

ON THE RECORD...

Professor Rachel Jewkes

Chandré Gould speaks to Professor Rachel Jewkes, Director of the Gender and Health Unit of the Medical Research Council and a member of the newly formed National Council on Gender-Based Violence.

Professor Rachel Jewkes and her colleagues at the Gender and Health Unit have undertaken foundational research on gender-based violence in South Africa for many years; most recently this includes research conducted to assess the levels of rape perpetration in South Africa,¹ and a national study of child and female homicide. The unit has also developed and tested the South African version of the Stepping Stones programme that was shown to be effective in changing men's sexual risk-taking behaviour and 'reduced their use of violence', while also reducing sexually transmitted infections in women.²

Chandré Gould (CG): Rachel, you and your colleagues have conducted more extensive and sustained research on gender-based violence in South Africa than any other research outfit. Do we know enough about rape and intimate partner violence, both in terms of risk factors for perpetration and in terms of what might work to reduce the high rate of perpetration in the country, to enable us to develop a plan to reduce and prevent gender-based violence (GBV)?

Rachel Jewkes (RJ): Yes, I definitely think we know enough about the risk factors for perpetration. South Africa has a wealth of information, and arguably more on the risk factors for rape than any almost other country in the world. We also know what is driving the problem of intimate partner violence. There is always a need for further research but the key thing is that we have enough knowledge to understand theoretically what is driving the problem and what our intervention strategies must address. Any need for more research should not hold us back from starting interventions.

CG: The recent high profile incidents of gender-based violence; the brutal gang rape and murder of Anene Booysen in the Western Cape and the killing of Reeva Steenkamp by Oscar Pistorius, have resulted in somewhat of a media frenzy.

Many newspapers believe that they can best contribute to reducing gender-based violence by drawing attention to the problem through increased reporting about rape and intimate partner violence. Does increased reporting help?

RJ: This is a difficult question to answer because it's a complex issue. On the one hand the media have a very important role to play in highlighting gender-based violence and bringing it to the attention of the public. The media can also be a critical influencer of social norms – that is, they can powerfully convey messages about the non-acceptability of violence and help de-stigmatise rape victims. It is important to cover violence incidents, but it has to be done in a careful way, as there is a danger of people starting to ignore the many stories, with the result that they lose impact. It is important to report violence in an empowering way so that the emphasis is on what we can do to prevent it. It is also important that there is a unified message of zero tolerance to violence. We have to change the social norms that lend acceptability to violence.

CG: Turning to the state, I thought that the formation of a Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities under President Jacob Zuma's government raised a warning. Putting

together women, children and people with disabilities suggests that all three groups have something in common, and runs the danger of infantilising women and people with disabilities. It would appear that the thinking that informed the clustering of these groups is the same thinking that makes us collectively think about women as victims, less able, and in need of rescue. Is this framework that we've been using to approach the problem of GBV at a policy level?

RJ: Yes, in many ways it is the vulnerability of these groups that has informed the policy framework. But it is important to recognise that all three groups are structurally disempowered in our hierarchical society. That is part of the problem we face. So it is important that we redress that disempowerment by responding to the needs of victims and establishing an agenda of prevention. The prevention agenda needs to be evidence-based and to span different sectors and levels of intervention. It must also give women a key role, not in a victim blaming way, for example, where people believe that the solution is for women to take care when walking through an empty field, or not to go out after dark. The key role that women need to play is to demand more from men in terms of gender equity; that is, they should not tolerate harmful relationships and understand that they are worth more than being a partner to a person who harms them. They also need to raise their sons to respect women. Equipping women with better conflict management skills can also help reduce gender-based violence. But the key parts of the prevention agenda of course involve engaging men.

The challenge for the department is to develop a strategy to address women's disempowerment and to involve men and women in interventions that actually build gender equity.

CG: Last year the Minister of Women, Children and People with Disabilities, Lulu Xingwana, announced the establishment of the Council for Gender-Based Violence, which, according to government statements, will 'provide strategic leadership, coordination and monitoring of

gender-based violence initiatives'. What does this really mean?

RJ: Well, it should mean that we should develop an action plan for the whole country, based on a comprehensive evidence-based theory of what is driving the problem and drawing on the best scientific evidence of what works in prevention. It needs to engage all relevant sectors, particularly government, academia, NGOs and businesses. That is what providing strategic leadership means. The Council should receive strategic plans for gender-based violence prevention from all government departments and sectors, receive reports on progress in implementing the plans, and monitor outcomes.

CG: I have been somewhat horrified by the 'war' speak that seems to characterise any official government statements, whether about violent crime or gender based violence. For example, last year the Minister said that '[T]hrough the National Council Against Gender-Based Violence, we are taking the war against gender-based violence to a higher level.' Is there reason to be concerned that we seem to only imagine a response to violence that involves at the least the language of violence itself?

RJ: I think that we have to understand that part of our problem with violence in South Africa is that violence is used in so many different arenas of our lives. Essentially we are a violence tolerant society. Experiencing and using violence is a way of life for so many people: through the use of violence in child rearing, in schools and to settle problems in our lives. To address gender-based violence we have to reduce violence in all spheres of our lives. So from that perspective it is very important that we don't use the language of violence when talking about solutions.

CG: There seems to be a great deal that is still unclear about the Council. In preparation for this interview I was looking for a list of the members of the council, and some explanation about the appointment process, but was unable to find much aside from statements by the Minister and her department about the establishment and launch of

the Council.³ How did you become a member, and what process was followed for the appointment of members?

RJ: I was approached to provide the contact details of someone else the Minister had wished to bring onto the Council to advise on research, and seem to have been substituted by chance. I think there is a problem stemming from the lack of a shared understanding of what is driving the problem of GBV, as, if this had been understood, more strategic decisions could have been made about who should be members of the Council. I was first informed in August last year that I was to be considered for membership, after which there was a process of vetting. I heard nothing further until November, when the Minister wished to launch the Council. After that nothing happened until these high profile cases made the news and a meeting was hastily organised. I saw a list of people who were invited to be members of the Council, and some sectors have clearly been missed, for instance the business sector, as well as Treasury and the Department of Public Administration.

CG: According to the Minister's public statement in August last year⁴ it was envisaged that the Council would have 45 members with a dedicated Secretariat. She also said that NGOs that deal with violence against women and children and gender-based violence, religious organisations, traditional leaders, the women's movement, local government associations and government organisations would be represented, and that there would be observers from the Commission on Gender Equality, United Nations bodies, research institutions, donor partners and experts. That seems rather unwieldy. It also seems as though there are organisations and institutions involved that represent very different, even opposing, views on the factors that underlie gender-based violence and responses to it. Will we not be creating a structure that is paralysed by its own internal disagreements?

RJ: Well, I think that if we were to get champions for the issue within the sectors that haven't traditionally been involved, like traditional leaders, it would be valuable. The Council could be a

source of strength for people from those sectors. I think we have to acknowledge that traditional leadership and some of the churches can play a very valuable role, as they are very influential, but that they can also replicate and reinforce a strong set of patriarchal values, which clearly needs to change if we are to achieve effective gender-based violence prevention. These sectors are a very important part of the solution and it's only through engaging with them and discussing the issues that we can move forward.

CG: According to a statement by Minister Xingwana, the Council will 'advise government on policy and intervention programmes, drive the implementation of the 365 Days Action Plan, advise government on policy and intervention programmes, strengthen national partnerships in the fight against gender-based violence, create and strengthen international partnerships and monitor and report progress on initiatives aimed at addressing gender-based violence.'⁵ She also listed many things that need to be done, all of which seem to come down to placing even more responsibility on the criminal justice system. Why is it that we don't seem to be able to move beyond punishment as our response to GBV?

RJ: The problem comes back to the lack of a clear theory of change driving the prevention programme. If there were a comprehensive, scientific evidence-based theory it would become clear that the criminal justice system is important, but that it is just one part of a much bigger programme of intervention that is required. Government seems locked into the 365 Day Action Plan, which was launched in 2007, but six years on we should be working from our current knowledge base.

So what are the key drivers that we need to address? At the top of the list we have to put gender transformation, in particular changing the way men see themselves as men, and changing social norms about violence use within relationships. Essentially that means empowering men to be respectful of women and non-violent, and empowering women to know what they want in relationships and hold their partners

accountable for providing it. We need to build relationship skills too, especially communication. We need a broad intervention strategy to reduce alcohol abuse and drug use. We must strengthen mental health services so that counselling is available, especially for abused women, and depression is identified and treated in men and women. A further major pillar of the strategy is one that will bring about long-term benefits. This involves reducing the number of unwanted children by strengthening contraceptive and abortion services, and reducing violence experienced by children, in part through interventions to teach and promote non-violent and more age-appropriate parenting. Why the childhood focus? Well, evidence suggests that boys who are abused in childhood (physically, sexually and emotionally) are much more likely to perpetrate violence when they are older.

This is a broad agenda, and of course the criminal justice system has a role to play, but we have to be mindful that it is easier as a society to focus on the small number of people who are caught by the police, than to deal with the difficult issues of changing the power structures that replicate gender equity.

CG: I am slightly confused about how people with disabilities have apparently become a focus of the Council. It is noted on the Early Childhood Learning Community⁶ website, in a report about the first Council meeting, that the Council noted the ‘current lack of statistics for GBV against people with disabilities’ and the lack of access to justice for people with disabilities. While this is true, is there not a danger of the Council on the one hand becoming bean counters, and on the other being distracted by issues that are important, but not really relevant to dealing with GBV?

RJ: Yes, it is true that we don’t have statistics about violence against people with disabilities; it’s a gap the department should fill, but perhaps not at this stage the Council. I think the Council needs to focus future research on determining questions that will allow us to monitor progress and address this issue in the best possible way. Care needs to be taken, as we know that if we don’t do GBV

research very carefully, with rigorous methods, we can end up with useless data.

CG: On a more positive note, you said at the start of our discussion that we do know what kinds of interventions we could start implementing. What do you think are the most important things for us to focus on in that regard?

RJ: The real question is how to do this. I can give you a laundry list of the types of interventions, but I think it’s important to strategically think through what tasks we need to achieve, and then how we best do this.

- We need to keep remembering the need to intervene on multiple levels – addressing the interpersonal and family level, but also impacting on communities and societies.
- In our mission to reduce gender power inequalities, enhance respect for women, and change social norms on the use of violence, we need leadership at the highest levels of the country, and a strategy that harnesses the contributions of all sectors. One part of this is using interventions such as Stepping Stones that are proven effective in reducing gender-based violence, and widespread teaching of communication and conflict management skills.
- We need to draw on the experiences of key NGOs in the sector such as Sonke Gender Justice, but we have to go well beyond the NGO sector. Education has a key role here with the school curriculum, but teachers need to be supported to deliver the curriculum and understand and embrace its values.
- We need a massive programme to change social norms, and here key contributions are required from religious institutions and from the cornerstones of social relations in rural areas, notably traditional leaders.
- We need changes in social norms among the police and those who are tasked with upholding our laws on gender equity and violence.
- We also need to acknowledge that alcohol plays an important part in the violence we see. Alcohol doesn’t cause rape, but lowers the barriers to rape. Men who are drunk are more

likely to become violent with each other and with women. Women who are themselves drunk are more likely to be the victims of abuse and violence. Addressing alcohol abuse is part of the strategy for reducing GBV.

- We also need to address the way in which we parent children. We need to change the way children are taught to use violence from a very young age, and prevent new generations of children from suffering life long trauma that comes from experiencing emotional and physical abuse in childhood. We have to focus on changing parenting to bring up a generation of children with higher self esteem and who can react to others more kindly and empathetically. We know the problems that we have now start when children are very young. There has been a systematic review of parenting interventions for low and middle-income countries, and this shows that we have tools we can use in our setting. Some of the very good work is from South Africa. We also have to recognise that the media have a key role in promoting alternative models of parenting that are non-violent and much more respectful of children.

People very often forget that if we want children to grow into adults who are not hierarchical and are respectful of others, we need to raise children that are themselves respected by adults. For example, we need to respect children's need for time with their parents; and for parents to listen to how children would like to spend their days. We also need to improve communication between parents and children. It may be as simple as asking your child: 'How was your day at school?' and listening to their response. Parents should understand that the best way to protect their children is to have open communication. We should not only speak to our children about the serious things, but about everything, because the biggest danger lies in children not feeling that they can speak to their parents. In many households this basic communication is lacking. What we see is that children often enter intimate relationships too early in their lives because that is where they can find affection, warmth and attention. If they were getting those things from their parents they would

not need to find them through sexual relationships.

I think the greatest challenge is to understand that we need to embrace primary prevention – that is, prevention of violence before it occurs – and not focus solely on responses afterwards. This requires a shift in thinking that can be hard, but we have a great deal of scientific evidence to guide us. The key challenge is to reach for the evidence.

NOTES

1. Rachel Jewkes, Yandisa Sikweyiya, Robert Morell and Kristen Dunkle, Why, when and how men rape: understanding rape perpetration in South Africa, *ISS: SA Crime Quarterly* 34, December 2010.
2. Rachel Jewkes, Mzikazi Nduna, Jonathan Levin, Nwabisa Jama Kristen Dunkle, Kate Wood, Mary Koss, Adrian Puren, Nata Duvvury, Evaluation of Stepping Stones: A gender transformative HIV prevention intervention, MRC Policy Brief, March 2007.
3. Statement by the Minister of Women, Children and People with Disabilities, Ms Lulu Xingwana during a Cabinet media briefing on the launch of the National Council Against Gender-Based Violence, 22 August 2012, <http://www.info.gov.za/speech/DynamicAction?pageid=461&sid=30031&tid=80830>.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. 'National Council on Gender-Based Violence gets off the ground', 7 March 2012, available at <http://www.ecdlc.org.za>.