

# **Embizweni: A project for men, by men.**

**An informal interview by W. Elliott. 2003**

The Embizweni project originated in Kyelitsha, and has spread to several other areas. It is focused on gender training and assisting men come to terms with the changing gender roles of modern society, as well as encouraging men to be involved with their families in constructive and non-violent ways. I interviewed two of its members, Dumisani Nqina and Xolile Speelman, and asked them what, in their personal experience working with significant numbers of men, the major issues and themes facing men were.

## **Unemployment**

Men have been socialised to be breadwinners and providers. Unemployment hurts and disempower has them at a deep personal level, since most men have not learnt to gain a sense of identity or personal value in staying at home and doing housework and primary parenting . Unable to find work, and often having no realistic hope of finding any, men spend many long hours escaping into alcoholism and drug addiction. This situation is often exacerbated when a female partner has been able to find work, increasing the man's feeling of powerlessness and jealousy.

## **Abusing maintenance payment for children**

Men often feel "taken for a ride" by greedy women. They have frequently observed that the money paid to them for children, is often not spent on the children but rather on themselves. This includes clothes and drinking parties amongst their friends. Men have also found that women they are married to are resentful towards their husbands when they pay maintenance to support children outside of wedlock. These women appear to have no sympathy for the other women, focusing only the needs of her own children. This situation is made worse when the woman often brings her own child out of wedlock into the marriage, but expects the husband to support this child, while claiming maintenance from the father of the child as well.

There is also a perception that women often used children as a source of income, setting out to become pregnant in order to be able to claim maintenance at a later stage. Men have experienced women who say they are taking contraceptives, when in fact they are not, tricking them into paternity.

## **Power relations**

Men, feeling disempowered by unemployment and having no personal income,

attempt to reassert their power by using physical strength and violence. Men are often unaware of laws about domestic violence, and are often blind to the legal and moral implications of their attempts to cling to power. There appeared to be very few organisations out there working directly with men. In those cases where women are violent perpetrators, men have no knowledge about how to go about securing protection orders. Men at times feel economically and financially abused by women who squander hard-earned money.

### **HIV Aids**

Men are not ready to understand a their HIV status. Women are often more educated at and exposed to HIV testing due to their clinic visits during pregnancies and check-ups. When issues of condoms are raised, issues of trust surface as well. The question starts been asked about why condoms are necessary. Who is sleeping with whom? Why are they necessary?

### **Distant fathers**

Many young men feel they have had no positive guidance from fathers or other role-models. Many fathers were are authoritarian and distant. Very little positive parenting to place in the home.

### **Men in prison**

Men, unable to find work, commonly turn to crime to support themselves and their families. When men come out of prison, there is little or no support from government or any other programmes to assist them to readjust to society, or find alternative forms of income.

### **Women using sex**

It is common knowledge that men are sometimes accused falsely of rape, when women use these rape accusations to get rid of or spite an unwanted man. It appears that all that is necessary to get a rape conviction, is to have the man's sperm detected inside the woman. Women have been known to have unforced sex with a man, and then go and accuse the man of rape, resulting in him being sent to prison. Men once again do not have adequate knowledge about sexual laws and what their own rights are.

Women also trade sexual favours for alcohol. It is known as "Some drink, Some Slaap" It is not uncommon for women to point at their genitals and taunt men by saying "This is only for men who work" .

## **Culture of silence**

While these two men could speak of these things freely, they reported that men generally could not, regarding these struggles as very personal and "confidential". Only once men attended workshops did they learn to speak of their private pain, fears and struggles.