

Why do men in South Africa sexually abuse young children– a study of 27 convicted perpetrators¹.

Background

South Africa is alleged to have the highest rate of sexual abuse per capita among 49 other countries in the world (Human Rights Watch, 2010; Posel, 2005). The statistics are sketchy as the SA Police Force does not keep accurate figures, and many rapes go unreported; however the SA rape crisis service assesses, from its work, that there are around 50,000 children under the age of 12 years old who are raped every year – 137 children every day – see <http://rapecrisis.org.za/>

There is considerable speculation about what accounts for these very high numbers of child rape so we set out to explore one key element of the problem - how perpetrators make sense of sexual acts with young children in South Africa.

The study

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 incarcerated male sex offenders, aged between 16 and 86, all convicted for sexual abuse of children aged six years and below. The men in the study were recruited from within eight prisons in Limpopo, North West and Gauteng Provinces in South Africa. The participants were from both urban and rural areas; they included most of the racial and ethnic groups in the South African population whilst some were immigrants from neighbouring Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The men participated willingly and it was extremely traumatic listening to, engaging with and being empathic to perpetrators who disclosed harrowing details of their sexually abusive acts.

Findings

The interviews reinforced the complex nature of the child sexual abuse phenomenon in South Africa. The perpetrators did not use the virgin cleansing myth as an explanation for the sexual abuse of young children. According to these participants the virgin cleansing myth explanation is used by those with a lack of understanding about HIV/AIDS; most of the men argued they had adequate knowledge that HIV/AIDS is incurable and that those who use such explanations were excusing abusive behaviour.

Some of the men believed that their childhood adversities put them at risk of offending. Some of these adversities include poverty, being raised in dysfunctional families characterised by domestic violence and parental alcohol and drug abuse, orphanhood, absent fatherhood, childhood neglect, and emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

Socio-cultural factors including patriarchal notions of manhood, particularly the perpetrators' beliefs about sexual entitlement, are often used to explain the sexual abuse of young children. Democratisation of South Africa and the subsequent institutionalisation of women's rights have led to feelings of disempowerment in some of these men and a belief that these changes have led to restricted access to sex. These beliefs are used to justify sexual abuse of young children because of a sense of entitlement to sex as and when they want it. Often it seems a child is used to replace a woman for male sexual gratification - here the act is not perceived as problematic because women and children are perceived as mere objects for male sexual gratification.

Conclusions

- Many of the men experienced sexual abuse at the same age of the children they abused.
- Children were, as in many societies, targeted because of their vulnerability.
- Women, and children, are still seen by vast numbers of SA men as objects for male enjoyment.
- Child rape is sometimes used to punish women and put them in their place.
- The primary motivation for the abuse and rape of children is the drive for power.

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