



What About The Boy Child?

"If you save the boy child, you save a generation."

Prof Paul Wandere¹

1. Introduction

It is easy to overlook the experiences of boy children.² Literature from East Africa suggests that there is disproportionate emphasis on the rights of the girl child and that this disproportionality has been at the expense of the boy child. This imbalance in favour of a particular gender, while seeking to engender greater gender parity, may have unintended consequences. Real transformation of gender relations requires an equal focus on the boy child.³

Professor Paul Wandere points out that "what this world order fails to grasp is the fact that the boy child has the same or worse challenges as girls have."⁴ Others ask,

"Why should the boy child of today suffer just because historically the girl child was marginalized? Aren't we also creating disparities that would need future rectification in the process? Both boys and girls need to be educated and mentored. We will be going wrong as a region if we give much attention to the girl child and forget that tomorrow will come when we will need the boys to become men. There is a need for more men to come out as mentors for the boy child, to guide and teach them what is expected of them as they grow up into men. After all we need each other for a healthy nation".⁵

2. Abuse and Neglect

The Children's Act defines abuse, in relation to a child, "as any form of harm or ill-treatment

deliberately inflicted on a child including: assaulting a child or inflicting any other form of deliberate injury to a child; sexually abusing a child or allowing a child to be sexually abused; bullying by another child; a labour practice that exploits a child; and exposing or subjecting a child to behaviour that may harm the child psychologically or emotionally."⁶ Sexual abuse includes using a child in or deliberately exposing a child to sexual activities or pornography and the commercial sexual exploitation of children. The Act is very broad in its reach and extends to actions of omission, commission and collusion

Recent statistics released by Stats South Africa show a chilling increase of 110% in sexual offences.⁷ This staggering statistic reminds us of the importance of understanding the socio-economic context and psycho-social environments which shape and mould the 'boy child', and which may be predicative of future anti-social behaviours.⁸ It is this normalization of rape and sexual violence which has led to such a horrifying statistic

The 2016 Optimus Study on the 'Sexual Victimization of Children in South Africa' found that

"The data also shows that boys and girls are equally vulnerable to sexual abuse, although the forms might vary. This is a departure from much of the literature, which usually focuses on the particular vulnerability of girls. The focus on gender is important but motivations for violence

towards children are not all gender driven. Children, girls and boys, are targets for violence because they are vulnerable developmentally and dependent upon caregivers for survival and protection. The study points to another critical gap in programme design that needs to be taken into account – the experiences of boys. Also important is the fact that two-thirds to half of children and young people reporting violence experience repeated victimisation. One in 10 children who have experienced sexual abuse by a known adult, had this experience four or more times”.⁹

Victims of such violence easily become perpetrators in a context where such abuse is seen as normal. An intergenerational cycle of violence is engendered.

Earlier this year Parktown Boys’ High School in Johannesburg hit the headlines when it was revealed that about 22 under-age complainants had accused the former assistant water polo coach of serious crimes, which included sexual assault, grooming¹⁰ and even attempted murder.¹¹ The matter came to light when one such incident was viewed on CCTV footage. This speaks to the extreme reluctance to report such occurrences on the part of the victims, and illustrates the under reporting of crimes against children.

3. Who Is ‘the Boy Child’?

South Africa remains a deeply patriarchal society. Moreover, it is shaped by the legacies of colonialism, migrant labour and apartheid, all of which made family life almost impossible and absent fathers the norm. Structural violence, untransformed physical environments, enduring poverty and inequality, unemployment and frustrated ambition all contribute to a toxic mix.

Themes from the CPLD Roundtable Discussion suggest that boys lack solid role-models and familial support, and may fall victim to all kinds of social pathologies – including participation in gangs, drug and alcohol abuse, violent crime and abusive domestic relationships. It is clear that urgent interventions are needed.

Zainab Kader, of James House,¹² approaches the reality of the boy child with much gentleness and care, reminding us that he is a child. He is a child with potential and the kind of family, home, school and community to which he is exposed will shape who he becomes as a son, learner, brother and

father. The quality of nurturing that children receive impacts profoundly on the kind of parents they become

Early childhood trauma and experience of violence leaves an imprint on the child’s psychosocial development which may manifest in further violence as the child gets older. In her monograph *‘Beaten bad, the life stories of violent offenders’* Chandre Gould writes that her research indicates that “children exposed to domestic violence and maltreatment were more likely than other children to display aggressive behaviour such as carrying weapons and knives, and to respond to stressors with physical aggression”.¹³ Zainab Kader quotes Frederick Douglas: “It is easier to build strong children than repair broken men”.¹⁴ We have to go back to the beginning and look at the way we socialize our children if we wish to curb this violence. The social and human cost of continued neglect is immense. Instead of investing huge sums of money in the criminal justice system and overcrowded correctional facilities, we would do far better to invest in parenting programmes and support services.

4. ‘The Boy Child – A Moral and Life-Skills Programme’

This programme, run by the Stellenbosch Child Welfare Society, reports an increase in teenage boys using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs; engaging in unprotected sex; and being both perpetrators and victims of violence.¹⁵ Information gleaned from the programme and the research of several child rights organizations indicates that:

- one in eight high school students begin drinking before they were 13 years old; nearly 25% of students in grade 8 to 11 admitted to binge drinking, cigarette smoking and marijuana use
- the rape of boy-children between the ages of 6 and 14 is common
- nearly half of all new cases of HIV/AIDS occur in people under 25 years old
- boys as young as 12 are abusing alcohol, sexually active and smoking
- South Africa is ranked first for rapes per capita

- 1,500 schoolchildren in the Soweto township, a quarter of all the boys interviewed, said that 'jack rolling', a term for gang rape, was fun
- more than 25% of South African men admitted to raping someone
- 16% of South African men who knew somebody who had been raped believed that the rape survivor had enjoyed the experience and had "asked for it".¹⁶
- 75% of boys experience bullying at school
- corporal punishment at school continues in spite of being prohibited

5. Impoverished Emotional Lives

More and more children are living impoverished emotional lives and as a result experience anxiety, depression, a sense of shame, and a poor sense of self. They experience inconsistent discipline, little praise and little encouragement. Such children have a desire to please in order to avoid the withdrawal of love and affection. This desire to please, along with a sense of shame, renders such children vulnerable to abuse and unlikely to report abuse of any kind. Many suffer from dysthymic disorder, an underlying yet pervasive depression that can be caused by the impact of early childhood abuse or neglect; sexual abuse; or stressful or traumatic life events such as loss of a parent or bullying at school. Exposure to domestic violence and other violent crime compromise the mental well-being of young children and adolescents.

Of particular importance in the South African context, the desire to belong can be met by gang participation as the child reaches adolescence. While gangs provide a sense of belonging they create opportunities for anti-social and possible criminal behaviour. Truancy is frequent. There is a pervasive culture of alcohol and drug abuse. Binge drinking among the young is common, which undermines good judgement and social mores and can result in irresponsible and violent behaviour.

6. The Children's Act 38 of 2005

The Preamble to the Children's Act states that "It is necessary to effect changes to existing laws

relating to children in order to afford them the necessary protection and assistance so that they can fully assume their responsibilities within the community, as well as that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, grows up in a family environment and in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding".¹⁷

It was widely felt that the existing legislation was out of step with the realities of contemporary social problems and did not afford adequate protection to children. The new Children's Act seeks to fundamentally transform the nature and provision of services to children; to protect children from harm caused by exploitation, neglect, and abuse; to promote "the right to survive, to be safe, to belong and to develop"; to identify vulnerable children; to ensure that such children receive their constitutional entitlements; and to provide a spread of services to address the many vulnerabilities of children. In terms of the boy child these aims translate as follows:

- to prevent abuse and neglect
- to create an enabling environment
- to support and equip youth and young children
- to reduce risky behaviour in young boys and school drop-outs
- to preserve their well-being
- to create a culture of respect, compassion and openness among boys
- to foster the participation of children in matters concerning them
- to strengthen and develop community structures and resources that can assist in providing care for children, and to protect them from maltreatment, abuse, neglect, exploitation, discrimination and any other physical, emotional or moral harm or danger

These aims can be achieved by empowering the boy child, through community-based support initiatives, to adopt assertiveness techniques instead of aggression to express themselves; to identify positive community morals and values as the basis for their growth; to address the daily challenges faced by the boy child, particularly those who are disadvantaged; and to educate boys

about life circumstances and equip them to deal with challenges in a positive and acceptable manner. In so doing, communities can support boys in making a successful transition to adulthood.¹⁸

7. 'Men Care' and 'One Man Can'

Sonke Gender Justice¹⁹ works across Africa to strengthen government, civil society and citizens' capacity to support men and boys to take action to promote gender equality; to prevent domestic and sexual violence; and to reduce the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS.²⁰ As discussed above, our society was structured in such a way that many fathers were excluded from the lives of their children. Through their 'Men Care' and 'One Man Can' programmes, the organization seeks to engage men in participating in the lives of their children, and to provide them with the necessary skills, motivation and support to do so. It seeks to promote positive parenting – and particularly fatherhood – as 'cool'.

The focus is on men being present in the lives of their children; actively supporting their partners, and in so doing contributing to the prevention of violence. Being present in the life of a child requires more than mere physical presence. It requires an investment in time and engagement in the everyday life of the child: playing games; reading stories; supervising homework; attending school, church and community functions; and knowing the whereabouts of the child. It is being mindful that behind each parent there follows a child. In this way, more reflective parenting is encouraged.

Participation by fathers in the domestic tasks of the home promotes gender equality and respect. The ground breaking Kinsey Reports on human sexual behaviour²¹ revealed, much to surprise of some, that the key to good gender relations was to be found not in the bedroom but in the kitchen, where tasks were shared and there was mutual respect. Such behaviour is modelled for children by example.

Responsible fatherhood mitigates against domestic violence and encourages domestic

dialogue. It promotes a 'feelings vocabulary' for children and stimulates family engagement and strengthens good family life. The White Paper on the Family, which is in the process of implementation, places a strong emphasis on family strengthening.²² Parents need affirmation, they need guidance, and they need acknowledgment that parenting, especially in challenging circumstances, is often difficult. To put it in a nutshell, healthy family life needs to be reclaimed.

8. Conclusion

Professor Wandere writes:

"Empowerment of the individual means that we create a society where both men and women can make choices in life based on their own abilities, preferences and circumstances. When you save the boy child from all these, by defending and fighting for his rights, you save a whole generation. That boy, upon growing up into a responsible man, father and husband, mentors his generation in the same way..."²³

It was clear from all the speakers at the Roundtable that the kind of parenting children receive during their formative years is critical. There is an urgent need to focus on the education of parents and the positive socialization of children, and in so doing enable all children to develop relationships of reciprocity and equality.

In conclusion, we should be mindful that it is

"In the faces of our children we are given the best glimpse of humanity's future, a preview of the world to come. This is why there can be no moral issue more unifying, more urgent, or more universal than nurturing their well-being and securing their chance to embrace the life our Creator destined for them."²⁴

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¹ www.informereastafrica.com/node/30388#sthash.WPdMIEai.dpbsw

² In terms of the Children's Act No 38 of 2005 a child is any person under the age of eighteen.

³ On 22nd August the SACBC Parliamentary Liaison Office held a Roundtable Discussion asking the question 'What about the Boy Child'? The Roundtable was addressed by Mr Thulani Velebani of Sonke Gender Justice; Ms Zainab Kader from James House and Ms Bettie Niewoudt from the Stellenbosch Child Welfare Society

⁴ See 1 above

⁵ <http://dispatch.ug/2017/08/22/embattled-african-boy-child-sons-neglected-society>

⁶ Chapter One of the Children's Act

⁷ Stats SA, 28th September 2017

⁸ 'Beaten bad: the life stories of violent offenders', Chandre Gould, ISS Monograph Number 192

⁹ http://www.cjcp.org.za/uploads/2/7/8/4/27845461/08_cjcp_report_2016_d.pdf

¹⁰ Sexual grooming is a process used by people with a sexual interest in children to prepare a child for sexual abuse in such a manner that the child is persuaded that such behaviour is normal.

¹¹ <http://ewn.co.za/2017/07/19/parktown-boys-high-s-former-assistant-coach-faces-at-least-160-charges>

¹² James House is a Child and Youth Care registered as such in terms of the Children's Act No38 of 2005. It is situated in Hout Bay, Cape Town.

¹³ 'Beaten bad: The life stories of violent offenders' Chandre Gould, ISS Monograph 192

¹⁴ Frederick Douglass (1818-95) was a prominent American abolitionist, author and orator.

¹⁵ Presentation by the Stellenbosch Child Welfare Society at the CPLO Roundtable Discussion on the 'Boy Child', 22nd August 2017

¹⁶ This is particularly the case in instances of 'corrective rape'.

¹⁷ The Children's Act No 38 of 2005

¹⁸ See 6 above

¹⁹ Established in 2006, Sonke Gender Justice Network is a non-partisan, non-profit organisation which works to create and necessitate change for men, women, boys, girls and including others, so that each may enjoy equitable and healthy relationships that contribute to the development of a more just society

²⁰ Presentation by Mr Thulani Velebani at the CPLO Roundtable

²¹ The Kinsey Reports are two books on human sexual behaviour, 'Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male' and 'Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female', written by Alfred Kinsey, Paul Gebhard, Wardell Pomeroy and others and published in 1948

²² The White Paper on the Family was published by the Department of Social Development in 2014

²³ See 3 above

²⁴ "No Room at the Table-Earth's Most Vulnerable Children", Donald H. Dunson, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2003,

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