

## **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN NAMIBIA**

Dianne Hubbard, Legal Assistance Centre, 1998

*Domestic violence has been an increasing feature of the news in Namibia. What do we really know about this tragic phenomenon? Although it is often a hidden problem, several recent studies provide a picture of how and why it happens. This article summarises some of the key findings of a study prepared by Debie LeBeau for the Law Reform & Development Commission in 1996. The study is entitled "The Nature, Extent and Causes of Domestic Violence against Women and Children in Namibia." It is summarised here by Dianne Hubbard of the Legal Assistance Centre.*

Domestic violence is when someone hurts another person in the same family or household. It is different from other forms of violence, because being hurt by someone you know or love or live with has deeper emotional consequences than more impersonal forms of abuse.

To find out about domestic violence in Namibia, this study questioned doctors, nurses, social workers, police officers and community leaders. Victims of domestic violence were interviewed. Other information was gathered from nursing students and from victim studies carried out by law students. (All of the names of the victims have been changed to protect their privacy.)

The research found that most domestic violence is perpetrated by men against women. It happens among rich and poor, in every ethnic group, in both rural and urban areas, and across all levels of education. The range of physical abuse includes hitting, burning, punching, beating, biting and even murder. The typical pattern is violence which starts soon after the beginning of the relationship and escalates with each episode. One victim told of a 23-year history of abuse. Another lost the sight in one of her eyes due to repeated battering. Another victim, "Saara", was on one occasion stabbed in the head by her husband with a knife. The wound required three stitches. When the police were unsympathetic to her plight she asked them, "If I died that night would they still come back and say to me that I'm married to that man?"

Women often try to hide their injuries. One victim, "Ellen", told how her mother-in-law helped her to ice her bruises and conceal them with make-up so that Ellen's mother would not know what was happening. The mother-in-law did not want to disgrace the family's reputation.

Abused women may be threatened with further violence if they try to seek help. "Mathilda" told how she tried to pick up the telephone to call the police after her husband beat and raped her. But he prevented her from seeking help by breaking the telephone and injuring the smallest child. A neighbour who heard the commotion phoned her parents, who did manage to summon the police. The police came but said that they could not interfere with a married couple. "Mathilda" had a broken nose and a black eye. Her children helped her clean up the blood after the police left. Then her husband came to her and once again forced her to have sex with him.

Another victim, "Ellen", left her abusive husband and went to stay at her parent's house. The husband followed her there and beat both her and her father. "Francina",

who had two miscarriages as a result of her husband's beatings, told how she sought shelter in a cave one night after a beating, saying "I did not go to anyone's house because I was afraid of people's words".

Women are most often beaten by their husbands or boyfriends, although other family members are sometimes the culprits. Children are most often subjected to physical abuse by step-parents. For example, a 3-year-old girl in Gobabis was subjected to regular beatings by her stepmother. When she accidentally angered the step-mother one evening while the family was sitting around the fire, the stepmother took a burning log from the fire and scorched her private parts.

Physical abuse is often accompanied by mental and emotional abuse, which can range from insults to forcing the victim to perform degrading acts, such as cutting up her favourite dress or licking dishes clean with her tongue. One victim, "Venezia", told how her husband would threaten her with a loaded gun, telling her that "Today is your death day."

Sexual abuse is often part of the package for abused women and children. Such abuse can include rape, sodomy and genital mutilation. "Ellen" told how her husband sexually assaulted her with a broomstick. "Mathilda" became pregnant in the course of brutal and bloody rape by her husband. A 43-year-old woman said that she was afraid to sleep with her promiscuous husband because she is afraid of getting AIDS. He raped her as a result and she tried to lay a charge against him, but found the police reluctant to help.

Children sometimes experience abuse in the form of deliberate neglect -- not being fed, not being given proper medicine or clothes, not being sent to school, being left to fend for themselves, or falling into alcohol or drug abuse without any parental guidance.

Another form of abuse is financial abuse, where women and children are denied the basic necessities of life. For example, "Saara" told how her husband refused to work to support the family, but instead forced her to steal food. He beat her with a pipe if she refused to steal food for him and the children, and she ended up with more than one stint in gaol.

How much domestic violence occurs in Namibia? No one knows for sure. But the medical personnel estimated on average that *almost half* of all the women and children whom they treat show signs of being victims of domestic violence.

And what causes it? Almost all of those interviewed cited alcohol and drug abuse as a major contributing factor. Women report that their husbands come home drunk and then beat them, or beat them to get money for more alcohol. Some people thought that the frustrations of unemployment and poverty exacerbate violence, while others thought that poor communication and bad relationships lead to violence. Other perceived causes of violence were the husband's jealousy, his anger if he suspects that his wife is using contraceptives against his will, or his frustration if she refuses to have sex when he wants it. In actual fact, these are more rightly classed as excuses rather than "causes".

Cultural patterns of male dominance and female submission also play a role. According to the paper, there are words for domestic violence in most Namibian languages (except Oshiwambo). However, it would be simplistic to say that abuse is an accepted cultural practice. While some people maintained that men have the right to beat their wives under certain circumstances, other stated that such violence is wrong and contrary to the cultural practices of their communities even though it occurs anyway. It may be that what is considered to be "violence" in one community is not viewed as violence in another. However, no one who participated in the research asserted that excessive violence can be excused as being culturally appropriate.

Everyone who was interviewed was asked for suggestions on what to do to combat domestic violence. Many suggested community education and awareness campaigns, as well as marriage counselling services. Greater control of bottle stores and shebeens and health education about alcohol abuse were also common suggestions. Others advocate law reform and more public education about the law, and victims want the police to take them seriously. . In the case of child abuse other suggestions included training in parenting skills, counselling services for children, support groups and greater efforts to use the law to punish the culprits.

The study reports: "Most of the victims who were interviewed for this report did so for one reason and one reason only, so that the government could know what was happening to women and seek ways to help them. These women, emotionally scared, physically battered and desperate to the point of hopelessness readily volunteered to tell their stories in one last desperate attempt to be heard."

*Next column: a closer look at spousal abuse*