

Section 9: Conclusion

This report has presented the findings of the first survey on gender-based violence in Malawi. Malawian women clearly are subject to high levels of violence and abuse. Definitions of abuse were formulated to be as broad as possible, and to include all types of behaviour that might be considered violent or abusive, and that might occur within intimate relationships. Most common in Malawi is physical abuse, with almost one third of women reporting some form of physical abuse. More than one tenth reported sexual abuse, and in total, almost half of the women interviewed had been abused in one way or another.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching. Gender violence has received increasing attention from policy-makers, the public sector and civil society in Malawi. Awareness campaigns and interventions have been designed and implemented over the past five years. Despite this, abuse remains unacceptably high. There is, at the same time, an awareness that various actions constitute abuse and gender violence, and furthermore, an apparent disinclination to accept any such actions. This raises a dichotomy that is difficult to challenge: the conversion of awareness and ideological commitment to rejecting gender violence into actionable and physical resistance to such abuse.

There is also mixed news for the public sector service providers. Those that reported or sought help from the police were generally satisfied with the service they received, and said that the police offered comfort to them. However, many of the protocols that should be in place to deal with survivors of intimate partner violence are not followed.

Similarly, an unacceptably high percentage of those victims who sought assistance from medical personnel had to wait for more than two hours to be examined. This may have been for reasons beyond the control of the medical practitioners, but suggests that there is clearly something lacking in the response to such cases. These factors all combine to indicate the need for greater awareness and training on the part of the service providers.

What can be done to deal with these problems? Some of the suggestions from the respondents themselves included:

- greater civic awareness and education for the public;
- harsher punishment for perpetrators;
- enhanced employment opportunities generated through government;
- increase access to community and institutional services.

These suggestions, while all pertinent, are premised on the commitment of the public sector, and the availability of adequate resources. Certainly, greater employment opportunities might have some impact on alleviating both the causes and the effects of abuse; women would certainly be more able to leave their abusive partners and support themselves. However, this alone is insufficient, as well as being only part of a long term strategy that is dependent on factors outside the control of those working in the sector:

- There is a need for greater awareness on how to deal with abuse within the home, on the implications of gender violence, and the need for medical and testing support for STIs and HIV/AIDS in the case of sexual abuse.
- More training and sensitivity awareness is required on the part of the police in dealing with victims. What is required is a set of protocols that all officers have been trained in, and the implementation of which are closely monitored.
- Practical support for victims through NGO and CBO networks and centres can provide hands-on support for those forced to leave their partners.

All these efforts need to be brought together in a single strategy that can be implemented by all concerned agencies, and more importantly, that can be closely monitored to ensure correct implementation and suitability for the target population.