

A Rough Kind of Justice

Battered Kenyan women are beginning to speak out against a troubling tradition of domestic violence

By SIMON ROBINSON NAIROBI

AUGUSTINO ODHIAMBO HAS ALWAYS been violent. After a drinking session with friends two years ago, he returned to his house in Nyakach, western Kenya, and began arguing with his wife, Margaret Wanzuu. "Perhaps he was unhappy with what she was cooking for dinner, or maybe it was about money," says daughter Angie Dawa. "Usually after they started fighting mum ran through the kitchen door, but this time he had locked it from the outside." Odhiambo retrieved the Somali sword given to him as a retirement by fellow prison officers. The couple argued and Wanzuu was stabbed in the arm. As she lay in the doorway Odhiambo sank the sword into his wife's chest, fatally piercing her liver and right lung. "This time I have finished my job," he said as he stumbled outside into a crowd of horrified neighbors.

Margaret Wanzuu's story is a familiar one in Kenya, where wife beating is common and often condoned. While no organization keeps national statistics on domestic violence, 70% of men and women interviewed in a 1997 study by the Women's Rights Awareness Programme, a Nairobi-based advocacy group and women's shelter, said they knew neighbors who beat their wives. Victims come from all cultural, economic and educational backgrounds and doctors say the number of attacks reported is increasing, as is their ferocity. According to the Kenya Human Rights Commission, 49 women were injured by their spouses last year, a 50% increase from the number five years ago. "People have become desensitized to it," says Hilda Mawanda from the Coalition on Violence Against Women. "Beating your wife has become an accepted part of our society."

Yet a new attitude is emerging. In a small but budding feminist revolt Kenyan women are speaking out against the high number of assaults and turning to the courts for redress. The movement is led by women's groups and churches and is receiving widespread local media coverage. "We have always taken it for granted that a husband has the right to discipline a wife just as parents discipline their children," says Nairobi lawyer Tobiko Keriako, who

represented his sister Agnes Siyiankoi in a recent landmark case. "But now people are beginning to question that wisdom."

Siyiankoi, a 31-year-old Masai woman, took her husband to court in 1997 after 13 years of beatings. The Masai are among Kenya's most fiercely conservative tribes and view women as property. Many Masai

Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA). "It's an excuse men use for battery." With the help of a small group of opposition parliamentarians, including men, FIDA has drafted a domestic violence bill and is pushing for the creation of a separate family court. "We want a law that makes it unambiguous," says M.P. Martha Karua, who plans to introduce the bill in the coming months. "This has nothing to do with tribes, nothing to do with religion. It cuts across all of Kenyan society."

Changing that society will take more than legislation alone. The Women's Rights Awareness Programme study found that nearly 60% of people believed women were to blame for their beatings and just



OSTRACIZED: Masai Agnes Siyiankoi pictured with her son after her husband's court case

men use force to maintain authority, usually with little protest from their wives. But Siyiankoi did eventually protest. "I feared he would kill me then live to persecute my children," she told journalists at the time of her trial. The price she paid for speaking out was considerable. Her husband was found guilty and fined \$80, but Siyiankoi lost her teaching job and was ostracized by her community.

Like the Masai, many Kenyans maintain that disciplining women is tradition and should not be challenged. "It's been that way for generations," says a 26-year-old man from the Luhya tribe in the country's western district. "It used to be worse but nowadays people know the legal repercussions." But women's groups say traditionally beatings were much rarer and never ended in death. "There is no tradition that supports injuring, maiming and killing," says Peris Karanja, a lawyer with the Kenyan branch of the International

51% thought the men should be punished. "Because your mother or your aunt put up with it, you're expected to tolerate it and keep quiet," says Mawanda. "But things are changing." Last year, after a police officer allegedly attacked his wife, paralyzing her and knocking out most of her teeth, police inaction led to a national outcry. When she died on Christmas Day, her husband was arrested. Often accused of treating domestic violence with indifference, police can now attend gender-based violence courses run by FIDA. Says Karanja: "We are trying to challenge the idea that wife beating is normal."

"Kenyans need to start talking about the problem," says Angie Dawa, who has started a foundation—named for her mother—which will try to educate people against domestic violence. "I had never mentioned that I had seen her beaten, though I had seen it since I was a little girl. The silence is what resulted in her death."

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