

BREAKING THE SILENCE

WOMEN SAY

OUR MEN MUST STOP BEATING US

Mary is sitting in a room with us. We have come to talk to her about wife beating. Mary has three teenage children. She lives with her children and her husband. Mary wears glasses. But her glasses are badly broken. When Mary came in, she was limping. Her leg looked a very strange shape. It had scars from being beaten. Her husband did this to her. We asked Mary about her glasses. Mary said: "Ja, he aimed a belt at me, and the buckle hit my glasses." Lucy is Mary's friend. She has also come to talk with us. Lucy said to Mary: "You are lucky it was only your glasses. Are you going to wait until you lose an eye?"

We spoke to Busi. She lives in another township in another city. She has two children. Her husband beats her. He has been beating her for the past sixteen years. She feels very alone with her troubles. She told us: "The whole yard hears my screams. He says he will kill me one day and I believe this. No one comes because they say that it is trouble between husband and wife." Busi has tried leaving home. He goes looking for her every time. And she keeps going back. Back to more beatings. She says: "I go back to the same swearings and beatings. He says he wants my money. I get very upset. But the funniest thing is that I am still hanging around this man."

Lindiwe is another woman we spoke to. Lindiwe was pregnant when her beatings started. She said: "Most of the time he usually carried a screwdriver or bushknife or knife, or whatever it is. Which he used as a weapon. He used to make me run around all over the location. I felt terrible for my kids. Because he used to shout and yell and I used to open the window to throw them out through the

window so that my neighbours could take them home to my mother."

THIS HAPPENS TO THOUSANDS AND THOUSANDS OF WOMEN

As we spoke to Mary, Busi, and Lindiwe we felt very angry. We felt angry that such beatings happen to women. We felt angry because this beating of women is hidden away. It is a hidden crime. We felt angry because it is an accepted crime. Many people see nothing wrong with men who beat their wives. We felt angry because Mary, Busi and Lindiwe are not the only ones. Thousands and thousands of women are beaten by their husbands and boyfriends. Thousands and thousands of women live with faces bruised and bodies battered. Trying to hide what their husbands do to them. Trying to hide the hurt inside them as well. Is it not time that women broke the silence about this crime against them? Many women spoke out when SPEAK asked them about the beating of women that goes on.

WHICH MEN DO THE BEATING?

So what kind of a man beats his wife or girlfriend? The answer is all kinds of men. Rich men. Workers. Unemployed. White men and black men. Educated and uneducated. Old men and young men. All kinds of normal, everyday men beat their wives. We have talked to all kinds of women who are beaten by their husbands or boyfriends. We have met teachers, workers, unemployed women, secretaries, black women and white women, grandmothers and young newly married women. We have met women who are married to comrades who beat them at home. And we have met many women who say they don't ever want to marry. Many women say: "Who wants to be treated like a dog?"

WHY DO MEN BEAT THEIR WIVES AND GIRLFRIENDS?

It is not easy to understand why men beat their wives and girlfriends. But we can begin to understand when we remember that women and men are not brought up as equals. Men everywhere are brought up to believe that they are more important and better than women. That it is men's right to own and control women. And women are brought up to believe that they are less important than men. And that it is their duty to serve men.

Busi said: "My husband would say that I think that I am too educated and too clever. I earn and he has no job. He accuses me all the time. He says that I think that I am better than him." Lindiwe said: "Men believe they own women. They are jealous of their women looking at or being looked at by other men." Some men lock their wives or girlfriends in the house. Some men expect their wives or girlfriends to report to them when they go anywhere. Even when they go next door to borrow some milk. They must report. But these same men do not report to their wives about where they go or what they do. Women have told us that they get beaten up for going to sleep before their husband has come home. Or for attending a union meeting.

WHY DO MEN GET AWAY WITH SUCH A CRIME?

Mary said: "You know I was brought up on a

farm and everything was behind closed doors. And we were always taught it doesn't matter what your husband does. You are married to him for better or worse. My mother told me, she says, 'You see my child you married him. You are married for better or worse.'" And so for many of us our world tell us to accept any treatment from men. It doesn't matter what. It can be beating, bashing, swearing.

And so this is how men get away with it. People say that a man has a right to beat his wife or girlfriend. And so women are expected to put up with being bashed in the face. Or kicked in the stomach, pregnant or not. Or even killed. People will turn their heads and say, 'It is his wife. She must have done something wrong.'

Some people say that unemployment, alcohol, dagga and overcrowded housing causes men to beat women. But everybody has problems. Why should men be allowed to take their problems out on women? Things like shebeens and poverty do make things worse. But they are not the root cause of the problem. As one woman said, "If you've had a few shots and you beat up your wife, you do it because you had it in mind anyway."

Men get away with beating their wives and girlfriends because they believe that they have a right to do what they like to women. But





Drawing by Sanna Naldoo

now we are living in times when everybody is struggling for the right to a decent life. Where people are treated as equals. Where women are treated like equals, not animals.

PEOPLE OPPOSED TO WOMEN ABUSE

We spoke to women from an organisation called People Opposed to Women Abuse (POWA). This organisation is in Jo'burg. POWA helps women who have been beaten. POWA said: "When we speak to women, they feel very alone. They live inside themselves. This beating up may have happened for years and years. It is important that women know that it happens to lots and lots of women. It happens because men are trying to tell women that they are in control."

And POWA says that they want to help women to get control of their lives. Women's bodies get beaten. But women's feelings about themselves and what they are worth also get a terrible beating. And sometimes that hurt inside lasts forever.

Children learn from their parents. Men who beat their wives are teaching their sons to be batterers. And women who put up with it are teaching their daughters to put up with it.

WHY DO SO MANY WOMEN PUT UP WITH THIS LIFE?

Most women struggle to find an answer to this question. But many women say there is the tradition that women must stay with their husbands. Also many women rely on their

husbands for money. And many women say, "We have nowhere to go. The townships are already overcrowded." And even if a woman can find a place to stay, it is not easy to start a new life. There is the worry of a job. Of children's schooling. Of who will look after young children. And the fear of being alone. And for some women not everything is bad about the man. There is some love. And a hope that the beatings will stop. A woman may want to leave, but she is scared that the man will come looking for her. After years of beatings many women start to believe that they are worth nothing. They feel guilty. They start to believe that they have done something to deserve a beating. It seems like a trap with no escape.

WHAT CAN A WOMAN DO?

It helps to talk to someone you trust. Talking helps to see things clearly. It is a good idea to find out about the law. Then a woman can get advice on what it is possible to do. There are places where people will listen to and help *beaten women*. Some of these places are POWA in Jo'burg (011-642- 4345), Rape Crisis in Durban (031-232323) and Cape Town (021-479762), and some family and child welfare offices. These people don't tell a woman what to do. They help her to understand her position and to make her own decision.

If a woman wants to she can charge her husband with assault. She has to lay the charge at a police station. If he is found guilty he may have to pay a fine.

It is not easy for a woman to go to the police. She may be too afraid of her husband to go to the police. She may not have decided to leave him. She wants him to stop beating her, but she may not want him to go to jail, or lose his job. She may be dependant on his wages. And often the police will say that it is only a husband wife problem. The police say they don't want to interfere. As one woman said the police will wait until you have been killed before they will charge the man. A woman who is beaten by her husband can get a

Peace Order from the Magistrates Court. If she reports that he has beaten her again after the Peace Order has been issued, then they both go to court. If he is found guilty he faces a two year jail sentence with no choice of a fine. A woman who is beaten by her husband can get a divorce. She can apply for Legal Aid. If it is found that he has beaten her, then she has free legal help. She can sue her husband for maintenance for herself and the children.

If a woman decides she wants to leave home she can stay at a shelter for 3 months. There are shelters in Johannesburg and Cape Town. This helps a woman to start building her own life. But after 3 months she has to find her own way in the world.

AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL

It is not only women who are beaten that must do something about this problem. All women can do something. An injury to one is an injury to all.

Women can help each other by talking about the problem. We must help each other to break the silence. And we must talk about ways in which we can stop men beating women. We can also do practical things. Like give someone who is running away from a beating or possible killing a place to stay. We

can help with looking after children. We can give each other support.

In another country called Peru women have come up with an idea of how to deal with their men. These women live in a poor part of the city. They decided that they had had enough of being beaten by their men. So they got together and made a plan. Each woman decided to carry a whistle. And when her husband comes to beat her she blows the whistle. And all the other women come running to her house. And they deal with the man! One man wanted his wife to leave their home with her five children so that he could bring his lover to live with him. The wife refused. So he kept beating her. All the women took action. They say: "So, one night when he was beating his wife up, we got hold of him, stripped him naked and hung a sign around his neck saying, 'I will never abuse my wife again.' After that he left and has not bothered her since."

This beating of women will not stop until women break their silence. It will not stop until men treat women as equals. It will not stop until women come together to talk and to organise. Women beating must be taken up as an issue in all organisations. The beating of women by men will not stop until women organise to stop it.

