

25 years of service to women, children

■ JANA-MARI SMITH

This month the Gender Research and Advocacy Project (GR&AP) of the Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) celebrated 25 years of groundbreaking work that has touched the lives of many Namibian women and children.

Launched in 1993, the specific task of the GR&AP was, and remains, “to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women through legal research, law reform and related advocacy work”. Since its inception, the project has been under the leadership of Dianne Hubbard, who is also marking 25 years of employment with the LAC this month.

Despite a small staff of three full-time employees, with the assistance over the years of more than 100 volunteers and interns from Namibia and many countries around the world, the GR&AP has managed to produce a huge volume of work. It has produced several major stud-

ies and given input into legislation on a wide variety of issues relating to women and children, including gender-based violence, family law and child protection. One key aspect of GR&AP’s work is to explain existing and proposed laws in accessible language. Hubbard noted that for her, “my favourite work has always been the production of educational materials which can help members of the public understand the law. For example, we have produced 34 comics on specific legal topics, along with several films and animations and numerous factsheets in multiple languages.”

The educational materials continue to be in production and have proven so popular and crucial that it is difficult to retain enough in stock. “This leads us to believe that they are filling a real need in Namibia,” Hubbard said.

Ups and downs
 Recounting some of the project’s top achievements over the past two

decades and a half, Hubbard told Namibian Sun their extensive work on rape and domestic violence were key to new laws, implementation and awareness on gender-based violence (GBV).

Unfortunately, despite decades of work, “GBV remains one of Namibia’s most challenging problems, but every step forward is important,” Hubbard said.

Moreover, in terms of gender equality, progress remains slow. “Where gender equality is still most lacking is in the home, and family law reforms have lagged behind other gender issues. Namibia urgently needs better laws on issues such as divorce, customary marriage, inheritance and cohabitation.”

One of the first research projects undertaken by Hubbard and her team was on affirmative action in local government, an area in which Namibia has been very successful. However, the issue of child maintenance, another early topic tackled



PURPOSE: Yolande Engelbrecht, Dianne Hubbard and Ruth Murangi.
 PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

by the GR&AP, has not improved much in the past 25 years.

“I am sorry to say that trying to get fathers to take emotional and financial responsibility for their children is still a huge problem in Namibia, despite a new law on maintenance enacted in 2003 and a great deal of awareness-raising.”

A great deal to be proud of Hubbard is currently assisted by Yolande Engelbrecht, who joined in 2009, and Ruth Murangi, who began one year ago.

“Working at the GR&AP has been the most fulfilling career imagina-

ble. Namibia as a nation has made great strides in the advancement of women and children’s rights since independence, although there is still much more work to do on gender-based violence and family law, in particular.”

Director of the LAC, Toni Hancox, said the work done by the team “fills me with a great sense of pride. The input they have provided in regard to these issues cannot be emphasised enough, and I personally wish to thank them for their energy, enthusiasm and hard work over the years.”