



Every year, hundreds of Mauritian children are raped by members of their own families. Most are sworn to secrecy, sometimes under threat, to protect the “family reputation”. Weekly has met paedophilia victims who grew up in families with “secrets” – but who refuse to remain silent.

INCEST AND PAEDOPHILIA VICTIMS' UNTOLD STORIES FAMILIES WITH “SECRETS”

“I’m scared of everything, sexual relations are difficult, I have no self-confidence, I’m anxious and I get panic attacks.”

Padma*, ex-paedophilia victim.



By Lina Myte PASCAL

Aruna* was five years old the first time her mother called her a whore. She didn’t understand what the word meant. And she didn’t understand the game her big cousin wanted to play at grandma’s place in Calodyne. She didn’t think that it was nice of him to lie down on top of her so that she couldn’t move. And it wasn’t nice of him to put his pee-pee between her legs, because there was a sharp, excruciating pain that made her want to run away.

Every day, many children go to bed at night wishing that daddy, mommy or an uncle won’t enter their bedrooms. Over a hundred cases of child sexual abuse were reported between January and March 2015 to the government’s Child Protected Unit (CDU). The flow is never-ending. New month, new paedophiles. And every single month, 20 new cases land on the Police Family Protection Unit’s table. In 80% of cases, the suspects are blood relatives or other people close to their young victims. “In Mauritius, most of the time, kids don’t get raped by strangers on the street,” Chief Inspector Viren Budree, who heads the *Brigade Pour la Protection des Mineurs* (BPM), confirmed. “The danger is a lot closer to home,” he said.

When Aruna told grandma what the big cousin had done with his pee-pee, her face went grey. Grandma went to fetch an auntie, who is a doctor. The auntie examined Aruna, sighed, and then gave the instructions that would come to define the rest of her childhood: “Don’t you dare tell anyone”.

In fact, the danger is *at home* – but you need to erase the mental image of a disturbed uncle who rapes a child while mommy and daddy are unaware. Often, mommy and daddy know exactly what goes on behind closed doors. They know – but choose to do nothing. “Protecting the family reputation becomes more important than protecting the child,” said Mélanie Vigier de Latour-Bérenger, psychologist and director of NGO Pédostop. The fear that *dimoun pou koz zot koze* (gossip about them) is an integral part of the



“Sometimes neighbours don’t report child sexual abuse out of fear of what the consequences will be.”

island culture, gets amplified and taken to extreme and sickening proportions. Theirs become a family of “secrets”.

Aruna didn’t tell anyone about the game that hurt, but mommy and daddy now call her a “dirty girl”. It is her fault that her cousin makes her pee-pee hurt, they say. She makes him do it by being dirty. Just after he first began hurting her like that, Aruna walks up to a little boy who she doesn’t like in kindergarten and pulls his pants down. She tries to put his pee-pee inside her because it’s a game that you can play with people when you want to hurt them. The pre-primary school teacher sees everything and stops it. “Why did you do that, Aruna?” she asks.

The fight against paedophilia in Mauritius has become a battle against families with secrets. So much so, in fact, that the word “secret” is used as a key word in police awareness campaigns in schools and kindergartens. “We teach children the difference between good and bad secrets,” Sylvia Rajiah, inspector at the Police Family Protection Unit, said. Good secrets are birthday and Christmas presents. Bad are of the kind that Kema* experienced when she was three years old, when her uncle and neighbours started abusing her

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sexually. “They told me not to tell anyone because no one would believe me anyway,” she says.

Aruna tells the “Miss” at kindergarten that it’s a game, a bad game that makes everything hurt. Her big cousin always wants to play it. But mommy is angry that Aruna talked about the secret game and her voice is loud when she speaks to “Miss”. Then, Miss says that she won’t tell and everybody is happy again. Aruna must call her rapist “Big Brother”, mommy says.

There is no such thing as a typical “profile” of a family of se-

crets. They’re everywhere, in every socio-economic environment. You’ll find them in church, temples, mosques and within charity organisation, where they are busy defending human rights, too. Some are articulate, extremely polite and smartly dressed. “Appearance doesn’t mean a thing when it comes to child abuse,” Chief Inspector Budree said. It’s also a huge misconception that child sexual abuse is linked to poverty or liberal values, according to Vigier de Latour-Bérenger. By buying into the myth, members of the public unknowingly become part of the cycle by making families with secrets even more adamant to keep them. They need to keep up the illusion that in their ‘good’ family, sexual abuse can’t exist.

On Aruna’s 7th birthday, there is a cake and a party. But Aruna doesn’t smile, not even when the cameraman points his lens at her. She can’t smile because on the inside there is only anger. Aruna doesn’t know why she is so angry but she knows that she has to hurt the other children in school. She has to scream and shout. She just has to.

In families with secrets, paedophilia and incest can become part of the family culture, a culture that becomes the norm and is passed on from generation to generation. Lack of information allows them to wrongfully dismiss sexual abuse as a trivial matter that doesn’t hurt the child beyond the physical pain. But as the kiddie-sized clothes are tampered with, so is the child’s future. Granted, years in therapy and personal strength can make the scars fade. But they never disappear completely. Padma*, who was seven when the very people who were supposed to protect her began taking advantage of her body, wishes that she could explain to others to what extent the abuse damaged her – but she can’t. “I’m sorry but the list is too long,” she said. Here are a few examples: “I’m scared of everything, sexual relations are difficult, I have no self-confidence, I’m anxious and I get panic attacks.”

Aruna hears people whisper that she used to be such a sweet child. She’s an angry child now. It’s

a pity that mommy and daddy have to put up with such a bothersome little girl. They're good people. Aruna knows that they are because everyone says so. They even donated a piece of land to the local temple, that's how kind they are.

Kema, who was three when the abuse began, has a list of her own: "I have no self-confidence, I don't trust other people, I look down upon myself and others, I'm wary and aggressive, I have a low opinion of men, sex is difficult, I get nightmares and I'm scared." When Kema was sexually abused as a toddler, and then again when she turned eight, she said nothing to the adult world. Today, she would like to say this: "Everyone needs to be more vigilant, and learn to recognise the signs that a child has been sexually abused."

When Aruna turned 16, she swallowed a whole bunch of painkillers. She just can't handle the pain anymore. It's too much, and she never wants to wake up. But she hadn't bought enough pills, she realised, because death didn't come to release her.

When local police officers walk into kindergartens and schools hoping to convince abused children to speak up, they know that they are fighting a difficult battle. Inspector Rajiah says, "We're basically asking them to trust strangers (the police officers) and go against the instructions given by their own parents or other family members. It's not surprising that not all of them can do it."

Daddy leaned over Aruna's body when she regained consciousness. "If you want to kill yourself, go ahead!" he said. The family will then tell everyone that she had killed herself over a boy. Aruna won't live forever – but the family secrets will.

If families with secrets are allowed to exist, it is because we – the rest of society – allow them to do so. "Sometimes neighbours don't report child sexual abuse out of fear of what the consequences will be," Inspector Rajiah said. The consequences for themselves, that is, not for the child. Here is an uncomfortable truth: We just don't care that much about the children of others.



In another family, eight-year-old Nathalie tried to ask her daddy's cousin why his urine was so white and thick. A strange sound always escaped from his mouth when the white pee came out. It hurt a lot when he put his weenie between her legs. Nathalie wanted to ask mommy why the "uncle" wouldn't let her watch cartoons on the telly unless she placed her legs in strange positions. But mommy would die if she said anything. That is what the uncle said. Nathalie didn't want mommy to die, so she kept quiet.

The culture not to report suspected child abuse cases cannot be written off as a mere desire to save one's own skin, though. There is that, but it is also a question of wanting to respect other people's privacy. It is a misplaced and dangerous form of politeness. "People would criticise me, telling me that I was weird and introverted," Padma, who was sexually abused when she was seven, remembers. No one ever attempted to find out why.

It was strange and scary that Nathalie always had to touch the uncle's weenie. But grandma and the "aunties" in the house knew that they were playing the weenie game and they didn't say that it was bad. One day, mommy took Nathalie to the doctor. The doctor looked very, very upset when he examined her little body. Then, mommy said, "Just let me handle it myself" and the doctor nodded.

Each time the police go out to schools to talk about paedophilia,

"Protecting the family reputation becomes more important than protecting the child."

an average of two children step forward with stories, said Inspector Rajiah. Sometimes, the stories are about themselves. At other times, about a friend. "Victims often find it easier to speak to other children than to an adult," she said. "It's important to work with all children because many of them walk around with secrets, even if they aren't their own."

In the past, teachers and family doctors could – and often were – sweet-talked by parents into turning a blind eye to any sexual abuse disclosure coming from the children they tended to, buying into the argument that it was "private business". While stricter rules have made that impossible, at least from a legal standpoint, many teachers still lack training and can't spot obvious signs of sexual abuse, according to Pédostop.

In school, some nice ladies come and talk to Nathalie and the

other children about their bodies. They talk about the weenie game, but something isn't right because they say that children can't play it. At home, the uncle tries to give Nathalie a magazine with pictures of naked mommies and daddies in it. They all play the weenie game. "You CAN'T touch me. It's wrong!" Nathalie shouted once. The uncle looked shocked. He never touched her again but the damage had already been done.

There are no heroes in Aruna's and Nathalie's stories. No knights in shining armours came to their rescue when they were abused and confused little girls, who were raped by members of their own family and made to feel guilty for it. Growing up, they were constantly angry without ever understanding why. Like many children, they pushed the memories of the abuse to the back of their minds, where they hurt less.

Aruna married early. Not for love, but because she wanted to get away from her dysfunctional family. She had children of her own but found that she couldn't relate to them. "I would scream at them for nothing, and constantly tell them that everything was their fault," she remembers. You fell down and hurt yourself, son? Your fault. You stained the carpet? Your fault. For being so incredibly clumsy. Come here and let me give you a good beating.

Nathalie never married but went from relationship to relationship, never allowing anyone to come close enough to love her. Growing up, she had been brainwashed into believing that a girl's only asset is her virginity. Well, that was stolen from Nathalie when she was a kid, so what was the point of anything? Nathalie needed to escape and chose a profession that allowed her to travel. Inside, she was a mess, as was Aruna. The anger was a constant companion. A minor car accident could make Aruna so angry that she almost felt like killing the driver who had committed a minor offence. While too many ex-victims of paedophilia suffer for the rest of their lives, both Aruna and Nathalie were strong enough in the end to face the memories of

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Kema*, ex-paedophilia victim.



the abuse. They both had therapy and also found solace in religion. It was painful but they came out experiencing an exhilarating feeling of being free at last. Aruna is suing her "big cousin". Nathalie found that she couldn't move on with her life unless she "forgave" her paedophile uncle, and so she did. "But if ever I see his face again, I will tell him that what he did to me was wrong, and to what extent it damaged me," she said.

Both Aruna and Nathalie have spoken to their families about the abuse. They are now being treated as outcasts – traitors who want to harm the family reputation. Their families have more than just one "secret" to keep, they have come to understand. For Aruna, realisation hit after her failed suicide attempt. Her mother told her to stop making such a "big deal" out of the fact that she was raped as a five-year-old. "You're not the only one, you know," she shouted. Today, Aruna knows that several members of her family, of both past and present generations, were sexually and physically abused as children. It simply became part of the family culture. Nathalie suspects that her little brother was abused as well, and that her mother too grew up in a physically violent environment.

Families with secrets will continue to make new "secrets" to keep

until someone breaks the cycle. Aruna is convinced of it. If she hadn't dealt with the memories, she would have become just another brick in the game, she said. What would have happened if her own sons had been sexually abused by another member of the family? "Perhaps I would have ended up protecting the 'secret'," Aruna said candidly. "To be honest, I probably would have, had I not changed, and my sons could have grown up to become abusers, too."

Today, Aruna is a different kind of mom. After having undergone therapy, she had a long talk with her eldest son (the youngest is still just a toddler). "I told him that I was sorry. I said: "When mommy hurt you before, it was because mommy had been hurt a lot when she was a child, but parents don't actually have the right to hit their children." She couldn't see his reaction because of all the tears that blurred her vision but she could hear him say "Stop crying, mom". Then, he went to fetch a drawing he had done in school, about children's rights. Aruna is satisfied with her life today, as is Nathalie. They are on a quest to leave behind a healthy family heritage, not one consisting of secrets.

Families with a culture of incest and paedophilia can be stopped from within by ex-victims

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who are strong enough to handle the rejection that often follows public disclosure. Five-year-old Aruna, eight-year-old Nathalie and thousands of abused children like them, however, deserve better than having to wait half a lifetime to be set free. They were let down by a society that just didn't care enough. And so, the real challenge is to make Mauritians look at paedophilia as a serious societal problem rather than a family affair. The *veille-to-zafer* (mind your own business) attitude that allows families with secrets to thrive has to die. "Anyone who thinks that

families have the right to mind their own business when it comes to this needs to think long and hard about what they would want others to do if their own children were in danger," Chief Inspector Budree said. "Would you want them to speak up or say nothing?"

The time has come to make a choice about what kind of society we want to live in. One that looks away when five-year-olds are raped in their own homes, simply because they're someone else's children, not our own. Or, a society where there is no such thing as someone else's child when it comes to paedophilia. They are all our own children and the blood on the mattress is the hands of all of us.

My name is Aruna. I want to say that we shouldn't be afraid to talk about paedophilia, nor should we be afraid to denounce it. I'm a former victim and I'm not afraid anymore. I'm not afraid to talk about it and I'm not afraid to make my abuser face the justice system.

My name is Nathalie. Having myself been a victim of incest and paedophilia, I want to encourage others to speak up. Talking about it makes you conscious that you are not to blame for what happened to you. Letting your suppressed, compressed and oppressed anger come out at last will allow you to heal. ■



How families with secrets operate

For families who want to put a lid on paedophilia, the first step is to make sure that the child keeps quiet. Swearing a victim to secrecy is seldom difficult, seeing that the paedophilic modus operandi is to reverse the blame and put it on the victim. "They told me that it was my fault," Kema*, who was abused as from the aged of seven, said. The strategy worked as Kema helped cover up the abuse until she was a grown woman, as did Padma, abused since she was a toddler. They never took their aggressors to court. And so, for every case that reaches the authorities (the CDU deals with around 300 per year), there are myriads more that go unreported. The abusers know their victims and they know what buttons to press to make sure that they keep the 'secret.'

Mommy and daddy embark on a damage-control exercise with the aim of preventing the "secret" from coming out. The kid, you ask?" "Oh, the child continues to get subjected to sexual abuse," said Vigier de Latour-Bérenger. In other

words, children are allowed to cry when adults in the family rape them – as long as they cry silently.

While some families find this normal, others are in denial. Sometimes, the lie is so convincing that they end up believing in it themselves. In the rare cases when child sexual abuse within the family does surface, the outside world tends to pass particularly hard judgement on mothers who stood by and said nothing when their husbands had sex with their little girls or boys. Some of these mothers, according to French researcher Martine Nisse, become so blind to the abuse that happens right in front of their eyes that they are short of being the paedophile's wingmen. In a state of total denial, they can't even see that their child is suffering. "Often, the mothers, too, went through a trauma long ago and became emotionally anaesthetised," Vigier de Latour-Bérenger explained. ■

** The names have been changed.*



REALITY CHECK By Iqbal AHMED KHAN

Awkward bedfellows

Dogma often arranges for some very awkward bedfellows. A case in point was the recent decision by British American Tobacco to raise cigarette prices in Mauritius between Rs5 and Rs10 for its various brands. The announcement was greeted with glee by anti-tobacco campaigners. But why would they – who usually pretend to be on the 'progressive' side of the aisle – cheer greater profit for an already Rs10 billion a year industry?

To understand this, it's important to understand the market fundamentalism that guides the push for higher cigarette taxes. Like neo-liberal economists, anti-tobacco NGOs have imbibed the questionable notion that the market is a rational actor. So, as the logic goes, the more expensive you make a cigarette, the less people will buy it and everything will be fine and dandy.

This assumption, for obvious reasons, is ludicrous. For one thing, cigarettes are addictive, so it's not exactly like choosing between two cans of tomatoes at the supermarket. And even if we assume that raising prices can really stamp out unwanted consumption, then this model really cannot explain why the drug trade continues to exist. After all, heroin is much more expensive than cigarettes and yet demand for it – often by people much poorer than an average cigarette smoker – continues to be strong. Not understanding this basic point is why, despite nearly a decade and a half of raising the price of cigarettes, 40.3 per cent of Mauritian men and 3.7 per cent of women still gleefully puff away, not that there is anything wrong with that.

Another point lost on the anti-tobacco crowd is that how effective nominal price rises will be depends upon how expensive cigarettes will be relative to other things. Put simply, if everything else is getting expensive, a nominally more expensive cigarette won't stand out on a grocery bill. In recent years, successive governments pushing for a lower rupee has meant that the price of just about everything has gone up. That means that the effect of raising cigarette prices has become drowned out. All it has ended up doing is making the cost of living for middle and working class people higher without doing much to press the message home. That's why in 2012 the International Tobacco Control (ITC) project in Mauritius had to admit that higher prices didn't even figure in the top three considerations of why people quit tobacco. Of course instead of getting the message, the anti-tobacco crowd simply pushed for more regressive price rises.

But another reason why all this will not work is simply because people will either switch to cheaper (and more dangerous) forms of tobacco or will have recourse to buying single cigarette sticks. Even though buying single cigarettes is technically illegal, the ITC admitted that one-third of smokers still bought cigarettes individually. A conclusion that a visit to any *tabagie* can demonstrate.

It's easy to see why the government continues to cling onto this cornucopia of bad ideas. After all, they make Rs3.9 billion a year off taxing cigarettes. For the anti-tobacco crowd, their inability to think outside the neo-liberal box is the culprit. That's why we are here today.