

OPINION & ANALYSIS

PERSONAL VIEW

Violence against women fights its way on to the global agenda

"I am aware of the fact that some view (the concern for human rights) as a luxury of the rich countries for which Africa is not ready." Kofi Annan, secretary-general of the United Nations, said in Harare last year in his address to the annual assembly of heads of state of government of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU).

"I know that other(s) treat it as an imposition, if not a plot, by the industrialised West. I find these thoughts truly demeaning, demeaning of the yearning for human dignity that resides in every African heart."

"... Do not African mothers weep when their sons or daughters are killed or maimed by agents of repressive rule? Are not African fathers saddened when their children are unjustly killed or tortured? Is not Africa as a whole impoverished when even one of its brilliant voices is silenced?" he asked

In his address to the UN General Assembly later on in the year Annan was as passionate in his view that violence against women has become "the most pervasive human rights violation, respecting no distinction of geography, culture or wealth."

And so it is that the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem), in collaboration with other UN agencies — on March 8 next year — will host a global video conference aimed at furthering the agenda of all those who working to end gender-based violence around the globe. Such violence, which includes female infanticide, sexual abuse, female genital mutilation, sexual harassment, forced prostitution, dowry-related violence, domestic violence, battering and marital rape, is recognised as a major obstacle to the advancement of women and to social and economic development, and peace.

Participants in the conference will include human rights advocates, government representatives, parliamentarians, academics, media representatives and others, who will meet UN decision-makers via two-way video to map a way forward to eradicating violence against women.

The way forward will take the form of a holistic plan for action aimed at addressing the unequal power relations between men and women that underpin gender violence as well as the treatment and rehabilitation of the victims and perpetrators of such violence. Addressing unequal power relations means addressing the inequality of access to society's resources, including income, education, land, credit, health facilities, jobs and information. The law is one arena where



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the creation of conditions for equal access can be facilitated.

An example is our newly introduced Maintenance Bill, forcing errant fathers to take financial responsibility for their children.

Other elements that help to create equal access include employers' creches, flexitime and paternity leave.

The protection, treatment and rehabilitation of victims of violence requires trained, gender-sensitive members of the criminal justice system. Such training began last week in South Africa, in line with provisions of the recent Domestic Violence Bill. Shelters for abused women, where they have access to skills training and credit facilities, enable them to break their economic dependence on abusive partners or family members.

Raising the status and morale of policemen handling gender-based violence, and raising the priority of this crime, would be other steps to eradicating such violence.

Helping the perpetrators who abuse women to look into themselves and understand their problem is done in South Africa by Asiganang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training (Adapt), the non-governmental organisation based in Alexandra and run by Mashilo Motsei, once an abused woman herself.

Adapt has earned a grant from Unifem's trust fund for a campaign in high schools educating students, teachers and parents on the problems of violence in dating and relationships.

The primary goal of Unifem's fund is to identify and support the most innovative and effective projects across the world that hold as their specific objective the prevention and elimination of

violence against women.

Sixteen days of activism against gender-based violence started in South Africa on the Day of No Violence against Women (November 25) and will end on December 10, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights. The campaign is aimed at raising awareness of the causes and effects of gender violence. It is also a step towards setting the agenda for the landmark video-conference next March.

South Africa is not the only country to observe these 16 days of activism to prevent violence against women and work towards the conference agenda. UN members in Latin American, the Caribbean, Asia, the Pacific and Africa are also involved. Gender equality, development and peace stand to gain much from these eventful 16 days, which will further raise awareness of one of today's most pervasive human right violations.