

## Matilda Gasela

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**In response to the ever rising rates of child rape and murder in the province and in South Africa as a whole, the government has decided to re-introduce sexual offences courts in the country.**

**These are specialised courts dealing exclusively with sexual offences. Apart from speeding up the prosecution of such crimes, they are also designed in a manner that makes them 'friendly' to victims by, among others, enabling a victim to testify without coming face to face with their molester thereby sparing them the trauma of reliving their ordeal.**

**One such court was recently opened in Bethlehem in the eastern Free State. In an interview with The Weekly's Neo Mvubu, the head of the department of social development, Matilda Gasela, explores the issues surrounding the abuse and rape of young children and women.**

**The rape and murder of children continues unabated despite attempts by the government and the private sector to reduce the cases. What do you think has gone wrong with our society and is there anything that can be done about it?**

The issue of child murders is not an issue that can be tackled by one particular person – it is a societal problem. We have really lost direction as a nation. When you look back at the olden days, there was a well-defined and active family unit. A child belonged to and was raised by the community in which she/he lives. An adult was viewed as your mother and children would show respect to older people. We have really lost that.

The disintegration of the family unit is what caused these social ills of today. Many of the cases of abuse involve relatives and people who are known to the victim. We need to emphasise the role of elderly people in re-instilling the values that many of us grew up with. We need parents to be pro-active and be responsible for their children. They also need to strengthen parenting skills.

**Why do victims of abuse often keep quiet about the challenges they face on a daily basis? Surely the scourge of abuse and rape of children could be lessened if women spoke up. Why are they quiet about the issues that affect them?**

People often keep quiet when the perpetrator is known to the family. The economic dependence in many of South African homes is a challenge that perpetuates the cycle of abuse and if we empower women, we will save children from rape and abuse and we will save women from suffering in silence. We as social development help women establish co-operatives.

This programme would help women break out of the cycle of abuse and stop their dependence on their violators. We also have a moral regeneration programme that helps integrate families and encourages women to talk about their problems.

**There are many cases opened at police stations of men who rape, beat and kill children. Some of them are failing to pay maintenance for their children. Would you say our men are failing us?**

I think we must shy away from painting all men with the same brush. We do have good men out there who take responsibility for their children. As social development, we have a relationship with the department of justice, and we urge women to report cases of neglect and men who do not pay maintenance.

This problem ultimately affects children and how they are provided for. So, partnerships with all sectors of society do help in dealing with issues of this nature. We have women who open charges only to drop them after resolving matters with their men. What we want is for the courts to act as custodians of these cases once they have been dropped.



**The isolation of men in women issues has created a problem, with men more often than not feeling sidelined from issues of women empowerment. They don't understand and thus the activity becomes futile. What do you think should be done?**

The minute we speak about women empowerment and don't include men, we lose the plot. We need to include men in initiatives of women empowerment and show them the type of challenges that we are going through. We have NGOs like Sonke Gender Justice, organisations that help us bridge the gap.

You must remember that this is not the role of government alone – we need all sectors of society, including the community, to discuss issues of women empowerment, abuse, rape and other issues that still need to be dealt with.

**Are these organisations really effective in ensuring that matters of social development are addressed? Can we be content with efforts made by the private sector to reach the community and inform them of their rights?**

It is not possible for NGOs to establish themselves and get support immediately.

This is an ongoing struggle that needs support from both the public and private sectors. If the initiatives of our NGOs help change the lives of even five people, then we will have done our task. What we want are ambassadors of change, people who are able to gain from our NGOs and educate their communities with what they have learned.

The only challenge faced by these organisations is lack of financial support, which makes it difficult for them to keep operating. Social development does play its part in funding some of these organisations but at times the challenge is human resources and physical resources.

We also need faith-based organisations to become custodians of morality, because they are able to relate with people on the ground. They need to partner with private-sector companies through their social responsibility programmes and get the funding they need to reach the communities.

**How many social workers do you have and are they enough to handle the great number of cases currently being worked on by the department? The issues pertaining to children and women are definitely not dropping, so is the department able to handle the cases, present and future?**

We currently have 454 social workers in the department but we need at least 1 000 to deal with the number of cases in our database.

The number again is dependent on the budget allocation that we get from treasury and which treasury gets from the national treasury. The employment of social workers is a priority but we also need to house them, so the issue of infrastructure becomes a problem.

We also need to offer them the skills they need to do the trade, so we need supervisors. This is a task that can be done progressively. Government is not the only solution to this problem; we and our NPOs to complement each another.

**Have you already allocated social workers to the sexual offences court in Bethlehem? And the idea of separating the courts from the normal courts, will it secure the safety of the children despite the fact that the perpetrator will still be released from prison?**

The sexual offences courts are a critical part of the solution to deal with abuse of women and children.

The police do not work in isolation. They call us when they come across volatile cases and we together with the department of justice and correctional service and the SAPS ensure that our children are kept safe. We have what we call the justice and crime prevention cluster which consists of the departments I have mentioned, together with home affairs, the department of health and the National Prosecuting Authority.

We also have a secure centre in Thabo Mofutsanyana where we provide underage victims, pending the outcome of the trial, with counselling. If I should give an example, there was a father who killed his wife in front of their minor children. The kids currently live at Tshireletsong while their father is behind bars. We try to keep them in contact with each other through letters.

The children are seven and 12 years old and we take them to him in prison and try to work on the element of forgiveness. The issue of rehabilitation and re-integration into society then becomes tangible with results that can be seen. This is not easy but it helps the victim receive the perpetrator into society.

**Two elderly people burnt to death in a privately owned old age home in Heidedal . . . an inquest was opened and the police still have to determine the cause of the fire. What we want to know is the role social development plays in a situation where a private home which is supposed to protect the elderly now becomes a threat to their lives?**As social development, before we register any old age home, we consider the norms and standards that we judge these homes by.

We consider the safety, the staff, the cleanliness and if it is habitable before we even register it. If there are reports of death or neglect, we investigate them and consider the next step. We have a right to intervene and ultimately consider de-registering the place.