



GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: SOCIALISING THE BOY CHILD

**Address by Val Melis,
Senior Public Prosecutor, Durban Magistrate's Court - 15 May 2013**

In the words of Lisa Wingate: “Your children are the greatest gift God will give to you, and their souls the heaviest responsibility He will place in your hands. Take time with them, teach them to have faith in God. Be a person in whom they can have faith. When you are old, nothing else you’ve done will have mattered as much.”

I have been working in the field of child abuse and gender based violence for most of my 23 years as a prosecutor and can honestly tell you that we, in South Africa, are currently sitting on a ticking time bomb when it comes to boys perpetrating violence, both sexual and otherwise, towards girls. We need therefore, to ask ourselves the questions that I have pondered over for the past 10 years:

Why are our boys and young men resorting to violent means to satisfy their adolescent, hormone fuelled sexual urges? Where have we, both as a society and as parents, gone wrong in raising our boys? And finally, what can we do to address and attempt to normalise our children’s sexual behaviours?

I am going to commence with a statement about which I hold very strong feelings: Many of us, as parents, have abrogated our God-given responsibility to parent and raise our children. All too often we have parents coming to the courts begging us to take control over their adolescent boys as they have completely lost control over that young person. This is not the function of the court or of the police. The following was stated by a young police officer who had been brought a boy who was allegedly “out of control”:

“So where mothers have problems, they bring the child to the police station, expecting that the police are going to perform a miracle with this child. The only thing that I have is to **start speaking to the child** – to be maybe the father that the child is missing. And to address the child through that and also to teach the child – the reason that the child is being brought is so that the child can be taught something. And the only thing that I can tell the child is that ‘if you do not obey the laws of the country, I will have to lock you up’. But from our side, we try

to address this with much more of a crime prevention focus, and it ends up a lot of times that people are expecting that we do have social workers in the police station”

We expect everyone but ourselves to raise our children and then are quick to blame “the government” when things go wrong. It is **not** the role of the government, social workers, schools or the police to raise our children – it is our responsibility as parents of those children. Research has shown that up to 80% of what children learn, they learn at home. I am not talking about academic learning but about socialisation skills, interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging. Without these skills, children are sent out into the world ill equipped to face the challenges that will inevitably face them.

Over the past 20 years, we have focussed on the girl child, equipping her to say no to unwanted sexual advances, teaching about “good touch and bad touch” and, in some instances, even teaching self-defence as a means to fend off would be attackers. It is now generally accepted that this approach has not been as successful as we would have liked it to be and we now need to shift our focus to the boy child from an early age.

Why am I emphasising “from an early age”, surely we need only to focus on teenagers? In my recent experience at court, I have dealt with cases where children as young as six years of age have committed rape either on a much younger or an older girl or boy. I will go into more detail about that later. Due to what many young children are witnessing in their homes, we need to start with children as young as six years of age.

In order to attempt to provide answers to the questions posed above, we need to have a better understanding of the scale of the problem of child sex offenders in South Africa. The most comprehensive study of sexual violence in South Africa was carried out by international research group CIETAfrica in 1998. They described South Africa as possessing a culture of sexual violence with 3 out of 10 South African women having reported being victims of sexual violence. Many other studies suggest that this violence begins in childhood at the hands of other children. A Medical Research Council study in the Western Cape found that most women’s first sexual encounter occurred at around 12 years of age with a male partner who was older by about 5 years. Most of the girls had been deceived into sex and many reported that they had attempted to resist but were intimidated, threatened or physically assaulted. In 2001 Human Rights Watch in their research report “*Scared at School: Sexual Violence Against Girls in South African Schools*”, described the common situation where the greatest threat to a girl’s safety at school was most likely to be sitting next to her in class. In her 2002 paper on Identifying and Treating the Adolescent Sexual Offender, Joan van Niekerk estimated that 42% of all sexual crimes committed against children and reported to Childline were committed by other children.

In the CIETAfrica study, 30% of female High School learners participating in the study felt that they had to have sex as a proof of love while that figure doubled amongst male learners. The same percentage of students stated that girls do not have the right to refuse sex with a boyfriend but the percentage was even higher amongst 10 to 14 year olds!

Some of the most prevalent misconceptions held by the students were

- A girl means “yes” when she says “no”. This belief was widespread amongst boys but was also commonly expressed by girls
- 10% of the pupils believed that girls who are raped ask for it and 26% did not believe that girls hated being raped
- 17% of the students believed that girls preferred sexually violent boys
- 60% of all these learners said that it was not sexual violence to force sex with someone you know
- 51% believed that unwanted touching was not a form of sexual abuse.

A 2000 study into the nature of adolescent sexual offenders between 7 and 15 years of age found that they shared many characteristics with young sex offenders in other countries in that most of them came from family backgrounds characterised by domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and violent criminal activity. The major differences that set the South African offenders apart from their overseas counterparts was that the majority of the South African group were frequently exposed to aggressive and forced sexual behaviours within their communities.

The 2006 HSRC study “*Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa*” commenced by saying: “Evidence has shown that where children are exposed to violence, they learn that it is normative and that conflicts are resolved through the use of violence. Young boys who witness mothers being abused are at an increased risk for becoming later perpetrators of domestic violence, while girls who are exposed to similar abusive patterns are more likely to be vulnerable to later victimisation.”

The study goes on to explore various constructs of masculinity and the roles of men within the family and in society in general. So let us explore the concept of “family” in the South African context. Numerous studies have shown that South African families are increasingly deviating from the “conventional nuclear family” of mom, dad and children. Rachel Jewkes in her 2009 study concluded that “growing up as a child in a home with two biological parents is unusual”. Furthermore, the majority of children are born outside of marriage, and there is

generally no expectation that the biological fathers will have any social involvement in the lives of these children. Often there is not even any financial support given by these absent fathers. Research has shown that 40% of households in South Africa are female headed. This is of particular significance in terms of the increased vulnerability of women and children and under these conditions, in order to cope, women and children develop their own survival strategies which may include violent or aggressive behaviours.

The unacceptably high rates of domestic violence in South Africa have not helped the problem of socialisation of children, both male and female. Numerous studies have concluded that, by witnessing the abuse of a mother in the home in childhood, men are reared into violence, and the belief that violence is an appropriate means of resolving conflict in intimate relationships. The phenomenon of young boys witnessing abuse against their mothers has been identified as the most consistent risk factor for them engaging in domestic and sexual violence later in life.

When it comes to understanding sex offending as it pertains to children, it is important to note that although children may know that hurting other children is wrong, they do not always understand the implications of sexuality since sexuality is part of the adult world. Often children do not get guidance on sexual behaviour, what is appropriate and what is problematic sexual conduct. When children commit sexual acts on other children, they may be acting out things they have observed in their homes, in their communities or, increasingly on the television. At times children commit sexual acts as a way of acting out things done to them by adults or older children. Numerous studies have shown that when younger children are subjected to early sexual victimisation it increases their probability of engaging in sexually inappropriate behaviour. In such cases there is often a thin line between a victim and a perpetrator of a sexual offence. Childhood sexual victimisation has a devastating impact, which includes internalisation of inappropriate behaviours and acting-out disorders, and there must be recognition that effective prevention and early intervention and treatment can end the cycle of both victimisation and perpetration.

It is critical for an adolescent to grow into adulthood with a sense of belonging, preferably to his family. In the absence of this, he seeks belonging outside of the family, amongst peers and in extreme cases in gangs. It is also of great importance that he has a male figure from whom to learn and on whom to model his behaviour as a man. In the common situation where the father is absent from the home, he attempts to model himself on external male influences, many of whom are unsuitable role models such as musicians, gangsters and other older men in the community.

What then do we mean by masculinity and how is this ideal construct of masculinity distorted when inappropriate role models are followed by male children?

We need to emphasise that masculinity is constructed – baby boys are not born with it. One of the key issues in exploring masculinity is the belief that men and boys need to “prove” their masculinity by conforming to the cultural ideal of successful masculinity which includes, *inter alia*, being macho, being heterosexual and having a high sex drive. International studies of adolescent boys have shown that they typically see a “real man” as someone who is physically attractive, dominant, aggressive and sexually powerful. Controlling women and behaving violently were important parts of their definition of the “real man” and many adolescent boys believed that young women sought this type of “real man”. The young men stated that it was important to “prove one’s manhood” and that proving manliness was characterised by violence against women, risky sexual behaviour, and alcohol and drug use.

Lynette Rossouw of the Western Cape Education Department conducted a very useful research study on “The Impact of Socialisation on the Behaviour of Boys”. She found overwhelming evidence that the socialisation of boys does have an impact on their behaviour as it was clear that boys were expected to conform to a masculine identity. I will explore some of the key findings of this research to demonstrate the effect of socialisation on our boy children.

- The boys in the research study stated that they would prefer **not** to have to act macho, brave, strong and emotionless or stoic, but **society dictates** that they must act that way as they will be the future protectors of and providers for their families
- The absence of fathers has removed the male models for many of the boys and distorted them for others. A number of the boys were also subjected to inconsistent harsh discipline
- Not all the boys missed out on a positive father figure: several of them gave examples of kind, supporting fathers, who praise, feel affection for them and look after them to the best of their ability
- At school, many of the boys do not feel safe and feel they have to act tough in order to be accepted by their peers and to steer clear of being mocked. When they break the rules a number of educators resort to humiliating them and subjecting them to corporal punishment. Some of the educators also fed into the cycle of violence by reacting rather than responding to the learners
- Within the peer culture the boys often had to prove their maleness by keeping strictly to a specific model of what boys perceive as masculinity and male behaviour. Their

peers stereotypical views on masculinity lead to male aggression and risk-taking behaviours such as drug taking activity

- The boys saw as important the need to earn money and be able to provide for a family and protect them from harm, despite the fact that they did not experience this from their own fathers or even their father-figures. For them it was important to be strong and unemotional in order to fulfil these duties
- Given the high crime rate and unemployment levels in the country, a group of the boys reported that they were ambivalent or even scared at the prospect of being a man as they were very aware of their male responsibilities
- It was particularly clear that the boys felt the need for a connection with at least one affirming positive adult role model.

It was interesting to note that most of the boys participating in the study cited the role of men as breadwinners in the household. It is thus easy to see how many young men have exceptionally low levels of self worth, given the high levels of unemployment in our society.

The risk factors predisposing boys to commit sexual offences have been documented extensively and include: anti-social, criminal or substance-abusing parents; poor adult supervision; single parent families; poor family management; poor relationships between parents/caregivers and children; peer rejection and problematic approaches to gender relations. Of further concern, given recent developments in the South African media, is the finding by Linda Dhabicharran in her Master's degree thesis on adolescents who commit sexual offences in this province, that "the immediate precursor of sexual abuse appeared to be exposure to pornographic material by the majority of offending adolescents"

Prevention strategies

Psychologist Dr Ulli Meys has established that over half of adult child abusers began their offending behaviour before the age of 18 years, which would lead us to conclude that early intervention during a child's development can prevent entrenchment of sexually abusive behaviour.

Research by Professor Andy Dawes has shown that, in South Africa, boys are becoming sexually active at an earlier age than was previously the case. According to Professor Dawes, peers and pornography (which objectifies women and sex) commonly provided the boys' first knowledge of sex while dating relationships were the route to first actual sexual encounters. This is however dependant on the context in which the boy has been raised with close parental monitoring and religious commitment often postponing the first sexual encounter. Joan van Niekerk, current President of ISPCAN has emphasised that, in terms of

boys who take part in gang rapes, one cannot discount the susceptibility of male children to peer pressure making some boys as much victims as offenders.

If we, as a society, are going to have an impact on this alarming phenomenon of children sexually abusing other children, we need to take cognisance of the so-called resilience factors, that is, those factors in the life of a male child that would make him less likely to commit violent sexual crimes against other children. These resilience factors are generally considered to be : belonging to a nurturing, close-knit family, the presence of a positive male role model be it a father or father-figure, positive interactions with parents and other adults, and adherence to a code of moral values whether through religious beliefs or otherwise.

How can we as a society or as religious organisations intervene?

Some suggestions:

1. Provide strong male role models (eg, youth leaders) in situations where boys are growing up with absent fathers
2. Provide programs aimed at strengthening the resilience factors and reducing, as far as possible, the risk factors
3. Be prepared to talk to our young boys about sexuality
4. Provide counselling services for boys struggling with this aspect of their lives.

I would like to end with the wise words of the father of our nation, Dr Nelson Mandela:

“One of the great tragedies of apartheid was its neglect of the majority of our children. It hindered the development of their potential to contribute to the community and the nation and many were pushed to the margins of society. And yet, our youth are our future.

By combining education and crime prevention, by working in our schools and amongst young people who are unemployed or in prison, our campaign will indeed bring the light of hope to help break the darkness that feeds the ranks of the criminals. It will, we believe, add strength to our efforts to change the culture of violence that pervades our society, and, in particular too, many of the schools and homes where our young people learn the values that guide them.

Our country’s well-being depends on the well-being of our communities and of our children. We cannot build our country without building our communities and developing our children.

There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way it treats its children”

Thank you.