

LET'S TALK ABOUT MEN - Part 2

By Marion Verweij

Two issues ago an article appeared in Feminenza Magazine called 'Let's Talk About Men.' It was Part 1 of an interview with three men who champion the strengths and qualities of the African man. In this issue we have part two in which Dean Peacock and Mokgethi Tsabalata talk about their motivation and work with Sonke Gender Justice Network (www.genderjustice.org.za) a South African NGO. Sonke Gender Justice Network (Sonke) is a Nguni word meaning 'all of us' or 'together' and symbolises the organization's commitment to working in partnership with all those committed to their vision of gender equality, human rights and social justice. They work with men, women, youth and children in South Africa to achieve gender equality, prevent gender based violence and reduce the spread of HIV and the impact of AIDS. They are champions of Sonke's 'The One Man Can Campaign' which supports men and boys to take action to end domestic and sexual violence and to promote healthy, equitable relationships that men and women can enjoy - passionately, respectfully and fully. The One Man Can Campaign promotes the idea that "each one of us has a role to play, that each one of us can create a better, more equitable and more just world. At the same time, the campaign encourages men to work together with other men and with women to take action - to build a movement, to demand justice, to claim our rights and to change the world."

TOGETHER FOR A JUST WORLD

So what is it that motivates these men to take up this work? Mokgethi has worked as a social worker in the area of HIV for many years and kept asking himself why they didn't seem to be making any impact on the problem. When the aspect of gender relations was introduced it caught his attention as he came to see that if the gender dynamic was not addressed the problem of HIV could not be solved. This process changed his life and understanding gender became his own personal journey. Mokgethi: "I used to think I was an ok guy, then I started to see the subtle things that I did and I just couldn't believe I had said or done it. I am still 'work in progress' and I don't ever want to reach a place where I can say I'm okay. The personal journey of discovering myself is exciting and my relationship with my son wouldn't be the same without it. It is part of building the future every day and being able to change yourself on the way."

Social injustice became an issue in Dean's life from a young age. His mother was an extremely capable lawyer and his father was a doctor. But when his father came home everything stopped and everyone, including the children went to the door to meet him as he was the boss. When Dean was 17 or 18 his mother gave up work to support his father in his work. This upset Dean and he fought both his parents about it.

Later he became involved in the anti-apartheid movement. Then a few years on a girlfriend introduced him to a group of men working to overcome violence and his attention was caught. Dean: "It forced me to look at how I had been, and at my masculinity. And it was an

inspiring time because there were older men committed to equality and they treated me as an equal even though I was a young man."

Dean feels himself to be very privileged to do the work he does, it is full with opportunities for catalytic moments and profound experiences. From participating in a workshop with four men who had been forced to watch their girlfriends being raped and then trying to come to terms with it, to elder men carrying a dignity that is marvellous to see.

Dean: "If women's rights can be violated it creates space for all sorts of other rights to be violated. We need to understand the interconnectedness of different types of social justice struggles. Many men will tell you they know women who have been affected by domestic violence. It impacts adversely on them too. I have four sisters, three of whom have been affected by violence. So suggesting that living in a patriarchal world is always in men's interests I think is problematic. We need to help people reconstruct their past. Take the example of my father. He waited for me to change my mind and become a lawyer. But now he is proud of me and what I do. Recently he even came to one of my workshops and it touched him."

Dean told a story from a workshop he was in recently where the question posed to participants was: How do you know a woman has consented to having sex? And a young man started showing off saying: 'no woman has ever turned me down; and if she does I just put a bit of pressure on her.' And there was an elderly man, who turned to the young man and said: 'You know our struggle to liberate our country from apartheid was a struggle for rights and we won those rights but along with those rights come responsibilities. And I'm asking you to think about how you enjoy those rights and how you exercise that responsibility.'

Dean: "This work at an individual level is part of a broader social change as each person sees that the work can't end with them as it's not just a personal problem." When asked what gender equality meant to them Dean and Mokgethi spoke about basic human rights. That a human's rights should not be jeopardised because of their gender. They want to be able to live in a society where all can live with basic human rights. Where women can live with dignity. A world where men and women can be free to be human beings.

Mokgethi: "The notion that the African man is incapable of change is one that must change. I know that in my own personal journey I am now very different from the man I was. I have seen men change, and I know that men can change, and I know that the status quo does not necessarily benefit us. People will tell you that South Africa has a huge problem with gender based violence. This is something that doesn't benefit me as a man. I don't like not being trusted by women. If I'm walking down the road at 6:00 pm at night I literally have to cross the road just to make my intentions very clear if there is a woman walking in front of me. That is not how I want to live my life. There have been a lot of debates in Africa because a lot of men feel we are all being tarnished with the same brush, that that is how

African men are. But I know from my work as a gender activist, and from my personal life, there are different masculinities, there are different types of men.

"I try to help men understand how women feel by asking them how they felt being discriminated against because they were black. You are human and you are therefore just as capable as your neighbour. Change will come about when you as an agent of change see that I am an agent of change. Exposure to many people helps me change. There are people who might be agents of change who are trapped in stereotypes and are waiting for someone to give them permission to change. We need to give them the option to change."

I asked Mokgethi and Dean to give a view on why they think some men become violent. Taking into account that they are addressing women how would they encourage women to think about it?

Mokgethi: "The temptation is to react when I as a man think I'm supposed to be respected. Even if I don't work to earn that respect I expect it. A man will say: "A woman is taking me for granted because a woman is supposed to respect me." And I ask myself has that man done enough to earn that respect?"

Dean: "The problem is expectation and what that does to your identity. In my experience it is mostly because someone has been hurtful to me and I want to be hurtful back. We need to help men to understand this. We men are not socialised to deal with conflicts."