

Coloured Women's Experiences of Domestic Violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa

by Elizabeth Petersen, MSW

The legacy of an institutionalized violent apartheid is flagged as one of the contributing factors for the violent nature of the South African society where women and children live in constant fear of being assaulted or raped. Research estimates that one in four women finds herself in an abusive relationship (Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002) and that every six hours a woman is killed by her intimate partner (Matthews et al. 2004).

Since the transition from apartheid to democracy, violence against women was regarded as a national priority by the government. State interventions produced a number of legislative reforms including the institution of the Domestic Violence Act (no 118 of 1998) and various specialist services such as the sexual offences court and family courts (Vetten, 2005). For many women in the deeply fragmented coloured¹ community, imagining a different future is almost out of reach when confronted with the vicious cycle of poverty, unprecedented levels of violence and substance abuse.

In the light of the 2001 religious demography census estimation that 80 percent of the population is Christian,² it is disturbing to note the absence of the religious voice in condemning violence against women.

Of the scant research available on Coloured women's experiences of domestic violence, one study revealed the complex process of leaving an abusive relationship for Coloured Women as follows:

"The beginning phase is characterised by confusion created by the abuse and the women's need to make sense of the confusion; fruitless efforts to bring the abuse to an end; stifled attempts to leave and eventual immobilisation. The second phase is alive with vigorous internal struggle and the passage of time allows for the emergence of a new self. The narrow confining experience of the self as a personification of the feminine role began to change as the women allowed their own thinking to surface, to be explored and to guide awareness and choice. At first they denied feelings and thoughts that were outside the role, viewing them as a threat to life as it was known, regardless of uneasiness or discomfort or unhappiness, depression, or pain" (Mohamed, 2006:5).

She continues to explain that it is generally hard for coloured women to imagine a different future. Those who finally left the abusive relationship, harbour regret for not leaving earlier.

In a recent study clergy reported that they are overwhelmed with issues of poverty and substance abuse in many coloured communities. They also reported that their theological training did not prepare them and that the church does not provide any guidelines regarding domestic violence intervention (Petersen, 2006). With reference to some of their experiences in the coloured community one participant said:

It was only maybe more domestic violence in the township and then also you know that it is something that is not seen as violence. It is not seen because of our culture, it's almost as if in Bonteheuwel³ people would come and say or the men would say I needed to put my wife in place... The boys grew up in homes where DV happens and even the girls. So as they grow up it sort of become second nature, that's the way to treat your wife or to be treated by your partner.

Many coloured women who are part of conservative churches are frowned upon for seeking liberation and wanting out of abusive relationships. Coming from a historical context where obedience to leaders and husband were strongly promoted and reinforced by some churches these women carry an extra burden as they try to make sense of Christ calling them to freedom and abundant life, when their faith experience often urge them to be patient in their suffering. Many have relinquished their beloved faith communities for the sake of their safety. Others still endure the abuse to retain the "support" of their faith communities.

In conclusion, we acknowledge the enormous strides made by South Africa to achieve its democracy and freedom. It is however the multi-layered aftermath of oppression and discrimination that requires more collaborative effort with the religious sector playing a pivotal role in the healing and transformation process. With escalating statistics of violent crimes against women and children in South Africa, it is now completely unacceptable for the religious sector to remain silent and inactive. The South African Faith and Family Institute established in 2008, seek to be a resource for religious leaders and their faith communities as they begin to take greater responsibility for helping to break the cycle of violence against women and children and healing the gaping wounds of apartheid.

References

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¹ Coloureds, as a mixed race group being neither white nor black, are classified as a distinct racial group in South Africa, and represent about 9% of the total population (The Coloureds of Southern Africa, 2005). These are people that are not "white" (European) or "black" (indigenous groups like Xhosa, Zulu, etc). They are a combination of Khoisan, Asian, white, black, etc

² According to International Religious Freedom Report 2008, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor [<http://www.biblebeliever.co.za/South%20African%20Stats.html>]

³ The name of one coloured community or township in the Western Cape Province