

Casting off the Cloak of Oppression: Countering Violence Against Women

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The Eldorado Park Centre for Peace Action has a programme on the prevention of violence against women. The programme conducted a needs assessment survey prior to embarking on service provision or intervention. A hundred women were interviewed about their perceptions of violence, the most pressing problems in their area, the counselling services they knew of and the resources they would like to see established.

Survey

The results of the survey indicated that unemployment, gang violence, substance abuse and spouse abuse were major problems. The respondents also highlighted the lack of services for abused women and children. They expressed a need for a wide range of resources, including shelter, police assistance and medical attention. However, there was a powerful emphasis on curative, as opposed to preventive, resources.

Respondents raised a number of reasons why abused women do not seek help. These include fear of further abuse by their partners; the feeling that these are private matters; and shame, humiliation or ostracism in trying to seek help. They suggested that men assault their partners because of insecurity and poor self image, which combine to produce an excessive need to dominate and subordinate women. Other important factors include being under the influence of alcohol and drugs, lack of housing, financial problems and unemployment.

There are a number of possible reasons why the women interviewed requested curative, rather than preventive services. These include a limited awareness on issues of women's subordination and a helplessness and involvement with the violence in their own lives. Existing mental health services are based on individual curative treatment and there is a lack of awareness of the nature of proactive and preventive services that could be established.

Curative services are clearly necessary for women whose lives are consumed by interpersonal violence, but pro-active, preventive services are also urgently re-



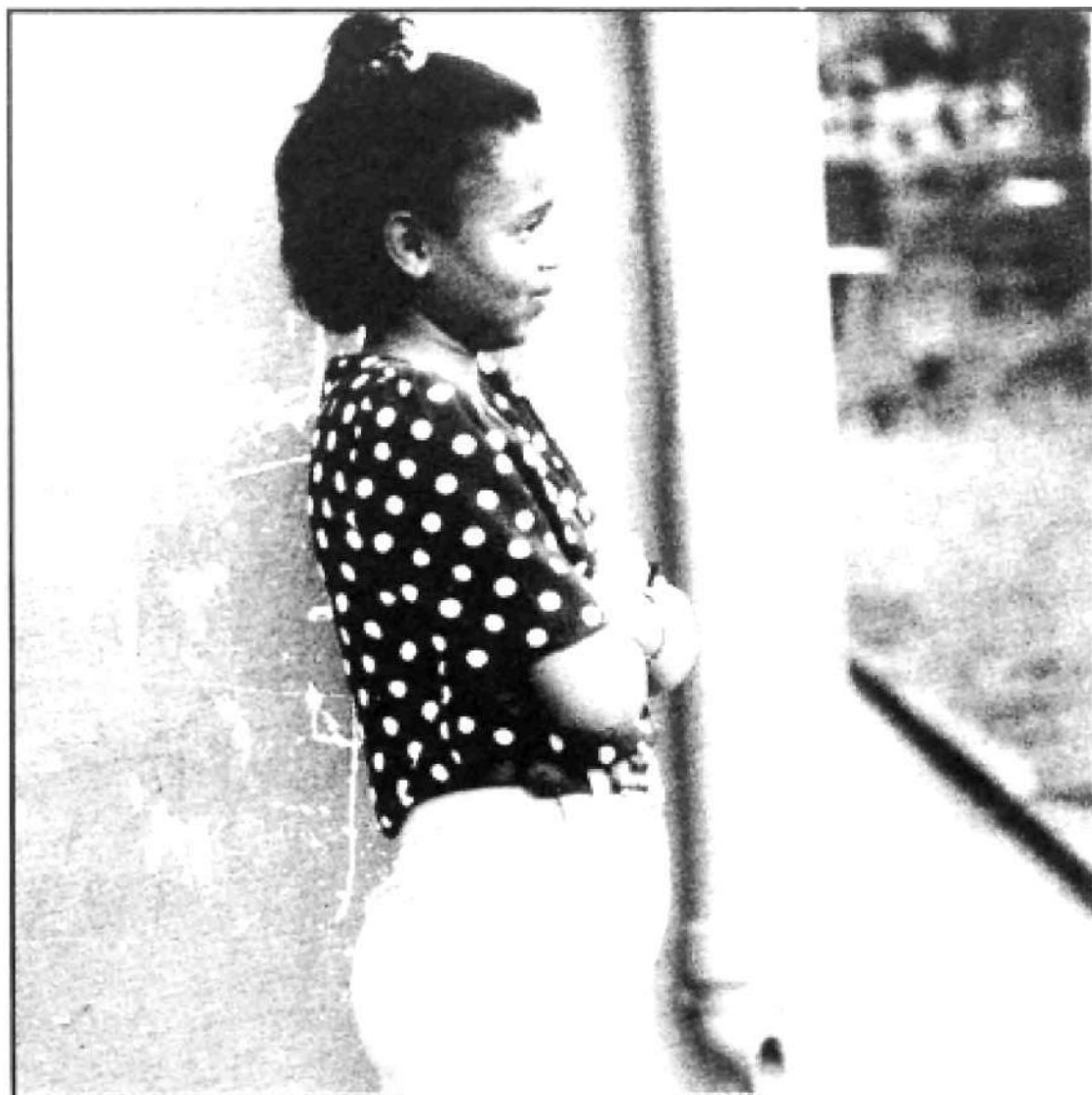
Women need to be alerted about the problems relating to violent relationships. *Photo: Naseema Saloojee*

quired. There is a need to raise awareness and educate both youth and old people that violence can not be condoned, as well as to inform women about their legal rights and to enable them to understand that violence is a social epidemic. Work also needs to begin at pre-school and primary school levels to alert children about the problems relating to violent relationships.

Curative and Preventive Services

The women's section of the Eldorado programme counsels survivors of violence, conducts community workshops and presents talks at clinics, factories and churches. It is also in the process of establishing a shelter for women who have been abused by their partners; creating, facilitating and sustaining drop-in activity groups that address the psychological needs of women; training and sensitising current social service providers who work with survivors of violence; and consolidating the existing network of safe-houses serving women survivors. Over the course of the next year, we will consider training with the South African Police with a view to preventing the re-victimisation of survivors of violence.

The services offered are based on the experiences of oppressed women. By providing these services, it is anticipated that women will first be able to break the silence regarding the abuse in their lives. Secondly, once they are able to share their problems with other women, the isolation cycle is broken and women begin to



The programme addresses the psychological needs of women. *Photo: Ismail Vawda*

appreciate the social nature of the problems of violence against women. When women as a group get together to collectively resolve an issue such as battering, the problem is initially addressed at the level of practical gender interest. It is a response to immediate perceived needs that arise from the concrete conditions of women's positioning by virtue of their gender. However, at a certain point, strategic gender interests are tackled and women decide to challenge patriarchy and male domination directly by adopting adequate measures against male violence and control.

It should be noted that the emancipation of women is a laborious and slow process. The purpose of this programme is to enable and strengthen women sufficiently so that they are able to deal with their personal lives and, having gained some strength, are able to work with other women on political issues surrounding women's lives.

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