

Addressing Gender-Based Violence in South Africa: Changing Men and The Role of the State

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A growing body of research reveals a disturbing and consistent trend of high rates of violence in South Africa, particularly more so than most of the world. In fact, in early 2012, Interpol named South Africa the “world’s rape capital” with an alarming assessment that a woman born in South Africa is more likely to be raped than educated and that it is estimated that a woman is raped every 17 seconds.¹ However ominous, this statement alone effectively captures a very serious problem that plagues South African society today – gender-based violence (GBV). GBV has detrimental implications for society as a whole, but in particular women - where there is a noticeably negative impact on gender equality as a result of the subjugation of women to violence. However, efforts to improve women’s rights alone are insufficient, in that there is not enough being done – particularly by the state – to focus on the male perspective of the gender paradigm. A closer look at the reality of GBV points to culpability in certain aspects of the masculine culture of South Africa. Understanding that this must change, an assessment of existing programs to shape male attitudes toward women provides valuable insight as to how and why the state is a necessary component in effecting this change and mitigating GBV.

The Reality of GBV in South Africa

Gender Matters: A Manual for Young People defines GBV as: “...an umbrella term for any harm that is perpetrated against a person’s will that has a negative impact on the

physical or psychological health, development, and identity of the person; and that is the result of gendered power inequities that exploit distinctions between males and females, among males, and among females.”²

GBV manifests itself in a multitude of forms that include the following: physical, sexual, and psychological violence; domestic violence; sexual abuse; rape and sexual abuse of women and children; ‘corrective rape’ and murder on account of sexual orientation; forced pregnancy; honor killings; burning or acid throwing; female genital mutilation; dowry related violence; violence and rape in armed conflict; trafficking of women for commercial sex work; and sexual harassment and intimidation at work.³

According to a study conducted by the South African Medical Research Council (MRC) in Gauteng province, over half of women have experienced some form of physical, sexual, emotional, or economic abuse and furthermore, that 78% of men admit to perpetrating some form of violence against women.⁴ Statistics released by Parliament on violence against women in South Africa show that 65,514 cases of sexual offenses were reported to the South African Police Services (SAPS) in the 2011-12 year⁵, although the MRC suggests that only one in 25 rapes are ever reported due to fears of stigmatization, retaliation, and lack of faith in the criminal justice system, among other reasons. This would lead one to believe that the number of incidents is exponentially higher in reality than what has been reported and this stark contrast serves as the basis for a grim picture of the conditions that women are subjected to everyday.

In a democracy so young as this one, recent history is but a constant reminder of the vigilance and integrity by which we must regard and defend the constitution. The constitution itself is a symbolic achievement of the people and a manifestation of the union, and not separation, of each and every kind of citizen of South Africa. To that extent, we must look to the values of equality and freedom and security of the person enshrined in South Africa's constitutional framework that make it one of the most respected and admired in the world and apply it to all. However, in the face of rampant GBV, it cannot be said that these ideals have been fully realized particularly for the female citizens of South Africa. The reality is that we cannot achieve full gender equality without first mitigating GBV altogether. Perhaps, the core of the issue is best described in the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women: "... violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women."⁶

The implications of a society where women are the victims of countless forms of abuse by men are dire and consequential in that they further solidify the imbalance in the gender complex and feed a cycle in which potential for progress by women in society is continually undermined by subjugation to male notions of societal norms, such as those that permit abusing women and acting with impunity thereof, which are then reinforced by physical dominance. Unequal power relations are the impetus and also the product of GBV – and this vicious cycle must be interrupted.

We are thus forced to examine gender policy in its current state and to question if enough is being done. In gender policy discourse we often observe rhetoric of women's empowerment by way of legislation and civil society initiatives to improve the lives of women in order to address the challenges of gender equality. But too often a necessary component of success in such efforts is overlooked. The reality is that any hoped-for advancement in women's rights cannot be divorced from a necessary evolution of the male attitude towards women in South African society. Thus, we must not forget the other, equally important, side of the equation: men.

The gender complex of men and that of women do not exist in mutual exclusivity – men play a critical role in the evolution and reinvention of gender identity for women, in that they react to and sometimes reinforce shifting norms of the gender complex. It is in this capacity that a symbiotic relationship emerges, whereby one gender does not exist in isolation from the other and changes in one group will invariably mold the other. Men themselves often undergo a sociological transformation in gender identity in tandem with that of women. However, this does not necessarily lead to an acceptance, on the part of men, of the new role of women in society and, as a growing body of research shows, this misstep is often the basis for gender-based violence and other harmful behavior that threaten women each day.

As a result, there is an emerging recognition that to achieve the desired level of women's rights and to reduce violence against women, we must work towards forging a "new normal" and with men as our partners. All too often, women's rights is perceived as a

challenge for women, and as a struggle that we, women alone, must endure. However, what we need is for men to recognize that this challenge is incumbent upon them as well and that men can play an active role in and benefit from advancing women's rights.

A number of non-government organizations (NGOs) and civil society actors have already recognized the need to examine masculine culture, redefine the construct of the male identity, and educate men in their role in gender equality. Programs such as the One Man Can campaign (Sonke Gender Justice Network) and the Men as Partners program (EngenderHealth) are examples of such initiatives that involve men in the process of achieving gender equality. Grassroots programs that seek to influence men as individuals, with the focus that changes can start at home, are a critical complement to legislative initiatives that put an external pressure on men to adjust to gender-based policies. The prevailing belief is that with gender equality, a reduction in GBV, intimate partner violence (IPV), substance abuse, and HIV/AIDS will follow – all of which are welcome benefits for society.

Examining the Cult of Masculinity in South Africa

There was a time when South Africa was known to be a 'man's country' – where male dominance in both the public and private spheres was the norm and gender equality nowhere near a conceivable notion. Some might make the case that that is still so, while others may disagree, and although there is no objective way to qualify either stance, the

pervasive nature of gender-based violence and the complacency by which it is often regarded is an alarming indicator of a serious problem that lurks just under the surface of an otherwise seemingly progressive democracy and leads one to question the root causes of such a widespread issue.

Data collected from various research endeavors that carefully examine the culture of masculinity among South African men point to a rigidly patriarchal society that pressure men to “act like a man”, which often entails exploiting power inequalities between the sexes in order to assert manhood and adhere to popular conceptualizations of masculinity. Implicit in this understanding of manhood is aggression, dominance over women, and sexual conquest. Furthermore this culture of masculinity tends to equate manhood with being employed, earning a high income, and being able to support a family financially, all of which boils down to overwhelming pressure. Having been indoctrinated with a masculine identity that dictates that feelings and emotional expression must be suppressed, men find themselves with limited coping mechanisms for this immense pressure they are left to deal with and consequently turn to violence and domination as a method of coping, which is often directed at their female partners or other women.⁷ During apartheid, masculinity was used to galvanize both black and white men for the struggle for liberation on one hand, and the protection of privilege on the other. This resulted in men viewing force as a legitimate means to secure the interests of their own social group and it is this concept based in militarist roots that has since infused itself into the modern-day gender complex of men.⁸

This is particularly so in the tribal areas of South Africa, which can be attributed to cultural influences and traditional practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, virginity testing among others that virtually dictate male superiority over women: “The role differentiation and expectations in society relegate women to an inferior position from birth throughout their lives. Harmful traditional and cultural practices maintain the subordination of women in society and legitimize and perpetuate GBV... they reduce women to sub-human assets belonging to men.”⁹

However, masculinity itself does not exist in a vacuum. The paradigm in which the gender complex of men and women coexist and interact with one another is in constant flux, whereby a transformation in one involves a tandem evolution in the other. In the two decades since the end of apartheid, there has been a noticeable shift of focus to women’s rights and empowerment, however, this is not without its effect on men; as their understanding of their own gender identity changes in response. Naturally, there is a significant amount of variation in how each individual man will respond to such changes. While there are those who may adapt positively and embrace gender equality, there are still others who react adversely.

Some men view legislation that supports women’s rights as challenges to male domination, leaving them with “considerable uncertainty about masculinity, frustration, or anger at women’s perceived gains, and/or feelings of a sense of irrelevance in the domestic sphere.”¹⁰ In this case, women’s rights are viewed in the context of a positive-sum game whereby any advancement is at the expense of men’s social, political, and

economic clout in South African society. Therein lies a sense of crisis and uncertainty that form the backdrop by which the male identity in South Africa is reacting to shifting patterns of gender roles and norms. “Some men have adapted to feelings of disempowerment and alienation by constructing masculinities through seeking more sexual opportunities, enacting “hypermasculinity”, engaging in violence, and detaching from family life to seek self-worth and status in all-male contexts.”¹¹ In light of this observation, it becomes increasingly evident that masculine identity and culture is endemic to the problem of GBV. Thus, any feasible solution to GBV cannot be devoid of a focus on challenging and redefining the notions that underpin the male gender complex. We must involve men in the process of tackling the issue of GBV, which would also result in improvement in other areas of women’s rights.

A key recognition in seeking to incorporate the male perspective in the issue, is that men themselves have several motivations for ending violence against women and promoting gender equality. Whether or not these motivations are self-evident or independently realized is not always clear and thus it becomes incumbent upon programs and initiatives that focus on men to emphasize this often overlooked angle of how gender equality can benefit men as well. First, men have been the victim of violence themselves and have witnessed violence done to their female loved ones and the detrimental implications resulting thereof. Boys whose sisters have been raped, fathers murdered, and mothers assaulted are themselves all too familiar with the depth of suffering that victims and their families must endure. Second, the leading cause of death for young men worldwide is violence perpetrated by other men, and can be attributed to the influence of gender and

power differentials between groups of men that pressure men to prove their manhood by initiating violence against other men. This is a clear indication that a reevaluation of the male gender complex is necessary so that it does not perpetuate further violent crime.

Third, when seen as potential perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence, men's interaction with women become characterized by a sense of fear and distrust which limits the degree to which men and women can interact effectively.¹²

Ultimately, however, men are not a single, monolithic group with a uniform identity across all individuals. Naturally, varying life circumstances and other factors shape each man to perceive and express masculinity in unique ways. It is nearly impossible to clearly delineate the boundaries of a one idea of masculinity from another in South Africa given this context, however, so it is important that such considerations are made when devising such initiatives.

An Assessment of Current Programs

Global women's health organization EngenderHealth established a program in 1998 known as the Men As Partners (MAP) program, an initiative geared at encouraging men to play constructive roles in promoting gender equity and health through MAP workshops, public demonstrations, and participation in community action teams. A comprehensive study conducted in 2007 by Hope Worldwide and EngenderHealth, with the aid of the U.S. Agency for International Development's South Africa Mission,

evaluated the effectiveness of this program. Overall, this study concluded that there was noticeable success in these efforts and thus positive progress in the objectives of encouraging men to adopt new gender attitudes. Of the men who participated in MAP, 95% reported that MAP changed their way of thinking about gender – with 57% saying it “taught me to stop violence against women and children”, 40% indicating that it “encouraged me to change my gender norms and attitudes”, and 34% saying that it “encouraged me to teach young boys to respect girls”.¹³

However, the survey noted a few areas of improvement that must be reconsidered in order to optimize MAP. One such example is the need to employ alternative recruitment strategies to reach older men, not just younger men and the unemployed, and to retain men for the entire duration of the workshops while also focusing on attempts to reach a wider range of men. Furthermore, the survey identified the collection of monitoring as a weakness and the need to refine the data collection of process elements of the interventions. It concludes with a telling statement:

“Given this experience, it is debatable whether changes in social norms and attitudes relative to gender and violence can be documented over a short period and it may well be that these may require longer term exposure to more robust and systematic interventions.”¹⁴

Examining another, similar program run by the Sonke Gender Justice Network called the One Man Can (OMC) campaign and established in 2006 also gives a strong indication that intervention efforts by NGOs to involve boys and men in gender equality advocacy is generally effective. An impact evaluation conducted to assess the campaign reveals that

respondents in a survey cited the kind and amount of information on gender-based violence provided through the workshops as meaningful impact in their community. Furthermore, the second greatest source of impact in respondents' communities was a shift in public attitudes and increased public awareness and discussion around the problems of GBV, among other things. Several respondents even pointed to the increased participation of men, youth, and traditional leaders in the workshops, community events, and meetings.¹⁵ These responses demonstrate that to some extent, OMC is having the desired effect on the community by raising awareness on the issue and having subjects reflect introspectively on gender norms and attitudes.

This impact evaluation also noted that conversations with participants of OMC showed a frustration among some men with the discourse of human rights as it intersects with the state. These men attribute the breakdown of social and family relationships and values to the political climate and culture of human rights in post-apartheid South Africa, alluding to failure on the part of the state to facilitate an environment in which human rights and gender equality is a policy priority.¹⁶

In spite of various legislative initiatives and being a signatory to international conventions, there exists an incongruity between theory and practice of the South African government in addressing issues of gender equality and especially so from the angle of targeting boys and men. It is this very discrepancy that has limited the efforts of campaigns such as MAP and OMC and thus undermined the potential for greater rates of success in positively influencing South African men to embrace gender equality. The

state is a critical entity in complementing the efforts of NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs), as its resources and legitimacy generally can enhance the scope and scale of efforts to deconstruct harmful gender attitudes and norms. Author and professor at the University of Cape Town, Robert Morrell, contends in “Changing Men in South Africa” that the state is the most critical agent of monitoring and initiating changes of masculinity and asserts that in contrast to other post-conflict societies that successfully demilitarized masculinity, South Africa’s situation is uniquely challenging in that the ‘the state is the symbol of victory – victory over apartheid.’¹⁷ Thus, provided the positioning of the state and its potential influence in the landscape of social transformation in the area of gender attitudes and norms, it is evident that it is incumbent upon the state to actively address the issue of gender equality and to do so particularly by engaging boys and men.

The Role of the State

A recent progress report submitted by Sonke Gender Justice Network to the 57th UN Commission on the Status of Women paints a bleak picture of the South African government’s efforts thus far to reduce violence against women and engage men in the process of doing so. Overall, government departments have mostly failed to fulfill their existing policy commitments and to honor regional and international obligations. Very few government agencies are developing policies and programs to ensure and protect the human rights of women, and those that have are limited in their implementation efforts or rely primarily on campaigns that are deemed insufficient for the societal change that is

necessary to bring about the desired result.¹⁸ A key determination resulting from this assessment was that none of the government departments surveyed have even developed legislation to create binding legal commitments for work engaging boys and men – not a single department surveyed has focused on this work as a priority theme for 2013.¹⁹ Other findings suggest that budget allocations, or a lack thereof, and failure to prioritize this issue are contributing factors to this disappointing outcome of government efforts in this area, in addition to, a lack of an integrated, comprehensive approach and monitoring and evaluation plans to determine the impact of these initiatives.²⁰

Thus the state can be found to be, to some degree, negligent in complying with the duties imposed upon it by the Constitution. The rights that women are entitled to, per the Constitution, place two types of duties on the state: first, it must refrain from acting in any manner that would infringe on these rights, and second, it must develop legislation and structures guaranteeing those rights.²¹ However, legislation alone is not enough. In *Director of Public Prosecutions, Transvaal v Minister for Justice and Constitutional Development and Others 2009*, the judgment of the South African Constitutional Court read as follows: “[c]ompliance with the Constitution requires not only that laws be enacted to give effect to the rights in the Constitution, but also requires that those laws be implemented. Failure to implement laws that protect constitutional rights is a violation of the Constitution.”²² To that extent and in the spirit of the Constitution, the state is obligated to devise policies that guarantee human rights to women and to fully implement them, and it can begin to do so by focusing on GBV and men.

A paper prepared for UN Women’s Expert Group Meeting for the Prevention of violence against women and girls, “Working with men and boys to promote gender equality”, contends that the following principles are necessary guidelines for successful positive engagement of men in gender equality initiatives:

First, policy and program approaches to involving men in gender equality must be framed within a human and women’s rights agenda and should seek to challenge men’s behavior, constructions of masculinity, and gender relations that harm women. Second, these programs should be developed and implemented in ongoing consultation with groups working to promote and protect women’s rights. Third, these programs must embody support for men’s efforts to change positively. Fourth, these programs must be sensitive to diversities among men, in terms of class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, etc. Finally, gender equality work with men must address the social and structural determinants of gender inequalities.²³ Most importantly, this expert paper asserts:

“Changing the attitudes of individual men is not enough, policy and programming targeting men must also include understanding the social and economic and political forces constraining the health and well-being of many women and girls and men and boys- from migration and changing labor markets to climate-related social crises, as well as the social institutions where gender norms and power imbalances are constructed and reinforced. On this basis, work with men must draw attention to the need for a more just economic and social order. ”²⁴

Assessments of existing male-focused programs on gender equality and the preceding expert analysis of the field and emerging approaches points to a critical revelation – that

the state is an instrumental tool in many of the areas where existing programs are unable to wield the degree of clout and organization that the state is capable of.

First, the state is an inherently centralized mechanism that utilizes various established conduits to govern, deliver its services, and sustain itself. The level of sophistication that is necessary for a state to function effectively at an administrative level is ideal for the dissemination and implementation of policy and programs such as those that we have discussed. The comprehensive nature and presence of the state in the daily lives of its citizens makes it an ideal mechanism to achieve the level of awareness and increased recruitment that the impact assessments noted earlier cite as areas that need improvement for greater efficacy. As the central political authority whose job is to govern the provinces and the country as whole, it effectively has an organizational ability across a greater area and at many more levels than most NGOs or CBOs do. The state operates at a local, provincial, and federal level and thus already has in place the administrative capacity to oversee and implement social programs. This would eliminate some of the critical shortcomings to programs such as the OMC Campaign, such as the need for a more robust and systematic intervention.

Second, in theory, the state has the necessary means to financially support such initiatives through budget allocations and state resources, while also soliciting aid from international organizations and other foreign or multinational entities. Particularly in a democracy where elected officials are held accountable by their constituents; policymakers can choose to recognize policy priorities that matter to citizens and interest groups that

express such concerns and incorporate that into their decision-making in the area of budgeting. In the realm of global politics and international aid, that state is unique in the clout that it possesses- unlike a nonprofit organization (NPO) or nongovernmental organization (NGO) that simply does not have the political legitimacy necessary, that a state entity does, to solicit aid via diplomacy.

Third, the state has legislative power to monitor and enforce any such programs it should put into place- a means of forced compliance. This also highlights an opportunity for the state to incorporate both preventative and rehabilitative elements into legislation regarding male-focused programs on gender equality- both of which are critical for improved gender equality. Current legislation on crime and punishment pertaining to GBV is largely reactive; only after a crime against a woman has happened will any sort of punishment be served without particular emphasis for preventing future cases of GBV or rehabilitating individuals with a history of GBV. CBOs and NGOs lack any sort of direct legislative leverage over such areas and thus the state becomes key in defining a new outlook for gender policy.

Finally, in the particular context of modern South Africa, the state is a symbol of victory over struggle and to many citizens, and as a result wields significant influence in the cultural and societal values that define the country today. Therefore, it is incumbent on the state to set an example to its people by endorsing and implementing programs that have been shown to be effective with the greater goal of gender equality by shaping the male perspective. If the state itself can show that it not only supports such initiatives that

encourage introspection on the part of men but itself becomes an accurate representation of this principle and practices what it preaches, then there would be reverberations amongst the people over time and over the course of continued efforts by organizations and the state alike to challenge the confinements of the existing gender paradigm.

Conclusion

In acknowledging the reality and implications of GBV in South Africa and exploring the role of masculine culture in GBV, it becomes increasingly evident that the two are intertwined and that to mitigate the former, we cannot afford to overlook the latter. In the larger context of gender equality, it is particularly important that gender policy entails not only efforts to advance women's rights alone but also to alter the gender paradigm by reshaping male attitudes towards women – effectively initiating an enormous societal change. To do so, existing efforts by NPOs and NGOs must be complemented by like-minded efforts by the state for maximum desired effectiveness. The state plays an especially critical role in redefining these new social norms and it is incumbent on the state to act in accordance with its constitutional obligations by playing a more active role in the process if it wishes to see a reduction in the GBV epidemic and ensure a better, safe place for the women of South Africa.

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