

Paedophilia in Mauritius Losing the battle?

Weekly's undercover investigation on sexual predators resulted in shocked reactions from our readers but also in victim-blaming comments. "Children who agree to meet sexual predators and paedophiles are "disgusting and have it coming," some readers argued. What they don't understand is this: Victim-blaming is the reason why paedophilia is so hard to beat in the first place, according to social workers and psychologists.



By Lina Myte PASCAL

After the first shock had subsided, the heavily overweight 49-year old man in front of us appeared calm and almost mildly amused. We were standing in a dark car park where he had planned to meet 14-year-old Stella, whom he planned to have oral sex with. The man found it slightly annoying that two journalists had shown up instead. After all, he works hard as a police officer (or so he claimed) to foot the bills at the hostels where he takes "his" girls. If his annoyance was mild, it was because the man did not think that he was doing anything wrong. Firing off

a soft smile that could best be described as fatherly, the sex predator criticised our investigation. "It's not good what you are doing," he complained. "You are biased!" he added, urging us to interview some child victims of sexual abuse to get "the other side of the story". His argument: The children themselves are "no saints".

Surprised? Don't be. When it comes to sexual crimes involving minors, victim-blaming is the rule rather than the exception, research suggests. When the story "Sexual predators exposed: How they prey on our children" was published in Weekly last week along with hid-

den camera footage on l'express.mu, it resulted in many shocked reactions. But there was no escape from the victim-blaming. "Those minors would meet and have sex through Facebook anyway," one reader wrote. He claimed that we were wasting our time "thinking big bad wolves were trapping little princesses with lollipops." "Instead, investigate on a solution about the main issue – the minors themselves," he continued. Another reader referred to child victims of sexual abuse as "disgusting girls".

What we are dealing with here is more than just a few misplaced comments. Victim-

blaming is a common reaction to sex crimes involving children in Mauritius, according to Mélanie Vigier de Latour-Bérenger. She runs Pédostop, an NGO dedicated to preventing paedophilia and supporting child victims. "People say that the child was asking for it and when the blame is reversed like that, the actions of paedophiles almost come across as justified," she explained.

Victim-blaming is especially common in sex crimes that involve children whose bodies have started to develop, according to Vigier de Latour-Bérenger. Thirteen and 14-year-olds are often held responsible for the

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Mélanie Vigier de Latour-Bérenger of Pédostop.



abuse. “Very often, people argue that the girls know what they are doing,” she said. Society fails to understand that young teens are still ‘under construction’ and not able to entirely grasp the full consequences of their actions,” she continued. The kids pay a high price for their ignorance as the psychological, social and physical costs of what they are about to do are enormous, according to psychologists.

PROMOTING PAEDOPHILIA?

The darkest side of the coin is that by condemning these children, society ends up playing the same game as the paedophiles themselves. Victim-blaming is their modus operandi, and guilt is their currency. “They want to make sure that the child keeps the ‘secret,’” Vigier de Latour-Bérenger explained.

The predators that fell into Weekly’s trap were no different. The 46-year-old who offered to pay Rs3,000 to have group sex with our fictitious 13-year-old and 14-year-old was particularly manipulative. In the chats, he kept repeating that the girls would have to be “discrete”. “If you’re not, you will get a bad reputation!” he wrote.

As individuals, paedophiles are extremely manipulative, the social worker explained. Their child victims, on the other hand, are immensely impressionable because of their lack of life experience and cognitive immaturity. The combination is explosive, and the elaborate mind game hits the children hard once a sexual act has been committed. “You asked for it.” “It’s your own fault for looking at me in that way” and “When I wrote to you, you wrote back” are common bricks in the mind game.

The real problem, however, is that in cases where the victims are strong enough to stand up to their perpetrators by reporting the abuse, society’s victim-blaming attitudes hit them like a slap in the face. Even if the authorities believe them, hearing the con-

demning voices who paraphrase the predators’ words (“You asked for it!”) often becomes too much to bear. “He was right,” they tell themselves. “It really was my fault”. Some children commit suicide when faced with victim-blaming. Others – and this is very common, according to social workers – backtrack and pretend that they made the whole thing up. In the end, victim-blamers end up promoting paedophilia by contributing to a situation where victims are afraid to talk.

Overseas, there are examples of child victims who have committed suicide upon hearing the judgmental reactions to their stories. Although their suicide rarely makes headlines, US psychologist Randi Gunther decided to speak up when his 14-year-old patient Melissa took her life a few years ago. After she had been raped at a party, Melissa was referred to as “a slut who will go to hell” when she spoke up. In an attempt to start a debate, Gunther published an article about what he referred to as The “second wound”. “The violations they (the victims) endure are the first wound, but how their significant people respond can be a second wound that is too often more devastating than the first,” he wrote.



NOT ABOUT SAYING “NO”

In Mauritius, the debate about the second wound is non-existent. But if the country is serious about wanting to battle paedophilia, we have to talk about these issues, Vigier de Latour-Bérenger stressed. She sees raising awareness and educating the population as the only way forward. “The problem is that in Mauritius, sexual abuse remains taboo. Even mentioning sex is taboo, which is something we have to overcome,” she said.

Fighting the silence, she believes, will break down mental barriers and make it more difficult for predators to hide behind a web of lies, since the children will be better informed.

It might change a situation where cases never even reach the authorities’ ears. Over the last few years, roughly 300 cases of child sex abuse have been reported to the Child Development Unit, according to Pédostop. Yet, the global estimation is that roughly 20% of the world’s children are victims of it. “From that, we can draw the conclusion that child abuse remains largely underreported in Mauritius,” Vigier de Latour-Bérenger said. “We can’t prevent children from using the internet – they will continue to go online – but if the taboos and stigmas are removed, we will have come a long way towards making Mauritius safer for them,” she said.

Public awareness campaigns, however, will have to be carried out in the right way. In other countries, certain campaigns have turned out to be counterproductive, according to Vigier de Latour-Bérenger. Their sole focus was to inform children that they have to say “No” to sexual abuse. Hearing that they *should* have said ‘No’ only intensifies the guilt that abused children experience, according to the social worker. “The children are not responsible. They can hardly say no,” she said, adding that it is parents and teachers who must take the responsibility by talking to them about the risks and consequences of child sexual abuse.

Raising awareness could be a first step towards change. It might also prevent more men from meeting children they plan to have oral sex with in dark parking lots. ■

