

Surveying the implications of violence against women: A perspective from academia

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During the period 2007–2008, the Human Rights and Documentation Centre at the University of Namibia (UNAM), and specifically its interdisciplinary Task Force Against Violence,¹ conducted both a preliminary and a follow-up survey on violence against women in Namibia. More than 200 UNAM students in total were involved in respect of the two surveys. For the preliminary report, 94 law students and 29 students from other faculties, making up a total of 123, were requested to answer the following six questions:²

1. *Is violence against women a problem in our society?*
2. *Have you experienced violence in your personal environment?*
3. *If answer 2 is affirmative, specify the type of violence and the persons involved.*
4. *Do you think that gun ownership at home is a problem?*
5. *How prevalent is the belief in Namibia that women are owned by a partner or husband?*
6. *How prevalent is the belief by many women that they are not as good as their male counterparts?*

The results of the preliminary survey reflected the following grim reality:³

- 96% of the students responded that violence against women was a problem in Namibia, i.e. only 4% said it was not.
- An alarming 72% of the students had personally experienced violence, while 14% had witnessed violence, at least indirectly. Only 22% had not experienced any type of violence.
- A wide range of abuse occurs in the family and community at large, ranging from physical and sexual violence to psychological violence. The abuse mentioned included battering; the sexual abuse of children; dowry-related violence; rape; traditional practices harmful to women; non-

1 The Task Force Against Violence was established on 13 September 2007 by Prof. Osmund D Mwandemele, UNAM's Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Research. The Task Force consists of the authors of this article.

2 HRDC (2008).

3 (ibid.).

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spousal violence; and violence related to exploitation, sexual harassment, stalking, and intimidation at work and in educational institutions.

- The female respondents provided distressing evidence of physical and/or sexual abuse by their partners.
- The perpetrators of violence against women are almost exclusively men.
- Physical abuse in intimate relationships is frequently accompanied by verbal abuse.
- Women are at greatest risk of violence from men they know.
- The shame associated with domestic violence, rape and other forms of abuse contributes to the fact that women often suffer in silence, afraid of repercussions and stigma.
- Some 82% of respondents confirmed the belief that women being 'owned' by a partner or husband still prevailed in Namibia, especially in rural areas, due to traditionally accepted custom, where the husband was strongly considered to be the head of the family. Some 22% stated that 'ownership' of women was not an issue, although they conceded that this depended on the socialisation, status and education of the parties involved. Only 5% stated that 'ownership' was not an issue at all.
- Some 47% of respondents believed that it was still a living reality and a strong belief by many women that they were not as good as their male counterparts. The reasons they gave for this included religion, custom, a lack of education, and dependency. While another 44% perceived that this belief had once prevailed but no longer did, 8% said it had never existed.

Thus, the outcome reflected in the preliminary report was already an expressive source of information. On the basis of this information a follow-up questionnaire was created by an interdisciplinary team. This time, 46 female students and 28 male students, namely a total of 74 students, were interviewed on the issues outlined in the following subsections.

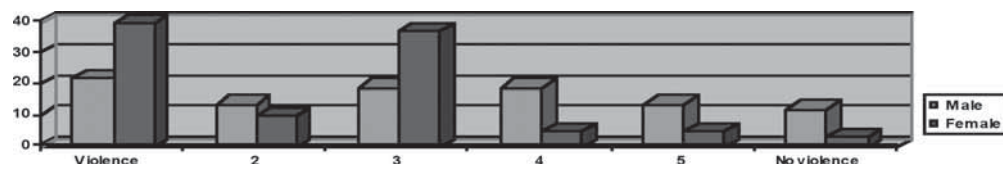
Behaviour of men towards women seen as violence, and to what extent

The first part of both the male and the female questionnaire investigation what type of behaviour by men towards women was seen as violence, and to what extent this was the case. Respondents were first asked how far verbal abuse and mental maltreatment could be seen as violence, before they were asked to what extent physical abuse and sexual harassment were seen as violence. The task was to determine, on a scale of 1 to 6, whether different types of behaviour by men towards women could be classified as *violent* or *non-violent*. Interestingly,

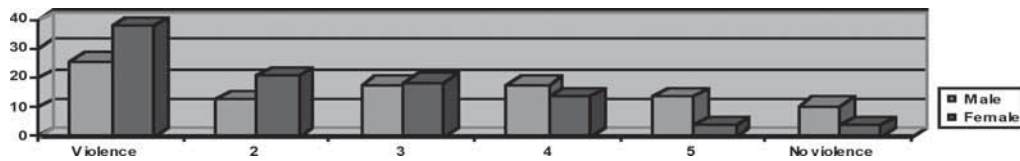
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across the board, the female students categorised the suggested behaviour as more violent than the males did. Furthermore, all students classified mental maltreatment in public as more violent than mental maltreatment in private. A possible explanation for this could be that students were accustomed to mental maltreatments in private or within the family.

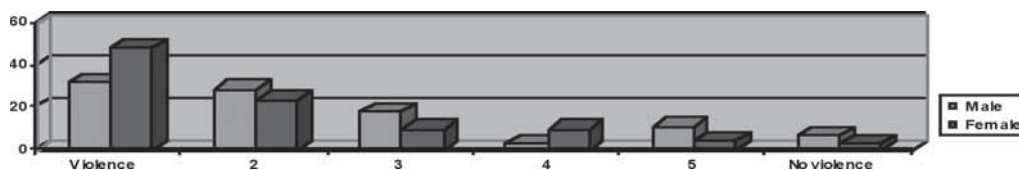
To what extent is a man's verbal abuse of a woman in private to be seen as violence against women?



To what extent is a man's mental maltreatment of a woman to be seen as violence against women?

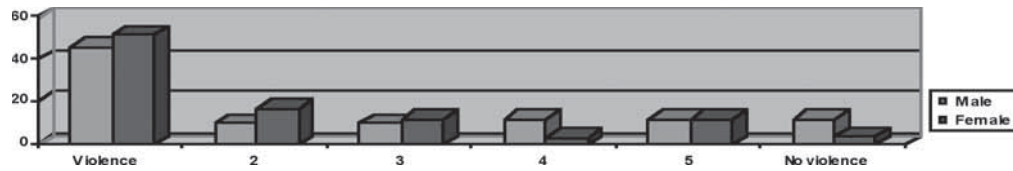


To what extent is a man's mental maltreatment of a woman in public to be seen as violence against women?

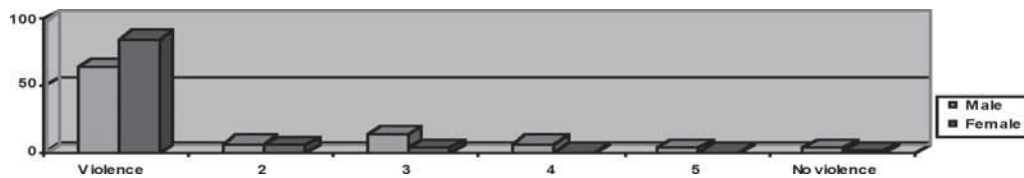


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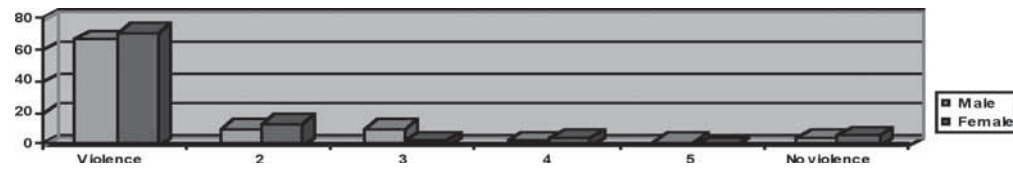
To what extent is a man slapping a woman to be seen as violence against women?



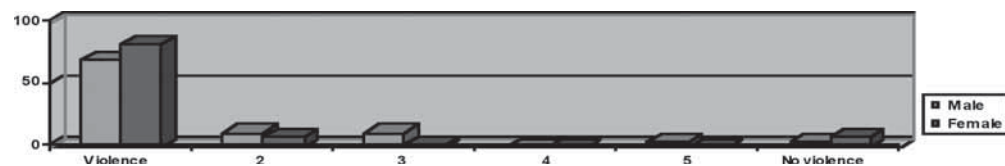
To what extent is a man sexually harassing a woman to be seen as violence against women?



To what extent is a man sexually harassing a woman in public to be seen as violence against women?



To what extent is a man pressuring a woman into sexual activity to be seen as violence against women?



Domestic violence and violence against women in public

Generally speaking, the results of the male and female questionnaire did not diverge significantly. The students mainly described domestic violence against women as degrading and inhuman physical, emotional, mental, verbal or psychological abuse at home, within the family, in a relationship, or otherwise generally in private. It is worth noting that the female students mentioned that abuse could also be sexual, economic or social. Respondents also felt that *abuse* could be understood as the prohibition of allowing women to practise their rights. Hence, both terms – *abuse* and *violence* – were interpreted rather broadly. Furthermore, the fact that both male and female students considered emotional maltreatment as abuse and violence against women showed that the phrase *domestic violence against women* was generally given a broad interpretation.

Again, the results of the male and female questionnaire did not diverge significantly in respect of violence against women in public. The students mainly defined *violence against women in public* as being degrading and inhuman physical, verbal, mental, emotional and psychological abuse that was barbaric and showed no respect for society or the general public. In respect of where such abuse occurred, their responses included streets, hospitals, parks, and offices. Particularly if combined with sexual advances, such abuse led to lower self-esteem, they believed.

In respect of violence against women in public, female respondents again mentioned economic maltreatment as abuse and violence against women. Combined with the fact that males and females also considered emotional maltreatment in public as abuse, it can be said that the term *violence against women in public* was also generally broadly interpreted.

Consequences for males and females in respect of violence against women

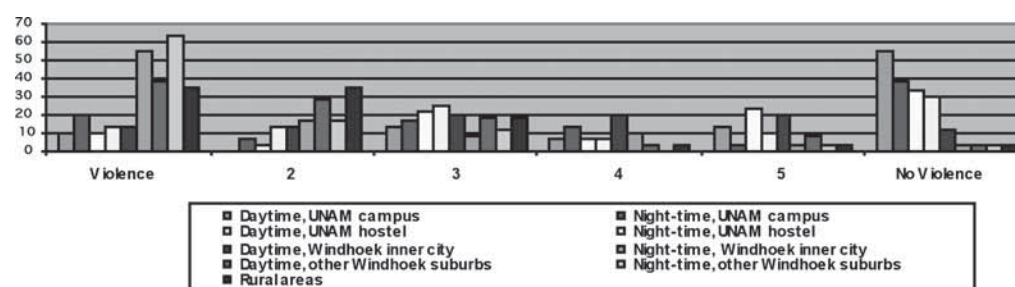
Due to the ambiguity of the question – it was only asked for consequences in general, and not for consequences on both the female and the male side – the answers diverged. The males mostly mentioned mental or physical harm, mistrust within the family, high divorce rates and broken families, while the females mentioned physical injuries as well as mental consequences such as a loss of dignity, loss of self-esteem and depression. Some even thought that women the danger of women committing suicide increased steeply as a result of violence against them. Furthermore, one female student mentioned that violence against women within the family taught children to tolerate violence, and would lead to them perpetrating violence themselves as they grew older.

Location of occurrence of violence against women

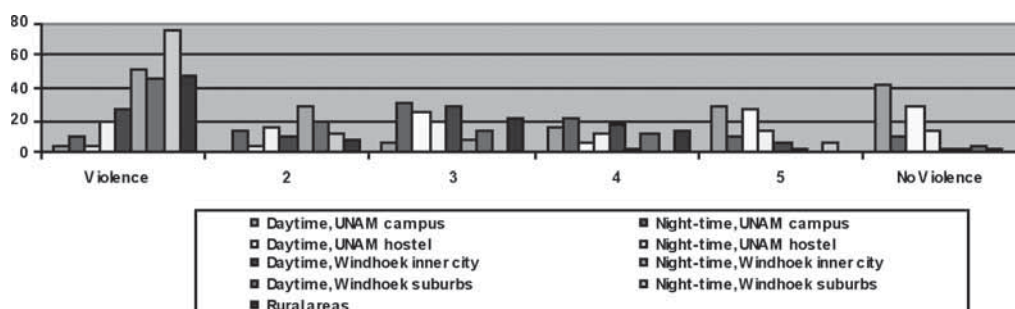
Taking into account the high rate of violence against women in public, it is remarkable that the UNAM campus seems to be relatively safe, both during the day and at night. The locations at which the highest rates of violence occurred were in Windhoek's city centre and suburbs, but also – and especially – in the rural areas of the country. In all these areas, violence was mainly experienced at night, while day violence did not seem to be a alarming issue yet.

As regards violence against women in private locations, male respondents notably saw the rate of violence as being higher between married couples and within families than between unmarried couples. Female respondents, however, considered that all types of relationships were vulnerable to the threat of violence.

Violence in public – male responses

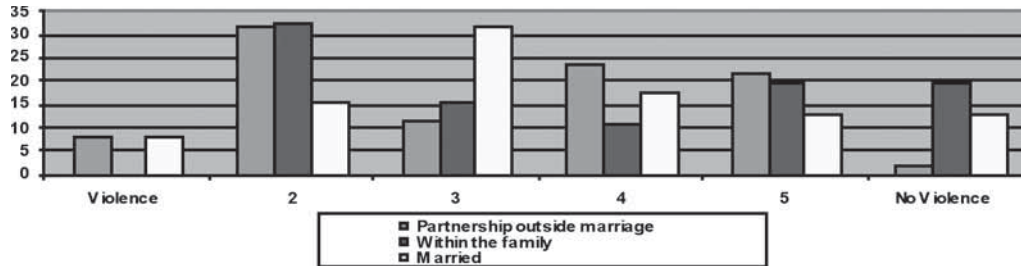


Violence in public – female responses

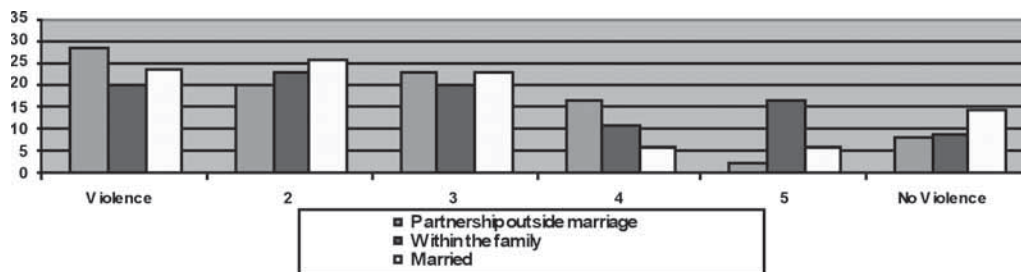


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Domestic violence – male responses



Domestic violence – female responses

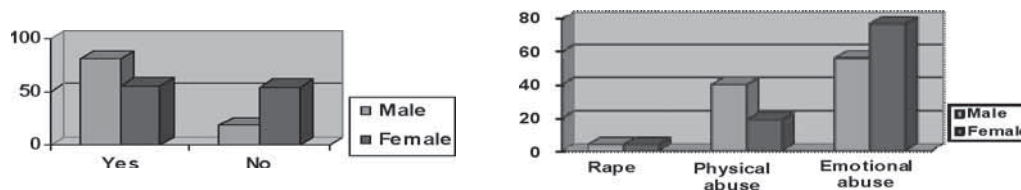


Specific groups targeted for violence against women

First of all, many respondents thought that all women within Namibia had to be regarded as being in the target group of violence being perpetrated against them. But more specific target groups mentioned were women without a stable financial base, teenagers, girlfriends, partners, married women, and women who are dating.

Experienced or witnessed violence against women

The diagram on the left below indicates that some 80% of the male students interviewed had witnessed violence. About half of the female respondents acknowledged having been victims of violence. The diagram on the right below shows that the majority of women had faced emotional abuse only. Some 20% of the female students stated that they had experienced physical abuse.



Explanations as to why violence was not experienced

Female respondents stated that a strong character, the right environment, and avoiding walking around at night as the main reasons for their not having experienced violence. Furthermore, one female student stated that she would always “make her standpoint clear and [would not] tolerate any violence” towards her. A number of other female students stated that they knew their rights and could defend themselves. Apart from these answers, with the common denominator of “*Strong, forward and educated woman with the right environment*”, some females also stated that they did not engage in their boyfriends’ issues, that they did not need other people’s money, or that they lived in families which did not abuse alcohol and where everybody respected each other.

Degree of equality in relationships between men and women

The students were asked about the relationship between men and women, and whether they were seen to be equal in all respects. More specifically, the questions were concerned with the notions of men’s sense of ownership of women and the subordination of women to men.

Sense of ownership

When asked what was meant by saying that a man “*Owens his partner or wife*”, the students mostly mentioned the terms *property*, *possession*, and *master/boss*. Secondly, it is remarkable that some described “*Status of being owned*” very accurately. This reflects that the stereotypical thinking of a man owning his partner is still deeply anchored in Namibian society. This is reflected by the fact that 38% of the male participants and 25% of the female participants admitted in another question that they felt, as men or women living according to the traditional laws and customs of a particular community. Some 14% of the male students even declared that they would own their partner or wife, while 10% of the female students felt owned by their partners. Fourthly, the students described the “*Status of being owned*”, i.e. the advantages and disadvantages associated with the sense of being owned. Most of the male and female participants were of the opinion that protection and care could be seen as an advantage in this respect, whereas the risk of being abused, dependence and the loss of self esteem and integrity were mentioned as disadvantages.

Subordination of women to men

The question whether female students felt subordinated to their partners and whether male students thought that “*Women are not as good as their male counterparts*” led to interesting answers. Some 19% of the male participants and 10% of the female participants responded that women were not as good as their male counterparts. Both male and female students stated that women felt “naturally subordinate” to men. According to some respondents, this situation led to oppression, rape and abuse on the one hand, and to a lack of trust and divorce on the other. One woman even stated that men usually felt they were in power; she believed they reasoned that this would lead to them taking all the decisions, especially about sexual activities.

Culture, custom and religion, and their influence in respect of violence against women

The question regarding the nature of the role women had in culture and tradition was mainly answered with the terms *housewife, mother, caregiver, pillar of the family, and keeper of peace and understanding*. But some also stated that women were *sex objects, subordinated and subject to the husband*. This shows that women still have a specific and predetermined role. They are still largely considered subordinated to men.

About 38% of male respondents saw themselves as living a lifestyle associated with the traditions of a specific community, whereas only 25% of women saw themselves that way. Although the students were aware of the status of women in civilised society, they still felt connected to their traditions. About 50% of men and 30% of women thought that traditional laws and customs justified violence against women. It was stated that tradition promoted beating and that beating was even part of the traditional concept of education. Some students said that beating was a sign of love and that it was used to discipline women. Additionally, men were seen as the head of the household, while women were subordinate to them; it was also stated that it was no one else’s business what happened in the privacy of one’s home.

This shows that violence against women is still part of daily life in traditional communities. About 64% of the male as well as the female students confirmed that tradition was a problem in respect of the issue of violence against women. When asked how the problem could be solved, they suggested to abolishing certain customs and amending certain traditional laws. Many students thought it would also help to educate communities about the consequences of violence; the

promotion of gender equality would also help to diminish violence in traditional communities. However, some thought it was impossible to abolish harmful traditions, and that violence against women was a problem that was closely linked to the abuse of alcohol.

To get an idea about the role of violence against women in customary law, the students were asked to what extent customary law promoted or accepted violence against women. Firstly, it was firmly stated that women were responsible for the household and that the man was in power as the head of the household. This meant the woman was subordinated or inferior to her husband. Secondly, the existence of lobola, traditional marriage, polygamous marriage, and other customs were felt to promote violence against women.

Nearly all students (92%) believed that their religion did not justify violence against women and that it was against God's law and Christianity. Furthermore, they saw religion as recognising men and women as equal before the Lord, and that it did not favour the use of violence as a means towards a peaceful settlement. They also pointed to the commandment that one should love one's neighbour as oneself. Moreover, most respondents saw women as being secure and important because they played vital roles in the sustainability of the family. Other respondents stated that religion, although not supporting violence, promoted the concept of the man being the head of the household, and that the wife and children were obliged to respect him and honour his decisions.

Recommendations from the students' perspective

Finally, the students were asked how they felt about the various attempts being made to prevent or at least reduce violence. Concerning legal remedies, the respondents were asked whether stricter punishment would reduce violence. It is remarkable that the majority of women (87%) thought stricter punishment would lead to a reduction in violence, whereas the majority of men (72%) thought it would not. Perpetrators, some stated, were mentally ill, and needed rehabilitation and education instead of imprisonment. Others felt that more severe punishment would frighten people and that they would think twice before victimising anyone.

The second question from a legal point of view dealt with whether more effective enforcement of domestic laws and international obligations would reduce violence. In this regard, the students highlighted the need to promote such laws and obligations by way of education and awareness raising campaigns. They believed that women should be made more aware of their rights and that

perpetrators should be made more aware of the consequences. Additionally, it was felt that the police should be more effective, should be more visible, and should do more to prevent violence. It was also suggested that executive bodies should be set up, e.g. special police units that dealt with the prevention of violence against women in particular. Moreover, it was stated that the laws should be applied more strictly.

The suggestion to introduce education centres for men who had committed violent acts against women was generally welcomed by the respondents. Ideas like combining imprisonment with education on the promotion of gender equality and tolerance were put forward, along with the recommendation that perpetrators of violence receive psychotherapy. However, some respondents felt that it would be a waste of resources because such strategies would not work; they believed the perpetrators needed rehabilitation instead of education, and that it was the parents' task to teach their sons appropriate social behaviour.

The question as to whether to establish a rehabilitation centre for women who had experienced violence was answered in the affirmative by the majority of women (92%) as well as the majority of men (81%). They recommended that such centres should provide counselling and support to women, as well as education. Such a centre should rehabilitate women by engaging them in different social activities; it should be a private and anonymous place of refuge, and should offer a place where victims could meet. The respondents also suggested that a fund should be established to compensate the victims of violence.

Conclusion

The reports reflected in this article are only a small step towards the elimination of violence against women. However, as the leaders of tomorrow, the students felt strongly that violence against women could no longer be ignored. The majority of students thought that education and the promotion of women's rights would help to reduce violence against women. Additionally, many students expressed their concern that cultural traditions and customary laws needed to be reconsidered and, in a rapidly changing world, be amended where they accepted – and even in some cases promoted – the violation of women.