Stemming the Tide of Violence

Leslie Swartz, notes the high incidence of violence against women and children committed by men in South Africa. He points out the importance of knowing how we construct masculinity, and the process of fathering in order to move away from our culture of violence.

Men in South Africa are in trouble. Some would put it another way: men in South Africa are trouble. The shocking statistics on violence in this country reflect deeds that are all too often perpetrated by men. Figures for rape are so high that they are hard to comprehend — the state president himself has expressed incredulity over the figures. The recent controversy surrounding the television anti-rape advertisement featuring Charlize Theron has thrown into the spotlight both the anger that many feel about gender violence and the sensitivity of some men to being accused, as they see it, of perpetrating and perpetuating violence.

How do we understand and deal with endemic violence perpetrated largely (though by no means exclusively) by men? Understandably perhaps, many argue for harsher sentences, for the return of the death penalty, for castration of sexual offenders and so forth. There is no doubt that there are difficulties with both the criminal justice system and the effectiveness of police and correctional services, but the call for blood can in some ways be seen as a symptom of the problems rather than as a solution to them. The impulse to become more violent with those who perpetrate violence is understandable when people feel afraid and unprotected, when there seem to be no negative consequences for those who terrorise others. It is one thing, however, to demand that perpetrators be punished appropriately; it is quite another to suggest that unfairness and brutality, even against criminals and suspected criminals, will rid us of the enormous social problems we face. Though revenge may indeed be sweet in the short term, any society that meets brutality with other forms of brutality and oppression is guilty of creating more violence and more grounds for violence.

Simply calling for more and more punishment for crimes is not enough to solve the dilemmas we face as a country constitutionally committed to human rights and the rule of law, which are unfortunately under siege both in public and all too often in our own homes. A central question is how we understand the difficulties we face as a society. More specifically, if we can gain insight into the ways brutality and violence are reproduced, perhaps we will be able to intervene in such a way as to stop the cycle repeating itself endlessly. Any attempt to make fundamental changes to the way we live our lives is difficult for a number of reasons. Any analysis of violence must allow for the fact that social conditions at different times provide enabling or constraining conditions for violence, and violence of particular kinds. For example, South Africa today is far more violent than Sweden; Germany today is far less violent than it was sixty years ago. This type of observation implies that the key to dealing with violence lies not only with those who are easily identified as perpetrators but also with others in society who see violence simply as a form of evil exclusive to those who do bad things. A second difficulty with trying to change society in order to prevent violence is that it is very hard to show that we have indeed prevented something. There are so many factors enabling and constraining violence that there are always many competing but useful interpretations of why things happen or don’t happen.

Given difficulties such as these, then, the challenges we face are great. Sentimentalised views of a conflict-free world if only people would come to their senses may be comforting but will not help us make meaningful changes. What is needed instead is an understanding of how our society produces and reproduces both the things we value and the things we abhor, and how these things may be very closely intertwined. Feminist scholars like Nancy Chodorow have given us important leads in how to think about mothering as an important force for both the reproduction of gender oppression and the potential for its being changed. We can go further back in time to Freud to see how ‘the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world’. What is becoming increasingly clear, however, is that we need to understand the reproduction of masculinity itself in order to understand our society.
When South Africans and others talk about our transition to democracy it is often said that we have been lucky to avoid the ‘bloodbath’ many thought was inevitable. But another way of looking at this is that we have not avoided the bloodbath — it is happening every day through crime and through terrible violence in our homes and our most intimate relationships. Most people who are raped know their attackers. Many children who are assaulted are the victims of people who love, care and want the best for them — parents and caregivers, teachers, priests and others in authority. Of course, this is not unique to South Africa, but the extent of the violence is enormous here. It is easy when thinking about our country to fail to take any responsibility for the present and to blame the past for everything negative happening now. I do not wish to do this here, but it is important, I think, for us to understand how some key features both of apartheid itself and the struggle against it impact on our lives today.

Apartheid was designed specifically to destroy black families and to co-opt and pervert traditional (indigenous African) hierarchies of power. Migrant labour laws, which predated apartheid itself, split black families and undermined authority in many rural homes. Communities destroyed through the segregationist Group Areas Act lost important networks that had played a role in sustaining and promoting co-operative behaviour. None of this is simply a by-product of our past — the previous regime systematically set out to destroy authority amongst the majority of the South African population.

The central role that children played in bringing democracy to this country is well known to us all. Especially after the Soweto schools uprising in 1976, black children were in the front line as agents of change and targets of state violence. During the struggle days of the 1980s many of us hoped and believed that because the fight these children were fighting was just there would be few negative impacts on society as a whole. We now know that the inversion of authority so necessary for our country to gain democracy also had a very high price — a price we have not yet completed paying. In South Africa, authority came to be seen as a bad thing, and we continue to struggle to find ways to express and respect appropriate and benign authority. Nelson Mandela did a great deal for the country by showing us that it was possible to have a national father figure who embodied appropriate authority. Unfortunately, though, some of the mystique and magic surrounding him have also allowed us to see this authority as his alone. If Mandela is a saint, where does that leave all sinners (the rest of us) who try to act with appropriate authority? This (unfair) question must weigh heavily on the shoulders of our current president and his administration.

The issue of authority is an important one for white South Africans as well. White people were led to expect that they were entitled to certain privileges on the basis of race; these privileges are now slowly eroding. Young white men were conscripted into the South African Defence Force (SADF) in order to protect their privilege; many engaged in acts of violence against fellow South Africans, including civilians. Many now question the purpose of their actions, living now as they do in a country that does not value their actions as they may have once expected. In this respect they are similar to many Vietnam veterans who returned to the United States not as heroes but as an embarrassment to a society that had changed direction on the issue of that war. White South African ex-combatants, conscripted or not, may now bear the scars not only of having been in war, but also of having been on the wrong side. This has implications for their integration into the new society, and also for how they raise their own children. How does a man who, willingly or not, went into battle for apartheid educate his children about the right way to live in our new society? Something of the contradictions in the lives of such men during the height of resistance in South Africa is well captured in Chris van Wyk’s poem, “A Riot policeman” (see box alongside). The male (presumably white) protagonist’s violence against anti-apartheid resisters during the day is forgotten when he goes home and plays with his children. This chilling image of a father is given a counterpoint in Van Wyk’s poem “in detention” (see box alongside), focusing on the deaths of political detainees (mostly black and many of whom were fathers) as a result of torture, which were covered up with implausible excuses by the state that the poem mocks.

All these broad social issues impact on and are fed by the way we live our lives in our homes as South Africans. With gender equality so importantly on the agenda, what does this mean for how men and women negotiate their relationships? In a context of children’s rights, how do parents exert discipline and teach their children about how to live? In the absence of traditional and oppressive forms of authority, how do people earn and maintain respect daily? With great changes in South Africa and internationally, we have to realise that much of what has gone before no longer seems relevant or appropriate — we need to think about how we do things now, why we do them, and what makes sense in our changing world.
This is easier said than done. Recently, as part of my own research on fatherhood, I interviewed a man involved in community work in Khayelitsha. This man feels that one reason there are so many difficulties with fatherhood in informal settlements such as in Khayelitsha is that traditional roles for men in African communities have withered away in the context of urbanisation and poverty. What he would like to do is to turn the clock back to a time that in his view provided a structure within which men knew their place and knew how to treat both themselves and women with respect and dignity. Leaving aside the question of whether such a time in fact existed, there remains in this call to recreate the past something both noble and very sad. It is noble to want to get things right and to return to better times. But it is also sad that the solution put forward is one that is not possible to implement — we cannot turn back the clock.

My discussion with this man focussed to a large extent on what men have lost by being cut off from their families, and this theme of loss was echoed in discussions with other fathers. A father who had spent many years on Robben Island told me that the worst part of being there was that for years he did not see children. The worst thing about being a free man is that his own children who had grown up in his absence could never be true children to him. Gangsters from Manenberg told me of their own feelings of loss at having fathered children whom they hardly saw. Their hopes for their children are very much the same as those I have for my own — for our children to be happy, productive citizens who contribute positively to society. Their perceived methods for achieving this end, however, were to me not realistic — they plan to get as much money as they can through gang activity and hope that this money will insulate their children from the need to be criminals. Psychological theory tells us that we repeat what we see around us, and also, sadly, that today’s victim may well be tomorrow’s perpetrator. Changing patterns of how we behave as both fathers and children needs for us to look not only at the outcome of what fathers do — in some cases, the provision of material things — but also at the process of fathering.

It is time to begin thinking about the experience of fatherhood — how it has changed in some respects, how it can change further, and how through these changes, we can begin to deal with the daunting challenges which face us as a nation and continent beleaguered by violent conflicts.

ENDNOTES

1. This anti-rape television advertisement was commissioned by Rape Crisis, a local organisation that offers support to rape survivors, Femina, a local women’s magazine, and the Trauma Centre, an organisation that helps survivors of violence, as part of a campaign to raise awareness about the alarming wave of sexual violence against women in South Africa currently. The advertisement shows South African born Hollywood actress, Charlize Theron, addressing an audience in which she answers a question she is often asked: what are men in South Africa like? She points to the terrible statistics of a woman being raped every 26 seconds and concludes that it’s hard to tell what the real men in South Africa are like. Some men were offended by the advertisement and felt that it identified all South African men as rapists. A complaint was made to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), which found that there was nothing in the advertisement that discriminated against innocent men. However, one of the commissioners at the ASA himself felt that the advertisement was discriminatory and the advertisement was withdrawn. Rape Crisis, Femina, and the Trauma Centre challenged this unconstitutional decision in the courts and the withdrawal order was lifted.

Leslie Swartz is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Cape Town and Director of the University of Cape Town Child Guidance Clinic. He has published Culture and Mental Health: A Southern African view (Oxford) and is currently writing a book on fatherhood.