

Stop violence against women

Violence fuels the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Swaziland

Amnesty International

[p2/3]

Betrayed trust

Sibongile (not her real name) was seven years old when her aunt's husband first sexually abused her. Sibongile had been living with her aunt following her father's death. Her mother, in accordance with tradition, was taken as a wife by her brother-in-law. As more children were born, her mother became increasingly impoverished, so Sibongile was sent to live with an aunt who had no children.

When Sibongile told her aunt what was happening, she did nothing to stop her husband's abuse of the little girl. Sibongile tried to escape from the repeated abuse and sought help from a neighbour, who was a pastor. To her horror, he in turn raped her, in the toilet, and threatened her with a knife when she screamed.

Another neighbour however did help her to go to the police. By January 2000 Sibongile had developed infections as a result of the rape and persistent sexual abuse. The police brought her to the office of the Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGAA), a national organization that helps women and children who are victims of or at risk of domestic and sexual violence.

SWAGAA found Sibongile a place in a government shelter and raised funds to buy her some clothes. They organized medical treatment for her but she could not be given an HIV test because there was no member of her family present to authorize it.

In July 2003 two men were brought to court on rape charges. Sibongile gave her evidence during a hearing behind closed doors in the presence of the perpetrators. The trial reportedly ended with the two men being acquitted.

Sibongile's case is one of a minority which have reached the courts. Most cases of rape and sexual abuse within the family are committed with complete impunity, with victims pressured to settle cases informally. In addition the law and court procedures can undermine the rights of complainants.

In Swaziland, women and girls suffer high levels of domestic and sexual violence, and experience pervasive economic, social and legal discrimination. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has had a devastating impact on women and girls. The level of HIV infection amongst pregnant women attending ante-natal clinics in 2002 was 38.6 per cent. The United Nations Development Program concluded in the same year that "most cultural expectations and practices [in Swaziland]...contribute to women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS".

A new draft Constitution, which may be adopted in 2004, for the first time guarantees women equal rights in law. However, several key provisions still discriminate against women or fail to specify whether the Constitution or customary law takes precedence. The constitutional reform process may also be jeopardised if the government continues to disregard court rulings, as it has done since 2002, and to attack the independence of the judiciary.

[pic cap]

Nonhlanhla Dlamini, Director of the Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGAA), comforts a young survivor of rape, Swaziland, 2003. © AI

Cover photo : Women take home bags of food distributed by the UN World Food Programme, Swaziland, August 2002. In 2003 up to a quarter of the population required food aid as a result of drought and the impact of HIV/AIDS. © AP

In the home and in the community, in times of war and peace, millions of women and girls are beaten, raped, mutilated and killed with impunity. Join Amnesty International's campaign to demand action by governments, communities and individuals to stop violence against women throughout the world.

Support our campaign: together we can make a difference

*** Take an interest:**

Find out and monitor how your community, government, police, security forces and courts respond to violence against women and girls.

***Take a stand:**

Speak out about violence against women. Challenge prejudiced or dismissive attitudes.

*** Take action:**

Join our global campaign for women's right to freedom from violence and discrimination.

Take action against sexual violence in Swaziland

Call on the Swaziland authorities to:

* welcoming the March 2004 ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) without reservations, urge that, in the context of the current constitutional reform process, its provisions are incorporated into national law and practice; urge Swaziland to ratify the Optional Protocol to CEDAW.

* reform the sexual offences legislation to ensure that perpetrators of rape and other forms of sexual violence can be brought to justice and complainants treated with dignity and respect.

* ensure that survivors of rape can have access to necessary medical treatment for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

Send appeals to: Prime Minister Absalom Themba Dlamini, Prime Minister's Office, PO Box 395, Mbabane, Swaziland, fax: +268 404 3943

Send messages of solidarity and support to: Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGAA), PO Box 560, Matsapha, Swaziland,

tel/fax: +268 505 2899, e-mail: swagaa@realnet.co.sz

What you can do

- I would like to join the Stop Violence Against Women campaign. Please send me more information.
- I would like to join Amnesty International. Please send me details.
- I would like to make a donation to support Amnesty International's work.

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Please send your form to the Amnesty International address in the box below, if there is one:

**or to Amnesty International, International Secretariat, Peter Benenson House,
1 Easton Street, London WC1X 0DW, United Kingdom**

or visit Amnesty International's website at www.amnesty.org/actforwomen

AI Index: AFR 55/003/2004
