

# Blessers are a curse indeed

Pastor Ray McCauley came close to the mark when he linked the blessee-blesser phenomenon to prevailing high rates of unemployment and sounded the warning about its implication in terms of HIV transmission (in The Star on June 7<sup>th</sup>).

He also came close to the mark when he emphasized the need for “enlightened masculinity” – that solving the problem must address the blessers not just the blessees.

But he still does not get to the crux of the problem. He only circles it. You can educate drivers about speed limits but no matter how many good drivers there are out there, you will always get speeders. So you need to add a penalty into the mix – speeding fines. Sweden is an example that has cut down the number of prostitutes by 50 percent in ten years – by penalizing the men who pay, not the prostitutes. Canada also treats the so-called “blessers” this way and France has just adopted this same approach.

South Africa is at the crossroads on this issue of whether to decriminalize prostitution. The recent media coverage of “blessees” seems to suggest a kind of lobbying in favour of legalizing prostitution? This should sound some alarm bells – especially at the Ministry of Health.

Essentially, the blessee phenomenon is Polyandry - a woman having more than one husband. First, this is very volatile in terms of public health, because “multiple sexual relationships” is the highest risk behavior of all. Second, Polyandry is not mentioned in the Customary Marriages act, while Polygamy is. The king of Swaziland has pointed out that if all his wives are faithful to him, Polygamy does not increase the risk of HIV transmission. However, the Polyandry reported by City Press on May 29<sup>th</sup> is neither sanctioned by any legislation in South Africa nor is it wise in terms of public health. It is surprising to see the media tacitly endorsing such behavior. Not for reasons of morality but for reasons of public health.

As if bad habits like smoking and alcohol abuse and drug abuse are not enough, now City Press wants to adopt a new vocabulary for prostitution? It should be noted that while adultery is no longer illegal due to gender rights, prostitution is still illegal. But the approach of penalizing the blessees has failed. So the existing laws are not really enforced – because on that footing they are basically un-enforcable. The secret to success is penalizing the blessers. McCauley’s analysis is going in the right direction but doesn’t get there. Penalties are needed, and they need to be aimed at the men. The Minister of Health should start pushing for this. Talking in its budget speech is not enough. Taverns are turning into brothels right before our eyes, in spite of the new National Liquor Policy – another good step, but not it’s enough. South Africa needs to get serious about Abolitionism – for that is what this is about. Sexual exploitation. Sex slavery.

City Press has opened a Pandora’s box by giving tacit endorsement to such behavior. Will it soon endorse breaking the speed limits as well? That would cause traffic fatalities to rise, and romanticizing prostitution will only hurt the institution of marriage and increase the rate of HIV transmission.