

The Uncommitted Sin

Jostina Sangweni is a name that is likely very unfamiliar to many reading this article.

To those familiar with it, the name will be a distant memory in the near future. To her loved ones, she was a beloved and cherished senior family member and a valued member of her community. Jostina is a 59 year old female who was recently murdered after being beaten and set alight in Soweto, following accusations of being a witch. Contrary to this false belief, her actual crime committed was having the diagnosis of dementia, a type of mental illness which leads to behavioural changes and is common in her age group. Her family's desperate plea following this tragic yet avoidable death, is for extensive community psycho-education about mental illnesses.

Mental illnesses are still plagued by the toxic and destructive presence of stigma and its presence mutates and poisons its surroundings much like a malignant carcinoma. In my personal capacity, I have always been aware of stigma generally but only became blatantly acquainted with it directly following my most recent relapse. During this relapse, I was displaying manic and psychotic symptoms and in my unwell and vulnerable state, I made a spectacle of myself in full view of colleagues and strangers alike on a social media group which I had created. The content in that social media platform ended up being circulated in my work setting and was sadly distributed by many who were in possession of it. The aftermath of this entire ordeal served as a life-altering turning point. It did not take long for me to realise that to people, my illness had become my defining moment and that my illness had become my identity. I was seen through the lense of my relapsed state and all credibility that I had garnered both professionally and socially, was obliterated through that single unfortunate event. I became my illness and people refused to see me beyond that mental episode.



Dr. Samke J. Ngcobo

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Being a victim of stigma is humiliating. It robs an individual of their sense of dignity and autonomy and forces an individual to conform to the rules and dictates of societal demands and expectations. It corners one into a lonely and isolated space of shame, self-defeat and self-loathing.

For as long as psycho-education about mental illnesses is not prioritised, the horrific incidents similar to that encountered by Jostina Sangweni who was simply a victim of sheer ignorance and intolerance, will persist.

Reflecting on the earlier days of my illness in hindsight, I realise that my illness presented a spiritual conundrum as I was deemed to be demon-possessed which meant that I had to be subjected to several exorcisms in order to command and cast out the demons out of me. My young and naïve 14 year old self was left confused and deeply troubled because I could not understand why people no longer ate food served from my home when offered and I could not fathom how it was concluded that I was spiritually weak and had become a conduit that housed demons. The level of

rejection, avoidance and lack of compassion was scarring and damaging- I was being punished and rejected for a sin that I did not commit. Much like religion, the same dynamics existed in my cultural context. It was believed that I was bewitched and therefore had to purge this darkness that was residing inside me.

We are in desperate need of a strong and decisive action by our government regarding their response to the current mental health crisis and management thereof.

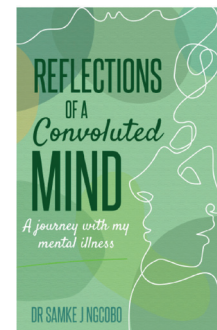
Due to this desperate and dire circumstance, one cannot afford to wait for government to implement strategies but instead, I believe that self-advocacy on behalf of those affected and persistent activism will accelerate this important agenda.

Following a traumatic admission to a state psychiatric facility last year; an activist within me was born. I was inspired to be more vocal both for myself and for those who will never be heard, seen or represented. I decided to formalise my organisation by having it registered (www.sistersformentalhealth.co.za) and commit myself to a role as a mental health advocate.

It is my firm belief that the best form of advocacy is self-advocacy as no one can fully empathise with a struggle unless they live with it or are directly impacted by it.

We have a long and arduous journey ahead of us but at least the journey has begun.

In memory of Jostina Sangweni and the patients and loved ones from the Life Esidimeni atrocity. I am you and you are me. Your injustice is not negligible. I will not allow your suffering to be in vain.



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