

*A Magnifying Glass and A Fine-Tooth Comb: Understanding Girls' and Young Women's Sexual Vulnerability*, by Mzikazi Nduna. Pretoria: CSA&G Press, Centre for Sexualities, AIDS and Gender, University of Pretoria, 2020.

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While reading this monograph, one could not help but be taken back to relive experiences as a young woman living in different communities across South Africa. From the outset, the author stirs up memories of adolescent questions and confusions around whether one had free will, through which one made decisions and choices that seemed, almost always, to backfire.

The “magnifying glass” revealed contradictions, illusions, and double standards in my adolescent existence, while the “fine-tooth comb” exposed confusion, denial, and sweeping dirt under the carpet, to the detriment of an adolescent girl and young woman trying to find her way in life. It is hard not to personalise the review of this monograph because it articulates, in too familiar terms, the lived realities of an adolescent girl transitioning into adulthood, particularly in Southern Africa.

Too familiar are the contradictions in the entrenched beliefs of sexual self-preservation and deferred gratification in consumerism, which carry the promise of a good life achievable through education and a free enterprise capitalist system. Omitted in the inculcation of these beliefs are the lived realities of enterprise monopoly in capitalist systems, access to resources and opportunities that are largely shaped by one's sex or gender, sexual identity, race, class, age, (dis)ability, and even language, for example the level of fluency in speaking English. These operate within an environment that is rife with sexual abuse and exploitation of young women seeking educational and career advancement.

The illusions of “choice” and “agency” in adolescent girls’ and young women’s lives are also too familiar, particularly as they pertain to sexual decisions and choices. The illusions are typified by the seemingly merited blame directed towards women and girls for their perceived unconventional or socially non-conforming behaviours. It turns out that the well documented “self-blame” syndrome in women is not an accident, but a well-orchestrated element of colonial and patriarchal value systems where, instead of seeking justice for being violated, women and girls have to deal with the guilt of wondering whether they deserved to be violated after all.

Patriarchal double standards are another familiar aspect that adolescent girls and young women must contend with. Typically, this may involve situations in which the same behaviour is encouraged for boys but discouraged or even punishable for girls. Promiscuity is a case in point. It is a known fact that women and girls bear socially degrading names for being promiscuous, while men and boys are given affirming names for the same behaviour. Another case in point is cooking, an unpaid home chore reserved for women; but when cooking starts paying, it becomes a man’s domain, as demonstrated by the prominence of male chefs in the hospitality industry. These double standards not only perpetuate the sexual vulnerability of adolescent girls and young women, but also their unequal access to economic benefits, even where these were traditionally reserved for them.

The contradictions, illusions, and double standards pervade social systems from the home, educational, religious, economic, and political systems, and are often masked by confusion. These include the questions of who or what is to account for the plight of adolescent girls and young women in our society – a certain level of denial of the existence of the contradictions, illusions, and double standards, and some sweeping of dirt under the carpet. The culture of silence around gender-based violence is an example of the extent to which families will go to preserve family honour, to the detriment of sexually violated adolescent girls and young women.

Looking at the historical, political, and economic contexts, as well as the hostile social environment that African adolescent girls and young women have to contend with, across generations, one cannot help but commend their

resilience. It is evident in their achievements throughout history, where some have overcome all forms of obstacles and demonstrated that females are as (if not more) worthy in any industry or aspect of life as males, despite the males' historical head-start. Interventions should remind adolescent girls and young women of this resilience, as one of the ingredients to affirm them in their journey through adolescence to adulthood.

Furthermore, interventions as well as their funders, should heed the underlying contradictions, illusions, and double standards inherent in settings where the interventions are implemented, and make efforts to address them. Experience has shown that these underlying issues are often dismissed when interventions are designed, since they are regarded as subjective soft issues that may not withstand scientific rigour. This monograph argues that these underlying issues form some of the impediments to the effective implementation of well-meaning interventions.

The author neither rejects the value of education nor the significance of current interventions, but points out key aspects that are essential for more meaningful and sustainable impact. She addresses perpetrators: mainly boys and men who normally exhibit toxic masculinities typical of patriarchal societies; older men, including educators, who prey on young girls' socio-economic vulnerabilities; and social systems that reinforce practices that are harmful to adolescent girls and young women, in the name of culture, religion, and educational standards. Dismissing these factors results in interventions only addressing symptoms, while the source of the problem thrives.