

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In Namibia today, it is especially disturbing that the rape of women and girls has become common place, and that perpetrators often attempt to conceal the crime by murdering the victim. It is cause for serious concern in the community at large that in spite of the severe punishments meted out by the courts, there has been an alarming escalation in violent crimes perpetrated against females generally, and against girls, in particular. As a result, women and girls feel increasingly insecure in their communities, and enjoying any form of “nightlife” has become a high-risk activity for females.

In the 1970s, studies with a focus on family violence were virtually nonexistent. The lack of research in this area seemed to imply that violence within the family was “either rare, dysfunctional or a pathology traceable to mental illness or psychopathology” (Gelles 1979:169). Over the course of the last two decades, however, abuse between intimate partners has come to be recognised by social scientists as a serious social problem that impacts upon all levels of society. A study by Le Beau (1997) on domestic violence against women and girls indicated that it is difficult to measure its extent, as many people believe that it is a private and personal matter, with the result that most cases go unreported. She further indicated that there is a clear relationship between domestic violence and other social problems such as unemployment, poverty and alcoholism, which frequently contribute to domestic violence. She concluded, amongst other things, that domestic violence occurs in a variety of forms; that it is likely to prove to be an intractable problem; and that there is a need for both the government and civil society to initiate social changes that attempt to address it.

A 2001 study on the nature and consequences of intimate male-partner violence conducted by the Ministry of Health and Social Services (MHSS) indicated that one-third of female partners in relationships suffered either physical, sexual, or both physical and sexual violence at the hands of their partners. These findings suggest that violence is widespread in these relationships.

1.2 Justification

It is against this background of widespread domestic violence that Women’s Action for Development (WAD) decided to conduct a joint investigative survey with researchers from the University of Namibia (UNAM) to determine the possible root causes of violent crimes committed by men against women and girls in Namibia.

WAD’s intention was to generate a descriptive profile of the perpetrators of violence against women and girls in Namibia. The focus is thus not so much on domestic violence *per se*, as on the perpetrators of domestic violence. It is hoped that the findings of this study will help to profile and predict potential perpetrators, and to enable the Namibian government and other relevant

stakeholders to establish the necessary rehabilitation programmes to help perpetrators – and those on the verge of becoming perpetrators – to confront and deal with the underlying causes that predispose them to committing acts of violence against women and girls.

It is also hoped that the study will assist in realising the aims of Vision 2030, which calls for a concerted effort by all concerned to resolve, rather than only to address, very important national problems such as social inequalities between men and women, and the resultant violence against women and girls. By addressing these underlying factors, the mental health system and correctional services may be able to treat the causes, rather than only respond to the symptoms of violence against women and girls, and thereby reduce the prevalence of such violent crimes.

Furthermore, the Namibian government has passed several acts aimed at combating violent crimes against women and girls, including domestic violence, rape and homicide. From general observations and reports in the media, it would appear that men constitute the vast majority of perpetrators of violent crimes against women and girls in Namibia. According to Blacklock (2001), most of the major advances in research into and the management of domestic violence are focussed on the victims, namely women. Over the past two decades, however, global agencies have also started to tackle the problem of domestic violence by working with the perpetrators themselves.

1.3 Understanding violence

For the purposes of this study, violence was defined as a means of control and oppression and in addition to physical harm includes emotional, social or economic force, coercion or pressure. It can be overt, for example in the form of physical assault, or threatening someone with a weapon. It can also be covert, in the form of intimidation, threats, persecution, deception or other forms of psychological or social pressure. The victim targeted by this kind of violence is compelled to behave as expected, or to act against her will out of fear.

A perpetrator is defined as a person or group of persons that directly inflicts, supports or condones violence, or other forms of abuse against a person, or a group of persons. Perpetrators are in a position of real and/or perceived power, decision-making and/or authority, and can thus exert control over their victims (www.irinnews.org).

1.4 Study aims and objectives

A study of this nature is expected to reveal local factors, both culture- and community-based, that are associated with violence against women and girls. These local factors need not necessarily be consistent with international or sub-regional patterns. The study may indicate the long-term effects of outmoded cultural views about females, which may have resulted in distorted perceptions of and disrespect for females in the minds of perpetrators. The intensity of the problem justifies local research to broaden our knowledge base; this in turn

could lead to legislation, corrective behavioural actions and/or early interventions at school level. The objectives of this study are thus multifaceted.

In particular, the study aims to gain an understanding of who the perpetrators of violence against women and girls are, and why they commit these violent crimes. In addition, the study investigates the psychosocial factors that contribute to the commission of these violent crimes, and generates data that it is hoped will aid the relevant authorities and stakeholders in designing and developing intervention programmes for perpetrators of violent crimes against women and girls.

1.5 Research questions

The study aims to answer the following questions:

- Why do perpetrators commit violent crimes against women and girls?
- What are the psychological characteristics of people who commit these violent crimes?
- Do early childhood influences on social behaviour and disturbances in the childhood environment contribute to violent behaviour in adulthood?
- Can psychological, interpersonal/family, societal/cultural factors lead to violent behaviour?
- Is violence used to control and dominate partners, or does intimate anger lie at its core?
- What is the role of substance abuse in violence against women and girls in Namibia?

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

The discussion that follows will review the conceptual framework in terms of which violence against women and girls is understood. In addition, theories that account for the phenomenon of violence against women and girls will also be discussed. It should be noted that there is a bias in existing research that focuses on males as perpetrators of intimate violence, and females as their victims, and that most theories of domestic violence are consistent with and reinforce these assumptions.

A number of empirical articles on domestic violence have highlighted the increasing incidence of abuse between intimate partners. In an attempt to explain how abuse between intimates develops, why it occurs and how it is sustained, researchers have relied upon theoretical frameworks to guide their research findings.

As noted by Sommer (1990), Knight and Hatty (1987) point out that the theories put forward by various researchers can be separated into those reflecting the