

Silence has routinely masked the crime of violence against women, more so in African societies. But African women are beginning to speak out and joining their global sisters to say “enough is enough”. **Belinda Otas** examines the female voices against violence on women.



Hot Issue

Violence against women

It's not a private matter

Three years ago People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA) conducted a social experiment in a townhouse complex in Johannesburg, South Africa, aptly titled ‘The Neighbours’. On the first night of the experiment, recorded with hidden cameras, a man could be seen playing drums very loudly. His incensed neighbours did not waste any time – or breath – in venting their chagrin on his doorstep. The recording then goes on to show the same man on a different night, this time loudly playing a pre-recorded incident of domestic violence in which the terrifying screams of a woman being abused are blared out through his loud speakers for all his neighbours

to hear. But this time around, no one knocks on the door, nor calls the police. The shocking clip ends with the message: “Every year 1,400 women are killed by their partners.”

Nhlanhla Mokwena, the director of POWA – an NGO – tells *New African Woman* that the film’s message was meant to demonstrate how South Africans respond to domestic violence incidents.

“We wanted to send a message to everyone and say domestic violence is no longer a private matter but a matter for all of us to address,” she says. “It’s a scourge in our country and we can’t be silent when it’s happening to our neighbour. As you could see, the complex residents

“The moment you speak about domestic violence some people would say there’s something wrong with that woman.”

quickly mobilised and advocated for the noise level. They even had a petition for him, but when they heard screaming, glass breaking and a woman’s voice, what did they do? Nothing! So, it was a mirror to say let’s look at ourselves and look at our



Supporting act: Members of the Coalition On Violence Against Women during a 16-day forum in Laikipia, Kenya

reaction when it comes to violence against women. We are able to mobilise quickly against noise but when it’s violence against women, we turn a blind eye.”

At the heart of violence against women, which comes in different forms – physical, sexual, emotional, mental and verbal – is gender disparity, which results in the imbalanced power dynamics between men and women and leads to domination, discrimination and abuse, according to the 2011 *Sexual Gender Based Violence (SGBV)* report on the Great Lakes region. Nhlanhla says the root cause of this inequality and its ensuing domino effect on society is patriarchy. “As an organisation, we have come to

understand that the root cause of violence against women is the patriarchal society and the inequalities, especially in terms of how we raise the boy and girl child. South Africa is a patriarchal society based on our cultural and religious beliefs. We put a main person (the man) as the head of the family, which means the woman is the subordinate.

“The different socialisations of the boy to the girl child is another factor because boys grow up being told and feeling they are a better sex. The world is out there for them to do whatever they like. The girl is out there to be submissive.”

She is not alone on this. Josephine Chukwuma is the founder and director of Project Alert Nigeria, a

local NGO that campaigns for the equality of women. She says: “The patriarchal structures guide the socialisation of boys and girls. Boys are socialised from a young age to feel ‘you are the man, you must be strong’. Even in families, you find that the boy is growing up and feeling he is superior to his sisters.”

The statistics on violence against women across Africa is chilling. *New African Woman* examined figures from three of the continent’s economic powerhouses – Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa. It reveals a dire situation for the victims.

According to an Action Aid study in 2011, girls in Nigeria experience “multiple forms of violence” on a regular basis. In 2012, the *Gender in*

Nigeria report by the British Council revealed that “up to a third of women say they have been subjected to some form of violence, including battering and verbal, emotional and psychological abuse, marital rape, sexual exploitation or harassment within the home. And one in five has experienced some form of physical violence.”

In Kenya, one in every six women between 15- and 70-years-old has experienced physical or sexual violence and three out of 10 women admit to having been physically and sexually abused by their spouses or sexual partners.

In South Africa, Gender Links published *The War@Home: Findings of the GBV prevalence study* in South Africa. It revealed that “over three quarters (77%) of women in Limpopo; 51% in Gauteng; 45% in Western Cape and 36% in KwaZulu Natal report experiencing some form of violence” – both within and outside their intimate relationships.

Despite these disturbing figures, violence against women is still viewed as a private matter; hence the silence and stigma that means victims are reluctant to come forward for fear of the shame associated with the issue.

Saida Ali is executive director of the Coalition on Violence Against Women (COVAW), Kenya. She says: “The shame is deeprooted and there’s a lot of silence because one of society’s expectations is that women are seen as people who should hold the family together. So the moment you speak about domestic violence, some people would immediately say there’s something wrong with that woman.”

Saida’s fellow activists in South Africa and Nigeria bring different perspectives as to why victims keep quiet.

Josephine says: “The issue of silence is rooted in culture and the decision of the private and public domain. We are raised to be ashamed of certain things outside, and silence has

been used for a very long time as a weapon to further perpetrate acts of sexual and domestic violence. This is in addition to the issue of stigma and poor response because, let’s face it, if I’m victimised, I’ll only feel courageous to speak about my victimisation if I know that structures are there to respond positively to my situation. What’s the point of further going to open my wound if I know you are not going to put iodine and plaster on it? The primary victimisation is the act itself. The secondary victimisation is the blame and shame, and silence explores the situation.”

“One of the most difficult things to address is the cultural underpinning that makes it so easy for society to accept violence”



Nhlanhla believes that what causes women to be silent “is fear of the perpetrator and a society that does not believe the victim. It’s difficult to come out; even in middle class South Africa, women would rather go to a private psychologist or private lawyer than come to POWA because they feel ashamed and stigmatised because their counterparts in the same social standing are not receptive. They will judge and ask how you can complain about domestic violence when you have such a nice car, a beautiful home and your life is so good.” Events such as the global One Billion Rising day of action are at the forefront of trying to combat these deeply held attitudes.

If silence and stigma is intrinsic to the cycle of violence against women, how does culture fit into the equation?

“One of the most difficult things to address is the cultural underpinning that makes it so easy for society to accept violence,” says Saida. “You would be surprised that there are certain people who are educated and hold very high positions in society but they are the same ones who revert to the traditional ways of being able to say this is what the expectations are or should be in regards to my wife and partner. We need to change that mindset that accepts, anticipates and therefore perpetuates violence.”

“People like to run back to their African culture, when really it’s an abuse of what African culture is by saying a man in African culture is meant to do this. That term has been abused to the point that we don’t even know what culture is and what it’s not. It’s not just about culture but also, masculinity in crisis. People have certain understandings of what it is to be a man that actually constitutes violation, and this is what is seen as the cool man. So I think the cultural underpinning and, unfortunately, the violent hegemonic form of masculinity is what is problematic.”

Josephine, on the other hand, ar-

“The patriarchal structures guide the socialisation of boys and girls. Boys are socialised from a young age to feel ‘you are the man, you must be strong’. Even in families, you find that the boy is growing up and feeling he is superior to his sisters.”

– Josephine Chukwuma



conflict in a rural court, which does not help the cause of women affected by violence, especially those who have limited or no access to services and awareness drives provided by organisations like POWA, COVAW or Project Alert.

Nhlanhla and Saida say these factors become “obstacles” to the wellbeing of the women affected and make things worse because “there are communities where women are socialised to think that a man must hit you to show he is committed to you and loves you”.

If the traditional court at the grassroots level is unable to effect real change, what can the legal framework of countries do to ensure the safety of women? In Nigeria, only four states (Lagos, Ebonyi, Jigawa and Cross River State) have domestic violence laws to protect women and men from violence within the home. At the federal level, a bill is yet to be passed and in the meantime, activist groups use the Criminal Code, which has various laws on assault, according to Josephine. Kenya currently uses sections 234, 237, 250 and 251 of its Penal Code to address issue of violence, although experts say there are no laws specifically designed to address that of violence against women. While South Africa has the Violence Act and the Sexual Offences Act, implementation is a huge challenge. It is to this end that Josephine and Nhlanhla say the current response to cases of violence against women are poorly responded to due to a lack of sensitisation and understanding of the law by officials.

“If I present myself at a police station and I say I have been raped and the person I see has never read or worked regarding sexual offences, how do you think that person will treat me because they don’t understand what the current law is?” Josephine adds that this is why “we need to continue with the work of sensitisation. You can never over-flog sensitisation and awareness creation”.

Nhlanhla says funding is just as important as sensitisation in the fight back, because without funds, it is impossible to provide much needed services and develop prevention programmes within communities gravely affected by violence against women. “It’s easier to break the cycle of violence when you are able to give the victims options,” she says. “If I tell you it’s against your right to be abused, but not giving you options, I’m not helping you. How do I give you options when there are no shelters that you can go to or a women’s programme that deals with economic empowerment? With domestic violence, you can tell the victim that they can apply for a protection order, but before you look at the exit strategy, is there a shelter she can go to? It’s important that the services are available as you give options which are discussed and pros and cons are weighed, so the survivor can make the best decision.”

It is Josephine’s belief that alongside sensitisation “we need to bring our girls up to believe in themselves and own ability, so they can do things for themselves and not wait for a husband to come and buy them cars. We need to empower our young girls to grow up placing value on themselves, setting goals and striving and we need to go back to the drawing board. Charity begins at home and for as long as there’s no peace in the home, there cannot be peace in society. No young man was born abusive. It’s what he has imbibed growing up that turned him into the violent creature he became. We need to get it right in the family, a microcosm of the larger society.”

Nhlanhla adds: “It is time we put our cultural beliefs aside and respect each other as human beings and it’s time good men stand up– it cannot be culture when we hurt one another.” ■