

Love Shouldn't Hurt

by Rosalee Telela

She is slapped, punched, kicked, raped, strangled, burnt. She bruises, loses an eye, a kidney, an unborn baby, her confidence. Maybe even her life. Brutality against women in our society is real. Frighteningly real, very common and mostly ignored.

Agisanang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training (Adapt) deals with this brutality every day. The program was set up to run workshops on how to identify abuse and offer counselling and support to abused women. One will find Adapt inside the brightly colored walls of Alexandra Clinic, Alexandra Township. There, Mmatshilo Motsei, the project's founder deals with the painful reality of violence against women.

Mmatshilo Motsei, outspoken, confident, courageous, herself a survivor of violent abuse is organizer for change. How did it all begin?

When the beatings began, Motsei was depressed and confused. She even thought of committing suicide. "The pain becomes so much that you can't go on. I understand when women in violent relationships are confused. One day they decide to leave the abuser, the next day they don't. But we don't have to be hard on ourselves. There are too



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-Mmatshilo Motsei

many people battering us. We need to be gentle with ourselves and support each other, as women," she said.

Motsei believes that although women can nurture and love each other, they do not always support one another.

"When I decided to leave, my mother supported my decision. Unfortunately for most women in our community, their mothers tell them to go back, even if their husbands beat them up daily. They say we received lobola from these people, and, that as a wife, one should withstand all the problems that come with being married," she said. Unfortunately, she added, the traditional ways of dealing with marital problems such as wife abuse ignore what the woman thinks or feels.

"After your family and his family have sat down and talked about the problems, most of the time you're just told to go back to your partner. He continues to abuse you, knowing that even if you go home, another 'indaba' will be called, and you will be sent back to him."

Motsei traces men's violent behavior to South Africa's history and, the breakdown of respect and pride. "The violence that comes with racism and poverty has pushed people to do things which they wouldn't normally do."

Still, Motsei notes, poverty is not the main cause of violence against women. "Men learn from an early age to see and treat women as objects. They have been raised to believe that a real man is one able to control women by being aggressive and violent."

South African structures, institutions, cultures and practices, which are mostly male dominated, justify, main-

tain and produce violence.

"When a woman goes to a religious leader for advice, she is told to love,



honor, and obey, and to suffer in silence. Sometimes we are even told it is our fault men abuse us. "I know of a priest in Soweto who tells the women who go to see him, 'If your husband beats you, it's a cross you should carry, like Jesus Christ'."

She adds: "Long ago, in most African cultures, when you got married, one of the things said to the man was, 'If you don't want her anymore, you must bring her back. Don't hurt her.'"

Women need to make their voices heard. Some have to stop taking the blame and feeling ashamed.

"This is where women's groups, associations, stokvels and prayer meetings

come in. Women are organized in so many ways. They have to start discussing issues like rape, abuse and abortion.

If a few women speak out, others are going to follow. If there is a death in your area where a woman has been killed by her husband, make a noise about it. Expose the man who did it."

The Constitution, Bill of Rights, Criminal Procedure Act, and the Prevention of Family Violence Act say violence is a crime. However, laws alone are not enough. Attitudes have to change. Police, courts, hospitals, clinics, schools and social workers also have to start seeing women abuse as a crime.

"Men have to take responsibility for their violence. They need to challenge all the lies they have been told about women. "They have to look closely at how they were raised, because these things are learned early in life. "I think we do have men who are our allies, men who condemn gender violence as strongly as we do. Those men could be trained as counselors for abusive men. They can be role models for others to say to men it's okay not to be violent—that it does not make you less of a man."

At the same time, Motsei recommends the maximum possible sentence on men convicted of violent crimes against women. "At the moment men do it because they know they can get away with it. There is no message coming from society saying it's wrong.

The program officer is calling for a national lobby that will elevate the problem of violence against women to a national issue.

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