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AnnMarie Wolpe's Article

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Article:

SEX, SEXUALITY AND MALE VIOLENCE

The aim of these dialogues is to create a space for open and informed dialogue and debate around key local and global political, social and economic issues facing South Africa.

Sex, sexuality, and male violence

**Article for the Cape Times
by AnnMarie Wolpe
September 2003**

It is extraordinary that sex and sexuality is so seldom discussed at a time when HIV/AIDS and its consequences are such a major threat to our society. Enormous grants are made to combat HIV/AIDS in a number of ways - safe sex, use of drugs to prolong life and to avoid mothers transmitting the virus to unborn children. Yet the seemingly ease with which school going youth have sex and with more than one partner does not appear to come under scrutiny.

The message that is loud and clear is utilise condoms and have safe sex. No one seems to raise the question of why it is that school children must have sex and at younger and younger ages. Nor does the media help. The media is filled with near explicit shots of sexual encounters. Just look at the programme on wrestling at prime time on television. Such programmes are nothing more than soft pornography. Where is the moral order that would question this?

Freud told us about the existence of sexuality amongst young children. Yet boys are still warned that if they masturbate their penises will drop off! "It is considered a truism to suggest that young people find their teenage/adolescent years a period of confusion and experimentation around sexuality". Indeed sexologists have for years commented on the rampant hormone development in teenage boys. Interestingly girls' sexuality appears to be ignored, although there is some evidence of girls initiating sexual encounters. Does sex education in schools discuss sexuality as such? Are teachers able to deal with such sensitive subjects? Do teachers address male power over females particularly in regard to sex?

It is the very cultural formation that establishes what constitutes the desired image of masculinity and femininity. Boys are encouraged to develop and maintain a "macho" image at this age - through traditional initiation rites and in the general youth culture. Girls are encouraged to be feminine. At every step of the way the media supports these images of the dominant male and the subjected female. But how does male sexuality link to male identity and to violence? Sexual violence is apparent in the huge numbers of rape in the country. It occurs both outside and in the home. And domestic violence appears to be on the increase. It is extremely worrying to read of violent gang rapes that take place as a virtual ritual initiation into membership of gangs. Nor is such violence confined to the young criminal. It occurs in date rapes as witnessed in the recent case where young students in Stellenbosch are being accused of this.

Sexual violence and other forms of gratuitous violence reflects a dysfunctional society. Why does violence seem to be such an essential part of the young men of today?

There are many reasons that can account for both the general as well as sexual violence. The profoundly unconscious beliefs that both males and females hold about what constitutes the ideal male appear to be universal and span different cultural formations. Men are to be the heads of households, supporters of their wives and children. More importantly men are to be controlling, powerful and domineering. These profoundly unconscious beliefs permeate our language, our cultural practices and our behaviour, and ensure the continuation of gender inequality in our society.

What happens, though, when these beliefs are not realised, when men are unable to support their families, when men are faced with the prospect of unemployment? The figures in the country are alarmingly high and for many young men there seems little hope of getting a job and for those already in the ranks of the unemployed ever getting a job may appear unrealistic. Under these conditions men's self identity may well be expressed through various forms of violence, including sexual violence. It is the means whereby they can assert their manhood. But it is not only such elements that promote anti-social behaviour. It may also be

embedded in traditional cultural practices. And it is this aspect that Nomboniso Gasa will address at the Wolpe Forum Meeting to be held on Tuesday 30th September. Ms. Gasa, an independent researcher and author, will explore the whole notion of maleness and manhood amongst Xhosa men. She will question the role that traditional forms of circumcision may contribute to the ideal of violence amongst young men. In what promises to be a highly controversial talk she will enter into the area of debate which is forbidden to women to question and even suggest an alternative. She will argue that circumcision is not the beginning and the end of what constitutes manliness. There will be a respondent, Advocate M. Nonkonyana, M.P.

The Wolpe Memorial Trust will host its monthly meeting at IDASA, 6 Spin Street at 6 for 6.30 p.m. on Tuesday 30th September.

Dr AnnMarie Wolpe is a Trustee of the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust