

Child pornography in the age of the internet

A study, the first of its kind, investigated the extent of the manufacture and distribution of child pornography in South Africa, the number of criminal cases in which child pornography played a role, and whether it is possible to establish profiles of perpetrators and children who are vulnerable to this form of exploitation. ADVAITA GOVENDER explains the findings.

THE STUDY, commissioned by the Film and Publication Board of South Africa, looked at the number of criminal cases in which child pornography played a role, and whether it is possible to establish profiles of perpetrators and children who are vulnerable to this form of exploitation.

It was prompted by the new Film and Publications Act which criminalises the production, distribution and possession of child sexual abuse images – commonly referred to as ‘child pornography’, and by increasing concerns regarding the multiplication of child abuse images on the internet and the potential for abuse of children through this medium and through cell phones.

This is a complex field of study since internet child abuse is a recent phenomenon, research data is limited, and the extent of the problem in South Africa is not known and may never be known. Also, no studies have been conducted in South Africa before. For this reason, desk reviews were undertaken, complemented by key informant interviews with members of the South African Police Service and the National Prosecuting Authority, internet service providers and child protection organisations. A consultation was also held with specialists from the UK, including child protection police and academics.

However, some estimates claim that there are more than 1 million child sexual abuse images available on the internet and this figure is escalating. The internet has made it much easier to distribute these images and for ‘communities’ of users to form. It has

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also made it possible for perpetrators to enter child chat rooms to groom children for abusive acts.

The number of reported child pornography cases in South Africa is also unknown because sexual offence data is not disaggregated by type of crime. The study estimated that fewer than 20 cases of persons possessing, manufacturing or distributing images have been investigated in SA over the past 5 years.

There is no profile of children who are vulnerable to this form of abuse. However, there is some indication that those most likely to be involved in the production of images are children who have an established relationship with the abuser and who do not have adequate supervision, and children with internet and high-end mobile phones (for example, requests from adults to produce pornographic images of themselves or to meet the perpetrator).

Children may be vulnerable when relations with their parents are strained; if they have low self-esteem and if internet use is unsupervised. As the technology is expensive,

far more children are vulnerable to sexual abuse without the use of electronic media. However, as schools obtain greater access to the internet, the proportions may change.

Offender profiles are not reliable. In some cases they may fit the criteria for paedophilia (a small minority of perpetrators). Even these perpetrators may mask their offending behaviour as they are likely to have appropriate adult sexual relationships, hold jobs and otherwise blend into society. One characteristic is that they often take a great interest in children – but so do many others who are not perpetrators.

Among the key recommendations were the following:

- Policing and prosecutorial teams need specialised technological skills to investigate offences, and they need ongoing training;
- Sexual offence statistics must be disaggregated to determine the extent of possession and production of child pornography;
- Computers and mobile phones must have filtering software and parents must be aware of potential dangers;
- Internet service provider's should be obliged to report clients who download and/or distribute child abuse images. ●

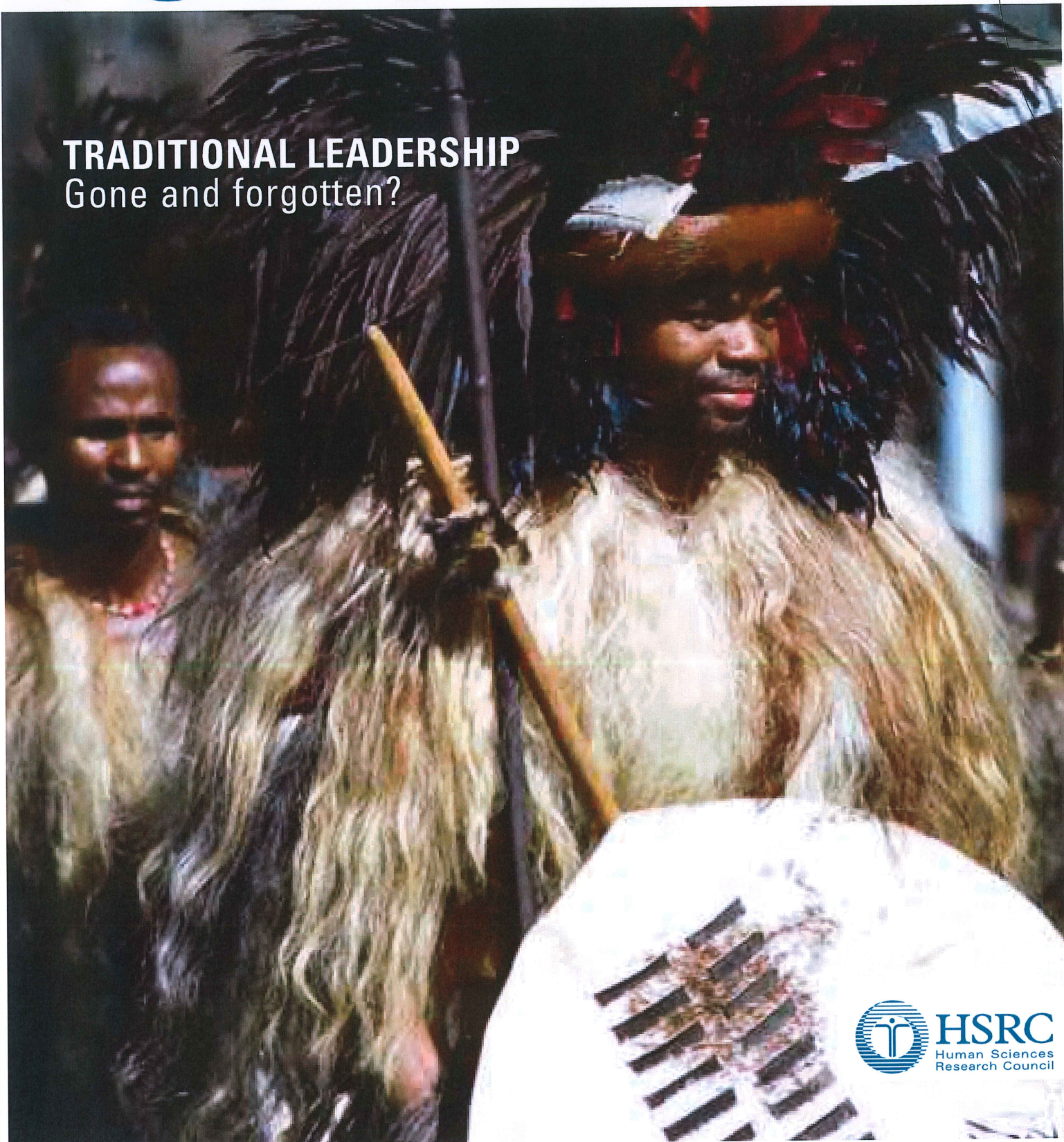
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