



**MAPUNGUBWE**  
INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC REFLECTION (MISTRA)

# Intergenerational trauma in South Africa

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# Introduction

- As part of the scenarios 2030, **MISTRA** saw it important to action research on:
  - University students - Universities have been a site of protest
  - Between the ages of 17 to 25
- **To find out their views and experiences of inherited trauma**
- As South African society tries to reimagine itself and to create a new social fabric, **it is important to interrogate the legacies of the past**
- Unique questions about the make-up of our society and history are emerging from the youth
- We went to a historically Afrikaans/white university that now has more black students from various backgrounds and locations

# Background

- Topic was identified as a concept that needs further interrogation at the Core Participants workshop
- Question: How do young people deal with the past in the present?
- In light of recent university activism surrounding the questions of history, justice and reconciliation, we thought it apt to ask how the past continues to feature in the lives of students of the present
- Decision that primary research on this issue would give interesting insight
- Questions about the past – how to interrupt the cycles of its repetitions and bring about social change- have come to dominate public debate

# Methodology

- **Field work**
- Target was young South Africans from different backgrounds and provinces.
- **A university was identified as a desirable location-** large number of young people.
- Universities have been sites of protest- shattering the myth that their reality/ lived experiences in SA are 'easy'
- **Used open-ended questionnaires - 10 questions**
- **Wanted the answers to reflect the reality of the participants** - they had space to explain their opinions on the subject.

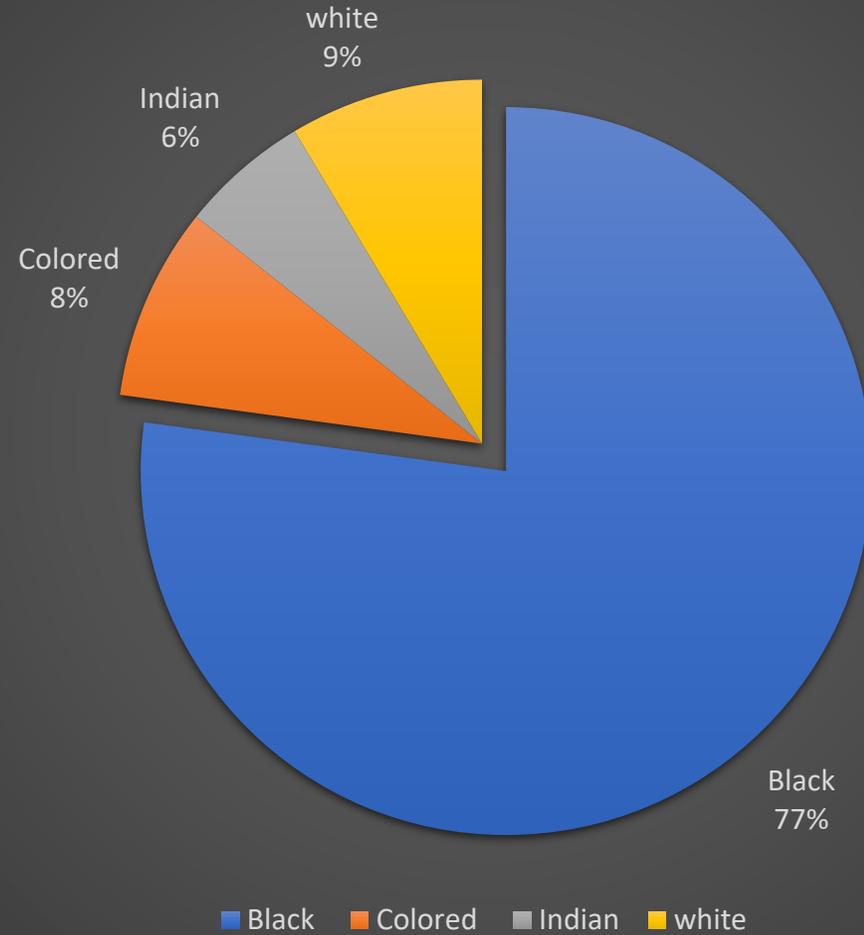
# As defined by scholars

- **Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela**: The **impact of colonial oppression, genocide and other kinds of mass atrocities** not only on individuals but also groups that experienced violence, felt **across multiple generations of descendants of survivors**
- Jeffrey Prager (2003) defines Trauma as **a wound that never heals**. It **succeeds in passing the experience from one generation to the next**.
- According to Prager, The present is lived as if it were the past and the result is that the **next generation is deprived of its sense of social location and its capacity to creatively define itself autonomously from the former**.

**Intergenerational Trauma**: The burden of history to the South African people in relation to their Social, political, and economic realities of race, identity and poverty etc.

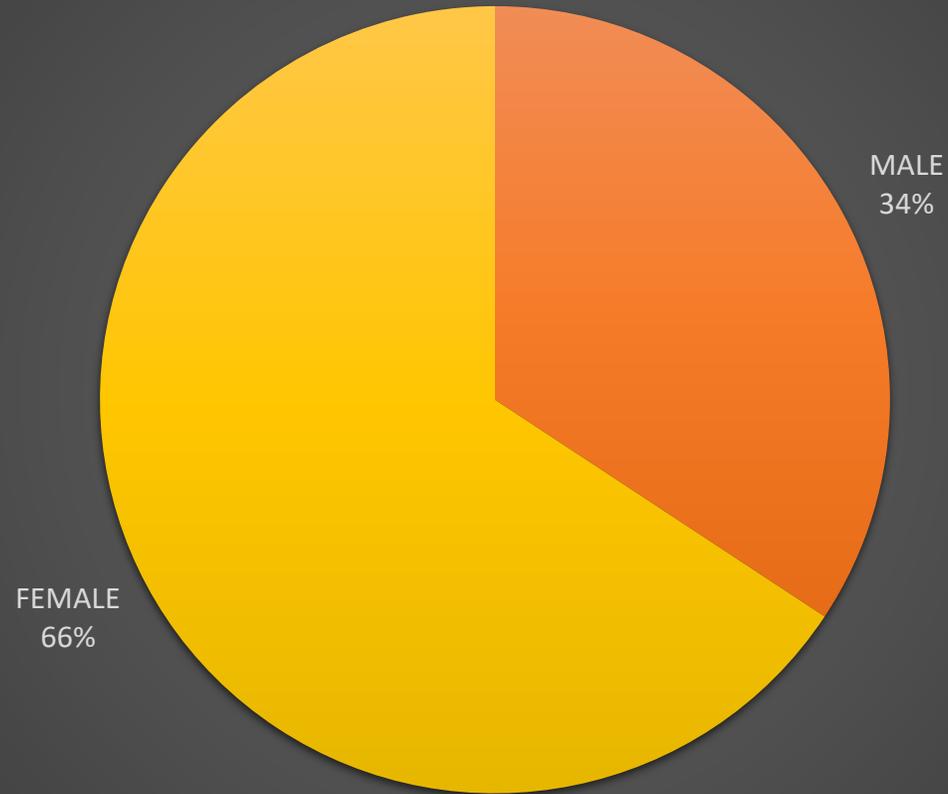
# Sample demographics

Race representation



# Sample demographics cont.

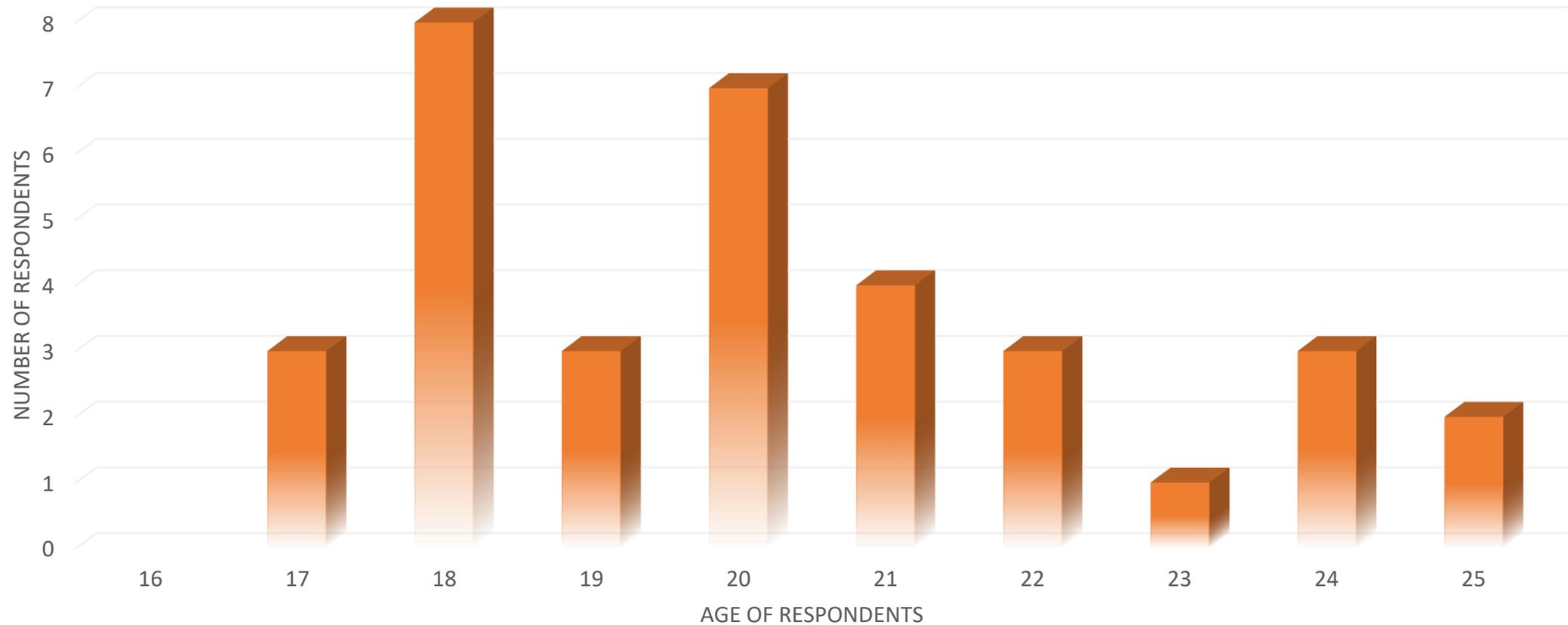
Gender representation



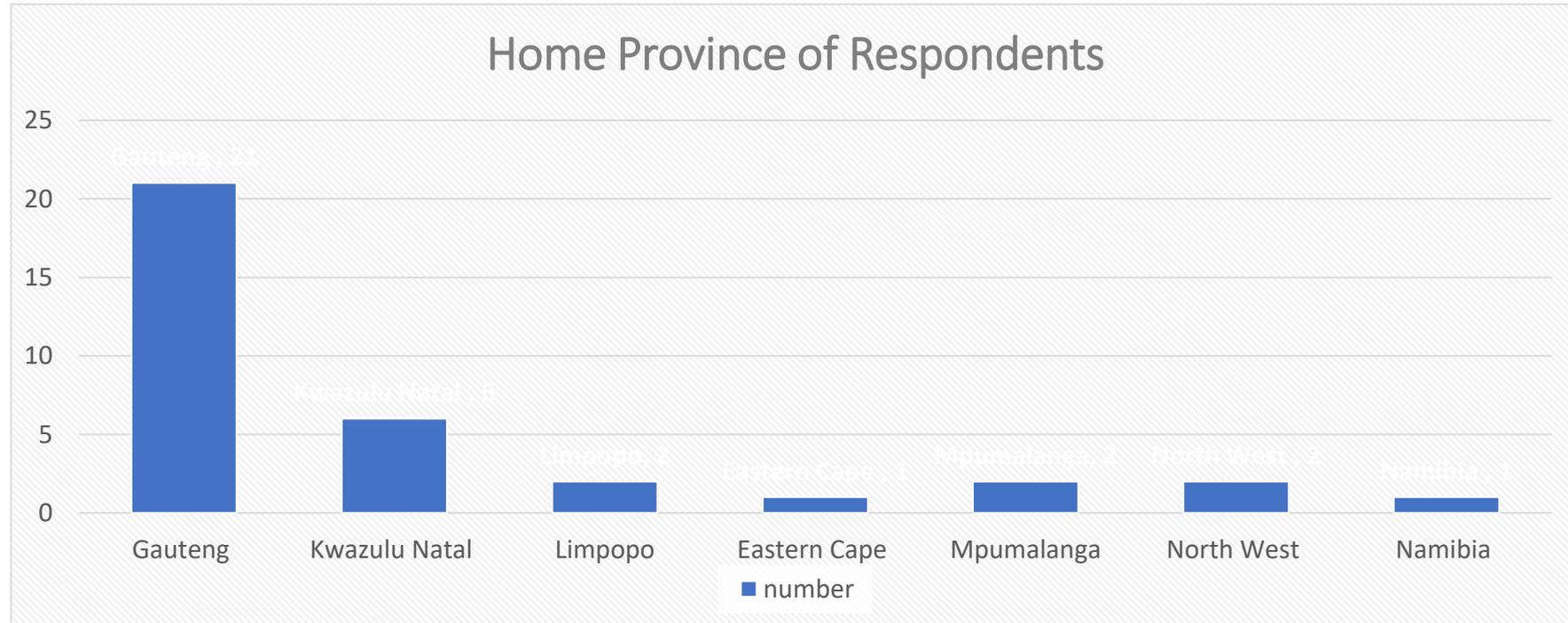
MALE FEMALE

# Sample demographics cont.

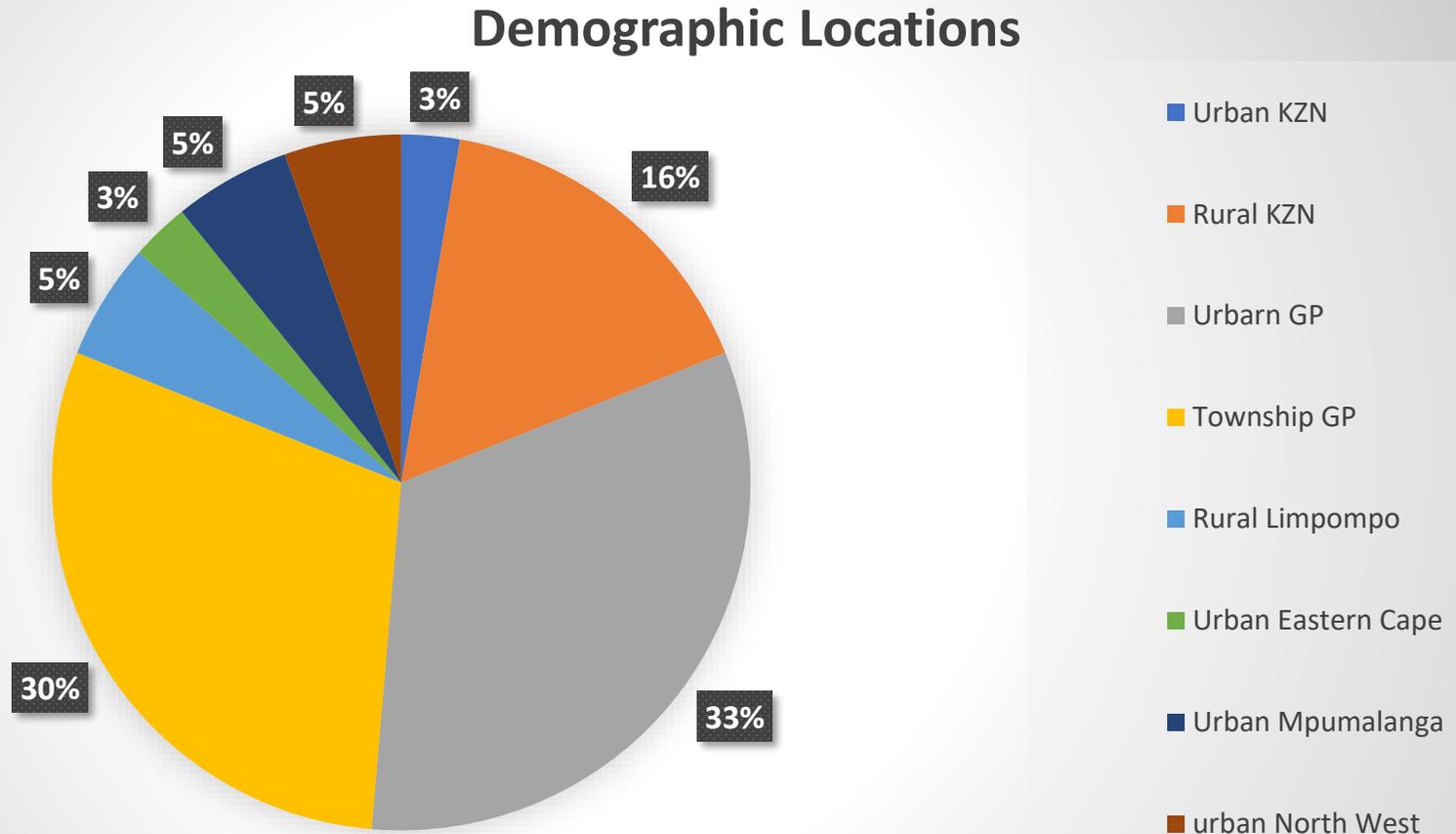
## AGE AND NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS



# Sample demographics cont.



# Sample demographics cont.



# How would you define intergenerational trauma?

Past experiences of past generations that still affect the current generations both positively and negatively

Limitations of freedom that psychologically affects people

It is the inherited effects of an anti-black unjust society into new society

A disconnect between two generations due to dramatic changes as a result of circumstances or social evolutions

Inheritance of trauma faced by parents in the past

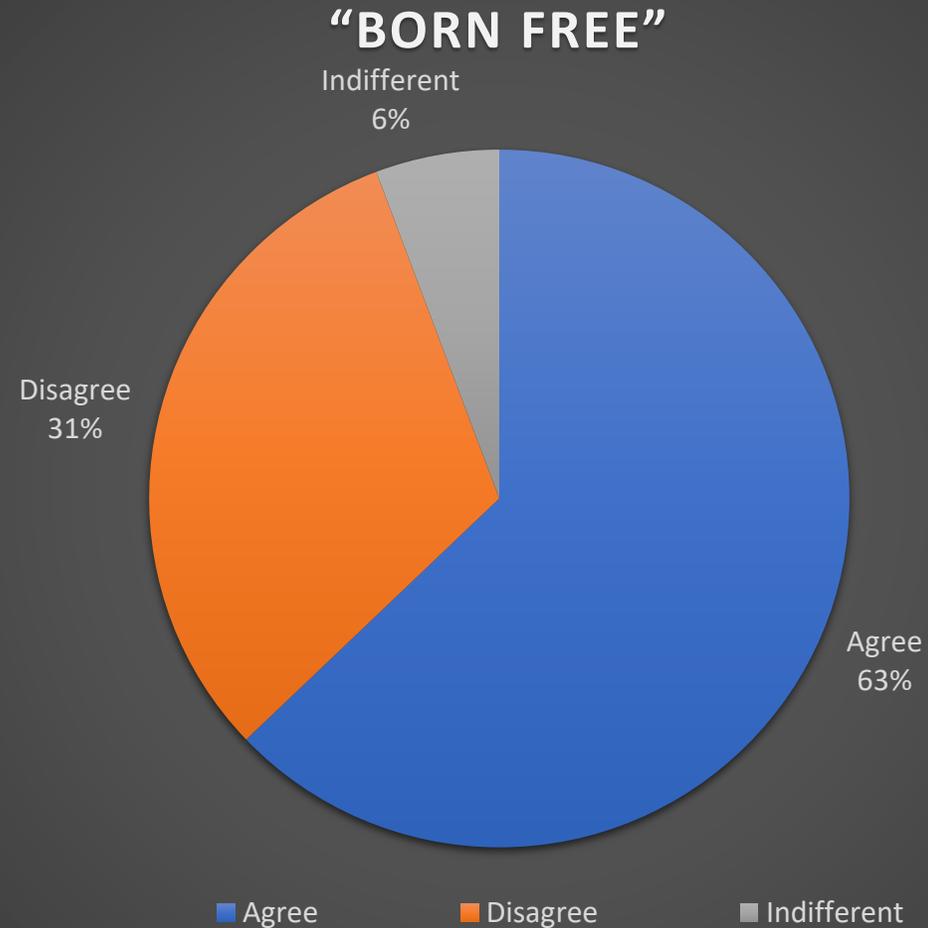
Effects of past imbalances affecting the youth of today

Being forced into poverty by ones wealth being taken away

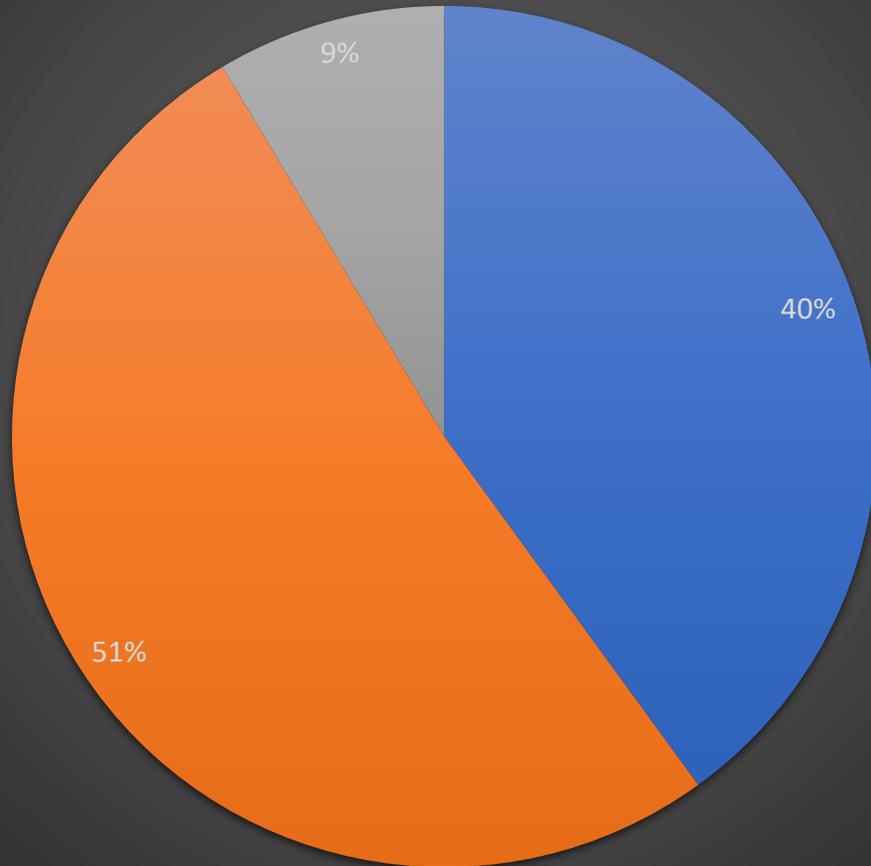
# How do you understand the label “born free”?

- **Those born after Apartheid**
- Born free from rules of apartheid
- **Everyone is free**
- **Born in a society when you have and can make own life choices**
- One who can achieve any dream
- Born free to express and do anything at anytime
- **Born in at the moment of technology advancements**
- **Free from the imbalances of the past**

# Do you agree/disagree with label 'born free'?



## Have 'born frees' engaged intergenerational trauma effectively?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Indiferent

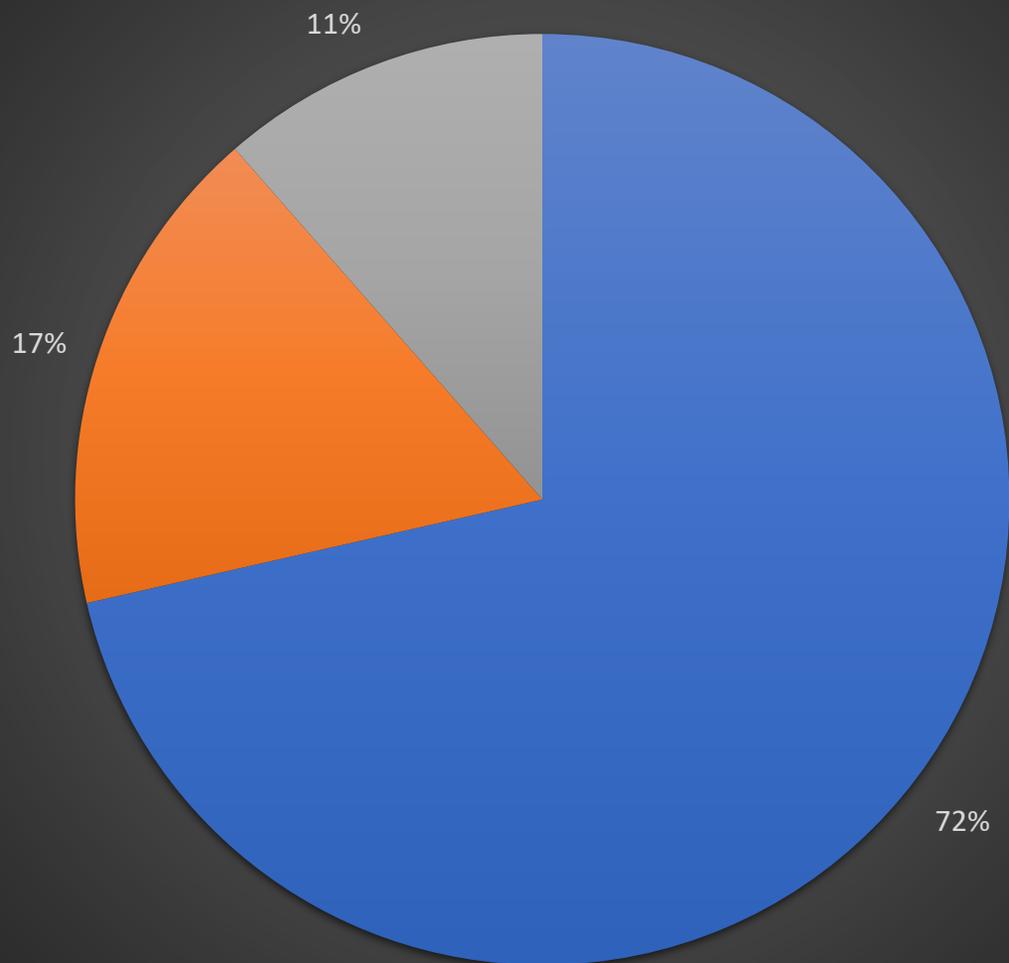
## NO

- The 'born frees' are still grappling with the concept
- Black families once had land, born frees do not have land
- People are still holding grudges for what oppressors did in the past

## YES

- "We don't have to believe what our parents believe".
- "We are trying to maintain the freedom Nelson Mandela fought for (reconciliation)".
- "'Born frees' are not following traditional norms, they seek to break boundaries".

## How is your Life similar/different to/from that of your parents?



■ Different ■ similar ■ both ■

### Different

- “We have more opportunities with regards to education”
- “We are more privileged with regards to access to opportunities”
- “We have friends of different races and we see that as a normal part of life”
- “We have freedom of choice, speech, human rights”
- “We have grown up in a constitutional democracy”

### Similar

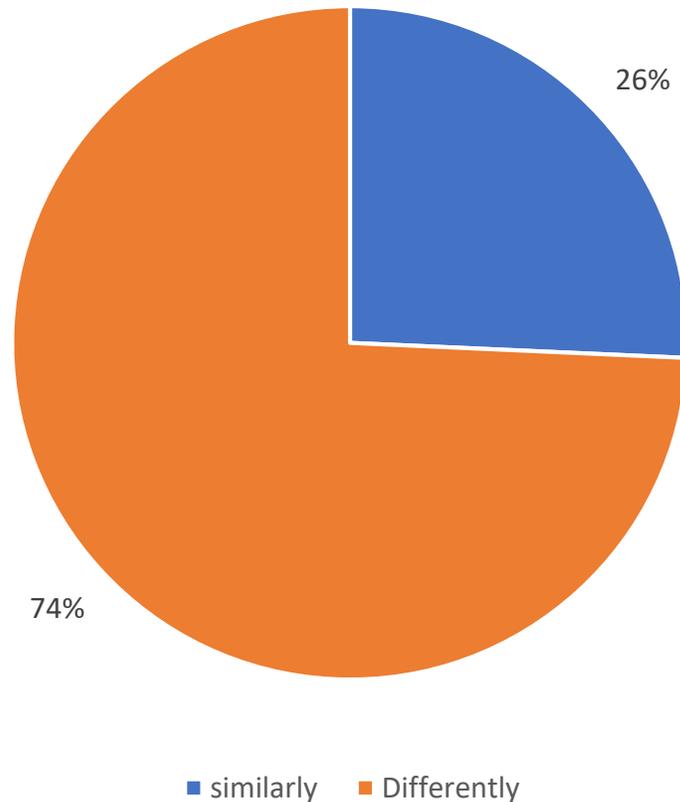
- “We both still believe in education as a primary door opener to opportunities”
- “We are still fighting to access the things my parents battled for such as education, land and a decent living wage”
- “Economically we are not different”
- “We still face similar difficulties and structural challenges”
- “Inequality still exists”

# How does intergenerational trauma show itself in families, communities & South Africa?

- Black and white people still dislike each other
- 'Born frees' are angry about apartheid
- **Many adults fail to understand the overarching dynamics of yesterday to today's world and they exert much pressure**
- Older generations are set in their ways to force things on younger generations
- **Legacies of poverty in that millions of 'born frees' still have to live under as a different effect from the past**

- **We are still at odds with people who benefited from the apartheid system**
- Black families still live in poverty and struggle to get access to basic needs
- New generations tend to disrespect older generations
- Parents influencing their children to hold grudges for things they went through in the past
- **Statistics show that majority black people are still struggling economically compared to white people**

# How do you think different races experience intergenerational trauma?



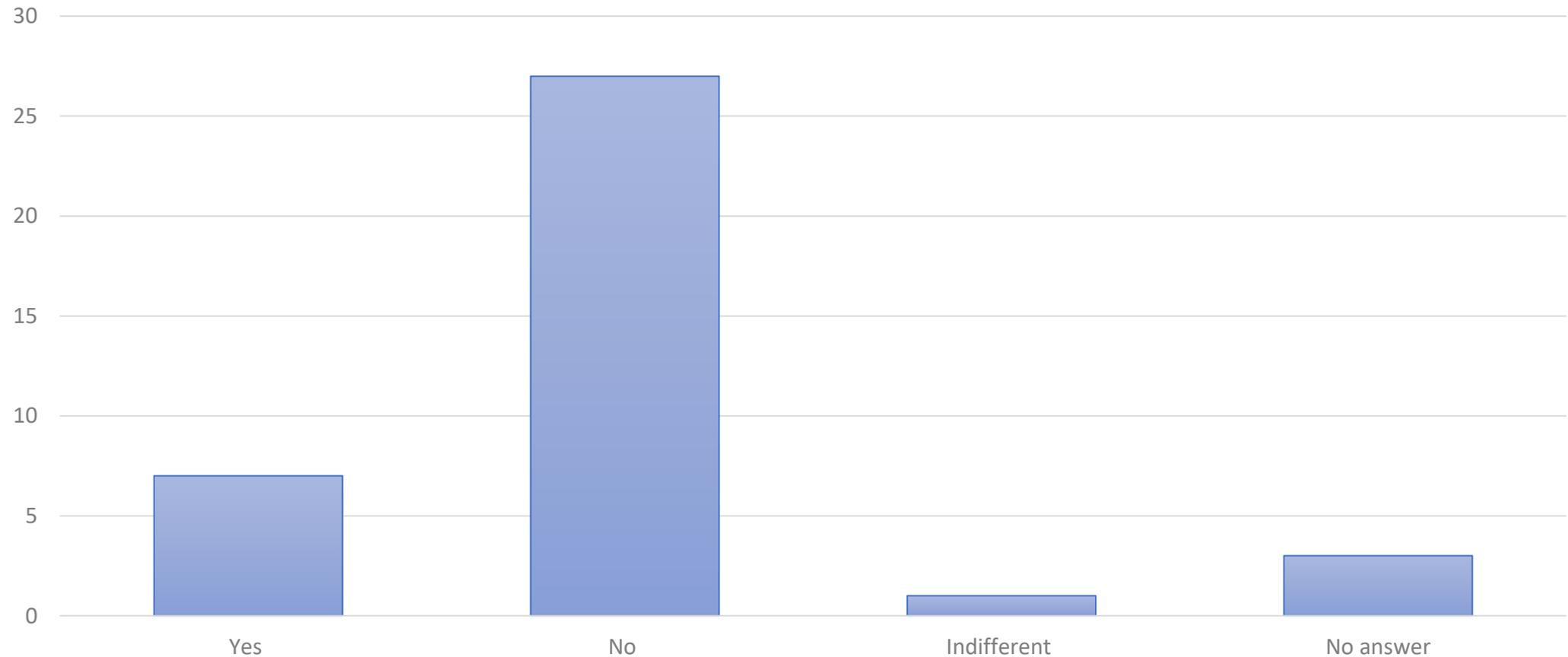
## Differently

- **Non-whites are affected differently**
- Previously disadvantaged groups are mostly affected
- Different backgrounds and up-bringing
- **Some have the advantage of history on their side**
- The previously disadvantaged find it more difficult to deal with change

## Similarly

- Depends on social class
- **We all live together, if one race feels attacked it affects other races**
- **Almost all 'born frees' mix with other races**

# Do you think government has done enough to address challenges of intergenerational trauma?



# What can South Africans do to confront and heal intergenerational trauma?

- **They must give back land to its original owners**
- Allow youth to integrate the way they want to and leave the past in the past
- Move forward not backwards
- **By having peace and understanding that apartheid is not going to come back**
- Youth should get educated so they can get better jobs and stop fussing about the past
- Unite and fight for equity not just equality
- **Stop blaming apartheid, start reading and studying in order to create better environment**
- **Young people should stop getting influenced by their parents**
- Rehabilitation centres
- Work hard, persevere and stop relying on government

# What can South Africans do to confront and heal intergenerational trauma? cont.

- **Create initiatives to confront and heal trauma**
- Stop blaming others and take redressive action
- Embrace interracial relationships
- **Make more campaigns and documentaries to make people aware**
- Prevent discrimination and inequality
- More education about apartheid
- **Open minded campaigns which aim to bridge gap between generations and shed light on motivating factors that drive the youth**
- Integrated discussions using different methods
- Put out interrogative books for next generations
- **Land redistribution is the only method that can help us heal the most as a collective**

# Noted by scholars

## **Martha Cabrera**

“Populations that are wounded lose their capacity to make decisions and plan for the future due to the excess suffering they have lived through”

## **Pumla Madikizela**

“ The problem of past trauma across generations is probably one of the most urgent questions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”

# Conclusion

- It is clear that **young people have a different understanding of South Africa to the narratives pushed by the state and society.**
- Young people know that the past directly affects and impacts on them even though they might not have the language to express themselves.
- Decolonisation is perhaps the concept the youth collectively embraced that engages intergenerational trauma.
- **The 'born free' are not naïve to the many causes of their lived realities and experiences.**
- There is no consensus on dominant type of trauma i.e. psychological, physical, political, social, structural, systemic. Different people experience trauma differently.
- Although the sample are impressionable, young people **still harbour strong opinions on how the past affects them and how they are imagining a future**
- South Africa has not engaged the issue of intergenerational trauma - **the youth are starting to have and own the conversation**

## REFERENCES

Prager, J. (2003). Lost childhood, lost generations: the intergenerational transmission of trauma. *Journal of Human Rights*, 2(2), 173-181.

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