

The Men Against Violence Against Women Movement in Namibia **WILLEM ODENDAAL, LEGAL ASSISTANCE CENTRE**

Violence against women is one of the greatest human rights challenges faced by women in Namibia. In 1999 a survey on domestic violence cases reported to the Namibian Police showed that more than one-fifth of all violent crime in Namibia occurs within the context of domestic relationships. This study indicated that 86% of the victims in domestic violence cases which are reported to the police are female, while men commit about 93% of domestic violent crimes reported to the police. More specifically, the survey revealed that most domestic violence cases were perpetuated by boyfriends against girlfriends either during the course of the relationship or after it had come to an end. Violence committed by husbands against their wives was the next most common category, followed by violence committed by brothers against their sisters. (Hubbard, 1999:1-3) Thus, as it is the case in all societies, men in Namibia are the main perpetrators of violence in the family, as well as in society at large.

The same study revealed that about 21% of all the dockets for rape and attempted rape opened during the study period took place within a domestic relationship (Hubbard, 1999, 25). According to the Commanding Officer of the Windhoek Women and Child Protection Unit, Inspector Rosalia Shatilweh, an average of 700-800 rape cases are reported at Namibian Police stations per year. Inspector Shatilweh described her experience with rape cases as a police officer:

In our society a number of men think that once they are married to or in a relationship with women, they own them and therefor can do anything to them. These men think it is their right to have sex with their female partners whenever they feel like it, despite the fact that their female partners might not feel like it. Here at the Unit we also see many cases where women lay charges of rape against their male partners but many of them pity their partners and withdraw charges of sexual abuse against them, because they [the women] don't want to see their husbands ending up in jail. Now with the new Combating of Rape Act in place, wives can also lay rape charges against their husbands. However, this Act is still very new and few women are aware that they can lay charges of rape against even their husbands. (personal interview, March 2001)

An increasing number of men and grassroots groups in Namibia have in recent years expressed their concern about the high incidence of violence against women. However, as these men were scattered in all different corners of the country, no clear programmes or objectives existed which could guide them in how to tackle this issue.

In 1999, the Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) started with its preparations to hold a national *Men Against Violence Against Women* conference, scheduled for 23- 25 February 2000. With the help of its advice offices located throughout the country, the LAC organised 25 consultative workshops in preparation for the national conference. These workshops involved all of Namibia's 13 regions, with the exception of the Caprivi

region, which was unsafe for travel at the time because of the 25-year-old civil war in Angola spilling over the border.

These consultative meetings played a very important role in getting men to think and talk about the issues of violence against women, as well as providing a forum for men from the different regions to select individuals to represent them at the national conference. Legal Assistance Centre staff and a core group of interested men utilised every possible means of getting other men involved and talking about the problem of violence against women. Through visits to schools, young men were invited to express their point of view on domestic violence. Public events were organised where men were invited to speak about the topic of violence against women. Popular gathering places such as bars, nightclubs, sport fields and churches were targeted for spontaneous and sometimes intimate conversations with men about their attitudes towards women and violence.

Issues that concerned men the most during the consultative meetings included personal fear of failure, jealousy, alcohol abuse and rape. For many men these consultative meetings were the first time ever in their lives that they got the chance to talk to other men about their feelings of manhood and their relationships with women. Some men openly admitted that they do not know how to deal with and control anger. A participant at one preparatory meeting referred to his own feelings of anger "as a ball of fire exploding in my head at times when I know it should not happen". Another man calmly suggested that maybe he needed "the cold water of patience to extinguish those fires in your head".

In the meantime, while the consultative meetings were underway, a Windhoek-based working group composed of interested men was speeding along with preparations for the big event in February 2000. This group made sure that the print media got involved, by holding press conferences and supplying relevant news articles, in an effort to raise public awareness of issues like domestic violence and rape. The Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) supported the Campaign's efforts by giving members of the working group airtime on phone-in radio talk shows, featuring discussion topics like, "What does it mean to be a real man?" or "What can men do to stop violence against women?". The NBC's television service gave a generous amount of viewing time to highlight the forthcoming conference. During the conference, the NBC television hosted two panel discussions: one on religion and violence, and the other on men's movements against violence, screened on *Talk of the Nation*, a popular weekly programme where panelists engage in a live discussion of topical issues of the day.

The working group invited key men's activists from other countries to spearhead the conference and to provide ideas and inspiration for Namibian men. The keynote speaker for the conference was Dr Michael Kaufman, founder of the White Ribbon Campaign, a Canadian effort to combat men's violence against women which has become a global example. Dr Kaufman also provided a special one-day training session in advance of the conference for 20 men from different regions who had been selected to act as small group facilitators for the conference. Another activity which took place in advance of the conference was a visit by some of the Namibian and international participants to 120 men

in the Windhoek Central Prison, who expressed interest in follow up discussions on the topic of domestic violence.

Other international guest speakers who attended the conference were Jonah Gokova from the Ecumenical Support Services in Zimbabwe, Augustine Mututu from the Musasa-project in Zimbabwe, Thulani Nkosi from Men for Change in South Africa and Samokelo Madonsela from ADAPT in South Africa. All of these participants are directly involved in organising men to stop violence against women in their respective countries. They were thus all in a position to share with the Namibian men their best practices and greatest challenges on how to deal with the issue. Several local guests also spoke at the conference. With the exception of one woman invited to speak on women's experience of violence, all of those who spoke at the conference were men. The participants were also all male, since the objective of the meeting was to explore the male position and perspective. A three-woman panel agreed to make themselves available to answer men's questions about women's attitudes towards violence, but the conference was otherwise a male space where the participants could discuss their understandings of masculinity.

The participants included men from all corners of the country, including representatives of rural and urban communities, different professional groups, grassroots men, religious and traditional leaders and different age groups.

The conference was based on a model of delegate participation, with a minimum of formal presentations and speeches. Most of the deliberations and discussions took place in small groups. In order to maximise participation, simultaneous translation from English to Afrikaans and Oshiwambo was provided in the plenary sessions. The conference was attended by more than 200 men every day. They debated, joked, differed and supported each other. They discussed culture, tradition, attitudes, behaviours, African manhood and the reasons for violence against women. They sought clarification for women's behaviour and for men's feelings, fear and anxieties. Then in unity, they said "Real men say no to rape!". Some participants even took the brave step to publicly acknowledge that they were abusive to women or had previously abused women.

At a vigil held at the Windhoek High Court on the second evening of the conference in honour of women who have suffered abuse at the hands of men, Dr Peter Katjavivi, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Namibia, said that men were indebted to women because of all the wrongs they have done to them in the past. "The time has come for men to change and see women as equal partners in developing Namibia," he concluded.

On the third and final day of the conference, the men developed strategies on how to implement activities in their respective regions. They committed themselves to play a continuing role in raising awareness and organising men in their communities to end violence against women. They selected an interim working committee of 28 volunteers to spearhead the development of an overall national strategy to continue with awareness raising among men in Namibia.

In April 2000, this working committee met for the first time after the February conference, to start drafting a constitution for the establishment of a non-profit NGO, called Namibia Men for Change (NAMEC). The name was chosen by the men as an expression of a positive approach to what they seek to accomplish – to be *for* change instead of just *against* violence.

On 29 July 2000, NAMEC was formally launched at a public meeting in Windhoek. NAMEC currently acts as an umbrella organisation for a number of concerned men's groups throughout the country. These affiliations include Men For Change groups in the Karas, Khomas, Oshikoto, Omaheke and Kavango regions.

Although funding for the activities of NAMEC is a concern for the organisation, some support for this group has already been evident. The Legal Assistance Centre has committed itself to lend support to NAMEC and its umbrella organisations in an advisory capacity. NAMEC has also been assisted and advised by a number of women groups including Women Solidarity, Sister Magazine, Women's Action for Development and the Multi-Media Campaign Against Violence Against Women and Children. According to the Executive Director of NAMEC, Abdallah Mwakembeu, women organisations act as advisors to NAMEC. Abdallah views the involvement of women's groups as an important strategy to guide the activities of NAMEC. "Our work within NAMEC, should not be in conflict with the work women are having on their agenda. NAMEC sees itself as a men's organisation in solidarity with what our sisters are doing. We therefore consult various women's groups in our deliberations..." Abdallah explained.

The Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Welfare has recently come to the aid of NAMEC by offering them an office in their building from which NAMEC can co-ordinate its activities. Although NAMEC has not yet achieved financial independence, it can already take pride in what it has achieved during the first year of its existence. With some funding obtained from the Ford Foundation, NAMEC and its regional affiliates have organised a number of workshops throughout Namibia. These meetings have included discussions with men in different communities and visits to schools where workshops have been held for boys aged 15 to 18 on the topic of manhood and domestic violence.

Also on NAMEC's workshop agendas are discussions with men covering topics like sexual abuse, rape, maintenance and fathers' involvement in parenting and child upbringing. NAMEC is currently supporting women's organisations on lobbying for the passage of a Domestic Violence Act in Namibia. It is expected that the NAMEC will reach an even wider male audience, once more substantial funding has been secured to cover the running costs of its activities.

This initiative shows how an appropriate intervention at the right time can help concerned individuals to mobilise around their common interest, so that their concerns can crystallise into action for change. The men's movement in Namibia is significant, for there is no hope of ever preventing violence without male involvement. Young men need positive male role models who are willing to take a public stand that rejects violence in all its

forms. It is too soon to assess the impact of the new men's movement on Namibian society, but the ripples are still spreading.

Notes

This article was written with assistance from Dianne Hubbard and Milly Jafta of the Legal Assistance Centre and Abdallah Mwakembeu of NAMEC.

References

Hubbard, D. (1999) *Domestic Violence Cases Reported to the Namibian Police: Case characteristics and police response*. Law Reform and Development Commission and Legal Assistance Centre.

Suggested reading

Legal Assistance Centre (2000). *Namibian Men Against Violence Against Women: Report on the National Conference in Windhoek on 23-25 February 2000*.