



Joining Hands to Stop Domestic Violence in Africa

Kevin Smith

Domestic violence is one of the leading public health issues of our time.

Almost 80% of rural women in South Africa report being victims of ongoing violence within the home. In Ethiopia, 78% of Ethiopian women believe that disobeying a husband justifies domestic violence. These statistics paint a horrifying picture of the level to which domestic violence is entrenched in many African countries. South Africa and Ethiopia, however, have recently partnered with a British Columbian non-profit organization to strengthen the two countries' justice systems in the area of domestic violence.

The South African National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), together with the Law Courts Education Society of B.C. (LCES) and the B.C. Ministry of Solicitor General's Victim Services and Crime Prevention Division, are participating in a project named "Joining Hands Against Domestic Violence". The project has provided training materials and workshops for hundreds of justice system personnel in the two African countries.

Uniting Forces

In the early 1980s, British Columbia's justice system lacked an integrated plan amongst police, prosecutors, and victim service workers that dealt with domestic violence. These stakeholders were united in 1985 by a training program created by the Victim Services and Crime Prevention Division. The program defined domestic violence, identified the stakeholders' roles, and emphasized strong communication between those stakeholders.

Empowering Victims

Every Monday morning, lines of abused women snake through South African courthouse corridors. Domestic violence peaks on weekends; after another nightmarish two days and nights spent being abused by their husbands, these women have decided to stand up for themselves.

Tsidi Kambula, a prosecutor for the South African NPA, knew a program was needed to defend these Monday morning heroines. Despite the fact that, in the past 13 years, her government had passed 50 pieces of legislation to protect women's rights and promote gender equality, her agency was struggling to manage the towering number of domestic violence cases in the justice system.

Having heard of B.C.'s domestic violence training program, Kambula contacted the LCES with the idea of

adapting the program for delivery in South Africa.

With input from the Victim Services and Crime Prevention Division and the NPA, and funding from the Canadian International Development Agency, the program was adapted for the country's justice system, social context, and laws.

Named the "Integrated Domestic Violence Training Course" and launched in 2000, the program has trained over 1,200 prosecutors, judges, police officers, and social workers. The concept of an integrated training approach with these groups had never before been considered – let alone applied – in South Africa.

Outside of the political sphere, the program is also using restorative justice in communities to raise awareness of domestic violence. Traditional leaders are being introduced to how domestic violence can be handled. They are also being trained in how to better respect the rights of women and children in traditional court cases. In the future, the traditional leaders will conduct workshops of their own, creating a community-level campaign to end domestic violence.

As word of the program's success spread, it gained recognition from UNICEF as well as other African countries. Ethiopia, which had revised its penal code in 2005 to outlaw domestic violence, showed particular interest in the training program.

Building New Attitudes

In one of Ethiopia's nine safe houses (that serve a population of 37 million women), women fleeing domestic violence gather in a room to share their stories. Some of them were forced into marriage by family elders when they were just 15 years old – three years before the legal age of 18. Unable to rely on their relatives for support, and facing the prospect of becoming either prostitutes or domestic servants, some women have arrived at the house's doorstep as a last resort. Many have already

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Tsidi Kambula



Mahdere Paulos

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tried to commit suicide.

Ethiopia first established women's rights in 1995. Roughly a decade later, having prohibited domestic violence for the first time, Ethiopian authorities realized that police, prosecutors, and judges required education on domestic violence and the revised penal code. Mahdere Paulos, the EWLA's executive director, set forth to find the resources necessary to deliver the training.

Under Paulos' leadership, the EWLA teamed with the LCES to develop a training program that incorporated the best practices from both the Canadian and South African experiences.

The project would face many obstacles including an existing lack of trust in the justice system. In addition to early marriage, prevalent cultural practices included rape, abduction, and female genital mutilation. Traditionally, domestic violence was considered a crime only if it resulted in serious injury. Police did not feel compelled to get involved in these *family issues*, thus allowing the practice of a husband beating his wife to root itself in Ethiopian society.

"The real challenge lies in transforming entrenched cultural practices and internalized attitudes towards domestic violence," said Paulos.

The program created a standard definition of domestic violence – a first in Ethiopia. Justice system personnel have been trained in the new laws, taught interview skills, and given the tools to establish support and safety planning for victims.

The training came out of a new partnership that was formed between municipal police in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia's capital city), the federal Supreme Court, the Ministry of Justice, the EWLA, and the LCES. More than 250 police officers, prosecutors, judges, and other justice system professionals were trained in Ethiopia in 2007.

Now that the first Ethiopian training has been completed, the real work begins. The LCES has just been awarded funding over four years from the Canadian International Development Agency to take the work deeper in order to build the capacity of the Ethiopian justice system in cases of domestic violence. The goal of the program is two-fold:

- to create a system that features integrated services including counselling and case filing, as well as coordinated communication between the sectors in order to accelerate the time it takes for a case to reach court;
- to offer training in crime scene investigation and examination techniques with Ethiopian police and to improve prosecutors' and judges' oral trial skills.

Joining Hands, Building Awareness

While working in South Africa and Ethiopia, the LCES produced a documentary titled *It's Time: African Women Join Hands Against Domestic Violence*. Viewers are taken inside safe houses to hear personal stories from women and girls who have fled abuse. Kambula, Paulos, and other men and women leading the campaign to end domestic violence describe their progress, the obstacles they face, and the successes they have seen.

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“Every woman and child has the right to feel safe at all times,” said Evelyn Neaman, LCES’ international projects manager. “Unfortunately, in countries such as South Africa and Ethiopia, that right is not always possible.”

The dialogues across Canada inspired both Africans and Canadians to pursue justice for women and to work to end domestic violence.

It’s Time has been nominated as the Best Canadian Short Documentary at the Okanagan International Film Festival as well as the Best Short Documentary at the 2009 Los Angeles Pan African Film & Arts Festival. Contact Neaman (evelyn.neaman@lawcourtsed.ca; 604-660-3259) for more information.

Engaging Canadians

In 2008, Kambula and Paulos came to Canada to share their stories. The two were joined by Neaman on a cross-country tour that hosted 22 events in four cities. Each event featured a screening of *It’s Time* as well as:

- a panel of Canadian and African legal experts discussing domestic violence or women in the legal profession;
- a breakfast lead-and-learn seminar with high-level government officials discussing strategies to prevent domestic violence; and
- smaller, targeted meetings and round table dialogues with agencies to share information about the project and share challenges and innovations in both Canada and Africa.

There was also a series of site visits to shelters, information hotline services, and legal aid clinics serving domestic violence victims.

Kambula and Paulos returned to their home countries having collected many tools and resources from Canadian agencies working in the field of domestic violence including research, policies, and program materials. They were also able to share their knowledge and experience with Canadians working in the area of cross-cultural domestic violence. The dialogues across Canada inspired both Africans and Canadians to pursue justice for women and to work to end domestic violence.

Moving Forward

With every conviction, the programs in South Africa and Ethiopia grow stronger. With every empowered and rehabilitated woman, Kambula and Paulos gain knowledge that can help other countries in Africa – and throughout the world – eliminate domestic violence. With every assault that is prevented or stopped, women, communities, and societies thrive under the cohesive strength created by better equality and greater respect for women.

About the Law Courts Education Society

Since 1989, the Law Courts Education Society (LCES) has been dedicated to improving access to the legal system through hands-on, targeted, two-way education between the public and those working in the justice system. As a non-profit

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organization with ongoing public and private sector financial and volunteer support, the LCES is able to offer a unique and comprehensive collection of justice-related educational services and work effectively towards creating a justice system that is accessible to all.

Kevin Smith is the Communication and Event Co-ordinator with the Law Courts Education Society of B.C. For more information about the Joining Hands Against Domestic Violence Project, please contact Evelyn Neaman, International Projects Manager of the Law Courts Education Society at evelyn.neaman@lawcourtsed.ca or 604.660.3259.