. It is by default raises an opinion ... it is a major generalisation, in my opinion, and because of that, men won't associate or interact with it, you know. Yes, it gave the women an opportunity to raise their frustration, and I understand the good it does for them to give them that strength or that voice. But if they knew a person who may perceive themselves as an innocent man, you know ... if they understood how it made that that guy feel, then I think they would have taken a much more cautious approach or like literally given ... like titled the actual movement a bit better. **(Hector; 27 years old; heterosexual man; software developer)**

Mamabolo highlights the role of naming in shaping public perceptions about #MenAreTrash:

Well, for me, there is a Sotho person [a member of one of the ethnic groups in South Africa] who said something very interesting, he said "*Bitso lebe ke seromo*" [a person tends to live up to their name]. To me, the hashtag's intentions are good, but the name is wrong. So, when you have a good intention, be careful not to cover it with the wrong name. If you brand a good product wrongly, it will attract the wrong market. **(Mamabolo; man; life coach and Daily Thetha guest, 2017)**

Yeah, it's a tough one. But I do think it needs a rebranding. At least people can talk about what it really is about, and not necessarily just see it as a pure attack. **(Sarah; 23 years old; heterosexual woman; student and tutor)**

Moreover, having taken an offensive approach to address men on the problem of VAW yet still anticipating them to be actively involved in tackling the issue is regarded as unwise and

myopic. This is because this approach discourages men's participation due to its "violent" and alienating nature (Mandla). In addition, the #MenAreTrash construct is perceived as dehumanising and posing an existential crisis to men. Understanding that this labelling may have made men feel worthless, the unwillingness to support the #MenAreTrash DFA became the by-product of this cause.

### **5.7 Was #MenAreTrash Digital Feminist Activism Successful in Fulfilling its Purpose and Objectives?**

This study also intended to find out to what extent the #MenAreTrash DFA was successful in achieving its purpose and objectives. The responses in this section address the question: *Do you think this movement has been successful in fulfilling its purpose?* Some of the participants suggest that although the #MenAreTrash DFA may not have set clear objectives for itself, it has succeeded in terms of creating conversations and bringing the issue of VAW to the fore. One of the ways in which the success of #MenAreTrash DFA can be perceived is through the realisation of legal justice by victims. As such, the view that some people were found guilty of a form of VAW by a court of law indicates a certain degree of effectiveness of this DFA. The following are the views of Nkanyezi and Salvator:

I think it didn't set square perimeters of where it wants to go. I think people are meant to take it and run with it. They wanted to create conversation. And if the only outcome we wanted was to create conversation and to force GBV to stay at the fore of the interaction, then we have achieved what we wanted. **(Nkanyezi; 28 years old; bisexual woman; researcher and activist)**

The extent to which they've been successful is the extent to which the people that committed those violence acts against women have been prosecuted, you know, being brought to the book of the law. **(Salvator; 27 years old; heterosexual man; unemployed graduate)**

While Nkanyezi and Salvator expressed positive sentiments regarding the effectiveness of #MenAreTrash achieving its objectives, Philemon and Seepamedu communicated doubts, ambivalence, and scepticism. For instance, similar to Nkanyezi, Philemon and Seepamedu acknowledge the success of #MenAreTrash in raising awareness and exposing the violent crimes perpetrated against women by men; however, they doubt whether this DFA was successful in terms of influencing a desired change in the behaviour of men. However, these participants hold the powerful institutions of society, such as the government, accountable for

their failure to provide victims of violence with the support they need and also their inability to implement effective mechanisms to deal with VAW. Philemon also points to structural inadequacies within the legal system, which can be attributed to the lack of skills and experience of the police force to effectively handle VAW cases. As such, he believes that these factors hinder positive and desired behavioural change in regard to VAW among men. The following are the statements from Philemon and Seepamedu:

In terms of raising awareness, yes, in terms of changing the behaviour, I don't think so. Like I'm saying, one of the reasons why the behaviour or the prevalence of the incidences have not gone down is because of the failure of the government to take action in terms of providing support to victims of gender-based violence, number one, and secondly, to introducing stringent reinforcement strategies to deal with GBV. Number three, you look at the South African Police Service, number one, they're not trained in terms of how to handle abuse cases know, when someone comes down to report the abuse, they're not properly trained in terms of how handle such cases and also in terms of rape. So, in that regard, I will say it didn't really hit your spot, but it's really trying. **(Philemon; 29 years old; heterosexual man; researcher and Facebook influencer)**

It was successful in a sense that when immediately something happens, for example, the current issue of Namhla, an incident where she was beaten and gunshot and other cases, crimes and violence that were committed by men on women's lives, you see that because of this movement, people are to be now able to uncover all these things and come out and use social media. And you can see the language "men are trash" continues. But I think what it still lacks to really achieve ... what it has achieved is to expose, is to reveal, and is to make people come forth and talk. But what it did not achieve is the combating or mitigating the violence. I think that is because of the lack of participation in a practical sense from other stakeholders. In this case, one can talk about government, one can talk about the institution in terms of the implementation of policies **(Seepamedu; 36 years old; heterosexual man; lecturer)**

Piet and Thandaza are the other participants who are sceptical about #MenAreTrash effecting any behavioural change in men. Thandaza, for instance, posits that none of the #MenAreTrash proponents or advocates provided the feedback that "Hey! You know since we started this thing of #MenAreTrash, men have actually tried to change" as proof of success. Instead, this social media hashtag may have instilled the mindset in women that they should anticipate the worst

outcomes when they decide to get involved in romantic relationships. The following are the sentiments of Piet and Thandaza:

You know what [silence]? I think I would have to speak in terms of the degree of success, or maybe you know ... because they have had some successes as far as maybe creating awareness around certain behaviours perpetuated by men. But as far as the behaviours ... I mean, creating awareness around the behaviours is one thing, but changing the behaviours is another thing, and I guess for me to say it was successful, it would have to have resulted in a change. **(Piet; 27 years old; heterosexual man; university social media marketer)**

I don't think there's been much change [giggles] in terms of... I don't know, maybe the people who started the campaign coming back to give feedback to say: "Hey! You know, since we started this thing of #MenAreTrash, men have actually tried to change". But I think it has also caused, I don't know if I should call it conflict. But it has also caused a mindset now on the 'other' [women] gender to enter a relationship expecting the worst, you know. To say, this person is going to do ABC that will be negative, you know. I don't even think it has played its part. I think the #MenAreTrash trend was just there to expose what men do, and nothing was done about it. **(Thandaza; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; student and volunteer)**

Thandi and Sunflower question the role of #MenAreTrash in neutralising and mitigating VAW. They point out that despite increased awareness this hashtag brought, the incidences of VAW are still high. Thandi highlights that "*hashtags are not stopping violence. They're just there for awareness*", and continue as follows:

We are having a situation whereby, although this thing is being called out, it's not stopping violence. Hashtags are not stopping violence. They're just there for awareness. But this thing is still persisting. And since, like it's even getting worse to show that those people are not even listening. Because the people that are been targeted are doing these things at the households, not via social media. **(Thandi; 32 years old; heterosexual woman; police officer)**

Sunflower attributes the perceived failure of the hashtag and other initiatives to deal with VAW to stem from men's attitudes. She argues that regardless of the fact that men are arguably exposed to a plethora of awareness messages about VAW, the steadily high levels of abuse, violence, and femicide suggest no change in men's behaviours and attitudes. Below is Sunflower's insight:

I don't think it worked. If it really did work, we wouldn't still be having so many numbers of GBV and so forth. What's making me second guess whether it worked or not, is men are still ... it's like they know what they're doing is wrong, by now. I mean, there's been *enough* type of incidents, talks, articles, and scenarios of where males could've actually been like, "Okay. If I do this, it is actually wrong". But we still get the educated man who are exposed to social media and so forth but still falling under so many cracks and doing so many things to women and so forth. So, I don't think it necessarily worked. And I think that men, they're just doing these things because they want to, but they know what's wrong. So, are we saying that, maybe it could have been more cases of GBV and so forth if we didn't have #MenAreTrash? So, it's ... yeah, I don't know whether it would either be less or more right now if we didn't initially start posting. But the numbers are still crazy, you know? **(Sunflower; 29 years old; heterosexual woman; UNICEF consultant and university residence head)**

Perhaps comparatively most unreserved in his viewpoint is Hector. He unequivocally believes that the #MenAreTrash DFA was unsuccessful in fulfilling its purpose because of a lack of communicative action on the side of the advocates and supporters of this DFA. It failed to facilitate meaningful communication with those it aimed to address. Hector expresses his thoughts as follows:

No. I do not think they were successful in fulfilling it. Like I said, their mandate was to be heard. They wanted to be heard, but in order for some, in order for someone and in order for any kind of communication to happen, there has to be an openness from the server and the client, the speaker and the listener or whatever we want to call it. **(Hector; 27 years old; heterosexual man; software developer)**

Hector further suggests that the DFA's failure to effectively communicate its message and standpoint may have had the unintended consequence of desensitising people to the original message, which was a plea and outcry to eradicate VAW. He believes the implication in #MenAreTrash may have worked to normalise VAW and femicide. The following quote captures Hector's sentiments:

If the modern female activist feels like #MenAreTrash did OK, great job for them, I need to see the data and I'd really like to see that information. But I don't think it did the right job. I don't have numbers, but I personally feel like once, once they started calling it out like that, the frequency or it became normal to see things like deaths from guys who are now killing the girls and stuff like that. I'm not saying it

wasn't a good thing that these activities were brought to light. I'm just saying the way that the conversation itself was going was normalising it, you know. So, it got to a point where it was almost as if it was like, "*Hai, siyabazi. Ba nje*" [We are used to them like this], you know? (**Hector; 27 years old; heterosexual man; software developer**)

## 5.8 Discussion and Conclusion

The first part of this chapter dissected the key meanings attached to the #MenAreTrash DFA. The findings suggest that the primary purpose of the #MenAreTrash hashtag was to address issues related to patriarchy, male privilege and domination, toxic masculinity, catcalling, sexism, misogyny, VAW, and rape culture. This is consistent with the literature discussed in Chapter 2. Mukufa (2020) contends that the #MenAreTrash hashtag represents a novel 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to denounce and confront the patriarchal power to which women are subjected. She further maintains that the use of the word 'patriarchy' to raise the concerns of women has become redundant, necessitating a new approach to revive the conversations around the issue of patriarchy and its impact on the lives of women. Similarly, Aphane (2017) posits that #MenAreTrash was a strategy used to confront social structures that enable men to perpetuate VAW, rape, and femicide. The emphasis on patriarchy as the main source of women's injustices is well articulated in the radical feminist theory (Section 1.7). One of the arguments advanced by this theory is that gender norms, which are the products of patriarchy, have created a culture in which women are regarded as property and sexual objects, and in this way, aggression, sexual assault, and VAW became normalised (hooks 1984; Martin et al. 2006).

The chapter also endeavoured to clarify an apparent misconception that the #MenAreTrash narrative is an attack on every man in South Africa. Instead, the findings highlighted that this hashtag was a social commentary, statement, and a plea for collective effort to combat VAW, rape, femicide, and other injustices to which women are subjected. Therefore, the discernment of the #MenAreTrash narrative should transcend the mere identification of these issues as individual problems. To this end, men are called upon to reflect on their collective role in perpetuating the social structures and norms that enable the aforementioned social ills to persist. Existing literature also underscores that not all men are essentially trash; however, the mere affiliation to the membership of men as a social group has conferred certain privileges on

them, which are predicated on the suffering of women (Aphane 2017; Matebese 2017; Engelbrecht 2020).

Moreover, the findings suggest that the #MenAreTrash social media hashtag can be seen as a symbolic outcry from women due to the violence and femicide they experience in multitudes. Such an outcry is validated considering the alarming rates of VAW and femicide in South Africa. The accounts provided in this chapter remind us that this cry pre-dates the era of DFA, which indicates that the issues being raised have a long history. For instance, in the 1970s, feminist movements and campaigns led to the recognition of violence against women and girls as a crime against humanity by international organisations such as the WHO (2021). Clearly, VAW and its related atrocities have been and continue to be ongoing struggles for women. It is for this reason that Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals involves the eradication of all forms of violence against women and girls, sexual exploitation, and trafficking by 2030.

Undertaking the rationale and key tenets of #MenAreTrash involved identifying the main objectives and goals that proponents of this DFA aimed to achieve. The most significant finding in terms of the objectives of #MenAreTrash was to raise awareness on VAW, rape, and femicide in South Africa. In extension, awareness raising was set out to condemn the patriarchal order and men's unbecoming treatment of women and to pressurise the government to address these issues promptly. Some narratives in this chapter acknowledge that the awareness-raising efforts align with the broader goals of the #MeToo movement, and to some degree, that of the #BlackLivesMatter campaign in the US. Previous literature reveals that 15 October 2017, the same year around which the #MenAreTrash hashtag emerged, marks the heightened levels of awareness raising on sexual violation by the #MeToo social media campaign (Bogen et al. 2019; Dawson 2020). This suggests that awareness-raising is a commonly adopted strategy across the globe. According to feminist theory, awareness raising was adopted by women activists in the 1960s during the second-wave feminism to conscientise women about the fact that they are subjected to social institutions and structures that primarily serve men (Akerly and True 2010; Molyneux et al. 2021). During this epoch, women were brought together by a common recognition that all women, regardless of their national, social, ethnic, cultural and racial backgrounds, are oppressed by men. This collective identity came to be known as 'sisterhood' (Inglis and Thorpe 2012). Prior studies note that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, feminist protests aimed at raising awareness gained prominence worldwide through the influence of DFA (Ahmed 2017; Kabira et al. 2018; Mushomba 2020). This is perhaps an indication of the continuation of the sisterhood ideology.

Another notable finding regarding the objectives of #MenAreTrash was that it aimed to spark a critical discourse and dialogue surrounding VAW. This engagement was deemed necessary because of the gravity of the situation. This finding aligns with that of Orth et al. (2020), that revealed that the #NakedProtest across various South African universities in 2016, among other things, sought to spark a public conversation about rape culture on Facebook. The approach of dealing with matters of concern through public discourse is well-supported by Habermas's theory of the public sphere and communicative action (Bolton 2005). According to this theory, debates, discussions, and dialogue about the issue in question are necessary to reach a consensus that could potentially lead to a desired development. It should be noted, however, that while #MenAreTrash was successful in reviving the conversation around VAW, the findings reveal that this was not supposed to be an end goal in itself but rather a starting point towards a more radical step.

The creation of conversations and awareness raising are closely correlated with the objective of gaining traction and increasing the visibility of #MenAreTrash. In the context of DFA, visibility is essential for gaining popularity, growth, and greater potential for larger outreach (El Asmar 2020). It makes people aware of its existence and purpose and how they can join forces (Mendes 2015; Sener 2021). For instance, Mendes et al. (2019) mention that feminist initiatives like the Hollaback! website created in 2005 relied on digital technologies to enhance visibility in order to raise awareness about street harassment. Hollaback! subsequently expanded to 13 countries that used the website to challenge various issues that affect women (Mendes et al. 2019). Its visibility played a significant role in the SlutWalk<sup>12</sup> protests in terms of increasing public awareness about the existence of the movement and facilitating the participation process for those who would like to offer support (Mendes 2015). Similarly, the findings in this chapter reveal that visibility was crucial for #MenAreTrash to attract the attention of the masses, and above all, to raise awareness on VAW. However, there is no evidence suggesting that #MenAreTrash also sought to garner support for its cause like the SlutWalk movement did. This could be attributed to the controversial nature and discordant approach employed by this DFA, which could have posed a challenge in gaining sufficient support, particularly from men.

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<sup>12</sup> The SlutWalk is a transnational movement that calls for an end to rape culture, victim blaming and slut-shaming of victims of sexual assault. Protestors march against referring to a woman's appearance to explain or excuse rape. The rallies began on April 3, 2011, when a Toronto Police officer suggested that women should avoid dressing like sluts to protect themselves from sexual assault (Mendes 2015).

The provocative nature of #MenAreTrash can be interpreted as a manifestation of emotions of anguish and anger, which makes it irrational and ineffective (D'Avanzato et al. 2021), but the findings show that the insertion of such a harsh element was intentional to raise awareness, gain visibility, and stimulate conversations around VAW. The intention was to hold men accountable for acts of VAW. In terms of the question of whether #MenAreTrash was successful in fulfilling its objectives, the findings suggest that this activism was mostly successful in terms of visibility and awareness raising. Nonetheless, the DFA was deemed less effective in influencing behavioural change, particularly among men. Participants stated that this was because, despite the #MenAreTrash DFA, incidents of VAW and femicide in South Africa did not decline and instead remained constant. According to crime statistics released by the SAPS for the 2017/2018 period, there were 2 930 murders, 3 554 attempted murders, 53 263 assaults with the intent to inflict grievous bodily harm, 81 142 common assaults, and 36 731 sexual assaults reported (SAPS 2018; World Economic Forum 2019). This report shows that there was a 2.4% increase in these criminal offences in 2017/18, which was around the period in which the #MenAreTrash DFA was initiated. Based on the findings, factors attributed to the failure of #MenAreTrash to reach its potential include its name, which is dismissive and offensive by nature, and a failure to effectively communicate its purpose. This finding is supported by Makama et al. (2019), who assert that the DFA failed to bring men into conversation regarding VAW.

This chapter further examined the views on the #MenAreTrash DFA by focusing on its impact on the ongoing struggle against VAW in South Africa and attitudes towards it. According to some views, men felt unfairly attacked and alienated by the sweeping statement that portrays all men as trash. The problem in this regard is the failure to acknowledge individual differences, and thus, possibly overlooking potentially good men. The findings revealed that the ultimate reaction of men towards #MenAreTrash was either silence on VAW discourse or retaliation and backlash through counter-narratives. In the process, an opportunity for misogynistic attitudes resurfaced. This is obviously counterproductive. It should be noted, however, that the reasons for backlash were not solely attributed to the hashtag itself but also to the human instincts to protect oneself against perceived threats. In this case, men's retaliation may stem from a need to protect their privileged position in society. Another factor that was attributed to the retaliative behaviour of men is the influence of socialisation that instils certain values and beliefs that may be in conflict with some of the approaches that feminists use to deal with VAW and other related issues. According to Crowe (2011), men are accustomed to the privilege of

having their points of view accommodated and valued in mainstream discourses, and since feminist discourse denies them that position, they usually perceive it as hostile, as is the case with #MenAreTrash DFA.

The impact of #MenAreTrash by examining the views on call-out culture and cancel culture. These social media cultures are some of the defining features of DFA and are marked by practices of shaming, exposing, and punishing men for the crimes they commit against women (Mendes et al. 2019; Engelbrecht 2020; Mukufa 2020). Overall, the findings revealed that the role of call-out culture and cancel culture in serving justice for women is recognised for the following reasons:

- They serve as a strong warnings to men not to harm women;
- They expose abusers and rapists, so women are aware of them;
- They amplify women's voices, enabling them to speak up against their victimisation; and
- They are used as tools to facilitate justice against powerful and famous public figures.

Previous studies acknowledge the power of call-out culture, particularly in cases involving celebrities. For example, Mendes et al. (2019) refers to an instance where feminists used the hashtag #AskThicke to call out the sexism and trivialisation of sexual violence in the lyrics of one of the songs of American singer Robin Thicke. Although the offence in this instance is relatively mild, the call-out was used to hold the offender accountable. An ethnographic study by Busch (2019) reveals that the call-out social media practice has been used by DIY/punk communities to expose, confront, and hold the perpetrators of sexual violence accountable for their actions. These communities use digital platforms for victims to seek justice outside conventional legal systems (Busch 2019). This indicates that call-out culture is a widely adopted social media practice in the realm of DFA.

Call-out culture and cancel culture were also condemned for their destructive and ethically questionable nature. Participants reported that there is a common practice of weaponising these cultures by making unfounded claims of abuse or sexual assault. In some cases, women go as far as engaging in character assassination on behalf of other men or for personal vendettas. Not only does this unbecoming conduct harm men but it also undermines the credibility of genuine cases of abuse. Previous research also highlight that call-out culture may lead to the public stigmatisation and ostracisation of individuals who are accused of the offences such as abuse, rape, or even statements that appear malicious or demeaning to women. This often occurs with

little consideration for factual information (Tucker 2018; Sundar 2020; Kim et al. 2022). This perpetuates the spread of misinformation and intensifies false accusations since the focus is more on public shaming than on seeking truth and justice. The fear of being called out can also lead to self-censorship as individuals, particularly men, may be reluctant to express their views on controversial issues, such as VAW (Sundar 2020). Moreover, this social media practice may create a divisive and polarised online environment in which people are quick to attack others, undermining communicative action as the most crucial aspect of a public sphere like social media (Kruse et al. 2017; Sundar 2020).

While most emphasis was on call-out culture, there was an interesting finding regarding cancel culture. According to the participants, the effects of cancel culture are more severe than that of call-out culture because cancel culture in extreme cases may lead to job loss, the destruction of families, and long-term reputational damage. While these consequences may be fitting punishment for real culprits, they are very unfair when used against innocent people. Furthermore, cancel culture was criticised for not creating a space for rehabilitation for the perpetrators to re-socialise them into being socially acceptable members of society. Consequently, this may lead to the ‘cancelled’ committing the same offences that had them cancelled in the first place. It is worth noting that most digital feminist literature emphasises call-out culture, but that there seems to be a dearth of research that covers the phenomenon of cancel culture, even though it is intricately linked to the former. This may be because feminist scholars might be hesitant to point out the shortcomings inherent in some of these activist practices. Those who do wish to shed light on these flaws may fear being accused of anti-feminism or disrupting the seemingly steady progress made by contemporary feminism in challenging various challenges faced by women.

Apart from the one-sided views that either approve or disapprove of call-out culture and cancel culture, the chapter also examined neutral and nuanced perspectives. The neutral views offered a balanced assessment of the pros and cons associated with call-out culture and cancel culture, presenting the dual nature that gives a comprehensive picture of these practices. Some participants claimed that although instances of misconduct may occur, the incidents of call-out culture and cancel culture are less frequent than those of abuse, harassment, or VAW. This line of thinking suggests that the abuse of these social media practices is relatively insignificant. Additionally, it was recognised that when powerful individuals are involved, those who perform the call-out may face legal consequences, regardless of whether the alleged perpetrator is guilty. In extreme cases, the person may resort to committing suicide should they not be

believed. Lastly, some participants argued that call-out culture and cancel culture should be used by both men and women, and by extension, by all genders, since it is believed that all genders are equally capable of victimising another. This viewpoint denounces the exclusivity of these social media cultures to only women victims. Similarly, D'Avanzato et al. (2021) analysed a tweet stating that men also suffer at the hands of women, and therefore, there should be a hashtag for them. In essence, this viewpoint suggests that it should be recognised that men can also be victims of violence perpetrated by women.

This chapter also explored the views on the resistance towards the #MenAreTrash narrative, particularly through the application of the #NotAllMen counter-discourse. Generally, the findings reveal that the formation of the #NotAllMen counter-discourse was unjustified, and the common sentiment was that it invalidated women's experiences of abuse (Matebese 2017) by taking a defensive stance and deflecting attention from the core issues that the #MenAreTrash DFA was trying to bring to the fore. Similarly, the exploratory study on public reactions to the #NakedProtest on Facebook showed that some comments were derailing from the conversation the campaign sought to initiate and trivialising the message behind the protest. The #NotAllMen counter-discourse was also accused of attempting to downplay the urgency of addressing VAW by associating the #MenAreTrash narrative with individual men as opposed to broader social structures that contribute to VAW and related issues. This finding was also reported by D'Avanzato et al. (2021), who found that some comments suggested the need to direct the focus on the role of societal factors and institutions that promoted VAW, thereby shifting the attention from individual social actors to underlying broader social forces.

This chapter also reported the narratives that are in favour of the #NotAllMen counter-discourse, deeming it reasonable and justified. The views that emerged, mainly from in-depth interviews, underscored the fact that resistance and opposition are integral elements of activism. Unlike much of the previous literature on DFA, which usually interprets any form of resistance towards feminist activism as fundamental acts of anti-feminist, online misogyny, backlash, online harassment, toxic masculinity and so on (Megarry 2014; Jordan 2016; Puente 2017; Mendes et al. 2019; Sener 2021; Reneses and Bosch 2023), the findings of this study reveal that counter-discourses are regarded as an opportunity to establish critical discourses around the issue of VAW also to test the validity claim of the hegemonic discourse like #MenAreTrash (Kaye 2014). According to counter-discourse theory, even though mainstream discourse has a powerful influence over society, complete dominance is not always possible since there is always a gap through which marginal discourse can break in (Laclau and Mouffe

1985). This means that #MenAreTrash as a dominant discourse that sought to dictate the understandings and explanations of the relationship between men and VAW, rape, and femicide was bound to be opposed and challenged by counter-narratives such as #NotAllMen.

Interestingly, one participant pointed out that most men who were part of the counter-discourses were civil and diplomatic instead of misogynist and chauvinist. This is corroborated by Reneses's and Bosch's (2023) research on men's perceptions on #MenAreTrash that indicate that a significant number of men, as well as some women, rejected the #MenAreTrash hashtag, highlighting the struggle to identify with its labelling despite agreeing with the underlying issues. This suggests that the #NotAllMen narrative sought to shift the focus away from a dominant discourse of #MenAreTrash and present alternative views and understandings of VAW (Oparinde and Matsha 2021). Makama et al. (2019) also advance that there needs to be alternative discourses of men and masculinities that shift away from constructions of men as trash or problems.

Moreover, the #NotAllMen counter-discourse was regarded as justifiable on the premise that #MenAreTrash was an unfair and unrealistic generalisation of men as inherently violent. This view is grounded in the recognition of positive masculinities and profeminist men who pursue justice for victims of VAW and those who treat women respectfully. Some participants referenced men who exhibit positive qualities, and who are known by and live among the supporters of the #MenAreTrash narrative. Perhaps the most insensitive and perilous aspect of generalisations is the assumption and default ascription of the status 'trash' to all men, including "the future men that will still be born, or little boys who are growing up towards becoming men ... by virtue of them being men" (Michelle). Previous research highlights the issue with the generalisation imbedded in the #MenAreTrash narrative; for instance, D'Avanzato et al. (2021) shows that some comments critiqued the hashtag, arguing that #MenAreTrash is overgeneralising, and therefore, ineffective in engaging men as allies to prevent VAW. These posts and comments suggested a more specific approach that addresses the behaviours of individuals rather than making broad generalisations.

Ultimately, the findings explored the question of whether the #MenAreTrash construct was a proper way to engage men on the issue of VAW and related issues such as rape, sexual assault, and femicide. There were competing views on this matter, but most participants condemned this approach. The dissenting voices maintained that the #MenAreTrash hashtag was problematic, ineffective, and counterproductive, meaning the hashtag may have worked against

itself. This viewpoint is supported by Sanger (2019), who points out that feminist activism such as #MenAreTrash unwittingly works against hard-won gains accumulated by feminists, especially in the context of the Global South. The findings further indicated that this hashtag made it difficult for men to engage with it, thereby alienating them. Not only did it alienate them, but it was also dubbed as dehumanising and posed an existential crisis to South African men, causing them to feel worthless and demotivating them from participating in the VAW discourse. Decolonial feminist scholars also accuse the tendency of academic and public discourses to demonise and construct men and boys, particularly Black ones, as inherently problematic (Makama et al. 2019). Such portrayals reinforce unhelpful mindsets and harmful stereotypes about men and overlook the diversity and complexity of individual characters. Some views in the chapter contended that constant exposure to the Men Are Trash phrase may have a negative psychological impact on men, such as a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, instead of influencing men to refrain from ‘trashy’ behaviour, the hashtag could have reinforced the belief that, indeed, they are trash and should conduct themselves as such.

For those who hold the view that the approach executed by the #MenAreTrash DFA was appropriate and effective, the common sentiment was that women had exhausted their avenues to address men on the issue of VAW. The proponents of the DFA maintained that at some point, women attempted to address VAW through diplomatic approaches and strategies but these approaches proved less effective in bringing about the desired social change (Mukufa 2020). Resultantly, harsh rhetoric was deliberately employed as a last resort to illicit reactions and responses in the wake of atrocities committed by men against women (Engelbrecht 2020). This marked a shift towards a more militant form of activism that sought to disrupt complacency and obliviousness, and ultimately challenge the social structure that enable VAW to persist. Moreover, the advocates of #MenAreTrash asserted that women are well within their rights to choose how to express their grievances and engage in protest. In other words, they reject any attempts that sought to dictate the dynamics and parameters of their activism.

To conclude, this chapter examined the #MenAreTrash DFA by exploring its meanings, definitions, and objectives. The chapter subsequently examined the perceptions and attitudes towards the #MenAreTrash DFA which revealed that despite its positive impact, the provocative approach of the #MenAreTrash DFA in addressing men raised concerns regarding the potential alienation of men and possible negative psychological impacts. Furthermore, the chapter investigated the role of call-out culture and cancel culture in facilitating justice for victims of abuse, sexual harassment, rape, and related offences. However, the chapter also

emphasised the misuse of these social media cultures, which has been demonstrated to have severe consequences. It also analysed its intersections with counter-discourses, particularly #NotAllMen, which sought to challenge the generalising and perceived repugnant aspect of the #MenAreTrash DFA. The chapter examined two contradictory viewpoints on the #MenAreTrash counter-discourses, presenting both justifications for and disapproval of it.

The subsequent chapter examines the factors identified as challenges and barriers that may have affected the effectiveness of the #MenAreTrash DFA, and it proposes potential solutions for some of these issues.

## **CHAPTER 6: CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS AFFECTING DIGITAL FEMINIST ACTIVISM AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS**

### **6.1 Introduction**

While the preceding chapters emphasised various ways in which #MenAreTrash contributed to the fight against VAW and related issues, the current chapter examines the challenges and barriers embedded in DFA, (even beyond #MenAreTrash). It specifically delves into the dynamics surrounding the challenges and barriers that may have hindered the optimal performance of the #MenAreTrash DFA. The chapter then explores potential solutions that can be adopted to overcome these obstacles. The ultimate goal is to provide insights into the development of an online environment that inculcates strong and fruitful support for DFA.

### **6.2 Challenges and Barriers to Digital Feminist Activism: External and Internal Factors**

The limitations associated with the #MenAreTrash DFA coalesced into two overarching categories, namely external and internal factors. External factors refer to the barriers and challenges extraneous to the activism, and internal factors point to the limitations that originated and emerged from the DFA itself. Collectively, both external and internal factors were hindrances to the ambitions and objectives of #MenAreTrash DFA.

#### **6.2.1 *External factors***

Online victim-blaming is one of the external factors that interfered with the work the activists were trying to do. Acknowledging that DFA on its own cannot end VAW, the lack of institutional response by government and legal systems was also identified as one of the factors that hinder the progress of DFA like #MenAreTrash. Moreover, the role of ‘complicit masculinities’ in VAW adds another layer to these challenges. These are men who do not violate nor abuse women, but they allow for abuse to be perpetuated by virtue of being silent and inactive in preventing VAW.

### 6.2.1.1 Online victim-blaming

The following extracts capture the pervasive tendency to blame victims of VAW and rape for their own victimisation in the context of DFA, as exemplified by #MenAreTrash. Those who identify online victim-blaming as a problem state that people are more inclined to rationalise the reasons a woman was murdered by a man, and they tend to question the victim about the conditions that could have led to her victimisation. This tendency is regarded as problematic as it interferes with the efforts to address VAW. This is according to Chi and Converse in the excerpts below:

People are committed to misunderstanding in that they don't want to understand the underlying layer or the basis of #MenAreTrash, right, because they want to victim-blame. They use that and the want to victim-blame: "So, she was killed by a man, but what did she do?" Reply: "*Umnikeze is'dliso*" [She gave him a lover portion] or "She was killed by a man. She didn't want to leave the married man". **(Chi; 27 years old; heterosexual woman; master's student)**

You see these posts, someone will say, "This lady has been killed after being with this man for 17 years". And people will be still asking questions around, "But why did she stay for that long?" "Why was he making him angry?" So, you know, in this, I think there are challenges in terms of behavioural and attitude issues. **(Converse; 31 years old; heterosexual man; lecturer)**

The tendency of victim-blaming is also highlighted by Linda. He refers to a typical example in which the victims of VAW become subjected to interrogation about their choice of clothing that might have "provoked" the attack on them. Linda finds this line of questioning absurd since it is not applied in other contexts where a crime like robbery, for instance, is committed. The victim is rarely asked what they had done to get robbed. In addition, Nondumiso refers to an example of pervasive online victim-blaming. She mentions a specific case of a young woman called Namhla who was shot dead in one of the locations in South Africa, and since this incident caught social media attention, she observed that some individuals implied that the murdered woman must have done something to end up getting shot. The following are the accounts from Linda and Nondumiso:

You find, you find yourself in a situation where the victim suddenly becomes victimised. Suddenly the victim is being asked, "What were you wearing?" This never happens to somebody who goes and reports a crime, maybe a robbery. If your cell phone gets stolen, nobody asks you, "Were you flashing it in the street?". Why

is it okay to ask a woman “What were you wearing?” when she comes to report a rape? Why is it okay to ask a woman, “What did you do to provoke this attack on yourself?” Whoever does that? Whoever actually invites an attack on themselves? **(Linda; man; author, radio personality, entrepreneur, and Daily Thetha guest, 2017)**

“What did she do wrong?”. There was actually someone who wrote something about Namhla, the recent gender-based violence victim who was gunned down in Mthatha. So, there was actually one guy, and obviously, it’s not just one guy; there are also women who share the same type of mentality, saying no man will beat you for no reason. **(Nondumiso; 32 years old; heterosexual woman; PhD candidate)**

#### *6.2.1.2 A lack of institutional response to violence against women*

This theme reflects yet another factor that undermines the efforts by DFA to mitigate VAW. The views herein highlight the reluctance of government and legal systems to respond to the clarion call made by DFA. There is a palpable frustration over the incidents of VAW and femicide, given that we live in the social media age, which is marked by a heightened level of awareness of the issues just mentioned. Despite this awareness, there is an apparent unresponsiveness by government organisations and legal institutions whose performance is questionable when dealing with the issues around VAW. The inadequacies of these systems are still a major hurdle to the progress of activism against VAW. Therefore, it is critical to ensure these systems are functional enough to decisively deal with the issue of VAW instead of nurturing the seemingly problematic nature of the #MenAreTrash hashtag. Brave and Jabulile describe the challenge as follows:

I think in the problem itself, they’ve got a solution. If you already know where the problem lies, the absence of legitimate systems to really deal with this is where the problem is. So, instead of encouraging a movement that may perpetuate another problem, let’s direct our efforts towards fixing the system that we are already aware is not effective. **(Bravo; 31 years old; heterosexual man; men’s rights activist)**

Femicide has been happening for too long. For it in this age of social media to still be happening at this pace and there’s no organisation that we know of. The government is not doing anything. There’s a Department of Women and Children but you don’t even know what the hell their job is. **(Jabulile; 36 years old; heterosexual woman; lecturer)**

There is also a realisation that regardless of the widespread protests and awareness raising online, there seems to be a wide gap between these outcries of women and the attention from the government. The only reaction from the government are symbolic responses of sympathy and consolation, which are insufficient to deal concretely with the issue of VAW. The following dialogue reflects Palesa's opinion on the matter:

**Palesa:** It doesn't get to the government. So, you're talking about all these things, but it's not reaching the government because a lot of people, a lot of women to be specific, are always talking about GBV. "We need to stop this", you know, like having all these protests on online. But nothing ever changes because the opinions are not reaching the government.

**Interview:** Umm, alright. So, somebody might say the president has had some sort of speech or address about gender-based violence, and that was due to attention that was brought by social media. What would you say?

**Palesa:** Mhm ... I think it's a matter of he is hearing it from ... I don't know. Online, a story gets changed as time goes by. So, he's not engaging, physically engaging with these individuals because I feel like it's different to go on to social media and see a tweet made by person, but you're not actually understanding the deeper emotion. You can sympathise, which I think it's something the government knows how to do, is just sympathise. I would ask if he actually went down to speak with these people, specifically, that tweet that he came across, the person who made that tweet, or was it the thing of "OK, we're compiling all these different tweets that were made by different people, and we're coming to this specific conclusion". But what about actually talking to and communicating physically and engaging with individuals? Yeah. **(Palesa; 20 years old; heterosexual woman; student)**

### 6.2.1.3 *The role of 'complicit masculinities' in violence against women*

The concept of 'complicit masculinities' is borrowed from Connell's (2005) masculinity framework. In this framework, complicit masculinities exist alongside other types of masculinities, namely hegemonic, subordinate, and marginalised masculinities (Wilson et al. 2010). While complicit masculinities do not actively engage in practices that are oppressive to women, they indirectly enact social practices that approximate men's dominant status (Creighton et al. 2013). In the context of this study, complicit masculinities refer to those men who may not engage in acts associated with VAW but display silent and passive acceptance of such acts or even fail to take a stand against them. The following extracts illuminate how men's

passive behaviour towards violent acts and behaviour towards women also undermine the attempts made by DFA to mitigate VAW. For instance, Chaze, Chi, and Masixole believe that the hesitance of “men who may consider themselves not to be violent” (Chaze) to condemn any behaviour or action that may lead or may have led to the victimisation of a woman contributes to the perpetuation of misogyny and VAW. In other words, while non-violent men may reject any association with those who are violent towards women, their mere silence around violent men locates them in the category of men who perpetuate VAW. These are the sentiments from Chaze, Chi, and Masixole in the following excerpts:

Misogyny continues to exist not only because of the men who are violent but also all of the other men who may consider themselves not to be violent that condone that behaviour and will never, in any situation, or rarely in any situation, stand up and tell that man, “You know, this is the place you need to be in”. But they want everybody else to believe that only the misogynists are trash. But it’s like by association, you know. **(Chaze; woman; The Mail & Guardian contributor, 2017)**

If you are on the sideline as a good man, and you’re not saying anything, you are as guilty as the person that is committing the crime because in their spaces, are they also having conversations with themselves to say, “*Eh Mfethu* [friend], you are not meant to do 1-2-3” or “This is not how you address a woman”. **(Chi; 27 years old; heterosexual woman; master’s student)**

So, what you often find in men is a defence that not all men [are] trash. We agree that we are not the same, but we can also agree that what other people do in the name of men also affects us collectively, and our silence or quietness on the issue makes us complicit in the status quo as it is today. **(Masixole; man; UCT SRC member and ‘fallist’, 2017)**

Citing the news that involved the former US President Donald Trump, Nkanyezi reveals how men in their private spaces, such as the “locker rooms”, engage in conversations that demean women. She maintains that failing to acknowledge how such interactions contribute to the normalisation of harmful attitudes makes men ‘trash’, even though they want to appear innocent in society. She puts it as follows:

And if you remember that time, you also had Trump in the locker and his excuse for the disgusting, vile comments he said about that journalist. His co-accused was: “Ah but it was locker room chats. It was never meant to be recorded”. And my thing is

that a lot of men agreed with that, which means men are trash when they're together. And they don't speak to remove the trashy parts that society forces them. Because some of it is learned. Society forces you to be trash. But I'm not saying you, I mean, as a man, it forces men to be trash. And in agreeing to comments like, "It's just locker room, and so that's what we talk about you know. We talk about women and the pussy". The fact that they don't realise the ramifications of a comment like that and that it's okay in certain spaces means that there's something very trashy about that. **(Nkanyezi; 28 years old; bisexual woman; researcher and activist)**

### **6.2.2 Internal factors**

In the context of DFA, #MenAreTrash, in this case, internal factors can be defined as the challenges and barriers that originate from within the formation itself that may have undermined its impact. These types of obstacles affect how the activism is perceived, received, and propagated. In this study, several internal factors emerged from the data, namely the application of the hashtag to issues irrelevant to VAW; the hashtags ephemeral nature; an unfocused debate around the hashtag; separatist feminist activism; and alienating feminist activism. The following subsections provide insights into how each of these constraints uniquely contributed to undermining the impact that the #MenAreTrash DFA was anticipated to have on VAW.

#### *6.2.2.1 Applying the hashtag to issues irrelevant to violence against women*

While the initial purpose of #MenAreTrash was to mainly address VAW in the country, the findings reveal how the hashtag was used for other motives. Its use became a broad and ambiguous internet trend that was used to 'trash' men for varied reasons, ranging from serious issues to humour and even mundane aspects of life such as dating dynamics. For instance, men would be labelled trash for not providing financial support, commonly known as a 'girlfriend allowance' to their partners. These views, although expressed in slightly varied ways, are reflected in the following quotes by Hector, Nkanyezi, Thandaza, Sunflower, and Palesa:

Men were trash for serious things, men were trash for humour, men were trash for heartbreak. And yeah, a whole lot of other things that weren't directly related to this actual thing. It literally became an internet trend more than an addressable sociopolitical issue. **(Hector; 27 years old; heterosexual man; software developer)**

Nkanyezi illustrates how different people perceived the activism in varied ways:

I think that's why I enjoyed this study because it uses one hashtag to bring together so many aspects and to share how different people perceive this movement. Was that movement a joke for someone? Because it became a joke for some: "Yho! #MenAreTrash. Yho, guys it was raining, and a male classmate of mine had an umbrella. He didn't give it to me #MenAreTrash". Now, we're having expectations upon what people need to do with their own personal belongings. **(Nkanyezi; 28 years old; bisexual woman; researcher and activist)**

Thandaza points out that the hashtag was abused by social media users by attaching "unnecessary" content to it:

Because I think also with this trash trend, it got to a point whereby now for example, if a man was not giving his partner girlfriend allowance, then that man was perceived as trash. And you find that it's not even supposed to be like that. What are the reasons? What are the basis of the men giving or not giving the allowance? What is the agreement between him and the partner? So, I feel like the trend, it got to a point whereby they started involving things that were just unnecessary. **(Thandaza; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; student and volunteer)**

Similarly, Sunflower and Palesa note that the #MenAreTrash hashtag became anarchic and derailed from its original purpose:

You know, the #MenAreTrash thing, I think it's spiralled out of control in the sense that it went in such a way on Twitter that it stopped being about violence. It stopped being about men killing women and so forth. It actually spiralled into a sense of saying, in our relationships, people were now like: "He started cheating. This is what he did". "Yho! My boyfriend did this ... He did this when he was ...", you know, all of that. But it wasn't necessarily based on violence towards women. They moved it into more personal stories of their own and then put the hashtag on normal relationship problems such as cheating and so forth. So, it kind of missed the plot eventually, from what I saw, or what I still see on social media. **(Sunflower; 29 years old; heterosexual woman; UNICEF consultant and university resident head)**

Okay. Firstly, the problem that I have with the hashtag. One, it is ambiguous in nature. Its ambiguity makes it about a whole lot of things. Women are now making it about a boyfriend that dumped her last week, or about a boyfriend that's continuously lying to her, a boyfriend that cheated. The real issue here is that somebody died; somebody lost their lives; condolences to the family. And we need

to make it about that issue. So, the ambiguity detracts from that issue. **(Palesa; 20 years old; heterosexual woman; student)**

The common concern from all the participants is the deviation of the #MenAreTrash hashtag from its initial purpose to addressing matters unrelated to VAW. This dilution of the primary focus weakened the impact of the activism to a certain degree.

#### 6.2.2.2 *Ephemerality of #MenAreTrash*

The insights herein shed light on the short-lived and reactive nature of the #MenAreTrash DFA. For example, Simphiwe and Siphso note that #MenAreTrash usually resurfaces and gains prominence after a horrific GBV incident occurs. They explain this point as follows:

It is said that every time we are reminded of the fact that men are trash is after a horrific domestic violence incident or to be more specific, a gender-based violence committed against a female or by a male. Then we rise up and say, “Men are trash...men are trash”. I remember reading about two or three women who were ... throughout the period of December 2019, two or three women who trended that is, who trended on social media, who were either killed or badly beaten up by their significant others. I know, there was a lady, she was lesbian, and she was brutally raped and murdered for being lesbian. And that’s the only time we hear the slogan #MenAreTrash. **(Simphiwe; woman; Necessary Conversations YouTube channel host, 2020)**

You know we live in times where trends are more valued than actual things that happen in social society. Hence, they only prosper at certain times, not like on a normal basis. So, take #MenAreTrash or a GBV or whatever; they only trend when something happens. So, they are trigger related. They’re reactive more than active. **(Siphso; 27 years old; heterosexual man; candidate attorney)**

Michelle criticises DFA for its inconsistency, referring to a specific incident of femicide that was overlooked by DFA along other murders of women. She further notes that the #MenAreTrash hashtag thrived alongside other social media-based protests in South Africa. This social media activism zeitgeist was marked by a series of protests around issues of education and politics (Section 2.4), and as such, the #MenAreTrash DFA barely existed on its own. Michelle elaborates this point as follows:

If you notice, Dr [referring to the interviewer], is that after the #MenAreTrash concept had emerged, it’s somehow just died away and there was never again a

continuous discussion around it. Nobody talks really much about this whole thing of GBV and femicide. In fact, women are still dying today. Even now, today, women are still dying, femicide ... there was the matter of Chesney Hayes. There was the matter so many other women who died at the hands of men. But #MenAreTrash brigade was nowhere to be found. Where are they now? They didn't say anything. So that #MenAreTrash concept, it came during a certain wave of activism in South Africa in between the period of, I think it was just shortly after #FeesMustFall and it was #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, #ZumaMustFall, #MenAreTrash. It came like in episodes, sporadic protests and activism matters occurring in South Africa. **(Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer)**

While DFA is commended for its impact in “forcing action”, it is criticised for its lack of continuity. The use of the word ‘momentum’ by Nkanyezi and Sunflower points to the inability of DFA, not just #MenAreTrash, to maintain momentum in protesting and confronting issue of VAW, rape, and femicide in the country. Nkanyezi and Sunflower criticise DFA in the following excerpts:

So, I think social media can do a variety of things in terms of maintaining momentum when it comes to forcing action. But again, the negative part of it is it's easier for it to lose momentum. **(Nkanyezi; 28 years old; bisexual woman; researcher and activist)**

What I hate about how feminists operate is that whatever the newest thing is, or the newest story, or the newest case that we are dealing with spirals up and then it loses momentum. And it just goes down for very long time, and then it picks up again. And then it drops. And I think that's what's very lacking in South Africa. It's ought to be a continuous movement. **(Sunflower; 29 years old; heterosexual woman; UNICEF consultant and university resident head)**

### 6.2.2.3 *An unfocused debate around #MenAreTrash*

While a discourse around any issue of public concern is expected to yield positive results and progressive solutions, as the theory of public sphere and communicative action suggests, the views presented in this subsection reveal that the debates around the #MenAreTrash hashtag were fruitless. Participants in the study, along with voices from various multimedia sources, displayed concerns that the debate diverted and derailed attention from core issues of VAW,

rape, and femicide. Doti, for instance, an interviewee in the City Press<sup>13</sup>, believes this debate is something we would not even bother participating in since it has little to do with the main issue. Rommel, another interviewee for the same newspaper, echoes the same sentiment, stating that the prolonged engagement about which men are trash, which men are not, has no bearing on preventing the issues that #MenAreTrash was trying to tackle. The following are the inputs from Doti and Rommel:

You know, I think that for me, that whole debate is a non-starter. It's something that I don't even want to discuss because it derails from the actual issue. **(Doti; man; interviewee in City Press, 2017)**

People went on and on and on and on about whether they're trash or not, and that doesn't change anything. It doesn't stop the next woman from being killed. **(Rommel; man; interviewee in City Press, 2017)**

Thandi, an ANN7<sup>14</sup> news channel guest, who happens to be a life coach, expresses her contempt for #MenAreTrash. She asserts that the slogan “violates the constitutional rights of men to dignity”. Resultantly, the focus shifted from the issues of concern to the debates around the hashtag itself and notions about it. Going forward, she suggests that there must be a constructive national dialogue that focuses on healing both men and women and finding viable solutions to the problem at hand. Below is Thandi's explanation:

If you look at the content of what people are saying, they're actually focusing on the hashtag instead of the issue that is supposed to be discussed. Femicide has not come up as it ought to. Rape has not come up as it ought to. But we are debating on whether men are really trash and which section is not, et cetera. I don't like the hashtag personally because I think it's violent. I think it violates the constitutional rights of men to dignity. I also think that it takes away from such a valid cause by distracting us to focus on men being trashed instead of what we need to focus on, which is people's children who are dying. Patriarchy has messed society up, and we need to have a national dialogue that moves us forward in healing both sexes. I don't think you can heal one leg of society by trashing the other one. I think we need to bring both legs forward and move forward and say, look, we've come to this place where

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<sup>13</sup> South African news brand that publishes on multiple platforms. Its flagship print edition is distributed nationally on Sunday, and it has a daily newsletter, online platform, and other social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. <https://www.news24.com/citypress>

<sup>14</sup> ANN7 was a 24-hour satellite TV news channel in South Africa that operated from August 2013 to August 2018.

we are dying in massive numbers, where we are being raped in masses. **(Thandi; woman; life coach and ANN7 guest, 2017)**

#### 6.2.2.4 *Separatist feminist activism: 'War of sexes' in the realm of digital feminist activism*

Another notable feature in the realm of DFA is the conflict between men and women about gender issues (Flood 2019). hooks (1984) noted that a strong ambition and assertion demonstrated by feminists in challenging patriarchal structures is usually interpreted as a declaration of war between men and women. The #MenAreTrash DFA is a classic example of this notion because of its arguably harsh linguistic confrontation of men. For this reason, it is unsurprising that this DFA has been accused of giving rise to a 'war of sexes' on social media platforms like Twitter (Makama et al. 2019). The subsequent extracts show how #MenAreTrash instigated conflicts that, to a certain extent, led to division in the views and beliefs between genders. This subsection is linked to the previous one in that they both shed light on the factors that played a role in distracting the cause from its original purpose.

In describing the impact of #MenAreTrash in addressing VAW through social media platforms, Thandaza states that this DFA became a source of conflict. Mamabolo and Nondumiso expand on this by noting that while #MenAreTrash made people talk, the engagement barely revolved around the issues of concern, and instead, contained counter-narratives coming from men. As such, Mamabolo perceives the hashtag as a "destructive, confusing fire that divides the gap between genders". Thandaza explained, "But I think it has also caused, I don't know if I should call it conflict".

By stating that the aim of #MenAreTrash was not to "...divide us, but rather to bring us as a society together so that we can actually work together towards fighting this issue that is within society", Nondumiso acknowledges one of the unintended consequences of attempting to fight against what is perceived as a societal issue. This view is further supported by Nondumiso, Mamabolo, and Jabulile as in the excerpts below:

Now we are divided between the North and the South, where we have women saying men are trash, and then men are defending themselves. I don't think the aim was to divide us, but rather to bring us as a society together so that we can actually work together towards fighting this issue that is within society. But then the unfortunate thing is that it has actually led to a division within society of which was not the main aim at the beginning. The aim was to raise awareness. **(Nondumiso; 32 years old; heterosexual woman; PhD candidate)**

So, did it get the people talking? Yes, it did, to what effect did they talk about it? They defended themselves against the tag, whereas the idea was not the tag. So, what then is the tag? The tag is a destructive, confusing fire that divides the gap between genders. **(Mamabolo; man; life coach and Daily Thetha guest, 2017)**

For me, this (#MenAreTrash DFA) thing is causing a division between men and women. So now we have the good and the bad. Not only is this causing a division between men and women, but it's also further causing a division between men and men. Which then further cause a problem because the bad men now don't have the good men to listen to. And when the good men will want to address the bad or the perpetrators, what are they gonna say? "You think you're better than us because you're on the other side". So, for me, it loses the plot completely because it feeds into that thing of 'divide and conquer'. **(Jabulile; 36 years old; heterosexual woman; lecturer)**

There is also a concern about being compelled to embrace and accept the dominant discourse of #MenAreTrash while in the process dismissing alternative narratives from men. The idea of allowing alternative discourses is well presented in counter-discourse theory, which argues that the goal is to provide other ways of perceiving an issue instead of relying on a single dominant narrative (Oparinde and Matsha 2021). In this case, rejecting men's voices only breeds conflict in the country, which means no one is working toward the common vision of eradicating VAW. Michelle articulates this view as follows:

If we are going to be dismissive of men and their views, then we are already inculcating a culture of toxicity of some sort between the two genders, between women and men. Because if we accept now, for example #MenAreTrash, and we just accept that men are trash. That is it! How are we building? How's that part of nation building? It sounds more like tearing apart, in fact, it's now a conflict between men and women. Is it now an argument between these two genders of who's trashier than the others. **(Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer)**

#### *6.2.2.5 Alienation of men: Problematisation, exclusion, misandry, and racial bias*

The final set of internal factors that were identified as obstacles to the efficacy of the #MenAreTrash DFA relates to men's experiences of alienation that prevent them from participating in issues that affect women, specifically VAW. These barriers and challenges can be classified into three distinct yet interconnected factors, namely the problematisation of men,

exclusionary feminist activism, misandrist feminist activism, and racially biased activism. Collectively, these factors posed significant challenges and barriers in terms of support, allyship, and the overall success of the #MenAreTrash DFA.

Modiegi and Lee state that the role of men in feminist issues, such as VAW, is a problem. They argue that profeminist men, along with those who just wish to contribute their views in matters that mainly concern women, undermine women's lived experiences and disrupt the established order in the feminist social organisation. Modiegi strongly rejects the membership of men as feminists on the basis that it would be absurd to "be part of the problem and want to be part of the solution". As such, men's understanding of women's experiences is limited to sympathy and not lived experiences. This point is well articulated by Crowe (2011) as he states that men's understanding and experience of women's suffering are limited because men are simply not women. For this reason, men's inability to go through women's lived experiences disqualifies them from becoming feminists. Furthermore, Lee contends that there is a risk of suppressing the voices of women and of exhausting the space in which they raise their issues if men become involved in feminist issues. Modiegi responded as follows when asked whether male feminists are also part of the problem included in #MenAreTrash:

...if we understand how feminism came about ... you know that there's a notion that says patriarchy affects both men and women, which is true, you know. I do not dispute that fact. However, when it comes to the ideologies behind feminism, it speaks to women's liberation. It speaks to femme bodies, and so on and so forth. You can't be part of the problem and want to be part of the solution [chuckles]. How are you going to represent the person who feels victimised by you? What do you mean when you say you are a male feminist? You can only be a sympathiser to feminism. In the townships when I walk every day, I have to experience a group of guys there. In a way, I must find a way to protect myself. How, then, do you come as a man and say, "I am a feminist"? You sympathise with my pain, you are not a feminist. **(Modiegi; woman; UCT student and SRC member, 2017)**

This is what Lee had to say regarding the challenges faced by DFA:

I know one of the challenges is, I think it's just allowing hashtags and narratives to kind of play out online. So, I'm thinking of one of the examples that I've heard before around ... so when this hashtag started trending, and people are telling their stories under these hashtags, and men and other and other people that want to come on board and support kind of take away the limelight, so it's like a cis-man coming

into a queer space and wanting to speak. It kind of draws away from giving space or allowing time for this group to kind of unpack and tell their stories. So, I think for me, the disadvantage is around just having the victims' voices kind of suppressed by other narratives, or the other people coming to the space with their own narratives. So, it can be narratives of support, which can be counter-narratives as well. **(Lee; 34 years old; non-binary [they/them]; communication specialist)**

The exclusion of men from issues that affect women is also illustrated in the narratives of Siphso, Bravo, and Thandaza. In responding to the question of what barriers are linked to the inefficiency of DFA like #MenAreTrash, these participants mentioned the animosity experienced by men who attempt to provide solutions for addressing VAW. Remarks such as “We don’t need a man to tell us how we are impacted or how we are abused” and “You are just as the murderer. That means you’re also capable of murdering a lady” exemplify the depth of resistance, exclusion, and intolerance of men’s contribution to finding solutions to the problem at hand. Moreover, Bravo, and Thandaza reveal that feminists also dismiss any view that seeks to challenge their standpoints regardless of how relevant or rational that viewpoint is. In the face of such alienation, Siphso is of the view that men may have no choice but to withdraw from being the allies of feminist-led activism, especially DFA. The lack of support from men due to perceived alienation from feminist activism is #MenAreTrash noted by scholars such as Kempen (2019) as unproductive to the cause. The following excerpts from Siphso, Bravo and Thandaza capture these ideas:

So, you get people who don’t wanna listen. I’m not saying they should listen to everyone out there. But I’m just saying that the more input we have, the more likely we are to solve the problem. So, that’s one of the challenges that face us as the gents who are willing to support, because violence against *anyone* is a problem. More especially if it’s against the weaker gender, which is women, physically weaker. [...] It’s gonna be a challenge to me because I’m silenced, but I’m also supposed to support you. It doesn’t make sense. I’m not a robot, I’m gonna have questions. I’m gonna need clear direction. But if you can’t give me that as a leader of a movement, then what’s the point of me joining this whole thing? So that is one of the challenges that we face. **(Siphso; 27 years old; heterosexual man; candidate attorney)**

There are a lot of challenges when you support a movement such as that one as well. Because in some instances, there’s resistance from the very women who are leading campaigns, we will hear phrases like, “We don’t need a man to tell us how we are impacted or how we are abused”. So, there’s resistance even from the advocates of

the movement themselves. **(Bravo; 31 years old; heterosexual man; men's rights activist)**

One thing I've picked up also on Facebook, whenever there's a maybe there is a trend on violence that took place or somebody murdered a lady, and every time you see a man commenting, maybe wanting to analyse the situation to say: "What might have happened for the men to kill the lady?" Nobody's interested in answering that question. But you'll find women talking to say: "You are just as the murderer. That means you're also capable of murdering a lady. Why would you ask such a question? Fact of the matter is, this lady's dead", you know, and the man is to account for it. So, men, no matter how hard they try, they will always be perceived as having to work extra hard to prove themselves. **(Thandaza; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; student and volunteer)**

Apart from the alienation of men that keeps them from participating in issues affecting women, (Philemon and Siphon) highlight the perceived elements of misandry displayed by DFA of #MenAreTrash. While they acknowledge the necessity of feminist activism to combat VAW, they also identify the instances when women use the cause to drive their own agendas, such as spreading hate and seeking revenge against men who may have wronged them. If this is what activism entails, Siphon's reaction would be to withdraw his support as he states, "What's the point? They already see us as trash, so, what's the point of joining them?". Siphon further states the following:

So, if it's a movement for women, for violence against women, then I'm for it. Everyone should be for it. But don't use the same movement to bastardise men because I'm gonna stay at home and say, "What's the point? They already see us as trash. so, what's the point of joining them?" **(Siphon; 27 years old; heterosexual man; candidate attorney)**

Philemon also cautions against the feminist "cults" that use activism inappropriately, which may undermine the efforts that have been made, for example, positive masculinity transformative programmes, to build trust between men and women. Additionally, such actions perpetuate negative stereotypes about the nature of feminism. Philemon explains this as follows:

I think one of them [challenges] also stems from the point that there are also women who don't understand the motive of feminism. They use feminism to sort of drive violent agendas against men, and then use this thing to their advantage, just similar

to someone who falsely accuses someone of rape. So, that can also be equally as damaging and irresponsible, and it thwarts the efforts that have been made to try to change the narrative around how men treat women. So, I think that way there is that part of liberal feminism where women sort of like come in groups, they create their own sort of cults, and sort of drive agenda to spew hate or to perpetuate hate against men irrespective of who they are or what they've done, and only hate them for the sake of being men. [...] and that's how eventually feminism ends up being perceived as this movement that aims to destroy masculinity, that aims to destroy men in general because of such rogue elements that are destroying the good efforts that have been done by people who are genuinely pushing this cause. **(Philemon; 29 years old; heterosexual man; researcher and Facebook influencer)**

Interesting findings to also emerge are those which indicate the racialised aspect of the #MenAreTrash DFA, as can be seen in the extracts from two students who were participating in the University of Cape Town (UCT) interview survey. Naledi and Lungile divulged that more often than not, the focal point in the #MenAreTrash activism is Black men. Naledi referred to the historical context of South Africa in which the White race perceived Black men as dangerous beings. This fear is captured in the Afrikaans<sup>15</sup> phrase *Swart gevaar* (Black danger). Lungile adds another layer to the subject by referring to the role of the media in contributing to 'trashy' masculinities. She exposes the media for portraying Black men as the perfect examples of toxic masculinity, which influences the perceptions of young boys on how Black masculinities should be. The ultimate impact of this is breeding potential toxic masculinities in the future. The following are the insights from Naledi:

The racialised aspect is when a White woman looks at the #MenAreTrash, who's the first image that comes into mind? It's a Black man, right? And there's a very big history when it comes to White victimhood and Black men. *Swart gevaar* [the notion that Black men are a representation of danger] that I think sometimes appears in this rhetorical when people are talking about #MenAreTrash. **(Naledi; woman; UCT student, 2017)**

Lungile explained the role of the media in perpetuating trashy behaviour as follows:

In #MenAreTrash, when I look at it, it's directed exactly at Black men. Like we don't care about ... let's be honest, I'm not going to take time from my life and be like, "Oh, my God, White men need to change". What's that got to do with me? So,

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<sup>15</sup> One of the South African official languages mostly spoken by White communities.

like the whole thing was a conversation between Black women and Black men, to say, “*Mtase* [Fellow brother/sister], you need to change this”, right. [...] you have this depiction of Black men and toxic masculinity. And then you also have the media that doesn’t give a shit. The media doesn’t care about ... We never had, like nuanced characters of Black masculinity. (Lungile; woman; UCT student, 2017)

This section sought to present the external and internal factors in the #MenAreTrash DFA that present challenges and barriers to realising the hashtag's potential to fight VAW, rape, and femicide in South Africa. The following section delves into potential solutions for both categories of these obstacles.

### **6.3 Potential Solutions to the Challenges and Barriers Affecting Digital Feminist Activism**

The findings in the preceding section shed light on several challenges and barriers in the context of DFA, particularly #MenAreTrash. It was shown that these complexities have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the activism. It is imperative to be not only cognisant of such impediments but also to consider them as stepping stones towards finding viable solutions (Jackson 2018; Turley 2018; Wang and Ouyang 2023). The following subsections therefore discuss proposed solutions and strategies to overcome some of the challenges and barriers previously discussed. These solutions were identified to develop more sustainable, durable, impartial, and inclusive digital feminist communities that are also capable of creating online environments that foster communicative action when engaging on societal issues such as VAW.

Perhaps a good place to start in terms of identifying potential solutions and strategies to deal with some of the challenges attributed to the ineffectiveness of the #MenAreTrash DFA is to examine what can be improved, changed, or amended within the activism itself. To this end, this subsection delves into the idea of rebranding, renaming, or reconsidering #MenAreTrash to be more inclusive, clear, constructive, and impactful. The findings revealed concerns that the name under which the activism operates has created a contentious and controversial environment online, which contributes little to no value to the cause. Hence, the phrase ‘Men Are Trash’ must be reconsidered to address men on the issue of VAW. This recommendation has emerged briefly in Chapter 4. Therefore, the findings in this section will be presented in light of the excerpts provided in that chapter to avoid repetition.

Participants used words like “reconfigure”, “renaming” and “rebranding” to describe the idea that the ‘Men Are Trash’ phrase must be reconsidered due to its psychologically harmful nature and lack of inclusivity. The contention that this wording carries harmful messages stems from the view that it creates a certain negative perception about men, which makes it difficult for some to relate to the cause. Those who are proposing this solution believe that the revision of the #MenAreTrash construct would enable people to engage in discourse that is related to the true objectives of the activism instead of an endless debate about the semantics that surrounds it. Doing so could also shift men’s perception of the narrative as an attack on them. This sentiment is further corroborated by a student from Nelson Mandela University. She suggested the following

### **6.3.1 Digital public pedagogy**

According to scholars like Eudey (2012) and Mendes et al. (2019), in the context of DFA, digital pedagogy can be understood as the use of social media platforms to empower individuals with knowledge about feminist issues through education and engagement (cf. Section 2.2). This strategy promotes community building, awareness raising, collective action, and advocacy for gender equality and social justice (Irving and English 2011). The findings under this subsection underscore the role of education that can flow both between online platforms and offline settings in order to strengthen the influence of DFA. Let us take Kaila, for instance, she believes that open-mindedness is key for those may be interested in learning about DFA and those who are in a position to impart knowledge about the activism. She highlights that it must be acknowledged that people come from diverse educational backgrounds, and that some do not have adequate knowledge to comprehend the concepts common in gender and feminist discourses:

People need to learn to be more open-minded. I would see this come from both sides, even from, you know, the people who need to learn more about the movement, and the people who are explaining the movement as well. They have to understand the background of the person they’re speaking to so that they know how to respond adequately. You can’t just assume that everybody is going to understand and respond to you in the same way and expect them to understand your words immediately because there is a lack of access to education, and not everyone has the same level of education. Not everyone has the same experience and exposure to different concepts and issues in the world. **(Kaila; 20 years old; heterosexual woman; student and activist)**

The concern that the discourse around #MenAreTrash is reserved mainly for the social cohort who possess a relatively higher level of education and knowledge is also raised in by Palesa, a guest on DailyThetha television show. She states that “this has become too intellectualised. This would make sense maybe to an intellectual person. Somebody even said to me the other day, ‘An intellectual will understand this’”.

One of the factors that was identified as an obstacle that may have contributed to the inefficiency of the #MenAreTrash DFA is the prevalence of conflicts that arose on social media platforms, especially Twitter (D’Avanzato et al. 2021). According to Anne, the source of these conflicts can be explained in terms of the limited understanding men have about women’s vulnerability in society. As such, she opines as follows that men should be equipped with knowledge to help them understand the gravity of VAW and related issues:

So, I don’t know if there’s a way to actually squash these conflicts online. But I do believe that better education is always the answer. By providing men with more resources into how women are disproportionately affected by violence that men perpetrate. By explaining how often women face these issues. By explaining the reasons why women face these issues, systemically. They are more likely to be affected. Um, I feel like it can be taught over social media, but also only to an extent because, like I said, everyone’s got their persona on social media, and they kind of always want to be right. But if there’s more prevalence of differing opinions, like ... an exposure to different forms of opinion to different ... access to different education, more reading. Because a lot of social media is reading. We’re reading tweets, we’re thinking thoughts, and typing it out. So, I think that resources just have to be a lot more prevalent. **(Anne; 23 years old; non-binary person [she/they]; ghost writer)**

The importance of education to reduce the tensions that rose from the #MenAreTrash hashtag is further underscored by Moipone, who was one of the guest speakers on the ANN7 news channel. She argued that merely engaging with the hashtag is futile to effect the desired change in women’s lives. She criticised the DFA for its overly simplified generalisation that failed to provide clear criteria for distinguishing which men should be classified as trash and which should not. She concluded that broader education on VAW is more essential than relying on a hashtag such as #MenAreTrash, and explained herself as follows:

Education is more important than making noise about the hashtag. How is it going to change my life if I run with the #MenAreTrash because I do not know to what

extent are they trash. So, if it's unpacked to say that, "This is why we are saying what we say". And when you say, "Not all men ...", I liked what she said [referring to a caller]. She said, "Not all men are ...", but the hashtag says men are trash. It does not say some men are trash. It basically speaks about everyone, be it a father that gave birth to kids, be it a son that we're raising. It's speaking about everybody, you know. I know that there's been drama about pastors and the likes, but we need to be able to stick to the education. Children will be rooted based on that, not based on the hashtag. **(Moipone; woman; image consultant and ANN7 guest, 2017)**

### **6.3.2 Communicative action**

The preceding sub-theme, which emphasises a pedagogical and knowledge-centred approach to tackling issues of VAW and feminist activism is closely related to the idea of communicative action. Communicative action in this regard also speaks to the shortcomings and limitations of social media as public sphere highlighted in Chapter 4, Section 4.3.

Communicative action is a prerequisite for knowledge and education to be shared effectively in the public sphere of social media. As discussed in Chapter 2, communicative action underscores the importance of rational and critical discourse, debates, and discussions on issues of public concern as a means of reaching a mutual understanding that leads to a desired change. The insights presented in this subsection align with Habermas's notion of communicative action as a strategy to overcome some of the obstacles that are prevalent in the domain of DFA. Siphso and Jabulile advocated for men and women to engage in a meaningful dialogue in order to reach a mutual understanding. They contend as follows that the #MenAreTrash DFA lack this feature:

But in order to fix something, there needs to be that dialogue. This hashtag lacks a lot of that. It doesn't address anything. It just tells me that they're trash. **(Siphso; 27 years old; heterosexual man; candidate attorney)**

To just say men are trash, what are we trying to fix if we are not saying, "Women, let's come on plate, men, let's come on plate" and say, "But men, I understand where you come from", so that we can also alter the behaviour. **(Jabulile; 36 years old; heterosexual woman; lecturer)**

According to Anne and Kaila, open-mindedness can create space for a "meaningful" and "respectful conversation" to take place. This process requires both parties to interchange the roles of listeners and speakers so everyone can state their cases through a debate or a discussion

(Kaye 2014). In this way, those who are involved will walk away having learned something from each other. These discussions should involve people who are well-informed on the topic, and in this case, it must be people who are able to use factual information to articulate the necessity for activism against VAW and the justification behind the harsh choice of words for #MenAreTrash. In the same breath, there should also be those who can state sound reasons why such an approach could be unhelpful and offer alternatives. The following are the views of Anne and Kaila:

So, a meaningful conversation kind of like, it would allow for both parties to have a say. Like where you're listening to actually learn something. You're not just letting them speak for you because you feel that they have to. Or you're not listening just so that you can attack them. You're listening with an open mind, maybe to learn something, maybe to show them where they might be going wrong. It has an outcome for both people where nobody walks away feeling like a bit crappy. **(Anne; 23 years old; non-binary person [she/they]; ghost writer)**

So yeah, I do think that it really helps if both parties remain open-minded, and we have a respectful conversation. When the language gets violent, and when it gets threatening, that is when the conversation is no longer the conversation. That's when it's, it becomes scary, and that's when the war begins as you say. I think in the home, it helps if young kids are taught how to engage in discourse, so that no matter what the topic at hand is, whether it's feminism or of a movement as such, or any other social issue, they're able to have discussions about it and now learn more from people who are more well versed on the topic. Yeah, I think that's one thing that's kind of realistic that you hope for that would help. **(Kaila; 20 years old; heterosexual woman; student and activist)**

Not only should the conversation be about the issues themselves but also the philosophical standpoints that underpin the views on those issues. For instance, there should be a conversation about which feminist principle informed the #MenAreTrash activism. This notion highlights the importance of digital public pedagogy, which is an idea supported by the likes of bell hooks (Sener 2021). These sentiments are captured in the following comment by Modiegi:

I think now more than ever comes a discussion for not just women to talk about their own issues, but the people that they find as being problematic should come down to the table and really start talking about it. And in essence, I'm thinking about one of the biggest issues that we can talk about that would have generated from

#MenAreTrash, feminism, you know. What is the patriarch's stance in a feminist agenda? Can a male person be a feminist, you know. Which is a deep conversation. Then we begin to understand the root of feminism, and the historical context of how feminism came about, and how does it propel the #MenAreTrash agenda. So, conversations are gonna take place. I believe so. It is long overdue, you know. The conversation is long overdue. There are moments where people try to talk about it this way but obviously, emotions are involved, and so on and so forth. But I think it's time for us to have discussion tables. Just that really, really engaging on theory, but also social, and political. **(Modiegi; woman; UCT student and SRC member, 2017)**

Like Sipho and Jabulile, Michelle criticises the #MenAreTrash hashtag for not being constructive as she posits that “#MenAreTrash is not going to allow us to create a new generation of responsible and respectful men in the future”. As such, communicative action should entail a conversation about the ways in which men and women can be allies in each other's struggles, and Michelle explains this as follows:

I think we need to then just re-group, I think we need to literally re-group in terms of stopping with the blame games. Let us have a conversation on how men and women can be allies in each other's struggles. Because in the same way, men can be allies of women struggles. Women can also be allies of men's struggles, especially if it's a struggle of #NotAllMen. There can be a woman that can support that struggle as well and say, “No, but there are pregnant women and we wanna raise boy children who are responsible, who are accountable, who are respectful, who are compassionate, who are caring”. That's the type of society that we want and need to strive towards. #MenAreTrash is not going to allow us to create a new generation of responsible and respectful men in the future. That's what I think. **(Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer)**

### **6.3.3 *The extension of digital feminist activism to grassroots levels***

Feminist scholar Barassi (2015) highlights that online activism, as exemplified by DFA, does not guarantee strong sociopolitical bonds that can enable effective interactions, deliberations, and confrontations but that grassroots activism does. This assertion is echoed in the narratives presented in the current subsection. While there is an acknowledgement of the role DFA plays in addressing VAW, most participants believed that this mode of activism must be complemented with physical action. For instance, Anne states that executing activism through

an electronic device is an effortless exercise that anyone can perform, and as such, physical engagement is necessary for impactful outcomes. Below is Anne's explanation:

There's only so much of support that they can get on the screen, and it needs to culminate physically. Because what starts on the screen is just, it's addressing the symptoms. But we can physically do something to change those symptoms. If we take these causes more seriously, if we actually consider that online activism is [real] activism, you know. I think it's important to realise that. I mean, everyone's got access to a phone, so it's very easy to tweet something. But we have to remember that there's a real person behind that. That there are real thoughts and feelings, and experiences behind that. And that's why we have to support it, to make change.

**(Anne; 23 years old; non-binary person [she/they]; ghost writer)**

Philemon supports Anne's view, stating that a direct engagement with people can improve understanding and knowledge about the issue of GBV. He explains his view as follows:

So, as much as there have to be campaigns and things that your social media do, also gender, or feminist activists, have to be on the ground. The activists also have to be on the ground and sort of speak to people directly so that they can understand some of these factors that may be perpetuating gender-based violence. **(Philemon; 29 years old; heterosexual man; researcher and Facebook influencer)**

Siyabula Jentile, the founder of the 'Not in My Name' social movement, suggested that DFA is characterised by the digital divide, which is the gap between the social groups who have access to modern information technology and those who do not or have restricted access. Hence, he suggested that "moving forward, let us go to the people", as shown in the following comment:

I say moving forward, let us go to the people, let us go on the ground and do practical work. Most people don't have TVs. They're not on Twitter. What about them? What are we saying? There's a girl somewhere in a shack who doesn't have a TV, who doesn't have Twitter. They've got no idea what's happening as we as we speak right now. We need to go to the people. **(Siyabulela; man; activist and Daily Thetha guest, 2017)**

Furthermore, Michelle said that there is an overreliance on social media for activism against VAW, stating that while DFA can generate a dialogue, it does not necessarily lead to practical outcomes. She further refers to the stark reality of the digital divide in a country like South Africa where most of the population not only do not have access to social media but also do

not have basic utilities. She points out that the social groups who do not have access to social media, and are hence restricted from participation, are the ones who are most affected by VAW and rape. Therefore, face-to-face interactions are crucial to overcome the digital divide, and by extension, support the most vulnerable. Michelle suggested the following:

Those social media accounts are only on Twitter or only on Facebook. I believe that there's more that has to be done because the conversation can't just only be on social media because not everyone has access to social media. Not everyone has data. Not everyone has Wi-Fi. Not everyone even knows what Zoom is and Google meets and those types of things, especially in a country like South Africa where majority of the country's citizens are living in abject poverty. They don't even have access to water and electricity, let alone to social media. And those are normally the people who are mostly affected by the issues and the crises of the world. Whether it's GBV, whether it's violence from men perpetuated against girls and women. Whether it's corrective rape that is happening in the townships or wherever in suburbs. Not that it's exclusively happening in townships. Yeah, those types of issues that are affecting people, mostly on the ground. **(Michelle; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; research assistant and community developer)**

#### **6.3.4 Cognitive authority**

The findings in this subsection demonstrate how the influence of men's voices can be crucial for DFA in terms of disseminating advocacy messages. This study adopted the concept of 'cognitive authority' to describe men as a social group whose opinions, statements, and interpretations carry weight in endorsing DFA among other men. Cognitive authority is defined as the recognition that is attached to a message based on the perceived expertise or reliability of the source delivering the message (Wilson 1983). According to Crooks et al. (2007), certain messages are likely to receive attention if individuals regard the source of information as knowledgeable and trustworthy on a particular subject. In this instance, the participants believe that men can have a greater influence on other men in terms of convincing them to rally behind DFA like #MenAreTrash to address VAW. For instance, Jessica suggests that DFA can find allies in "good men", who will then influence other men to be receptive to the cause. Jessica states, "I think a man is more likely to listen to another man than they are to women. So, if you can mobilise the good men, then I think then we are moving towards the right direction".

Philemon expands on Jessica's notion, pointing out that men are likely to listen to other men delivering and disseminating certain messages. In the context of #MenAreTrash, men are likely

to interpret the assertions of women as an attack, and as such, he highlights the importance of leveraging the cognitive authority of men to advance the DFA agenda. He explains his thoughts as follows:

Like you as a person, like, as a sensible person, there's also nothing as disheartening as having to explain yourself over and over again to people who are committed to this misunderstanding. Sometimes these things men understand them when they come from other men unlike when they hear them from women because they tend to think if something is said by women, then it's an opposition or a direct attack to their character as men. But now, when they see some of these things coming from other men, that's when they're able to understand that these things are actually not a personal attack, but it's people trying to raise a genuine concern over specific things. **(Philemon; 29 years old; heterosexual man; researcher and Facebook influencer)**

In the excerpt below, Kaila provides a real-life example that proves that men's voices have more influence when delivering certain messages. She expresses frustration over the fact that regardless of how frequently women may raise a certain issue, it is not taken seriously until a man communicates the same issue. She expressed her sentiments as follows:

I find that people are more likely to listen to a man explaining something as compared to women, especially when coming to this. I think a good example would be recently with the internet personality, Andrew Tate, and all the videos he was responsible for making. I saw countless videos and articles by women explaining why his views were harmful, contributing to a bad ... like having negative impact to young boys. But none of the social media platforms really took action despite countless female voices on the matter. I think that it was about not more than a week ago, a male YouTuber [YouTube personality] made a video on the topic and his views were insightful, but it wasn't anything largely different to what women were already saying, but suddenly there was a shift in online spaces. People seemed to understand him more than they understood the women who spoke on the matter, even though their views were pretty much the same. After that, Facebook, Instagram, pretty much all the social media platforms, removed Andrew Tate from online spaces. That's why I think it's very helpful for men to be supportive of these movements because I think it generates more awareness. That's how it is at the moment, and that's what society responds to. **(Kaila; 20 years old; heterosexual woman; student and activist)**

Bravo stated as follows that advocacy messages in the context of DFA like #MenAreTrash may have more impact when they are delivered by perpetrators rather than victims:

I mean, I have written myself, “men are trash”. But it always had a certain context, you know, when we were speaking rape statistics, you know, men are trash, indeed. So, I think it should be supported by those ... even those that are not affected because that’s the nature of advocacy. If only those that are victims or stand to be victims are voicing out their concerns, the impact is not the same as the voice of perpetrators. So, the support of men is important from specifically men in terms of that specific aspect. **(Bravo; 31 years old; heterosexual man; men’s rights activist)**

### ***6.3.5 Models for integrating men in feminist activism***

This subsection examines two approaches that emerged from the data that suggest ways in which men can enhance feminist causes like #MenAreTrash. The first approach is the ‘Men’s Auxiliary Model’, which suggests that men should offer support to women in the struggle for gender equality (Baily 2015). However, this does not mean men should work alongside women as equal partners; instead, they should allow themselves to be led and remain accountable to women-led activism (Kimmel 1998). The second approach is ‘Men Working with Other Men’. This approach entails men working on their own to challenge their privileges and masculinities that contribute to the marginalisation or subjugation of women (Baily 2015). The following subsections explore the findings that align with these models.

#### ***6.3.5.1 Men’s Auxiliary Model***

Kaila’s and Sunflower’s perspectives on how men can best provide support to DFA reflect the Men’s Auxiliary Model. Kaila suggests that men can support DFA by amplifying and endorsing an already existing narrative that women are trying to disseminate. A practical way of doing this is by tweeting and retweeting these narratives so they can reach a wider audience of men. However, Kaila asserts that men should be clear about their role and never cross the boundaries in the process. This means that women’s voices should be at the centre since the struggle (VAW) is about them. Baily (2015) agrees with this sentiment when she maintains that the Men’s Auxiliary Model operates on the assumption that women should exercise self-presentation and autonomy. Moreover, she harshly condemns men for crying wolf about being called ‘trash’ while they do less to nothing to undermine this stereotype. Therefore, she urges

men to collaborate with women by rallying under the #MenAreTrash banner to enhance the cause. The following are the views of Kaila and Sunflower:

I'll speak mainly with regard to Twitter. I think that it would help if men would promote the voices of women on the matter, especially since they have a larger audience. It would be ... like I said, it's really helpful if their explanations are heard as well. If they understand their role in the conversation and understand that they should explain to other men as well how to do this thing. But at the same time, it is an issue that affects women, primarily. So, something that would help is to promote women's voices and retweet the tweets and post so that it reaches larger audiences. And perhaps adding a reply that elaborates on the issue in some way. I think that would be effective. **(Kaila; 20 years old; heterosexual woman; student and activist)**

But it angers me that men just wanna sit back and now be angry about everything. "OH, no you guys already see us as the villain or whatever" but do something. Do something. You might not have all the answers, but then partner up with women who do. And then that's what's going to enhance the whole initiative. So, I think action from the male side under the hashtag #NotAllMen is what's missing. You can't just keep posting posts on Twitter saying: "Oh no, but the woman will still say #MenAreTrash". You need to do something about it. **(Sunflower; 29 years old; heterosexual woman; UNICEF consultant and university resident head)**

#### 6.3.5.2 *Men Working with Other Men*

While some suggest that men should work under the leadership of women activists, others perceive challenges imbedded in this arrangement. Lee observes that direct participation and the mere presence of men in the spaces meant for women leads to a 'war of sexes' when dealing with a sensitive issue such as VAW. A solution to this is for men to create their own spaces in which they can address each other. The notion that men should not be integrated into women's activism is further underscored by Anne when she states, "It's not their movement. It's not their activism". However, she believes men can influence others within their social circles. The following are the excerpts from Lee and Anne:

There's always some sort of conflict. It always ends up like it's some sort of gender war because we know that a lot of the violence is inflicted by men. And regardless of whether you are one of the trashy men or not, the fact that you're in this space where a lot of these people are wounded and could be triggered by your presence

alone becomes problematic. And that becomes a challenge on the basis that you're a man within a space that's very traumatic, and that can be very triggering for the persons that try to relay their lived experience. So, I think that's a big challenge in that it's always perceived to be a gendered war. So, thing to kind of minimise that, it should be forming support groups and support spaces outside of that, and contextualising what that support would look like to come into this cause. **(Lee; 34 years old; non-binary [they/them]; communication specialist)**

I don't think that they [men] can co-opt it as their own because it's not theirs. It's not their movement. It's not their activism. Like it exists and has real voices and experiences behind it. But because they have access to audiences that will listen to them, I do believe that they kind of have a responsibility to make these voices known. **(Anne; 23 years old; non-binary person [she/they]; ghost writer)**

Shiloh calls as follows for the collective voice of men to support women by denouncing acts of rape and femicide perpetrated by other men:

We've never really had men come out collectively and say to other men, "Stop raping our women. Stop killing our women". So, the clarion call right now is for men to unify and give out one voice of support to women. **(Shiloh; woman; author, life coach, and ANN7 guest, 2017)**

### **6.3.6 *Strengthening the institutional response to violence against women***

Previous research shows that the institutional response, especially by government and law enforcement agencies, plays a crucial role in mitigating the impacts of VAW (Mittal 2020; Polischuk and Fay 2020; Gordon 2022). Polischuk and Fay (2020) observed that effective government responses can address the systemic causes of VAW by ensuring the continuity of existing services and creating new communication channels that allow non-verbal reporting of incidents during emergencies. The findings under this subsection also highlight the need for a robust institutional response to VAW, pointing out that the success of DFA also depends on it.

In providing a potential solution for VAW, Philemon pointed out that this social issue requires joint efforts from different stakeholders, with the government being the major player. He acknowledges that "activism can only do so much" in preventing VAW, and explains as follows:

To properly come up with solutions for things [like violence against women], it's a multi-responsibility type of thing, not just for one side. So, activism can only do so

much itself. But now the government also has to take control and play their role to make sure that things are changing for the better. (Philemon; 29 years old; heterosexual man; researcher and Facebook influencer)

Ratele on NewsRoom news programme expressed his concern for heart-wrenching conditions of femicide in the country and attributes this state of affairs to a failure of the justice system to act. As such, he called for sustained efforts by law enforcement systems to protect women. Similarly, while she commends DFA like #MenAreTrash for playing a pivotal role in fighting VAW, Thandaza believes that significant change can only occur if both the government and justice systems do their part by providing support to DFA and by taking decisive actions. Ratele and Thandaza explained their opinions as follows:

In our country, we tend to live with this hysteria. Every week, you have a litany of cases of women being murdered by their boyfriends by their husbands. But part of the problem is that we don't learn. And part of the problem is, of course is, a lot of people say is the criminal justice system, which has to work to protect women constantly. Every day, 24 hours a day. **(Ratele; man; decolonial psychology and masculinities scholar; NewsRoom guest, 2017)**

I do believe that these movements, in general or these campaigns, have somewhat played a role in society. They have somewhat helped maybe those who are in need of help. They were able to give support to those who were may be dying in silence. But I still believe, if maybe if I can just be too ambitious to say, if maybe then the government, as well as the justice system, can also come together to support the movements. **(Thandaza; 26 years old; heterosexual woman; student and volunteer)**

DFA is further recognised for its usefulness in pressurising law enforcement agencies like the police to act against VAW and related issues, as shown in the following extract:

But I feel now with the exposure from social media, it also puts pressure on our police services as well as those that are ... or let me say, other stakeholders, right, who are in a space to actually make a difference because of the exposure that we get. (Nondumiso; 32 years old; heterosexual woman; PhD candidate)

This section explored potential solutions to some of the challenges and barriers discussed previously. The first solution proposed involves rebranding, renaming, and reconstructing the Men Are Trash phrase because the phrase poses challenges to inclusivity and constructive dialogue. Secondly, the dissemination of information and knowledge around VAW and

feminist issues in general on online platforms such as Twitter was emphasised, which is an example of digital pedagogy. Thirdly, the insights pointed to the importance of communicative action to develop meaningful and respectful conversations that can lead to mutual understanding and desired change. Fourthly, while DFA is commended for its role in fighting VAW, there is a consensus that it should be extended to the grassroots level to make it more inclusive and far-reaching and to address the digital divide. Essentially, it is crucial to bring real-world change to the population most affected by VAW. Fifthly, the narratives underscored the significance of men's cognitive authority to add weight to feminist messages by influencing the social perceptions of their followers or social circles. Sixthly, the ideas around how men should approach and support DFA were represented in two models, namely the 'Men's Auxiliary Model' and the 'Men Working with Men' approach. The former captures the suggestions that men should promote the voices of the DFA, like #MenAreTrash, without necessarily shadowing women's voices. The latter acknowledges the challenges that come with the direct engagement of men in feminist spaces, and as such, it was recommended that men collaborate and support each other to address VAW. Lastly, a solution that can also minimise the challenges to the effectiveness of DFA is strengthening the institutional response to VAW, especially that of the government and criminal justice systems.

#### **6.4 Discussion and Conclusion**

The first section of the chapter explored the challenges and barriers that could have hindered the effectiveness of the #MenAreTrash DFA, and then the solutions to some of those obstacles were identified in the second section. The factors that constitute challenges and barriers were classified as external and internal. The first external factor was online victim-blaming. This phenomenon is demonstrated through social media posts and commentaries that attempt to hold the victims of abuse and rape responsible for their victimhood, which means the women who speak out about their victimisation are questioned about the social circumstances that could have led to violation, harassment, or rape. This attempts to rationalise the occurrence of these misfortunes. A classic example mentioned in the findings is blaming a woman's choice of clothing for her victimisation. Orth et al. (2020) also report that some social media users post victim-blaming statements suggesting that the #NakedProtest activists in South Africa were maximising their chances of being sexually violated by marching topless. Similarly, research shows that the #SlutWalk protests emerged as a response to victim-blaming in society since the narratives suggested that women's clothing choices, conduct, or appearance provoke sexual

violence (Mendes 2015; OMeara 2016). Such narratives can be harmful as they may perpetuate the notion of aggressive male sexual desire and place the onus on women to protect themselves.

The second challenge that emerged from the data involves the perceived inadequacies within the government and legal systems. The role and performance of government structures designated to handle matters related to VAW were questioned, given the widespread awareness-raising initiatives in South Africa. One of the participants noted that the government's only response is abstract sympathy and consolation through the release of media statements and news. These findings are consistent with the previous literature on institutional responses to VAW. For instance, according to USAID (2015), there is less or no political will to decisively deal with VAW through the criminal justice system in many countries. Many legal and policy frameworks do not criminalise all forms of VAW, showing bias against women (USAID 2015). A study conducted in India reveals that India's legal frameworks still allow marital rape, resulting in perpetrators going unpunished (Louis 2022).

Moreover, large-scale research was conducted on behalf of the Institute for Global Innovation at the University of Birmingham to assess the governmental response to GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gordon et al. 2022). The results indicate that most countries (N = 33) delivered fewer than two policy responses to GBV. However, the study reveals that countries with experienced government officials responsible for gender issues were more likely to have more adequate government policies in place to deal with GBV (Gordon et al. 2022). These are governments that involve civil society organisations to facilitate policy-making for addressing GBV (Gordon et al. 2022). This study's results highlight the importance of cooperation and allyship between government and activist formations such as the #MenAreTrash DFA to mitigate VAW.

The third challenge to the effectiveness of DFA arises from the role of complicit masculinities in contributing to attitudes that could lead to VAW. Complicit masculinities refer to men who choose to remain silent, passive, or fail to condemn other men who exhibit abusive behaviours towards women. Even seemingly innocuous private conversations between men that degrade women can perpetuate harmful attitudes that contribute to VAW. Several authors (Matebese 2017; Engelbrecht 2020; Mukufa 2020) highlight the importance of recognising the role of complicit masculinity in perpetuating VAW, and they argue that men who may not have physically abused women but have engaged in catcalling, participated in misogynistic conversations, or failed to address workplace harassment are also complicit in VAW (cf.

Section 2.4). Therefore, while men may not actively engage in abusive behaviour towards women, their silence or inaction in the face of harmful attitudes and behaviours makes them complicit in perpetuating VAW.

When coming to internal barriers and challenges to the effectiveness of #MenAreTrash DFA, this chapter identified the following factors:

- **Applying the hashtag to issues irrelevant to VAW:** The data collected revealed common concerns regarding the versatile and flexible manner in which the #MenAreTrash hashtag was used, which to a certain degree, rendered it ambiguous and broad in terms of its intended purpose. The hashtag was applied to various contexts that implicate men. Men were labelled ‘trash’ for reasons ranging from serious matters to humour. For instance, a man would be called ‘trash’ for cheating on his partner or not providing financial support to her. These matters are relatively trivial and do not constitute social issues. This usage of the #MenAreTrash hashtag may have contributed to the trivialisation of the cause to some certain extent. It should be noted that this finding has not been previously reported despite the abundance of literature on DFA.
- **Ephemerality of #MenAreTrash:** DFA, and #MenAreTrash in particular, has been criticised for its transience. The findings indicated that these demonstrations are largely driven by incidents of VAW, rape, or femicide that happen to catch media attention. As such, DFA tends to be more reactive than proactive. In the South African context, hashtag feminist activism thrived shortly after the surge in a series of social media protests that addressed various issues of concern in the country. As noted in the literature, DFA in South Africa, especially in the university context, is strongly linked to the student protests that challenged the colonisation of institutions of higher education (Gouws 2018). This correlation raises questions about DFA’s ability to be pre-emptive and autonomous in its action. Generally, the ephemeral nature of South African DFA is seen as one of the factors that undermine the credibility and efficacy of the cause to deal with issues of VAW.
- **An unfocused debate around the #MenAreTrash hashtag:** The participants and data from multimedia sources recognised that much of the discourse surrounding the #MenAreTrash hashtag deviated from the core subject of VAW. The findings indicated that much of the debate was concentrated around the meaning of the hashtag itself. Consequently, these interpersonal engagements were deemed ineffective in producing viable solutions to the issue at hand. This tendency displayed by social media users to

derail from the core issue addressed by DFA is not new and has been observed in previous studies. For example, Orth et al. (2020) report that some commentators on Facebook were more focused on criticising the #NakedProtest method of activism than the message behind the protest. Such occurrences pose challenges to the effectiveness of these protests as far as VAW is concerned.

- **A separatist feminist activism: ‘War of sexes’ in the realm of DFA:** The narratives emerging from the data portrayed the #MenAreTrash DFA as a separatist form of activism. This DFA was accused of instigating a ‘war of sexes’ (hooks 1984) on social media, leading to conflicting views and beliefs between men and women on the issue of VAW (Makama et al. 2019). D’Avanzato et al. (2021) support this by reporting that the hashtag was more divisive than uniting. Moreover, the findings show the hashtag caused a division not only between men and women but also among men themselves. This division is likely to occur between men who support the narrative of #MenAreTrash and those who are against it. Previous literature note that men who demonstrate support for feminist causes have always had their masculinity questioned by other men (Kimmel 1998; Crooks et al. 2007). This is because when men stand with women in their struggles, they contest against other men who may feel inconvenienced by a feminist agenda. This chapter also showed that the social media conflict was intensified by the rejection and dismissal of alternative discourses around the issue of VAW by #MenAreTrash proponents. This suggests that #MenAreTrash DFA exemplified a form of hegemonic discourse that offered no space for alternative discourses. This need to dominate and control narratives about gender issues, in this case VAW, sabotages the efforts instead of amplifying them (Theodore 2017).
- **Alienation of men:** The chapter further found that the #MenAreTrash DFA had alienated men from full participation in several ways. Previous research raise concerns about whether the #MenAreTrash DFA alienate men from being part of the solution (Kempen 2019). Firstly, men are perceived as potentially alienated because of being regarded as problems and not part of the solution. This finding corroborates the results from a nationwide study conducted in the US among 1 000 men to explore their attitudes towards feminist activism (Minerson et al. 2011). The study reveal that 13% of these men reported that their hesitance to support feminist activism was because their involvement would be regarded as problematic (Garin 2000 cited in Crooks et al. 2007, p.219). Some participants argued that even though men want to support feminist activism like #MenAreTrash, they should not be granted full participation in terms of

having an input in the discourse. Their presence was described as disruptive and had the potential to suppress women's voices and occupy their spaces. This notion is also observed by Digby (1998), who states that men who want to join feminist events as allies are regarded as intruders in spaces that are exclusively meant to serve women. However, scholars like Kimmel (1998) caution against this gaze of men as problems as this could push men further away from being allies of women's struggles like VAW (cf. Section 2.7). Secondly, the findings revealed that men were alienated in the #MenAreTrash discourse through exclusion and intolerance when they express their views. At times, their views were met with animosity, especially if they seemed to challenge the dominant discourse of the hashtag. Prior research among young men in a South African university reports that the participants claimed that feminists engage them as if they "bark orders" at them (Ratele 2018, p.66). This creates another challenge in terms of creating constructive dialogues around issues related to VAW. Thirdly, it was recognised that misandry is disguised as DFA. This is represented by women who use the #MenAreTrash to vilify men with the intention of spreading hate and advancing their own agendas. Such practices raise concerns in that they perpetuate negative stereotypes about men, which further contributes to tensions, which are counterproductive for the cause. Lastly, the findings showed that DFA activism tends to racialise VAW in its rhetoric. When topics such as toxic masculinity are discussed, they are usually associated with Black men. This narrative has its roots in the apartheid era when White people portrayed Black men as inherently dangerous. Previous studies also note that feminist formations such as #MenAreTrash implicitly confront Black men as opposed to men in general (Makama et al. 2019; Sanger 2019). A major concern with this position is the perpetuation of the colonial-apartheid stereotype of Black men as barbaric while at the same time overlooking potentially violent men from other races (Makama et al. 2019). Therefore, it appears that the current brand of feminism is uncertain about the kind of future it envisages for men and the position it wants to afford them within their spaces.

The second section of the chapter explored the potential solutions to some of the identified challenges. One notable finding in terms of solutions aimed at enhancing DFA is the need to rebrand, rename, and reconstruct the hashtag #MenAreTrash. The current hashtag is perceived as harmful as it perpetuates negative stereotypes about men. A newly reconstructed hashtag should be inclusive, clear, and constructive. It should be inclusive in the sense that it should be

applicable across genders since violence affects everyone, and constructive by encouraging a more fruitful dialogue. Moreover, moving away from generalising statements like Men Are Trash can shift men's perceptions from viewing feminist activism as an attack on their identity. By so doing, men will understand DFA as a collective effort geared towards eradicating VAW. It is possible to recognise diversity in men's individual characters while addressing VAW as a systemic social issue. Generalisation has been associated with high levels of prejudice among certain social groups; for instance, a podcast interview conducted with four Muslim men revealed that the interviewees had been stereotyped and generalised as potential terrorists based on their religious affiliation (Ismail 2020). These experiences were used as an example of the effects #MenAreTrash may have had.

Previous literature emphasises the significance of knowledge production and dissemination of information on the topics and issues that affect women in their daily lives (Mendes et al. 2019; Sener 2021). In this regard, social media spaces through DFA offer educative practices without the need for formal education (Martin and Valenti 2012). Similarly, the findings in this chapter underscored the role of digital public pedagogy in enhancing the effectiveness of South African DFAs such as #MenAreTrash. This means that there should be knowledge and information exchanges flowing from both online and offline contexts on the broader topic of VAW. The data suggested that acquiring such knowledge would be valuable, particularly for men. There was an emphasis on open-mindedness as a crucial quality to learn and teach about issues related to VAW. The findings also highlighted the importance of acknowledging that people have different levels of understanding of gender issues, which is often influenced by their educational backgrounds. Therefore, not everyone should be expected to be familiar with the intricacies around VAW, and hence, the need for digital public pedagogy. The problem with the #MenAreTrash discourse is that it is perceived as "too intellectualised" (Palesa) to accommodate the wider South African society, thus rendering it elitist, exclusive, and less relatable.

Another significant finding underscored the importance of meaningful and respectful dialogue aimed at reaching a mutual understanding. This means that communicative action is necessary for a functional public sphere (Bolton 2005; Susen 2011), in this case, the social media platforms on which DFA operates. The #MenAreTrash hashtag was perceived as lacking communicative action, resulting in polarity between its proponents and opponents. To overcome this challenge, open-mindedness was yet again identified as a key element to pursue communicative action. The process should entail both listeners and speakers who are willing

to understand each other's perspectives (Kaye 2014). Knowledgeable proponents of #MenAreTrash should present factual information to justify their position on the issue of VAW. Similarly, counter-discourse should present their case to justify why the use of #MenAreTrash may not be progressive in addressing men on the issue of VAW. Providing clear rationales behind the adoption of specific stances lends credibility to the overall engagement. Eventually, such engagements should aim to develop an alternative discourse that provide direction on how people of all genders can be allies in each other's struggles, and most importantly, in the fight against VAW.

The extension of DFA to the grassroots level was also pointed out as one way in which the barriers to online feminist protests can be overcome. According to the findings, this approach is crucial since DFA has limitations in terms of raising awareness and confronting VAW at every societal level. Hence, DFA must be complemented with face-to-face engagements to enable collective action. Sener (2021) avers that social media-based activism that lacks a well-organised structure does not guarantee the formation of a collective identity, which is essential for producing practical results. Therefore, scholars like Barassi (2015) communicate the importance of amalgamating DFA with physical interactions and deliberations to foster a collective identity.

While the impact of DFA is widely recognised on social media platforms, the interviewees from both this study and multimedia sources believe that direct engagement with ordinary people on the ground can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the issues related to VAW. Extending DFA to grassroots levels can help address the challenge of the digital divide and ensure that the populations that are mostly affected by VAW are included in activism and have a say in shaping solutions. This approach can be functional since the findings revealed concerns that some online feminist activists tend to use DFA for exposure and social mobility without any commitment to provide practical support to the communities most affected by VAW. As such, this calls for a broader strategy that encompasses both digital and grassroots engagements.

Furthermore, the participants highlighted the importance of employing cognitive authority strategies to engage men. This process involves leveraging men's voices within DFA to wield greater influence in convincing other men to recognise the importance of acknowledging women's woes and struggles (Wilson 1983; Crooks et al. 2007). The findings revealed that men often respond positively to messages relayed by other men because, more often than not,

they interpret women's assertions and demonstrations as attacks. As such, by finding allyship in men who are committed to the objectives of #MenAreTrash, the DFA can expand its reach and impact. By so doing, the cognitive authority approach can allow men to play a unique yet crucial role in advancing the interests of DFA. The approach further helps lift the burden of addressing VAW from women, and instead recognises that everyone has a role to play.

This chapter also explored the ways in which men can be involved in supporting DFA and being allies. The responses provided aligned with either of the two models for involving men in feminist activism, namely the men auxiliary model and men working with other men. In terms of the former, the findings suggested that men should support DFA by amplifying women's voices. In practice, this can be done through 'liking', sharing, tweeting, and retweeting the content produced by women. However, it is crucial to ensure that women's voices remain at the core of activism. This model entails that although men would play an active role, they should still follow women's lead (Kimmel 1998). As such, the model is essentially based on men's allyship without overshadowing women's experiences and narratives.

The 'Men Working with Other Men' model suggests that men should actively collaborate with other men to address VAW and related issues. This entails engaging in conversations with their peers to challenge various harmful behaviours, attitudes, and norms that may be contributing to VAW (Baily 2015). The model orients men to influence within their own social circles without necessarily being in the spaces meant for women. This means that men's input in the #MenAreTrash discourse is discouraged, and therefore, they could formulate their own hashtags that can be used to address each other. The ultimate goal is for men to have a collective voice to denounce VAW and related issues. According to the findings, the direct participation of men in DFA such as #MenAreTrash is another reason for the pervasive occurrence of a 'war of sexes', and the 'Men Working with Other Men' approach has the potential to mitigate that challenge.

The strengthening of institutional response to VAW emerged as one of the means through which the perceived objectives of DFA can be advanced. While the findings indicated that addressing VAW requires collaborative efforts from various stakeholders, more emphasis was on the intensive involvement of government and criminal justice systems. The government's task should involve the allocation of adequate resources to support victim empowerment programmes, care centres, and specialised courts to enhance access to justice. It should also

involve civil society and activists to develop policies and strategies to prevent VAW (Gouws 2016). The insights from this chapter also suggested that the government should prioritise training law enforcement agencies, such as the SAPS, to respond sensitively and effectively to VAW-related cases. Moreover, DFA should engage with the legal system by advocating for the development and implementation of legislation to address VAW. For instance, Gouws (2016) shows that South African activists played a role in monitoring the implementation of existing legislation, such as the Sexual Offences Act, for its effective enforcement. Perhaps this should be the route that DFA such as #MenAreTrash can take in order to enhance its influence.

To conclude, the aim of this chapter was to examine the challenges and barriers that are commonly encountered in DFA, particularly with regard to #MenAreTrash. These challenges and barriers were classified as both external and internal. These impediments have collectively contributed in various ways to undermine the credibility, potential, and effectiveness of the #MenAreTrash DFA. The chapter then offered potential solutions to enhance the performance of DFA in the future. By acknowledging both sets of challenges and barriers, as well as incorporating the proposed solutions, the chapter advocates for the broader goal of mitigating VAW and related issues in order to promote gender equality in the country and beyond.

## **CHAPTER 7: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This study set out to explore the perceptions that South Africans hold about the impact of the #MenAreTrash DFA as a response to VAW. It relied on in-depth interviews with individuals well versed on the subject matter and also drew on diverse multimedia sources that included television programs, news channels, podcasts, YouTube channels, and university media interviews. Through these data sources, the study aimed to delve deeper into the views, opinions, attitudes, and experiences around the #MenAreTrash phenomenon and how it presented itself in the social media public sphere. The prevalence of VAW in South Africa saw the rising reliance on social media tools such as Twitter for activism purposes. However, the #MenAreTrash DFA, in particular, has stirred a lot of controversy owing to its arguably harsh and offensive naming. As such, the effectiveness of this DFA to address VAW by engaging men as perpetrators has been questioned (Kempen 2019; Makama et al. 2019; Sanger 2019;

D'Avanzato et al. 2021). It is against this backdrop that this research attempted to provide a comprehensive study on the nature, merits, shortcomings, and impact of the #MenAreTrash DFA in order to enhance knowledge and understanding about it.

The study had the following objectives that were addressed in the different chapters of the thesis:

- To critically evaluate the relevance of social media platforms as modern-day public spheres that facilitate activism against social issues such as VAW;
- To understand the rationale and key tenets of the #MenAreTrash social media narrative and the logic behind the #NotAllMen counter-discourse;
- To conduct an in-depth exploration of South Africans' perceptions of and attitudes towards the #MenAreTrash DFA; and
- To identify and analyse the challenges and barriers that may have interfered with the optimum performance of the #MenAreTrash DFA and to provide potential solutions for these.

The current chapter provides a summary of the main findings in relation to each of the specific objectives and makes recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

## **7.2 Summary of Key Findings**

- *Objective 1: To critically evaluate the relevance of social media platforms as modern-day public spheres that facilitate activism against social issues such as VAW*

Chapter 4 evaluated the extent to which social media platforms serve as the modern-day public spheres in which activism surrounding pressing social issues such as VAW thrives. Drawing mostly on in-depth interviews, the findings revealed that the nature of social media is dualistic in that it presents both benefits and limitations to its users, depending on how the platforms are used. One significant finding was that social media serve as an empowering mechanism for women by providing them with a voice to raise their concerns and confront patriarchal norms and practices. This is particularly noteworthy in the light of the historical suppression of women's voices by patriarchal systems. Social media is also valued for its pedagogical significance. It serves as hubs for knowledge production and dissemination, particularly around issues of GBV, VAW, rape, patriarchy, and gender inequality, which are all part of the daily struggles of South African women. The findings further confirmed the theory of public sphere and communicative action by revealing that social media platforms like Twitter allow users,

particularly women, to bring their private conversations to public attention. This is done by sharing their experience and raising awareness on the issue of VAW, for instance. This practice is also reflective of the renowned feminist principle that the 'personal is political'. Based on the context provided, social media platforms appear to be functional public spheres.

Furthermore, despite the acknowledgement of social media as a modern-public sphere based on its usefulness to the public, the prevalence of misinterpretations and misunderstandings of views, comments, and posts shared on social media were a common theme that emerged from data. The consequences of these dysfunctions are conflicts around issues under discussion, especially if it is sensitive topics, such as VAW. The findings revealed that the character limit of Twitter posts, currently 280 for free users, exacerbate the challenges of misinterpretation and misunderstanding by making it difficult to produce in-depth and elaborate text. This restricts how people express their thoughts and opinions because when they are not expressed clearly, they can easily be taken out of context. In light of these challenges, most participants reported that they self-censor or engage in less risky social media activities that still enable them to express themselves. This includes 'liking', retweeting, or sharing content that resonates with their sentiments. The main reason for being tactful is not necessarily the social media tension itself but rather the potential loss of employment and reputational damage that can result from being misunderstood.

The lack of communicative action was another key finding and is correlated with the toxic behaviour displayed by social media users, as well as the emotion-driven debates and inadequate knowledge on a particular topic. This finding confirms previous research that reported that communicative action is usually minimal on social media platforms (Bolton 2005).

Chapter 4 further shed light on the influence of social media platforms on feminist activism. The main finding in this regard was that social media has amplified the role of feminist activism by raising awareness on the issues related to VAW. Social media have also been successfully used as a tool to punish men who are accused of rape, violence, and any form of abuse towards women. The severity of the punitive measures range from reputational damage to job loss; this is usually more common for high-profile people. However, it should be noted that the effectiveness of social media activism depends on the appropriate use of these platforms. For instance, the chapter revealed that social media anonymity can be used for both virtuous and nefarious purposes. While it can provide a platform for individuals to express their

grievances and views without fear of retribution, it can also be used to spread false information, such as making unfounded allegations of sexual abuse. Therefore, the lack of accountability that accompanies social media anonymity threatens the credibility of activism. Chapter 4 further revealed the scepticism held towards social media; for instance, the real-life impact of DFA has been questioned because social media activism mainly relies on effortless activities using digital gadgets that may give a false sense of social engagement. The concepts of ‘slacktivism’ and ‘clicktivism’ capture this notion and have been given attention in a lot of literature. All in all, social media do meet the requirements of the public sphere to a certain extent. The aforementioned shortcomings associated with these platforms undermine their credibility in addressing issues such as VAW. Despite this, social media remains a powerful tool for activism and should continue to be used effectively for desired social change.

- ***Objective 2: To understand the rationale and key tenets of the #MenAreTrash social media narrative and the logic behind the #NotAllMen counter-discourse***

While Chapter 4 provided context for the correlation between social media and feminist activism, Chapter 5 sought to discover the nature, definitions, and objectives of DFA, particularly #MenAreTrash. According to the findings, the agreed-upon rationale for the existence of #MenAreTrash DFA was to address issues of patriarchy, male privilege and domination, toxic masculinity, catcalling, sexism, misogyny, VAW, and rape culture. The DFA is perceived as a contemporary strategy for confronting the aforementioned social issues with the view that using ordinary narratives to articulate women’s concerns has become redundant. The insights from the chapter also endeavoured to dispel the misconception that the #MenAreTrash narrative was formed to attack South African men, and instead, it served as a social plea to the country to join forces to stop VAW, rape, and femicide.

The chapter’s notable findings are that the main objective of the #MenAreTrash DFA was to raise awareness on VAW, rape, and femicide in South Africa. On a more abstract level, the DFA sought to spark conversations about the aforementioned issues and to gain traction and visibility. According to the theory of the public sphere and communicative action, debates, discussions, and dialogue about issues of public concern are used to develop the desired outcome. Nonetheless, the findings revealed that sparking a conversation on social media was not the ultimate goal but was a step towards a more pragmatic approach.

The study showed that #MenAreTrash achieved its objectives, but only to a certain degree. This DFA was successful in raising awareness about VAW and ensuring its visibility.

However, it was less successful in influencing the behaviour of men in significant ways. This observation was based on the fact that incidents of VAW and femicide remained high during and after the height of the #MenAreTrash DFA. The main factor that attributed to the limited impact of the DFA was its dismissive and offensive construct, #MenAreTrash, which obscured its actual purpose.

Chapter 5 also examined the #NotAllMen social media hashtag, which presented itself as a counter-discourse against the #MenAreTrash narrative. The study found that the #NotAllMen social media hashtag was unjustified as it was argued that it invalidated women's experiences and attempted to shift the focus away from the core issue of VAW and related issues. This counter-discourse was further accused of failing to discern the #MenAreTrash social media hashtag as an endeavour to address broader social structures responsible for perpetuating VAW instead of individual men.

However, there were interesting views in support of the #NotAllMen counter-discourse. They contended that resistance and opposition are the inevitable elements of activism that creates the opportunity to assess the credibility of a cause. This viewpoint aligns with the argument put forth by counter-discourse theory, which posits that although hegemonic discourses may hold significant influence in society, there is always a gap through which marginal discourses can penetrate (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). While most studies in the field of DFA examine resistance against feminist narratives as anti-feminism or online misogyny, the findings in this study revealed that #NotAllMen counter-discourse was spearheaded by civil and diplomatic men whose aim was to foster a rational debate around the #MenAreTrash narrative. The proponents of the #NotAllMen counter-discourse argued that the #MenAreTrash narrative was an unrealistic generalisation that failed to recognise individual differences and diversity among men. In the process, this narrative may further doom “the future men that will still be born, or little boys who are growing up towards becoming men” (Michelle) based solely their gender. Based on the context provided, it can be concluded that the #NotAllMen narrative emerged as an attempt to develop an alternative discourse to the #MenAreTrash narrative. The goal was to establish a unifying and inclusive discourse that positively contributes to the struggle against VAW.

- ***Objective 3: To conduct an in-depth exploration of South Africans' perceptions of and attitudes towards the #MenAreTrash DFA***

The core objective of this study, which was to explore South Africans' perceptions of the influence of the #MenAreTrash DFA in addressing VAW, was discussed in Chapter 6. This study found that generally the #MenAreTrash DFA is recognised for its impact on empowering women to speak out against their abuse. The DFA revived the spirit of feminist activism, and at the same time, used social media tactics (e.g. call-out culture and cancel culture) to facilitate justice. It also raised unprecedented levels of awareness of VAW. The role of awareness in this context was to conscientise women to recognise VAW as a social issue rather than a private matter, as it had been in the past. This finding aligns with the fundamental principle of second-wave feminism that advocated for the idea of 'the personal is political'.

Another finding was that #MenAreTrash may have played a role in an attitude shift among young university men. It appears that these young men were taking part in GBV campaigns in their respective institutions of higher learning. This shift also involved introspection in men in general. However, the findings suggested that the introspection was propelled by the perceived repercussions that individuals may face if they treat women in socially unacceptable ways that could lead to harm. The confrontational nature of #MenAreTrash was thus regarded as the main social force for change in men's attitudes.

The study further reported negative views of the #MenAreTrash DFA. These include feelings of alienation because of the perceived unfair generalisation of men as 'trash'. As mentioned elsewhere, the problem with the failure to acknowledge individual differences is that it may overlook potentially good men who could be allies of the cause. These feelings of alienation led to men keeping their views to themselves, retaliating, or responding to the hashtag with counter-discourses. In the midst of these such reactions, misogynistic and ant-feminist men found the opportunity to strike, and these negative reactions were believed to have worked against the objectives of the #MenAreTrash DFA.

The sentiments around call-out culture and cancel culture as the defining features of DFA were generally positive because of their remarkable role in shaming and exposing alleged abusers and rapists; warning men against their unbecoming conduct towards women; and enabling women to speak up against abuse and seek justice against powerful individuals. However, these social media cultures were also harshly criticised for their destructive nature and their unethical use. For instance, the findings, with the support from previous studies, revealed that call-out culture and cancel culture have been used against men to make false claims of abuse and rape (Tucker 2018; Sundar 2020; Kim et al. 2022). It was found that cancel culture has more severe

consequences than call-out culture and may lead to job loss, the destruction of families, and long-term reputational damage. Furthermore, cancel culture was regarded as leaving little space for rehabilitation, which does not encourage offenders to reform. There was also neutral and nuanced views regarding call-out culture and cancel culture. One notable finding was that since violence can happen to everyone, regardless of their gender, these cultures should not be used to exclusively address men.

In terms of whether the #MenAreTrash construct was a proper way to address men on the issue VAW, this study revealed that this approach was mostly condemned. Among the reasons stated was that the word choice made it difficult for men to interact with it. It was deemed dehumanising, and it creates feelings of worthlessness among men, which may discourage them from contributing to VAW discourse and to participate in face-to-face campaigns. Moreover, the dominant narrative of #MenAreTrash raised concerns about the psychological effects it may have on men, and that it may be a self-fulfilling prophecy that lead to men living up to the label of ‘trash’.

Furthermore, the study examined the contradictory nature of the #MenAreTrash DFA. On the one hand, the hashtag is provocative and confrontational, while on the other, it sought support from the very people it was harsh towards. This paradox highlights the need for a feasible approach to effectively engage men in collaborative efforts to eradicate of all forms of VAW and gender inequality.

- ***Objective 4: To identify and analyse the challenges and barriers that may have interfered with the optimum performance of the #MenAreTrash DFA and to provide potential solutions for these***

In Chapter 6, the challenges and barriers that attributed to the perceived ineffectiveness of the #MenAreTrash DFA were categorised into external and internal factors. The external factors were online victim-blaming, a lack of institutional response to VAW, and the role of complicit masculinities in VAW. The internal factors were the use of #MenAreTrash in contexts irrelevant to VAW; the ephemerality of #MenAreTrash; an unfocused debate around #MenAreTrash; separatist feminist activism; and the alienation of men. The findings suggested that all these challenges contributed in unique ways to undermining the optimal performance and effectiveness of the #MenAreTrash DFA to tackle VAW and related issues.

Subsequent to identifying and describing the obstacles in Chapter 6, the study explored the following potential solutions to some of these impediments to encourage more inclusive and

impartial online environments that can facilitate progressive discourse on issues of public concern, such as VAW:

- The findings indicated that it would be beneficial if #MenAreTrash is renamed, rebranded, and reconstructed in order to attract support from men and be more constructive.
- The study emphasised the importance of digital public pedagogy in DFA. This involves the production, dissemination, and exchange of knowledge and information around the issue of VAW. The acquisition and assimilation of such information could improve people's understanding and knowledge about the magnitude of the VAW issue in South Africa.
- The findings underscored the need for communicative action as a way to establish meaningful and respectful dialogue. This will allow social media platforms to serve as functional public spheres in which DFA and discourses around VAW can thrive.
- The study showed that DFA must be complemented with a face-to-face component to strengthen its impact and produce tangible results. Expanding DFA to grassroots levels can broaden its reach and influence across various levels of society. At the same time, this approach can help overcome the challenge of the digital divide by ensuring individuals who are not on social media and are likely to be disproportionately affected by VAW play an active role in dealing with their own social situations. Moreover, this should also expose and undermine the role of certain social media feminist activists who tend to use DFA for personal gain without demonstrating any form of commitment to offering practical support to those affected by VAW.
- The findings emphasised the importance of leveraging men's voices within DFA to wield greater influence to convince other men to acknowledge the struggles of women and to support them. This idea is known as the cognitive authority strategy and is recommended by previous studies (Wilson 1983; Crooks et al. 2007). This strategy is used because men are more likely to listen to certain messages when they are delivered by other men rather than by women.
- The study examined how men can be involved in supporting DFA considering the constraints that were identified elsewhere in this thesis. The ideas on how to do that were analysed in terms of two approaches, namely the 'Men Auxiliary Model' and 'Men Working with Other Men' model. The former suggests that men can support DFA through various performances such as 'liking', sharing, tweeting, and retweeting

content produced by women, but that men should follow the lead of women in the cause (Kimmel 1998). The latter model proposes that men create their own spaces in which they can challenge and advise each other on their internalised norms, behaviours, and attitudes that contribute to VAW (Baily 2015). This approach can also mitigate social media tensions that usually arise when men and women share the spaces originally meant for women.

- The findings indicated that the success of DFA is also contingent upon a strong institutional response to VAW. These institutions include government agencies and criminal justice systems. The involvement of DFA and other feminist initiatives in monitoring and influencing the legislation and policies aimed at addressing all forms of VAW can enhance their impact. Therefore, institutional support and collaboration with DFA can make a critical difference in fighting VAW.

### **7.3 Study Limitations**

Although the participants were recruited from different parts of South Africa and were from diverse social backgrounds, the sample size was still not large enough to represent the entire study population. However, the use of various multimedia sources was useful to explore the sentiments, thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions of more South Africans to maximise representativity. The researcher's choice of individuals who have higher education and can speak English was also a limitation of this study because it excluded individuals who might be knowledgeable of the study topic but do not have a higher education background. The choice of English as the language for the interviews may have excluded individuals who are more comfortable expressing themselves in other South African languages, thus restricting the diversity of perceptions captured in the study. However, all participants who were part of the study seemed comfortable using English as a language of communication and appeared to express themselves fairly.

The other limitation pertains to the use of web-conferencing applications to conduct and record the interviews. Despite the convenience of these internet tools to overcome budget and time constraints and travelling restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 regulations, technical issues arose that are typical of internet-based applications. In some instances, the network coverage was poor either on the side of the researcher or the interviewee, thereby interrupting the flow of the conversation. To surmount this hurdle, the researcher employed member checking

technique, which involved calling back the interviewees to clarify, verify, or corroborate their statements.

## 7.4 Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

The following recommendations for policy, practice, and future research are guided by key findings of this study.

### 7.4.1 Recommendations for policy

- **Gap 1:** The lack of institutional response to VAW has implications for the effectiveness of DFA.
  - **Recommendation:** There is an urgent need for government agencies and the criminal justice system to ensure the effective implementation of existing laws to protect women from violence, rape, and femicide. Such reforms must involve allocating adequate resources to support victim empowerment programmes, care centres, and specialised courts to improve access to justice. Collaboration between policymakers and leaders of DFA can be explored to leverage the experiences gained from online engagements in which issues related to VAW are expressed. This can be useful to influence the implementation of the legislation and policy decisions that are responsive to the realities of VAW affecting women (Gouws 2016).
- **Gap 2:** Minimal social media regulation
  - **Recommendation:** Previous research highlights the prevalence of online harassment, online misogyny, and hate speech in the context of DFA (Mendes et al. 2019; Kurasawa et al. 2021; Sener 2021). This conduct exacerbates the existing experiences of abuse endured by women. It is also important to find a way to hold women accountable for the misuse of DFA for online misandry as well as for making false allegations of rape and abuse. The findings of this study revealed the extent to which the misuse of call-out culture, for instance, can impact various aspects of men's lives (Tucker 2018; Sundar 2020; Kim et al. 2022). In addition, such behaviours undermine the credibility of DFA. Therefore, greater efforts to strengthen social media regulatory policies are needed to strike a balance between free speech and the prevention of harmful online practices.

#### 7.4.2 *Recommendations for practice*

- **Gap 1:** Lack of impact of DFA at grassroots levels
  - **Recommendation:** This study found that the #MenAreTrash DFA was unidimensional because of its overreliance on social media tools, which limited its ability to raise awareness and disseminate advocacy messages at every societal level. DFA should expand its reach to the grassroots levels and have direct engagement with members of society to enhance activism and awareness raising. Moreover, this approach can foster dialogues on the issues around VAW on social media platforms and beyond.
- **Gap 2:** Lack of digital public pedagogy on issues around VAW
  - **Recommendation:** Previous research underscore the value and importance of education, and knowledge sharing and dissemination on GBV, VAW, rape, patriarchy, and gender inequality via social media (Sener 2021). Social media platforms have the potential to make available the knowledge that was previously confined to formal institutions of learning (Martin and Valenti 2012; Mendes et al. 2019). This study emphasised injecting more information on social media discourse, which could be helpful to broaden the understanding of gender issues such as VAW. Activists, academics, scholars, and policymakers should take the initiative to promote this idea.
- **Gap 3:** The prevalence of hegemonic DFA discourse
  - **Recommendation:** The counter-discourse theory has been employed to elucidate the narrative of the #MenAreTrash narrative as having assumed a dominant position in explaining South African men's relationship with VAW. The emergence of counter-discourses such as #NotAllMen revealed some of the flaws within the #MenAreTrash narrative, which includes the perpetuation of negative stereotypes, the division between men and women (and among men themselves), and unfair generalisations. Going forward, the findings suggested the development of a DFA that acknowledges diversity among men and that promotes open dialogues, debates, and criticisms that could lead to solutions. This will create online environments that are more inclusive, cohesive, and supportive of the overall struggles of people of all genders.

### 7.4.3 *Recommendations for future research*

- **Longitudinal studies:** The current study adopted a cross-sectional design that entailed collecting data at a single point in time to gain insights into DFA. It is possible that the views expressed by the participants at the time of the interviews may change as time passes, and therefore, future research could conduct longitudinal studies to examine the perceptions and attitudes of South Africans on the impact of DFA over time. This would enable researchers to identify possible reasons for any shift or consistency in attitudes. Additionally, longitudinal studies would also facilitate the long-term assessment of the impact, sustainability, and effectiveness of DFA.
- **Comparative studies:** Future research could use a comparative study to explore the perceptions of different social cohorts and age groups on the phenomenon of #MenAreTrash. Comparative studies provide researchers with appreciation and insights into how social actors from diverse backgrounds, contexts, and ages think and perceive certain issues. In this case, it is recommended that future research compare the perceptions of young and older adults to investigate their differences in views. Given that the current study involved young, educated professionals who were between the ages of 25 and 34, other studies can replicate this sample but include individuals who are less educated in order also to explore their perspectives on the role of DFA in addressing VAW.
- **In-depth exploration of challenges faced by men serving as allies of DFA:** The findings of this study identified various challenges men face when interacting with DFA and feminist movements; there is also a substantial body of literature on this topic (cf. Chapter 2). A natural progression from the present study would be research that focuses specifically on the barriers and challenges experienced by South African cis-gender men in their endeavours to support DFA. Cis-gender men are typically the ones implicated in incidents of GBV and VAW. Endeavours to understand the real and perceived challenges faced by men can inform the development of strategies to attract their support and involvement in various feminist agendas and gender equality initiatives.

## 7.5 **Conclusion**

This study delved into perceptions surrounding the role of the #MenAreTrash DFA in light of the pervasive issue of VAW in South Africa. The findings of the study illuminated the

significance and relevance of social media platforms as modern-day public spheres in which members of society congregate to address VAW as a matter of public concern. The role of DFA in these public spheres is apparent in terms of raising awareness and challenging patriarchal norms that contribute to VAW, rape, and femicide, as well as lending women a voice to speak to share their common struggles. The #MenAreTrash DFA is further recognised for its role in initiating a much-needed public discourse around VAW across various social media platforms.

This thesis demonstrated how DFA can also be a site of contestation of views that often leads to online conflicts. The different views and opinions about the #MenAreTrash construct were demonstrated. While some believe that #MenAreTrash was innovative and a powerful mechanism for raising awareness on VAW and holding men accountable, others criticised it for its unfair generalisation of men as violent and causing division in the country. Moreover, it was argued that #MenAreTrash may have alienated men from becoming allies with DFA. However, this study proposed potential solutions to some of the challenges associated with the DFA. These solutions can be adopted in the future to build strong and effective DFA formations.

Moreover, this study highlighted the complex nature of feminist activism in the digital era. It contributes to the academic understanding of the intersections between DFA and counter-discourses, and how these shape the direction of the ongoing struggle against VAW. Therefore, the study calls for broader, more nuanced and inclusive strategies in which everyone is able to make a meaningful contribution to combat VAW and related issues, ultimately culminating in realising gender equality in the country and beyond.

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# APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

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Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in the study. You have been asked to participate in this study because you are a South African who is between the age of 25-34 and are aware of the controversial debate over the #MenAreTrash social media hashtag. I, therefore, am interested in your views about #MenAreTrash digital feminist activism in the context of violence against women (VAW). I am curious about anything you have to share, so please be comfortable.

Please feel free to stop me if you do not understand a question. I may also need to stop you to make sure I understand your responses.

Our discussion will take thirty minutes to an hour.

### 1. Background information

I would like you to share some information about yourself as I would like to understand who you are:

- How old are you?
- What is your ethnicity?
- How would you describe your gender identity?
- Please tell me about your educational background.
- What do you do for a living?

### 2. Social media as a 'public sphere'

2.1. How long have you been using social media, and how many followers do you currently have?

2.2. How often do you engage with other social media users? (post, retweet, like)

2.3. Do you usually express your views on socio-political issues of the country on social media?

2.3.1 If yes, which issues have you expressed your views on, so far?

2.3.2. If no, why don't you express your views?

2.4. Do you think social media spaces like Twitter are relevant platforms for the public to engage each other on issues such as VAW/GBV? Please explain your answer.

2.5. What are your thoughts on social media activism? (does it thrive or make impact in society?)

### 3. Perceptions on the #MenAreTrash hashtag

3.1. Have you ever participated in the #MenAreTrash hashtag debate on social media (or on the interpersonal level)? if yes, what made you participate?

3.2. What do you think about the #MenAreTrash movement?

3.2.1. What do you think is the movement's obligation/purpose? Do you think this activism has been successful in fulfilling its purpose?

3.2.2. One of the aims of the #MenAreTrash movement was to 'call-out' men in general on their acts of VAW. How do you feel about the 'call-out' culture in relation to VAW?

3.3. What do you think about the concept of 'men are trash' itself? Do you think it was a proper/effective way of addressing men on the issue of VAW?

3.3.1. If yes, why?

3.3.2. If no, why?

3.4. What effect(s)/impact do you think #MenAreTrash movement has on its intended audience?

3.5. Generally, do you support the #MenAreTrash movement and its principles? Please explain why you support or not support this movement.

#### **4. Resistance towards the #MenAreTrash narrative**

4.1. What is your view on the #NotAllMen counter-discourse?

4.1.1. Do you think this counter-discourse was reasonable?

4.1.2. Do you subscribe to the #NotAllMen hashtag?

4.2. Some people believe the #MenAreTrash hashtag is too generalising. What is your take on that statement?

#### **5. Challenges and barriers to digital feminist activism**

5.1. Do you think there are any challenges and barriers to digital feminist activism like #MenAreTrash?

5.1.1. If yes, what are some of those challenges and barriers?

5.1.2. If no, why do you think there are no challenges and barriers?

5.2. Have you demonstrated any form of support for the #MenAreTrash digital feminist activism before?

5.2.1. If yes, did you experience any challenges and/or barriers in the process?

5.2.2. If no, how easy was it to support the activism?

## **6. Potential solutions and allyship formations**

6.1. Do you think digital feminist activism such as #MenAreTrash need support for their cause?

6.1.1. If yes, in what way do you think they want/need support?

6.1.2. If no, why do you think they do not want/need to support?

6.2. Do you believe men should collaborate with digital feminist activism on online platforms like social media?

6.1.1. If yes, how do you suggest they work together?

6.1.2. If no, why should there be no collaboration?

6.2. Often times than not, digital feminist activism is embroiled in ‘war of sexes’ — conflict between men and women. How do you think this situation can be mitigated/managed?

- *Is there anything you want to add or comment on in relation to what has been discussed?*

*Thanks very much for your participation*

# APPENDIX B: ETHICAL APPROVAL



**Faculty of Humanities**  
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe  
Lefapha le Barmatho



18 May 2022

Dear Mr SJ Sele

**Project Title:** Perceptions of South Africans on the impact of digital feminist activism in the context of violence against women  
**Researcher:** Mr SJ Sele  
**Supervisor(s):** Prof ZS Mokomane  
**Department:** Sociology  
**Reference number:** 21825450 (HUM018/1121)  
**Degree:** Doctoral

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was **approved** by the Research Ethics Committee on 18 May 2022. Data collection may therefore commence.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely,

**Prof Karen Harris**  
Chair: Research Ethics Committee  
Faculty of Humanities  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
e-mail: tracey.andrew@up.ac.za

Research Ethics Committee Members: Prof KL Harris (Chair); M A Dlodlo; Dr A-M de Beer; Dr A de Siqueira; Dr P Souto; Ms KT Gokhale; Andrew; Dr C Johnson; Dr D King; Prof D Lurie; Mr A Mchomo; Dr H Momo; Dr J Okoko; Dr C Ntshongile; Prof D Ruzibwa; Prof M Soob; Prof B Tshame; Ms D Mokoape

Room 7-07, Humanities Building, University of Pretoria, Private Bag 20, Hatfield 0028, South Africa  
(+27) (0) 12 329 3200; fax: (+27) (0) 12 329 3200; email: ethics@up.ac.za | www.up.ac.za/ethics/ethics.html

# APPENDIX C: INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM



Faculty of Humanities  
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe  
Lefapha la Bomo



## PERCEPTIONS OF SOUTH AFRICANS ON THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN THE CONTEXT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

*Individual interview Information and Consent Sheet*

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### **Who I am and why I am here**

Good day. My name is Sello Sele. I am a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Pretoria. As partial requirements of my studies, I am undertaking a research project entitled “*Perceptions of South Africans on the impact of digital feminist activism in the context of violence against women*”. The main aim of the project is to explore the perceptions of South Africans towards #MenAreTrash feminist activism.

### **Request for your participation**

To assist me in gathering the information required to complete the project I am requesting your permission to conduct an interview with you that should last no longer than 1 hour. You have been asked to participate in this study because you are a South African who is between the age of 25-34 and are aware of the controversial debate over the #MenAreTrash social media hashtag. As such, your knowledge on the study topic will be valuable for this research. In addition, I will be grateful for your permission to record the interview. On the next page, there is a place for you to sign as an indication that you give permission for me to conduct the interview and, if you are willing, to record it.

Please understand that you are not being forced to take part in this study and the choice whether to participate or not is yours alone. If you choose not take part there will also be no penalties and you will NOT be prejudiced in ANY way. If you agree to

participate, you may choose to withdraw at any time during the interview. Furthermore, if at any point in the interview you feel uncomfortable with a question asked, you are not forced to answer it and you have the option to decline to respond to the question.

Your participation will cost you nothing and there will be no direct benefits to you.

### **Confidentiality**

All the information you provide in this interview will be kept highly confidential and in all dissemination of the study results pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity. The information will only be used for academic purposes such as writing the dissertation, presenting in local and international conferences, writing journal articles, books or book chapters. However please note that the following:

- **The records from your participation may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly.**
- As per the University of Pretoria policy, the transcripts of your interview will be stored securely and in an anonymised format at the Department of Sociology for a maximum of 15 years.

### **Risks/Discomforts**

There are no anticipated risks attached to participating in this study. However, if you feel distressed in any way at any point during the interview or after, please let me know and I will provide you with the details of the local Lifeline or the South African Anxiety and Depression Group who will be on standby to offer your services free of charge.

If you have any concerns regarding the way the interview was conducted, or any other concern regarding your participation in this study, please contact the Postgraduate Coordinator of the Department of Sociology at the University of Pretoria on 012 420 3744 or by email at [Zitha.Mokomane@up.ac.za](mailto:Zitha.Mokomane@up.ac.za)

Should you have any questions about this study prior or after the interview, you can contact the researcher, Sello Sele, at [u21825450@tuks.co.za](mailto:u21825450@tuks.co.za) or at 0782319260.

**CONSENT**

I hereby agree to participate in the study entitled “*Perceptions of South Africans on the impact of digital feminist activism in the context of violence against women*”. I understand that I am participating freely and without being forced in any way to do so. I also understand that I can stop this interview at any point should I not want to continue, and that this decision will not in any way affect me negatively.

I understand that this is a research project whose purpose is not necessarily to benefit me personally.

I have received the telephone number of a person to contact should I need to speak about any issues which may arise in this interview.

I understand that my answers will remain confidential.

.....  
**Signature of participant**

**Date:**.....

I am willing for this interview to be recorded.

.....  
**Signature of participant**

**Date:**.....

## APPENDIX D: LETTER FROM LANGUAGE EDITOR



KARIEN HURTER  
Copy Editor and Proofreader  
Email: [karien.hurter@gmail.com](mailto:karien.hurter@gmail.com)  
Tel: 071 104 9484

16 April 2024

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is to confirm that *The Perceptions of South Africans on the Impact of Digital Feminist Activism in the Context of Violence Against Women* by Sello Sele was edited by a professional language practitioner. It requires further work by the author in response to my suggested edits. I cannot be held responsible for what the author does from this point onward.

Regards,

Karien Hurter