

Research, practice and evaluation: Making the links

Round Table

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Summary

South Africa has one of the highest incidences of violence against women in the world. High poverty and unemployment add to an already volatile social and political climate, making it particularly difficult for women to attain economic independence and permanently leave abusive partners.

As a result, women and young girls increasingly resort to prostitution as a mean of economic survival. This obviously makes them more vulnerable to sexual attack or abuse as well as the very real risk of HIV/AIDS infection.

Civil society organizations receive little government support and the Department of Justice and the South Africa Police Services are seriously under-staffed and overstretched under the burden of crime and general social pathology in the country.

Although South Africa has a progressive constitution and a lot of progressive new legislation regarding women's rights and issues, the real battle is ensuring their proper implementation. Overall, there is a real need to increase gender-sensitivity training and specialization of women and victim services within justice, police, health, and shelter services.

Specific recommendations include :

- Specialized Family, Sexual Offences, and Child Abuse Courts must be expanded.
- Courts must consider alternative sentencing options such as periodical imprisonment where perpetrators could serve their sentences on weekends and thus remain employed during the week.
- Police must create Community Policing Forums that empower communities and let residents take co-responsibility for some problems.
- Housing policy should consider abused women's needs such as by offering subsidized housing.
- Make 24-hour health care services available and accessible for victims.
- Government should prioritize employment and partner with shelters to offer job skills training.

Strong alliances must be built across society and a [super]-agency should coordinate the training and work of all different players. It is also of utmost importance that proper evaluation systems be developed to monitor and document the progress of different service providers. This will help to ensure the proper and sustainable implementation of South Africa's new progressive constitution, the Domestic Violence Act, and related legislation on women's rights and safety issues.

Discussion

The unequal treatment of women who kill their abusive partners compared to men who commit "femicide" is discussed. Women are often punished with longer sentences than men. Instances where women kill their partners have serious consequences for children: when a child's father is dead and mother is imprisoned, the late fathers' parents often get custody of the child. This often results in children not getting to visit their mothers in prison which partly contributes to their increased risk of becoming street children.

A Canadian rape crisis centre's provision of comprehensive ongoing services for victims is highlighted. The centre provides assistance and support to women all the way through - ie, from the crisis centre, through the legal court procedure, and back into the community.

Cookie describes how action is immediately sparked by having women participate in community research. For example, women have begun to sell their wares on the streets in attempt to generate an income and have formed a union to protect themselves against street victimization. Since these women must sleep under their tables, making themselves especially vulnerable to street violence, they have pooled their new income to pay for protection on a monthly basis.

Anna Mtani (Tanzania) raises the point that research on violence against women will be scrutinized and sometimes discredited as men do not always trust the results. Nevertheless, men's input and participation in research can be pertinent.

Conclusions

- Equality will enhance the lives of both men and women. Violence is a problem for all of society, not just women. Therefore, all citizens should be involved in solving problems caused by violence and inequality.
- Numerous victim service delivery shortcomings which place all responsibility on civil society organizations. Lack of government coordination and capacity to implement progressive legislation and practice are large challenges to improving women's safety. Despite government's commitment to prioritize violence against women, they have not set time frames or performance indicators to evaluate service delivery. Furthermore, there is a serious lack of ongoing training for service providers who work with victims of violence and monitor their progress.

Recommendations

- Research should not be confined to feminist academics and women's groups - men should be included in research so that they will also take on responsibility for improving women's safety.
- Research with men should examine their responsibilities, the causes for the persistence of violence, and the role that they can play in changing this problem.
- Researchers can not just produce a report and leave - they must find ways to communicate research results in a variety of formats to different community groups (ex., illiterate) and must follow up with and help communities to develop research-based action.
- Women's groups and grassroots and community organizations must be proactive rather than reactive. They must set a research agenda that will be useful to them and will meet their needs.
- Grassroots organizations must be included in every stage of the local research process - that is, from formulating questionnaires to developing research-based action in cooperation with other partners.
- Action must go beyond making the links to bridging the gaps. We have made the links between the people that are currently involved in women's safety efforts - we now have to determine which actors are not currently involved who should be.