

Chapter 16

Women and Child Protection Units, Namibia

16.1 Context

GBV is a pervasive issue in Namibia and one that the government has taken very seriously since gaining its independence from South Africa in 1990. Among other initiatives, Namibia had passed six pieces of legislation related to GBV and created 15 specialised police units across the country dedicated to assisting all victims of rape and domestic violence, regardless of gender, known as Women and Child Protection Units (WCPUs).

In spite of these notable advances, however, the problem of GBV within Namibia has persisted into the twenty-first century, as evidenced by a number of studies conducted, particularly on domestic violence. For example, a study conducted in 2007–08 within eight regions of Namibia found that since 2000, 41 per cent of female respondents and 28 per cent of male respondents had experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner (SIAPAC 2008). What's more, GBV is almost certainly under-reported, not least because of traditional beliefs that sanction violence and stigmatise victims for speaking out.

16.2 Key institutional actors

WCPUs provide a good example of cross-sectoral collaboration. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare (MGE CW), which is the national gender machinery, is responsible for co-ordinating Namibia's gender-related programmes and for providing WCPUs with social workers to assist children with counselling services. This ministry has also recently strengthened support to child witnesses and is the lead agency for the provision of shelters. The Namibian Police, under the Ministry of Safety and Security, is the lead agency in control of WCPUs. The Ministry of Health and Social Services is responsible for providing social workers to the centres, counselling and welfare services for adults, and doctors to do medical examinations and treat survivors of abuse. Several NGOs, especially the Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) and Lifeline/Childline, also provide services and support to the WCPUs. UNICEF has provided financial and technical assistance to WCPUs since their inception in 1993.

16.3 Theory of change

GBV can be effectively mitigated or prevented by combining legislative reforms with initiatives that bolster support to survivors and target individuals' consciousness and cultural norms. According to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare '... policies and laws are not sufficient to curb GBV, other programmes need to be introduced to improve the socioeconomic status, especially of women, so that they are not vulnerable due to poverty... Factors that fuel GBV include unemployment, economic hardship,

[and] negative cultural and traditional practices, whereby some of these practices are discriminatory and widen the gap of gender inequality in the country' (MGECW 2014).

The Ministry has also recognised the complexity of addressing GBV, so one of the foundations of its approach has been to build strategies and interventions on a strong evidence base. For example, prior to releasing the country's current National Plan of Action on GBV, a Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) study was conducted in 2007–08 to analyse factors and traditional practices that may perpetuate or protect Namibians from GBV and discrimination.

16.4 Social institutions and discriminatory norms

The Ministry has built on insights gleaned from its activities to further strengthen Namibia's approach to addressing GBV in ways that balance legislative reforms with interventions that also influence individuals' consciousness, societal norms and survivors' access to resources. The work of WPCUs must be understood in the context of these multisectoral interventions.

Access to resources and opportunities: To improve the quality of support provided through WPCUs, which include police officers, social workers and medical personnel, eight of these units have been upgraded to include shelters for GBV survivors, particularly women and children. These shelters were due to go into operation soon after the time of writing (MGECW 2014).

Formal laws, policies and accountability: As noted above, Namibia had already introduced numerous laws to address GBV prior to the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality (2005–15), including the Combating of Rape Act (2000) and the Combating of Domestic Violence Act (2003). The Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare has also contributed to the policy landscape on GBV through development and implementation of the National Gender Policy for 2010–20 and through the creation of the National Plan of Action on GBV, 2012–16. More recently, the government introduced legal measures to prohibit rape cases from being withdrawn by victims or relatives, the results of which will be monitored.

Informal cultural norms and exclusionary practices: Building on recommendations from the 2007 National Conference on GBV, in 2009 the Ministry and stakeholders launched the National Media Campaign on Zero Tolerance of GBV. This campaign included television and newspaper advertisements, a radio drama series, and posters in English and local languages.

Box 16.1 Sending signals, changing attitudes

'Our patriarchal societies teach us that girls are soft and boys are strong, and that there is nothing wrong with being beaten up by your husband or partner. We can start changing that attitude by sending very clear signals that violence against women is not acceptable.'

–SarryXoagus-Eises, Namibia Media Women's Association

Women and men's consciousness: The KAP study conducted in 2007–08 explored root causes of GBV in Namibia, including cultural practices and patriarchal gender norms and attitudes that perpetuate GBV. These norms underpin attitudes and behaviours of frontline social sector and police staff. Currently, all new police recruits receive basic sensitivity training related to GBV (Matthews and von Hase 2013). Further, changes to Namibia's legal and policy framework on GBV, described below, are influencing individual women's consciousness and beliefs regarding their right to live free from violence.

The Namibian people's beliefs and norms surrounding GBV have been conditioned by centuries of colonialism, apartheid and violence, in which GBV was condoned. The challenge facing the Ministry, therefore, is to translate Namibia's progressive policies and laws into transformational norms.

16.5 Strategies

When the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005–15 was launched, Namibia had already taken a number of measures to prevent and mitigate GBV with varying degrees of success. As a result, one of the core crosscutting activities in the Ministry's approach to ending GBV has been to reflect, consult and re-strategise. In 2007, it hosted a national conference on GBV with approximately 300 participants, and subsequently launched a KAP study in 2007–08 to provide an evidence base for its reflections and planning. Namibia's National Plan of Action on GBV (2012–16) builds on this commitment by emphasising the importance of data collection and research, as well as collaboration. Two specific strategies are the focus of this case study, one illustrating Namibia's efforts to prevent GBV through popular mobilisation and the other to improve services for survivors of GBV. Both strategies provide important contributions to addressing GBV.

GBV prevention: In 2009, Namibia launched a mass media campaign, 'Zero Tolerance for GBV: Report it to Stop it'. The campaign was designed to raise awareness of GBV; communicate the government's stance of zero tolerance for GBV; and empower service providers and members of the public to prevent, detect and report cases of GBV (MGECW 2014). Also in 2009, the Ministry, in collaboration with the LAC and the University of Namibia's Gender Training and Research Programme, expanded on Namibia's approach to preventing GBV within the government's National Plan of Action on GBV. Strategies included national campaigns, mobilising the grassroots, involving children, youth, faith-based organisations, traditional authorities and media in prevention initiatives, and programmes for abusers. A new zero tolerance media campaign on GBV was launched in July 2015. Another initiative is a special programme to sensitise men on GBV and its effects on society. Meetings are held countrywide for men and by men in order to advocate respect for the rights and dignity of women.¹

Improving responses to GBV: Prevention strategies were complemented by a series of measures designed to improve responses to GBV in Namibia regarding health and other services, information dissemination, family and community support, and legal procedures. WCPUs are a particularly interesting example of support/

service provision for survivors of GBV. The first WCPU was established in 1993 by a steering committee consisting of various ministries and NGOs, and the University of Namibia.

WCPUs provide multisectoral support to those who have been subject to sexual or domestic violence by providing a specialised and friendly environment where they can report assaults and get the medical and psychosocial help needed to assist their recovery. The demand for their services is substantial and growing (LAC 2013). WCPUs currently only deal with cases of rape/sexual violence or very serious physical assaults (where the person is hospitalised); all other cases are referred to regular police stations. However, there are efforts taking place to publicise the WCPU mandate and provide clear information to the public on the procedure to follow in cases of GBV. WCPUs receive referrals from schools, hospitals and clinics, psychologists, family and friends of victims, police charge offices, the LAC, the Legal Aid (Ministry of Justice), Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, women's networks, and other community groups and organisations. These units also run outreach programmes to educate the public on GBV, as well as for schools and tertiary educational institutions, church groups and women's groups. As necessary, they advocate for policies and guidelines on GBV and violence against women and children, and also provide training for police officers, social workers and other professionals (LAC 2013).

16.6 Outcomes to date

Constituency/community level: According to the 2007–08 KAP study on GBV, community awareness about Namibia's new laws on GBV is growing; about half of those surveyed could specify a law that might protect against GBV. The majority of respondents could also cite places that women or children could go to for protection. Additionally, a study commissioned by the LAC in 2012 established that when GBV survivors do turn to the court, most complainants successfully attain at least an interim protection order. Further, the majority of Namibians expressed confidence in the effectiveness of police and courts in coping with domestic violence (although a considerable gender gap persists (men 81 per cent; women 57 per cent) (LAC 2012).

However, a number of challenges also remain on the road towards fully supporting victims and effectively preventing GBV. For example, the LAC reports on case outcomes where many GBV victims' interim orders are not converted into final protection orders (i.e. 598 out of 866) (LAC 2012).

National level: Preventing and responding to GBV at a national level and in sustainable ways is evidently a long-term objective. As noted above, a number of challenges remain for service and legal providers in Namibia's efforts to end GBV, which is exacerbated as traditional beliefs about gender roles and violence mix with increasing rates of unemployment, and men's subsequent sense of disempowerment (Britton and Shook 2014). Nevertheless, MGECW has taken on a number of initiatives to prevent/respond to GBV with some success: WCPUs are better equipped and more responsive than they once were; the general public is increasingly aware of legal rights to live free from GBV; and GBV cases are being brought forward through the police

and legal channels, with at least some success. GBV survivors are also finding their voice and providing an example to other women who may be in similar situations.

Box 16.2 A survivor's experience

I went to the Women and Child Protection Unit several times ... [eventually] I was told by a social worker about Friendly Haven [a Namibian NGO that works with victims of GBV], so I went there together with my children. If they had sent me there earlier I would have made my decision to leave him sooner. There I became strong again and could reflect on what was happening in my life. I realised that it is better for my kids to grow up without a violent father... Looking back at my situation, I would advise another woman who has just started to have these sorts of problems with her partner, to not sit and wait for better days. I would tell her to stand up and move on.²

Source: Matthews and von Hase (2013)

Efforts to collect and monitor data on GBV have been spearheaded by the MGECW with varying degrees of success. As the Ministry noted, Namibia's national database on GBV has encountered operational difficulties and, as a consequence, data is collected manually through police offices (MGECW 2014). The KAP survey, conducted in 2007/08 by the Social Impact Assessment and Policy Analysis Committee (SIAPAC), could provide one important benchmark for monitoring changes and developments in the social institutions and discriminatory norms surrounding GBV. Another important area for future research in this area could be regarding the effectiveness of Namibia's mass media campaign on preventing and mitigating GBV.

Civil society organisations such as the LAC and agencies like UNAIDS have also commissioned high calibre research regarding the effectiveness of the state's efforts to advance GBV prevention.

16.7 Lessons learned and the way forward

The MGECW has, with a number of public, non-profit and international agencies, taken bold steps towards addressing GBV, an approach that demonstrates the value of collaboration. Progressive legislation has helped to advance change. Public perceptions about the country's commitment to ending GBV are positive, and there is evidence that Namibia's legislation to address issues related to GBV is becoming known and utilised by citizens. Further work is required to better operationalise support services (especially given the demand) and to monitor the ways in which Namibia's mass media campaign has had an influence on how to prevent and respond to this issue.

Specifically, with regard to WCPUs, a number of issues have been identified for action that may be of broader relevance to other contexts where similar cross-sectoral initiatives on GBV occur. The units do not have a dedicated single budget, but are reliant on funding from a variety of ministries, which creates challenges for the

smooth operation of services. Effective functioning of WCPUs also requires strong management committees, involving key stakeholders. Finally, regular, rigorous and standardised collection of data/statistics on WCPU service provision is crucial for monitoring and evaluation of the operation of these units across Namibia, in order to track cases involving GBV, including tracking information about case outcomes and services provided to complainants (LAC 2013).

The Ministry is aware of the remaining challenges, and committed to building on its past work to address GBV. Some of the main activities that it has committed to address include (LAC 2013):

- Carry out a national GBV indicator study.
- Continue collecting and disseminating monthly returns for GBV cases reported to all police stations and mobile police satellites countrywide.
- Intensify legal literacy programmes targeting key service providers (e.g. life skills teachers, traditional leaders, church leaders, police, defence force members) and community members.
- Extend community sensitisation on GBV and male responsibility to the constituency level.
- Incorporate domestic violence indicators into the Demographic Health Survey.
- Revamp the national mass media campaign on GBV.
- Operationalise existing GBV shelters in the regions and improve on the co-ordination mechanism.

Notes

- 1 See more at: UNHCR (2015).
- 2 The impact of GBV for children is a question that the Legal Assistance Centre has underlined as a critical area for future research.

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