

Research, Practice and Necessary Alliances

The Durban Experience

Nizaam 'Cookie' Edwards

*Provincial coordinator, Kwazulu Natal Network on Violence against Women,
Durban, South Africa*

Summary

South Africa has one of the highest incidences of violence against women in the world. High poverty and unemployment add to a volatile social and political climate, making it particularly difficult for women to attain economic independence and permanently leave abusive partners. Civil society organizations do not receive substantial government support and services are seriously under-staffed and overstretched under the burden of crime and general social pathology in the country.

Overall, there is a real need to increase gender-sensitivity training and specialization of women/victim services within justice, police, health, and shelter services.

Specific recommendations include:

- Specialized Family, Sexual Offences, and Child Abuse Courts must be expanded.
- 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, ex., subsidized housing. There is also an urgent need for 24-hour health care services 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.

Introduction

I am a wife, a mother, a granny and friend to many. I am also a survivor of violence. I started this work because I could identify with what women went through and how hopeless and helpless they felt in abusive relationships. Fourteen years ago I turned my two-bed roomed flat, in a sub-economic area of Durban, into a shelter and counselling

centre for women who were victims of various forms of violence. When women came in for shelter, my family had to leave the living room and wait in one of the bedrooms. As more and more women became aware of what I was doing, I had to turn the living room into a waiting room and my bedroom into a counselling room. When women needed a place to stay, my children had to move off their beds and sleep on the floor, sometimes for weeks on end.

After five years of doing this, I eventually found rent-free rooms at an old municipal clinic and started a support group for abused women. With the help of legal and other professionals, we trained a number of volunteers to assist in the running of the support group. This we did with no funding whatsoever, with me using my husband's wages to cover all costs relating to this work. In the course of my work over the years, I met many other people in this field and, when the network started, our support group became a member organization. The rest is history.

The Kwa-Zulu Natal Network on Violence against Women (KZN-NNVAW) forms part of the National Network on Violence against Women (NNVAW), a national coalition of non-governmental and non-profit organizations working in the field of violence against women. Its main objective is to advocate for the prevention and eradication of all forms of violence against women. The mission of the NNVAW is to be a unified and effective support organization that works towards the eradication of violence against women. The national network acts as an umbrella body for the nine provincial networks in South Africa, which, in their turn, act as umbrella bodies for the various organizations involved in programmes and activities relating to violence against women in their respective provinces. The KZN Network consists of about ±300 member organizations spread right across the province. In addition we also actively build networks and alliances with relevant government departments, civil society bodies and women's groupings in communities.

Women and Safety: Durban, South Africa

GENERAL CONTEXT

South Africa has one of the highest incidences of violence against women (and children) in the world. This is one of the saddest and most alarming manifestations of violence in a society, generally regarded as traumatized and wracked by violent crime and [very often] violent interpersonal and public behaviour. Although the causes of the high levels of violence in South African society are manifold and complex, they broadly relate to the country's violent history of colonialism and apartheid. One can also safely assume that the high levels of poverty¹ and unemployment² in the country and the resultant economic hardships and frustrations add to the already volatile social and political atmosphere in the country.

Apart from the patriarchal attitudes, which we share with other societies, the harsh economic realities of South Africa make it particularly difficult for women to attain economic independence. As a result, many women are unable to permanently leave their abusive partners, thus failing to protect themselves and their children from physical, sexual, emotional, economic and other forms of abuse. As times get harder and choices extreme narrow, more women and young girls resort to prostitution as a way of survival. Studies have shown that increasingly this includes ordinary rural women who have lost all traditional means of livelihood. In some cases they have been abandoned by a male partner or [increasingly] been left destitute by the premature death of their partner due to AIDS. Having to resort to sex work obviously makes women more vulnerable to sexual abuse/ attack, but also to the very real risk of HIV/AIDS infection³.

Apart from the historical and socio-economic realities mentioned here, people who work in this field are also up against enormous challenges regarding the transformation of various relevant state departments. Although South Africa has a progressive constitution and a lot of new progressive legislation regarding women's rights and issues, the real battle is to force their proper implementation. On the one hand,

it's clearly a case of new wine in old bottles, in that many government departments are stuck in old bureaucratic ways of doing things. On the other hand, ironically, many departments are caught up in complex internal transformation processes that have, in practice, created a lot of insecurity and lack of motivation amongst staff. Lastly, the departments of Justice and the South Africa Police Services are quite simply totally overstretched under the burden of crime and general social pathology in the country.

TAKING UP THE CHALLENGE

The above then, very briefly, is the context within which the many organizations and volunteers that form part of the Network have to do their work. Clearly the challenges are almost overwhelming and, to have any impact at all, there is a strong need to co-ordinate exceedingly well and build strong alliances within the sector but also across society. This should include strong links with relevant government departments, business, media, civil society (including churches), traditional leaders and healers and, lastly, communities. To meet these challenges, in an ideal world, each organization would have specialized in a particular aspect of woman's safety. In reality most organizations involved in the network have no choice, but to involve themselves in every single aspect of this work, viz. everybody gets involved in all the various stages⁴ of assisting victims of domestic violence and sexual offences. We therefore have no alternative than to spread ourselves very thinly, but we do accept this enormous task and most of us do it with lots of passion and very little resources.

Our work then generally covers the following areas/ activities:

- 1) Constant crisis intervention/ guiding victims through the bureaucratic maze;
- 2) Training volunteers & service providers (lay counseling, gender awareness, etc.);
- 3) Monitor work of volunteers;
- 4) Victim empowerment programmes;

- 5) Advice/assist in setting up trauma rooms (usually in or adjacent to police stations);
- 6) Awareness-raising and dissemination of information (in all sectors of society);
- 7) Refer victims to shelters (7 in DMA⁵ for population of 3 million);
- 8) Advocacy/ lobbying;
- 9) Submissions on draft bills/ legislation.

BASIC SHORTCOMINGS IN SERVICE DELIVERY

- 1) Lack of co-ordination between government departments on all matters/ issues relating to women's empowerment.
- 2) Lack of capacity in relevant government departments to implement progressive legislation and practice.
- 3) Despite government's public commitment to prioritize violence against women issues, they have no time-frames/ performance indicators in place concerning service delivery.
- 4) The lack of ongoing training to sensitize service-providers who deal with victims of violence (and monitoring their progress).
- 5) Government is not taking responsibility for putting up/ supporting shelters for abused women, thus making it entirely the responsibility of civil society organizations.
- 6) Local government has a very limited grasp of violence against women issues and makes no provisions for it in its programmes and budgets.
- 7) No 24 hours services, particularly for health facilities.
- 8) Government does not provide emergency monetary relief and/or interim social relief grants for abused women.
- 9) The majority of civil society organizations in this sector do not receive any substantial financial support from government and are, therefore, almost entirely dependent on foreign donor funding and/or voluntary contributions.

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Although the Network generally does not have the resources and/or capacity to conduct research in any conventional sense, all our activities, in a sense, involve information gathering. We operate at the cutting-edge of society, both in terms of our hands-on approach with individuals, communities, government department, etc. We are also there where policy/ legislation is made and/or influenced and are usually on the forefront of advocacy and lobbying campaigns. If anyone can thus clearly discern or identify new or emerging trends, it will be members of the network. In terms of more recent research methodologies, our work fits in quite comfortably with the notion of participatory or action research, in that we constantly gather information and use it in our dealings with policy-makers and other role players; or to back up our advocacy and lobbying campaigns. All we therefore need is time, increased know-how and financial and human resources, in order to document the information and experiences. In this way, we can make a unique and powerful contribution, in that we can really relay the voices of the women of this country and their lived realities.

Specific policy/ practical recommendations

JUSTICE

Women are still experiencing a number of problems in courts. They have difficulty accessing justice mainly because they are afraid of further victimization and they lack information on how the system works. Women who are abused are also abused by the system. When going to court, they have to sit in the same room as the perpetrator and that puts them in an unsafe situation again. There is therefore an urgent need for user-friendly rooms in all the courts for victims and witnesses of crime.

Personnel working on family matters are generally not gender sensitive. Career-pathing, proper training and psychological services in Family Court Sections in the Court should be high on the agenda of the Justice Department. As a result of the afore-said,

staff should make a career of family court work, thus, building up specialized expertise in this field. As such, the necessary expertise will be retained within the family court centres resulting in better service delivery to victims of violence.

Magistrates too, are generally not gender sensitive and as a result cases are often postponed and prolonged. Similar to other court/ justice staff, there is also a strong need for magistrates to develop sensitivity and specialized expertise in this field, thus ensuring that crimes arising from gender violence can be treated with the priority they deserve.

Furthermore, there is a need for every court to have an NGO Advice Desk that would provide women with information about their rights and the status of their cases. This is especially so, in view of the fact that the courts are terribly short-staffed.

Specialized courts such as the Sexual Offences Courts and Child Abuse Courts must be rolled out throughout the country. The National Prosecuting Authority should assist with the progress as to deal with the huge backlogs in sexual offences and domestic violence cases.

The courts presently do not look at other sentencing options like periodical imprisonment. As a result, complainants are sometimes reluctant to press charges against their abusive partners for fear that they may be imprisoned. For instance, in the case of periodical imprisonment perpetrators would serve their sentences during weekends and still be employed in the week instead of losing their jobs. In order to realize the aforementioned suggestion, a training budget especially aimed at family court personnel is of paramount importance.

Finally, the Department of Justice must put in place proper monitoring and evaluation processes to ensure the smooth implementation of the Domestic Violence Act and other related legislation.

SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE SERVICES (SAPS)

Notwithstanding the radical transformation process SAPS has undergone, e.g., by initiating the Service Delivery Programme, The Community Policing Forums (CPF's) and Trauma Centres, there are still a number of shortcomings in terms of services delivery. This is mainly due to the lack of logistical and financial support from government. The following are some of the problems that we are still faced with:

- 1) It is embarrassing for women who had already been traumatized to give a statement in a charge office in view of the public. In most instances, police do not inform victims of their rights and are not gender sensitive. Also, police tend not to take complaints about domestic violence seriously, often arriving late on the scene [or not at all], a situation that has sometimes resulted in femicide. Part of the problem is that many police stations, particularly in under-resourced areas, are understaffed and have only one vehicle to service a whole area.
- 2) Police officers need to be trained and sensitized in dealing with issues regarding women's safety. As in most cases the police officer, who takes down the statement or assists the women is male. Some of the stations have victim empowerment rooms (trauma rooms), which are, in many cases, not properly utilized, often being used as staff rooms or storage rooms.
- 3) There are clearly enormous gaps in the SAPS's own efforts to train their staff regarding gender-sensitivity and the necessary attitudinal change. For example, they received three hours training: two hours on the new Domestic Violence Act and one hour to change attitudes of police officers. Government clearly need to revisit their training programme for police and implement ways that would be more beneficial & effective in dealing with women's safety in regard to violence against women issues. Ideally, police stations should have specialized units at station level dealing with women's issues.

- 4) On a more basic level, some stations have very poor facilities and are so under-resourced [and under-motivated] that they do not seem able to provide a more effective service to communities. Government really needs to provide more resources for Police Stations so officers can perform their duties in a sensitive and professional manner.

- 5) Police should work together with residents and community organizations in their areas to create Community Policing Forums that work for the uplift of the community and also let the residents in the communities take co-responsibility for some of the problems.

SHELTERS

Shelters are temporary accommodation and women cannot live in these shelters all their lives so government needs to prioritize housing that is subsidized. The Department of Housing should therefore include plans for women in abusive situations in their long-term housing policy. Skills development to ensure that women have access to economic opportunities is also important, as well as prioritizing employment so abused women can become financially independent.

Government should also ideally partner with shelters to provide job skills training for shelter residents to generate an income.

HEALTH CARE

Health care personnel also need to be trained and sensitized about violence against women issues. At present, when a victim of domestic violence arrives at a clinic or hospital, all they can expect is clinical care. In the majority of cases, there is not even the beginning of a more holistic understanding or approach to the issue. This needs to change urgently. In the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal, 41 areas have been identified to provide 24-hour health care for victims of violence (with particular emphasis on women

and children), but at present only 5 of these are fully operative. Like in the other areas of service delivery, there is clearly a very long way to go here as well.

Conclusion

At this point in time, women in South Africa are definitely far from being safe in their homes, cities, rural areas, wherever they are. South Africa is presently a violent society, and women and children tend to bear the major brunt of that. Living in fear and being constantly inhibited in their freedom of movement, most definitely does not encourage gender equality. It curtails women's mobility and limits their equality to participate fully and freely as citizens. Thus, in spite of some of the world's most progressive legislation, women in our country still have a long struggle ahead.

I have made a lot of recommendations above, but for them to have any effect at all, some [super]-agency has to take ultimate responsibility for coordinating the work and the training of the different role players, thus ensuring an holistic approach in dealing with violence against women issues. That will hopefully also alleviate some of the present duplication of services and political ball playing between different role players. That is why it is so important to have the specialized services, e.g in courts, police stations, health care facilities, welfare, etc., that I mentioned above. It is also of the utmost important that such an agency develops an excellent monitoring and evaluation system, in order to track the progress/ performance [or the lack thereof] of the different service providers.

It must be clear to you, ladies & gentlemen, that women in South Africa are still up against enormous challenges, but as we say in our network: **Women of Africa won't be beaten.**

¹ It is estimated that up to 50% of the country's population live in conditions of absolute poverty.

² Estimates range from the official 30% to region specific rates of up to 80%

- ³ The province of KZN in South Africa has the sad distinction that it has the highest HIV/AIDS infection rates in the world.
- ⁴ That is, from immediately after the crime was committed against her, through the whole process, e.g. laying a charge at the police, getting medical care, shelter [if needed], counseling & dealing with the justice system.
- ⁵ Durban Metropolitan Area