

Hundreds march in protest against domestic violence

IARA M BUA

In commemoration of Women's Month, the Volunteer Centre hosted a march through the streets of Athlone, calling on people to stop domestic violence.

About 100 people walked from Jan Smuts Avenue to the Bridgetown Community Centre, chanting slogans and holding up anti-violence posters. Children from the Young Sunrise Brass Band were among those who took part in the march.

Harvey Allen, a volunteer at the Volunteer Centre, said: "Women's Day is not only one day, it is every day."

Mbuseli Steven, another volunteer at the centre, said to him domestic violence is "something that is there, within the community, you can see it every day", but that people don't do anything about it because they think it is not their business.

Like Mr Steven, a lot of youth cannot identify what domestic violence is, because they see it day after day and they believe that it is normal.

This is a major problem the youth are confronted with, he said, to fight against something that people consider "normal".

According to the Domestic Violence Act domestic violence and emotional abuse are behaviour used by one person in a relationship to control the other.

Partners may be married or not, heterosexual, gay, or lesbian, living together, separated or dat-



PICTURE: IARA M BUA

■ Volunteers and members of the Young Sunrise Brass Band march through the streets of Athlone to voice their concerns about domestic violence.

ing. Abuse can be physical or psychological.

Some examples of abuse are name-calling, keeping a partner from contacting their family or friends, withholding money, stopping a partner from getting or keeping a job, actual or threat-

ened physical harm, sexual assault, stalking and intimidation.

Violence against women has been one of the most prominent issues in post-apartheid South Africa.

The first piece of legislation to

address it was the Prevention of Family Violence Act.

The product of this regulation was the creation of the Domestic Violence Act in 1998, which came into effect a year later on December 15 1999.

But regulations and law are worthless if they are not implemented. The Southern African Media and Gender Institute asserts that the Act is worthy because the government has realised that domestic violence is an issue in South Africa.

Given that, there is still room for improvement.

Its implementation is a problem because many of the staff at the South African Police Service lack the capacity to handle complaints involving domestic violence. This failure silences women's voices.

Government spending is not prioritising this as an issue of concern, despite research showing that there is an increase in domestic violence. The problem is at various levels, from grassroots to legislative.

Mr Steven added that, despite work done by local NGOs and government, domestic violence is increasing among the youth.

"They teach us in school how important it is to be equal, but people don't listen to the teacher, and when you go back to your neighbourhood, things are different to what you are taught." Andrew Samuels, manager of the Young Sunrise Brass Band, which took part in the demonstration against domestic violence in Athlone, thinks that politics in the country are changing, and step by step, women can make their own decisions, they can raise their voices and not to be scared any more, because they know that people are helping them.

The Media and Gender Institute says that domestic violence is an issue that affects all women, irrespective of race or class.

However, the media is responsible for creating a perception that domestic violence occurs mostly in historically disadvantaged communities.

Low-income, coloured and black households are the stereotype. Although these women may be more disenfranchised due to the country's apartheid legacy, gender inequality is an issue that crosses all boundaries.

Because of that, the Volunteer Centre is implementing its sector project, a workshop for men and women in order to explain the causes and the consequence of domestic vio-



lence.

The workshops are going to be held in Khayelitsha and Athlone.

People interested in taking part should contact the organisation's sector project officer at 021 674 5338, or visit its website www.volcent.co.za

Sector projects are part of the Youth Programme, which includes the exchange programme and the YLI (Youth Leaders Initiative).

Their focus areas are drug abuse, domestic violence and HIV/Aids awareness.

The idea is to expose volunteers to role models and give them the experience to travel to other countries, such as Mozambique or Canada — a chance to dream.

Exchange students will travel to other countries and, on their return, they will share their experiences and this in turn will be beneficial for the Athlone community.

"The volunteers come here to help, but what they don't know is that they are here to be helped. We are going to teach them that men are not superior to women. The idea that a man has power and a woman not, that to be a man is better than being a woman, it's a social construction, not a cultural identity," said Crizalda Simbine, supervisor of the AYUDE organisation, which works with the Volunteer Centre.

The Volunteer Centre aims to highlight the differences between gender and sex.

Sex means to be male or female, it refers to biological differences such as chromosomes, hormonal profiles, internal and external sex organs. Gender describes the characteristics that a society or culture delineates as masculine or feminine: It is a social construction.

For example, women working at home, as housekeepers without economic remuneration (private sphere), and men working in the public sector (a job with a salary) is an aspect, which deals with gender not with sex.

The women were not born with special chromosomes that force them to work in the kitchen.

They are part of a sexist society that places obstacles in their way to achieve economic independence. So while your sex as male or female is a biological fact that is the same as in any culture, what that sex means in terms of your gender role as a man or a woman in society can be quite different cross-culturally.

Nozuko Masiba, of the Volunteer Centre, said, she's disappointed by the lack of cooperation among NGOs; meaning "that what is not done by my NGO is not of my concern".

The ideal scenario will be when women and men are educated about a woman's right to be equal and women feel free to report those who infringe upon those rights — in other words a justice system where women who report crimes know that the perpetrators will receive punishment for their actions.

Mr Samuels affirmed that the solution is to change the values of the community.

"Show the children what is wrong and what is right."

Nicole Macamblo, a volunteer at the Volunteer Centre, said that it is a change that "has to start in the community and then be translated to society".

"Speak to the women, speak up. They pretend that everything is okay when it is not," added Mr Steven.

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