



## The Impact of Domestic Violence on Women and Children

*"The effects of abuse are devastating and far-reaching. Domestic violence speaks many languages, has many colours and lives in many different communities"*

Sandra Pupatello<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

South African society is painfully riven by deeply disturbing levels of inter personal violence, from which the domestic sphere is not exempt.<sup>1</sup> According to the recently released crime statistics, violent crimes against women and children continue to escalate, and much of that violence is experienced at home. The trauma of domestic violence casts long shadows into the future and devastates families and communities. According to a recent Institute for Security Studies (ISS) Report, children who grow up in households where they are exposed to violence are more likely to use, or become victims of, violence later in life. What happens at home has serious implications for the larger society.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. What Constitutes Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence should be understood as any behaviour the purpose of which is to gain power and control over a spouse, partner, girl/boyfriend; but it also extends to the abuse or harsh treatment of children and older people, and may extend to the ill treatment of animals. Domestic violence takes place within the context of a significant relationship which should be characterized by care, love and respect. Instead home, which is supposed to be a safe place, is for many the most dangerous place of all!

Domestic violence is not limited to physical and sexual violence. Physical violence is often seen as being more serious than emotional and economic abuse, but numerous studies have shown that this simply is not the case. Emotional and economic

abuse, while having no visible wounds, are insidious and equally damaging.

It is important to note that domestic violence takes place within all socio-economic groups, races and religions. It is predicated on and sustained by entrenched patriarchal attitudes which our society continues to tolerate. However, while domestic violence is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men, men may also be victims.

- **Physical abuse** includes slapping; punching; kicking; choking; pushing and burning. Damage to possessions and property is common. Physical violence may include the use of a heavy object and the use of a weapon such as a knife. A gun may be used to frighten the victim and can be used to threaten the target of the abuse as well as threaten harm to other vulnerable persons. Physical violence may be sexual, and may involve the use or the threat of force to obtain sex; it can extend to rape.
- **Emotional abuse** involves frequent criticism and verbal abuse in the form of swearing and shouting; blaming and public humiliation; as well as refusing to take responsibility for negative behaviour. The abuser may isolate the woman from her family and friends, thus making her all the more dependent on him. Her phone calls may be closely monitored and her accounts scrutinized carefully.
- **Economic abuse** is the complete control of the household finances, resulting in

complete financial dependence on the abuser. The household finances and budget are not discussed. Money has to be requested for food, medicine, transport and school fees. Money may be withheld due to some 'noncompliance' or perceived transgression on the part of the dependant. Emotional and economic abuse are both extremely manipulative. They result in loss of self-esteem; confidence; concentration and the ability to work. Many women and children experience manifestations domestic violence which result in depression, anxiety, or fear; and which may lead to self-destructive behaviour.<sup>3</sup>

Life Coach and author of *'Emerging from the Broken'*, Dalene Ouimet, writes that, "survivors of any and all abuse become very good at anticipating mood of others, looks, actions, all of it in an effort to survive. Believing that if we can be agreeable, be compliant and loving, do things how they want, that we will be safe. This becomes our way of life."<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Incidence of Domestic Violence

According to the South African Police Services (SAPS) crime statistics for 2017/18, there has been an escalation in violent crime in general, and this is particularly the case in crimes against women and children. The number of crimes against women increased by 11%, against girls by 10% and against boys by 20%.<sup>5</sup> The greatest proportion of violence against women is domestic violence, and highest number of female homicides are committed by intimate partners. Similarly, the majority of child homicides occur in the domestic setting; the perpetrator is often known to the child and may be a person with some responsibility for her or him.<sup>6</sup>

### 4. Abuse as Learned Behaviour

Abuse is a learned behaviour; it may, however, be exacerbated by factors such as anger; poor impulse control; untreated mental health problems; and substance abuse.<sup>7</sup> Nelson Mandela reminded us that "no one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to

the human heart than its opposite."<sup>8</sup> The socialization of children is thus the critical factor. Dalene Ouimet comments that

"Attitudes and ignorance about (any type of) abuse can be passed down through the generations. It is important to our healing that we sort out the belief systems we adopt; belief systems that were taught to us and because they are so full of lies, they lead to all kinds of depressions, addictions and other struggles while we try to cope with the manifestations of the problems instead of the roots of the problems."<sup>9</sup>

Domestic violence is both intergenerational and trans-generational.<sup>10</sup> According to a recently published article,<sup>11</sup> men who are abused as boys are more likely to be violent as adults. Child care practitioners from Africa Tikkum<sup>12</sup> suggest that

"To solve the crisis of violence against women we need to look to boys' experience of childhood in South Africa. Behaviour disorders that lead to violence in later life are already present at the age of 10. This is not to say that all boys who experience abuse become violent. But if we want to heal our communities we must turn our attention to cycles of abuse that begin at a very early age. [...] It is therefore crucial that the persistent nature of violence is recognised. If we want to improve safety of women, we must begin with the protection and safety of all children from harm as a matter of priority."<sup>13</sup>

### 5. Consequences

In her presentation at the Roundtable, Valdi van Reenen-Le Roux, of the Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Torture, pointed to the importance of having eyes that see our reality of widespread, systemic violence, and its impact on domestic violence, if we wish to change it. Children who have been exposed to the trauma of domestic violence, once they reach adulthood, are three times more likely to experience depression and to require anti-depressive medication; and frequently absent themselves from work or experience serious employment-related issues which may result in unemployment. They are four times more likely to become alcoholic or to have other substance abuse issues. They may engage in risky sexual behaviours and develop sexually transmitted diseases. There is a strong degree of

self-destructive behaviour, and they are fifteen times more likely to commit suicide. Violence may be directed inwards toward the self, or be directed towards others.

Van Reenen-Le Roux emphasized that trauma is multiple, complex and continuous. A study conducted among schoolchildren aged 8-13 in the Cape Town area as far back as 2007-2008, indicated that there was a high level of exposure to all forms of violence, which resulted in substantial psychological distress.<sup>14</sup> Early intervention, before maladaptive coping mechanisms have developed, is critical.<sup>15</sup>

Chandre Gould, of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), notes that

“according to a recent longitudinal study by the Wits Centre of Excellence in Human Development, 99% of all children born in 1990 in the greater Soweto-Johannesburg metropolitan area experienced violence at home, school and in their communities before they turned 18. Across the country, one in three children in South Africa is hurt by their parent or caregiver and one in five experiences sexual abuse, with dreadful effects on children, families, communities and the whole country. The effects of violence echo through society long after the last bullet is fired and the bruises have healed. Violence is felt emotionally as depression, fear and anxiety; and in a loss of concentration and inability to work”.<sup>16</sup>

Bernard Joseph, an EFF Member of the Provincial Legislature of the Western Cape, writes that the persistent issues of femicide, rape and abuse by men, in the main, of women and children, point to the deep-seated inequality that exists between the sexes in our communities and the inequality between grown-ups and children. Our communities have little to no regard for children — little wonder they are the victims of the most heinous crimes”.<sup>17</sup> Children who live with such trauma may develop a defence mechanism called ‘frozen watchfulness’. The child is unresponsive to its surroundings but is clearly aware of them. Frozen watchfulness is usually an indicator of abuse.<sup>18</sup>

The Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, ‘The Joy of Love’, addresses the issue of violence and abuse in the family and quotes the Bishops of Mexico, who have pointed out that

“violence within families breeds new forms of social aggression, since family relationships can also explain the tendency to a violent personality. This is often the case with families where communication is lacking, defensive attitudes predominate, the members are not supportive of one another, family activities that encourage participation are absent, the parental relationship is frequently conflictual and violent, and relationships between parents and children are marked by hostility. Violence within the family is a breeding-ground of resentment and hatred in the most basic human relationships.”<sup>19</sup> The document goes on to state that “good pastoral training is important, especially in light of particular emergency situations arising from cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse.”<sup>20</sup>

## 6. Places of Refuge

Pope Francis acknowledges that

“in some cases, respect for one’s own dignity and the good of the children requires not giving in to excessive demands; or preventing a grave injustice, violence or chronic ill-treatment. In such cases, separation becomes inevitable. At times it even becomes morally necessary, precisely when it is a matter of removing the more vulnerable spouse or young children from serious injury due to abuse and violence, from humiliation and exploitation, and from disregard and indifference.”<sup>21</sup>

However, there are generally too few places of refuge and shelter for women and children, which makes it very difficult for them to leave an abusive partner. This is particularly the case when the woman is unemployed and has no independent source of income.

The Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998 makes it clear that domestic violence is a crime against society; it is not a private matter. The persistent failure of the South African Police Service to successfully implement the Act is a matter of ongoing concern.

Cees de Rover, a security analyst who provides rights-based assistance to police and security forces, comments that “the rule of law, justice and

respect for basic human rights all suffer greatly when a civil police force fails to adhere to its basic roles and responsibilities in a manner able to withstand judicial and public scrutiny.”<sup>22</sup> There is an urgent need to invest in the promotion and adequate funding of the SAPS’ Family Violence and Sexual Offences Units. Furthermore, it is imperative that there is closer co-operation between such units and the Department of Social Development.

## 6. Conclusion

Children need to live in an environment that is both safe and predictable; to have secure attachment to at least one parent; and to be both taught and modelled the values of human dignity,

justice, respect to both themselves and others, equality, and love.<sup>23</sup>

Violence against women and children must be a concern for all of us, and we have a collective responsibility to ensure the protection of those vulnerable at home. Only then might we realize the dream of the prophet Isaiah: “Violence shall no more be heard in thy land, desolation nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise”.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘On Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> October 2018 the SACBC Parliamentary Liaison Office held a Roundtable Discussion on ‘The Impact of Domestic Violence on Women and Children’. The Roundtable was addressed by Ms Valdi van Reenen-Le Roux, Director of the Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Trauma, Ms Joy Lange, Director of Anne’s Home, and Ms Lynette Oliver, Social Auxiliary Worker at the New World Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> <https://issafrica.org/issa-today>

<sup>3</sup> <https://au.reachout.com/articles/what-is-emotional-abuse>

<sup>4</sup> <https://za.pinterest.com/pin/150378075035738254/>

<sup>5</sup> The spike in the number of boy homicides may be attributed in part to the gang violence in the Western Cape. Cape Town is the ninth most dangerous city in the world.

<sup>6</sup> <https://issafrica.org/iss-today>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.acesdv.org/domestic-violence-graphics/tps://>

<sup>8</sup> ‘The Long Walk to Freedom’, Nelson Mandela

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/addiction-recovery>

<sup>10</sup> While the focus of this paper is on the abuse of women and children it is important to note that the abuse of older persons is also an important issue to be addressed

<sup>11</sup> Ground Up, 12September 2018

<sup>12</sup> Africa Tikkum seeks to provide education, health and social services to young people and their families in South African townships. Their main goal is to create a sustainable future for the youth of South Africa.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-09-12-the-protection-of-womens-rights-begins-with-childhood/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0145213408000550>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0145213408000550>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-09-12-crime-stats-south-africa-is-at-war-with-itself/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2018-11-11-alan-windes-pre>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.encyclopedia.com/caregiving/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/frozen-watchfulness>

<sup>19</sup> ‘Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Lætitia Of The Holy Father Francis To Bishops, Priests And Deacons Consecrated Persons Christian Married Couples And All The Lay Faithful On Love In The Family’, 2016

<sup>20</sup> See 20 above

<sup>21</sup> See 20 above

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/author/cees-de-rover>

<sup>23</sup> ‘How can we help to end violence in Catholic families?’, Dr.Christauria Welland, 2018

<sup>24</sup> Isaiah 60:18