Gender, Domestic Violence, and the Spread of HIV/AIDS

Frieda Haikuti (University of Namibia)
Linea Munenguni (University of Namibia)
Nangosora Tjipitua (University of Namibia)
Fillemon Immanuel Wise (University of Namibia)
Archibald Shipanga (University of Namibia)
Joy Okezie (Polytechnic of Namibia)
Veno Kauaria –Facilitator (American Cultural Center)

Death, Destruction, Devastation and Doom are the four letter D words, we the youth of Namibia are using to describe the current devastating situation in our country. It is a pity, that a country that is rich in natural resources will soon be poor in human resources. In Namibia human lives are being wasted through either domestic violence or HIV/AIDS.

According to UNAIDS report on Global Aids Epidemic, July 2004, Namibia has one of the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rates in the world. The same report also states that in 2003, 210,000 people estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS in Namibia, in simple terms, is more than one in five adults. If figures such as these don’t spell DEATH we don’t know what does or what will. The sad reality is, the majority of the people living with HIV/AIDS in Namibia are women.

How does International Gender-Based Violence compare to our own situation in Namibia?

• In 48 population-based surveys from around the world, 10-69 percent of women reported being physically assaulted by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives.
• Intimate partners commit 40-70 percent of homicides of women worldwide
• Around the world, 1 in 3 women have been beaten and coerced into sex. Most often, the abuser is a member of her own family.

Domestic Violence Cases Reported to the Namibian Police:
a joint publication of the LAC and the Law Reform and Development Commission (2000)

Revealed the following frightening statistics on violence against women:

• 86% of the victims were female, compared to only 14% male. In violent crimes other than domestic violence, about 60% of the complainants were male and about 40% female. Thus, if domestic violence could be eliminated from our society, women would be significantly safer from violence.
• Most domestic violence crimes reported to the police are committed by men – about 93%. A similar pattern holds true for other violent crimes reported to the police, showing that men are responsible for most of the violent crime in our society.
• Most of the domestic violence in the survey sample was perpetuated by boyfriends against their girlfriends, either during the course of the relationship or after it had come to an end. The next most prevalent category was that of violence committed by husbands against their wives, followed by violence committed by brothers against their sisters. In the majority of cases (more than 60%), the complaintant and the accused were living in the same household at the time the violence occurred.
• Most victims of domestic violence experienced the incident that gave rise to the charge in their own homes, or sometimes in the accused home or in another private home. Overall, almost 68% of domestic violence took place in the complainant’s home, compared to only about 24% of other violent crimes.
Except for police statistics. Today, it has become normal practice to pick up a daily newspaper e.g. *The Namibian, Die Republikein* etc. and read the following headlines:

- Juanita Mabula, 21, a single mother and commercial sex worker, was found naked and beheaded nearly three weeks ago along a main road in Windhoek West, a suburb of the capital, Windhoek.
- At Grootfontein, a 12-year-old girl was raped on Friday in the bush behind the Blikkiesdorp township.
- Boyfriend kills girlfriend over loss of manhood.
- Swapo Member of Parliament Doreen Sioka claimed some MPs were paying lip service to the cause of combating domestic violence while they themselves were engaged in “exercising domestic violence by beating up their wives and girlfriends”.
- A Supreme Court Judge Pio Teek, is facing charges of rape, attempted rape, indecent assault, kidnapping and supplying liquor to minors.
- Monika Florin was murdered by her husband, who later cooked her remains.

With headlines such as these and our lawmakers being accused of being perpetrators of domestic violence themselves, we the youth would like to get an answer to the following questions from our lawmakers: Where is our country heading?

**What do we see as contributing Factors of women Risking getting HIV/AIDS and becoming victims of Domestic Violence?**

- Some Cultural Practices promotes Polygamy – “a man who only has one partner is not a true man”
- Cultural Practices of “ACCEPTING Polygamy is a male thing”
- Cultural Practices of “Stealing partners” or sharing men
- Cultural practices of Male dominance and female submission
- High unemployment among women
- A low socio-economic status of women
- A lack of education
- Alcohol Abuse by both sexes
- Prostitution (due to economic status)
- Complexity of the female condom and its in availability
- Abused women are afraid to ask their partners to use condoms for Fear of being abused further.
- Forced sex – Wives are not supposed to deny husbands sex nor ask to use protection
- Myths: Traditional Healers encouraging HIV positive men to have sex with virgins, therefore encouraging incest and child molestation
- Some local practices encourage men to beat up their wives as a sign of love.
- Traditional Upbringing – Women are not supposed to talk a lot. A shy woman is the best woman. She’ll never give men any trouble. Women who talk a lot are not good. No man should marry such a woman.
- Some studies show a strong correlation between domestic violence and the spread of HIV/AIDS. Violence and poverty forces many women to remain in violent and dangerous relationships where, they are often subjected to rape and HIV infection by their HIV-positive partners. Recent research in Uganda shows that abusive men often intentionally infect their partners with HIV.
- Domestic violence limits women’s movements including health care, testing and getting treatment, as abusive partners often prevent women from visiting friends relatives and seeking help.
As we stated before, some of our Parliamentarians and Judges are guilty of some of these crimes and these are the people to whom we are supposed to look up to. If they themselves practice polygamy and see nothing wrong in beating up their wives and children, who will help make a change? Police officers, who’re supposed to uphold the law are perpetrators of some of the most hideous crimes committed against women and children in this country.

Violence against women and girls is a global problem. Like most other countries, there is a strong relationship between violence and the spread of HIV/AIDS, and an even stronger correlation between poverty and domestic violence, in Namibia. Poverty forces women and children to stay in violent relationships where very often they are subjected to rape and HIV infection by their HIV-positive partners. It is said that in Uganda, abusing partners who’re positive, intentionally infect their girlfriends or spouses.

In marriage, women are not supposed to refuse their husband sex. Asking your husband to use a condom is a no-no. Due to these practices, married women who’s husbands are publicly known to have multiple partners are at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS.

**How do parents encourage Gender-based violence?**

- Encouraging the boy-child to be tough and girl-child to be soft and feminine

The above fact may come as a shock to most of us, but it is unfortunately the truth. Our patriarchal society teaches children that girls are supposed to be soft and boys are supposed to be strong. Without realizing it, parents teach their boy-child to disrespect women and be aggressive. The fact that boys are raised differently from girls is one example of parental mistake. Secondly, parents discourage their boys from showing emotions. “Don’t cry, you’re not a girl”. As Veronica De Klerk of WAD said, “the parental home is where the seeds of disrespect for women are being planted”.

**How can our churches, parents and community in general help eliminate Gender-based violence from our Society?**

- Change the way children are raised. Teach children to respect one another and give them equal roles to play in the house.
- Early childhood education. Discourage violence/fighting at home and at schools.
- With 90% Namibians who are Christians, the churches can play a crucial role by preaching against violence and polygamy.
- Community leaders and Church officials should lead by examples.

**Efforts from the Government**

Legislations have been passed, to ensure, promote gender equality and protect Women and Children from gender-based violence.

- Married Persons Equality Act 1996

The Government has also shown its commitment to combating abuse of women and children by establishing a Women and Law Committee in the Law Reform and Development Commission (LRDC) to focus on legislation that discriminates against women. A number of protocols for police, prosecutors and magistrates have accompanied these Acts. Namibia is part of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and children.

**How can Namibia lower its HIV/AIDS status from being one of the countries with the highest infection rates to the least infected country?**
• Churches should help with sex education
• Young people should be encouraged to delay having intimate relationships
• Women should be encouraged to be assertive – Give assertiveness education to women in order to break the silence
• Women should be empowered – economically and academically
• Eliminate cultural “mentalities” such as men being the “bosses”
• Eliminate Gender-based discrimination – certain roles of women and certain roles of men
• Compulsory sex education
• More educational TV programs
• The media should stop “glamourizing” alcohol and sex
• HIV/AIDS should become a notifiable decease

According to some reports from the Ministry of Health and Social Services, the prevalence rate of 35-39 age group is still on the increase, as we know these are the productive years.

References
Die Republikein Dec. 2000

Key Sources/Websites
Government of Namibia, Ministry of Health and Social Services: www.healthnet.org.na/
Namibia Network of AIDS Service Organisations: www.sanaso.org.zw/country-networks.htm#namibia
Voice of America: http://www1.voanews.com/article.cfm?objected
Family Violence Prevention Fund. www.endabuse.org