Gender-based Violence in Zimbabwe

Introduction
This bulletin is dedicated to the commemoration of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. It is going to highlight what gender-based violence is, its traits, types, possible causes and effects.

Gender-based Violence
The General Recommendation Number 19 of the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), defines gender based violence as “violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately.” This is violence that is directed at an individual based on her specific gender role in society. Gender-based violence is used interchangeably with “sexual violence” and “violence against women”. It includes any act or threat by men or male dominated institutions to inflict physical, sexual or psychological harm on a woman or girl because of their gender.

Gender-based violence arises from social, cultural and religious practices that subordinate women. It thrives in communities where violence is acceptable as a form of conflict resolution. It is facilitated by patriarchal (male controlled) social hierarchies, acceptance of violence as a mode of social interaction and political interface; by socio-economic inequality and a breakdown in norms and social structures. Gender based violence reflects and re-enforces differences between men and women and compromises the health, dignity, security and autonomy of victims. It serves to perpetuate male power and control and is sustained by a culture of silence and denial of the seriousness of health and social consequences of abuse.

In Zimbabwe gender-based violence is seen particularly in acts of domestic violence where rights are violated because of physiological make-up and gender roles performed. Spousal abuse is the most common form of gender-based violence. As a result of the patriarchal nature of Zimbabwean society, women are affected more by gender-based violence than men.
Women are mainly under attack in their homes and society in general. They face sexual violence, physical violence, emotional and psychological violence and also socio-economic violence. Cultural and traditional practices have perpetuated the subservient position of women, which makes them more vulnerable. Patriarchal socialization portrays women as perpetual minors who can be punished by their fathers, brothers and husbands.

Traditional practices which violate women include;
- forced virginity testing;
- pledging of women or girls for the purposes of appeasing spirits;
- child marriages.

Despite the enactment of laws to protect women, gender-based violence remains high.

Apart from the violence women experience in their private spheres, more violence is experienced in the public sphere in the form of rape and torture. In the recent past, election-related political violence in Zimbabwe has seen women being raped and forced into concubinage. This was done to intimidate and punish them or their spouses for participation in politics. This trend has been common in elections in the post 2000 Zimbabwe.

**Policy and regulatory framework**

The Government of Zimbabwe enacted the *Domestic Violence Act* in 2007 to protect women against gender-based violence but such violence continues to occur. The *Domestic Violence Act* of 2007, in its pre-amble spells out that the Act is intended to, 'make provision for the protection and relief of victims of domestic violence and to provide for matters connected with or incidental to the foregoing.' Establishment of victim friendly units in police stations for reporting of abuse has assisted in addressing gender-based violence.

The protection of women is also covered in the United Nations *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) of 1979. The Convention stresses the need for states to uphold equality between men and women in all spheres; economic, social, cultural, civil and political. In the African region, there are Protocols intended to protect women and to promote gender equality; the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development and the protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.

**Types of gender-based violence**

1. *Sexual violence*
This includes any sexual act directed against a person using force, regardless of their relationship to the victim in both the private and public spheres. It includes rape, verbal abuse of a sexual nature, forced marriage, forced abortion, genital mutilation and other violent acts against the sexual integrity of a person. This also includes denial of access to sexual and reproductive services and facilities such as birth control.

2. Physical violence
This refers to any deliberate act that directly impairs the victim's physical wellbeing. It is the intentional use of physical force with the potential of causing harm, injury, disability or death. Physical violence includes pushing, choking, slapping, punching, and burning among other acts that can cause physical harm.

3. Emotional and psychological violence
This is behavior that affects victim's feelings and sense of self with the intention of directly impairing the victim's psychological integrity. Such acts include insults, stalking, threats and denial of access to needs and requirements.

4. Socio-economic violence
The socio-economic status of a person is often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation. As a result orchestrated denial of access to these indicators constitute violence. Violation of access to space thereby limits opportunities for livelihoods and freedom of movement. For example women can be prohibited from walking in specific areas at specific times of the day where they can be accused of or arrested for prostitution. Women can also be discouraged from engaging in certain trades or professions which are perceived as male domains.

Causes of gender based violence
Gender based violence is sustained by silence; therefore the continued under reporting of such perpetuates the culture of violence. The cultural setup of patriarchy has also sustained gender-based violence although on the other hand it inhibits reporting of violence against men, as it is unthinkable for men to report violation by women. It has only come to the fore in the recent past where reported cases of men raped by women for alleged ritual purposes have been on the increase. In most cases of gender-based violence against men, perpetrators justify themselves as acting in self-defense, particularly where physical violence is involved. In some cases, traditional practices have been an excuse for violations, as in cases of sexual violence where female genital mutilation is performed or in cases of circumcision of young boys.
Causes of gender-based violence also include:

- economic dependency of women on men;
- a weak and unprotective policy framework;
- cultural, religious or ideological permissiveness and bias that condones gender-based violence;
- poor reporting and redress mechanisms for victims;
- social degeneration associated with the breakdown in social values;
- rape of virgins by HIV positive men in the belief that they can be cured of the disease;
- subjugation of women.

Effects of gender based violence

- intensification of social inequalities between genders;
- institutionalization and legitimation of gender-based violence;
- devastating consequences for victims including health complications such as HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases;
- psychological problems.

Conclusion

There is need for victims of gender-based violence to speak out and seek justice in order to reduce the incidences. Gender based violence is a violation of human rights and should be condemned in the home and in society at large. The theme for the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence for 2011 is “From peace in the home to peace in the world: lets challenge militarism and end violence against women.” As the existence of peace in the home brings peace to the world at large, there is need to challenge structures that perpetuate violence.

This bulletin was compiled in collaboration with the Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association (ZWLA).