

AN ANALYSIS OF ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN RURAL AREAS OF LEPELLE-NKUMPI MUNICIPALITY, LIMPOPO PROVINCE

Mmabatho Portia Aphane

Tshwane University of Technology

Jacob Tseko Mofokeng

Tshwane University of Technology

E-mail: mofokengjt@tut.ac.za

-Abstract-

This seeks to identify the contributing factors of domestic violence against women in the rural areas of Magatle, Lebowakgomo and Zebediela policing area. A quantitative self-administrative survey was used; the primary data was collected from respondents comprised of ordinary heads of households (both men and women), community leaders (mostly men) in the area and police officers stationed within the three police stations, namely Lebowakgomo, Magatle and Zebediela. Responses obtained from 978 of 1527 questionnaires distributed to respondents, of which 721 were ordinary heads of households (both men and women) (38.2%), 168 community leaders (mostly men) (31.9%) and 89 SAPS officials (29.9%). African respondents were in majority making up of 975 (98.8%) and unknown 13 (1.2%). The findings indicated that many African women experience violence in partner relationships. Formal and informal social networks assisted these women to some extent. It would seem as if the low conviction rate could be influenced by a myriad of issues, such as the effective implementation of the Domestic Violence Act (Act 116 of 1998), by the South African Police Service (SAPS); the characteristics of the people involved in the incident, the victim's relationship with the offender and whether the offender remained at the crime scene. Based on the findings, it is the view of the authors that the majority of rural women are not yet adequately familiar with laws against domestic violence despite decades into a democratic dispensation in South Africa. Thus, the response by the SAPS to domestic violence calls is essential as police officers often serve as the gateway to the legal community through first-response action.

Keywords: Domestic violence, police, women, rural area, abuse

JEL Classification: K42

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of democratic dispensation in South Africa, domestic violence is one of the societal issues that have increasingly emerged as a local as well as global concern. As part of the global community, it has been observed that South Africa has positioned itself as part of a worldwide trend of establishing and enhancing women's rights, including protecting women against various forms of violence. Gender-based violence (GBV) is the most pervasive form of abuse and a violation of essential human rights (Bendall, 2010). He further argues that violence of this nature is often hidden from view and is not discussed openly. This could be for a number of reasons. For example, women are afraid to speak out about what they are going through due to fear of retaliation by their partners. Some also fear the reactions of others to them should they choose to disclose the abuse. They therefore prefer to remain silent in order to maintain the appearance of a happy home. Furthermore, women in South Africa are predominantly still under the control of men and often simply accept their situation as the victim. As a result, it is impossible to quantify the full extent of the problem and statistics tend to underestimate its full extent.

Apart from being treated as a private matter, research also shows that GBV and sexual violence lead to a wide range of short and long-term physical, mental and sexual problems (Archer, 2006). Research also indicates that domestic violence is an ancient phenomenon and as old as recorded history itself. Its roots go back to ancient Greece and the dawn of European civilization. Lately it has been documented in virtually all societies, in most countries and has been accepted legally, socially and culturally (Cunningham & Baker, 2007; Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth), 2007). In addition, it is evident that awareness regarding the rights of victims and the remedial action available, was not aggressively pursued, although legislation highlighting the challenges and the plight confronting victims of domestic violence was already in place (Human Rights Watch Report, 1997).

Consequently, the South African Domestic Violence Act (DVA) (Act No. 116 of 1998) came into being because of a participative forum, which involved Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) to deal with all forms of abuse that confronted women. The Act was considered as a catalyst to address violence against women, and to provide them with adequate protection. The DVA (Act No. 116 of 1998), was introduced with the aim of affording women protection from domestic

violence, by laying obligations on law enforcement agencies to protect women (the victims of abuse) as far as it is possible. The Act sets out a broad range of behaviours that constitute domestic violence: these include physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and psychological abuse, stalking, intimidation, harassment, malicious damage to property, unauthorised access to the complainant's property, as well as other forms of controlling behavior which may cause harm to the safety, health or wellbeing of the complainant.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

There are concerns that domestic violence against women has become more prevalent. It is encountered by women from all walks of life and infringes upon their fundamental human rights. The rights of women that are thus violated are, *inter alia*, the right to equality and dignity as enshrined in Section 9 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996). Domestic violence and abuse against women prohibit them from exercising their right to participate in the community and freely express their views (Section 9 of the Republic of South Africa (1996)). The prevalence of violence also raises concerns regarding protection of their human rights (Vetten, 2014:2). While some studies conducted in South Africa offer some insight into the nature of domestic violence, neither they nor police data offer accurate indicators of the prevalence of domestic violence. These estimates are better derived from community-based surveys of representative samples of women and men.

A few such studies have been conducted in South Africa, chiefly of intimate partner violence. The researcher is of the view that not many women, especially from rural areas, know where to go for help when faced with violence and abuse. This is exacerbated by the fact that violence often occurs in a domestic relationship and may not be that easy for the victim to come out in public for assistance about the issue. To make matters worse, when such violence occurs, the victims are helpless due to lack of facilities, such as a health service and guidance and counselling centres. Hence this article seeks to investigate the responses by the South African Police Service (SAPS) to victims of domestic violence at Lebowakgoma, Magatle and Zebediela policing area in the Northern region of Limpopo Province.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Conceptual framework

Domestic Violence is regarded as a serious social evil and South Africa is one of the countries with high incidences of domestic violence. The DVA, 1998 (Act 116 of 1998), was enacted with the main purpose to afford the victims of domestic violence maximum protection from domestic abuse, that the law can provide. The Act further introduced measures which seek to ensure that relevant organs of state give full effect to the provisions of this Act, and thereby to convey a message that the State is committed to the elimination of domestic violence. According to the Department of Social Development (2014:4), the high level of violence against women and children is particularly alarming and continues to have a devastating and lasting effect on survivors. It also harms communities and families across generations, and constitutes one of the key drivers of the human immune-deficiency (HIV) epidemic in the country.

3.2 Direct impact

Garratt (2012:21) argues that though domestic violence can happen to anyone irrespective of gender, women and children are in greater danger in places where they should be safe within their families. For many, home is where they face a regime of terror and violence at the hand of somebody close to them, somebody they should be able to trust, they are unable to make their own decision or voice their opinion or protect themselves. Their human rights are being denied and their lives are stolen from them by the ever-present threat of violence. Dysfunctional families characterised by conflict, abuse, neglect, fear and misbehaviour of children have the ability to foster and legitimise oppression of certain family members, especially women and children (Department of Social Development (2013), as cited in Department of Social Development, 2014:4). Research indicates that there is a common link between domestic violence and child abuse (Unicef, 2006:4). Global data shows that, in addition to the adult female partner, a significant number of cases of domestic violence are also perpetrated against children (Pinhiero, 2006:13). Among victims of child abuse, 40 per cent report domestic violence in the home (World Health Organisation (2002) as cited in Unicef, 2006:4).

According to Brown and Bzostek (2003:1–13), children who have been exposed to domestic violence, are more likely than their peers, to experience a wide range

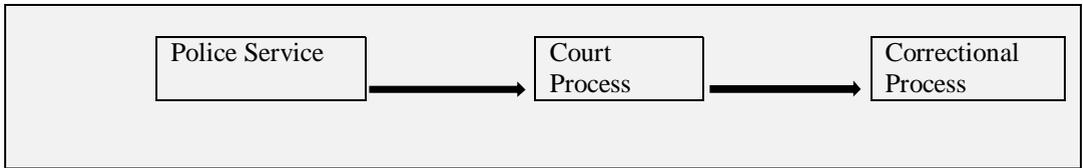
of difficulties. Behavioural, social and emotional problems of children in families experiencing domestic violence are more likely than other children to exhibit aggressive and antisocial behaviour or to be depressed and anxious. Cognitive and attitudinal problems of children exposed to domestic violence, are more likely to experience difficulties in school and score lower on assessments of verbal, slower cognitive development, lack of conflict resolution skills and use violence to solve problems. Males engaged in domestic violence as children, are more likely to engage in domestic violence as adults and similarly, females are more likely to become victims. Children who witness domestic violence and especially physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abuse are at a higher risk for psychological maladjustment than children who did not witness violence and abuse (Bunston, 2008; Rosewater & Goodmark, 2007).

Children and youth learn about healthy relationships by watching and modelling the relationships they witness. Children who are exposed to domestic violence may later repeat the abuse they see, thinking that it is a normal part of relationships. This can be especially concerning with young adults forging their first romantic relationships. Child welfare professionals, domestic violence victim advocates and related professionals can work together to help youth understand that healthy relationships are nonviolent relationships. They can help young people who have experienced dating violence, develop resilience and healing (Browne, Notkin, Schneider-Muñoz & Zimmerman, 2015:33–52).

3.3 Criminal justice system's response to domestic violence

Maxfield and Babbie (2005:42) assert that the Criminal Justice System (CJS) is a field founded on many other disciplines, such as sociology, economics, geography, political science, psychology, anthropology and biology. At its basic structure, the CJS encompasses the police, courts and correctional processes. The police service represents the law enforcement component, the courts process represents the adjudication, and the correctional process represents the (re)making of people to suit the system. These sub-systems are related to one another (Chamelin, Fox & Whisenand, 1975) as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: The criminal justice system model



Source: Chamelin, Fox and Whisenand (1975:3)

South Africa's CJS response to domestic violence is the DVA (Act 116 of 1998), which is also referred to in the Firearms Control Act of 2000. The Firearms Control Act seeks to restrict those with a history of domestic violence from owning firearms, given their role in domestic violence and intimate femicide. Other pieces of legislation relevant to combating domestic violence in its many forms, include the Older Person's Act of 2006 and the Children's Act of 2005. The Protection from Harassment Act of 2011, is also important for the protection it offers against electronic harassment. The DVA is, however, the most studied of these laws (Vetten, 2014:4). Many of the initial aspects of victim reporting include situational, relational and systems-level factors that influence battered women's use of either the police, prosecutorial or court systems. It is interesting to note that Fleury-Steiner, Bybee, Sullivan, Belknap & Melton (2006:327–342), have examined how these factors each influence women's intentions to reuse these systems, in the event of future violence. Fleury *et al.*, (2006:327–342), reported that employed women were more likely to want further involvement with these systems; felt supported by their communities; received information about services from the police; found case outcomes consistent with their desires; and felt that the criminal legal system treated them well. Victims were less inclined to tend to use the system in the future if they were legally or financially tied to their perpetrators; they had been assaulted again before the court case was closed; court proceedings had been cancelled at least once; or, they had been pressurised rather than supported by the criminal legal system (Fleury *et al.*, 2006:327–342).

4. METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, a quantitative method was utilised. Supporting this quantitative strategy, a single cross-sectional descriptive survey design was adopted. A cross-sectional survey collected data that makes inferences about a population of interest (universe) at one point in time (Davies, 2007:84). The Kaiser-Meyer measure of sampling adequacy, performed on the measuring

instrument of the questionnaire in order to determine whether a factor analysis is appropriate for the data. The measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) =0.7093 which was adequate to perform a factor analysis (Kaiser, 1974:31-36), was realised. Descriptive statistics were analysed using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) software. Responses obtained from 978 of 1527 questionnaire were distributed to respondents, of which 721 were ordinary heads of households (38.2%), 168 community leaders (31.9%) and 89 the SAPS officials (29.9%). African respondents were in the majority, making up of 975 (98.8%) and unknown 13 (1.2%). Attitudes and perceptions of domestic violence against women in a rural area of Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality policing area, were measured by asking four statements and structuring the answers on a five-point Likert type scale, where 1=totally disagree, 2= disagree, 3=uncertain, 4=agree, and 5=totally agree.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1 below depicts that the highest agreement is exhibited for the variable, 'Domestic violence is a serious problem in the community of Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality with a mean agreement score of 4.45', followed by 'Domestic violence is regarded as one of the most frequent types of violence that the police encounter in this area' with a mean agreement score of 4.25 and the third highest agreement is observed for the variable 'A significant amount of domestic violence incidents are unreported in my area' with a mean agreement score of 4.04. The above table also shows that the lowest agreement is exhibited for the variable 'Members of the community in my area overlook abuse perpetuated in the name of customary norms of practices' with a mean agreement score of 2.60.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for contributing constructs

Contributing Construct Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.Domestic violence is a serious problem in the community of Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality	4.45	.865
2.Domestic violence is regarded as one of the most frequent types of violence that the police encounter in this area	4.25	.584
3.A significant amount of domestic violence incidents are unreported in my area	4.04	.793
4.Members of the community in my area overlook abuse perpetuated in the name of customary norms of practices	2.60	1.02

The highest variation of opinion is observed for the variable, ‘Members of the community in my area overlook abuse perpetuated in the name of customary norms of practices’ with a standard deviation of 1.02, the second highest variation of opinion is observed for the variable ‘Domestic violence is a serious problem in the community of Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality’ with a standard deviation of .865 and the third highest variation of opinion is observed for the variable ‘A significant amount of domestic violence incidents are unreported in my area’ with a standard deviation of .793. The lowest variation of opinion is observed for the variable ‘Domestic violence is regarded as one of the most frequent types of violence that the police encounter in this area’ with a standard deviation of .584. These variables are discussed below in the form of statements to add more meaning to Table 1 above.

Statement 1: Domestic violence is a serious problem in the community of Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality

A significant high proportion of respondents, ninety percent (90.1%) felt that domestic violence is prevalent in the community of Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality, compared with ten percent (09.9%). Regarding the perceptions of respondents, it was observed that, the significant majority of respondents, approximately eighty

percent (79.8%) considered domestic violence as a serious problem in the community of Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality. Overall seventy-three percent (72.5%) of the respondents, amongst male and female respondents, indicated that the majority of the rural women tolerate domestic violence, due to variety of reasons such as, cultural practices and customary norms. It also emerged from the findings that some of the rural women, on some occasions, tried to convince the perpetrator, forty percent (35.9%) to seek help outside, such as with relatives, neighbours or the NGOs comprising of four percent (4.3%).

Analysis from community members, of which 721 were ordinary heads of households (38.2%), 168 community leaders (31.9%), revealed that among other socio-demographic variables, age, educational and marital status were significantly associated with the domestic violence in this study. It was observed that the females between the age group of 30–39 years, comprised of thirty-nine percent (39.0%), whereas those between the age group of 26–35 years, consisted of thirty-five percent (34.6%). These cohorts, based on the findings, were highly exposed to domestic violence. Maximum prevalence was observed among the illiterates, comprising of fifty percent (49.5%), followed by only literates with a Grade 12 Certificate, consisted of twenty-six percent (26.3%). Unmarried females which consisted of fifty-one percent (51.3%), were more exposed to domestic violence than married females comprising of forty-nine percent (48.7%) and there were no widowed/divorced female respondents.

The high prevalent rates of domestic violence against women among rural families in this study, suggested that a high occurrence of domestic violence against women has festered, despite all of the media campaigns against it in South Africa. These findings also indicated that rural women were more likely to condone the extent of domestic violence. The high prevalence of domestic violence in the community of Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality, could be attributed to the fact that rural women were more likely to be less educated and economically disempowered, than their urban counterparts. The survey results were consistent with ethnographic evidence that the women in rural areas in a household are the most disempowered members (Machisa & Musariri, 2013; Musariri, Nyambo & Machisa, 2013), but less is known about the remaining power dynamics between various genders and generations. It is also common in rural settings, especially among black communities, for the senior generation to make decisions on behalf of a couple, even if they do not reside in the same household.

Statement 2: Domestic violence is regarded as one of the most frequent types of violence that the police encounter in this area

An overwhelming majority comprised of eighty-seven percent (86.9%), agreed that domestic violence is regarded as one of the most frequent types of violence that the police encounter in the community of Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality, compared with a mere thirteen percent (13.1%) of the respondents who disagreed. Based on the findings, a gloomy picture is portrayed regarding the prevalence of incidents of domestic violence under the area of study. Based on the findings of this study, one could make safe deductions that women in rural areas are still victimised by their intimate partners despite the existence of a legal framework such as the DVA (Act 116 of 1998), for addressing violence against women.

Among the socio-demographic variables, gender, age, educational and marital status are significantly associated with the domestic violence in this study. It was observed that the females above 39 years of the age group comprised of fifty-nine percent (59.4%), agreed more to this statement. Uneducated and unmarried females respectively, were more in agreement comprised of sixty-six percent (66.2%) than married and literate females comprised of thirty-four percent (33.8%) or widowed/divorced females (none). The findings corroborate that of Sahoo and Pradhan (2007), where these researchers observed that in India, educational level of women makes a substantial difference of being beaten or physically mistreated. Illiterate women have found to experience violence more than three times compared to women who are educated in higher secondary or above. Working women are found to be more mistreated than non-working women since age of 15. The higher the age at marriage, leads to lower the proportion of women to be beaten since age of 15. Women who have been married for less than five years are less likely to have been beaten than women who have a longer marital duration. It is generally believed, that not bearing children and not bearing a son, are important reason for wife beating (Sahoo and Pradhan, 2007).

For this current study, the responses could also be an indicative of poor understanding and implementation of legal provisions by the SAPS officials, scarcity of police resources, the unwillingness of the SAPS officials to act on reports of domestic violence, the serious lack of shelter for victims of domestic violence and the lack of awareness on the side of rural women regarding access to legal aid, together with the government's very limited efforts to tackle domestic violence and harmful traditional practices, suggests that many women fearing gender based persecution will not be able to obtain effective State protection.

Machisa, Jewkes, Lowe Morna and Rama (2010) argue that for this reason, boys have grown up believing that women are slaves, with neither feeling nor blood running through their veins. That is the reason why women abuse in this world is still so rampant. The implications for the SAPS is that as the institution mandated to protect the inhabitants of South Africa, top management and policy makers should therefore carefully assess whether effective protection is available in relation to the particular circumstances and profile of the person. Any past persecution and past lack of effective protection may indicate that effective protection would not be available in the future.

Statement 3: A significant amount of domestic violence incidents are unreported in my area

A significant majority of respondents comprised of sixty-nine percent (68.9%) agreed with the statement that a significant amount of domestic violence incidents are unreported in their area, compared with thirty one percent (31.1%) who did not agree. As highlighted in the previous statement, due to the close-knit social network in rural and small towns, domestic violence victims may keep quiet out of fear of stigma and shame. Some victims might be extremely mindful of being noticed by other community members when entering, say, a local family violence shelter or a local community service centre, commonly known as a police station, thus rendering the victims particularly reluctant to access what few resources and services are available to them. Research indicates that in the absence of affordable transportation, victims of domestic violence in the rural areas may be forced to stay in the relationship and continue to be at risk of being abused. Most notably, geographic isolation in rural areas renders victims unaware of services available or their access to services painstaking (United States (U.S) Department of State, 2013).

The findings of the study by Artz (2011), support the above arguments relating to the cost implications confronting the victims of domestic violence. In a case where a victim of domestic violence reports the incident to the police, the prohibitive costs of transporting the victim from outlying areas, were higher when witnesses were required to stay within the court's jurisdiction in order to testify (Artz, 2011). Furthermore, research relating to domestic violence in South Africa indicates that the under reporting of domestic violence incidents is not a challenge for the police in the rural areas only, but also a in the urban areas as well (Vetten, 2014:2). According to the findings by Machisa, Jewkes, Morna and Rama as cited by Vetten (2014:2), when analysing police statistics, researchers have found

intimate partner violence to be significantly under-reported. Between April 2008 and March 2009, 12 093 women in Gauteng, or less than one percent (0,3%) of the adult female population, reported an assault by an intimate partner to the police. In contrast, during the same time period comprised of eighteen percent (18,1%) of women in the province reported an experience of violence at the hands of intimate male partners to researchers. The South African culture, mostly from the African communities which prescribes obedience and respect for women, may also contribute to this, since women consider opposing their husband or life partner as a rebelliousness or uncultured behaviour normally seen in entertainment industry. Besides that, domestic affairs are something that is usually kept a secret. The mind set of projecting husbands or life partners as the sole authority of the household needs to be changed and this is to be more emphasised by the parents.

Statement 4: Members of the community in my area overlook abuse perpetuated in the name of customary norms of practices

The majority of respondents comprised of sixty-eight percent (67.5%) agreed with the statement, whereas thirty-three percent (32.5%), did not agree. The findings relating to this statement indicated that the prevalence of customary laws in rural areas undermine a women's human rights and access to justice. The responses paint a bleak picture. The majority indicated that in the community of Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality, there were members of the community who still condoned discriminatory cultural practices at the expense of women. The findings further indicated, that despite laws aimed at enhancing women's rights and countering certain discriminatory traditional practices, thus, it could be safely argued by the researcher that women remained disadvantaged in communities of the Lepelle-Nkumpi policing area.

The authors of this paper are of the view that economic dependency and prevailing social norms prevented, rural women in particular, from combating societal discrimination. The findings regarding the challenges brought by dual existence of customary and general laws, such as the Constitution upon the victims of domestic violence, corroborate with those of the study conducted by Chuma and Chazovachii (2012). Chuma and Chazovachii (2012: 0976–1195) found in their study, conducted in the rural area of Zimbabwe, that the dual legal system that prevails in most rural areas, whereby customary and general laws co-exist is hindering the effective implementation of the DVA. Chuma and Chazovachii further argue that “Women are more likely to seek help from the village Chief, because of his respected and widely accepted role in conflict

resolution and peace building, than to go to police officers... Ironically, women in rural areas would neither report cases of violence to the police, nor to the Chief, because they feel that a Chief would not necessarily offer them neutrality and support. On the other hand, they are reluctant to go to the police, since the latter use general laws, which are considered inappropriate in rural areas” (Chuma & Chazovachii, 2012:15).

It is the view of the researcher, that the existence of such structures would be beneficial to victims of domestic violence, especially women and children, as these structures would act as a backbone of the legal system to complement any organs of the State, where the protection of women against domestic violence would be addressed. Currently (2013/2014), the traditional perception that the customary and general spheres of life are distinct and divorced from each other, is a major barrier for the SAPS to intervene or act against violence that occurs within homes.

6. MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

The responses indicated that there was a high probability that the SAPS inaction could be attributed to misunderstanding of or failure to follow the law. The responses could also be indicative of poor understanding and implementation of legal provisions by the SAPS officials, scarcity of police resources, the unwillingness of the SAPS officials to act on reports of domestic violence, the serious lack of shelter for victims of domestic violence and the lack of awareness on the side of rural women regarding access to legal aid, together with the government’s very limited efforts to tackle domestic violence and harmful traditional practices, suggest that many women fearing gender based persecution, will not be able to obtain effective State protection. The criminal justice interventions need to ensure the safety of the victim, by using procedures suited to the level of violence and risk exhibited.

7. CONCLUSION

This article highlighted the prevalence of incidents of domestic violence in the area under study. This article indicates that justified female empowerment and enlightenment in the form of education, culture and economic productivity may help reduce this social, as well as public health problems. In order to effectively address these problems, a multidisciplinary approach to formulate fundamentally sound public awareness measures is essential. There is need for sustained educational campaigns to bring change in the community’s attitudes, particularly

those females themselves. Similarly, educational programmes to target boys and girls are necessary, to prevent violence from being perpetuated generation after generation. There is a need for organizations that would support and help adult and adolescent females, who are victims of domestic violence in the community with shelter, legal aid and an awareness increase.

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