

Wife beating still acceptable in some communities in Namibia

The beating of women is still everyday practice in communities in the north – and it is not only accepted as a rightful cultural practice by men, but even more so by women themselves. This was one of the findings of a 2009 baseline study for the United Nations Joint Programme on Gender and Development, conducted among 300 women and men in ten rural and peri-urban communities in the Ohangwena, Oshana and Caprivi regions in. Women's acceptance of wife beating was found to be especially high in the Caprivi Region (71%) and among the San population (94%).

Wives seen as subordinate to husbands

A repeatedly cited reason for wife beating was women's subordinate position in marriage and that men consequently feel entitled to discipline women if they 'disrespect' them. Examples of such 'disrespect' include going out without seeking permission, an untidy house, food that is not ready on time or accusations of wives having affairs.

The payment of *lobola* was also cited by many women as a reason for promoting violence against them, because in practice *lobola* means that 'women can be regarded as property of their husbands.' Once married and paid for, they are expected to fulfil certain obligations and if they fail to do so, strict discipline is seen to be justified.

It was also said that peer pressure among men to exercise their male 'authority' often reinforces violence against women. This cultural acceptance of wife beating leads to women suffering in silence, regarding the beatings as a private matter with little hope for intervention from the community or the state except in very severe cases.

In all three regions, people agreed that alcohol abuse was the main cause for the increasing violence in the communities involved in the study. Another factor named

was women's low level of economic empowerment: they usually do not own property or have their own income, and are thus completely dependent on their husbands for housing, access to land, and cash.

Low self-esteem among women

The finding that the majority of women in the communities studied accept wife beating as a normal part of life and as their 'husband's right', is an alarming sign of women's continued low self-esteem, states the report. For most situations, especially if the motive is the neglect of children, women accept wife beating even more readily than men.

It is interesting to note that the middle-aged women interviewed were the least tolerant towards wife beating, while - against all expectations - the youngest group of women (15-24 years) accepted wife beating more readily. An explanation given in the report was that the present-day young generation has often been raised by grandparents and thus been instilled with traditional

values, while the middle-aged group has also been influenced by television, radio and public campaigns against gender based violence.

Setting things right

The UN Joint Gender and Development Programme for Namibia: *Setting things right – towards gender equality and equity* will become operational in 7 of the 13 regions of Namibia, with a special emphasis on issues such as problems faced by women-headed households, girls' education, gender-based violence, the protection and expansion of women's socio-economic and political rights, and enhanced rural employment and income through the diversification of livelihood strategies for women and girls.

The baseline study recommends that gender sensitivity, HIV and Aids awareness, and prevention of gender-based violence need to be an integral part of all interventions in all communities. These would include legal literacy programmes, challenging existing gender stereotypes, and using local media to educate on alcohol abuse and attitudes that condone violence as normal.

This study contains many other interesting findings and recommendations on issues of gender equality and equity in the ten communities studied, and is worth reading by everyone interested in gender issues and women's rights in Namibia. ♀

