****

**Opinion piece**

**Ending the Rape Culture**

Gender inequalities are at the heart of rape culture in South Africa and without conscious sustained and deliberate effort to dismantle them, the problem will prevail. Gender equality should be understood in a much broader frame than the equal treatment of all human beings regardless of gender, extending to include the need for creating an enabling social and institutional environment for all women and all men to be able to access equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities. Inequalities are not just expressed in our beliefs, attitudes and actions, but are entrenched within social structures and institutions to maintain and reinforce the superiority of one gender over another.

We need to reflect continually on how we think of ourselves (our gender identity) and value ourselves. We then need to reflect on how we value others. What is your social standing (gender stratification) and where do you place others? Few of us ever really think about our privilege or lack thereof in terms of gender, nor do we consider how we must change the status quo. Yes, we acknowledge it when it is politically correct do so and join campaigns as a feel-good measure, but to live the revolution on a daily basis is a completely different story. What then is our individual and collective place in the hierarchy?

We must always remember that gender inequality is deeply rooted a patriarchal system that subordinates one gender and elevates another, and therefore creates unequal social categories for men and women. Patriarchy esteems heterosexuality, male virility, dominance, aggression and power, while women’s virtue is seen to be in their being acquiescent, quiet, submissive and passive. Patriarchy usually subordinates women to men (which is my main focus in this piece) but we are increasingly seeing how, within each gender category, some subgroups are subordinate to others based on age, class, race, gender identity and disability, among other factors. Among men, for instance, certain values and behaviours are esteemed, thereby disenfranchising those who lack these attributes. For example, heterosexuality is the norm and is privileged over homosexuality.

It is this undervaluing of one group of people that allows society as a whole (both women and men) to condone and perpetuate sexual violence. For example, violence against women manifests gender inequality when women become targets of male aggression because men have been socialised to view women as sex objects for their pleasure or because men feel a sense of entitlement over women’s bodies.

Another example is when women are viewed as second-class citizens who are not supposed to challenge the authority of men, violence is intended to ‘put women in their place’, silence them, force their cooperation or to maintain the social order – the very argument for correct rape.

In a similar vein, older women police young women’s bodies and violate them through practices such as virginity testing or even female genital mutilation, in an attempt to keep young girls ‘pure’ for the pleasure of the men who eventually marry them. The strict regulation and control of women’s sexuality in patriarchal societies is done by both men and women, in a variety of ways and with clear and enforceable penalties that range from a disapproving scowl to a slit throat in extreme cases. All this is part of the routine process of socialisation and gendered identity construction through which girls and women are persistently reminded that they are the possessions of men.

Both men and women perpetuate gender-based violence and we must pay attention to this to fully respond to the problem. It is why both men and women can sit and condemn a rape victim based on what she was wearing or where she was at a particular time. After all, ‘good women’ do not drink or wear short skirts.

We have come to normalise and downplay gender-based violence, particularly sexual violence, creating a culture of rape. Women have learnt – whether by experience or through education – to accept sexual harassment, to live in situations of continued violence, to expect violence as inevitable, to turn a blind eye to it and to organise their daily lives around routines that protect them from violence. Women in South Africa live with fear of sexual violence and wear it like a second skin. Each of us wears it differently depending on our race class, sexual preference and community, but from birth we have been taught our lessons well. Women have also learnt the hard way to keep quiet about violence, lest they be shamed, ostracised, blamed, not believed, ridiculed and even punished for being a victim. Those who have dared to speak out about sexual harassment, rape and other forms of sexual assault have in many cases not been supported in their quest for justice. Secondary victimisation of victims of violence is all too common in our society.

Furthermore, these imbalances operate in the context of a nearly universal sexual double standard that gives men greater sexual freedom and rights of self-determination than women. Men have been taught to blur the lines between consent and non-consent, engaging in sexual coercion and describing it as persistence, expecting sexual favours in exchange for a bottle or two of beer or some other trinket, at the expense of a woman’s dignity and self-worth. The objectification of women is a daily occurrence, taking forms such as catcalling, groping, rape jokes, sex tapes, and perpetrating or justifying sexual assault or other forms of gender-based violence. We have created a continuum of violence where a peeping tom is understood as harmless, where we thank God that a woman was only raped and not killed, and where threats of violence are seen as harmless. In this way, we can all live our lives as if the epidemic of sexual violence does not exist.

The fight for gender equality has not always been a priority and where it has been advanced the burden of change has been placed solely on the shoulders of women. All too often people point out that women are perpetuating the rape culture themselves, or that men are victims too, or that not all men are perpetrators, but in South Africa and in many other countries, unequal gender relations are tipped in favour of man and women continue to negotiate life in ways that protect them from violence even when it means conforming to a practice that has harmed them in many ways.

We all need to pause and consider how we have perpetuated the culture of rape and how we can change the status quo.

Opinion piece by Ms By Patience Mungwari Mpani from Gender Unit Manager, Centre for Human Rights