

Gender dynamics and girls' perceptions of crime and violence

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Introduction

Numerous social stressors have required urgent attention in post-apartheid South Africa, including poverty, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and high levels of crime and violence.¹ South Africa's crime rate is said to be among the highest in the world and is a pressing issue for the government.² More alarmingly, South Africa's young people between the ages of 12 and 22 years are not only most at risk of being a victim of crime and violence, but are also most likely to be the perpetrators of crime and violence. Crime statistics (see textbox, *next page*) and research are primarily focused on males, because statistically they are most likely to be both the offenders and victims.³

While criminology discourse is filled with narratives of males as both the perpetrators and victims of violent crime, there is limited information available about females.⁴ Mainstream criminology literature, studies, findings and theories on female offending are often reduced to footnotes and generally place more emphasis on male offending.⁵

Jefthas and Artz provide three reasons for the under-representation of females in crime research. First, female offenders are usually convicted for petty property crimes and are rarely convicted for violent and aggressive crimes such as sexual assault and homicide. There is more focus on men because proportionally they commit more crimes and they are more likely to be the perpetrators of more serious crimes. Second, the so-called female crimes such as

shoplifting and prostitution are not seen as a threat to society and are therefore thought to require less attention. And last, female offenders are not seen as interesting to most researchers because they are considered less violent and not as disruptive as males.⁶

Female violence and involvement in crime has always been an unacknowledged societal problem. The research focus is, however, slowly moving towards females and crime since statistics reveal that females are now committing more violent crimes and are offending at much younger ages.⁷ For instance, data from the United States (US) on girls' involvement in crime shows an escalation in female offending. Data for 2009 from the Office of Juvenile Justice confirmed that young girls are the fastest growing cohort of offenders in the juvenile system.⁸ The escalation in female offending is growing twice as fast as that of their male counterparts.⁹

More specifically, official US statistics show that between 1991 and 2000, charges for female offences increased by some 28% for serious crimes such as murder and robbery.¹⁰ Similar changes were noted in Canada: male offending statistics remain relatively stable, while female offending for both serious and minor crimes has increased by an overwhelming 66%.¹¹ The increase in female incarceration in South Africa has not been as dramatic as that in the US or Canada; however, there was a marked increase in female inmates from 2,535 in March 1995¹² to 3,652 in March 2010.¹³



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FACTORS INFLUENCING YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN CRIME

- Exposure to crime and violence:** The ubiquity of crime and violence in the youths' communities was highlighted as a major factor influencing youth involvement in crime. Arguments and fights in the home and community were the norm for most offenders.
- Poverty and unemployment:** Young men claimed that they resort to criminal activity in order to provide for their families.
- Acquisition of material goods:** The offenders said they felt obliged to steal material goods such as expensive clothing, cellular phones and cars in order to impress their female peers.

Nationally, there is a dearth of specific information regarding young women's offending behaviours and conviction rates. Violent behaviour by girls can, however, be noted in some of the statistics provided by the 2002 National Youth Risk Behaviour survey, which revealed that one in four girls (24.5%) was part of a physical fight six

months prior to the survey. A surprising 4.6% of the girls also revealed that they had forced someone to have sex with them.¹⁴

Although these statistics do not necessarily prove that crime among girls is escalating, it does reveal that girls and young women are violent.

YOUTH VICTIMISATION AND OFFENDING IN SOUTH AFRICA

Youth victimisation

Young people in South Africa are at high risk of experiencing crime and are twice as likely as adults to experience violent crime. National mortality rates show that violence is the leading cause of death for young people (44.8%) aged 15–24 years.

Results from the 2007 National Crime Victimisation Survey (NCVS) found that young males aged 16–24 years are most susceptible to violent crime such as assault. The first National Youth Victimization Study (NYVS) conducted in 2005 by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention found that two out of five young people (41.4%) between the ages of 12 and 22 years have experienced any form of crime. One in two males (46.1%) and one in three females (36.1%) were victims of violent crime. Overall, the male youth cohort was at a higher risk of violent crime than females. Females were, however, at greater risk of sexual violence (15.9%). Results from the second sweep of the NYVS, termed the National Youth Lifestyle Study (NYLS), indicated that overall victimisation rates had decreased since 2005. Even though there is a marked reduction, youth victimisation rates remain significantly higher than that for adults. The most common crimes experienced by young people in South Africa were property crimes such as theft (16.4%) and house breaking (15.1%), followed by assault (14.4%).

Youth offending behaviour

Young people in South Africa are not only most at risk of being victimised, but are also the most likely perpetrators of crime and violence. The incarceration rates for young people are higher than expected. Youth comprise almost a third (29.9%) of the total population of sentenced offenders.

In June 2008 a total of 832 youths under the age of 18 and 11,292 between the ages of 18 and 21 years were incarcerated in South Africa. These figures increased in March 2011: of the youths incarcerated, 1,275 were younger than 18 years and 56,520 prisoners were aged 18–25 years. Half the population of youth offenders (50%) were incarcerated for committing violent and aggressive crimes.

The 2002 South African National Youth Risk Behaviour Survey found that 30.2% of all young participants had been in a physical fight, 16.7% had ever carried a weapon, 8.5% had access and carried a gun, and 6.4% had forced someone to have sex with them. The NYLS conducted in 2008 found that one in five youths had participated in a physical fight (28.7%) in the past year, 5% had ever carried a weapon and 2% were forced to have sex. Findings from both surveys confirmed that young people are engaging in violent behaviour.

Source: Burton P, Leoschut L & Bonora A, Walking the Tight Rope: Youth Resilience to Crime in South Africa. Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, Monograph Series No. 7, Cape Town, September 2009; Leoschut L & Burton P, How Rich the Rewards: Results of the 2005 National Youth Victimization Study. Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, Monograph Series No 1, Cape Town, May 2006; Dissel A, 'Youth, Crime and Criminal Justice in South Africa'. Presentation to the SAHRC Conference on Crime and Human Rights. Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Johannesburg, 2007; Department of Correctional Services, 'National Offender Population Profile in the Department of Correctional Services: Using statistical data up to 30 June 2008'. DCS, Pretoria; Medical Research Council, 'The First South African National Youth Risk Behaviour Survey', 2002. Available at <http://www.info.gov.za/otherdocs/2003/youth/part3.pdf> [accessed 2 July 2010]; The Department of Correctional Services, 'Department of Correctional Services Annual Report for 2009/10 Financial Year'. DCS, Pretoria; Institute for Security Studies, 'Crime Statistics: Report on the Crime Situation in South Africa', 2007. Available at <http://www.issafrica.org>; Donson H, 'A Profile of Fatal Injuries in South Africa 2008: Annual Report for South Africa Based on the National Injury Mortality Surveillance System (NIMSS)', MRC-Unisa Crime, Violence and Injury Lead Programme, November 2009.



The aim of our study is to add to the paucity of literature on crime and violence among young females in South Africa. The study is a spin-off of a previous study conducted by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP), which looked specifically at the male offender perspective on violent crimes. The 2007 National Youth Offending and Resilience Study explored the possible reasons why young offenders choose to use violence when they commit crimes (for more on the findings, see side columns).

The study found that gender was a crucial factor for youth offending behaviour. More specifically, meeting traditional gender norms was an important reason why young men commit crime. Males felt pressured to own certain material goods, such as modern designer clothing, expensive cars and cellular phones, which signified their social standing with other males and played a part in their romantic relationships. Ownership of such material goods and the ability to provide financially proved that these young men were successful and masculine.

The findings claim that young men who do not own material goods are often ignored by females. Young men in the study confessed that they were pressured to obtain these goods in illegitimate ways in order to impress both females and other males.

In this case, females did not directly influence the males to commit any crimes, but their expectations acted as covert pressures to engage in criminal activity. The young men also reported feeling pressure to prove their masculinity through violent behaviour patterns.

Based on the findings of the male offender study discussed above, a further study was initiated to explore young females' perceptions and experiences of crime, as well as their beliefs about female complicity in male crimes. This was necessary because, as mentioned, much of the research on crime in South Africa focuses on male offending behaviour, male perceptions and male experiences.¹⁵

The research used a qualitative study design to better understand young women's perceptions and experiences of crime in South Africa. Since qualitative research is more concerned with in-depth understanding as opposed to broader generalisations, nine focus groups were conducted in two areas in Johannesburg and three areas in Cape Town. The areas in which the studies were conducted are rife with social problems. These psychosocial issues were identified and discussed in the focus groups (see textbox below).

The study comprised 117 girls between the

- **Peer relationships:** The young offenders claimed that they felt pressured to impress their peers and to gain acceptance by their peer group.
- **Gender:** Societal expectations of traditional male gender norms were motivations for their criminal behaviour. They claimed that men were expected to be the providers, tough, aggressive, autonomous and sexually promiscuous.
- **Substance use and abuse:** The initial use of substances and sustaining their habits were found to be influencing factors for criminal behaviour.
- **Family variables:** The offenders' family environment was important. Lack of parental involvement and support, as well as parental rejection, were predictors for delinquent behaviour.

Source: Leoschut L & Bonora A, *Offender perspectives on violent crime*. In Burton P (ed), *Someone Stole My Smile: An Exploration into the Causes of Youth Violence in South Africa*. Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, Monograph Series No. 3, Cape Town, November 2007, pp 89-111.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN THE COMMUNITIES

The young women identified numerous social issues in their communities, including the following:

Crime and violence

'I can say we are not safe because there are many people who always steal our things and they come in our houses and break in and steal. The other thing is that there are many armed robberies. We are not safe at all.'

'We witness a lot of crimes here.'

Poverty and unemployment

'Daar is baie mense wat swaar kry. Nou sit hulle op die hoeke want hulle kan nie werk kry nie, dan sal hulle rob sodat hulle geld kan kry.' (There are many people who have it hard [struggle financially]. They sit on the corners because they can't find work, then they rob so that they can get money.)

Gangsterism

'In die aande dan voel ek nie veilig nie. Eerste kan ek laat buite gebly het maar nou moet ek vroeg in kom, want is, die gangsters is te mal.' (In the evenings I don't feel safe. Before I could stay out late, but now I have to come in early because the gangsters are too crazy.)



WHAT GIRLS LOOK FOR IN A BOYFRIEND

Physical attributes

- Six pack
- Muscles
- Sexy
- Handsome
- Bedroom eyes
- 'Nie vuil nie' (not dirty)

Material aspects

- 'Hy moet kan koop' (he must be able to buy things)
- 'Hy moet agter my kan kyk' (he must be able to look after me)
- Decent job
- Expensive clothes (name brands)
- Money
- Rich
- House
- Car
- Can provide cellphone and airtime
- Taxi drivers (as they are perceived to be able to provide financially)

SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN THE COMMUNITIES (continued)

Substance use

'Dwelmmisbruik is groot hier. Tik,¹⁶ die mense gebruik tik. Tik is die grootste. Almal doen dit, van klein laaities van nege, agt jaar oud tot groot mense van 40 op, ook 65 jaar oupas.' (Drug abuse is big here. People use tik. Tik is the biggest. Everyone does it, from small children of nine, eight years old, to adults of 40 years and up, even 65-year-old grandfathers).

Sexual abuse

'We are not free. You can't walk at night because you can be raped.'
'Fathers are in love with their children ... They have sex with them.'

Discrimination and xenophobia

'Here they ask you if you are Tsonga and then they call you names and say you must go back to your country. Even people who don't know you say you must go back.'
'Nigerians, jy weet mense van ander lande ... hulle bly nie eers hier nie dan kom hulle oorvat. Mens moet hulle sommer hard slaan.' (Nigerians, you know people from other countries ... they don't even live here but they come to take over. One should just beat them.)

ages of 12 and 19 years. It focused on female perceptions of ideal male attributes and roles within the context of dating relationships, and how this may contribute to female complicity in male crime. The study also looked at girls' perceptions of female crime.

Gender and crime

Gender is a complex social construct and describing it in detail is beyond the scope of this paper. It is, however, mentioned briefly here in order to place the subsequent findings in context.

Gender is a central aspect of an individual's identity, and children are taught the roles and expectations related to their gender. These gender roles and expectations are embedded in social environments, which hold certain ideals about what constitutes 'normal' behaviour for males and females. Conformity to gender norms is prized in society and individuals learn to value gender norms because of this. In contrast to traditional female roles that expect women to be nurturing, maternal, sensitive and emotionally driven, traditional male roles are often the complete opposite (see side column).

According to Schrock and Schwalbe, from a young age males are discouraged from involving themselves in any behaviour that is viewed as feminine.¹⁷ This is reflected in the hostility which confronts men who do

not fit in with the ideal notion of masculinity (such as homosexuals). Ideal masculinity requires males to exert control and resist being dominated by others. Toughness and aggression are seen as typical male behaviours, and in romantic relationships males are required to protect and take care of their female partners.

The traditional expectation for males to behave this way contributes to the high rate of violence exposure among South African children and youth. According to the 2005 National Youth Victimization Study, South African society is very violent with high violence exposure both in the home (21.8%) and in the community (68.6%).¹⁸

These figures indicate that children and youth are surrounded by violent role models and begin to view violence as normal. Young men begin to exert their masculinity in violent ways, and the cycle of violence is perpetuated in this way.

Masculinity is further equated with achievement and success, where males are often taught to do better than those around them and thereby exert their dominance over other males.¹⁹ Success is typically related to a male's income and his ability to acquire material goods, which is an indication of his peer social standing, success and, ultimately, his masculinity.

In addition, the acquisition of material goods and a male's ability to provide are



important in relation to male and female romantic relationships. This has consequences for males in economically deprived communities, who often have to seek out alternative means of meeting these expectations in order to successfully prove their masculinity. The pressure that these expectations create can influence young men to take part in criminal activities.

Apart from financial benefits, men may use crime to exert their masculinity by instilling fear in others, gaining respect and showing fearlessness.²⁰

The following sections focus on female perspectives on masculinity through the attributes they seek in romantic partners, their expectations of males in relationships, as well as the potential role that females play in influencing male crimes.

Attributes young females seek in male partners

■ **'He must be a chick-magnet'**

The females who took part in the focus groups listed several physical, material and personal attributes that they look for in a male as a potential romantic partner. In terms of physical appearance, the man should be handsome, well-built and a 'chick magnet'.

Participants also mentioned that they prefer men with 'mooi tande' (nice teeth) and 'goue tande' (gold teeth). A man needs to 'dress to impress' and should be someone who is worthy of being seen with ('Hy moet reg lyk om in die pad te loop').

■ **'Girls look for what a guy can give to you'**

Being worthy of being seen with is linked to the material aspects that females are drawn to, such as expensive clothing ('He must wear name brands like Billabong and Quicksilver'). A decent job, money ('being rich') and having a house were important factors that young women look for in a man. In short, the man must be able to provide for his girlfriend.

'Hy moet agter my kan kyk.' (He must be able to take care of me.)

'Hy moet kan koop.' (He must be able to buy things.)

Material goods reflect a male's social standing and are desirable because they signify his ability to provide for his female partner. The importance of having material possessions was also highlighted in the National Youth Offending and Resilience Study.²¹

The male offenders in that study indicated that the money they obtained from criminal activities was spent on possessions such as designer clothing, expensive cars and modern cellular phones. Little mention was made of basic necessities such as food, which would be important in the poverty conditions in which they live.

This underscores the importance placed on materialism and status by both male and female youths in South Africa – a focus which undoubtedly exerts pressure on young males to conform to traditional gender norms.

■ **'You can't be with someone who doesn't respect you'**

Personal attributes that young females look for include a caring, impressive, responsible, kind and charming man. Respect was an important quality: the participants mentioned that the man must be respectful to women and to his parents, and must be respected by others.

Being respected by others was a key finding in Leoschut and Bonora's study on young male offenders.²² The males in that study reported that respect could be gained by instilling fear in others. While they acknowledged that respect could be gained in more positive ways, they believed that criminal and violent behaviour was an easier and more convincing way of doing so. Being feared and respected by those around them is also seen as a reflection of young males' ability to protect their female partners – this is a key feature of traditional male roles and is highly valued by the females in the current study.

Ultimately, the female participants place great value on a partner's popularity and status. Some females were impressed by a

Personal qualities

- Respectful to females
- Respectful to parents
- Must be respected by others
- Popular
- Status
- Impressive
- Caring
- Charming
- Kind
- Responsible
- Must monitor you and look out for you
- Educated
- Guys who bunk school and leave school
- Does not do drugs
- Does not demand sex



FEATURES OF TRADITIONAL MASCULINITY

- **Productive/ breadwinner (provider)**
- **Aggressive/ tough/ fighting spirit/ fearless/strong (protector)**
- **Not expressing fear, pain or emotions**
- **Sexually promiscuous**
- **See women as sexual objects**
- **Autonomous/self-reliant**
- **Capacity to exert control/be dominant**

'bad boy who bunks school and leaves school', while others perceived graduating high school to be a desirable attribute. A male who 'monitors you and looks out for you' was also seen as attractive, further highlighting the traditional male role of being a provider and protector.

Not doing drugs and not 'forcing for sex' were important personal qualities. While this may be seen by many as a given, the fact that the girls mentioned these as specific attributes speaks to the extent of the problem of drug abuse and sexual abuse in their communities.

Males: The provider and protector?

The attributes that females in the study seek in male partners are directly linked to the roles that males are expected to fulfil within these relationships. The physical, material and personal qualities that are desired by females often represent traits that are required for a male to successfully fulfil the ideal notion of what it means to be a man in society. For example, having money and being able to buy things emerged as material attributes that females looked for in a partner, and these attributes are directly linked to the expectation that a male needs to provide adequately for his female partner within a relationship.

The participants mentioned that in a romantic relationship males must provide females with gifts and money (specifically for clothes and for getting their hair done) as well as cellular phones and airtime. A man should 'spoil her when she wants something'. One female said that a man must be able to support his partner in every way, including helping her solve problems, reassuring her, supporting their baby as well as supporting her financially.

These expectations are further highlighted in the following quote: 'He must do anything, like if she wants him to kill someone then he must do it.'

This attitude captures the role that certain expectations can play when it comes to crime in South Africa. The notion is that a young man must do whatever it takes if he wants to ensure the success of his romantic

relationship. He must do whatever is asked of him, even if this means killing someone, in order to prove his love and commitment to his partner.

Providing material possessions and money is further seen as a reflection of love and satisfaction in a relationship.

'He must provide gifts or he doesn't love you.'

'He has to buy gifts to make her happy.'

Financial support and material goods, on the one hand, are a primary means for men to satisfy women in a relationship. On the other hand, men give money and gifts to girlfriends 'because of something they want from you'. The implication is that men provide money and gifts not only to please their girlfriends but also to create opportunities to engage in sexual interactions.

These findings point to the reciprocal nature of romantic relationships as well as the transactional character of these relationships among the youth.

Besides providing material goods, being able to take care of and protect his partner is another traditional notion of the masculine ideal which females in the study subscribed to.

'Sê maar nou ons loop in die pad en 'n ander outjie skree vir my, dan moet hy die ou kan ruk.' (Say we are walking in the street and another guy calls out to me, then he must be able to rough the guy up.)

The findings thus far indicate that South African youth continue to adhere to traditional gender roles and norms. The current study shows that females' expectations in relationships are closely tied to traditional views of masculinity, with the male being the provider and protector. When a male finds himself in circumstances where he cannot fulfil this traditional role, his masculinity is threatened. Males may therefore resort to criminal activity in order to ensure that their masculinity is maintained, not only in the eyes of females but also among their male peers.



Female complicity in males' criminal activity

A vignette was used to begin a conversation about the reasons why males commit crimes, as well as the possible role that females play in this. The vignette tells the story of a 19-year-old young man who was arrested and put in jail because he was caught breaking into homes and stealing. When he was in jail he spoke to a social worker and told her that the reason he committed the crimes was because of his girlfriend. The female study participants were then asked to give some reasons why the young man would make such a comment. The following themes were identified:

■ Provider in difficult circumstances

The first explanation for why males may commit crimes is associated with the traditional role of men as providers, who must take care of their girlfriends and provide for them financially. Participants indicated that this may be due to the girlfriend's family living in poverty or other home circumstances such as substance abuse.

'Maybe het sy meisie se familie swaar gekry.' (Maybe his girlfriend's family had it hard [struggled financially].)

'Maybe her parents are drinking so he provides for her.'

Participants also said that the girlfriend may be unemployed or that the young man resorted to crime to support their baby.

■ Satisfying the romantic partner

Satisfying a romantic partner in a relationship involves showing affection; and, according to the participants, a sign of affection in a relationship is a male's ability to provide a romantic partner with material possessions and money. In a society where ever-increasing importance is placed on materialism and love is equated with material possessions and money, a man seeks to impress his girlfriend and satisfy her expectations in this way ('Boys do bad things to impress girls'). A male's ability to provide material possessions in a romantic relationship ensures that his girlfriend is content and that she will not leave him for another man.

'He did this to show her in so many ways that he loves her.'

'I think he was doing this because he didn't want to lose his girlfriend and maybe by stealing he can satisfy his girlfriend.'

'Women like money and beautiful things.'

■ Female manipulation and threats

This theme highlights the way in which females pressure males to do things, such as commit crimes. Participants mentioned that women often use men for money and make demands on them, which results in males feeling pressured to meet those demands.

Suggestions were made that the girlfriend in the vignette threatened to break up with him if he did not meet her expectations, or is manipulative and undermines his self-esteem to get him to do what she wants. Threats and manipulation are a direct way in which females can get males to do something they may not want to do themselves.

'She wanted more things so he decided to steal to make her happy.'

'Maybe his girlfriend wanted expensive things and she will dump him.'

■ Substance abuse

The need to sustain either or both partners' drug habits emerged as a driver of crime committed by males.

'He needed drugs money to feel high together.'

'Sy sê vir hom hy moet goed gaan steel vir drugs.' (She tells him he must go steal things for drugs.)

'Som mense gaan steel goete né dan verkoop hulle dit vir drugs.' (Some people steal things then they sell it for drugs.)

Males may also commit crimes if they owe their drug dealers money and feel desperate. They may also deal in drugs in order to make money.

In a society where ever-increasing importance is placed on materialism and love is equated with material possessions and money, a man seeks to impress his girlfriend and satisfy her expectations in this way ('Boys do bad things to impress girls').



There is enormous fear that a young man's masculinity may be brought into question both by his partner and his male peers if he does not meet his girlfriend's expectations.

Substance abuse is a serious concern in South Africa, with high levels of alcohol and drug abuse reported in many communities. Alcohol is still the most commonly abused substance among patients who seek specialist treatment for addictions across the country. Other substances that are abused include marijuana, crystal methamphetamine and mandrax.²³

Substance abuse can significantly impact the rate of crime and violence in communities, with high substance abuse being linked to the ever-present threat of violence. High rates of substance abuse also reflect a deep-seated culture of violence, especially in communities that are tackling other social problems, such as income disparity. In other words, substance abuse may promote criminality, and vice versa, with other socioeconomic factors contributing to the extent and nature of the violence.²⁴

■ **Indicator of dominance over other males**

Apart from the reasons associated with romantic relationships, males also compete against each other and may view the acquisition of material possessions as a means of proving their masculinity and worth in the community. Traditional gender roles equate masculinity with achievement and success. This encourages males to do better than those around them, or at least to stay on par with other males in the community who are seen as having a lifestyle that earns them both male and female respect.²⁵

'There is peer pressure to fit in with other men.'

The participants were asked to relate the vignette to their own communities. Many participants thought that females in their communities are 'too demanding' in terms of their expectations and this 'puts pressure on them [males]'. The pressure and fear of losing his partner by not meeting her expectations means that young men in economically deprived communities may resort to illegal means to ensure that this does not happen. There is enormous fear that a young man's masculinity may be brought into question both by his partner

and his male peers if he does not meet his girlfriend's expectations.

Social involvement with peers becomes very important during adolescence. This is the developmental period when young people move away from parental attachments and seek out bonds with people in their social circle. Peer relationships and the desire to fit in with peers leads adolescents to engage in risky behaviour by conforming to negative peer norms.²⁶ Peer pressure can also result in criminal and deviant behaviour due to the higher likelihood of seeking validation from others – even if this is at the expense of one's own autonomy – in order to bolster one's social status and relationships.²⁷

For young men, proving themselves to male peers earns them acceptance in the peer group and a higher social standing in relation to other males, and this makes them more desirable to their female peers.

More direct female involvement in male crimes also emerged in the study, with young females in the focus groups saying that they have seen girls in their communities who encourage their boyfriends to commit crimes, and some even act as direct accomplices to crimes.

'Yes, I've seen it because you see them living together but they are not working and they don't have money but they still stay together. He steals because they have a child and that child needs food and everything.'

'Daar by ons se kante breek die meisie saam hom in. Ja, hulle gebruik die meisie om in te klim en goete aan te gee.' (There on our side the girl breaks in with him. Yes, they use the girlfriend to climb in and to pass the things.)

Punishment for crimes

The findings indicate that male and female youths in South Africa conform to traditional gender roles and norms. These traditional views are further reflected in the way in which the participants perceive punishment for crimes. A debate ensued when the study participants were asked



whether males and females should receive the same punishment for crimes.

While most females believed that males and females should be treated equally before the law, a fair number believed that females should not be treated as harshly as males. One of the arguments for this was that *'women are not strong like men'* and that *'women get angry'* and their crimes are often committed as *'revenge'*.

These findings depict the traditional views of females as physically weaker and emotionally driven, while men are physically and emotionally stronger and, as a result, their crimes are viewed as more severe. The notion that women are sensitive and commit crimes because they are not able to control their emotions reflects the typical gendered perceptions in the participants' cultural and social milieu, as well as in the broader society. The participants who tended to be more sympathetic to crimes committed by females claimed that females *'can die in jail'* and that they should not be charged the same as males for rape because *'men can't fall pregnant'*. Overall, far more excuses were given for females.

'Maybe she is just sick in her mind.'

'Miskien het sy haar redes.' (Maybe she has her reasons.)

'Is die tik wat hulle so maak.' (It's the tik that makes them like that.)

'Maybe she murders by accident or maybe it is self-defence.'

'Miskien het sy nou kinders wat buitekant is en sy het nou niemand om na hulle te kyk nie. Ek sal 'n jaar minder gegee het.' (Maybe she has children outside [jail] and she has nobody to look after them. I would give her one year less [of her sentence].)

'If she has a valid excuse.'

These perceptions are not far from the views expressed by those who decide the fate of women who commit crimes. International studies have shown that

females receive substantially lighter sentences compared to males in the criminal justice system.²⁸ Findings suggest that females are 12–23% less likely than males to receive prison time, and when they do they receive sentences that average two to three years less than males who commit the same crimes.²⁹

Two theoretical viewpoints are suggested to explain this phenomenon. First, the chivalry thesis, which dates back to the 1970s, is embedded in traditional views of females as childlike and not fully responsible for their criminal behaviour. Females are also generally seen as more 'treatable' of the two genders; the perception is that female criminals simply need to be placed back on the right path.³⁰ Men are portrayed as wanting to minimise the pain and suffering of women. In the criminal justice system this plays out with preferential treatment being given to females who commit crimes.³¹

The second theory, the focal concerns thesis, brings to light the dynamics of the decision-making process in criminal sentencing, and suggests that lesser punishment for females is a by-product of human error because judges are not able to spend enough time on a case and receive incomplete information about the case.³² As a result, judges may be influenced by stereotypes and personal biases (they may take into consideration the gender, age, personal circumstances, marital status or occupation of the perpetrator), which may result in females being given lesser sentences. Both theories highlight the impact that traditional gender norms have at all levels of society.

In the current study, however, many participants did not agree with these traditional views and thought that women who rape men should be treated the same as male rapists (*'... because a girl can give a man HIV'*), that women who kill should be treated the same as a male murderer because *'crime is crime'*, and that *'if women want to be equal to men, they must take the same consequences as men'*.

'She must get the same punishment because she knows what is right and wrong.'

The notion that women are sensitive and commit crimes because they are not able to control their emotions reflects the typical gendered perceptions in the participants' cultural and social milieu, as well as in the broader society.



The findings indicate that there is a need to challenge and renegotiate traditional male and female roles among young South Africans.

We also need to encourage different value systems that move away from materialism and focus instead on educational and other achievements, such as sports.

'Ek moet responsibility vat vir my actions.' (I must take responsibility for my actions.)

These perceptions are a more modern take on gender and speak to issues around gender equality. The divergent perceptions highlight how females often grow up with mixed messages from society: on the one hand they are encouraged to be empowered, independent, strong and equal to men, and on the other they are expected to be demure, polite and taken care of by their male partners.³³

Conclusion and recommendations

Gender and crime were explored in the focus groups to gauge females' perceptions around gender roles, specifically masculinity and female complicity in the criminal behaviour of males. The findings of this study, together with findings from previous research with males, indicate that many South African youths still subscribe to traditional gender norms. Females in the study expected males to take on the role of provider and protector in romantic relationships – a central feature of traditional masculinity. In addition, young females tended to equate affection and love with the material possessions that a man could provide them in a relationship. These expectations can put pressure on males in economically deprived communities to seek out alternative means of satisfying their expected roles and to prove their manhood, which may include resorting to criminal activity.

It is important to clarify that the findings do not suggest that females are the sole contributors to criminal activity by young men in South Africa. This research merely highlights the way in which traditional gender norms and the socialisation of children and youth in our society impact on youth decisions – which can include crime.

As crime is a central issue in South Africa, it is imperative that factors influencing crime are understood. This exploratory study offers a different perspective in understanding factors that contribute to crime in South Africa, specifically traditional gender roles. The findings indicate that there is a need to

challenge and renegotiate traditional male and female roles among young South Africans. We also need to encourage different value systems that move away from materialism and focus instead on educational and other achievements, such as sports. These interventions need to be pitched at multiple levels, including government, schools and parents or caregivers. This is particularly relevant as education, positive role models, neighbourhood factors (such as lowered violence exposure) and intolerance towards violence and antisocial behaviour have been found to be resilience factors for youth.³⁴

The government should work with educational institutions by providing financial assistance for the creation of workshops that equip youths with life skills and platforms to discuss issues that affect their lives, as well as by providing opportunities for youths to engage in meaningful after-school and holiday activities. Moreover, support structures and public awareness campaigns need to be made available for youths affected by substance abuse, gangsterism, discrimination, and physical and sexual abuse. This would minimise youth criminal involvement, improve youths' coping strategies, for example, when it comes to dealing with peer pressure, and lead to better life choices being made in general.

Owing to the amount of time young people spend at school, educational institutions can play a major role in altering young people's values, beliefs and attitudes. More engagement by school governing bodies, principals and teachers is therefore needed to impact the lives of young people. Positive role models in this environment can significantly influence youth decision-making, as well as their values and attitudes.

As the primary socialising agents in children's lives, parents and caregivers play a vital role in stressing the importance of education, instilling positive values and monitoring their children effectively.

All three role players – government, educational institutions and parents/caregivers – can make a positive contribution in the lives of young South Africans.



ENDNOTES

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CJCP mission

The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) is dedicated to developing, informing and promoting innovative evidence-based crime prevention focused on the groups identified as being vulnerable to victimisation or offending. The CJCP does this by:

- conducting rigorous research into issues of relevance to policy makers, public service officials, development partners and crime prevention practitioners;
- facilitating the implementation of crime prevention projects;
- providing sector-specific and accredited training in crime prevention for policy makers, public sector officials and non-governmental organisation practitioners; and
- disseminating the results of its research and lessons learned to relevant audiences.

About this paper

This paper outlines the preliminary findings of a research study conducted by the CJCP, which focuses on female perceptions of, and possible complicity in, male criminal activity.

The findings suggest that females subscribe to traditional gender views and expect males to be the provider and protector in relationships, a central feature of hegemonic (or ideal) masculinity. A previous study conducted by the CJCP on males found that there was a major focus on acquiring material goods. The current study found that females also place great value on material possessions and view these as a symbol of love and affection in a relationship. This

expectation can pressure males in economically deprived communities to acquire goods in illegitimate ways, just to ensure that their girlfriends do not leave them.

This paper explores females' expectations and perceptions of male roles and discusses how these beliefs shape romantic encounters among adolescents in South Africa. The traditional gender views and values held by many girls in the study indicate that the socialisation of children and youth in South Africa can impact on the country's crime situation.

A monograph will be published soon, which discusses the findings in more detail.



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