The Rural Context

The economic development of rural women is one of the keys to their social emancipation while education is a mechanism to help form new values and perceptions, writes Kees Van Der Waal.

The high rates of crime, rape and abuse seem to be overwhelming us. While the media keep us informed about these worrying aspects of society, there is often too much focus on physical violence and too little focus on relationships, perceptions, context, and the cases of these phenomena.

Despite the increasing violence against women, there are positive developments. The 1993 Prevention of Family Violence Act is an improvement for those who can make use of the instrument it provides. Opposition against women abuse has also become more visible. However, the interventions that exist—shelters and programmes—are mainly in the urban centres. Rural areas remain largely untouched and unexplored, and this motivated the anthropological research reported here.

The research was conducted in 1991 and 1992 in an area of the former homeland of Gazankulu, in the Northern Province [of South Africa]. The unit of study was a group of 65 residential stands. The men mainly migrant workers to the factories and mines of the main economic centre of the country, while the women worked mainly on the farms of the Letaba Valley. The economic conditions of the settlement were characterised by a high level of unemployment and the poverty it caused. The research used a variety of methods which sought to find events, relationships, and perceptions: daily reports were written by people living in the settlement, participation observation was done during research visits, and cases of violence were analysed.

It is important to note that much of the daily interaction among inhabitants of the rural settlement consisted of cooperation and fun. Yet, physical violence seemed to be quite obvious

and important in many relationships, especially where age and gender played a role. In one year, 757 cases of violence were recorded, which translated to more than one incident per person per year. The cases covered only those picked up by research assistants (living in the settlement) and did not take into account cases that never became public knowledge or those that took place outside the settlement. It was clear from an analysis that boys and men used much more physical violence than did women.

An inclusive definition of violence was used: physical violence, verbal attacks, and refusal to provide resources or refusing cooperation. Often, a verbal attack or a refusal to provide resources led to a physical confrontation. Invariably, physical violence was associated with verbal and psychological abuse. It was further evident that levels of domination implied levels of dependency based on age and gender and were seen as natural and given.

Powerful outsiders often acted violently against the people living in the rural settlement. This included representatives of the tribal authority, the homeland government, and white farmers in the vicinity. Children were, for instance, beaten at school for lacking uniforms or they were scolded and sent home for not paying school fees. The water pump attendant, a paid official, often ignored the women who were waiting for water which he alone could pump for them. Clinic sisters often shunted patients around and diminished them verbally. Farm workers, especially women, received low wages, despite physically demanding work done during long hours and in poor climatic conditions.

Men had given themselves the exclusive right to multiple sexual relationships. If their girlfriends or wives questioned them or, worse, opposed them, they were subjugated by beatings. Apart from this, many men neglected their families by not remitting money regularly to their wives. If money was remitted, it was only a small part of the salary that was earned and the rest was used by the man and his new urban household. Men also often stayed away from home whenever they liked, without having to tell their wives as was always expected of them when they left their homes. Women were also symbolically put down by men, being referred to as "prostitutes." They were beaten when they dared to have extra-marital relationships to gain access to another man's salary.

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Women had less scope for physical violence and usually hit back at their men when neglected or abused by refusing to do as they were told. They show their disrespect in other more psychological ways. Women among themselves often had violent altercations about men and resources about which they competed. A place in the queue for water or firewood left in the bush to dry often caused such conflicts.

Parents often used force against their children when they were not behaving as expected. Boys often used violent means to subjugate other more junior boys. Girls were harassed on the streets and footpaths, seemingly in a playful manner, but often with violent results. Sex was often forced on girls and boys considered themselves to be owners of their "cherries."

Girls occupied the lowest rung on the social ladder, being at the bottom of the hierarchy of violence and therefore the most vulnerable social category. Among themselves, girls used age as a ranking criterion and enforced seniority with violent means when necessary.

Several health implications are evident from the relationships discussed above. Injuries inflicted during fights and disciplinary action are self-evident health risks flowing from the highly stratified relationships in the rural context. Just as important to consider as the physical wounds are the psychological scars on the perpetrators and victims of violence. The strict social hierarchy furthermore implied that the socially junior did not have easy access to decision-making or to the resources they needed. Reproduction is one area with health implications where girls and women had

little say. They were, furthermore, subjected to life-threatening risks involving sexually transmitted diseases, of which HIV was the most serious.

Mostly, the reaction of women and girls to the violence they had to endure was one of submission. In the event of the woman taking action against a person who used physical violence against her or who abused her verbally in a serious way, she usually relied on her kin and on informal arbitration rather than on the intervention of the police. Only in extreme cases did women resist male violence against them in a physically violent way. Such a course of action needed a strong woman who had the necessary character or resources to rely upon. Leaving the household was the ultimate threat feared by men because of their own vulnerability, but this again was only possible where a woman had access to supportive kin.

Is it right to present the violence in families in rural areas as the problem? In South African society, it seems that violence is widespread throughout the society. Crude acts of physical violence seem to be more common in conditions of instability and poverty, but are these in themselves not also violent and to some extent caused by those outside these conditions? Violence does not only affect the working class or the poor. Our society is still highly hierarchical and patriarchal. Seen in a wider context, the institutions of modern society—schools, hospitals, churches, families, and factories—are often violent in concept.

Just as much as the interrelationships among various forms of violence differ, the contexts in which they occur also differ. This has important consequences for intervention strategies which need to be diversified and locally rooted. Examples are the different options which women of different backgrounds have when their married life becomes unbearable. In the city, a shelter may be the appropriate strategy for effective support, but in the rural areas, where kinship plays a very important role, it is not certain that a shelter would be preferred to the home of origin as a refuge.

AS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IS SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY EMBEDDED, THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL WOMEN IS ONE OF THE KEYS TO THEIR SOCIAL EMANCIPATION.

What is fundamental and similar to all social contexts is the presence of patriarchy. In terms of the values of justice and democracy, which are central to our constitutional system and the bill of rights, patriarchy is unjust and needs to be undermined. The factors which reinforce patriarchy (and the violence which it generates) are historically so much part of our society that they are difficult to remove or to change. Tradition, which can help a person retain self-worth and to find security in social forms and customs, is one.

Poverty is another factor and, where relative deprivation is high, as in South Africa, people have to make the best possible use of social difference in order to compete successfully for limited resources. The grip of tradition and poverty on social life has, again, been reinforced by colonialism and apartheid which led to the dispossession of Africans. Another factor is female disempowerment, again linked to the externally introduced forces such as racism, migrant labour, and social marginality. The devastation of family life as a result of migrant labour and influx control, is another factor which led to the growth of social survival strategies with negative effects, especially the high rate of fostering, estimated to be about 20 to 30 percent of the country's children.

Given the complexity of the phenomenon, an integrated, holistic approach is needed. A truly democratic society needs to be created in which exploitation and domination are replaced by just and equal relationships. The legal and justice system needs to be reinforced and, in this connection, the role of a trustworthy police is crucial as it forms the first line of contact with victims and perpetrators. Secondary support for victims, for instance, in the form of shelters and counseling programmes are equally important.

As violence against women is socio-economically embedded, the economic development of rural women is one of the keys to their social emancipation.

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