

COLUMNISTS

'Boys will be boys' saying encourages violence, especially GBV

📍 BY TSHEPO SEFOTLHELO -17 June 2022 - 07:19



Men have learnt that to be masculine they must be powerful and unrelenting. Their manhood is said by taking ownership of things. Money, real estate, social status, and sexual conquests have become the valued commodities that represent power and strength. Power over another, or what sociologists, for years, have termed “dominance behaviour”, is seen as the core characteristic of masculinity.

Toxicity thrives on and is driven by cultural norms and socialisation based on ideas that masculinity is centred on a man’s control of others, sexual entitlement, inequitable gender attitudes, risk-taking and antisocial behaviour. This is the breeding ground for gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF).

Alongside this, our families, society and systems of power entrench ideas about femininity that promote the subordination of women (and other vulnerable groups) to men, and submission to violent acts perpetrated by many.

So, when we say “boys will be boys” in our patriarchal system, we are breathing life into a socialisation that normalises violence, and GBVF in particular. This toxicity seeps into our institutions and spaces and dictates the way we work and live.

It is found in the bloodied body of a young gay activist, killed for being “that way”, and in the mind of the little girl who has just been told to wash dishes because playing soccer outside with her brothers is a “boys’ sport”.

Often overlooked is that this hurts men and boys too. It denies exploration of emotions, it denies the very expression of the spoken words of “I am not OK, I need to talk about how I feel”.

It denies access to the “old boys club” for those who do not excel at “manly” endeavours. It hurts the little boy who is told not to tell anyone that his uncle has just raped him.

Evidence shows that we need to change the way society says about this and how it contributes to GBVF, and rationalises it, if any of our interventions are going to be successful. Social behaviour change is a huge endeavour as is changing gender norms.

The National Strategic Plan on GBVF provides a road map for us to dismantle our patriarchal systems, restore justice, provide survivor support, encourage women’s economic power and ensure accountability at the highest levels of decision-making and in the government.

It is also about peeling away toxic masculinity in our work spaces, our faith spaces and our communities. It is about how we divide the labour in our homes and how we love, or dismiss, each other in the language we use with and about each other.

We often hear of boys being raised in a system that promotes aggression, power and rage, where some are encouraged to use anger or violence to solve conflict. They hear phrases like “don’t start the fight, finish it” or “don’t hit first, hit hardest”.

It is time for all of us to reflect on this and make the conscious decision to pass on to our boys the value of accepting the differences of others and embracing diversity.

We can teach our boys to embrace an attitude of compassion, empathy, kindness, and respect for women and others who are traditionally targets of toxic masculinity, and in many instances, ultimately GBVF. We can succeed in raising our boys to be emotionally healthy masculine men — beginning at home.

Sefothelo is executive head of marketing and communication: GBVF response fund1