

# Breaking the silence brings hope to abused in the rural Eastern Cape

Mention gender-based violence (GBV) and images of physical abuse immediately come to mind.

What is rarely considered is the passive violence which began with the spread of HIV/Aids and still stalks women across the country, especially in rural communities.

A real, ongoing threat in the small town of Cathcart in the Eastern Cape is the spread of HIV/Aids linked to a patriarchal society in which men reject efforts made to get them to find out their status and practise safe sex.

The result, said Linda Brukwe, director of the Ikhwezi Women Support Centre, located in the area, was that women and young girls remained at high risk.

Even more sinister and concerning is the false belief that sex with a virgin can rid men of the virus – which has led to a high incidence of rape cases, adding to the gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) problems that are sadly rife in the community.

Ikhwezi Women Support Centre also extends its reach to three surrounding townships and five villages.

Added to the HIV/Aids concern is spiralling domestic violence, worsened by various setbacks caused by Covid-19.

As personal frustrations have grown over the past couple of years, made worse by people still confined in small dwellings, so too had alcohol abuse and the violence that mainly women and children suffered at the hands of men, said Brukwe.

Addressed through Ikhwezi educational campaigns, the social “taboo” that once encouraged



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silence had largely become a thing of the past, Brukwe said.

“The violence which results from the ills of unemployment and poverty and drug and alcohol abuse, has seen abused women and children seeking shelter with Ikhwezi since 1997,” she said.

“Since our early days, we have learnt a lot and become more active.

“We have been dealing with the belief that women regard domestic abuse as normal, and have launched education programmes to help shift these perspectives.

“These are offered at schools and also to women’s groups.

“At an official level, we have informal ties with the department of justice and the SA Police Service.

“We also draw attention to the plight of our women by lobbying outside courts when we believe that granting bail to an abuser is against the community’s interest.”

Other practical actions have included introducing assistance at the local police station.

Ikhwezi has created and furnished a safe room where survivors can be interviewed and supported by the centre’s social

worker. Men were also standing up and condemning the endemic violence in their communities, said Brukwe.

She said Ikhwezi was also addressing the lack of understanding that GBVF was criminal.

“We work across a large area, and our messages don’t get everywhere.

“Cases of violence and rape often only come to our attention several days after they have happened. Because people don’t understand the need to preserve evidence, this is lost, making prosecutions difficult.

“Where the abuser is a prominent community member, there is also a reluctance to lay charges.”

As Ikhwezi pushes on with its much-needed work, financial constraints are a challenge.

The department of social welfare meets the social worker’s costs, and office space is free, but the other costs of developing programmes and sheltering and counselling survivors is a constant challenge for the centre.

The news, late last year, that the GBVF Response Fund had identified Ikhwezi as one of the 108 high-impact non-profit community-based organisations that would receive grant funding was a boost to their work, said Brukwe.

She said the funding would go towards meeting daily costs, with about 60% devoted to spreading the message about GBVF across communities, and attracting more volunteers to the cause.

“We are grateful to the GBVF Response Fund for the support.

“It is a life-saver in a rural

farming area like ours, where employment in agriculture has suffered because of the number of farmers who have relocated to other areas.

“As people have moved into Cathcart and surrounding areas, social issues have grown.

“We are grateful for any funding we can get – this means we are able to help those who need it.”

Commenting on the role and successes of Ikhwezi, Lindi Dlamini, CEO of the GBVF Response Fund, said: “It is the fund’s role to act as a catalyst to accelerate action in the fight against GBVF.

“We are pleased that we were able to help with much-needed funding to back this centre’s drive to assist survivors of domestic violence, abandonment and HIV/Aids in this part of the Eastern Cape – a major GBVF hotspot.

“It is encouraging to see that the educational support being provided is helping more women understand that what many of them experience at the hands of their abusers is not ‘normal’.

“We commend and value organisations like this that are actively helping survivors and reaching the perpetrators of violence,” Dlamini said.

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