

Help is needed for victims

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Over the past five months there have been numerous stories in the media about victims being harassed, attacked and even murdered by their intimate partners. According to Statistics SA, the incidence of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa is five times higher than the global average.



Prof Hayley Walker-Williams

Prof Hayley Walker-Williams, the deputy director of the School of Psychosocial Health at the North-West University (NWU), gives insight into why GBV victims find it hard to leave these relationships and what can be done to help them.

Prof Hayley explains that GBV can be physical, sexual, emotional and financial, and can be perpetrated by intimate partners, acquaintances, strangers and institutions. Both men and women can be victims, but in most instances GBV is committed by men against women. The man perpetrating the violence is often known to the woman, for example a partner or family member.

Why do victims stay in abusive relationships?

Prof Hayley says that it is well documented that most women leave an abusive relationship four to seven times with varying degrees of permanency before they finally escape the perpetrator's control. The fear of leaving is often far greater than the fear of staying.

The reason for this is that victims fear aggravating the abuser, which can result in them and their children getting hurt. Being socially, geographically, physically and financially isolated and having no access to resources that allow them to function independently from the perpetrator are further reasons for victims not leaving.

As GBV is shrouded in secrecy and stigma, the fear of being shamed or stigmatised for leaving also prevents victims from doing so. Furthermore, if the victim grew up in an abusive household, the repeated cycle of violence affects their self-belief and self-worth.

Prof Hayley adds that religious or cultural values also play a role in victims not leaving abusive relationships, because some religions and cultures forbid separation, divorce or going against the patriarchal leadership of the family.

Literature also reports that women have lost faith in the police services or justice system and may feel that no one will be able to protect them or their children.

What can be done?

GBV has devastating long-term effects on almost every aspect of the victim's life. Victims tend to suffer from mental-health, inter- and intrapersonal and sexual difficulties.

The critical point of departure has to be to focus on healing the victim and neutralising the devastating long-term impact on the victim's ability to live a normal life. Victims can be assisted if they are offered a legal approach that is empowering, compassionate and responsive to their needs. This can be done by mobilising resources and strengthening protective community resources.

To GBV victims the world can be lonely, isolated and riddled with fear. Family and friends need to offer victims support and

ensure that they validate the victim's feelings.

Prof Hayley states that victims who have suffered long-term abuse should create a safety plan that prepares for a safer exit from the relationship. Victims need to be offered support and resources. Family and friends can assist them to approach a social worker, psychologist, medical doctor, lawyer or even their human resources officer at work. Encourage them to seek out local trauma clinics at primary healthcare facilities, counselling services like LifeLine, or non-profit organisations such as People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA).

If GBV victims receive the necessary support, it will be easier for them to leave these toxic relationships.

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