

**Sophiatown Community Psychological Services (Sophiatown CPS)** is a registered Non Profit Organization (NPO) providing psychosocial support services to some of the most marginalized communities within Johannesburg. Its inner city service, located in Bertrams, was established as a result of the xenophobic violence in 2008 and serves primarily migrants and refugees from other African countries, almost 60% of whom come from the DRC. Over 70% of the clients who make use of the therapeutic and other psycho-social services are women and girls. Counsellors, therapists, social and community workers are intimately engaged with narratives of trauma and distress, including those related to xenophobic violence and hostility, most of which plays itself out in the more hidden spheres of home, school, and health care facilities.

### **Reflections on the Hidden Face of Xenophobia – 23 April 2015**

By Johanna Kistner, Executive Director of Sophiatown CPS and Clinical Psychologist

In my view xenophobia presents itself in many ways - only one of which usually draws the attention of the media and of state officials. This is the overt violence and looting which we have seen over the past two weeks, resulting in serious injury and death, and making headlines all over the world, which then galvanizes some level of action on the part of the governmental and non-governmental sector. The hidden, pervasive face of xenophobia, on the other hand, shows itself mainly to women and children in

- The intimacy of their living spaces - perpetrated mainly in the form of ongoing threats by SA neighbours and co-tenants
- Schools- perpetrated by both teachers and learners, but also more subtly in the adoption of (illegal) exclusionary practices
- In health care facilities in which medical and clerical staff refuse to treat foreigners, often openly utter xenophobic threats, and/or make access to health care impossible by (illegally) charging huge amounts of money
- Social media through which unconfirmed rumours and threats are spread like wildfire, seemingly planned and intended to frighten foreign nationals into either complete resignation and paralysis or a determination to leave-
- The harassment of women informal traders by both the metro police and SA customers.

Women and children are particularly vulnerable to this hidden face of xenophobia because they have already been multiply traumatized by violence in their home countries as well as in South Africa. The exposure to repeated and/or ongoing trauma has a cumulative effect on cognitive functioning and when subjected to threats (even if these are never carried out) a cognitive and emotional paralysis sets in which then makes it impossible for victims to rationally assess threats and explore reasonable ways of protecting themselves. We see this especially in women and children who were victims of the 2008 xenophobic violence. When confronted with the current violence and threats these mothers and their children lose all sense of agency, and feel that they have no option but to wait for death by gunshot, fire or knife.

Most of the families we work with in the inner city are headed by single mothers whose only source of income is some kind of informal trading. The xenophobic violence and the continuing

threats of further violence result in women not feeling safe to continue trading and thereby losing the only source of income that secures the roof over the head - a roof which already shelters far too many people who cannot afford the rent for accommodation that provides them with at least a measure of dignity and protection. We expect that by the end of this month many more families will be homeless and very hungry as a direct result of xenophobic violence and threats.

Xenophobic attitudes, threats and exclusionary practices in schools and health care facilities in effect remove the only (constitutionally mandated) spaces in which women and children can expect safety, protection and care. This means that women don't get treated for manageable conditions such as diabetes for hypertension and that children's progress at school is severely jeopardized. We have seen children being orphaned by conditions which could easily have been managed, and our high school learners tell us that if they miss an exam because of the violence on the streets by their homes, they are simply failed.

These are just some of the effects of the hidden face of xenophobia. Each one of them obviously has serious long-term implications for the physical and emotional well being of women and children in all spheres of life, and therefore the progress and well being of our country, our continent and our world. We therefore appeal to all South Africans who are genuinely committed to social justice and the fight against xenophobia to look the hidden face of xenophobia straight in the eye, and to declare with their actions that here, too, in the intimate spaces of home, school, pavement trading, and health care, we shall uproot you, never to show yourself again.