

## **THE PROBLEM OF SPOUSAL ABUSE**

Dianne Hubbard, Legal Assistance Centre, 1998

*The previous column by Dianne Hubbard of the Legal Assistance Centre presented highlights from a 1996 study of domestic violence in Namibia. This column is based on information from a 1998 report on one particular kind of domestic violence. The title of the report is "An investigation to assess the nature and incidence of spousal abuse in three sub-urban areas in the Karas Region, Namibia", written by Dr Hetty Rose-Junius, Mrs VN Tjapepua and Mr J de Witt.*

A recent study on "spousal abuse" provides a chilling picture of this particular form of domestic violence. "Spousal abuse" refers to physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, financial or social abuse in an intimate relationship -- including civil and customary marriage, people who are living together as husband and wife, and even brief encounters with a sexual partner.

### *Information from victims of abuse*

The study gathered information from Luderitz, Karasburg and Keetmanshoop. The researchers conducted individual interviews with 130 victims of domestic violence. They also held group discussions with another 126 community members and talked to social workers, doctors, nurses, police and church leaders.

The victims in the study were overwhelmingly female. Most of the victims who agreed to answer questions were over the age of 30, but many of those interviewed suggested that younger victims may not yet be ready to admit that they have suffered this type of abuse. Many of the older victims stated that it was only later in their lives, after they had suffered repeated acts of violence, that they were prepared to speak out about the problem. But victims also suggested that women of all ages are starting to speak more openly about the problem of spousal abuse in recent times, because of their increasing awareness of women's rights.

The study confirmed that spousal abuse takes place in a spectrum of relationships, from marriage to more casual relationships. Victims also fell into a wide variety of educational and income levels. The victims who took part in the study were divided almost half and half between those who are the family's main breadwinners and those who are unemployed, showing that economic independence is no guarantee of freedom from abuse. Victims suggested that financial independence on the part of one partner might lead to diminishing self-esteem on the part of the other partner, which could contribute to violent behaviour. On the other hand, victims who are financially dependent on their partners may feel that the option of leaving the relationship is not open to them.

Most of the victims gave accounts of a brutal variety of physical abuse in combination with other forms of mistreatment. Beating, slapping, kicking, pushing, choking and shoving were amongst the most common forms of assault mentioned. Abusers brandished deadly weapons in more than half of the cases studied, giving a clear indication of the seriousness of the risks at stake. The arguably "milder" forms of abuse, such as pushing and shoving, can be the abuser's way of "testing the waters" to

see how far he can go, with such treatment often being a prelude to more serious forms of physical aggression.

- “He physically threw me out of the house, burned me with cigarette stumps and smashed my head against the wall.”

The physical abuse can have severe emotional consequences in itself, but it is often accompanied by separate forms of emotional abuse, ranging from insults and attempts to humiliate the partner, to threats and intimidation. Abused spouses also reported a range of sexual abuse, with 25% of them saying that they had been forced to have sexual intercourse against their will.

- “He denied that he was the father of my child. That was the ultimate humiliation that drove me to attempted suicide.”

Economic abuse is also part of the picture, with large numbers of victims claiming that they are not consulted about financial decisions by their partners, or that they have to beg for money for their own needs. Some victims reported that they were forced into financial dependency, explaining that they were prevented by their partners from either getting or keeping a job. But having an independent job is not necessarily a protection against financial dependency, as almost a quarter of the victims reported that their partners take control of their earnings. Another common complaint was the partner’s failure to contribute to household expenses, or the squandering of family resources.

- “He buys things for his personal satisfaction such as cameras, video tapes, etc even when there is no money for food.”

Yet another form of abuse which was reported was social abuse, such as verbal abuse and insults in public, or belittling the partner in front of others. The fact that 52% of the victims reported that they are physically abused in public suggests that abusers are confident that their behaviour will be accepted by others, or even admired, rather than being condemned or stopped.

Alcohol and drug use were identified as major triggering factors for abuse, with more than three-quarters of the victims reporting that abuse generally occurs when their partners are “under the influence”. Abusers also take out their frustrations on their partners, with abuse sometimes being set off by unemployment, job-related stresses, or aggravation from the children. Some victims believed that their partners were encouraged by their friends to engage in abuse. The common excuse of provocation by the victim looks very weak in light of the fact that large numbers of victims stated that abuse sometimes starts while they are sleeping.

### *Getting help*

One sad fact which emerged from the study was how long victims endure abuse before seeking help, with almost three-fourths of the victims saying that they first reported the abuse to someone else after it been going on for at least four years. Victims who find the courage to speak out tend to approach other family members

first. They may turn to ministers of religion, social workers or friends. Victims are likely to turn to the police at some stage, but they complain that police response is unsympathetic. Some say that the police side with the abuser, asking questions like "What did you do to provoke your husband?" Police reportedly say that they cannot intervene in domestic affairs. They may lock up an abuser who is drunk, but this provides little protection to the victim since the abuser is likely to return home with even more aggression than before once he sobers up. Because police response is often unhelpful, victims tend to approach the police only in cases of severe assault. Women and Child Protection Units are not yet well-known or understood by the community. They may become a more popular choice for assistance once their victim-friendly approach has proved its effectiveness.

Police who were interviewed balanced the picture by explaining some of the problems they encounter. They are sometimes handicapped by legal constraints on their powers of arrest. They find that the complaining party sometimes teams up with the abuser to turn against a police officer who tries to intervene. They also experience frustrations when a victim decides to withdraw a charge, often because of fear or hopes of reconciliation.

Lawyers are approached for assistance far less frequently, because of the victim's lack of conviction that the legal system can do anything to help, or because of a preference for preventative or therapeutic action. Medical personnel are approached only in cases of severe injury, sometimes because victims fear that the case will be taken to court against their will.

And why are some victims reluctant to seek help from anyone? Shame was the most often-cited reason. Victims are afraid that they will be blamed for the abuse themselves, or they feel guilty because they believe that they are the ones at fault. They are also reluctant to risk social rejection by their communities, and they do not want to disgrace the family name.

Many victims carry on hoping that the relationship can be preserved -- because of emotional or financial dependency on the abuser, because of the children, because of concerns about social status and the family name, or because they are persuaded by the abuser's promises to reform. About one third of the victims interviewed were reluctant to seek help because of their fear of the abuser's reaction.

One rather surprising reason for the silence of victims was fear of testifying in court. About half of the victims interviewed felt intimidated by the legal process itself and wanted to avoid a court appearance at all costs. For example, some said that they would be willing to turn to the courts if they could do so without having to undergo the trauma of being questioned about the violence.

### *The abuser's point of view*

To get a look at the other side of the story, the researchers interviewed 27 convicted perpetrators of violence in the Windhoek Prison -- 22 men and 5 women. The older men indicated that they do not see their aggressive behaviour as abuse, but as a

culturally acceptable form of behaviour. Biblical teachings on Adam and Eve and the submission of wives were cited in support of their actions.

One man referred to his "right and indeed even responsibility" to keep his wife "in line". Younger men tended to blame matters on the emancipation of women, complaining that women "misconstrue the whole movement of women's rights and jumped on the bandwagon of those who strive to overthrow the men as the true heads of the household". Women who admitted that they have resorted to abuse claimed that they have a duty to fight back against the kind of abuse that their mothers and grandmothers put up with. Some expressed feelings of ambivalence, indicating that they feel bad about their actions but do not see any other way of handling family situations. One man said, "I think I have a right as head of this household to control my family, even use force to control them. I don't know why I do sometimes feel bad and guilty when I use some extra force."

- "It is not my choice, but this is part of life. I do not feel anything at that time. I am just so angry. What else can I do?"
- "Yes, I abuse sexually, physically, what ever. So what. A female is there for a man's purpose and that's that."
- "I beat my wife when she refuses me marital rights and I force her to respond. I feel terrible, but do it again every time."

Several of the abusers who were interviewed were part of a cycle of violence, with 14 of the 27 stating that they themselves had been abused as children. All of the abusers stated that they had seen one parent use violence against the other parent when they were growing up, and 20 out of the 27 witnessed family violence directed at other members of the family. This information shows how children can unwittingly absorb the idea that violence is an acceptable response in family situations.

The perpetrators mirrored the victims' point of view on substance abuse, believing that alcohol and drug use contributed to their aggressive behaviour. Some said that their partners also have drinking or drug problems which complicate the situation.

Most of the abusers blamed the victims for their own aggressive behaviour. When pressed to explain why, they cited nagging or other forms of perceived "provocation". They also interpreted the victim's unwillingness to report abuse, or to carry through with laying a charge, as evidence that the victim accepts the abuse. Yet, despite their tendency to lay responsibility at the door of the victim, all of the abusers who said that they had been involved in previous intimate relationships admitted that they had also been abusive towards these previous partners.

Abusers complained that social services are usually directed towards the perceived victim, whereas the abuser's needs should also be considered. As one abuser said, "We have feelings too. We are often so guilt-ridden by our inability to control ourselves. We need help too."

*Next column: how society can help*