AGENDA FEMINIST DIALOGUE

Transforming violent culture and building platforms for young women

and

Launch of *Agenda* journal No. 97: *Sex, gender and childhood*

Agenda Feminist Media's June 2014 Feminist Dialogue, organised jointly with the Human Sciences Research Council, combined the launch of the latest issue of *Agenda* journal, on *Sex, gender and childhood* with a dialogue focusing on the creation of platforms where young women are consulted and involved in finding solutions for transformation of the culture of gender violence in South Africa.

Sex, gender and childhood created a space to actively engage in building alternative and dynamic understandings of childhood and childhood sexuality. The various authors interrogated childhood, gender and sexuality from different perspectives – legal, educational, the role of the media, and children's agency. The overall outcomes of the critical theoretical analysis and research that was conducted contain a set of central messages:

- Gendered subjective identities are socially constructed and discursively produced: there is nothing intrinsically natural to gendered identities – they are not rigid and can change.
- The dominant conception of childhood is that of a time of innocence. Children thus need to be protected from premature exposure to what is considered to be adult experiences (for example, sex). This conception treats children as passive, asexual beings who are at risk. As childhood sexuality is not acknowledged, it is a taboo subject. When sexuality is evidenced, the adult response is moralistic and prohibitive.
- Research has evidenced that the above conception of childhood does not capture the reality of the experiences of children and young people. Children are active, agentic and competent human beings, and do make choices and develop strategies to deal with their everyday challenges.
- If programmes and policies are to be effective and sustainable, spaces must be created for children and young people to express their views, talk about their experiences and get actively involved in finding solutions and taking up opportunities.

The June 2014 Feminist Dialogue was designed to put these theoretical and research outcomes into practise by creating a platform for the input of young women around gender violence. Young women not only compiled the presentations, but were also participants in the dialogue – learners from Tafelsig High School in Cape Town, members of the Young Urban Women's programme in both Johannesburg/Pretoria and Cape Town, and from the Triangle Project in Cape Town. A special feature of the dialogue was the participation of spoken word poet and performance activist Andiswa Dlamini, whose words on truth, life and love inspired all present.

After Lee Stone and Lebo Moletsane from Agenda Feminist Media had welcomed the participants attending the dialogue in the HSRC video conferencing centres at Pretoria, Durban and Cape Town, the following three presentations were delivered.

Lessons in building young women's voices in the new women's movement

Presented by Vainola Makan, coordinator, Young Women's Chapter, New Women's Movement

The New Women's Movement (NWM) was founded in 1997. It operates in the Western Cape, and is a grassroots pro-poor women's organisation concerned with issues relating to the cost of living, social security and gender violence. In 2003 the Young Women's Chapter was established within the NWM in order to develop leadership amongst young women. The approach taken to leadership development is holistic, focusing on the socio-economic, socio-emotional and socio-political needs of young women via the medium of study groups, mentorship programmes and leadership camps.

What are the expectations of young girls and women, Makan asked? They wanted to enjoy being young; fall in love and be cared for in a relationship; live in a safe environment; learn and enjoy career opportunities in a field that they are passionate about; be equal citizens and make equal contributions towards the public good; have spaces in which to express themselves fully; and be valued as human beings. These expectations were often thwarted by the lack of an enabling environment. Pervading structural inequalities and discrimination, reinforced by culturally framed perceptions of gender, and the high incidence of gender violence, all worked against young girls and women fully realising their hopes.

How then have the NWM and its Young Women's Chapter designed their intent to improve the chances of their young women members realising their expectations? Makan outlined the following:

- Young women were viewed as active and intelligent partners, thus the 'rescue paradigm' adopted by many organisations working with young girls and women did not play a role in the NWM.
- The young women's motivation was enhanced by their sense of ownership of their activities, programmes and outcomes. The members of the Young Women's Chapter ran their own meetings and were responsible for the governance of their Chapter.
- The Young Women's Chapter was not considered an appendage to the NWM. Young women formed 50% of Board membership, and thus they were fully integrated into sharing power and decision taking. This integration and participation was deepened through interaction at local branch level and organisational level, which expanded the spaces where members were able to gain organisational experience.
- The NWM practised programme diversification and age-specific strategies. This not only held the members' interest, but provided information and built confidence on a wide variety of topics/issues.
- Leadership development took place through the NWM tmentorship programme, which paired a younger woman with an older woman, thus also promoting intergenerational understanding and respect.

Through these innovative methodologies the NWM had been successful in building a layer of leadership amongst young women and had expanded young women's confidence and politicisation. Self-confidence and improved access to information has promoted the

possibility of these young women achieving their dreams, and the NWM had a number of success stories to tell in this regard.

What should the future direction be, asked Makan? Young women as a social and political force have not been fully recognised by women's movements in South Africa. Given pervading structural inequalities and discrimination, a large percentage of young women have personally experienced violence in their lives – whether through sexual harassment, coercive sex, rape, and domestic violence. Listening to their experiences would assist in finding solutions.

Thus building a strong national young women's movement would provide a space for their participation as a respected political voice. Furthermore, the support and experience of transnational connections should also be sought. Lastly, further research should be conducted into what would really make a difference in young women's lives instead of basing interventions on assumptions about their lives.

Project Empower: Working with experiences and vulnerabilities of young girls and women

Presented by Tunkie Mhlambu and Mabusi Ntshangase, Project Empower

Project Empower is an organisation that works with young poor black women in informal settlements in and around Durban, and also in rural areas. The organisation aims to support young women to develop their independence to make their own decisions in their lives, and to build solidarity amongst young women so that they support each other. At community level Project Empower works to improve the safety and health of young women through making sure that they are active participants in community structures like community policing forums, street committees, and ward committees, where they can represent their interests.

In their presentation, Mhambu and Ntshangase related how they experience violence in their communities as young women, and illustrated this through personal stories. Their experience of violence took on a variety of forms – physical, emotional and economic. Physical violence was being beaten or raped by your boyfriend, gangs, family members or another. Emotional violence was experienced as abuse from one's boyfriend, parents, or employers. Economic violence was being locked into poverty, unemployment and precarious work, without having the tools to understand the economic environment that could inform alternative choices about one's life.

They essentially understood violence and abuse as being the violation of a person's rights, either by another person, or by a system (health clinics, police stations, and so on). The women reported how their health rights were violated when nurses at clinics refused to attend to them. Access to the clinics was often denied by the security guards, who interrogated why they were visiting the clinic, and then turned them away when they deemed the health issue not serious enough. They experienced violations of their right to protection when they reported cases of gender violence at police stations, where the police often refused to open a case, or demanded sexual favours in return.

The women argued that the causes of gender violence in their communities were complex. The historic violence of oppression had permeated into current conditions, where it had become entrenched through widespread unemployment, inequality and poverty. Women were not able to provide for themselves, and thus turned to men as providers, even if the relationship turned abusive. Men themselves also lived in this violent culture, so they too were traumatised, and this often turned into abuse.

One of the women related a personal experience. When she was about 18 years old, her then boyfriend started doing crime by breaking onto houses. One day he promised her a present after his work was done. When he arrived back home, he started smoking drugs. When she asked what had happened to her present, he started beating her. She later discovered that when he had broken into the house, he found a young child there and had shot him. The fact that he had done so had traumatised him to the extent that his reaction was to lash out at her. Although she did not want to defend men, she argued that it is important to understand what men sometimes have to go through to provide for their women and families.

Furthermore, the women argued that the living conditions in the informal settlements served to permeate violence. Overcrowding and poverty caused stress in relationships and small disputes often became violent. Fear of this pervasive violence, as well as of individual perpetrators who have a history of extreme violence, often deterred police from coming into certain communities to investigate crimes.

How does Project Empower intend to address the lived realities of young women and violence? The women noted four strategies, which would also require support from other stakeholders:

- Work together as women raising consciousness across communities and supporting each other.

- Challenging violence in all its forms when we experience it.

- Being represented as young women on structures and making sure that service providers work and are accountable.

- Making economic changes so that women and men can be free from poverty and unemployment.

Girls leading change in addressing sexual violence at a South African university

Presented by Sandiswe Gaiza, Bongiwe Maome, Elethu Zimbini Ntsete, Zethu Jiyana, Takatso Mohlomi, Wandiswe Momoza, Asisipho Mntonga, and Naydene de Lange (lecturer), Faculty of Education at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth

The young women introduced themselves as students from the Faculty of Education at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth. They have come together to

address sexual harassment and violence, particularly on their campus, but also in other spaces where they are active. Through their work in the classroom as teachers they aim to develop into responsible and active members of society, and plan to continue the work of grooming young girls and boys so they may lead responsible lifestyles.

The students introduced their project, called Digital media for change and well-being. It is framed by the critical need for innovative approaches to policy making and programming in relation to the safety and security of girls and young women and particularly in contexts of high sexual violence and HIV and AIDS. In particular, their project explored girl-led policy development relating to sexual violence at their university. The project had been running since 2013, and will feed into a larger project, due to start within the next 6 months, called Networks for change and well-being: Girl-led from the ground up policy making in addressing sexual violence in Canada and South Africa (2014- 2019).

As Lebo Moletsane later explained, the proposed project will be a partnership between Canadian and South African institutions, seeking to examine the co-creation of knowledge about sexual violence in relational and institutional settings, as informed by young girls and women themselves. It will furthermore explore innovative approaches for information dissemination, and is due to be launched by the end of 2014.

The overall question being investigated is: How can participatory initiatives (including digital media practices) with girls and young women, a group typically excluded from policy dialogue, inform practices, policies, programmes and services related to their own safety, security and well-being?

The digital media for change and well-being project had used the methodology of participatory visual research in exploring ways of improving the safety and security of young women on campus. The methodology comprised three elements: the production of cellphilms, the creation of policy posters, and the development of action briefs.

The production of cellphilms was the first step in the project process. The young women produced their own cellphilms around two sets of issues:

- Reflecting back on incidents of sexual violence that occurred while they were still in school, and telling these stories.
- Considering when they feel safe and when not on their campus, and telling these stories. Here the main issues of concern revolved around getting to their residences. Xanadu Square on campus was particularly mentioned as an unsafe place; security at sporting events; and careless security personnel. One of the cellphilms on security issues at the residences was played as an example during the dialogue.

The next stage of the process was to analyse the central themes that emerged from the cellphilms and turn these into visual representations as policy posters. The aim of these policy posters was to draw the attention of stakeholders to these issues and raise the consciousness of fellow students. Six themes were thus represented:

- Unsafe in my space
- My right to privacy, your responsibility to respect it
- Sexual harassment by security staff – we are victims of our protectors – who could one trust?

- Safety in our home away from home – we need to feel protected and safe in our residences
- My body, your toy? No such luck
- Date rape. Report it.

The final step took the form of developing action briefs to inform policy development in the university to tackle the issues raised during the participatory research, and lobbying the university management to introduce these. The presenters reported on their dialogues to date, and outlined the target audiences for their next round of dialogues. They are committed to furthering their work and hope to act as an inspiration to others to also get involved.

Question and answer session

Discussion during the question and answer session that followed the presentations focused on the following issues:

1. The importance of framing initiatives in terms of an approach that is positive towards sexuality. This meant acknowledging young people as active sexual beings, and thus looking at the issue of safety in terms of how to safely express one's sexuality. Positive sexuality was an important message, particularly in the context of the moral panic that was gripping this country. As long as sex was viewed in a moralistic fashion, we would not be able to create spaces where young people could develop positive sexualities. There were indeed opportunities for young women to become involved in the creation of these spaces. At the moment such an opportunity was on offer – to become involved in the transformation of the Sexual Offences Act, which was in the process of review following the decision by the Constitutional Court. Initiatives could be by way of connecting the voices of young women to the review process so that their input was taken into account, and they could play an active role in change.
2. Building a young women's movement needed to consciously attend to questions around the issues of class and race. We needed to critically interrogate the picture that we have of sexual violence in this country, and who is being represented as the perpetrators of such sexual violence. Although it was clear that individual initiatives had specific target groups that they organise and work with, it was important to have a movement that built solidarity over a variety of women's lived realities. Sexual violence was not only experienced by the poor black young woman, although they were more vulnerable given limited access to information and support.
3. Sexual violence at the country's universities was a reflection of the national picture. The State and other institutions perpetrated violence when they did not protect women. The problem was not the lack of good policies, but that the State and other institutions are not held accountable for their implementation. It should not be left up to women alone to take responsibility for transforming the culture of violence – men should be included as well.
4. Initiatives like the Girls Leading Change project at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University are also starting at other tertiary institutions (for example, the University of KwaZulu-Natal). The students already involved appealed to other groups of girls and

young women to themselves become active agents for the social good, whether at their schools or in other spaces that they occupy.

5. Lastly, there were expressions of admiration for what the groups of young women were doing. It was refreshing to hear the voices of young women. There was excitement that the young women were naming their world as they see it, which was proving very empowering. There was a sense of pride in handing over the baton for young women to lead.

Launch of *Agenda* issue No. 97: Sex, gender and childhood

Asha Moodley from Agenda Feminist Media introduced the launch of the current journal. Three contributions were summarised by their authors as part of the launch. Kerry Frizelle reported on how the media constructs a negative image of young people's sexuality and the implications of this. Kelly Moult discussed how school education was not addressing the themes of sex, gender and childhood, and how the school structure militates against positive messages around sexuality. Pholoho Morojele discussed how children are active agents in their lives, illustrated by how they leverage dominant gender discourses to serve their safety on the way to and from school.

Vulnerable sexualities: Constructions of youth sexuality in South African newspaper articles aimed at adults

Kerry Frizelle

On behalf of co-authors Olwethu Jwili and Khanyiselle Nene, Frizelle reported on the outcomes of research conducted on analysing the depiction of young people's sexuality in newspapers. She noted that not all aspects of the analysis put forward in the journal article could be covered in a short presentation. She would thus focus on those aspects which applied to the theme of the present Feminist Dialogue – transforming the culture of violence by building new platforms for young women.

The research was motivated by a concern with the problematic construction of young people's sexuality held by the general public in South Africa which, if not interrogated, would lead to reinforcement and perpetuation of the moralistic and protectionist responses that mould the majority of present programmes and interventions. Given that the media plays an important role in influencing people's attitudes and perceptions, they analysed how newspaper articles reported on youth sexuality. The outcomes were:

- The depiction of young people's sexuality was primarily negative.
- The youth were depicted as sexually innocent and thus at risk, this framing the responses to prohibit, ban and moralise, and not support young people to develop their own sexual agency.
- A set of dominant discourses around youth sexuality were traced in the newspaper articles: the legal/criminal discourse, the developmental/transitional discourse, the gendered discourse, the parental discourse, the scientific discourse, the racial discourse, and the expert discourse.

Frizelle focused on the legal/criminal and gendered discourses in her presentation.

In the legal/criminal discourse, young people were positioned in two ways – they were either the perpetrators or the victims of sexual crimes. This interlocked with the gendered discourse where girls were viewed as the victims, and the boys as the sexual predators. What was never present in this discourse was a mention of consensual, pleasurable and active youth sexuality. Yet the reality was that, despite the prevalence of sexual violence in South Africa, by the age of 15 (latest HSRC study) many young people were engaging in consensual sexual behaviour. Thus young people could not be seen only as perpetrators and victims of sexual crimes.

When youth sexuality was only acknowledged when it was framed as a crime, adult responses became protectionist and moralistic. The dialogue that took place with young people was conducted on the basis of them becoming sexually active in the future, not acknowledging that they were already sexual beings. Thus there was little support for young people to develop their sexual agency, the assumption being that they would automatically know what to do when the time came as they would be older. Furthermore, when the picture that young people's sexuality only took place in a context of violence became embedded, teachers and other well-meaning adults tended to terrorise young people about the risks and dangers of sex.

Frizelle pointed out that their aim as researchers was not to deny the realities that were being reported in the newspaper articles, but they wanted to question the grand narrative that emerged from the articles, in that they foregrounded one particular story and silenced another reality that was equally important. The story of the dangers and risks of sex was the story in the foreground, and the story of sexual pleasure and agency was silenced.

She proposed that those working with young people should adopt a balanced approach to youth sexuality – one that did not create a dualism between negative and positive messages about but gave due respect to all aspects of youth sexuality, not just the risks and dangers. Introducing a sex-positive narrative would support young people to navigate the complexities of sexual relationships, and could serve to challenge them to think about new forms of masculinities and femininities.

Talking taboos: Teaching and learning about sexuality, gender and violence in Western Cape schools

Kelley Moult

The Gender, Health and Justice Research Unit at the University of Cape Town (where Moult is currently Acting Director) has embarked upon a research project to examine gender-based violence prevention messaging in schools in the Western Cape. One of the questions that formed part of this research was: How do teachers teach and learners learn about sexuality, gender and violence? Schools, she argued, were critical spaces for engaging around these issues and, given the fast-changing environment that children and young people had to mould their lives in currently, there was a need to shift the way in which we think about and approach youth sexuality.

Moult shared preliminary outcomes of their research to date as follows:

- The learners whom they interviewed confirmed that they did not broach the subjects of sex and sexuality with their parents – this remained a taboo area. They also reported that their parents had limited time to talk with them due to the hard demands of work, and the busyness of life in general.
- Teachers interviewed acknowledged that children were not receiving information and guidance around sexual issues from their parents. They also reported that parents were against their children learning about these issues at school. This resulted in a tricky situation for teachers to manoeuvre in, where even the most motivated teacher might be wary about providing the learners with positive messages about sexuality.
- Even though research indicated that children were becoming sexually active at an earlier age, the push was rather to start sex education later due to fears that exposure to sexual education would spurn children on to experiment with sexual activity.
- The location of sex education within the curriculum of Life Orientation was problematic. Given its low priority in the school curriculum as a whole, learners tended not to take Life Orientation seriously, and teachers reported that the subject and its contents thus lack legitimacy.
- Little evidence of teaching around gender and youth sexuality issues that supports learners to understand their developing sexuality and that carries positive messages about sex was found. Indeed, some of the teachers reported that they did not have any specific training, and did not feel prepared then they entered the classroom to manage discussions around sex, gender and violence. They felt more comfortable when they could use biological/scientific-based teaching materials.
- Teachers were individuals and had their own histories, which might include personal experiences of violence and abuse. This could make teaching on these topics very difficult. Teachers also had their own attitudes and beliefs which impacted on how and what they teach about gender and sexuality.
- In many of the schools visited during the research, classes were large. This made it difficult for teachers to follow and monitor individual learner experiences, so there was always the risk of topics triggering painful experiences that learners might have had. Teachers did not always feel confident that they could deal with such learner reactions.
- The school environment itself was hierarchical and gendered. This structure and the subsequent culture that developed from it impacted negatively on the ability of learners to learn and teachers to teach sexuality, gender and violence. The school environment could operate against any positive messaging – when teachers themselves were perpetrators, and when the school administration evidenced a punitive response to issues of sex and sexuality amongst teenagers.

Having outlined the above preliminary outcomes, Moult summarised three sets of issues that the project will continue to explore:

- Supporting teachers with alternative teaching materials on sexuality, gender and violence, explaining why these themes are important and how to teach about them.
- Thinking of ways to extend learners' role in shaping their own environment and their own learning.

- Addressing Life Orientation and its curriculum, which was a much larger project.

Interested persons can access the alternative materials that have been developed to date at the following web site www.ghjru.ac.za by clicking on *Schools.*

Children speak out: Gender and sexuality in treacherous school journey terrains

Pholoho Morojele

Morojele outlined his intent to critically investigate how notions of gender and sexuality are leveraged by learners to negotiate challenges that they face in the spaces and places within which they live and move. His research focused on one particular example: how learners from one primary school in rural Lesotho managed their safety on their way to and from school in a treacherous terrain.

Underpinning Morojele's approach were two contemporary conceptual frameworks:

- The new sociology of childhood studies, which stresses the need to understand children as agents – as active social beings who have the capacity and will to determine their lives. Similarly, this approach also acknowledges children as sexual beings.
- The concept of people's geographies – how human beings are positioned in social spatial relationships – the importance of space, place and time in moulding human experiences. The concept of space is not limited to physical space alone but also incorporates social space – the spaces where power relations are lived out – where some occupy positions of advantage and others positions of disadvantage. Thus understanding children's geographies is critical to understanding the complexities of childhood.

Synergising the concepts of children's agency and children's geographies, the research question was formulated as: How do children construct, contest and position themselves in the special dynamics of their localities, and how can these insights subsequently be used to improve the schooling experiences of rural children in Lesotho?

During the research data were collected using the participatory methodologies of mapping exercises and photovoice. By drawing maps of their paths to school, illustrating the hazards that they face along the way, and taking photos of their school journey, the learners could tell their stories directly, without the assumptions of the researchers getting in the way. Furthermore, the learners could choose which aspects of their lives they wanted to share. The challenges that the learners faced en route to school were not limited to the physical terrain (mountainous, forests, rivers) and climatic conditions, but included groups of people who were sometimes threatening (shepherds, young men tending cattle, initiates at circumcision schools, 'muti' hunters).

The outcomes of the research indicated clearly that the learners, while navigating the difficult terrain of walking to school, use the journey as a space to leverage and actively exploit gender and sexuality performances in creative and useful ways to overcome the dangers that they faced. These strategies are explored, giving individual examples, in the article published in *Agenda*, and included:

- Walking in protective gender-based groupings where the boys protect the girls;
- Heterosexual walking relationships where boys and girls pair up;
- Creatively utilising homophobic sentiments to trick the young men herding the cattle to protect the girls from their interference.

The strategies and solutions adopted by the children were framed within the dominant discourses of gender and sexuality. This is understandable, Morojele pointed out, because when one finds oneself in compromised contexts, it is difficult to be critical about underlying social power relationships. The issue that should be tackled was: How do we need to change our social and physical space contexts to facilitate changes in dominant gender constructs?

In looking for ways to improve the school experience of children, Motojele concluded, policy makers should acknowledge that children were active agents in their lives, and should thus look at what they were already doing to overcome challenges, and build on these insights for future interventions.

Question and answer session

The issues what were discussed during the question and answer session touched on the important messages that the *Sex, gender and childhood* edition of Agenda delivered:

1. Children and young people were active social beings and had the abilities required to fully participate in decisions affecting their lives, and mould how they live their lives. Therefore building platforms, as this Feminist Dialogue had done, where young people's voices were heard was very important and should happen more often. Interventions and programmes, whether run by the public or not-for-profit sectors, cannot be effective when children and young people do not have ownership of the processes thus introduced.
2. Children and young people were sexual beings. The dominant view that they were sexually innocent/asexual did not grasp the full reality of children's sexuality. When children reported that they have known about sex since the age of five (as reported by one participant), it pointed to the need for open discussions around sex and gender to start at an early age. Children could then benefit from a balanced approach to sexuality – one that was affirmative of sexuality but that also pointed out the risks involved when not approached safely.
3. Although there was little discussion about sex, gender and sexual violence between children and parents/caregivers, this did not mean that parents were not involved in their children's lives. They were involved – by silencing questions around sex, by controlling and by prohibiting certain behaviours. A number of participants spoke to the importance of finding ways to include parents into a more open dialogue, although researchers reported that they had found parents to be a difficult group to engage. It is interesting to note that current historical research into sexuality in Africa has recorded that considering sex a taboo theme was a recent development. There was evidence that systems of sex education were in place in traditional societies, where older children were responsible for educating younger children, and they in turn were mentored by elders. All these processes dissolved when a moralistic

approach to sex entered the equation through the missionaries and colonial powers, where the notion of Western respectability was foregrounded.

4. A number of speakers pointed out that the discussions around sexuality had been focused primarily on heterosexual interactions. This excluded other groups who had a different sexual reality. Over and above the LGBTI communities, this also included those young people living with disabilities. How, for example, did one engage around these issues in the school environment? In answering, Moult drew attention to the alternative material that they had developed for teachers to teach around issues of sex, gender and sexual violence in the classroom. These materials were designed to inculcate tolerance of the other, which would include diverse sexualities. A special project at the Gender, Health and Justice Research Unit was dedicated to persons living with disabilities. As Morojele pointed out, the same logic underpinned homophobia, sexism and racism, and that was an intolerance of difference. One cannot promote women's empowerment and not promote the rights of the LGBTI communities and those living with disabilities as well.

Asha Moodley and Lee Stone closed the Agenda Feminist Dialogue with a vote of thanks to all participants and stakeholders for an exciting and inspiring discussion.