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WHAT IS YOUR REASON?

BY: RACHEL COOMER

AS the World celebrates International Women's Day, data shows that approximately 35% of women and 41% of men think that a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife for at least one reason. These are shocking statistics.

The numbers carry more meaning than just the number of people who may be affected by violence. When a person is abused, the community around them also suffers.

The ripple effect of gender-based violence touches every person in Namibia. For what reasons do 40% of people in Namibia use to justify beating a wife?

The Gender Research and Advocacy Project at the Legal Assistance Centre has been trying to make sense of the issue by asking the people who should know – the community – through holding focus groups in all 13 regions of Namibia. The answers have been interesting. 'Alcohol abuse;' 'it is our culture;' 'the Bible allows men to be dominant.'

EXCUSES

How many excuses can people hide behind to justify the violence?

Alcohol is not the sole answer to explain why violence occurs. If it were so, every person who became drunk would become abusive.

Using alcohol as a reason for violence is too simplistic. There have to be other reasons behind the violence that were already in place when the person was sober.

Whilst many people attributed violence to 'their culture,' in actual fact, much of the type of violence that occurs appears to be the same throughout Namibia and across cultures.

It is not the attribute of Oshiwambo, Oshihero, Afrikaans, Damara, Silozi or any other culture in Namibia to be abusive.

It is the state of society in Namibia. People are using culture as an excuse, just like they use alcohol is an excuse to do what they want to do.

Money often becomes an overriding reason. Some women turn to sugar daddies for love and endure the beating because they do not have the money or the confidence to survive by themselves.

The elderly are robbed for their pension because the young cannot find jobs. But telling a woman, who genuinely does not have any other means of survival, to leave her partner is hard.

The lack of service provision in Namibia, such as an insufficient number of shelters for battered women, is a huge problem. But neither is poverty a get-out clause for being violent, or for accepting violence. Namibia might have huge disparities of wealth, but it is not the poorest country in Africa.

Other African countries have much better records of tackling gender-based violence. Clearly there are answers, Namibia just needs to discover them.

As the Gender Research and Advocacy Project continues to try and find ways of reducing the level of gender-based violence in Namibia, the questions must become more probing. Alcohol abuse is not the cause of the problem, it is an effect.

The real question should be what problem, situation or example is driving a person to abuse alcohol? Why do some people become violent when drunk and others do not?

Culture cannot be used as an excuse to hide from change.

ANSWERS

What aspects of culture can be used to address gender-based violence?

Poverty is an issue but it is not the only issue. How can poverty be addressed in Namibia? Not every person who is forced to live on a dollar a day has to endure gender-based violence. What can be done for those that are suffering?

There will be no easy solutions, but the questions must be asked. It is when we stop asking, when we give up empowering people, that the cause becomes lost.

Therefore as the 2009 International Women's Day passes, the question 'what is your reason?' can be asked of community members – 'what is your reason to fight gender-based violence?'

Maybe it is because of the neighbour who is getting beaten by her husband. Or because an elderly woman in the community is beaten for her pension money every month because, as a woman, she is still expected to provide for children whether they are her own children or her grandchildren.

Perhaps it is the verbal abuse a step father inflicts on his step daughter or the lack of maintenance provided to a single mother even though she has a young baby to look after. None of these cases may hit a nerve for you. But maybe in your workplace someone is often taking sick days. Is it to hide the bruises inflicted by a 'loving' partner?

Or maybe your children dislike school because others in their class are disruptive. Can you blame the child who comes from a broken home and is only imitating how he sees his parents behaving?

There may be 40% of people in Namibia who think they have a reason to engage in violence. But that means there are 60% of Namibians who do not believe in domestic violence.

The fight against gender-based violence is being won, but as a nation, Namibia must continue to look for answers to these problems. What is your reason to join in this year?

– Rachel Coomer is the Public Outreach Manager, Gender Research and Advocacy Project, at the Legal Assistance Centre.

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