Sexual abuse of boys on rise

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LITTLE was said during Child Protection Week, which came to an end at the weekend, about the increase in the sexual abuse of boys.

"There is certainly less concern being publicly expressed. There is almost an assumption that boys are less harmed by sexual abuse," Childline manager Joan van Niekerk said.

"We come across some professionals who believe that boys cannot be sexually abused. We have increasing evidence that the sexual abuse of boys is as frequent as that of girls," she said.

University of KwaZulu-Natal education professor Deevia Bhana said that the abuse of boys was not sufficiently recognised or adequately dealt with compared to the sexual abuse of girls.

She said the under-reporting of the abuse of boys was attributable to silence, stigma and shame.

"In the first instance, victims are reluctant to reveal the nature of the crime, especially when the perpetrator is a family member or someone known to them."

Homosexual behaviour is stigmatised and revealing such sexual abuse might lead to homophobic abuse of the victim.

"Gender roles and expectations for boys differ from those for girls. Boys at an early age are inducted into rituals of manhood that require acceptance of pain and suppression of emotions. This prevents easy disclosure of the abuse," Bhana said.

When victims do get medical assistance, doctors do not always report the abuse to protection services, she said.

"In the context of lack of services, fragile family structures and economic decimation, who can boys actually turn to? The under-reporting of cases must be viewed against this wider social system involving family, protective and medical services, and the lack of them, police services and the obligation of every adult to report sexual abuse," Bhana said.

The Esikhawini Regional Court last week sentenced a 20-year-old man to 15 years in jail for raping his seven-year-old brother.

KwaZulu-Natal police said it was alleged that the man had raped the boy over a long period but the assaults were not reported until one was witnessed by a friend.

Bhana warned it was important not to "create boys versus girls abuse".

"We need to understand sexual abuse in ways that do not set one gender against the other."

"As far as boys are concerned we need much more research in South Africa to develop our understanding of what forms and shapes the abuse."

"There is a need for families, schools, healthcare professionals, and the police to be much more educated about this and the delicate way in which to handle these situations. Consideration must be taken of the masculinity-making processes that prevent boys from speaking out," Bhana said.

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