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7 June 2022

New study sheds light on violent crimes against children

Abandoned, raped and sexually assaulted, and abused is the daily harrowing reality for thousands of children in South Africa. Sadly, according to research by the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Children's Institute (CI), many of these serious and violent crimes go unnoticed and unreported – leaving the perpetrators to roam free – and young victims of violence with inadequate care and long-lasting psychological effects.

This study, titled "Closing the gaps in services that respond to violence against women and children", is led by a team of CI researchers – Professor Shanaaz Mathews, Dr Neziswa Titi and Lucy Jamieson. The team conclude that drawing on the support and expertise of community members, religious leaders, teachers, law enforcement agencies and other sectors of society to understand these service providers and how they operate is critical in this process.

"We know that institutions of learning like schools, colleges and universities experience sexual violence challenges, and it all forms part of the broader sexual and gender-based violence pandemic in this country. Violence is prevalent in all communities, even in ours on campus. Because of this scourge, service providers and responsive services experience empathy fatigue. But this fatigue should not cause more harm to victims and survivors," Titi said.

"Service providers have a duty to protect women and children against secondary trauma and their behaviour shouldn't silence victims and survivors further."

In this study, researchers explore the myriad of services in place to support victims of violence in South Africa. It aims to understand what survivors of violence need from these services and assesses and analyses the pitfalls. The study uses decolonising methods to inform its contextual and culturally relevant findings at the end of the research process. The study is conducted in partnership with Masimanyane Women's Rights International – a non-profit organisation based in the Eastern Cape and committed to supporting victims and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

"Violence against women and children is not just intersectional, it's intergenerational and it necessitates a holistic and developmentally appropriate approach to obtain the answers we need," Titi said.

Response services like law enforcement agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are mandated to provide specific services and members should be adequately trained to respond to victims of violence and offer the support they need.

Because communities are not homogenous, services should not adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, Titi suggested that they be context-specific and tailored to suit the individual needs of the community.

“While all communities should have access to services of equal quality, the manner in which services are presented and offered should be in line with what women and children need and can relate to,” she said. “Knowing exactly what these needs are is important. It will help service providers to understand what they can do to ensure that women and children seek services, participate in interventions and adhere to the necessary treatment.”

For children who experience daily exposure to sexual and gender-based violence in the home, research indicates that the scourge has become a normalised occurrence. Reassuringly, however, children and adolescents don’t consider the experience of sexual and gender-based violence as normal.

“Indeed, sexual and gender-based violence is not normal and we need to encourage women and children to speak up,” she said.

But what prevents children from seeking help? Titi said they mistrust law enforcement organisations and fear being victimised and ridiculed for speaking up. Their concern that relatives, community members and religious leaders would dismiss their cries for help is real too. Children also find it especially difficult to report perpetrators who are close relatives or friends as a result of emotional ties and connections and feel a sense of responsibility to protect their families from the stigma associated with sexual abuse.

“We should address this issue of silence as a matter of urgency. If we want to empower children to speak up, we need to take a community-based approach that builds the capacity of families and communities to listen to children and to validate their views. We need to create enabling environments that encourage children to disclose these crimes, to provide support and to allow for healing and recovery to take place,” she said.

Schools have a role to play in the process as well. Teachers need to be trained to respond to children and to refer them for psychosocial support. Law enforcement agencies and healthcare facilities should adopt a trauma-informed approach, one that assumes that young victims of violence have experienced trauma in the past, and to manage them sensitively and respectfully.

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News.

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