

THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA

Violence against women is a scourge in our society. Not only does South Africa have one of the highest per capita rates of reported rape in the world,² but studies that seek to identify the actual level of violence and abuse have documented levels of between 19% and 40% (Jewkes *et al.*: 1999).³ These figures correlate with estimates of coercive sex.⁴ In general, studies in South Africa have found violence in relationships to be so endemic that men and women often accept coercive and even violent sex as 'normal'. For example, research in urban Gauteng⁵ found that more than a quarter of women (27%) and nearly a third of men (31%) agreed that forcing someone you know to have sex with you is never seen as sexual violence (CIET Africa, 2000).

The problem of violence against women in South Africa is a complex one. It is both an individual and a social problem. It is embedded within, and emerges from, our history and our current unequal social, economic and cultural relations.

Socio-economic influences

Research has begun to clarify how violence against women is culturally ascribed and defended. Some research refers to the 'culturally prescribed gender scripts' that legitimate sexual violence against women (Leclerc-Madlala, 1997). Thus '[p]atterns of systemic sexist behaviour are normalised rather than combated'.⁶ Many argue that deeply entrenched patterns of cultural and sexual inequality are also enforced by violence, the most extreme expression of the power imbalance between women and men. Lilian Artz examines the impact of this patriarchal power that exists across different culturally specific forms:

[i]n South Africa, preservation of patriarchal power may have many culturally specific forms, but ultimately violence against women – or the threat thereof – is the prevailing form of social control. It keeps women off the streets at night, restricted at home and silenced. My research saw the grip

of kinship and other social structures as only one component of the total complex of violence against women and social controls. The research illustrated a widely accepted sentiment by gender advocates that violence keeps women in conditions of poverty, and fear of poverty keeps women trapped in violent situations. For abused women, lack of economic access dictates their physical mobility, their access to education, recreation, as well as access to each other (Artz, 2002).

The economic dimensions of violence show how gender-based violence also arises from women's economic dependence and the impact of poverty. Feminists differ as to the actual impact of economic inequality and poverty on the levels of violence. Radical feminists would argue that violence exists evenly across society, whereas others suggest that poverty and inequality foster and exacerbate the incidence and effects of interpersonal violence. Nevertheless, there is a common consensus that violence against women is prevalent in all sectors of South African society and exists across socio-economic, race, political, religious and cultural divides. Violence is committed by men of all ages, all educational levels and of any status within their community.

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Political influences

It is shown that communities that have experienced high levels of oppression and violence of this nature in other countries (African-American, Maori-New Zealand, and Aboriginal-Australia) continue to experience high levels of violence including gender-based violence. Atkinson & Atkinson note that in many instances the pain of colonisation has been internalised into abusive and self-abusive behaviours,

often within families and communities. The multiple layers of acute and overt violence experienced by such communities at the hands of the colonial state can lead to complex expressions of rage, within and across generations (cited in Laing, 2002:19).

Apartheid was a deliberate attempt to subordinate and oppress the majority of South Africans, undermining their identity and cultural and social infrastructure. 'The fragmentation that exists in the community is indicative of the fragmentation of identities of individuals...' (Foster, 1999:4-5). The use of violence by the apartheid state and in the struggle against apartheid further reinforced its use as a legitimate form and expression of opposition (Harper, 2003).

With South Africa's long history of colonisation, followed by an internal system of racial oppression since 1948, entire communities were systematically attacked and oppressed, which may account for the high levels of domestic and sexual violence noted above. But at the same time, violence against women is not merely a post-Apartheid occurrence. It appears to have always been part of South Africa's social fabric in all cultures and racial groupings; it was just not addressed. During apartheid, violence against women in the black community was often placed on the back-burner as the focus was on the struggle for freedom. Violence in the white community was also silenced – especially incest and marital rape. The white community had to have an image of 'decency' and 'civilisation' (Harper, 2003). Approaches to working with men in South Africa must take account of these socio-political factors in the design of intervention strategies and programmes.

In addition, the history and experience of institutionalised violence through the apartheid state points to the need for caution in focusing interventions solely at the institutional level through criminal justice reforms. These efforts must be matched by interventions at the individual and community and overall societal level, which challenge dominant attitudes and values that perpetuate gender-based violence. This is borne out by the ongoing levels of

gender-based violence, even with extensive gender machinery, and progressive laws, policies and programmes in place. As Foster notes: 'the responsibility for eradicating violence against women lies not with government alone but with communities and the entire South African society ... we cannot legislate change; social justice and social change requires more than laws and policies' (Foster, 1999: 4).

Solving the problem requires a transformation of the way we think about gender identity, sexuality and the place of women and men in our democracy. It requires a coming-to-terms with our past and addressing personal, community and societal transformation. It further requires an examination of the interaction between attempts to introduce a new human rights culture and efforts to rebuild a conception of traditional pre-colonial culture. It is a daunting task, but it can be tackled. The strategies of dealing with gender-based violence are legal, economic, social, cultural and individual, and located within all levels of society. Many within the state and civil society have thrown their considerable weight into finding solutions.

¹ Project People: 2001

² Rape reported at 115.6 for every 100 000 of the population in 1998. The report by Statistics South Africa quantitative research findings on rape in South Africa (2000) recognised that the per capita number of reported rapes was amongst the highest in the world.

³ This study found that 26.8% of women in the Eastern Cape, 28.4% in Mpumalanga and 19.1% in Limpopo (Northern Province) had been physically abused in their lifetime. Another survey confirmed that girls commonly experience rape, violence and assault, including within relationships. Over one-quarter of women aged 16-20 have been forced to have sex against their will (L. Richter, 1996). Research conducted in 2000 found that 39% of young girls between 12 and 17 had been forced to have sex; 33% of girls were afraid to say no and 55% agree to have sex with their boyfriend when he insists although they do not want to. (LoveLife (2000) Hot Prospects. Cold Facts. Colourpress Ltd. South Africa).

⁴ 30% of females were forced to have sex the first time they had intercourse. (Khayelitsha study by the Medical Research Council, as cited in the Cape Argus, Jan. 7, 1998).

⁵ Gauteng is the economic and industrial heartland of South Africa. This research was undertaken in the southern part of Gauteng governed by the Southern Metropolitan Local Council.

⁶ S v Baloyi para 12.