

ESSAY

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## **Building on a Legacy of Social Justice Activism**

*Enlisting Men as Gender  
Justice Activists in South Africa*

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Burglar bars and security gates dot the architectural landscape of the new South Africa. Armed guard signs are visible on most suburban houses, while placards attached to razor wire–topped walls feature the bared fangs of multi-lingual attack dogs who deter potential burglars in English, Afrikaans, and Xhosa with a reminder, “I am on guard”. Yet these manifestations of postapartheid South Africa’s obsession with crime do nothing to deter one of the most frequently committed criminal acts—domestic violence. Despite South Africa’s new progressive constitution guaranteeing the promotion and protection of women’s rights through the Commission on Gender Equality, violence against women is endemic. One in three South African women are victims of sexual assault, a statistic made more frightening by the high incidence of HIV infection. Domestic violence takes a similarly heavy toll, with women assaulted across all class and racial categories at alarming levels.

Recent reports in the international media have drawn attention to the pervasiveness of violence against women in South Africa. Less well known, however, are the innovative efforts emerging across the country that work to prevent this violence. Drawing on the rich tradition of community organizing that succeeded in toppling the apartheid regime, these initiatives attempt to frame violence against women as a male problem and enlist men as activists in preventing it.

Farid Esack (personal communication, February 2000), commissioner of the Commission on Gender Equality in the Western Cape and a prominent Muslim theologian, offers an analysis shared among the loose community of male “gender justice” activists. “There isn’t a problem of women”, he says

with the same intense passion that characterized his leadership in the antiapartheid struggle.

In the same way that people in the apartheid years spoke of a black problem and there wasn't a black problem. There was a white problem. . . . Whites had the problem. And so there isn't a women's problem. Men are sitting with the problem. Of course it becomes a women's problem. . . . Women are quite literally the victims of all of this in the multifarious, insidious, all pervasive forms of violence against women. So women do end up with problems. But women aren't the problem. If we do not address issues of men and men's violence against women, and machismo and male insecurity and the question of masculinities as opposed to a very oppressive, homogenous understanding of a man, we will really be sitting with problems eternally.

As the youngest of six sons raised by a single mother who endured three violent relationships before the heavy toll of working long hours from "don't see to don't see" each day caused her an early death, Farid is intimately familiar with the problems caused by the rigid models of masculinity he describes. His commitment to developing alternative models grows directly out of his experience in a home permeated by violence and its aftermath. Although he knows many men share his experiences, Farid is under no illusions that it will be easy to engage men as proponents of change. Few men, he argues, are able to gain a vantage point that allows them to see that violence against women inhibits and restricts their own lives. Unlike during the antiapartheid struggle, he says, when people could see very real personal investments in participating in the process of change, the personal motivation to participate in ending domestic violence and sexual assault is less apparent for most men. Instructive precedents of men taking action to create healthy relationships are, not surprisingly, hard to find, says Farid:

You can't have a group of men developing male values along the lines of the Promise Keepers where men are set up as the eternal protectors of perpetually vulnerable women steeped in victimhood. Until we enable people to see alternative visions and create alternative role model, it's going to be very difficult to sell this to men. We need to find ways of making gender justice attractive to men.

Also based in Cape Town, the Five in Six Project embodies this exciting vision of engaging men. Their choice of name reflects their program philosophy. Five in Six is named for the five men out of six who some calculations suggest are not violent with their partners. Charles Maisel, the group's founder, has received some criticism for using statistics many see as overly optimistic. Nevertheless, he believes most men are opposed to violence against women and can play a crucial role in organizing to end the violence. However, he argues that men are unlikely to see a role for themselves in

ending violence against women when they are identified primarily as potential perpetrators or made to feel guilty. He contends that men can be engaged as activists because they have both a crucial role to play in ending violence and a very real personal investment in doing so.

Maisel is a young father who's contagious optimism in the face of a daunting task reflects his commitment to his son and to the program's remarkable success in recruiting men as gender justice activists. Maisel followed an unlikely trajectory to his current work. His investment in creating new models of masculinity stems in part from his experiences in the South African Army. Conscripted during the politically turbulent late 1980s, Maisel began to grapple with the insidious complexities of male violence while serving as a counselor to agitated or despondent soldiers returning from tours of duty in the combat zones of the townships and the covert war fought in Angola. He saw that the brutal military indoctrination of conscripts achieved its dual goals of dehumanizing the enemy, most often black South Africans, and transforming young men into violent accomplices of the apartheid state at a tremendous cost. The young soldiers manning apartheid's armored vehicles, firing tear gas and birdshot into protest crowds, had become transformed into callous, self-destructive, and regimented men out of touch with their own humanity. Charles began to recognize in this very transparent military indoctrination a parallel experience with similarly destructive consequences—the pervasive gender socialization that routinely transforms boys into men willing to dehumanize women, use violence, and disconnect from their humanity.

Consistent with their vision of engaging men as part of the solution by offering men both an opportunity to end the violence and to reconnect with their own humanity, the Five in Six Project launched a campaign late last year that enlists men as “everyday heroes” uniquely situated to end violence against women. In its new campaign, Five in Six attempts to educate men about the price all men pay when some are violent and articulate their vision of men as vital and willing allies in the struggle to end violence against women. Over the past eight months, Five in Six has saturated the popular media—magazines, newspapers—with posters that encourage readers to nominate a man they view as an everyday hero. Their poster reads,

Five in six men want to stop domestic violence. That's an overwhelming majority. . . . We're asking you to give [them] a decisive thumbs up in the form of a poem or letter, the most inspiring to be published in the Cape Argus. Go on give that man in your life exactly what he deserves. Recognition.

From posters like these, some posted in supermarkets and corner stores, Five in Six has received 50,000 everyday hero nominations. Most often written by women—girlfriends, wives, daughters and sisters—but also by sons and

brothers, and usually handwritten on notebook paper, these thousands of pages bear testimony to men who in their everyday lives are seen as allies in the struggle to create a nonviolent South Africa.

Five in Six has begun what promises to be an unprecedented organizing campaign with the men nominated in these touching letters. Five in Six staff and volunteers have written letters congratulating each everyday hero and have visited those nominees who live in or near Cape Town. They traveled to shantytowns characterized by startling poverty, to the townships of the Cape Flats that were the sites of pitched battles against soldiers and police of the white regime throughout the 1980s, and to astonishingly wealthy, and still predominantly white, suburbs. There they encouraged men to organize neighborhood-based groups to whom they are in the process of providing training with the hope that each of these groups will engage in activism to create communities that guarantee safety and justice for women and girls. As impressive as their successes have been, Charles Maisel and his colleagues at Five in Six see their recent efforts as just the beginning of things to come. By the end of this year, they hope to have received nominations for one million men seen in their communities as everyday heroes in the struggle to end male violence.

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