

What is wrong with us men?



We have become used to special days to celebrate or emphasise certain important issues, such as “World AIDS Day” or “Breast cancer day”. Special days are intended to focus the attention and perhaps raise funds to deal with the consequences of such human or social disasters. Some say that we should not have such special days because it may just have the opposite effect, that

we may become inclined to think about those important issues only on those special days. I personally think it is good to have such special days to raise awareness over and above our efforts to continuously work on those issues.

One of these days is called “16 Days of Activism for No Violence Against Women and Children” (25 November – 10 December).¹ The mere fact that there is a campaign such as this is deplorable to say the least, but that we need not one day, but 16 days to make the point should make you pay attention. One day per year is clearly not enough to remind people about this terrible scourge in society and to try to do something about it.

The true and horrific magnitude of the gender-based violence problem in South Africa is unknown, and what is known is probably just the proverbial “tip of the iceberg”. Jewkes et al reported in 1999 that 27% of women in the Eastern Cape, 28% of women in Mpumalanga and 19% of women in the Northern Province had been physically abused in their lifetimes by a current or ex-partner.² In the same year Abrahams et al reported that in some southern Cape rural communities an average of 80% of rural women are victims of domestic violence, and in three Cape Town municipalities approximately 44% of men were willing to admit that they abused their female partners.³ Mathews et al also reported that in 1999 in South Africa 8.8 per 100 000 of the female population aged 14 years and older died at the hands of their partners – the highest rate ever reported in research anywhere in the world.⁴ Need I say more?

We can look for excuses, and blame poverty, the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, substance abuse, urbanisation, migrant labour, or even the feminist movement. Some of these factors undoubtedly contribute to exacerbate the problem, but do we really need excuses? History has shown that humans are repeatedly capable of the most horrible deeds of torture, violence, homicide and genocide. That is why society had to supplement the laws of nature (followed by most animal species) with codes, conventions, declarations and laws. As John Galsworthy put it in *The Forsyte Saga*: “As for the law – it catered for a human nature of which it took a naturally low view.”

What can be done about this? Yesterday I listened to a talk show on the radio about gender violence, and, when asked the same question, the unknown (male) show participant said “*you need to hit bad men hard, very hard, before they will listen*”. That response shocked me. Will we ever escape this cycle of violence? Already prominent ANC politicians are hinting about bringing back the death penalty in South Africa, perhaps testing public opinion this way. It is a sign of weakness to me when we talk about fighting violence with violence. Is that not what war is all about – an eye for an eye? And yet, are we not already in the midst of a civil war in this beloved country of ours?

I also do not know how to stop the scourge of gender-based violence, but I think we should start by raising our voices very loudly, openly and continuously. As the English philosopher Edmund Burke said: ‘*The only thing necessary for the triumph [of evil] is for good men to do nothing.*’

Let’s take the example of smoking in public places. I remember when I was much younger that smoking was quite acceptable anywhere, and I have to admit here that I delightedly participated – in the movies (can you imagine!), in restaurants. How things have changed! Today smokers are doing their thing out in the street, in alleys outside buildings, and sometimes, desperately, in aeroplane toilets. The habit is clearly frowned upon and just try to light up a cigarette in a restaurant and see the reaction! And yet, how very often gender-based violence is ignored by our society and perpetrators protected by friends, family and neighbours. Let’s stop that!

South African Family Practice rejects gender-based violence in all its manifestations and will speak up by, amongst other things, publishing all valid research it can muster to highlight the problem and unmask society’s inability to deal effectively with it. And, for what it is worth, I unreservedly apologise on behalf of all good men to all women and children so dear to us for what we men have done to them. *What is wrong with us men?*

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Editor

References

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