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THE VICTIM DOES NOT LIVE TO TELL THE TALE

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LAST month The Namibian reported that civil society is concerned about the high incidence of gun ownership in Namibia. The report stated that in 2012, 7 600 people obtained firearm licences.

This figure represents 0.4 percent of the population over the age of 18 (the age at which you can apply for a gun licence) although a person can have up to four guns on one licence, meaning that this figure is not totally representative of the percentage of people with them.

Given that once you have a gun licence you do not have to renew it (meaning that there is no control over whether a person is suitable to be in possession of a gun in future years), it is the cumulative number of licences issued that is of most concern.

The police report said that since 1998, 148 000 gun licences have been issued. This means that approximately seven percent of people aged 18 and over own one or more two guns (a licence can be for two guns). The fact that nearly one in 10 adults in Namibia owns a gun is a worrying statistic.

The most worrying issue of all is, as the Inspector General of Police has noted, "the current procedures of licensing firearms are too open to any person. It is very easy for someone to get a firearm".

Added to these concerns is the fact that we don't know the number of people who applied for gun licences before 1998 and we have no way of knowing how many people illegally own firearms.

One reason civil society is concerned by the high incidence of gun ownership is due to the similarly high incidence of gender-based violence. Data from Seeking Safety, the LAC [Legal Assistance Centre] report on the incidence and impact of domestic violence in Namibia, confirms a link between the threat of violence and gun ownership. The study assessed over 1100 protection order applications opened between 2004-2006 from 19 different magistrates' courts in 12 regions of the country and found that in approximately one quarter of applications, the victim reported that the abuser owned a weapon; over half of the weapons were guns.

Fortunately the study found that reported injuries for the most recent and past cases of abuse rarely involved gunshot wounds, although the reality probably is that if a gun is used in a case of domestic violence, the victim does not live to tell the tale. According to police statistics, in 2011 49 women were murdered and in 2010 it was 51. We do not know how these women were murdered but it is likely that some were murdered with a gun and many were murdered by someone they knew – in many cases in situations of domestic violence. Therefore whilst knives, pangas and axes were used more often in reported cases of domestic violence, it is the untold tales, the silent stories of victims who have been murdered by their partner, that hold the real story.

Similar records are found in an analysis of rape cases in Namibia. The LAC report 'Rape in Namibia' assessed 409 police dockets for rapes (including attempted rapes) committed in 2001-2005 from 16 selected urban and rural locations in nine of Namibia's 13 regions.

The study found that weapons were used in less than a quarter of the cases in the sample. Firearms were not commonly used as weapons, occurring in only about eight percent of the cases which involved weapons – or in only about two percent of all the cases in the sample. In contrast knives were used in 52 percent of the cases where a weapon was used. The study did not identify any cases where the rape survivor had been wounded with a gun although again the study is based only on reports from survivors; it does not tell the story of rape victims who did not survive their terrifying ordeal.

Based on the information from these two studies, is there an argument to be made for a link between gun ownership and the incidence of GBV? Some people say that the only difference between violence with a gun and violence without a gun is the possession of the gun. This finding is seen in Namibia where most incidences of GBV do not involve a gun.

However, the story is not just about incidence but of surviving and escaping from the violence. There is no correlation between the incidence of gun ownership and violence – international evidence proves this. While the USA has the highest per capita gun ownership in the world, it is in the South American region that the most homicides by firearm occur. Furthermore, in some countries where gun ownership is high – such as Australia or New Zealand – the incidence of gun homicide is low. This means that owning a gun is neither a protection for nor a mitigation against violence in Namibia. Based on the available data we can conclude that guns are used as weapons in cases of GBV and the consequences of violence with a gun can often be far more severe than when other weapons are used, and the consequences are often irreversible.

There is a need for better regulation of gun ownership in Namibia and the debate on how this should be achieved should be an ongoing and intensifying discussion. Other interventions could also be considered to accompany these strategies including higher levies for gun ownership and incentives to disarm.

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