

Namibians Speak Out Against Domestic Violence

Namibia Institute for Democracy, 2004

A group of 250 people dressed in black stand against a barrier facing police officers. The hands of the multi-racial demonstrators, mostly women and children, are painted red. They chant “stop violence against women and children,” as President Sam Nujoma officially opens the new 2003 session of Parliament.

The scene was the culmination of many months of advocacy work around the Combating of Domestic Violence Bill. Advocacy is an essential component of the democratic process and as a young democracy, Namibia is working to ensure that more individuals and civil society organizations are advocating on important issues.

The Namibia Institute for Democracy (NID) is an NGO committed to a multi-party democracy in Namibia. One of the many programs implemented by NID is the Civil Society Development Program (CSDP). CSDP, funded by USAID, seeks to assist civil society organizations with institutional capacity building on a local level, while on a national level it supports NGO's with advocacy programs which aim to change policy and legislation.

In 2001 the Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) submitted a proposal to the CSDP for a project entitled “Advocacy around rape and domestic violence.” The project was funded through 31 October 2003 and the focus was two-fold. Firstly, to finalize, through intervention and advocacy, six Rape Protocols (for police, social workers, magistrates, prosecutors, medical professionals and accused rapists) based on the progressive Combating of Rape Act passed in 2000. Secondly, to finalize through intervention and advocacy, the Combating of Domestic Violence Bill.

Five Rape Protocols have been finalised, but the Rape Protocol for Medical Professionals is still in the approval process. These protocols have already been influential, in particular those for police and social workers. In addition, two very useful educational booklets (the *Guide to* and *Summary of the Combating of Rape Act*) have been translated into Afrikaans and five local languages and have been well received by trainers. They are widely used to educate government departments involved in rape cases and the public.

The advocacy campaign around the Combating of Domestic Violence Bill has been a bit more tumultuous, but very interesting nonetheless. The Bill itself was introduced into Parliament in October of 2002 in a form that was approved by the LAC and others and it was felt that the advocacy around the Bill had been very successful.

Once in Parliament the Bill was trivialized by certain Members of Parliament and it did not receive the support expected. Many felt the Bill was discriminatory towards men. To address this problem, the LAC gave input into a speech presented by the opposition, prepared a summary of the Bill for all members of the National Assembly and prepared a

newspaper article on the Bill which was subsequently re-published in three languages in *Sister Namibia* magazine. A heated debate took place in *The Namibian* between Minister Helmut Angula and Dianne Hubbard from the LAC on a few finer details of the Bill. All these activities served to raise public awareness. In addition to these public debates, the LAC has presented a summary of the Bill to various audiences and participated in a panel discussion as part of a three-day “train the trainer” course for 60 rural women representing 30 different towns and villages.

Draft protocols for the Bill have been prepared in consultation with various groups. These protocols are intended for police, social workers, the medical profession, prosecutors and magistrates. A guideline for the handling of suspected perpetrators has also been prepared.

Perhaps the most interesting episode in this campaign was the demonstration which took place on 11 February 2003. After the Parliamentary debates which took place in October and November 2002, the Bill was being stalled due to a lack of wide support.

To express their concern on domestic violence and a group of Namibians applied to demonstrate at the official opening of Parliament by President Nujoma. The application was initially approved, with the stipulation that demonstrators would not be allowed on the President’s motorcade route, nor close to the Tintenpalast which houses the National Assembly. As the main intent of the demonstration was to ensure that the President was aware of their concerns, the demonstration organizers went to the High Court for an interdict which was denied.

250 people, mostly women and children, did demonstrate, but at the Supreme Court. Police barriers were positioned and as the demonstration progressed the police eventually pointed and cocked their weapons at the demonstrators.

At the same time, President Nujoma was addressing the National Assembly. He was extremely supportive of the Bill, encouraging Parliament to pass it. He has always been supportive of gender issues and the rights of women and children.

The police action was met with public outrage and resulted in wide coverage of both the demonstration, but more importantly, the Bill. While the incident was detrimental to democratic ideals, it did serve to raise awareness on the issue of domestic violence. Combined with the President’s support, the demonstration served to raise public awareness to previously unimagined level.

The Combating of Domestic Violence Bill was passed by Parliament in March 2003, signed in June 2003 and came into force on 17 November 2003.

The LAC, supported by NID’s Civil Society Development Program has waged an impressive and classic advocacy campaign around significant social issues and has achieved great successes.