

THE MEDIA AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN ZIMBABWE

By: Mika Nyoni and Tsitsi Dzinoreva

ABSTRACT

In spite of the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act, domestic violence is still prevalent in fictional work such as drama and soaps on the only station in Zimbabwe. This study concentrates mainly on physical abuse as depicted in locally produced fictional programs. Viewers look forward to these but they are also heavily influenced by the actors, especially the young viewers. It is not uncommon to hear people discussing or arguing about characters in soaps and drama as if they are real. The researchers note that the Domestic Violence Bill might have been passed into an act but there should be a concerted effort to re-orient the art producers to ensure that their work is compliant with the furtherance of the philosophy of a violent-free family and society. Many artists we contend have never read the contents of the said Act and as such they are unconsciously peddling an archaic and retrogressive set of values when it comes to family relations and as such the producers of the family television station should reach out and conscientize those who supply them with the art works about the dictates of the Act.

Key words: media, fictional programs, domestic violence, bill, act

Introduction

The study covers a period of about four months that is August to December 2007 during which different locally produced soaps and dramas were analyzed. These included the so-called street theatres and dramas in Ndebele, Shona, and English, as well as soaps: *Studio 263* and *Estate Blues*. The timing is important because it was deliberately selected after the passing of the Domestic Violence Bill into the Act.

Domestic violence means ‘any unlawful act, omission or behavior which results in death or the direct infliction of physical, sexual or mental injury to any complainant by a respondent...’ (Domestic Violence Act [Chapter 5:16, Number 14], 2006). The same act goes on to give the following as examples of domestic violence: physical abuse, intimidation, harassment, malicious damage to property, forced entry into the complainant’s residence.

In spite of the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act, domestic violence is still prevalent in fictional work such as drama and soaps on the only Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television station in Zimbabwe.

This study concentrates mainly on physical abuse, which includes ‘any act or threatened act of physical violence towards a complainant’ (Domestic Violence Act [Chapter 5:16, Number 14], 2006), as depicted in locally produced fictional programs. Viewers look forward to these but they are also heavily influenced by the actors, especially the young viewers. It is not uncommon to hear people discussing characters in soaps and drama as if they are real. Some actors who are unfortunate enough to play roles deemed by some viewers to be unpleasant have had the shock of their lives when some errant viewers have taken the law into their hands and meted some instant justice onto actors for their ‘evil acts’ against other actors. Some female actors who play the role of commercial sex workers have had to live with the label in real life. Very recently a spouse to one of the leading actors in *Estate Blues* was quoted in the local papers as saying that she was uncomfortable with the situation whereby her husband was acting ‘befriending’ young ladies in the soap. In *Studio 263* one married woman temporarily parted ways with the soap partly because her role was clashing with her beliefs in real life-she was supposed to marry her late husband’s friend. The above examples amply demonstrate that the actors’ lives in the fictional productions have a lot of influence on their real lives. They also show that the soaps/dramas also leave some lasting impression on the viewers.

Why Focus on Domestic Violence?

A strong link exists between domestic violence and school achievement, domestic violence and emotional adjustment as well as domestic violence and H.I.V. and A.I.D.S. The fear of violence makes people less able to refuse unsafe sex or negotiate for condom usage even if they know that their partners are infected with STIs and or H.I.V. (*The Herald*, March 20, 2008).

The above cited article goes further to say that domestic violence is killing and maiming people across the cultural and racial divide filling their lives with pain and terror from which some never recover. The article goes on to indicate that 40% of all female homicide victims in the United Kingdom are killed by intimate partners and that gender violence is prevalent in Zimbabwe with some women experiencing physical violence, economic abuse, psychological abuse and emotional abuse among other forms of violence, according to a World Health Organization Report (cited in *The Herald*, March 20, 2008).

In 1988, a nongovernmental organization, the Musasa Project, was created to combat domestic violence against women in Zimbabwe where such violence is not only widespread but is also socially acceptable (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12159819>). Fictional programs reinforce such stereotypes and 'persuade' viewers to accept them. In a 1996 study, by the Musasa Project, on the prevalence of violence in the Midlands Province, 17% of women over 18 years had been assaulted by their intimate partners.

Importance of Film in Disseminating Information

With the Domestic Violence Bill becoming an act in Zimbabwe the International Video Fair Trust began an intensive screenings campaign in July 2007 targeted towards men's and women's clubs as well as communities in the four main regions of Zimbabwe namely Harare/Chitungwiza, Mutare, Bulawayo, and Masvingo to educate communities on what Domestic Violence entails, what the law says about it and effects such as H.I.V./A.I.D.S. amongst other social ills. Films were used as precursors to facilitate discussions. The goal of the campaign was to initiate the process of behavior change by educating communities on the connection between Domestic Violence and H.I.V./A.I.D.S., as well as the legal implications of Domestic Violence. Zimbabwe is one of six countries in Southern Africa who have a Domestic Violence Act. Others are Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, Malawi, and Botswana. This shows the seriousness with which the government takes the Domestic Violence pandemic.

Presentation and Analysis of Findings

Zviri Mudzimba produced in 2004 and shown as a repeat on 6 August 2007 is about the trials and tribulations of the physically challenged members of society. It is replete with violent scenes. The scriptwriter is commended for realistically depicting domestic violence, that is, not as a preserve of

those who are 'able bodied' but also as quite prevalent in people living with disability. However, the writers' bone of contention with the dramatist is the message sent to the viewers when perpetrators of violence go scot-free. The drama as pointed earlier was produced in 2004. It is included in this analysis because it was rebroadcast after the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act, therefore, falls in the 'sphere of influence' of this inquiry.

In *Uhambo*, shown on 7 August 2007, the husband threatens the wife, thus: '*Induku iyaqamuka*' (The knobkerrie will break [on the wife's body!]). The wife dutifully falls silent after receiving the threat. The utterance reflects a relationship paralyzed by lack of communication. The husband cannot carry out a normal conversation where ideas are freely put across and counter ones proffered if necessary. From the 'declaration' we can conclude that there is coercion and rampant human rights violations in this relationship and many similar ones across the country. Sadly this is shown on the only television station and the threats are seen as normal-normal because the perpetrator suffers no sanctions for the indecorous behavior.

In the drama *Maimbodeyi*, Mai Meki literally terrorizes everyone she comes across including her pastor. The other of her victims are her husband, her son Dickson and her deaf and dumb daughter-in-law. In episode 6 shown on ZTV on 16 August 2007, she threatens her husband, thus: '*Ndinokutushurai maziso aya!*' [I will pop these eyes!], poking her finger into his face. At one time, the husband decides that he has had enough and beats her up sending the message that the solution to violence is counter violence. In the same drama, Mike and Sheba are always on each other's throats. Dickson beats up Nyuki, his mother's boyfriend and in episode 9 Arineshto physically assaults his wife, Gertrude, for protesting against his wayward behavior.

In *The Small House Saga* Jean who sees CC as a cash cow refuses to report him to the police for physically abusing her after her friend, Sandra, urges her to. Jean is not economically desperate but out of sheer greed she sticks to the economically, physically and emotionally abusive CC. She is even aware of CC's flirtations with his secretary. Zulu, a private investigator, physically abuses the security guard hired to look after Thabani for no apparent reason in an episode shown on 21 August 2007. As a private investigator one thinks that he should be cognizant of basic human rights and what the law says about violence.

In *Studio 263* Jabu literally ‘ransacks’ his family members especially the H.I.V. positive sister, Tendai. Jabu verbally assaults all his family members with impunity. He also physically abuses Tendai. Nothing happens to him. He seems to be some little god who straddles about spoiling for a fight. When he does the unthinkable, that is, proposes love to Mai Madziva, his mother’s friend and a prominent church member, again, there are no reprisals for the behavior - it seems he is a law unto himself and this sends wrong signals to the viewers especially the young and impressionable ‘fans’. At one time and in real life the actor teamed up with another in the soap and hosted an unsanctioned ‘outreach’ function in Bulawayo where young fans paid to see the actors. This shows that the actors have a following in the young viewers so their antics on the box should not be naively dismissed as innocent acting.

Almost all so-called street theatre dramas seem to depict beating each other up as a normal and effective way of solving problems. Actors seem to derive great satisfaction from just slapping each other’s faces and kicking each other’s bottoms-the harder the blow (that which sends the recipient staggering or falling awkwardly from the impact) the greater the entertainment value! These theatrics are performed in the heart of big towns where human traffic is at its highest. It seems the street theatre artists and their actors, who mostly live from hand to mouth stop at nothing to lure the paying public.

In *Suburb D* shown on 11 August 2007 Pastor Mutasa advises one of his sons, Evans to beat up his younger brother Tapiwa for not doing his chores. He actually says: ‘Wai bhura. Wai munera zviya zvekunera zviya’ (Beat him thoroughly. Really flog him). This is quite unfortunate especially coming from a revered member of society and the amount of beating prescribed is disproportionate to the ‘crime’ committed if beating can be tolerated at all. Since this is coming from a significant other in the boy’s life, the recommendations are likely to be taken up. Instead of teaching forgiveness, love, and harmony, as recommended by his mentor, Jesus Christ, he sows seeds of hatred and disunity in his own family. How is he expected to shepherd his larger flock outside? In the same drama Smart abuses Maureen, his girlfriend, and again nothing happens to him.

In *The Forgotten Son* shown on 15 August 2007 Jacobias is beaten up by three commercial sex workers for reneging on his earlier undertaking to hire one of them. The ‘wronged’ prostitute goes on to hire two

others in the fraternity to fix him. Tsitsi, Jacobias' wife, who had gone to Botswana, is verbally abused by one of the prostitutes to make matters worse.

In *Nyarai*, Baba Peace and Mai Peace are a very young couple who are forced by a teenage pregnancy to live as husband and wife. The man is particularly unprepared for the heavy responsibility of being a husband and father. It is ironic that they decide to call the child 'Peace' when the two are always at war. Baba Peace assaults his wife even in the presence of his mother, the acme of disrespect in African society. Mai Peace initially protects her abusive husband when asked by the husband's older brother who had come to visit from the diaspora.

NdiGringo Chete episode 10 shown on 21 August 2007 showed Baba T beating up John Banda and Mai T when the former comes to see what he calls 'his child'. John Banda's actions may be provocative but does this license Baba T to beat him? If all people alleged to have wronged others are sentenced in our homes, our streets and our neighborhoods to floggings and if all of us regardless of our qualifications and training are arresting officers-cum-prosecutors-cum-judges –cum-prison officers what kind of a society will we create-a warring one?

The *Zvirimudzimba* shown on 4 September 2007 billboard depicts violence. The billboard is expected to whet the viewers' appetite by giving the most salient features and themes of the piece of art and is shown each time the soap or drama is on screen and because of this has lasting impressions on the viewers. Baba Nhamo is the main perpetrator. At one time his wife deserts him but he does not seem to learn. Chenai has a misunderstanding with her brother on the washing of a vest, which deteriorates into nasty pushing and shoving. Allan and his sister have an altercation when the latter describes the former's wife, who lives with disability, as 'kadhori' (doll). Allan threatens Janet and even points at her menacingly. This constitutes physical abuse because physical abuse also includes 'threatened acts' (Domestic Violence Act [Chapter 5:16, Number 14], 2006). In episode 3 (19/9/07) John beats up Tirivanhu for beating up his sister who lives with disability. This drama is not the only one, which 'sells' itself through the depiction of violent scenes. The *Show Time* billboard shown on 7 August 2007 shows an altercation between mother and daughter. The latter says to the mother '*Muri mai vangu pachii kana musingandipi mari yekuenda kumovie?*' (How can you claim to be my mother when you do not give me money to go and watch movies?). In the same episode, Tawanda is beaten by the father, Museyamwa,

with poor results. *Show Time* is a program dedicated to schools drama. Domestic violence depicted in these young people's production should worry many-it shows that the domestic violence scourge lives on-it's a baton the older generation has and continues to give to the young to continue with the race! The cycle of violence is ensured.

In *Maimbodeyi*, Episode 11 (26 September 2007), Arineshto threatens to beat up Sheba and takes by force a packet of *maputi* from the vendor. Mugomba buys a tracksuit for Mai Christine his former girlfriend. He verbally and physically abuses her, points at her threateningly and fondles her against her will. In a later episode, in full view of passersby Mugomba forcibly bundles Mai Christine in his car after she ran away from the room he had literally imprisoned her. What is the message communicated here? That the world does not care about one's abuse - that it's a 'domestic affair' even when it spills into the streets in broad daylight? In episode 17 (6 December 2007), Mugomba and Dickson beat up Nyuki for allegedly proposing love to the latter's wife. Earlier Mai Meki had poked her finger into Dickson's wife's face. Both guilty and innocent members of the public are subjected to the same violent treatment. The 'justification' for Nyuki's treatment is his guilty while that of Dickson's wife is her physical weakness vis a vis the perpetrator as well as the 'social immunity' which covers her as a mother-in-law. The daughter-in-law may be physically able to fight the mother-in-law but can't, society frowns upon such behavior. The latter sadly exploits this to trample on her daughter-in-law's rights with impunity.

In *Zvirimudzimba*, episode 11 (11 December 2007), Brenda and Taurai, who are siblings, have a misunderstanding over the former's phone. Taurai beats his sister - a fight ensues. The mother comes to rescue her daughter but is also physically assaulted, a capital offence in black Zimbabwean society. The mother warns the victim 'Unoitwa kafira mberi naTaurai!' (She says she should be well advised to know that Taurai is wayward and therefore should be avoided). She also blames the victim for showing off her phone. This way the mother pushes a patriarchal agenda. Women's rights do not matter -the message is if a male, who is physically more powerful is on-coming give way as a female although you might be having the right of way. Art is expected to assist in deconstructing gender stereotypes and 'outlaw' gender-based violence. When art perpetuates instead of zero-tolerating abuse including that of a mother at the hands of her own male offspring then it does not deserve the space it would have been allocated. In the same installment, Dudzai, who is also physically and verbally assaulted in earlier episodes,

especially for her physical condition, assaults her late father-in-law's young brother over his 'meddling' in her domestic affairs. Zimbabwean society least expects a daughter –in-law to have an altercation with any of her fathers-in-law (this includes the father-in-law and his brothers hence the use of the plural). Dudzai may have suffered a lot of prejudice but two wrongs do not make a right. In fact retaliatory physical abuse may be seen as more savage especially bearing in mind that the 'referees' are there to make sure that redress is ensured. Retaliation proves that one can also be beastly. Does this make the act better? This explains why players who retaliate after being roughed up are red carded.

Conclusion

The research has amply demonstrated that there is a lot of domestic violence that is depicted on the only Zimbabwean television station in spite of the enactment of the Domestic Violence Bill. The researchers are of the opinion that this practice perpetuates the unfortunate practice especially bearing in mind that the perpetrators seem to be let scot-free in the works. If the argument by, especially the soap producers, that the evil doers will one day face the music since soaps naturally have long lives our argument as researchers and critics is that that will be too late to reverse the conscious or unconscious emulation of the actors especially by the young and impressionable minds amidst us.

References

- Domestic Violence Act [Chapter 5:16, Number 14] (2006). Harare: Government Printers.
- The Herald*, March 20, 2008. Harare: Zimpapers. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12159819>
- Estate Blues*. Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television-produced Drama. Harare: Zimbabwe.
- The Forgotten Son* (2007). Shown on 15 August 2007. Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television-produced Drama Harare: Zimbabwe.
- Maimbodeyi (2007). Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television-produced Drama. Harare: Zimbabwe. (*Episodes of interest: 6, shown on ZTV on 16 August 2007; Episode 11, 26 September 2007 and episode 17 shown 6 December*).
- NdiGringo Chete* (2007). Episode 10 shown on 21 August 2007. Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television-produced Drama. Harare: Zimbabwe.
- Nyarai*. Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television-produced Drama. Harare: Zimbabwe.
- Show Time* (2007). Billboard shown on 7 August 2007. Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television-produced youth programme. Harare: Zimbabwe.

The Small House Saga (2007). Episode shown on 21 August 2007. Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television-produced Soap. Harare: Zimbabwe.

Suburb D (2007). Shown on 11 August 2007. Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television-produced Drama. Harare: Zimbabwe.

Studio 263. Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television-produced Soap in collaboration with Population Services International. Harare: Zimbabwe.

Uhambo (2007). Shown on 7 August 2007. Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television-produced Drama. Bulawayo Studios: Zimbabwe.

'Video Fair' (2008). Inter. Video Fair Trust and Cida Supplement. *The Herald* of 14 March 2008. Harare: Zimpapers.

Zviri Mudzimba (2007). Produced in 2004 and shown as a repeat in 2007. Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television-produced Drama. Harare: Zimbabwe. (Episodes of interest are those shown on: episode 1, 26 August 2007; episode 2, 4 September 2007; episode 3, 19 September 2007; episode 9, 26 October 2007 and episode 11, 11 December 2007).