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A PROGRAMME FOR EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN : CONSIDERATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION*

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INTRODUCTION

Women, specifically rural women, have often been discriminated against, undermined and disempowered with regard to their roles and their rightful places in society. The process of empowering women requires attitudinal change, gender sensitivity and the active promotion of dignity, self-esteem and the well-being of women. It is encouraging to note that the transformation process has resulted in conscious efforts being made to address the problems facing women and to improve the overall status of women. The White Paper for Social Welfare (1997) clearly acknowledges that, in addition to their roles in the family, women in rural communities contribute voluntary time to social and development programmes. However, they are disadvantaged by policies of the past which keep them isolated and deny them access to social and economic opportunities which could improve their lives. The document highlights the urgency of the need to build capacity and to promote the advancement of women at all levels in society via comprehensive and integrated services.

In keeping with the needs outlined above, this paper presents a pilot programme implemented and evaluated with women in a rural area, Vulamehlo, situated to the south of Durban. Feedback from the participants relating to their experiences of the programme are discussed and some considerations for social work education are presented.

EMPOWERING WOMEN FOR DEVELOPMENT

Cook (1995) cautions that the word "empowerment" has suffered from a process of semantic inflation in which it has been used to represent almost anything. However, in acknowledging that empowerment of people is a prerequisite for their development being sustainable, he suggests that the term be clearly defined within specific contexts. For the purpose of this paper, empowerment is seen as a process in which a person becomes more able to direct his/her own life and more likely to succeed in whatever he/she attempts. Training, for example, provides people with the skills needed to make progress. Empowerment clearly has to do with power. As Block (in Cook, 1995) points out, empowerment clearly implies a shift of control towards the people who actually do the core work. Therefore empowerment needs to encompass a motivational element that improves performance, be it staff in a department or participants in a rural community development project.

The historical oppression of women and the deeply rooted nature of male domination has undoubtedly hindered the development of women to their full potential. The contradiction here is that, while we live in a patriarchal society where men wield authority, the majority of households in South Africa are headed by women. This means that, while the men remain dominant, the women are expected to assume major responsibilities within the home. This amounts to a situation whereby the poorest sector of society consists of families headed by women (Meintjies & Marks, 1996).

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The need to build human capacity for sustainable development is increasingly being recognised, along with the realisation that women should be key participants in and beneficiaries of policies, programmes and projects concerned with the attainment of social, economic and political improvements in people's lives. Our roles as social workers are to ensure that women are not left out of the development process.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: AN OBSTACLE TO DEVELOPMENT

Despite transformation, violence is a problem which affects masses of women in South Africa. Women are subjected to domestic violence, public violence, poverty, ignorance regarding rights and responsibilities, poor access to health care, social services, education and information. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that violence within the home is reflective of a wider spectrum of societal violence and represents the symptoms of broader social power relations. As in all other areas of gender inequality, violence affects women differently, depending on their position in relation to race, class and sexual orientation. Violence against women keeps them in subordinate, restricted and powerless positions. Strategizing and organising for effective action depends on understanding the vulnerability of women to violence, and the nature and the extent of the problem.

The myths surrounding women abuse serve to keep women in the "victim" positions and to absolve men of the consequences of their negative behaviour. Mullender (1996) argues that these "half-baked theories of causation" provide excuses for men to deny responsibility for what they have done and to blame alcohol, drugs, uncontrollable anger and the "victim". Myths tend to perpetuate the patriarchal ideology, that is, the values, beliefs and norms regarding the legitimacy of male dominance in all social spheres (Ward, Carter & Perring in Makofane, 1997.) Like the abusers themselves, wider society and welfare agencies tend to treat men as if they are less than fully to blame and women as if they share the blame for domestic abuse. Meintjies (2000) points to the judicial system itself which simply reinforces traditional myths about gender relations. Angless (1998) and Gelles (1997) highlight the need to explode conventional myths and replace them with knowledge derived from scholarly research. This is a major step in understanding family violence and in adopting approaches to address the problem effectively. In the present research the workshops conducted focused on some of the myths and the realities related to women abuse. The sessions centred on encouraging discussion and debate, increasing understanding and enabling women to view abuse in a wider context, that is, as a social problem residing in attitudes and normative behaviour and influenced by structural socio-political factors (Meintjies, 2000).

THE RESEARCH STUDY

The area

The research took place in Vulamehlo, which is a rural area situated in Southern Kwa-Zulu Natal. The population of the area is about 322 707. The majority of the homes are built of wattle and daub and have no electricity or water supply. Thirty percent of the population obtain water from a river. Others make use of bore holes, springs and communal taps. Unemployment rates are exceptionally high. Some males in the area work in industries in Durban and on the south coast. A small number of men and women work in the nearby sugar and timber plantations. All the women who participated in the research were employed.

Research objectives

The study aimed at:

- increasing awareness amongst the women about their position in society, their domestic roles, problems experienced and ways to address these;
- empowering rural women through the acquisition of skills, knowledge, information sharing and networking;
- focusing on the issue of women abuse and dispelling the myths related to violence against women;
- training the participants in counselling skills and group work skills. As the “train the trainer” approach was used, it was envisaged that the women would transfer skills and knowledge gained to empower other women in their community.

The research design

Programme evaluation, incorporating qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection, was utilised. Quantitative data collection took the form of self-administered pre-test and post-test questionnaires that focused on myths relating to abused women. In keeping with the objectives of the research, this design helped to ascertain whether minimum standards of programme outcome were achieved and the extent to which participants’ perceptions changed during their participation in the programme (Marlow, 1998). Qualitative information was obtained during the final group evaluation. A detailed structured questionnaire consisting of mainly open-ended questions was drawn up. Questions related largely to the participants’ experience of the group, impressions of the programme, methods used by the facilitators, and whether they felt equipped to assist and train other women. To avoid researcher bias the questionnaires were verbally administered to the group by fourth-year social work students who assisted as interpreters.

The research process

Programme development and training were undertaken by the researcher, who was assisted by fourth-year social work students and a community development worker from the Durban branch of the Family and Marriage Association of South Africa. As the majority of the women were more fluent in Zulu, interpreters translated programme content into Zulu for easy understanding. The training programmes were conducted at the Ekuphileni Community Health Centre in Vulamehlo. Nompilos (community health workers) who participate in the district health care programme formed the sample in this study. The Nompilos serve the community in a voluntary capacity and provided advice, information and counselling on basic family health issues.

As part of the pilot study, three six-hour training workshops were held once fortnightly over six weeks and they form the core of the discussion in this paper. The pre-test and post-test questionnaires were carefully explained and administered and a verbal group evaluation was held at the end of the programme. Each participant was given a code to ensure anonymity.

Programme content

The topics covered during the workshops are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1
WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMME

SESSION ONE
Exploring the multiple roles of women
Understanding ourselves and the various influences on our lives
The self-concept and motivation
Listing concerns and identifying obstacles to development
Where to from here (needs and programme planning)
Summary
SESSION 2
Exploring the myths
Exploring feelings (group exercise)
Empowering the self and others (skills acquisition, networking, reading, group involvement)
How to start a group (purpose, recruitment, content)
Group process and facilitation skills
Summary
SESSION 3
Types of abuse
Why do men abuse their partners? (in small groups)
Consequences of abuse
The role/qualities of a counsellor (role-play and discussion)
The helping process (role-play and discussion)
The power of collective action
Good and bad techniques (role plays)
Summary
Evaluation (feedback on programme and identifying further training needs)

The myths

The pre-test and post test questionnaires consisted of the statements below. Participants were required to place ticks in Yes, No and Don't Know categories.

Women abuse occurs mainly in poor families.

1. Men have the right to beat their wives or partners.

2. Beating a woman is one way of teaching her correct behaviour.
3. Children need their father even if he is violent.
4. Abused women are uneducated and have few job skills.
5. Women enjoy being beaten, or else they would leave the man.
6. Once you are an abused woman, you will always be an abused woman.
7. Drinking and drugs are one of the main causes of abusive behaviour.
8. Because of their behaviour and attitudes, some women deserve to be beaten.
9. Men who hit women are violent in all their relationships.
10. Violent men are usually unsuccessful and cannot cope with the world.
11. Men stop being violent when they get married.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the pre-test and post-test are summarised in Table 2, followed by a discussion.

TABLE 2
PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST RESPONSES
N= 19

Question	Pre-test			Post-test			% Change	
	Yes	No	Don't know	Yes	No	Don't know	Yes	No
1	10	9		5	14			26.32
2	2	17			19			10.53
3	3	16		1	18			10.53
4	11	8		14	5		15.79	
5	8	11	1	3	16			26.32
6	3	12	4	1	17	1		26.32
7	4	14	1	4	15			5.26
8	18	1		12	7			31.58
9	6	13		3	16			15.79
10	6	13		2	17			21.05
11	15	4		5	14			52.63
12	2	15	2		19			21.05

Table 2 indicates a 26.32% positive change in responses to Question 1. Gelles (1997) and Angless and Maconachie (1996) point out that, although researchers find more *reported* violence and abuse

among the lower class, those working with abused women maintain that women of all cultures, races, occupations and income levels are abused. Meintjies and Marks (1995) agree that middle-class women are just as likely to be abused, but they are more likely to be secretive about it. During the discussions women talked about the economic dependence of women on men and felt that men use this power to abuse them. One woman commented: "If a man is unemployed and doesn't have money, he gets angry and beats his wife for minor mistakes". These comments explain the perception of the link between the lack of resources/poverty and abuse.

Of the sample of 19, two participants felt that men have a right to beat their wives/partners. However, in the post-test all 19 participants(100%) said "No" to this question. This change in perception may have been due to the sessional discussions in which participants spoke about the rights of men and women. These rights did not include the right to hurt each other. Some mention was made of the fact that cultural and religious practices often subordinate women. Customarily, *lobolo* (bride wealth) is paid to the bride's family, usually in the form of cattle to compensate the bride's family for losing a daughter and to thank the bride's mother for the proper upbringing of the bride (Msomi 2000). Nowadays money may be used as a form of payment. In exploring this issue Msomi (2000) found that women were increasingly becoming disgruntled at being viewed as household goods being sold at a price determined by their parents. Chinkanda (1992) agrees that, while *lobolo* reinforces society's perception of a woman as property to be acquired and disposed of, some women do not interpret this system as such and feel that it enhances social status. However, some women in the group saw beating as a form of asserting male authority. Discussion followed on restrictions and the oppression of women by their husbands and their husband's families that arose from the payment of *lobolo*.

Questions relating to justifying the beating of women because of their behaviour and attitudes, and the need to teach her correct behaviour, showed a 10.53% positive change in the post-test. Some of the participants commented that if women are lazy and spend time chatting to friends instead of cooking for their husbands, then men are "driven" to resort to violence. On this issue Meintjies and Marks (1996) and Angless (1998) observe that women sometimes tend to defend men who beat them, saying that they deserved to be beaten for not listening to their husbands. Many women argue that this is a traditional practice which is acceptable.

Question 4 related to children needing their father even if he is violent. It was interesting to note that in the pre-test and post-test the majority of the participants (57.9 % and 73.68 % respectively) answered "Yes" to this question. In fact the post-test indicated a 15.79% increase in the "Yes" category. This response conforms strongly with a traditionalist view that subscribes to the patriarchal family, male supremacy and the stereotyped masculine sex role in the family (Makofane, 1997). Most of the women felt strongly that children needed a father figure. Even if the father was violent, he was still a male role model for the child. The culturally superior and significant role of the father seemed to be entrenched. A major part of this session centred on the question posed by Gelles (1997: 12): "Is it healthy to grow up learning that it is acceptable to hit people we love?"

A 26.31% positive change in perception was noted in the post-test to the question relating to women being uneducated and having few job skills. This seemed to follow from the discussion, which highlighted the fact that women of all occupations and income levels were vulnerable to being abused. Abuse was not directly linked to levels of education and job skills. However, Chinkanda (1992) points out that the migratory labour system frequently reinforced the man's perception of himself as superior to his rural wife, who depended entirely on his knowledge of the city. This dependency resulted from a lack of knowledge, skills and opportunity, which in turn

frequently led to a lack of a sense of self-worth and to feelings of guilt. This was compounded by the acceptance of shabby treatment, which had already formed part of early socialisation.

Table 2 depicts a 26,32% increase in the number of participants who felt that women did not enjoy being beaten. This response may have been due to the content of the discussion which focused on the participants' ideas of why abused women remained in abusive relationships. Some responses during the sessions were: "For the children", "There is no home of origin - nowhere to go" and "For her dignity and a stigma attached to the person who leaves her marriage". Quoting Poorman, Sikhitha (1997) outlines some reasons for women staying: fear of harm or death, fear that she has no place to go, feelings of embarrassment and guilt, economic difficulties and limitations, and lack of social and institutional support. Gelles (1997) comments on the unfair "victim blaming" in this regard and points to the number of women who find themselves socially, legally and materially entrapped in a marriage. Mullender (1996:51) adds that a Scottish Women's Aid organisation once claimed: "In our experience of helping over 10 000 women, we have never encountered a woman who enjoyed being beaten."

The majority of the participants in the pre-test (73,68%) and in the post-test (78,95%) felt that once a woman is abused, she will always be abused. This shows a 5,26% positive change to this perception. This response may be attributed to the participants' experiences and observations of patterns of continual abuse within their communities. A lack of helping resources may result in people feeling a sense of helplessness, powerlessness and a lack of motivation to change. In this regard Power (2000) expresses a concern that many women live in fear because they do not know how to protect themselves.

Table 2 presents a significant change in perceptions (31,58%) relating to alcohol and drugs being one of the main causes of abusive behaviour. This is a common perception with many women experiencing abuse by partners who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Discussion on this issue during the sessions revealed that abuse took many forms that were unrelated to alcoholism and drugs. Questions posed by Angless (1998), Gelles (1997) and Mullender (1996) were discussed during the session: Why do many drunken men not abuse their wives? Why is there a target choice in hitting a woman? Will solving the drug/drinking problem eliminate the violence? How do we explain sober men who abuse their wives? Do women who consume alcohol abuse their husbands? These questions stimulated a lively discussion with many of the participants acknowledging that while drugs and alcohol could play a role in influencing behaviour, there was no direct causal link and men use this as an excuse after the event.

A 21,05% perception shift was noted in the post-test to the question relating to abusive men being violent in all their relationships. As with the previous question, the discussion highlighted the fact that men choose women as their targets to direct their anger, frustration and aggression. The woman acknowledged that being physically weaker, less powerful and dependent on men made them easier targets. One woman commented: "Men think that it is okay not to show respect for their wives."

A 52,63% perception shift was noted to the question relating to violent men being unsuccessful and unable to cope with the world. Following from the discussion, this response may have been due to the realisation that, although women have fewer opportunities for advancement, they are charged with major household responsibilities. Attributing men's violence to stress or a lack of success therefore does not make sense.

Fifteen participants (78,95%) indicated in the pre-test that they felt that men did not stop being violent after marriage. The post-test showed a 100% "No" to this question. This showed a 21,05% perception change. The participants were clearly aware of consistent violent patterns before and

after marriage. As a few women stated: "Because of *lobolo* (bride wealth), men view women as their property". In addition, participants commented on the high levels of marital violence in the area.

The pre-test and post-test responses indicated that the programme conducted with the participants was effective in bringing about a perception shift regarding the majority of the myths discussed. Varying degrees of positive shifts regarding the myths were noted. It was evident that the debates, discussions, knowledge and sharing gave the participants new insights, something which will certainly lend itself to strengthening the women regarding their positions and enable them to educate, strengthen and empower other women in the community.

FINAL GROUP EVALUATION

The final group evaluation, which took the form of a discussion based on a detailed questionnaire, elicited several interesting responses regarding the value of the programme experience for the participants. These responses are discussed below.

For all the women the group experience taught them how to work in group contexts, how to convey respect when interacting with people, to be patient, to confront emotional problems and to make use of effective communication skills. In addition participants were able to reflect on their own abusive relationships (although this was not openly discussed) and they developed some awareness of the status and roles of women. Many of the participants stated that being part of the group programme gave them a better understanding of the extent to which women are abused, the consequences of this, and the need to do something about it. One woman asked: "If we do not help other women, who will? Certainly not the men".

Being part of the group afforded the opportunity for participants to share the "being in the same boat" experience. They appreciated the importance of teamwork, especially with regard to generating ideas and joint solutions to problems discussed. The group served as a support system for members. The majority of the participants indicated that they would like the programme to continue as they felt "bound to the group".

Most of the women indicated that they felt comfortable in the group and also felt fairly free to participate. They stated that the training received would enable them to train and empower other women. It was encouraging to note that some of the women had already started providing counselling and support with regard to personal problems and health and welfare-related issues. They were enthusiastic about commencing support groups in the community as soon as possible. However, they felt that continued training was essential on various topics that were of concern to the community. These included training in first aid techniques, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse among young people and by their husbands, teenage pregnancy, abuse of children by their step-mothers, and unemployment. Most of the participants again commented on the need for ongoing education and training with regard to the abuse of women and children.

The participants commented that the language used was easily understood. Having an interpreter was certainly helpful, especially with regard to role-plays and other exercises where the participants felt more at ease to communicate in Zulu. They stated that the content was relevant and that the exercises made them feel young. The varied methods used provided interesting learning experiences and the participants commented that the facilitators demonstrated respect and cultural sensitivity. Furthermore, the workshops clarified the roles of social workers and they learnt about creating resources and accessing available resources.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

The programme that was described and evaluated was a pilot project and the workshops that were held were primarily educational. The research results indicate that the programme did achieve its aims of empowering women and providing them with knowledge and skills to train and to empower other women. It can be said that programme participation enhanced the capacity of the women to engage in capacity building themselves. The positive response to the programme led to requests for further workshops and these are ongoing in the area.

Angless and Maconachie (1996) and Makofane (1997) highlight the importance of social work education and practice to empower women for participation on social, political and economic levels. This seems appropriate as the social work profession has historically been in the forefront of advocacy on behalf of minorities and disenfranchised groups. Makofane (1997) adds that the purpose of education in empowerment practice is multi-dimensional. It includes developing skills to increase interpersonal and political power, the development of feelings of efficacy, and an increased understanding of the meaning of group membership. The overlap with the purpose of social work training is clear.

Social work students need to know more than just the theoretical aspects of the empowerment model. Translation of the principles of this model into practice – that is, the how, where, why, with whom and when of the model – is imperative. Social work practice modules must focus on practical methods to address the needs of families in rural areas. It is worth noting Cook's (1995) comment that not all training is empowering. To achieve developmental goals training must respond to specific needs that are identified. Learning to engage rural women in dialogue could be a good starting point.

It follows that social workers must be adequately trained in order to train others. Issues relating to violence against women and to the way that this impacts on empowerment and development must be included in social work curricula. Social workers must have a thorough knowledge of the myths, aetiology and circumstances of the abused woman, the effects of the abuse and intervention procedures and techniques. Intervention for men who are abusive and for children exposed to violence in the home is crucial. Angless and Maconachie (1996) and Mullender (1996) emphasise education around primary intervention strategies which are aimed at achieving structural changes to eliminate factors such as poverty, unemployment and societal violence which contributes to the problem. Of equal importance is the need to change attitudes and values which perpetuate the problem (Meintjies, 2000). Content on structural factors, policy and legislation are crucial if social workers are to contribute to broader societal changes to enhance the position of women. Power (2000) highlights the need for education on women's rights, resources available and procedures to assist abused women as outlined in the Domestic Violence Act, 1998. Of relevance is the point made by Ducados (2000) that policies and programmes must enhance the stronger participation of women in all spheres of society and adjust gender relations to the needs of both women and men equally.

The programme participants felt that training in counselling skills, learning about the role and the qualities of a counsellor and the stages of the helping process were most useful. They found training in group work equally relevant as a supportive technique, to consolidate peoples' strengths and to engage in collective action. It is felt that in teaching social work methods, content on women's issues and gender equality should be included to facilitate the integration of theory and practice in this area. This is one way of creating a "national consciousness that abuse of and violence against women is unacceptable" (White Paper for Social Welfare, 1997:74).

Students also need exposure to problems that are specific to women and families in rural areas. Some observation and practice in these areas would go a long way in preparing students to meet the challenges facing social workers. For training to have a ripple effect, students must be familiar with the "train the trainer" approach, that is, the process, the impact, the need for follow-up, close monitoring and evaluation of programmes.

CONCLUSION

Ducados (2000) observes that despite women's lack of visibility in formal politics, they have developed survival strategies to cope with daily hardships. Although outside of formal political processes, these strategies indicate an awareness and commitment in women to finding solutions to end violence and to readjusting gender relations. Participants in the study confirmed that socialisation, cultural practices and attitudes tend to keep men in superior and dominant positions, while undermining women and leaving them powerless in their homes and in society. Education, knowledge, skills and information could go a long way towards effecting a progressive shift for women. Over the years women have won certain victories by collective action. However, the struggle for equality in the home and in public life continues.

As oppression and women abuse cannot be viewed in a narrow sense, so too empowerment and development cannot be viewed in a vacuum. These are multi-dimensional concepts which require detailed exploration and clear understanding. This task, although complex, is not beyond the capacity of social workers and other helping professions. It is hoped that the continuation of the programme described will in some way enhance the lives of the participants and the many additional women reached via the programme.

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