

GBV: WE NEED TO START ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE – TOGETHER!

NAMIBIA DOES NOT NEED ANOTHER TALK SHOP ON THE CAUSES OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV). THE CAUSES HAVE BEEN WELL ESTABLISHED AND TALKING ABOUT THEM SOME MORE DOES NOT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE TO PREVENTING GBV OR TO EFFECTIVELY RESPONDING TO IT. ACTION IS LONG OVERDUE. AND IT BEGINS BY ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE.

Why can we not improve the protection order system? Why are police insensitive in many cases? Why are there not enough shelters across the country? Why are LGBTI-specific needs excluded from protection services? Why do we still have archaic laws that trap people in dangerous marriages? Why are we incapable of capturing necessary national data on GBV? Everyone keeps saying there is political will to tackle GBV. But where is the money to prove it? As civil society we need to get informed, and focused, and start holding those who are responsible accountable.

At the end of 2018, gender-based violence (GBV) is arguably, still, the most important social issue our nation is facing. Too many women live in fear of the men in their lives; according to the Namibia Demographic and Health Survey of 2013, 72% of women are afraid of their husbands. Too many Namibians accept domestic violence as a normal part of life with 44% of men who feel that physical violence against a wife is justified, according to the Namibia Demographic and Health Survey of 2000. And a completely sobering and devastating number of women have been murdered or assaulted as a result of their gender this year, again.

The truth is, many amazing organisations, institutions and individuals work tirelessly every day to make a difference. Great examples include safe school programmes introduced by the Ministry of Education, training of health practitioners by the Ministry of Health on sexual and intimate partner violence; and parenting programmes are becoming increasingly popular as stakeholders appreciate their importance. NGOs like Friendly Haven, Survivors Speak Up, and LifeLine/ChildLine support survivors with counselling and with navigating the complicated and often harsh protection system. Many of the social workers stationed at the GBV Protection Units, give so much of themselves, doing whatever they can with limited resources.

“Political will” is a phrase often heard in the context of GBV in Namibia. But why does it seem as if nothing is getting better? Why is the Legal Assistance Centre’s (LAC) report, How to Improve the Services of Women and Child Units in Namibia, written in 2013, still relevant today? Why has there been such disappointing follow-up and hardly any implementation following the lists and lists of recommendations and necessary actions proposed by the National Plan of Action 2012-2016, National GBV conferences from 2007 and 2014, the 13 rec-

ommendations from parliament 2014, and many more from organisations like the LAC and the GBV Coalition (recommendations handed over after the TOTAL SHUT DOWN march in early 2018)?

A fair explanation for the disappointing implementation can be found in the complicated nature of some of the recommendations that require mind shifts and unlearning such as alternatives to corporal punishment, transforming harmful gender norms and abolishing harmful cultural practices. But not all recommendations are such that it would necessarily take time. There are many that ask for very basic necessities that can ensure the dignity, rights and safety of survivors are protected and upheld.

We need to stop passing the buck to the gender equality ministry as if they alone are mandated to respond to GBV and related problems. Considering the Gender-Based Violence Investigation Units, as one example, demonstrates that numerous service providers and institutions are involved. To effectively respond to a single GBV case, collaboration and cooperation are required between the police (MoSS), health workers (MoHSS), social workers (MGECW), legal practitioners (MoJ) and NGO community workers. Yet, we usually only see the MGECW called to public spaces to resolve the issue of GBV. We generally also only see them blamed for failing to effectively prevent or respond to GBV related matters. If we want to see action, we have to start holding other ministries accountable as well.

In the recent disclosure of public budgets and work plans, very few ministries directly mentioned GBV. The ministries of Justice; Safety and Security; and Finance – all key and central to improving the response system – made no mention of GBV. And as long as civil society leaves them alone they will continue to place GBV at the bottom of their “to do” lists. Furthermore, if civil society is unaware of the multi-stakeholders, then, of course, they will not expect nor demand the other key ministries to deliver on their key mandates as it relates to GBV responses and services. While the MGECW can act as a coordinator, adviser and facilitator, (an extremely important role), it does not have the mandate to “force” other key players to increase the quality and quantity of their service delivery. This factor, combined with a budget limited to the status quo of primarily paying social grants in contrast to expanding programmes, means the MGECW is essentially toothless, yet the first to be blamed for inadequate services and protection.

The questions around why and what have been answered. The lists of what to do are available! They simply need to be done. Can we, therefore, stop looking at the MGECW as the only custodian and please start making demands and asking the important questions to all the other ministries as well, so that we can finally see the action we need to tackle GBV? ♀