

## **WHY CHILDREN NEED FATHERS**

Dianne Hubbard, Legal Assistance Centre, 2004

Parliament and the public are currently engaged in a debate of the Children's Status Bill, a law which would (amongst other things) encourage greater contact between single fathers and their children. But perhaps we ought to be asking ourselves, why is it that so many Namibian fathers do not play a meaningful role in the lives of their children? And why do our children need their fathers?

The Legal Assistance Centre once had as a client an 11-year-old boy who wanted to bring a court case to force his father to have a relationship with him. The father had paid maintenance regularly since the boy's birth (a degree of responsibility which is all too rare) but he did not have any contact with his son. The son wanted a father in every sense of the word. We had to tell him that unfortunately there are some things that courts orders simply cannot accomplish.

We do not have statistics on how many children in Namibia are growing up without fathers in their lives. But we do know that the marriage rate in Namibia is low -- 56% of Namibians age 15 and above have never married, and only 28% were married under civil or customary law at the time of the 2001 census, with another 7% informally cohabiting. We also know that 45% of Namibian households are headed by women. These facts indicate that single-parent families are the Namibian norm.

South African research provides a frightening point of comparison. The context is similar -- as in Namibia, marriage rates are low and the number of female-headed households is large. An elaborate study by Wits University is attempting to follow the lives of all children born in greater Johannesburg over a seven-week period following Mandela's release in 1990 until they reach age 20. The group of 2500 still being tracked in this 'Birth to Twenty' study includes children of all race groups and economic classes. By the time the children reached age seven, half

of their fathers had ceased to provide financial support – and by age 12, only 20% of them still had contact with their biological fathers. Many of these children expressed a desire for a father in their lives.

The Secretary General of the South African Men's Forum (an organisation devoted to getting men involved in stopping violence against women) says that part of the blame for the problem lies in the past: "Apartheid destroyed family life and is responsible for so much of the social dysfunction that we see. There is an emptiness, a void, inside many black men. They lack a sense of purpose. I want to make men realise that masculinity can also mean being caring, loving and compassionate", says Mbuyiselo Botha, father of three children of his own.

Another part of the problem is sexual stereotypes. Speaking in an article on fatherhood published in *Sister* magazine several years ago, one 30-year-old man said: "It's a woman's job to take care of the children. I can only take full responsibility for the children if the woman is sick or busy cooking." A different complication was described by a 68-year-old father who was interviewed: "It is very difficult to go and see your children if both you and your ex-woman have re-married. Her man might think you want her back if you keep on phoning her to ask about the children. The other problem is that your woman may ill-treat the children when they come to visit you." (*Sister Namibia*, Vol 10, Nos. 5 & 6, Nov/Dec 1998).

Further exploration of feelings about fatherhood may give us more insight into the interplay of factors that lead to violence. For example, drawing on information from several small focus group discussions held with young Oshiwambo-speaking men in Windhoek and Tsumeb in 1998 and 1999, one researcher pointed to the connection between violence and the feelings of vulnerability which are common in societies undergoing fundamental transformation:

Men have been responding in different ways to the vulnerability. The current increase in social violence, particularly gender-based violence, in countries such as Namibia or South Africa, is thus one response to the vulnerability. The other response is to engage with that vulnerability, to

work with male and female friends, colleagues, partners and social structures to identify the origins of the vulnerability and respond positively. Some male UNAM students indeed expressed a vivid interest in the debates about 'new men', and new kinds of masculinities concerned about responsible fatherhood, gender equality, and a culture of caring and peace.

(Heike Becker, 'What it means to be a man': Masculine identities among young men living in Namibian townships, Development Update Vol.3 (2), March/April 2000)

Why are fathers important for their sons and daughters? Some recent research says that children who have good relationships with their fathers – or with substitute father figures – experience improved mental development and are more social. The theory is that men tend to play more adventurously with young children, which stimulates their development. And the benefits work both ways – men who are involved in nurturing children are likely to be healthier and happier, and less likely to be violent towards their partners.

Children's need for fathers is a worldwide phenomenon. In the United States, research conducted in 2002 for the US Congress found that compared to other children, children without contact with their fathers were five times more likely to live in poverty and twice as likely to commit crimes and to drop out of school -- as well as being more likely to commit suicide or to become pregnant as teenagers.

Young men growing up in particular need caring men as role models who can help them shape their own concepts of masculinity in positive ways. If their relationship with their own fathers is characterised by neglect or abuse, this will be the role that they learn – and the cycle of negative manifestations of masculinity will be perpetrated.

The Human Science Research Council in South Africa is trying to encourage positive male involvement with children through the "Fatherhood Project". This is a travelling exhibition of photographs which depicts positive portraits of men

caring compassionately for children. Some of the photographs were taken by children who used disposable cameras to record interactions with their own fathers or the father-figures in their lives. Some of the children also wrote essays on the people who serve as fathers for them. At the end of 2004, the project will culminate with a National Fatherhood Convention in Durban, where organisations from around the country will come together to share ideas on other ways to encourage responsible fatherhood.

Maybe we need a similar initiative in Namibia – an exploration of fatherhood and what it means for children, and a national discussion of how men feel about themselves as fathers.

We hope that the debate about the role of mothers and fathers in the family will not end with the passage of the Children's Status Bill. Let this be a beginning of a larger debate on how to give Namibian children a better start in life, in the hope of continuing to build a less violent and more caring nation.

Dianne Hubbard

### BOX TO GO ALONGSIDE TEXT

If you are man enough to make a child,  
you should be man enough to take care of the child.

father interviewed in Sister magazine  
Vol 10, Nos. 5 & 6, Nov/Dec 1998

For more information, see Kerry Cullinan, "All our Fathers, Fair Lady, June 2004; "The Fatherhood Project", Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa at [www.hsrc.ac.za/fatherhood/](http://www.hsrc.ac.za/fatherhood/); and "Birth to Twenty" at [www.wits.ac.za/birtht020/media13.htm](http://www.wits.ac.za/birtht020/media13.htm).