



iStories



This book contains 69 iStories documenting the lived experiences of victims and survivors of Gender based Violence.

“I take a deep breath and sidestep my fear and begin speaking from the place where beauty and bravery meet--within the chambers of a quivering heart.”

— Terry Tempest Williams

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FORWARD

Regain Trust, a registered non-profit Trust was established in 2015 with the ultimate goal of contributing towards the country's efforts to address existing Gender Inequalities. The organization implements a variety of activities to prevent and mitigate the ever-increasing incidences of Gender based Violence (GBV) and Sexual and Reproductive Health concerns such as teenage pregnancy. One of the key services offered by the organization is the provision of psychosocial support services through counselling for victims and survivors of Gender based Violence and those affected by teenage pregnancy.

In 2018 Regain Trust, in collaboration with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and with the financial support of the European Union, convened the implementation of a project titled "Survivors Speak Up: No more Gender based Violence and Learner Pregnancies". This project has seen Regain Trust implementing activities across three Regions in Namibia (Khomas, Erongo, Omusati). Survivors Speak Up was designed against a key principle: To strengthen the voices of survivors in Namibia to 1) speak out against acts of GBV, 2) To promote and advocate for improved services for GBV victims and survivors and 3) promote and strengthen collaborations and partnerships amongst stakeholders working in the area of GBV.

Regain Trust recognizes the important role victims and survivors of GBV play towards reducing levels of tolerance and acceptance of GBV in Namibia and as such one key activity implemented by the project was to encourage survivors to share their stories and experiences. Through Survivors sharing their stories we believe that other victims and survivors would be encouraged to not only speak out but also seek help. Over the 3 years of the project the organization has worked with approximately 600 survivors of GBV, and learners affected by pregnancy.

To our survivors, we wish to express our greatest gratitude for your courage, tenacity, and willingness to reach out and seek help. And to the few that took the step further by telling and sharing your stories, we wish to thank all of you for your continued bravery and trust.



Mr. James K.A Itana
Executive Director
Regain Trust



iStories



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Courage is found in whispers and roaring
at the top of our lungs, alike.

The kind of courage depicted in this book
is that of humanity clothed in bravery.

Deep breaths and countless pauses to narrate
a personal experience and violent encounter
in the hope to inspire others to speak up.

Regain Trust acknowledges and extends its gratitude
to every survivor who was willing to SPEAK UP.

Thank you Survivors!

Without passion, tenacity and dedication
towards social development displayed
by volunteers, interns, staff, trustees and affiliates
of Regain Trust, the crafting of this book would not be a reality.

Your undeniable perseverance in the pursuit
of justice and healing for all,
inspires those with untold stories
and gives courage to survivors who continue to Speak Up.

Heartfelt appreciation for your unwavering commitment.

iStories Themes

The backdrop of all iStories are set against the following thematic areas and more often it is found that a number of themes may very well be woven into one story.

Physical Violence

Sexual Violence

Psychological Violence

Economic Violence

Teenage Pregnancy

*Pseudo names are used to protect the identity of survivors.



Regain Trust and (FES) Friedrich Ebert Stiftung with co-funding from the European Union are implementing a project that will contribute towards National efforts to address Gender based Violence and Learner Pregnancy in the Khomas, Erongo and Omusati. The project titled "Survivors Speak Up!" seeks to Increase and Enhance the delivery of prevention, psychosocial, health, legal and protection services to reduce the prevalence of GBV & LP.

iStories

Physical Violence

Time lapsed so quietly that I did not recognise the presence of Joanna when she arrived at the office. Wearing a colourful dress with her signatory hairstyle helped me to bring back the old memories of her visits. Joanna was born in the northern part of Namibia where culture plays a major role when raising a child. When Joanna was ten years old, she moved to Windhoek with her parents.

At the age of twenty-one Joanna was persuaded to get married. After she experienced what marriage really was, she decided not to have children immediately until she was able to independently care for them. “As a result of my decision I have been labelled selfish and sometimes these derogatory remarks would be said in a church setting. The irony is that fellow women, some in substandard marriages themselves have also resorted to calling me names for not choosing to have children within their time frames” narrated Joanna. Joanna went through many struggles on a personal level and in her business. She was passionate about women empowerment and emancipation from co-dependency, which has proven to be the root of many social evils’ women have to endure daily. “Many are advised to keep their marriage issues silent for the sake of protecting the marriage and the testimony of the church.

A lot of married women in the church are suffering from abuse in silence and pretend as if everything is fine which is tantamount to pride which the bible says will bring a man low”, narrated Joanna. According to Joanna’s experience, most pastors have never gone through training to counsel people in their congregation, nor have they faced the same situations that their congregants face and hence have no clue how to navigate their way through counselling. “When you do eventually gain enough courage to take up the matter with the pastor of the church, you are not given the support you need to get through your abusive situation. The pastors do not support their congregants with the same professional counselling that is being offered by psychologists and psychiatrists. They try to use their own wisdom coupled with some bible verses to offer advice, but there is still an alarming rise in separation and divorce cases amongst born-again believers” narrated Joanna. “I made decisions not to have children for now because of financial and emotional strain brought about by irresponsibility on the part of my spouse.

From a nurturing perspective, I felt the need to ensure that there was always enough money in my bank account for him to use. I was manipulated into taking loans with the promise that they would be repaid, but I ended up scraping for finances to settle these loans myself. Money meant for paying important expenses would be redirected to other things without consensus” narrated Joanna. As an aspiring entrepreneur, I was required to travel for business purposes.

However, this entailed engaging in long discussions to convince my husband, and I was prohibited from exchanging contact details with men while on business trips. On the other hand, my husband was charming at church and in public, calling me pet names, but an abuser at home. All the young girls in church would confide in him.

He would tell me things like, “everyone including my boss tells me that I am sweet, and you are the only one who does not think I am.

This and the fact that he was in church ministries that appealed to the human eye made it seem like I was the bad person” narrated Joanna. Joanna discovered betrayal and further deception on the part of her husband. Experiencing this trauma set her life on a different course, both positively and negatively. At the core of the trauma was a mode of perplexity that set in as she tried to get around the shock. “I experienced temporary memory loss and episodes of depression at the time. On a positive note, I became fiercer and more determined to achieve my academic goals. Quitting was not an option and I could not afford to fail my modules as my financial situation deteriorated” narrated Joanna.

For the first time in her life, Joanna lacked confidence in her studies. She experienced anxiety and was always scared of failing her studies, but she refused to throw in the towel. She remained determined and focused, irrespective of the underlying challenges she faced daily. “Electricity was disconnected because of unpaid bills and I was using a torch to study.

The money I made from my job at the time was mainly used to pay for my tuition fees. However, through hard work and perseverance I managed to clear the debts we were in and electricity to the house was reinstated” narrated Joanna. Women are being expected to contribute to the economy of a country with additional challenges added to the normal challenges of starting and establishing businesses. “For a long time, I felt oppressed, dismayed and helpless. Although it took courage, I stood my ground and persevered” said Joanna.

Joanna could however never have gotten through struggles without the support of her friends and family. Hence, her advice to victims of abuse out there is that they should never allow anyone to isolate them from the people who care for them as that is one of the strategies abusers use. “This was also the first sign of abuse in my case, but I fought it off and kept fighting it off over the years of my marriage.

Contrary to the popular saying, “never expose your spouse’s weaknesses to your family and friends”, I dare you to speak up if your spouse is abusing you. Nothing makes the perpetrator stronger than a silent victim. Speaking about my situation helped tremendously. It helped me with the healing process, my friends and family helped me with food when there was no electricity and financially.

My boss understood and was supportive when I endured depressive episodes and would literally offer me his office to work from. Above all, God has been very faithful to me in the midst of this ordeal” narrated Joanna.

“The road to healing and reconciliation is long, however, complete reconciliation is not possible without my spouse seeking professional psychological help, with or without the church sanctioning it. I am not for the notion of divorce being the solution unless all remedies have been explored and proven to be ineffective. I still believe marriage is a covenant and the testimony of my parents being married for 47 years in 2020 and raising us as independent, responsible and honest children is an inspiration to me” said Joanna as she concludes the conversation.

I am seated with Emma in our counselling room, and I am immediately reminded of the first time I met Emma. I recall the conversation we had nearly 2 years ago, which led to her story being shared with other survivors of gender-based violence. The first time I heard Emma telling me her story, she seemed miserable, depressed, and suicidal. Having had 3 children at a young age and going through physical abuse from a boyfriend was more than enough to endure. In a nutshell Emma was done with life. She did not want to see herself living again. “I had negative thoughts and emotions and a lot of complains when I was going through difficult times”. Having children at a young age was not easy. My body was not ready to carry three children. Someone was supposed to protect me instead of abusing me”. Now two years down the line we hear from Emma again “I blamed myself and everyone for my problems” she started the conversation with a smile with which she tried to hide her self-blame. “You see I have somehow managed to survive with my children” said Emma.

As I listen attentively to Emma, I encourage her to elaborate on her journey after accessing psychosocial support services 2 years ago. “There was a time when I was very sick, and I dropped out of school twice. Unfortunately, I got pregnant again. So, you can imagine the confusion and emotions which piled up. It was overwhelming to say the least. I thought I was going crazy, and I really needed help” she explained. Emma approached Regain Trust not knowing what she was really searching for. Her argument was based on how the family had deserted her and she was living a lonely life. She discovered that she was not the only teenage mother who was looking for help. “I attended group counselling with young mothers” I started to listen to other group members and realised I was not the only one with problems” she said. I was able to speak up and to listen to what other people were going through. I learnt not to be judgemental. I used to have so many issues and challenges, but I eventually overcame most of them” she narrated.

After receiving psychological counselling and empowerment from the self-help group, Emma started to see her life from a different angle and gained a new perspective. “Today I learnt that I do have rights and the confidence to talk over what is going on in my life”. I watched her display confidence and kept emphasising on how sexual abuse is a serious issue that need to be addressed. “The situation I am in today allows me to assist others to seek help so they can change their lifestyle. Knowing your rights and your responsibilities and where you need to go for help is something that is not supposed to be taken for granted. Now I have my voice back and my strength” she said. Teen pregnancy and sexual abuse towards young girls has become a worrisome issue for the Namibian nation. Children as young as 9 years old are being sexually abused and some are giving birth, whilst they themselves are still just a child. According to the Namibian law, the (Combating of Rape Act 2000) says if someone under the age of 14 has sexual intercourse with someone who is 3 years older than the victim this is regarded as rape. Legal Assistance Centre further explained that if someone decides to change their mind even though he or she agrees to it at the start, that should be regarded as a no, and if the other person continues then it is regarded as rape.

Veronica is an older lady who is now in her 60s and was born in Windhoek. She was married in her early years whilst still a teenager. Like the generation of that time, being married was envied by all the girls in the community, as every girl was supposed to be a wife to be respected. “In my culture, being a married woman came with a lot of respect” said Veronica. Today Veronica is a grandmother, and it makes her happy to be around her grandchildren. Reflecting on her teenage years, she expresses how abuse can be toxic in a manner that can affect one generation and spread to another. She grew up in an environment where secrecy was top priority. “My mother was born in the North. She would wake up looking good every day. She would put a smile on her face regardless of what she was going through” narrated Veronica.

Veronica grew up viewing her mother as the strongest person in the family. “My mother was a strong woman. I can’t imagine what she was going through everyday” said Veronica. “Seeing myself as a married woman was the greatest thing I ever wanted. I was also looking forward to starting my own family” narrated Veronica. As Veronica became a young woman she got married. “I was immersed in love and at the beginning there were a lot of things I did not pick up. The red flags of abuse from my father were now showing up in my marriage” said Veronica.

Veronica’s mother got conditioned into the situation and decided to live with it. “My mother was not happy, even though she pretended to be. She was experiencing abuse every day, but it was never discussed or being talked about until we were old enough to see what our father was doing, on our own. For my father it was normal to abuse our mother. As brave as she was, everything was swept under the carpet. She had to endure the abuse all the time” narrated Veronica. Years passed and Veronica started to see the dangers of abuse. She was tired of being beaten by her husband. “I tried to keep it a secret, just like my mother used to. For years I was lying to myself that it should be normal to live in an abusive relationship. My siblings and I had only seen that one side of the family life. I was already conditioned to accept a life of abuse.

My husband was an abuser. I tried to keep it a secret but unfortunately, I could not take it anymore. I went and told my mother about it. My mother was telling me that is what marriage is all about. Divorce is something that most families do not want to hear about. There is a lot of stigma when someone is being divorced and their family is often unhappy. It takes more strength for the survivors of abuse to give up and start afresh than to stay. It is not easy for survivors to share their stories either.” Veronica took that step forward and decided to take her future into her own hands. “I wanted to be a role model for my children. I realized that I only put up with the abuse that long because I witnessed it myself when I was a child. When I thought that my children would go through the same situation in the future, it gave me the strength to leave.

I hope that I managed to teach them that accepting abuse because you are scared to leave your partner or thinking that this is what marriages is supposed to be like, is not right and that divorce is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of strength.”

iStory | Is divorce evil in the eyes of the church?

DRESSED neatly in her colourful attire, Beauty could not hide her smile throughout our conversation. She could not stop talking about how wonderful life is treating her at last. Today, she is running a successful project in her community, where she sells kapana. She became a successful musician as well.

Beauty wanted me to understand that had it not been for the church, she would have left this world. Growing up in the northern parts of the country, she was a woman who fought all odds to become a Christian and a businesswoman. She is a survivor of physical and emotional abuse, who is sharing her story of how to become a successful woman after going through abuse.

Beauty was trapped in a violent marriage which lasted for 15 years until she filed for divorce. She was afraid of what the world would say, especially her Christian relatives, if she tells them about the violence. Therefore, she never mentioned the abuse until she decided to walk out of the marriage. “You know our culture; if you leave your husband, you are not a good woman. You have to take care of him, no matter how he treats you,” stated Beauty. She eventually managed to escape from the abusive marriage and started a new life when she moved to Windhoek.

Beauty started to visit witch doctors and was sure that they were helping her. However, she started to feel uncomfortable and developed a mania about her husband and relatives giving her bad luck and trying to kill her. When she was invited to a church by her best friend, she refused at first, but eventually she started to feel comfortable about attending church services. “I remember hearing the pastor telling the congregation to come forward if they are going through some difficulties in their lives. Later on, I opened up, and my pastor invited me and my husband for counselling. Through the counselling of the pastor, I was healed. I overcame my depression, loneliness and low-self-esteem,” narrated Beauty. She attended the counselling sessions and stopped visiting the witch doctors.

The church had other programmes for women, besides counselling. There were educational seminars on how to overcome problems in life and to receive inner healing. “The programmes gave me strength to move on. The church taught me to be self-sufficient, to stand up and do something for myself. I was a housewife and financially dependent. Currently, I am running my own kapana business. I am getting something. I am free and strong in everything that I do and, most importantly, I know the difference between being abused and not being abused,” narrated Beauty.

Unlike other people who blame the church for their divorce, Beauty believes that she was responsible for her choice to overcome her abuse by divorcing her husband. “The church cannot tell you to stay in or to leave an abusive marriage. They can advise, but they cannot make a decision on your behalf. The pastor can preach forgiveness, but then we people can get confused and think that the church is telling us to divorce,” narrated Beauty.

In 2014, former President Hifikepunye Pohamba gathered the nation to pray for its people who

had been affected by gender-based violence. He tasked churches to help find healing solutions.

According to Musodza, the assistant priest at the Cathedral Church of St George's, "churches have been performing pre- and post-marriage counselling sessions, but still there is an alarming increase of cases of gender-based violence. The role of the church is to teach people about relationships, and one of the things the church does is to prepare people for marriage, he said.

"Discuss with the person; ask the person questions which will lead them to actually share with you what they think they are going to do, and then support their decision. Lead them to make a decision themselves, and support them along that way", Musodza noted.

Beauty has been to REGAIN Trust for psychological counselling. She shared her story because she wanted to tell other women to seek help as soon as possible, and to find solutions on how they can be financially independent rather than relying on their partners. "When I look back today, I can say I was blessed to have such kind church members who were supportive and helped me to build my ladder," beamed Beauty.

This is the second time Alice has popped in to see us. A short, medium-built woman in her thirties, she relates to me about her fight against gender-based violence. At this time, both of us are relaxed, and Alice has decided she wants to share her ordeal. Alice was born in the southern part of Namibia and grew up in Windhoek. Fourteen years ago, she started a family, never thinking that she would suffer abuse in her marriage. Ten years down the line, the happy marriage turned into a nightmare of verbal and financial abuse. “Most of the time, I kept quiet to calm the situation when he picked a quarrel with me. Financially, I suffered a lot. My husband would go with his money and leave me with nothing. He had many relationships, and his other women would come and insult me at our home. “He would return home broke after spending his money recklessly. He would tell me how useless I was, and how much better other women were. I stopped taking care of myself. I stopped bathing regularly, cleaning my house, and even stopped visiting my close friends,” she lamented. Alice had experienced a cycle of abuse; growing up with an abusive stepmother, and she was exposed to abuse at a tender age. She vowed she would one day be happily married and have children of her own. However, fate was much harsher on her as she suffered even in her role as a mother, stuck between her children and her abusive husband. Alice got tired of living with someone who always asked for forgiveness every time he abused her, but yet soon repeated his bad behaviour. “When I told him that I wanted to leave him, he did not accept my decision. He was happy if I stayed with him because he would see me as a useless woman and continue abusing me.” Alice received no support from her community. “The community encourages that kind of behaviour. Most women used to tell me that I was lucky because my husband always apologised for his errant behaviour; some even suggested that maybe I was the problem. “For all these years that I have been abused, I never said anything to my mother or my mother-in-law. My mother-in-law used to take her son’s side and did not understand what I was going through.” Eventually, Alice decided she had had enough. After 14 years of marriage, she approached her extended family and told them that she had made her decision to end the marriage. Sadly, the cycle of abuse has a tendency to repeat itself. According to the US Department of Health and Social Service, a third of people who were brought up in abusive or neglectful homes end up in abusive adult relationships. Alice had been in abusive relationships for a bigger part of her life. She was a victim of the culture of silence, which silences victims of abuse. Many victims have grown up being told that what happens in marriage is a private matter, and that it is a husband’s right to mistreat his wife. After 14 years of abuse, Alice had been diagnosed with depression, and has suffered a stroke. She said that she felt her heart was broken when she thought about the heavy burdens of her life. However, Alice has picked herself up from the lows of her struggles and has started afresh. Today, she is a hard-working woman who takes on any work that comes her way to ensure her independence. Alice is proud of her progress, “I have learnt to speak out after gaining confidence at REGAIN Trust and my church. I encourage all families to teach boys to grow up being responsible. Men should be taught how to take good care of their families. Nowadays, both men and women do not know the importance of families.

We have to know who we are, and what our roles as women and men are.”

GEORGINA, a young woman very well educated and dressed in expensive attire, has just been promoted at her job. With a big smile and an even brighter face, she keeps on laughing, and the situation tells it all. I felt she is much happier, compared to previous days when we met. We greet each other and take a seat. Georgina's face today is eager, her expression clearly showing that she has been waiting for this day to come. That is how she expresses her feelings non-verbally. Still young and with a bright future ahead, Georgina was born at the coastal part of Namibia. Her parents did everything they could to make sure she acquired a good education. Equipped with her degree, she moved to Windhoek to start a new life. Georgina met her husband when she started working. As with any other relationship, there were some arguments, but things mostly seemed normal. At first, Georgina's husband was a very supportive man. Both of them worked, and they encouraged each other to work for their future children. However, after a few years, her husband started drinking, smoking, and gambling heavily. After seeking and getting help, he would relapse again in his bad habits. This happened several times. "When a relationship is said to be healthy, it conquers all problems that come by. The power of giving and sharing problems together is very important. Arguing to disagree is something that can come between two people who are in a relationship," narrated Georgina. Later, the husband started abusing her sexually and physically. "I needed help. I was depressed. I was crying all the time. He would come back anytime of the night and force himself onto me. When I refused, he would strangle me in protest. He does not care about anything. It is not about alcohol only, even when he is not drunk, he can also repeat his deeds," explained Georgina sadly. As the abuse continued, Georgina's husband started to dissuade her from going to work. "He tried to discourage me from going to work, because he was accusing me of cheating," said Georgina. After going through these difficult episodes in her life, Georgina decided to leave her husband and start a new life. However, this did not sit well with her husband. He became very angry, and retaliated. "When I told him, I wanted to leave the marriage and stay alone, those words made him very angry." He started beating me severely. He would not allow me to live without him. He wanted me to stay so that he could continue abusing me," said Georgina. During those difficult times, Georgina ended up fearing for her life. All her relatives pretended that everything was normal, and they did not try to find out what was happening in her marriage and how she ended up with all the scars all over her body. "My life completely changed. I was no longer living freely and could not sleep freely in case he would come and hurt me at night. If the person loves you, he or she will never abuse you," stated Georgina.

"When I left my husband to start my new life, I approached REGAIN Trust to get help for everything which I went through. I received counselling to overcome my depression. I learnt to forgive in order for me to carry on with my new life. It is not that easy to tell someone about the difficulties that I went through, but eventually I managed to talk about it. Most men are abusing women a lot, though there are also women who are abusing men. If women and men can seek support, they can be helped. Family members can advise their relatives, and they can also be counselled together to find solutions for problems that they are going through."

iStory | Never ending cycle of bad experiences

“I TRY my best, but sometimes life is just too difficult for me” said Clara.

Clara (*not her real name) is a young mother of two, who has been receiving psychological counselling for almost two months. She has been through a lot.

She recently had to give up her two babies and have them live in an orphanage because of a lack of support. Clara came to REGAIN Trust because she was feeling very depressed because of the situation she was living in. She had a strained relationship with her family, and it was devastating for her. At 16, Clara decided to get married because she was tired of being scolded by her family on a daily basis. “I wanted to escape the situation at home because I had failed Grade 10 too,” said Clara.

The marriage was a horrible experience for the young girl. Her husband would at times beat her up mercilessly until she fainted. It worsened when she got pregnant with their first son. He would cheat on Clara and beat her if she asked about it. Life was miserable as a young, first-time mother with no support. “I remember one day my son was so sick, and I got worried when he couldn't breathe. I spent two weeks in hospital with him, all alone, and not even my husband visited us or showed concern,” said Clara.

Clara lived with her husband for three years. During this time, she fell pregnant again with her second child before her nineteenth birthday. She was dependent on the husband for everything, and he would use this against her. Social worker Mongiwa Ncube says many victims, especially women, see no other option because they succumb to power that they are left with no choice but to stay in an abusive relationship.

Most commonly, financial control from the abuser influences the decision of the victim on whether to leave or stay in the relationship. Clara decided to leave the marriage when her new daughter was just a few weeks old. “That day when he was drunk, for the first time he took a knife and threatened to kill all of us. I knew he was serious.” Clara decided to run away to Windhoek and seek help from Friendly Haven shelter.

This is where she received help to begin a new life with no violence. Her children were taken in by an orphanage. Currently, Clara is trying to rebuild her life, and is rewriting Grade 10 at Namcol.

She is also about to complete a course in SME development at the Centre for Enterprise Development. She hopes to become a successful businesswoman or social worker one day. Whilst she is studying, Clara would like to empower herself through starting a small business.

She has been selling items as a vendor and is trying to save from the little she gets. “I would like to start selling braai meat and salads because it will help me earn more”.

Clara's one wish is to one day be able to reconcile with her children and provide for them. It is a long journey, but with her strong character, she will be able to succeed.

iStory | A broken life – ruined by gender-based violence

JOANNA (*not her real name), an Afrikaner woman in her early 30s, has come to our offices at REGAIN Trust. You can see the sadness and despair in her eyes as she speaks with a soft voice. The bruises on her arms and face are evident that she has been through some violent encounters. Under those scars, you can see a beautiful woman who was once full of strength, happiness, and hope. Joanna married her high school sweetheart, who supported her after the death of her father. Joanna's husband was such a good man, and she never thought a day would come when she could develop a deep resentment for her knight in shining armour. For almost six years, Joanna has experienced hell on earth. She would receive severe beatings from her husband.

One time, whilst her husband was watching, his friend drowned her in water so she would not be able to breathe. Anything could set off an argument with her husband, and he would have a reason to be angry and hit Joanna. She was defenceless whilst her husband was fuming with rage.

Furniture and kitchen cutlery would be thrown at her whilst her son watched. Her young boy would witness the fights and bloody scenes after a horrendous bout of beatings. Joanna tried to get assistance from relatives, but they would advise her to resolve it alone, or in fact influence her husband to make him angrier.

“It has been difficult to work again as I am recovering from the severe injuries I sustained during the abuse. I have memory problems too”, stated Joanna. The doctors have confirmed that her legs and lower back were damaged as she experiences some sharp pains when standing or walking for more than fifteen minutes. Joanna felt disappointed by people in her community as the violence was ignored.

According to the Legal Assistance Centre, one Namibian study found that 21% of women who experienced physical violence had never told anyone about it, and those who spoke out tended to talk only to family or friends. Joanna, being a reserved introvert found it difficult to open up to anyone, or to report the matter.

However, she remembers and appreciates her gardener and house help, who constantly make contact up to now to find out about her well-being. Joanna has been left stranded with nothing to her name. Her husband made sure that she would be vulnerable on her own.

Currently, she is living with a close friend as she was evicted from her marital home. It has been a difficult time for Joanna, as she has to learn to live without some basic necessities, she was accustomed to having. Food has been difficult to get, and sometimes she does not even have a few coins to pay for parking.

Joanna would like to begin a new life with her son. “At the moment, I wish I had a stable life and work so I can support my son and ailing mother. I really want to move on from this trauma as I deserve to be happy”.

ROSE (*not her real name), a young lady in her late 20s, has been through a lot of challenges in her life. She is supposed to be enjoying life and building a stable career for herself, but domestic violence has taken away a lot from her. Rose married her long-time sweetheart four years ago, and they have three children. Her marriage was all bliss, as she had hoped. Domestic violence and abuse reared its ugly head in their home when Rose fell pregnant with their first child. The physical abuse was so severe that it caused her child to be born with blood in his eyes. “The physical abuse left me with a scar on my back and face. My husband also abused me emotionally by posting hurtful things on social media about me or my parents, and how our children were conceived. He emotionally abused me for most of our marriage. But I stayed on, because I am a believer, and I hoped he would change,” explained Rose. Cyber bullying is becoming common in Namibia. According to the South African Police Service, cyber bullying occurs when someone uses electronic communication media such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp to purposefully hurt and bully another person. Rose's husband used social media to humiliate her and make her feel inferior through the derogatory words he used. “He accused me of witchcraft and questioned the paternity of our children”. These hurtful words continuously haunted and destroyed her emotionally. When their marriage was still tolerable, she agreed to take a huge loan on his behalf since she was a Government employee and the only one with a stable income. The repayments are deducted directly from her salary every month. Although her husband had promised to deposit money in her account to pay off the loan and other bills, he has not kept his word. Instead, he abandoned the family and left Rose – a single mother of three, half of whose salary goes to pay off his business loan – to deal with the problem. He has not been helping out with the bills, nor paying maintenance for their three children, and is using this as a way of punishing her as he knows she cannot bear this financial burden alone. She has been forced to cut her family's basic necessities to a bare minimum.

“I am in such a bad state. I cannot even afford to pay for basic necessities, let alone the rent. I have reduced meals at home to once a day. My three children are suffering the most, especially the young baby who still drinks milk. My milk outflow has reduced greatly because of the emotional stress and physical abuse,” said Rose, who is suffering from severe depression.

She came to REGAIN Trust because she wanted to take her life back for the good of her children. Sometimes she gets tempted to go back and continue with the marriage, hoping the financial burden improves and she could feed her children. But then the thought of the trauma she experienced during the marriage worries her. She could not handle the pain and suffering anymore and is crying for help. “It gets too much for me. I feel so worthless, and that I am a failure by not providing for my children.” Today, Rose is supported by colleagues who are dear to her. Everyone has been helping her wherever they can, but the situation requires a long-term solution, and she thinks of taking another job in the afternoons. “I would like to urge my husband to find his heart and provide for his children as they are severely suffering because of this financial situation. However, all he says is that he wants a divorce. I assume he will neglect and abandon his family even further”, said Rose.

“BEING male is a matter of birth, and being a man, you have to step up everything, to be responsible for everything that happens in your life”. Steve has been married for 13 years and has two children. He stayed in the southern part of Namibia before moving to Windhoek in 2008. An engineer by profession, Steve studied outside Windhoek. In his past life experience, Steve had a habit of drinking occasionally on weekends, at parties or weddings. However, the drinking habit grew, and he drank more frequently. He started physically abusing his wife on different occasions, especially when he came home drunk. For many years, the couple spent their lives fighting over many and petty issues. They could not solve their problems and had no idea how to do it. There was too much pride in Steve so that he did not see anything wrong with what he was doing. “I did not pay attention to the needs of my wife and children,” Steve admitted. He was unaware that what he was doing was hurting the family.

The couple went through their first divorce attempt, but later reconciled. But the relationship got worse, and they soon started physically fighting again. She got a restraining order against him, and Steve was not able to see his children for a long time. Gender-Based Violence Investigation Unite social worker Charlene Umurerwa said in most cases during counseling sessions, men justify their wife-beating by saying: “I beat her because she does not respect me”. She added that according to these men, this is “the only way they feel they can show emotions.” Nevertheless, there have been positive developments.

“More men have come here saying 'before I start to beat her, I want to seek counselling with you',” the social worker said. Counselling helped Steve and his wife to understand what was going on in their lives, but they did not change their behaviour immediately. While Steve cut down on his bad habits, it did not take long before he relapsed, and their problems began again. He loved his wife so much that he reconciled with her again after their youngest daughter was born.

Through attending a conference at one of the church services, Steve started to reflect on good things. “At the church service, it was my first time to see my children in three months, and there was hope that something could happen between my wife and me,” he exclaimed happily. Attending the conference changed Steve's life.

It was a long process for both of them. Through the church, they got help to reconcile. He realised that a lot of men went through similar situations. “I learnt that maturity comes with a set of responsibilities, and even now I am learning a lot through attending meetings at men's groups,” he noted. Steve emphasised that it is very important to do everything as a family.

He encouraged men to be involved in their family affairs. “A man has to guide the family, stepping up everything in order for the family to move forward, changing their behaviour and looking after the family's needs and also identify what a father and a husband is. As a man, you have to see what other men have done.”

After getting help, Steve started respecting and appreciating his wife. They have built a strong bond based on their love for each other. He advises that men should spend more time and efforts with their families. “Being a man is a learning process. Someone has to grow as a father and husband and implement the things that he has learnt.”

Today, Steve's wish is to bring the best out of his wife: to reach full potential in everything she does and doing the same for his children and be able leave a legacy.

His final advice to men is not to be found at the wrong places with wrong people.

Men do not easily open up. Regain Trust was thrilled to interview Steve. We would encourage all men to speak out on their marital problems in order to get help before it is too late.

For so many years many people have heard about a protection order that has been put in place to assist those people who want to escape their abusers. Many survivors do not understand how the process of applying for a protection order works. They move quickly to apply for a protection order only to withdraw it within a short period. It has been more than five years since Matilda lost. Matilda grew up in Windhoek and got married in the same city she had grown up to be a young, beautiful, and intelligent lady. The years that came saw her being in a troubled relationship after getting married to her long-time fiancé.

They started a family and by then the abuse was escalating in their relationship. It was something they did not talk about, a taboo subject. Many women are not allowed to talk about their marriage problems and how they are being mistreated, whether it be physically, sexually, or financially. Nor are these women allowed to divorce and leave their partners. They were raised to stay in their marriages no matter how difficult the situation might be. As time went on, it emerged that Matilda was in a seriously abusive relationship. She started spending more time away from her matrimonial home and partner. After what can be deemed a toxic and dangerous relationship, things escalated even more, and she suffered from serious injuries to her body. She then went and reported the abuse to the police in order to apply for a protection order. For some reason, unknown to even herself, she withdrew the order after two days and eventually, the abuse continued. "The system has failed me I can say, I thought I was doing the right thing, I guess. I applied for a protection order only to go back and cancel it after changing my mind. How I felt that time had contributed to the situation I am today. I was abused but later I felt it was not an abuse. I reported the case to the police, even though they allowed me to do that, I went back and cancelled the protection order." narrated Matilda.

Withdrawal of protection orders has become a worrisome trend for law enforcement. A person who violated a protection order may be arrested. But, in most cases when the person who has reported the case chooses to get back in contact with the abuser, it is no longer regarded as a crime and the order no longer applies.

In most cases, the process does not change the behaviour of the abuser. Rather, the situation can become worse and that can lead to more abuse.

Domestic violence has become a major scourge in a nation since most survivors stay with their abusers. The fact that abuse in the relationship is regarded as a private matter makes it more difficult for the survivors to walk away from abuse to receive help. Though domestic violence has been considered a normal crime, it has left many families asking unanswered questions. The month of September has left the nation in a shock when it ended up with not just a few but many women being killed by their partners.

"I feel as if the protection order could allow many women to withdraw their cases and regret this decision later. Today I wish if I could have not withdrawn. I made the decision to change my situation but then doubted myself. I should have believed in what I thought rather than second-guessing myself."

WALVIS BAY - “My father was very abusive. One day he beat my mother so bad that I thought she would die. I ran to a nearby house for help, but the uncle I found told me to go back home as everything would be fine.”

A brave high school learner at Walvis Bay shared this harrowing tale of domestic violence, during the launch of “Survivors Speak Up” campaign that seeks to address gender-based violence in the Erongo Region.

Men and even young boys rarely open up about acts of domestic abuse and usually bottle up such experiences. However, Lazarus (20), plucked up the courage to share his personal experience of domestic violence that he witnessed first-hand witness at home, a place he should have felt safe and protected.

Lazarus said he witnessed the abuse while he was 11. He is now 20 and in Grade 12. However, he still believes that the abuse continued behind closed doors. He is so traumatised and scared that he will turn out to be like his father. “I have anger and resentment bottled up inside me. It scares me so much. I have recently ended a relationship because I am scared that I would take out the anger I have for my father against girls,” an emotional Lazarus said.

He says he is angry at society too, saying it turned a blind eye to domestic violence despite it happening right under its noses. “By being mere bystanders, society makes monsters of young boys who are exposed to violence at a young age as most of us are either raised by single mothers or in abusive households. The only role model we are exposed to in many instances are the abusers of our mothers,” he recounted.

Lazarus also says that many young boys are not taught how to deal with their emotions and are raised with the impression that men do not cry or show emotions.

“Abused women and girls always take centre stage when it comes to initiatives that assist them when experiencing abuse. Men are also getting attention now, but the boy child often takes the backstage unless he is not the perpetrator or sexually abused,” further narrated the brave youth.

Hence, he suggests that a lot more male teachers be trained as guidance teachers at schools, so that it makes it easier for them to open up. “I don’t want to be an abuser but what I have experienced has left me with so much frustration and anger and I don’t know how to deal with it. I also know I am not alone and that there are a lot of boys that feel the same way. We should get help before domestic violence makes us monsters,” he cautioned.

*not their real names

iStory | It felt like I was walking on eggshells, but I loved him

“We had our good times, but once we were married, his desire to control everything became more obvious” Renee shares with the Social Worker during their counselling sessions.

“It was like walking on eggshells, but I loved him. I coped by trying to keep him happy. I believed that it was my fault when he would get angry. I cried daily and I felt worthless. I lost all belief and faith in myself. I felt better when I was totally isolated, and no one knew about what was happening. I don’t think I really coped as I would just hide it from the world and from myself” an emotional Renee share.

Renee shares with the Social Worker her emotional process of dealing with abuse, “I hit rock bottom emotionally; I was so diminished that I shut down. I Remember falling into a deep depression and I began to drink and go out to avoid being at home. I believed he wanted to change. We even went for counselling as a couple.”

Renee shares her coping mechanism with other women with the hope that all battered women can one day be brave enough to turn their backs on their abusive relationships. “If I could come and help you leave, I would, but it is you who must do it. Leaving permanently is the only thing that will change the situation. You cannot make him better no matter how much you love him.

It is NOT your fault, it is his. You are a wonderful person and deserve so much better”

Liina is a 43-year-old woman, born in the Omusati region. She is light in complexion, always looks polished as enjoys taking good care of her body. She has a great sense of humour. Liina is married and the mother of three children, two with her husband and a son from her previous relationship.

“My husband and I are raising all our three children in our home. Unfortunately, he started abusing alcohol and gambling. More problems started occurring when he started having affairs and at the same time accusing me of sleeping with other men. In most cases when he came back home, he did not have time to take care of his body; many days would pass by without him taking a bath and he never paid attention whenever I brought up the issue as it affected me deeply. This led us to sleeping in separate bedrooms” said Liina.

She further narrated “Whenever I tried to say something about his alcohol abuse, he used to beat me to a pulp and insulted me. He would beat me until I could not recognize where I was. He beat me for many years. He insulted me while our kids were listening and this made me feel bad, vulnerable, and worthless. Communication with my husband was minimal; we only greeted each other in the mornings. We did not sit together as husband and wife; we were basically like two strangers. I attempted to go to the traditional leaders, but they could not assist us. I sought for help from the police officers, but my husband’s behaviour did not change. When everything started to overwhelm me, I would play gospel music, sing my lungs out and joke with people because it instilled some hope in me and made me forget about my reality for a while.”

“I sell fish, fat cakes, vegetables and fruits and traditional brewed alcohol. I use the money I get to pay for my kids’ study policies and buy everything we need in the house such as food, cosmetics, and clothes. Most of my husband’s money goes into gambling. I told him to contribute to our children’s study policies, but he does not want” stated by Liina. “I received help from Regain Trust after I was referred by an officer. We received counselling together with my husband. The situation is better because we communicate now. He does not insult and beat me anymore, however, we still do not sleep in the same bedroom. I am encouraging women to work hard for themselves, because if they are financially independent, they will not be easily controlled by anyone” concluded Liina.

iStories

Sexual Violence

“Facebook! It all started with a Facebook friend request “Abby recalls. In 2015 I made a new friend on Facebook. His profile said he was 15 years old, and I was 13 back then, Abby shares with Erongo Social Worker. We chatted online for some time until that one day he asked to meet in person. I was so young but felt like I could trust him, I mean we were friends what harm could meeting in person bring? Abby narrates. “I was so young and naïve, so I decided to go and meet him. When I got there, I was so shocked by the fact that it was not the same face from Facebook” Abby sighs. Abby further shared that he was not alone. “This man touched me, I still remember his arrogant and demanding tone of voice. I cried, I screamed, but there was no one to help me” an emotional Abby sigh. “The last thing I remember was being at the place the taxi dropped me. I don’t know his name or anything about him, just the fake information on his Facebook profile” Abby shares.

A lot of rape victims experience trauma that causes anxiety and gaps in their memory about the sequence of the traumatic event. Until today Abby is not able to tell if she was raped by all the guys or just the one because when she woke up, he was the only one in the house. She also shared that she may have been drugged as she suspects she blacked out. “I had no taxi money to return home, I had to walk home, I couldn’t stop crying, I was in so much pain. When I got home, I never spoke about what happen to me, because I felt that it was my fault. I should never have gone to meet him” Abby narrates.

Rape is a crime of power and victims are never to be blamed for the actions of their abusers. Many victims of sexual abuse do not report their abusers because they blame themselves for the abuse and this is wrong. It is not a victim’s fault, you are not to blame, you are not alone. “It has taken me years to come to terms with the rape. I remember drowning in depression for years, my breakthrough began when I decided to take my life back.

We cannot allow our abusers to take our lives away from us; we need to open up and seek help. We can help other women prevent this from happening to them by sharing our experiences. Abby proudly shares. Abuse is never confined to a present moment; it lingers across a person’s lifespan and has pervasive long-term ramifications.

Violators cannot live with the truth: survivors cannot live without it. Speak Up!

Winter has taken its toll and we have seen biting cold days that made many people stay indoors. The dropping of degrees in temperature has everyone shivering. We are warming our bodies with a cup of coffee and revisiting the past of Lazarus. Lazarus had vowed to see the best being done for his daughter after sexual abuse violation six years ago. At the age of nine Anna had seen it all. She started building trust as a young girl who was surrounded by so many people in her life. Still young, innocent and under the care of her father, she did not know that she would become a victim of gender-based violence at a tender age. Powerlessly and unknowingly, Anna was sexually abused by people who were close to her. Anna was born in the northern part of Namibia. A girl who used to like swimming in the river and spent most of her time playing with other kids. Since she was born, she was in the care of her father who was working very hard to provide food for her. As the only child in the family, Anna was very close to her father. Lazarus trusted the people who were close to his family too. It was until then when Erastus discovered that something terrible had happened to his child. Anna was sexually abused by the people whom she had known for some years. As if that was not enough another abuse was perpetuated by another close person. "It was like a curse in my family. I could not understand why it was happening to my daughter only" narrated Erastus.

One afternoon Anna got sick of stomach aches. According to the father she changed her behaviour and became quiet "My daughter's behaviour became very depressive and worrisome. She just got sick suddenly. She used to be a talkative girl, but she became very quiet" She also used to play with her friends. My daughter stopped playing her favourite games" narrated Erastus. We are no longer friends with those people. Although the case of abuse was opened the process is taking long to see justice being done and until now no one has been found guilty of committing the crime. Anna was affected by the abuse so much so that her schoolwork deteriorated. "My daughter would spend days without going to school. We had to change her from the previous school because of stigmatization and being embarrassed due to how she was performing" narrated Erastus. It was not an easy journey for Anna when she got in contact with the police. "She used to be frustrated here and there when being questioned about the abuse by the police".

The only way to assist his child was to seek help. As a child she felt very comfortable to go through the medical and counselling sessions. In most cases children who have been abused at a tender age become abusers themselves if help is not given to them. Father and daughter gained their strength back after attending psychological counselling. "The power of art helped my daughter to open up a lot. We were encouraged to understand ourselves first for us to let others enter our lives. We must start somewhere to build trust with others. As parents we need to encourage our children to keep trying in difficult situations. If there is no encouragement, there is no future for them" stated Erastus.

I hear a soft knock and quickly dash towards the door to see who is there. Standing at the door is a tall slim middle- aged lady with a familiar face. I then quickly recognise Ndahafa. She was born in the Northern part of Namibia and went to school until she finished her primary level. Her mother vowed that she would work hard for her daughter to attain a university degree. Having the only child, she sends her to the big city, Windhoek to live with relatives and to continue with her education. She grew up with the hope of becoming a medical doctor.

As I am welcoming Ndahafa, I remember the last time she was in our office. She came as a rape victim who was not looking forward to recovering from her ordeal. That time Ndahafa was living in bitterness, so severe that it changed her Christian beliefs and started to behave in a retaliating manner, devoid of forgiveness and filled with bitterness, she started hating men for what had happened to her. As she tried to make herself as much comfortable as she can, she embraced herself and started talking. “First of all, before I get into my story, I would like to applaud and thank the entire Regain Trust team project for caring and giving helpless victims like myself hope again for a brighter tomorrow, says Ndahafa. She started to smile again and paused a bit. I could see the happiness through her eyes. She continued "Survivors Speak Up" article in the newspaper, this really touched my heart and played a tremendous role that positively encouraged me to get out of my shell and speak out and trust me, it was not easy at all, narrated Ndahafa. “Growing up, I have always been a vibrant and an ambitious child, full of life with big dreams and strategic plans of accomplishing my goals. Never had I ever looked down on myself, or doubted my capabilities, until at the age of 16 years when I endured what I would call the most 'disgusting pain' of my life. To make a long story short, I once felt like my whole world shattered the night, I was sexually assaulted by somebody I entrusted to protect me, sighed Ndahafa.

Ndahafa trusted those who were close and knew her. She never thought anything bad might happen to her. This is a safe city with lovely people who can protect each other, she thought as she hurried out of the house. “It was a Friday evening around 22h00 when this certain guy from the location I knew, found me outside the house locking the gate. He approached me and we started having a conversation as usual. When it was time for him to leave, he asked me to escort him, but I had refused. Upon my refusal, he literally got hysterically aggressive, which I had found bizarre because I have never seen him in that state before. Just when I was about to walk away, he took out a knife and held it by my neck, demanding that I should follow him or else he would not hesitate to stab me. “At that time, I was aware that he had a history of alcohol and drug abuse, with previous offenses with the law, so in my mind I knew that he would not think twice about acting out his threat, so I did not take it lightly. I was so frightened, and I could not even scream for help because that would put my life at risk. In fear of my life, he dragged me to follow him to a riverbed behind my house and that was when he forcefully undressed and raped me”, narrated Ndahafa. The atmosphere of the room changed at this moment.

“After the assault at knife point, he suggested that we walk to his place, and I had no choice but to adhere to him. As we were walking, I managed to escape and ran on the other side of the road, screaming for my life whilst trying to stop any possible car to come to my rescue. He ran after me, but I fortunately had a taxi approaching my side before he could reach me. The taxi driver helped me to get home” explained Ndahafa. At that moment Ndahafa asked if there are many people who have gone through what she experienced. I nodded yes in response and this helped her continue talking and vow to do much better to protect and help other women who are going through a similar ordeal. “Having been my first sexual encounter it took me time to actually process and understand what really happened to me. I however, decided to tell one of my relatives what exactly happened to me. She obviously told another person and the next thing I knew in a blink of an eye; the whole family knew about it. For some reason, at that point, I was so confused and uncomfortable with everybody, because I felt that what happened to me was quite embarrassing and shameful for it to be out there, said Ndahafa. The following day Ndahafa went for a medical examination and went through the usual procedures required after a sexual assault. According to her she went through a helping process.

“I was asked to open a criminal rape case against the perpetrator, but at that point I was emotionally and mentally traumatised. The only words that kept playing in my head, were that of the rapist threatening and reminding me. I thought about what he will do to me if I decide to open a case, that is if I do report, he will surely kill me. So once again out of fear for my life, I stubbornly refused to open that case, however I did not give anyone the reason motivating my decision, and this is something I regret to this day, narrated Ndahafa.

After making such a drastic decision Ndahafa felt she was judged. People became suspicious and started questioning the truth behind her story. Ndahafa felt neglected because she thought people should have been by her side and support her. Regrettably, people started pointing fingers at her and doubted the fact that she was really raped. “What was more painful is the fact that even outsiders got to know about it. I found myself being judged and hearing all kinds of ridiculous versions of my story with a lot of mockery surrounding it. People said the most hurtful things like, I was not raped, and I went out to have sex now I was claiming to be raped in order to cover my shame. And this was another reason why I did not even have the courage to open a case more than ever”, mentioned Ndahafa. She was emotionally drained and at that point she became very spiteful as she started developing intense hatred for her family. “Because these were the same group of people I trusted and expected them to fully reason and understand me. It got so worse and resulted in me being disgusted by the whole environment and everyone around me, I was filled with so much rage inside me. I literally wanted nothing to do with all of them” narrated Ndahafa.

After a period of living in denial Ndahafa started to think positively and understand that she needed help. Today she can share her story and continuing with her studies. It took a lot of courage for her to seek help, but it was important for her that others know about the dark side behind her smile. Regain Trust is happy that there are people like Ndahafa who are out there to encourage other survivors to start a new life.

It has been a difficult month for everyone. I saw Mercy twice when we were working on her I-story. At this moment we are all worried with the new development that have been taking place in this world. The world has come to a standstill because of COVID-19, a virus without a cure which spread throughout the whole world. As we both went through the iStory, I promised Mercy a phone call due to the lockdown, as we will not see each other soon. Mercy, born in Windhoek, was raised by both parents. In her 11th grade the family moved to the southern part of the country. She returned to Windhoek for tertiary studies. Through- out all the years, she managed to build friendship with other students and was used to a quiet and peaceful life. One day Mercy woke up with her life changed, her world turned upside down. from that day she was pretending and made everyone believe that she was a happy person. In the middle of her degree Mercy was sexually abused, she was raped by someone close to her.

“I quickly forgot what happened to me, but deep inside me, I was hurting. My emotional trauma caused me to react with denial, which led me to ignoring my feelings and pain” narrated Mercy. She went through a lot of emotions until she could no longer handle the situation. The fact that the perpetrator is still out there without being brought to book is the hardest thing she is faced with. Mercy became so angry with herself and felt that she failed by submitting herself at some point to the perpetrators request, knowing very well that she was not obliged to and had a choice not to. Mercy’s confidence and self- respect had deteriorated. “I hate the fact that I did not fight hard enough for myself , and wish I could have handled the matter differently, the fact that this guy that took my joy away was breathing freely after what he had done to me” narrated Mercy. Mercy’s experience was the main factor which influenced her career choice. She wanted to study something which would allow her to understand the human behaviour of an individual. For some time, Mercy’s memories became so conscious, because she had to walk past the place where she was raped every time she went to college. She was depressed to a point where she did not want to live anymore. “I was mad at the world that in the eyes of everyone I was being judged about my wrong decisions without them seeing beyond it, as to what exactly triggered me to get to the beast that I had become. I became depressed because for some reason I felt the whole world was against me. I was sort of living a double life” said Mercy.

During the day, in the presence of people, Mercy would wear strong and fearless personality, with the aim of confusing people to make them think she was at her happiest stage of life.” Deep down I knew I was the opposite of all these attributes. On the other hand, at night, I cried myself to sleep each single day” narrated Mercy. During the years of studying Mercy felt dejected and lonely, with no one to confide in. This forced her to engage herself with the wrong friends and relationships, so she could feel some sense of love and belonging. She was then exposed to alcohol abuse and used it as an excuse to numb her pain and forget about her problems. “At that point, I developed an absurd mentality of blaming my family for my pain and decided to cut them all off. I then made myself believe that my new friends were my family, even though I knew that they did not really have a positive impact on my life. It was at that time

that I started losing focus to the point of missing classes and got as far as not showing up for exams. Things even became worse when I moved out of my parents' house to live on my own.

Mercy faced so many challenges moving from one place to another, living on the streets. Her anger and pride rebuked her from accepting or asking for help from the family. She made it clear that they should not bother looking for her." There were even times I would have nothing to eat at all and lost most of my belongings. I rendered myself even more useless than ever, so I totally gave up on myself to the extent of attempting to commit suicide" narrated Mercy.

Mercy became very rebellious and disorganised. She ended up failing and eventually dropped out of school. She was not happy about how she handled her trauma and the decisions she made in the past." I developed an intense dislike for men, but as a way of comforting myself I found myself, getting into multiple relationships for the wrong reasons. My aim was to lead them on and then break their hearts because I did not want to be the only one with a broken heart. In my eyes everyone had to feel pain, so I could start feeling better about myself. This was because I felt every man was to be held accountable for the pain I endured, for this reason they should feel that pain too. Little did I know that I was just depreciating myself and hurting myself more" narrated Mercy.

Mercy is thankful to God that she made it through although she will have to live with the mistakes she made. "I have been through such a dark place and I would not wish it upon anyone, thus, I would like to tell my whole story to empower young women out there not to take the same road that I took as a way of fighting their trauma. I have gone back to college this year, so that I can do even better than before. With my life story, personal experience, and knowledge I believe that I can help save a life.

My story and motivation behind it would touch the next girl's heart who will find herself in a similar form of exposure to be strong and to seek help, speak out and avoid the wrong decisions I made. I would like to empower women to grow emotionally to stand up for their rights without any shame and fear and most essentially not to subject themselves to silence" narrated Mercy. Mercy battled with her trauma and chose to never give up on herself.

iStory | You don't know how it feels to be a survivor

WINDHOEK - A phone call from the capital city, Windhoek directed to the other side of the country brought back the memories of the past two years. Grace's voice could hardly be heard from the other side. Hers was a story that she never told anyone until her self-esteem was destroyed. Still young and energetic at the age of 23, Grace grew up in one of the coastal towns of Namibia.

Grace witnessed the cycle of abuse taking place as she was growing up until her grandmother took her away. She endured sexual abuse from her stepfather. "I witnessed one abuse after the other from all the men who were in my mother's life. First, it was my real father who used to beat my mother and secondly, it was my stepfather who used to beat my mother as well. I endured sexual abuse when my mother was not around," she narrated.

Years down the line Grace found the love of her life. It did not take long before the abuse started again. "My boyfriend used to beat me and drag me in front of other people. To my surprise people would just look at me as if they were watching a movie. They could not intervene either. I started seeing what my mother was going through when I was young. With this kind of behaviour, I saw in people I had a relapse. I went into serious depression," she said.

"I replaced my happiness with alcohol. I was growing crazy. I was educated but I was an angry person. I had so many issues to work on," she recounted. Grace was in the middle of a crisis when she decided to seek help. "The moment I decided to seek help was the day I read the article written by Regain Trust in the newspaper. I saw a psychologist, but I felt it was not enough. I needed more. I read weekly stories of survivors and how they were positively moving on with their lives. Emotions went through my mind as I was still afraid of being judged by people including my own family and friends. It was the only way I could be free and not bottle up emotions and blaming myself for what I went through. After opening up about my life I was free like a bird that was kept in a cage for a long time. I was calm and more approachable. I could talk to anyone who needed advice from me regarding gender-based violence. People are judgemental and they do not know how it feels to be a survivor," she said.

Two years later Grace is more radiant, full of life and living with no regrets. She had moved on with her life. "I was embarrassed in front of other people. You can imagine the beatings I endured. That kind of abuse happening and no one bothering to intervene. I was in denial to the point where I used to drop the charges I applied against my boyfriend. I could not make peace with anyone and neither with myself," she said. Grace now feels secure and safe. Being asked as to where she gets the strength from after everything she went through, Regain Trust was her answer.

According to World Health Organization nearly one-third (31 percent) of the women in Namibia have experienced physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner and 10 percent of the Namibian women reported that an intimate partner had either tried to kill them or threatened to kill them.

“Had I not spoken out about being raped I would have never healed from the trauma I experienced.”

I am relaxing and sitting on this chair for an hour now. It is after lunch and I am constantly checking on my watch. As I gaze through the window, I could see the leaves on the trees and how they were almost discoloured by the long harsh, dry weather. Winter is slowly dissipating like a beautiful morning fog. Suddenly the image of Agnes appeared towards the office door. As I lifted my head to stare at her, I could tell she has lost weight. I stood up from my chair and welcomed her inside. Very closely I could see her lively face with all smiles when we greeted each other. I have not seen Agnes for quite some time. Last time I had seen her she was emotionally broken down. She immediately engaged into conversation and made herself comfortable.

I was eager to learn about the new developments. As we started talking, I discovered that a lot of positive changes had taken place in her life. She was fighting inner conflicts after being sexually abused for so many years. “I told myself I will never give up on life. I was repeatedly raped when I was a child, I grew up and became angry at myself. I just withdrew from life. I got to understand that I can overcome this dilemma. I reached a point where I have decided to let it go,” narrated Agnes. This year Agnes turns 23 and she recalled how her childhood dilemma changed her life. “I was abused by someone very close to me. I was just a child. I had one parent, who struggled to take care of us. The relative took advantage of me and the damage was done. I could not tell anyone that time because I was threatened not to do so, and I was also just ashamed of what happened,” she says.

It took years for Agnes to forgive. “I was afraid how people would react if I told them about my situation. I kept it as a secret, but it was haunting me. It is important to forgive yourself and those who have hurt you as it allows you to move on with life. After some years I discovered that I am HIV positive. I went through a lot and forgiveness was the first step to my healing,” Agnes said. She recovered from the difficult period after going through counselling sessions. The perpetrator could not live longer to face the justice system. “My uncle passed away before one of my family members could confront him,” recalled Agnes.

Agnes’s family kept it a secret and never reported the matter to the police. “It was a secret and no one from outside was supposed to know it. I had to live with it. The most important therapy you can give yourself is to find meaning in suffering. Learn to look at a situation from different angles and you will realise that a situation brings both positive and negative impact. I am living a healthy life and I am a graduate. I never gave up on my studies. I seek help from people who are non-judgemental. I am indeed thankful for all my struggles because I am who I am today because of them,” said Agnes.

According to the National Demographic Health Survey (NDHS), 32 percent of all women aged 15 - 49 surveyed experienced physical violence since the age of 15.

Between 2013-2015, Namibia experienced over 2000 cases of domestic violence, over 3000 cases of rape and 157 murders (Gender Based Violence Investigation Unit).

NDESHI, a woman in her early 20s, walks into our office at REGAIN Trust on a hot Tuesday afternoon. She has a story to tell, and she hopes this will help her heal the scars of sexual abuse she endured from a tender age. Ndeshi grew up in Windhoek with her elder siblings – two sisters and two brothers – and the family once stayed on a farm.

She was visiting our office to get help after a traumatic ordeal that she had to endure many years ago. She was only four years old when it all began – and she was blinded by the innocence of childhood. One of the workers at the farm where the family was staying then, sexually abused her on several occasions. Ndeshi started bedwetting, constantly crying, having sleep problems and nightmares after the ordeal. “I experienced pain from the injuries I sustained. But in my innocence at the time, I could not tell my parents what was happening because I was also confused. I did not know it was wrong, although I did not like it,” said Ndeshi. However, one day, her mother came to know that Ndeshi was being abused by the man. In her intense anger over Ndeshi’s silence, her mother gave the four-year-old toddler a brutal beating with an electric cord.

Ndeshi could not comprehend these bad events. She could not understand why the man was abusing her, and why her mother beat her so much for being abused. After all, she was just an innocent baby. This made Ndeshi fear her mother and have a strained relationship with her, she explained. When she was about eight, her uncle came to stay with them. To her horror, the uncle started calling the young Ndeshi to his bedroom, and he would abuse her and then threaten to murder her and her family if she spoke about it. She remained silent for about six months – fearing the beating from her mother on one hand, and the threats of her abuser on the other. The sexual abuse worsened, and the uncle even went as far as abusing her during family gatherings by coercing her to go to the bushes while no one was noticing. “I was forced to do things for grown-ups that I was not ready for at that age. I was so young, and no one noticed my pain and hurt.”

Ndeshi could not open up to her mother because she feared that she would be blamed and beaten up severely as previously. The abuse stopped when her uncle left to work in another town. She added “this was a relief for me when he moved out, but I had to live with the scars of the abuse. I still cry every day when I think about those years, and I fail to concentrate on activities because the memories always run through my mind”. Ndeshi continues to receive counselling from REGAIN Trust on coping strategies, having a balanced emotional environment, and enhancing a strong bond with her mother.

REGAIN Trust urges parents and caregivers to know that it is not always easy to detect whether a child has been sexually abused because it often occurs in secret, and there is not always physical proof of the abuse.

FOR twenty years, Grace (not her real name) has been quiet about her past because since she was a child, she had been taught and told to hide her experiences and her feelings. Today, at Regain Trust, she finally feels she is ready, and able, to share her story. With a cup of hot coffee in hand, she revisits her history. Grace grew up in an abusive household. As a young girl, she saw her parents having frequent fights in front of her, until her grandmother stepped in and took her away.

After a divorce, her mother found a new partner, remarried, and took Grace to stay with them. When Grace's mother was at work, her stepfather abused her. "I was only 15 years old," Grace told me, "As soon as she went to work, her husband would touch me in inappropriate places," she said. This not only affected Grace emotionally, but it also damaged her relationship with her mother. "I started blaming her because she did not do anything about it. She also did not know it was happening, but I held a grudge against her until she got divorced."

Grace grew up, not talking about what she had suffered. She felt she could put the past behind her, but sadly, the cycle of abuse in her life continued. Upon meeting her boyfriend, she thought she was with the love of her life, but after six months, Grace started to see red flags. Her boyfriend started to become increasingly violent. After one violent explosion, she asked her father to help her. Her father took her to the police's Women and Child Protection Unit and called for the arrest of her boyfriend. "However, I was not ready," she said, "I was scared." So instead, she chose to calm her father down, and returned to her boyfriend. "Then it happened the second time, and he almost broke my arm" Grace said sadly, "then the third time, he almost drove over me, accusing me of cheating on him."

Grace finally left her boyfriend, but the scars he left on her were deeper than the scratches he had given her. "I was depressed" she narrated, "I had a good job, but I would drink from Monday to Sunday just to stop thinking about it. A year and a half later, someone approached me and asked me why I was drinking so much since I was still a young girl." This made Grace realise that "I had not made peace with the fact that I was abused." She decided it was time to seek help, looked for a psychologist and went through a healing process, staying away from negativity and finding herself again. Grace feels she is doing well.

Learning from her experiences, Grace is encouraging the community not to judge or discriminate against people who are going through abuse. "People judge me on the fact that I was abused, but they do not really know how it feels to be a survivor."

The Legal Assistance Centre reports that many victims do not open up and are afraid to speak about their experiences due to inter alia shame and stigma, fear of retaliation, lack of independence and the 'normalisation' of violence. Grace wants other victims to know the empowerment that can come from being open about your past.

GRACE appears to be very confident and assertive when she steps into our office. She was born near the border of Namibia and Botswana and moved to Windhoek after getting married about eight years ago. She now has four children and is working as a volunteer in a non-governmental organisation in Windhoek. A few months back in June, Grace came back home from work to find her 15-year-old daughter, Faith, crying hysterically in her bedroom. She tried to question Faith and her other children about the reason, but she could not get a proper response. After this encounter Faith began to behave in a different way. She would have troubles sleeping, stopped eating properly and would seem distant from the rest of the family. Grace got very worried about this behaviour, so she decided to have a serious talk with her daughter. This was the moment Faith disclosed that she had been sexually abused by her mother's colleague from the organisation she volunteered for. The perpetrator lives just two houses away from their family. Faith had been sent to fetch her little brother who was playing outside in the street. She passed the perpetrator's house, who called and asked her to wash his dishes. Faith refused to do so and whilst she was about to leave the house, he grabbed the young girl, covered her mouth when she tried to scream and violated her. The perpetrator told Faith that he would kill her family if she told anyone about the incident.

According to a United States Department of State study in 2014 cases on child abuse are on the increase. They rose from 750 in 2011 to 870 in 2012. Cases ranged from rape to attacks and comprehensive incest. A Legal Assistance Centre study in 2009, revealed that it is common for perpetrators to use threats and intimidation tactics to remain in control of the situation.

This terrible event has haunted Grace as a mother. She feels as if she failed her duty to protect her child. "It has destroyed me seeing how traumatised my daughter is. Faith does not want to return to school because untrue rumours have passed in our community that she is now pregnant and has sexually transmitted diseases" says Grace. This has caused the family to be isolated from their community. They are unable to transfer Faith to another school because Grace earns only N\$200 per month and her husband is a car guard who does not make much. Furthermore, the perpetrator escaped Namibia to Mozambique. This has devastated the family as justice might take a while if he does not decide to return to Namibia. REGAIN Trust has provided free psychological therapy sessions for the family to enable them to cope with this traumatic event.

They plan to donate to Grace some clothing so her family can feel warm during winter. REGAIN Trust has also assisted Faith to receive counselling at the gender ministry. The ministry is also working towards moving Faith to a hostel so that she can continue attending school. "It is a work in progress trying to move on after a traumatic situation. However, I will try to be the pillar of strength for my family" said Grace. She was motivated to speak out about this ordeal because she wants other parents to always develop a healthy relationship with their daughters, so they are free to discuss any bad things that happen to them. Furthermore, it is important to educate children about sexual abuse at an early age.

iStory | Holding onto faith after trauma – Faith's story

FAITH is a 15-year-old girl who is in Grade 9. She is an intelligent lass who has managed to stay in the top 10 at school. It is easy for me to understand her interest in education as we try to discuss positive things such as learning that she can look forward to instead of focusing on the traumatic event that occurred. A few months back, Faith was a carefree young girl. Even though she did not have basic necessities such as water, electricity, and warm clothes, she was still content with life.

“I enjoy spending time with my three siblings and parents” she said. However, in June this year while she was looking for her brother in the late afternoon, something horrible happened. She was walking when their neighbour called her to come in his house. The man asked her to wash his dishes, but Faith refused. As she was leaving the man's house, he grabbed her from behind, closed her mouth so that she would not scream and raped her. “I felt powerless and as if what was happening was unreal” says Faith. She ran back home and began crying in the bedroom she shared with her siblings. Her mother tried finding out why she was upset, but the words just could not come out. She felt stuck as if her whole world was over. “I could not eat, sleep, or do anything. I would spend the whole night awake sitting on the floor and not realise that the sun was up” said Faith. She went through a depressed state and would constantly think about what happened. She also felt terrified to tell her family because the man had threatened to kill them if she spoke about it. The man also told Faith that if she kept silent, he would give a reward and marry her. But she did not want to marry a man older than her own father.

A week later, Faith had a long talk with her mother until around 2 am and she opened up about the rape. Her mother, Grace, was very supportive and they immediately went to report it to the police station after their conversation. Faith felt as if a heavy load had been lifted off her shoulders. They even went to Regain Trust to see if the organisation could assist them. The perpetrator has left the country, but a case has been opened with the police. “At the moment, I just want to move on from this horrible event,” Faith tells Regain Trust.

She is currently not attending the school she enjoyed because some students have been teasing her about the sexual abuse. She is still feeling depressed, but she is glad about opening up to her mother. She was motivated to speak out about the experience because it will be a good step in moving on and encouraging children to be open with their parents.

According to a 2006 study conducted by the Legal Assistance Centre, approximately 1 200 of reported rape or attempted rape cases were found and one-third of all sexual abuse victims are under the age of 18.

Faith's mother has been assisted with plans to move her daughter to a hostel in a different town so that she can continue school. Faith is thankful that her mother is supportive, and she is free to talk to her whenever she feels down.

She appreciates her family so much as they try to make her focus on other things which uplift her mood.

ESTER had her childhood cruelly snatched from her when their neighbour and her father's trusted friend raped her. She was fetching water after school when the neighbour called her to his house because "he had something to give her". She innocently went into his house, but the waiting neighbour pounced and raped the girl. After the abuse he gave her N\$5 and ordered her not to tell anyone about it. Her nightmare did not end there. She was raped again during a visit to her grandmother's house by an uncle who had returned home drunk and looked all over the house for Ester. He told her "do you know that I am your uncle? You must make me feel good" as he ripped her clothes off and raped her. Ester was raped twice by men she knew and trusted. Both had threatened her with further harm if she spoke about the attacks. Sadly, Ester's experiences are by no means rare. According to the LAC, 7 out of every 10 people who report a rape in Namibia know their attacker, and a further 1 out of every 4 rape cases is connected to 'a loved one'. After suffering physical and emotional pain in silence, she finally gathered enough courage and reported the crime to her parents, who were loving and supportive. Sadly, however, when crimes are committed within a family, children are often too scared to speak out. Her father told her: "I am not blaming you, you are a small baby, and the people who did this are grown-ups and know what they are doing."

There are several myths that are widely believed to add to a rape victim's ordeal and prevent them from seeking help. These largely focus on blaming the victim. Common myths highlighted include, "she was asking for it" by being provocatively dressed, young and attractive. "She was irresponsible" by walking alone at night, chatting with men, or drinking. These myths blame the woman and suggest that if she were 'doing the right thing' she would not have been raped. Another common reaction to rape is "she just wants attention" a thinking which values a man's word above that of a woman and treats women with inherent suspicion. In Namibia there is a general trend not to believe claims by rape victims. This discourages victims from reporting the crimes for fear of being ignored or accused of lying. The LAC states that "blame is taken away from the rapist and put on the complainant", even when the victim is a minor. Another common and destructive belief is that men cannot control themselves and that it is the female's responsibility not to tempt them. This gives the rapist an excuse for their behaviour.

These misconceptions traumatise rape victims and prevent perpetrators from being brought to justice. They also serve only to turn against victims at their time of need. By silencing rape victims, they receive no official help or supportive solidarity from those who have faced similar ordeals before. Ester's family reported her case but are told that it could take five to six years for justice to be meted out due to the backlog of cases at the office of the Attorney General. In the meantime, Ester has no way to escape the constant threat of contact with her attackers. Her father Peter shares how they are their neighbours. They are still close." Peter has been taking his daughter for counselling. "I expected to feel ashamed going here, but I was made to feel good, and got a lot of help," said Ester. Her father has seen improvements in her attitude and found it reassuring to see her making progress. He wanted to share his and his daughter's story to let people know that if they have suffered something similar, they should speak out because they are not alone.

A TALL, slim young lady visited our office one sunny afternoon. Although she looked a bit tired, she still held herself well. Today marks her third visit at REGAIN Trust's offices. A month ago, the situation was very different. She could barely talk or smile. However, today is a new day for Agnes (*not her real name). Every time she talks, she smiles. She quickly takes her seat and prepares herself in the quiet room. Agnes has been going through a lot until she decided to seek help. Agnes (21) was born and educated in the southern region of Namibia. When she was growing up, she was a normal child. However, her life changed one day, but it was only recently that she opened up about it. She recalls very well that something bad happened to her. She did not want to share with anyone that she was physically abused. Fear caused her to keep it to herself. When adults sexually abuse children, they often instill fear in them. Even if the children know what is happening is wrong and would like to share it with someone, they feel they cannot for fear of repercussions. After a while, this abuse becomes normal to the child, and often children do not open up to anyone until it haunts the person at a later stage in life.

Agnes had not spoken out about the sexual abuse as it came from a close relative. She had trusted the person who was supposed to look after her when she was a child. She remembered very well that she was still young and wanted protection from the very abuser. "The abuse happened when I was still a child" I did not tell anyone because my uncle threatened me. He told me he will kill me, and by then I was afraid to say it" she said and started to cry. When Agnes was growing up, she had a very low self- esteem. She often became emotional and was not able to communicate well. "I have become very angry, rude, and sometimes the anger affects my well-being. I have lost trust in people as well. I do not talk much. I am a quiet person," she told REGAIN.

Agnes does not have a good relationship with her mother either. Her mother was not involved in her upbringing, and she feels that they have nothing in common. It was her grandmother who has always played a motherly role in her life. "I am not close to my mother because I did not grow up with her. My grandmother has been looking after me all along.

I am closer to my grandmother, though I did not open up to her," she continued. According to the Legal Assistance Centre, there were 409 police dockets for rape cases which were opened in the years 2001-2005. Out of these, 304 dockets were from victims who are related to the accused. Most of the time, children who are survivors of abuse and are close to the perpetrators find it difficult to seek justice, because they are threatened or told that they will bring shame to the family. On the other hand, the law system has seen the prosecuting of crimes against children rising.

According to Ellaine Smit (Namibian Sun 2015), there are several factors which prevent rape cases from being solved in Namibia, for example, a lack of police transport, poor communication between police stations, a lack of expertise in dealing with child rape complainants, and the withdrawal of allegations by alleged victims after the filing of charges.

The government has done a lot in terms of fighting the ever-increasing number of rape cases. According to the Legal Assistance Centre (2008), the implementation of the Combating of Rape Act has seen the prosecutor general's office working together with other ministries which deal with the survivors of violence to improve their services. The Legal Assistance Centre (2008) further states that the research done has helped the government to address rape cases and improve the services provided to the survivors.

The government has also worked with other stakeholders to put the materials in different languages and simple terms to help the survivors, their families and other organisations understand them better.

Projects have been implemented to train the professionals who are working with the survivors, their families, and children. (Legal Assistance Centre, 2008). Sensitisation programmes for the survivors of gender-based violence have furthermore been carried out by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, and other stakeholders who are working with the survivors and their families.

Agnes is telling her story because she wants parents to learn to identify the signs of physical and sexual abuse of children. If the child is not being helped, he or she grows up with it, and it can severely affect their future. She also wants parents to teach their children to be comfortable speaking to them, should bad things occur in their lives.

Secondly, Agnes feels that it is very important for families to give their support when someone is going through difficulties. Agnes wants to become a doctor one day when she is done with her studies. She wants to help others through her career.

“I am happy that I have been to REGAIN Trust to get some help. I have learnt to be able to identify myself, to know who I am and to understand my ways of reacting to others. The psychological therapy sessions changed the way I perceive myself,” she said.

If you want to help us to stop violence, reach out to REGAIN or other Namibian NGOs. Please report to the police or ministry of gender if you get abused, or if you feel somebody else is in need.

LAZARUS* (not his real name) walked into our office this afternoon with a healthy smile on his face for the first time. He sat on the chair with a sign of relief. The tall, middle-aged man finally had a reason to smile. After months of heartbreak, there is finally hope and progress for his son, a boy brutalised by sexual assault. Many happy years with his children and wife came to an abrupt end when Lazarus's only son, Carlos* (not his real name), was raped by a group of men nearby their village. The boy suffered with extreme emotional and physical wounds. However, from this dark period had finally dawned some light. The story of Lazarus's son, which was published in The Namibian on 6 May 2016 has encouraged the community, church, and individuals to provide help. With tears in his eyes, Lazarus narrates the latest happenings. "I received support by a very engaged social worker at the ministry of gender. She referred me to REGAIN Trust for deeper psychological counselling. Both REGAIN and the ministry have helped me and my family through the road of rehabilitation. Betina, the mother of the child, is also very grateful about the latest happenings. "My child was very traumatised. At the age of only nine, he wanted to regularly commit suicide. Often, he wanted to jump in front of a car, or down from our roof. During counselling, these suicidal thoughts vanished", said the mother happily. Carlos also received individual tutoring from an experienced teacher, which allowed him to be more ready when going back to school. "My son has been studying mathematics and English and is getting a lot of reading under his belt in order to prepare him for the next term," said Lazarus. "Lazarus's son is also receiving individual tutoring from an experienced teacher, which will allow him to be ready when going back to school," said Dantago Gorases, one of those helping the family. A year-and-a-half after the brutal rape, Carlos could still not sit for long periods of time without complaining about the intense pain. This hindered his schooling, as did the stigma and bullying that he was exposed to. The state doctors have been working to help the family. At present, Carlos is being seen by a medical specialist, and is receiving treatment. "The doctors were very helpful. They managed to support the family in their recovery process" narrated Lazarus. The contributions which people made, helped Carlos tremendously. The child is being seen in a state hospital so he can have the protection of the state. Investigations are also underway. The severity of the case is such that Interpol is involved, as is the Office of the Ombudsman. The family is feeling positive about the results they have seen so far. "We, as a family, have gained a lot of stability. I thought my son will not be healed, but finally I got support." said Lazarus

A further 12 cases of attempted rape were recorded between June 2014 and February 2015, and the Gender-Based Violence Investigation Unit recorded 21 cases of assault with the intent to cause grievous bodily harm, again with children as survivors. In the face of fear and stigma, the brave family decided to speak out about their son's ordeal. "I decided to share this story with any parents who might have been going through a similar dilemma so that they can seek help" said Lazarus. "With help and support, there is a chance for a renewed life after such trauma. The parents have said that he is like a completely different person. So, after so much heartache, he is doing well, enjoys learning and is being a child again. Any assistance is welcome, and he is still on the road to recovery", said Gorases.

IT WAS a lovely winter morning, a bit chilly though, when Martha* (not her real name) visited REGAIN's office. Martha appeared to be a resolute, well-groomed lady in her forties. She was born and raised in Windhoek and has a loving husband and four wonderful children. After securing employment, which not only sustained her family, but which she also liked, everything seemed to be going smoothly in her life. Then one afternoon three years ago, everything changed. Martha sat down in front of me with tears rolling down her cheeks. There was a period of silence before she started telling her story. She needed someone to listen to her. Someone who could understand her feelings and what she had been through for so many years now.

“Although the incident lies almost three years behind me, I still feel I am not recovered yet. Someone disrespected my body,” she says, and she started crying. Martha describes the day she was raped and physically abused as an “unfortunate one.” It happened when family members were around. It happened so fast that when she told others what had happened, people could not believe her. “I was taken into a room to be shown how it looks inside since it was an accommodation business. I never suspected anything.” Martha was raped by her own cousin, a person she knew and trusted. “My cousin grabbed me from behind and overpowered me. He raped me while he covered my mouth with his hand. I was unable to scream for help. People did not notice what was happening in the other room. That I was raped by someone I knew and trusted.” After the incident Martha felt unworthy and afraid of what will happen to her and her family. A sudden change in her sleep patterns occurred and she was unable to fall asleep without medication. “I cannot sleep any longer. Sometimes I just cry,” she said. “I have lost everything including my dignity.”

Her family's reaction contributed to her feelings of shame and guilt. “My family who should be my place of refuge turned me down. There was no support. My mother was angry, fearing that the family is going to be in danger and discouraged me from reporting. My sister even gave wrong information to the police to protect my cousin.” It was the behaviour and reaction of her family that pushed Martha to the edge of suicide.

“I am speechless about everything that happened. I have raised and always nurtured my family. I have given all my love and care to my siblings and children. Only to find myself turned down and criminalised by the people I love most. Criminalised for a crime I never committed.”

It took three years before the case could be solved. This is what Martha heard from the investigating authorities. She was never invited to speak in court or got any official documents.

The government has done a lot in terms of fighting domestic violence. Different ministries working in close cooperation with NGOs have conducted a lot of awareness campaigns.

According to the 2014 report from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, Cabinet approved the Gender Responsive Budget Initiatives (GRB) and has given directives that include the inclusion of GRB in Government budget allocations.

According to the 2015 SADC Gender Protocol, only 12% of rape cases are committed by a stranger.

In most cases the perpetrator is a close relative and is known to the victim. Often perpetrators and relatives pressure the complainant to withdraw charges. According to the protocol, approximately 20% of all rape cases were withdrawn at the request of the complainant.

This factor and others have led to a very low conviction rate on rape cases.

Martha is now getting encouragement from her children. She is grateful that she has managed to reach out for help. She has started receiving intense trauma therapy with the help of the psychologists at REGAIN Trust.

“I have grandchildren now. I want to look after them and my children. I want to live for them. I am sharing my story because I want others to stand up. I want everyone to be protected by their family members regardless of whether they are female or male.”

Martha decided to share her story with other women so that they know they are not alone. She encouraged other women to speak out about crimes committed against them. “Do not let anybody victimise you.”

“I am grateful for what REGAIN Trust is doing. I needed someone to listen and support me. If you need help, please ask. Do not suffer in silence.”

SUSAN (not her real name) thought that all was well in her life. She was born and educated near Windhoek. After completing her education, she got a job and established herself. She married, and in the course of a few years got three beautiful children. Susan believed she had accomplished everything she wanted. She had an education, a career, and her children. One day, Susan received a disturbing call at work, telling her that her child had been abducted by a man. It later turned out that her daughter was physically abused throughout the whole night. The mother described this night as the most horrible and fearful she had ever experienced. "I could not even talk, nor breathe. I just stared into the darkness, waiting for her to return. There was immense fear and pain in my body. It feels like somebody is stabbing you, but you cannot take the knife out. I felt so helpless. I read such things in the newspapers, but never thought they were going to happen to me," said Susan. The next day, her daughter returned home. "She looked horrible. I even did not recognise her," she said, tears running down her cheeks. "She had sand all over. Some of her hair had been pulled out. Her clothes were torn. She was unable to talk." It turned out the abuse took place in the nearby riverbed, and the mother assumes the perpetrator was a man who frequented the neighbour's house. "He just vanished after committing this crime," she said. After the incident, the family's life changed tremendously. "My family used to hang out with our neighbours. We were happy together. Now, we are not doing this anymore. We are scared. All of us. Susan even stopped to go to church. "It feels like I lost everything I believed in, everything I had, my whole life dismantled, like I cannot 'feel' anymore. There is only pain left." To curb the pain, Susan said she started to drink. "I never drank, never. But I do not know what to do with this agony inside of me. I just wanted it to go away. I do not know what to do anymore", Susan stated, and one could feel the despair in her words. Susan had to stop the interview and continued later. "But I want to be strong. I want to tell you what happened to me. I want to tell the world out there. How he destroyed my life, my daughter's future. I do not want another mother to suffer like I am suffering. I do not want another child to experience something similar. I do not want another family to be torn apart. I am telling you because I want this violence to end."

At the moment, Susan and her daughter are finding their way back into life. She is grateful with the medical support her daughter received from the gender ministry. When she is at work, her mind is more at ease since her children now stay with her mother. She always visits them whenever she is off. She also knows that police are combining efforts to track the perpetrator down.

At REGAIN Trust, daughter and mother started intense trauma therapy. "My hope is to carry on with life," said Susan. "I got support to be strong again for my children as a mother." Susan thus encouraged other mothers who are in a similar situation to seek help and to speak out.

"I decided to share my story after I read about other families in the same situation. Before, I thought I am alone, but now I think different. If I can reach and help only one single mother with my words and relieve her pain a bit, this article is a success for me."

iStories

Psychological Violence

iStory | A childhood ruined by Domestic Violence

Emma, a young woman from the coastal town of Walvis Bay narrates her story and sighs deeply, whilst recalling her childhood. “When I think of my childhood I think of homelessness and hunger. Growing up with a single dad was not easy, although my grandmother would help him, sometimes I just wish my mom never had to die, I think life would have been very different” Emma shares her story with Erongo regional Social Worker. Emma recalls the year her mom passed away and shared how her dad fell into depression for some time and was unable to care for her and her siblings for a while. “We were all so young. I was grade 3, I think, and my little sister was in pre-primary school, while the youngest was living at the farm with our grandmother” Emma narrates. Emma shared how she and her sister were forced to eat from the dustbins or steal food from local shops just to have something to eat for the day. There were times Emma, and her sister would sleep under the bridge in Omaruru, “My dad was never home, we had no home.” A year after the death of Emma’s mother her dad tried to recover from the sudden death of her mom and slowly started caring for Emma and her siblings again, but not long into the year Emma was faced with the challenges of hostel life, which she explains was yet another difficult experience “We could only see my dad during holidays” Emma states. “My younger sister would lose her school shoes and I would give her mine and go to school barefoot for a whole term” Emma smiles sharing this during our sessions.

As Emma’s Primary schoolyears came to an end, she remembers the year she was grade 10; her dad remarried and introduced his wife to her and her siblings. “She was fine the first week, but when my dad travelled with work the week after her true colours came out” Emma sobs while sharing. Emma shared that she had to collect her food from the dustbin in the yard as her stepmom would dish her food in a plastic bag and leave it in the dustbin. “My dad knew about this, but he never believed us when we told him” Emma narrates.

Emma Failed grade 10 with 20 points, she wanted to return to school but her stepmom convinced her dad that Namcol would be a better option, “I never went to Namcol, she made me her maid instead, she would make me wash her period underwear” Emma shares. Emma says she cried every day and had no one to talk to. She shared that this made her hate her dad and stepmom, yet she never knew this was a form of abuse. “They made me stronger, these things help to build character”.

Times got tougher for Emma in 2013, when she gave birth to her first child and family closed their doors and refused to extend a helping hand. Emma had one aunty that opened her doors and helped her with her baby. “She paid for me to enrol for a certificate at IOL on HIV Management.” Emma shares that this is where she decided to look forward and move from her past, to appreciate the lessons and try to build a better future for herself and her child. “

I am now an independent woman; I work in the health care and social service profession and I am able to provide for myself and my family” Emma shares proudly. “My advice to victims is to speak up and know that you are not alone.” Emma stresses the importance of seeking help and speaking up with Regain Social Worker during counselling.

It is important for survivors/victims to seek help. Emma has been very resilient and is a great example of how talking about our abuse can help us heal from the effects that comes with it.

WINDHOEK - Ndapewa is a middle-aged woman who was born in Windhoek 32 years ago. Since her childhood, she wanted to strive for something new. Growing up in the capital city, she would grab every opportunity that came her way. The sky was the limit for her. One of her strengths was that she would work very hard to sustain herself. She believed in self-empowerment and was a woman who would not give up easily. Looking back at her journey: It was a phone call from a soft voice that sounded so relieved. A voice that was carrying the power of happiness. I immediately connected myself to Ndapewa's feelings that moment, and I wanted to hear what she had in store for me. Seven years ago, she had a vision of becoming an empowered woman who could stand up for herself. She wanted to educate herself though she was coming from a poor background, where struggling to earn a living was an everyday thing. Still determined to overcome poverty, she never gave up and she enrolled herself to study at a local university.

She started selling sweets and worked as a part time domestic as a means provide for herself. One day in the middle of her studies, Ndapewa met a handsome young man who told her he was falling in love with her, and so she pursued the relationship. The boyfriend started getting interested in helping her. He would buy gifts and food for her. At a later stage, he insisted to pay her fees. In her culture she could not accept such kind of help from a man who was not married to her. Nevertheless, she could start noticing the red flags from her partner. Ndapewa's partner was so lovely at first, however, she started to notice that something was wrong. The first issue she picked up from the red flags was jealousy. The boyfriend was obsessed and jealous. She could not stay away from her phone even when she wanted to do group study with her classmates. The boyfriend would get angry when she took time to answer the phone. "He would ask me why I was not picking up my phone even if it rang for a second, so I would literally go with my phone to the bathroom because of fear he'd call, and I would end up missing his call. He started controlling my movements and the type of friends I used to associate with. He would just turn up without telling me. "I ended up like a person living in a prison," narrated Ndapewa. The jealousy got worse to a point where she decided to stop the relationship. "He started sending me threats that if I decided to live without him, he would kill me. I then reported the case to the police. I am talking about a person who owns a gun, who was threatening me every day that he will one day kill me," narrated Ndapewa. "It took me years to get rid of a person who has serious issues. I refused to be abused by him. If I had accepted him to pay for my school fees, today I could not have been alive. Ladies should learn to take care of themselves. Especially the young girls who are not working," advises Ndapewa. There are men who think that if they take care of a woman, she becomes his property. In most cases, women are not financially stable, and thus struggle to earn a living. Most girls at the university struggle a lot which forces them to get into relationships where they can benefit financially. Most of them are coming from a poor background where living a luxurious life is not an option. Jealousy in a relationship is a negative feeling unless it is addressed. In most cases people who struggle with jealousy struggle with deeper issues that have not been resolved. At its deeper end the individual becomes controlling and having trust issues that lead to emotional or physical abuse.

iStory | The importance of family support after abuse

ROSE* is a woman in her fifties. She is a hardworking lady, who raised three children. Since she got divorced from her husband, she has stayed a single mother. Family matters a lot to Rose, which is why she travelled in 2003 with her mother and her son to the south in order to solve a familial land dispute. One day, during the long journey and their struggles to end the land conflict, a member of the traditional authority invited Rose and her family to his remote village. Rose and the man went to a bar nearby in order to discuss the case in more detail. After a while, the member of the traditional authority wanted to show her the accommodation for later – Rose agreed, because it was already getting dark. When she entered the bedroom, she started to have a strange feeling. “I just believed that an exemplary person would never do anything to me,” she said. But then, he stood in the doorway and refused to let her go. She tried to defend herself and used all her strength. But after a while, she had to give up. He was just too strong. He raped her. The first thing Rose did afterwards was to wash her face: “I felt so dirty”.

Totally confused and in a state of shock, Rose went to the tree where her mother and the mother of the perpetrator were sitting. She told the latter one: “Your son just raped me.” The mother of the abuser told her to be quiet, and to sit down. Her own mother refused to listen too. Not only on that evening, but also many days later, Rose tried to talk to several family members, but no one trusted her nor believed her story, or at least took the time to listen to her.

Rose is not sure why exactly her family members did not believe her, as they used to have a good relationship. Perhaps the fact that the perpetrator was a member of the traditional authority scared them. They were probably also afraid of the consequences if Rose spoke out. Furthermore, they might have felt that a rape case is nothing that should be discussed in public, or even opened a case for. No matter what exactly their reasons are, Rose is disappointed. She is a woman who believes in the importance of family ties. “It is crucial to have a family that supports you afterwards. I am no longer in touch with them”.

She expected more support, especially from her sister. “We used to have a close relationship, but now? We are no longer together,” Rose added. Her family does not support her; they do not help her out when she is in need; they do not listen to her concerns, and what matters most to Rose: they do not join her in her struggle for justice nor speak out on her behalf.

She has joined REGAIN Trust at the beginning of this year, and already feels at home. “I am not alone; I feel like REGAIN Trust is my family now.” The counselling, the possibility to talk to other people who also went through abuse and the psychological support, helped. Rose wants to share this advice: “Don't be scared! Tell the people you trust. Go to the church, talk to social workers. Join REGAIN Trust or open up to your friends. It will help.”

Rose reported her case to the police in 2007, although she knew that it would be a long way to go. She believes in the Namibian justice system and wants to continue until justice is done.

THE morning looked so bright, even though it had been raining earlier. The outside world is so quiet, and what you could clearly hear were the birds singing It has been a week now since our land was blessed with rainfall. The green vegetation and the blooming flowers are to be seen everywhere. This quiet and beautiful morning was then disrupted by a young woman who walks into our office. Although we were enjoying nature, not all was well on the other side of the world. Theresa, as beautiful as she is, could not let anything pull her down again after domestic violence affected her family. Born in the northern parts of Namibia, she grew up in a big family full of love and care. Up to the age of 29, she had never witnessed any type of violence in her family or community, where she used to play with other children and girls her age. She had an opportunity of staying with her parents as much as she liked during her teenage years. Unfortunately, the family's life changed after they witnessed severe domestic violence incidents, which affected her two sisters. As the girls were approaching their adulthood, the family lost one of her sisters in a fire, while the other one is still recovering from the burns she sustained during the same fire. According to Theresa, the community members failed to put out the fire which burnt her two sisters and everything in their shack. Police are still investigating the matter, and no one has come forward to confess this evil deed. No one has been arrested either. Theresa's family never thought they could become victims of gender-based violence one day. "I remember the day, and I will never forget it. I received a phone call about the incident, but before that, I had a long conversation with my sister. I could not believe the news. It was so shocking," narrated Theresa.

The whole family is still struggling to get answers. "Losing one sister and not knowing if the other one will survive makes me angry. I did not sleep for the whole week. When I look at my sister who survived the fire, I start crying. We were very close. My father could not handle it as well. He was crying all the time since the death of my sister. "Even now, he cannot believe what happened to our family. We are a big family, but we are all weak now. Everyone has been affected by the death of my sister and the illness of the other," said Theresa. The sister who passed away was the breadwinner of the family. Although Theresa is now working, she is struggling to cover the daily expenses. "I am the only one working in the family. My father is not working, and he struggles to survive. My salary is not enough to cover the upkeep of my sister and as I am talking, my contract will end this month. I do not have anything to help my sister with. My family is back in the north, and I am the only one here because I have to take care of my sister, who needs everyday help. We receive help from the community members, but it is not enough to cover my sister's needs," said Theresa. When she arrived at REGAIN Trust, Theresa's emotions were very high. She wanted to talk to someone for the first time. "When I came here, I was not feeling well. But now I feel like something heavy has been lifted off my shoulders. I am feeling much better now. I would like to thank REGAIN Trust for encouraging people to seek help when going through difficult times. I encourage people out there to have healthy relationships, and to talk about issues that affect them before it is too late. Let us encourage each other to solve our problems in a peaceful manner.

WHEN Paul, a man in his forties in a sporty outfit, entered our office, he already had had a long day. The aura that surrounds him is that of an activist. He shares his story and his concerns about the situation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexual and questioning (LGBTIQ) sex workers with passion. Paul introduces himself as a professional sex worker for more than 30 years and a member of the organisation “Rights not Rescue Trust”, which advocates a decriminalisation of sex work.

Gender-based violence is a major concern for him and members of his organisation. As a transgender sex worker Paul has already experienced a lot of gender-based violence, for instance by some gangsters in the communities. They show up at the “hot spots” of the sex trafficking, rob them of their belongings and sometimes rape them. But reporting such abuses at the police station is not an option for them. As sex work is illegal in Namibia, police are often reluctant to open cases of the abuse they suffered. Although this work is only one part of their lives, it makes them feel outlawed in every aspect of life.

Paul is very serious: “We do not want a special service. A justice system needs to be accessed by the whole society. That is universal to all of us.” What such a rape can cause is of course multi-fold. According to psychologist Joab T Mudzanapabwe: “Rape is a traumatic event that in most cases causes post-traumatic stress disorder.”

A post-traumatic stress disorder can include reliving the experience through nightmares, flashbacks and feelings of isolation, irritability, and guilt. Paul went through all that – like many other members of his association – and states: “Somehow that made me strong! And now I fight for our rights.” It is not only the abusive behaviour of special groups that makes their situation so precarious, but also the huge stigma sex workers are confronted with. For many people sex work is a symbol of immorality. Then one pending question remains: Who are the customers if it is condemned so broadly? Paul leans back and laughs: “They are coming from any cluster of society. Of course, that also includes politicians, doctors, pastors and teachers.” But this is not the only issue Rights not Rescue Trust is concerned with. They also clearly state that they are against the exploitation of children in sex work.

According to Paul this is a big problem in Namibia. The street children use drugs, alcohol, sniff glue, eat from the dustbins and sooner or later find out that they can make money through sex work. They mostly do not know how to protect themselves properly from sexually transmitted diseases.

He added that abusive situations are more dangerous for minors, especially when there is no guardian to protect them. At the end he added: “I was a street child myself and I know what they are going through. This is a national concern: All of us need to solve it.”

It is a slow day at REGAIN Trust when Nangula visits our office. She is a neat woman and appears to be well organised. Nangula begins to explain the reason she has showed up for the appointment a few minutes after settling in.

Nangula (*not her real name) is a 56-year-old woman with four children who are all above the age of 20. Her first husband passed away, and she is currently married to another man. The mother of four was pleased that she had finally found someone to spend the rest of her life with. However, this was not the case. In the beginning of their marriage, things were enjoyable, and she was satisfied that it was a strong relationship. Her husband would drink occasionally, but it did not affect the family so much.

However, life changed for Nangula's family after her husband was caught drinking at work, which resulted in him getting laid off. His drinking worsened, and he began to steal money from her and their children whom they shared the house with. She would sometimes find clothes, furniture, kitchen cutlery and food missing, and she would know her husband sold the items to satisfy his urge to drink alcohol. She reached a breaking point after she saved some money and bought a new car. Her husband stole the car one night and did not come back home for three days. Nangula reported the case at the police, and her car was found later. Many important parts were missing, and the car would cost more to repair than what it's worth. "I was so disappointed that day when I saw my treasured car, I had bought a month ago. I saved for that vehicle for years, and it was destroyed by my so-called husband", she explained.

She decided not to go ahead with an arrest as the situation with her husband had worsened. She tried to get him to go for some rehabilitation programmes in Windhoek, but her husband was uninterested as he thought he could recover alone.

"He kept on telling me that he would change, but I decided I could not wait forever until he completely destroys my life," she said. Nangula obtained a protection order to help with removing her husband from their shared home and to stop stealing from her. She hopes that with the protection order in place, her husband will be put in a position where he has no choice but to get help for his alcoholism. She still had to recover from the losses and embarrassment she experienced with her husband's behaviour, and she decided to open up to the social worker at REGAIN Trust. "I have been through a lot, and I am tired. Right now, I am concentrating on being happy and having a good relationship with my children as it was affected a lot by my husband's drinking", she said.

Nangula's story is an example of how alcohol has affected a family. Alcoholism is difficult and complex to treat, but with the right approach and support, positive steps can be taken to improve. Linea Kapofi, a social worker, encourages those living with alcohol problems in Namibia to get help from any social worker, or to go to the Ministry of Health and Social Services to be referred for a rehabilitation programme.

VICTOR is a young man who is 20 years old. He is one of the few people brave enough to admit that he needs psychological therapy.

As he enters our office, he seems to be a bit sceptical about his visit at REGAIN Trust. We sit down with him over a cup of coffee before he begins discussing the purpose of his appointment. Victor grew up in Katutura with his mother and five siblings. He is the firstborn, and as the oldest male in the house, he was expected to take up huge responsibilities. He was just in Grade 10 when his mother passed away. This came as a huge shock to the family because his mother looked healthy and had not fallen ill for a long time. Victor got government assistance to bury his mother because he had no support from family members. He had a good relationship with some relatives, but they were unable to assist his family. Victor also had a strained relationship with his father, who used to abuse his mother when they were still married.

His problems began a few months after his mother's death. He was grateful that his mother owned the house that he was staying in, but food and other basic necessities were scarce, and one of his five siblings was still attending school. Victor was forced by circumstances to start selling drugs to provide for the family. However, he stopped after getting into violent encounters with rivals and realising that he could be killed easily. He is, however, sometimes tempted to resort to selling drugs when he has problems at home.

Victor had managed to get grants for some of his siblings, but the money was paid into the bank account of his stepsisters' father because he did not have an account of his own. His stepfather would only give Victor N\$150 out of all the money his siblings were entitled to. "Life is tough for my family because I have to be the head of the house now. I did not know where to get help, which is why I decided to make an appointment with REGAIN Trust after I read an article about the organisation", said Victor.

Research conducted by UNICEF suggests that by 2021, Namibia will have approximately 250 000 orphans and vulnerable children under the age of 15. Therefore, this situation must be taken seriously.

Victor wants to be positive that things will work out for the better soon. "I just wish my siblings would be taken in by someone or any children's home so that the burden on me can be reduced for a while. I would also like to continue going to school so that one day I can be able to care for all my brothers and sisters". Victor is undergoing counselling at REGAIN Trust to help with depression and suicidal thoughts. He has also been referred to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare to assist him with the situation of his siblings, and he hopes that they will come back to him soon with some news.

Victor is thus urging other children in a similar situation to be strong, and to always have hope that a positive outcome will occur one day.

IT IS just before midday when Mavis (not real name) entered the REGAIN office. Unfortunately, she looked sad and was trying to find something to keep her going. Still looking very young in her early twenties Mavis does not have any hope of finding happiness after what she went through. She sat quietly for a few minutes before the conversation started. Her eyes were red, and she looked like she had not had enough sleep the night before. Born in a family of six daughters, Mavis is feeling very lonely at the moment. Like any other girl she had all the dreams of getting a job and becoming independent one day after finishing school. Being born in the southern part of Namibia and raised by both her parents, Mavis could afford to attend school with her siblings then. Mavis was about to finish Grade 12 when she received shocking news. As a young girl growing up she always heard stories about how parents gave away their daughters to older men in forced marriages. This became a reality for her when her parents forced her to marry a man three times her age. “I got the shock of my life when my parents told me that I was to become the wife of an older man. I asked my parents what they meant since I was just a child who was supposed to continue school. My parents knew that I wanted to become a nurse one day, but they thought the community would respect them more if they sent me to marry an older man,” narrated Mavis. Mavis relates how she was sent to her husband-to-be. “My parents and relatives all supported this marriage. They could not hide their excitement that I was going to be a wife. Until now I do not believe what was happening to me. When I discovered that I was going to be given away, I cried every night. I could not sleep, and I thought of how difficult my life would be. When I discovered his, I got a shock. He was already approaching his sixties. I told my sisters who were supporting me that there should be a way out of this difficulty, but we were powerless” she said.

Soon after she was sent to her husband, she ran away. “I did not know how to look after an older man. I got confused on what exactly I was supposed to do. We were not communicating because I did not know what type of stories to share with him. At the time we stayed together, I used to cook for him and left the food on the table for him to serve himself. It was like being in a prison. I was sad every day and I could not think properly as well,” recalled Mavis. After running away, Mavis moved from one place to another in fear that her parents or relatives will take her back to her husband.

According to a 2016 UNICEF report on child marriage among girls, the highest rates of child marriage are found in Sub-Saharan Africa where four in 10 girls get married before the age of 18 and one in eight was married before the age of 15.

“I know my parents will never forgive me for what I did. I respect them for being my parents, but I could not take being given away to an older man,” she said. Mavis had to share her story with REGAIN Trust after suffering from psychological and emotional pain. “I have decided to share my story with REGAIN Trust so that people will understand the negative effects of giving young girls away into forced marriages. Parents should let their children choose their own partners and should consider their happiness too. I wanted to talk to someone who could understand my situation. I do not trust my relatives anymore since they failed to help me. I want to start something afresh that can help me in the near future and be able to choose a man I want to spend the rest of my life with” narrated Mavis.

MARTIN *(not real name) is a young man in his early twenties, with bright brown eyes, a soft voice, and a gentle smile. His childlike appearance triggered an urge of protection within me, while I was sitting and listening to his story. Martin came from the northern parts of Namibia to Windhoek to study Science at Unam. Currently, he is a student with good records and a bright future in front of him. However, Martin's life has not always been as easy and bright looking. Together with his siblings and his mother, he suffered for years under an abusive father, who sexually and physically abused his mother, and assaulted the children. Martin testified how his father forced himself onto his mother for years. "For decades, I suffered in silence. My younger siblings have been affected the most; seeing our mother getting raped every day, and not being able to do anything about it traumatised them."

Finally, his mother freed herself from her husband, divorced and got engaged to another man. "I remember she called him the knight in shining armour", narrated Martin. "He was very charming, and he promised my mother the world. He told her that he would never abuse her, and that he would protect her from the likes of my father." At first, he did everything for us. I felt he was the real father I was searching and longing for all my life. He was supposed to be different, and we believed him at first. Some years later, his true colours came out." Martin started to talk about the event that changed his life forever. "One evening, he spat on me, bashed my head against the wall and did as he pleased with my body, while I just laid there," said Martin, trying to hold back his emotions. My younger siblings were too young and afraid to stop him; they just hid in a corner and kept quiet. From this point onwards, I was just a dumb puppet in his hands. I was afraid to speak up, or even to breathe. From then on, I did not allow myself any kind of emotion and feelings, neither for myself nor for anyone else."

"Of course, my supposed-to-be-father did not stop at this point with his abuse. He went even further. He stole a lot of my families' money; he drove my mother to the edge of bankruptcy and got my other siblings into enormous debt. This is how much power he had over me and my other family members; even over our community members, since everybody knew what was happening in our house, but nobody intervened."

My siblings and I somehow managed to survive and grew up. A lot of them ran away, and the ones who stayed behind turned into unemployed and needy dependents," said Martin in a trembling voice. "Today, my mother is still living with my second father, and I suppose she will continue to do so until she dies. I tried several times to take her away, but she prefers to stay with him at the village. She sees that as a wife's duty, and she says she does not want to be a burden to me." I wanted my story to be published because I hope my mother reads my words. I want to tell her through this article what I never managed to do in real life. I wanted to tell her that I love her; that I will always care for her; that I miss her, and that the only thing which would free my heart would be if she walks out of that relationship."

However, I know I cannot make the decision for her. She needs to finally find her own voice to say: enough is enough!

NAPAH and I were sitting in comfortable chairs and having our afternoon conversation at the REGAIN Trust office. Dressed for work and well prepared to start her day, Napah was very willing to share her story before proceeding to work. She sat and looked me straight in the eye, giving a clue that she was ready to start. Today, she had decided to start a new life through forgiving and empowering herself. Napah was born in the northern part of Namibia, where she grew up and got her education at her hometown at Oniipa. She then moved to Windhoek, the capital city, to look for work a few years after leaving school. During that time, she met the man who was to be her husband, got married and had five children during her 20 years of marriage. She was forced to resign from work to look after her children. It is at this time that she realised her mistake. The man she was married to started abusing her financially and psychologically. “He would get his salary and squander it. Our children were still very young, and I would struggle to get them food. I have been in this kind of relationship for 20 years, and I don't know how I have managed to stay in it for so long” said Napah.

On payday, Napah's husband would disappear for days on end. “He would then just return home without saying anything, as if everything was normal,” she narrated. “I got emotionally and financially drained. Sometimes, I blame myself for taking on all these responsibilities. Struggling and doing everything for him, since he would not think about the family, and spent all his money on alcohol.”

At the height of her abuse, Napah was always under stress and did not feel well. After years of struggling, she decided to go back to work, and she started to feel better.

“To be what I am now is because of hard work. I provide food for my children. Even the environment in which I spend most of the time is very helpful. I have a support team and very supportive colleagues when I feel low. I am managing to take care of my children with what I earn as a teacher.

After opening up about her abuse to her family, Napah got all the support necessary.

“I feel relieved after talking to REGAIN Trust. Having someone listening to my story makes me feel better as well. After reading REGAIN Trust's article and being counselled, I decided to open up about my problems and have managed to have a peaceful mind again.

“A grown-up knows what he or she wants in life and should go for it. Women should be strong. They have to fight all challenges, and not give up. It is also important to share what you experience with people you trust. Women have to be frank when issues of gender-based violence happen. It is very important for everyone to stand up and fight. Ask other women to help you when you are struggling with life,” she advised.

iStory | Abused in Relationship, Bullied by Family

MARIA is full of smiles, her eyes are alight with hope, and she is eager to share her story. Born and bred in Windhoek, Maria (36) feels she is ready to talk about her relationship of 11 years, and the suffering she endured during that time. When she met her husband, Maria was a young schoolgirl full of hope. She never imagined that she could be the victim of marital abuse and decided to choose the relationship over her education. She dropped out of Grade 10 and shortly after that, had her first of three children. Maria's marriage was dominated by many years of unhappiness and abuse. "At first, our relationship was blissful," Maria confessed, "until after four years when he started cheating on me." Maria's husband was an occasional drinker and would disappear from home for days. When he returned, he would subject her to physical abuse, often in front of their children.

Maria felt trapped but did not know what to do. "I do not know why I stayed in that relationship for so long," she says sadly. The turning point came when her oldest son, frustrated by the mistreatment his mother suffered, tried to retaliate against his violent father. Maria decided she must leave him. "I thought it would be good for my children if we left. I was protecting them from this long life of abuse." "After I left him, I have been staying alone for four years. I have been trying to raise the children on my own. I no longer trust men. My children need their mother more than anybody else. I am close to them, and I managed to open up to them. My eldest son understands what I went through because I explained everything to him. He had seen me being subjected to endless abuse, and he does not blame me for making them grow up without their father".

One day, out of the blue, Maria found out that her ex-husband had died. Although he had left his property and possessions to his children, his family took advantage of Maria's position, and tried to deny the children their inheritance. Despite the fact that Maria was struggling as a single parent and had suffered at the hands of her husband, the family tried to further bully her. The man's family took everything, including furniture, as they did not consider her the legal wife of the deceased, and felt they were culturally entitled to mistreat her. She sadly added: "I never thought that people would come and grab furniture from a single mother's house". She believes that there are many widows who suffer a similar fate and feels there is no point trying to report this behaviour. Maria wants to share her story. She wants to tell other women that double abuse can happen in their lives. Women should be strong, and quickly make their own decisions. They should not let relatives come and abuse them by taking anything they inherit. So many women have suffered and fell victim to their husbands or partners' behaviour, or of mistreatment by relatives. "Today, I have managed to speak out about abuse after I went through it for a long time." Says Maria proudly: "I have been to Regain Trust to seek help, and I have been able to forgive and move on with my life."

Maria found out about REGAIN Trust after reading articles in the newspaper. "All my life, I did not talk to anyone about my situation. I was afraid that people would judge me. At last, here at REGAIN Trust, I am sharing my story. I have been helped to bring out something that I was carrying for so long. I am grateful."

JACKIE*, a 19-year-old soon-to-be-mother is sitting in front of me after she had finished her day's counselling session. She shows me the ultrasound picture of her unborn baby smilingly. Jackie's life has been challenging; she came to REGAIN to seek help regarding her violent boyfriend, but it is the underlying causes of Jackie's situation we want to speak about today. Jackie was born and raised in Windhoek, where she was left her floating in the air, without an anchor. This pushed her into what she thought would be a romantic relationship but turned out to be a violent one. With no other way to turn, she accepted the violence as part of her life. She relates her life, and while she speaks about it, her eyes are turned down to the floor. "My parents were both alcoholics. When they went out drinking together, they returned home, often engaged in arguments that turned into physical fights." Jackie and her young siblings heard every beating, every vulgar word, every scream as they cowered in the room next door. "I can still sense the strong smell of alcohol and feel the small body of my young brother sobbing and trembling under my armpit, while my younger sister hid behind me," she said. On these violent nights, Jackie prayed that morning should come fast and rescue them from their ordeal.

Her mother often took advantage of her drunken father. "Since I was the only one who knew the pin of my father's ATM card, she pressured and intimidated me to go and withdraw money." Jackie's mother often woke her up around 02h00 or 03h00 to withdraw money at the ATM. "From the age of 10, I was forced to get cash alone in the middle of the night. It was very risky. When I was alone at night in front of the ATM, my heartbeat so fast that I thought I would faint. I just wanted to run away from my mother." "My father used to give me his ATM card when I was very young to withdraw money for groceries, because he trusted me." Due to the parents' drinking habits, the children's basic needs were never satisfied. "After school, I had to work to sustain myself and my siblings." From the age of 9, Jackie was already looking after her younger siblings. "My mother used to drink till very late. Sometimes, I had to take my siblings with me to school because there was no one to leave them with," she stated. Two years ago, the parents broke up, and her father moved out. Life then became even more stressful. Her mother spent the money their father sent on personal things, leaving her children hungry. "My father stopped giving her money and gave it to me instead."

At this point, her mother vented her anger on them, and her harassment of the children, especially her oldest daughter, became worse. "Not only that, she insulted and called me names, and also started accusing me of sleeping with my father. I felt sick at her words, and even wanted to commit suicide," said the teenager in tears. "But it was me who fed the children, and it was me who took care of the household. She started to select boyfriends for me, usually older men who were already working because she wanted their money. I never took them because this was not the life I wanted to live," explained Jackie.

After the break-up of her parents, her mother started coming home late more regularly, always accompanied by different men. "She used to tell me I should go out; I should search for a place where I can go for the night, and she frequently texted me 'Go and sleep with your boyfriend, or sleep with someone else'."

Providing food, mothering her siblings and managing the household, Jackie did not have much time to study, and dropped out of Grade 10.

Currently, she relies on her abusive boyfriend for support, and she is always at his mercy. Jackie wanted to share her story since she believes there are many other young girls in the same predicament. She wants to tell them that there is always light at the end of the tunnel, and that no child should feel responsible for the actions of their parents.

Having a child does not make you a mother. Forcing your little girl to walk alone in the dark to steal from her father's account is not what it takes to be a mother. Pushing your daughter into the hands of strange men is not good parenthood. We all have a responsibility to prevent gender-based violence, especially if we are parents.

THE father of the 10-year-old boy who was gang-raped last year at Otjiwarongo says the boy is still traumatised and emotionally unstable.

Last week, we narrated how Carlos* (not his real name) was gang-raped by several men when his family lived close to Otjiwarongo. The gang waylaid Carlos in May last year while he was on his way home from the basketball court. They lied to him that his father had sent them to take him since the family car had broken down. They then took turns to abuse him in the bushes on the farms. They also beat him severely.

Carlos' father Lazarus* says the boy still suffers physically and mentally from the trauma caused by bullying at the hands of other pupils. "It was a small environment, where we used to live," Lazarus says, "If a serious crime like that happens, everybody knows about it." Lazarus says although the children at Carlos' former school knew what he had gone through, they teased him when he went back. Carlos has not been going to school since the family moved to Windhoek last year. "These pupils told him that he is not a boy anymore and that he does not deserve to be with them," Lazarus says, calling on schools to do more when it comes to children experiencing gender-based violence. For him, there is only one solution to internal bullying in schools: "The children need to be sensitised with regard to gender-based violence. They have to be educated about sexual violence from a very young age on."

Even more importantly for him is that the children should be informed about their rights. "Just a few children, who experience sexual violence, have the courage to speak out. Most victims suffer in silence," he adds. Lazarus has not lost hope, however. "We try to stabilise him psychologically so that he can go back to school. That is our only hope for him, for his future. We want him to regain the trust to be able to go back to school," the father says. Unfortunately, some of the best schools in Windhoek Lazarus contacted have not given a positive response and with only the mother working, the family's financial situation makes Carlos' recovery difficult.

"My wife works as a teacher. At the moment, she is the only source of income, but she has not been paid since January," he narrates, adding that he still wants Carlos to go to a private school. "When he is in a fee-paying school, the teachers are more committed than teachers at government schools," he says. The move to Windhoek, Lazarus adds, has brought some slight improvement to Carlos' condition. In addition, Carlos is receiving psychological help from Regain Trust after the gender ministry referred the family to the organisation.

"The change of environment and the psychological counselling make it easier for him to forget. He is learning a lot. He is also sharing a lot with us now," Lazarus says. "I am convinced that he will go back to school next term. He is ready!" Caring community members have joined together to see how they can help Carlos regain his childhood and lead a normal life.

The group is seeking financial contributions for him to receive specialist treatment.

“WHY did it happen to our child? Why?” asks Peter, the father of a 10-year-old boy, who was brutally raped by three men in May last year. The father of five children is now sitting on a bench in Katutura. “My family lives in shame and guilt. We have the feeling that we did not protect our child enough”, says Peter, while nervously twisting his fingers. Together with his son Simon (not real name) and his first-born daughter, Peter moved to Katutura earlier this year. “The change of environment was good for the boy, although he has not seen his mother for almost two months now. Along with Simon’s other siblings, the mother has stayed near Otjiwarongo, where the whole family used to live together. “I never expected to find myself in such a horrible situation”, says the 48-year-old man and starts telling the story of his little boy. It was on a Saturday afternoon in May last year. Simon went to watch a basketball game. On his way back, not more than 200 meters away from the basketball field, he met the perpetrators. One of them was familiar to him: it was the elder brother of his class teacher. “They convinced my boy that I had sent someone to take him home. This is how they took him. And then they went with him into a nearby forest and raped him.” According to Simon, the organiser of the crime wanted him dead afterwards. “He wanted to execute him. He said it would be better to kill him because my boy knew who he was.” After raping and beating the 10-year-old boy almost to death, they dropped Simon next to a road leading to Otjiwarongo. A car picked him up and brought him back to the village, where he received medical treatment at a nearby hospital.

Almost one year after the incident, the abusers have not been arrested yet. Simon’s father blames the passivity of the Namibian police. “I do not think the police are doing their best. They always tell us they are still investigating, but nothing is happening. I think they are protecting two of the perpetrators because they are well-known Namibians.” Since two of the perpetrators have not even been identified, the family lives in constant fear. “We never know who is listening to us, who stands next to us. Our mouths are shut. Our hands are tied. It is just our legs that are walking. It is a horrible situation. During the night, I cannot sleep. I am handling the case by myself. There is no support.” But for his only son, Peter keeps on fighting. “I need justice to be done for the boy”, the father emphasizes. The feeling of insecurity is also hard on Simon. One day he went to a shop with his mother, Peter tells. She wanted to buy him some toys in order to cheer him up. The toy Simon chose was a gun. “We do not know what goes on in his head. But apparently, he has no trust in the police. When it comes to his own protection, he has only trust in himself.” For Simon, it will be a long way to recovery, both physically and mentally. “My son is not healed yet. He is still bleeding and is heavily traumatized.” But the family has not given up on him: “Simon is not the way he used to be. But there is a slight improvement. The change of environment and the psychological counselling at Regain Trust and the Church are good for him. He has even started talking about going back to school.” For his father, this is a good sign. Before the incident last year, Simon was performing above average in school. “For his future education is our only hope. That is what we are fighting for,” Peter says with a glimpse of hope in his eyes, “and perhaps he can fulfill his dream of becoming an engineer one day.” Simon was an excellent student, outperforming his classmates. Now, it seems that his future is destroyed.

SAMANTHA * (not real name) is a 19-year-old tall and very slim girl. She is part of a family of five children and was raised in Windhoek by her parents. Today, she is sharing her story of her road to recovery. Samantha was deeply affected before the family decided to seek help. She was struggling to concentrate in school and was unable to communicate well with her siblings. Her parents then decided to seek help. She had a lot of feelings of anger and had lost her trust in people and because of this, she had lost most of her friends. Her behaviour had completely changed to a worrisome extent. She started to perform poorly in class until she failed all her subjects dismally at the end of the year. "It affected me at school badly. I had no good pass rates at all that year" said Samantha. At home, things had also drastically changed. She struggled with extreme mood swings. "I could not talk to anyone or eat anything at home. I have been angry with everyone. I have lost trust in people, even those who are close to me," she narrated.

It has been a year now since Samantha's younger brother Paul* (not real name) was attacked and raped by a man who was known to him. After the rape, he was brutally beaten and left for dead. The incident left the family horrified and enraged about what the perpetrator had done. He is still on the road to recovery. Samantha could not believe it when her parents told her what had happened to her brother. "I was extremely shocked when I heard about what happened to my brother. All this time, I was very angry with the person who had done such a horrendous crime to an innocent child," she said. Her anger has turned from the perpetrator to people close to her. "Instead of fighting the perpetrator, I was fighting everyone. There was no happiness in the family. Everyone was sad and crying. My mother and my father were completely devastated as well," she added.

After seeking help, the family has learnt to be open. Samantha is very close to her brother, and the whole family is supporting each other on the road to recovery. After the incident, Samantha and her family changed the way they viewed issues at home. The communication in the house has improved after attending REGAIN Trust's counselling sessions. "It has helped me to change my behaviour towards other people. I have started improving in my schoolwork, and I am able to concentrate now." "REGAIN Trust has helped us to work and accept who we are as a family. We have done and learnt a lot through the counselling sessions. Therapy sessions on topics like 'how to respect each other', 'how to handle your anger' and 'managing the impact of the first trauma' has helped us as a family.

We have been encouraged that there is always hope, and when problems come into our lives, it is not the end of the world. Emotionally and physically, we have been helped, and we were taught to be open and to trust each other again," said Samantha. The government has put some measures in place to protect children from abuse. Samantha wanted to share her story so that others know that problems can be solved, and that it is possible to live a better life again.

"Look for help and seek counselling before it is too late. Find someone to help you and get more information from social workers. Something positive will come out from that difficult life," said Samantha.

CHARLES arrived midmorning at our office. The sun was already so hot that when he entered the office, all he asked for was a glass of water. Charles looked much older than his actual age of 23, but he was very happy and in a jovial mood when we started our conversation.

Charles was born in northern Namibia and raised, together with his three younger siblings, by a single parent. He always aimed to do well in school and was trying hard to achieve something that he was going to be proud of. When he was growing up, he started to identify what he called “the three phases of life”, namely yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Charles' own childhood was marked by emotional abuse. His father left the family when he was still very young. He would try to communicate with him, but without much success. His mother unloaded the stress of her divorce and financial worries onto her children. “Since I was the eldest, she would lay all financial burdens on me. She would go even further. She would constantly insult me for things I could do nothing about. It was not my fault that my father left us. I was just an innocent boy, who in especially that moment needed the care and love of his mother more than anything else in life. However, what I received was the opposite – rejection, harassment and coldness.” Charles internalised the emotional abuse from his mother, burying it deep inside of him. He developed a deep depression and a severe sleeping disorder. “There were times I could not sleep one single night in a week. At the age of 16, I was already extremely stressed, drained and exhausted.”

Although close family members noted the treatment he received from his mother, nobody intervened. As the communication with family members worsened, he decided to seek help. “I felt hopeless and isolated from my family. All I wanted from them was to encourage me and to be happy with the things I choose to do. No one ever got interested to see or recognise my talents when I was trying to make something out of my life. Men and boys love to be encouraged as well,” said Charles. Today Charles says he is in his second life phase. After moving out of his mother's house his inner tension decreased. He is currently recovering from his depression as a result of the counselling he receives. “From the outside you can never know what someone is going through. No one knew how much I suffered, and no one took me seriously. I needed someone to help me. Men also have feelings and emotions. We are not made out of stone. We have our weak sides and are hurt by words as well,” said Charles. According to him, the victims of abuse are often the innocent and their pleas for help ignored. Charles is now living a positive life, thanks to the strength he acquired through seeking counselling. He managed to write a movie script as well as a book which he is very proud of. “My mother made me feel like a second-class human being, but if I write I feel empowered and valued.” I gained all my knowledge and skills through reading. Regain Trust encouraged me a lot through their articles,” said Charles happily. He is currently working on the third phase of his life – his “tomorrow” – to achieve something better for his future. “Sometimes you get discouraged and lose hope. These feelings get increased if you have nobody to talk to. In life you need people who support you.” He further advised “Stay with people who appreciate the small things you do in life.” He feels that we need more programmes to encourage individuals to seek help and to recover. “Some people are trapped because they are made voiceless by others. Don't let others victimise you. It doesn't matter if you are a man or a woman.”

iStory | Community action on gender-based violence

WITH tears rolling down her cheeks, Ouma Bertha bravely shares her story. With a smile lighting up her face, Ouma Bertha realised she was talking to someone who was paying attention to her story. She apologised for not speaking clearly and composed herself again. Ouma Bertha had raised her only grandchild since she was one year old. She was happy because she was nurturing someone special. There was a strong bond between the two of them. Ouma Bertha explained how her grandchild (nine years old), together with a friend, decided one day to go to a nearby shopping centre to get some sweets, and did not return home. She will never forget the day. She was horrified when she heard that her granddaughter had been abducted by a man. “When I received the news, my heart became very heavy. I blamed myself for allowing my grandchild to move around alone. I could not imagine how I would live without her. It is very hard to accept what happened to her. She was lured away, and sexually abused by a stranger.”

The girls met the men while buying sweets on a previous occasion. He was in his fifties and looked very friendly. He gave each of them a dollar and offered to accompany them on their way home. On a second occasion, the girls met their new friend again at the shop. He again asked if he could take them home. It was on this second occasion that the stranger lured the girls to a secluded place and raped her. “The community reacted when they heard that my grandchild had been seen with a stranger. People started to follow him, but unfortunately the man already had a chance to abuse my granddaughter. When the community members arrived at the scene, they could not believe what they were seeing: a big man trying to harm a small child in public,” narrated Ouma Bertha. The news of the kidnapping of the girl spread like a veld fire. Everyone was angry and wanted to pounce on the perpetrator. “I was relieved after the man was apprehended. The whole community worked as a team to keep this man on the scene until the police arrived. The case of my granddaughter became easier after she identified the perpetrator. Police got enough evidence since people moved fast to apprehend him before he ran away. Even I could sleep well, knowing that the person who harmed my child was now identified, because the police had been called to the scene and the community helped with the arrest of the man. I found it a relief that it did not take a long time to identify the perpetrator,” said Ouma Bertha.

Although the community worked swiftly to bring the perpetrator to book, Ouma Bertha did not take what happened to her granddaughter lightly. She approached REGAIN Trust to share her story so that people can be aware of this type of person in their communities. “My granddaughter is a lovely person who used to hug people. Now, she is afraid of everybody. She has become naughty and hyperactive and forgets things so easily.” “Even if it is not your own child, it pains every mother to see a little one goes through that. The government should not allow a person who abuses children to walk freely,” stated Ouma Bertha. “Look for help and let us work together in our communities. I have been to REGAIN Trust to help my granddaughter to receive counselling. After receiving counselling sessions, my granddaughter managed to gain her self-confidence back. She went back to school. Most importantly, she realised that she should not feel guilty about what happened,” added Ouma Bertha

SUSANA and I were sitting with our coffee. The hot mugs warmed our hands on this cold day. This cosy setting put Susana at ease, and she felt comfortable to speak openly about the hardship she had endured in her life.

Susana is a young, well-educated woman who followed the traditional path of marriage, with children to follow. However, after eight years of marriage, she started to feel wracked with loneliness. Despite the existence of her husband, she still felt the burden of a single parent. Her husband started pursuing his own business interests and left her solely responsible for family life. This is what he believed to be the duties of the husband and wife, respectively. For days on end, Susana would be left alone, with no communication from her spouse. “When he came home, there would be no explanation,” Susana confided, sadly. As time went on, Susana struggled to feel positive about the future of her marriage. She was put in a difficult situation, with the children always asking about the whereabouts of their father, and her not wanting to hurt them with the truth. “I thought they would hate their father for what he was doing” she explained. “I did not want to open up to anyone about the situation that I was going through in my marriage,” she said.

Susana struggled both financially and psychologically. Communication within her marriage broke down, and she started to blame herself. She was tired and burnt out from the heavy workload at home, emotional turmoil, and financial worry. She also suspected that her husband was cheating on her, and this further added to her grief.

Abuse comes in many forms. It is not only violent or threatening behaviour that constitutes abuse. Emotional abuse can cause serious, long-term harm to the victims, and is especially detrimental to self-esteem. Rejection is a common type of emotional abuse, when the victim feels like their partner, or loved one, does not recognise their presence or their value. Other forms of emotional abuse include intimidation, controlling finances, isolation, verbal insults, and bullying. Emotional abuse often leads to loss of self-worth, depression, and anxiety. Susana fell into a period of depression and self-loathing. She developed suicidal thoughts and wanted to end her life. Namibia has one of the highest rates of suicide in the world, with an average of 22,5 suicides per 100 000 people per year. The global average is 16 per 100 000. Tackling the source of depression can lead to the reduction in suicide rates nationally. Susana sought help from REGAIN Trust, and through psychological counselling, she was able to speak about her turmoil. She is moving forward with her life and gaining the tools to work towards solving her problems.

Susana would like to use her story to encourage other women to seek help, and not to give up. She encouraged other women to “approach institutions like REGAIN Trust to get assistance and counselling on how to move on with life.” She added that it is important not to give in to whatever situation you find yourself to be in. “Communication is the key to relationships” said Susana, along with “honesty, trust and respect. After attending sessions at RE- GAIN Trust, my communication skills have improved.”

“Men who are much more religious than their partners are especially likely to perpetrate domestic violence (Simister & Kowalewska)”

I am running out of time, I guess. It is the end of the year. Everyone is trying to wrap up the work before dashing out for the Christmas holiday. Though many of us are exhausted, the excitement is over the moon, I can say. I have been thinking I still have more time before I wrap up to reach out to one of the survivors. It is already time for 16 days of activism. We are now on that time of reflecting. It has been some years now when I look back the lane of tackling gender-based violence. It has become three years when an article, entitled ‘Is divorce evil in the eyes of the church’, was published. After meeting a young lady who was going through abuse, it has become clear that abuse can happen to anyone regardless their status.

The case of a lady called Beauty in that article is not an exception for most women who are struggling to leave abusive relationships. Today, I am doing a follow up on Beauty. It is just a phone call away from the office where she runs her business. She could not believe how many years have passed by since the first meeting after we published the article. A lot of changes happened in her life, but she could not hide her worry on the issue of gender-based violence, which seems to be on the increase. According to Beauty, being young and not having people to guide you is a big challenge when you are married. “You need people who tell you the truth about abuse in marriage. Many of us lie to each other and comfort each other that the abuser will change. Something bad could have happened the time I was in that abusive marriage.

Some people have been telling me to stay in that abusive relationship and not to divorce. All my relatives were against my divorce, starting with my parents. It was an outcast for the family. That is the only advice people can give. You start to wonder if there is anyone who is being abused until it is too late to help someone who, for years, has kept a secret of abuse. People should know that I am a Christian, but I had so many problems as a human being. I suffered a lot until I decided to change my life. Remember, leaving an abusing husband does not prevent you to continue being a Christian,” narrated Beauty. “Men who are much more religious than their partners are especially likely to perpetrate domestic violence” (Simister & Kowalewska). Cases of women who struggle not to divorce due to stigmatisation are alarming.

Three years down the line, after Beauty’s visit, the number of survivors of gender-based violence is increasing. Many women have been murdered and some survived with severe injuries. “In any congregation, you hardly find someone approaching the church leader to talk about the abuse. Many of us are not willing to seek help. If the church does not talk about abuse, it is not easy for the congregation to share their problems too. People need encouragement; people need to be reminded about their behaviour,” explained Beauty.

The church might have its own code of conduct which is not written anyway but is known by the congregation. Sometimes, Christians can judge a person who has gone through abuse due to certain beliefs. For example, a Christian cannot move around exposing themselves or go out with friends and get drunk. If any type of abuse happens during that time, a Christian will be judged. Many people are afraid to be stigmatised by their own people, so they are unable to share their problems.

Some church leaders who were interviewed in Mwinga's (2012) study on 'The role of churches in Namibia's economic development' mentioned that the resources for the church should be used only for preaching and teaching the Word of God and on issues related to social welfare. However, some church leaders urged that the duty of the church is to help its congregation on different issues regardless of its nature.

Some churches have enough resources to cater for its communities, such as crèches, which means they are able to provide certain services that are beneficial to their community. The church is very close to its people, as it is aware of the social and political issues. The church understands the behaviour of its members, making it easy for the church to assist its members to go through some programs concerning gender-based violence and to offer the necessary help.

It is estimated that more than 200 educational schools are owned by churches, from pre-primary to tertiary. 50 health centres are also owned by churches, including clinics, hospitals, and health centres. Some of the churches own some of the biggest hospitals and are doing well in terms of providing health services to society. Some of the schools are performing well because of the nature of its leadership and administration that is being offered. Churches are also working towards making the lives of individuals better by doing humanitarian work through HIV/AIDS programs.

This entails that churches can help the society in different ways, such as building shelters for the abused and homes for disadvantaged children. Churches can also offer training services to their church leaders and the whole team of the clergy to offer counselling services to the congregation.

According to our time zone it is still early afternoon, and it is getting hotter day by day. After the spring, the weather changed to an appalling upward slope. The summer hit us so hard that we have lost faith to anticipate the coming of rain. Today we are having the final episode of Maria's story. I was eager to find out how Maria managed her journey, one so full of difficulties and challenges.

The father of Maria's child denied that he was responsible for the pregnancy. He insisted that they never had unprotected sex and that there was no way he could be the father. "He told me to go look for the father of my child elsewhere and that he never wants to hear me say he is the father of my child" said Maria. Maria could not believe what she was hearing. "This was the same person who knew before I did, that I was expecting his child, the same person who was against me getting an abortion" narrated Maria. Maria left her boyfriend's house broken, and those words he uttered continued to haunt her for the first few years of her child's life. "I grew bitter and was very resentful towards my child's father for a very long time. I had already made up my mind ; I was not going back to school to finish Grade 12. I was determined not to feel sorry for myself and the circumstances I found myself in. I made a bold decision and pushed myself to step up, find a job and take care of my child" narrated Maria.

At the age of 17 Maria had become one of Namibia's teenage pregnancy statistics. The stigma and judgment felt overwhelming, but she did not allow other people's thoughts or words, move or shake her. She had to grow a thick skin for the sake of her wellbeing and for the sake of her child. "Over the first couple of years of my child's life, her father denied paternity and said I should not expect anything from him. With the help of my mother and close friends I managed to raise my daughter. My daughter started asking questions about her father for the first time, when she went to pre-school where she saw other kids with their fathers. When Maria's daughter was in Grade 1, she started communicating with the father of her child and he proposed that they go for a paternity test. Maria agreed and had her daughter ready for the appointment, but he never showed up for the paternity test. That was the last time they had any conversation regarding her daughter. "Over the early stages, I would have people approach me and tell me that they were informed by him that we have a child together. I unfortunately shot this down, because I said how can he admit to other people that we have a child together but deny it in conversation with me" narrated Maria.

Life became exceptionally hard for Maria when her mother passed. Her daughter was only 8 years old, "I had lost my strongest support system. Being the first born, I now had the responsibility of having to take care of my 2 siblings plus my daughter all by myself, but I persevered and remained persistent at being the best sister and mother I could be. Having the responsibility of raising my daughter and my siblings shaped me into the strong, bold and independent woman I am today."

Over the past 21 years, Maria's daughter has never officially met her father. She saw pictures of him and that is how she knows of him. Both Maria and her daughter have no ill feelings towards her father. "My daughter has made it clear that she still desires to have a relationship with her father, regardless of what happened in the past. She is ready to welcome him in her life if he wishes to be part of hers. I personally went through my healing process and I sincerely forgave him for the pain he caused me when he chose to deny paternity and my pregnancy. But so much damage has been done and my daughter suffered the most, she was at the receiving end of dealing with the consequences of the actions of myself and her father" narrated Maria.

Maria is fully aware of the trauma that she went through over the years, especially her teenage and adult life. According to Maria, it is so easy to fall into the peer pressure trap of wanting to fit in or try out experiences. Teenagers give in to social pressures without fully grasping that there is a price to pay for every foolish decision and act. "Being pregnant at 15 or 16 years is regarded as normal, society has accepted it as such. But it is wrong on so many levels because learner pregnancy robs you of so many things. Your mental, emotional, and psychological state is affected, and your life will never be the same.

Through your adult life, you struggle and battle with your inner person because you were forced to grow up fast and before your time. For a child to bring another child into the world is one of the most tormenting experiences. Your support system can only be there for you so much, but the rest is completely up to you, most of the work you still need to go through by yourself. Not many are privileged enough to have successfully navigated through the process of making the best out of being a learner pregnancy survivor.

Others are not as lucky. But the responsibility lies with each of us who have been through this, to share our story, regardless of how ugly and painful it is. By sharing our stories, we can help the next girl child from becoming another teenage pregnancy statistic. Through our stories, we can inspire and motivate the girl child who currently finds herself in the position of being a mother at such a young age, that there is hope even though the current circumstances might seem dark and gloomy. There is light at the end of the tunnel, but before you reach the light, you must go through the darkness, for every process serves a purpose" narrated Maria.

iStory | Unprovoked curiosity – my world of sexual encounters as a teen

Years have lapsed since Maria tried to change her life. After 21 years, Maria openly speaks about the journey of a child giving birth to a child and having to deal with the harsh reality and urgency of having to grow up fast to raise a child. I have been in touch with Maria on a few occasions and I could tell there is a lot that she is feeling and a strong urge to share with all young mothers. Hers is a story of encouragement for young mothers not to give up regardless of the nature of the problem.

Maria was 16, when she lost her virginity. She was born in a small family where her mother worked hard to raise her. “I remember how excited I was to try out this "sex" thing that all my friends were talking about” narrated Maria. Maria was the only one who was not sexually active, and she felt out of place whenever her friends would talk about their sexual experiences. Mondays were particularly tough days for Maria, because that is when her friends would talk about what they did over the weekend. Maria would have conversations about sex and boys. “I was not someone that was easily influenced or that would give in to peer pressure. I was very strong willed, with a strong personality and it was not easy to convince me to do something that I did not want to do. But for some reason, this "sex" thing was getting in the way of my friendships” narrated Maria. Maria’s friends started going out without her and avoided chilling with her at school during break time. “They felt I was boring and could not relate to what they were talking about since I was still a virgin and knew nothing about sex. I literally saw how my friends were drifting apart, the once close- knit friendship cycle was falling apart and nothing was the same” narrated Maria.

“That is when I decided (unprovoked) to give this "sex" thing a try and see for myself what the fuss was about. I had a boyfriend (a much older guy who was not in school) and I told him I wanted us to have sex” narrated Maria. Maria was disappointed after the sexual encounter because she had envisioned it to be an experience of a lifetime. Because that is how her friends sold this sex thing to her.

The Monday at school, Maria was so excited to share the news with her friends that she is no longer a virgin. “I shared my encounter, expecting my friends to be happy that I'm finally one of them now, but to my surprise the feedback that I got was that now that I got a taste, I had to do it often, as much as possible, to have different sexual experiences” narrated Maria. After hearing that advice, Maria decided to give this sex thing another try but she was not comfortable with the pressure that she suddenly felt of having sex.

Shortly after two sexual encounters her boyfriend decided to dump her. “My world came trampling down. I now started finding sex very interesting and I was curious to finding out more about sex” narrated Maria.

It was at this point that Maria's life changed. She was now desperately in search for someone who could further explore her interest with. A few months later, she had just turned 17 years, and got a new boyfriend. "This guy was way older than my previous boyfriend. I remember how I was not really into the guy, but because he was so persistent & adamant about wanting me, I decided to take him. Maria's boyfriend used to take her to school with his car, pick her up after school and he made sure they spend time together.

At this point she started lying to her mom about sleeping over at her friend's house, but then she would be with her boyfriend. She would sometimes not go to school just so that she can spend more time with him. "I was now too deep into this sex thing and wanted to explore as much as possible by creating different sexual experiences.

I started developing strong feelings and fell in love. The sexual chemistry between me and my boyfriend was very intense, and I was sinking deeper & deeper into this sex thing, I did not know how to control my hormones or focus on what was really important, like my education.

What seemed like a lot of fun at the time would soon prove to bring about serious consequences as I was losing touch with reality. I was merely a child about to become responsible for a child as I fell pregnant." narrated Maria.

Lovisa is a short 60-year-old woman who is fair in complexion. She was born in the Northern regions of Namibia. Lovisa is a married woman and the mother of three children. They built their homestead together the very year they got married. She lived in their home with their children while her husband worked in a different region.

At the beginning of 2019, Lovisa and her husband visited the Regain Trust office because her husband started to abuse her psychologically and physically. “My husband started to be at work for many years without visiting us, it turns out he had another woman there. I had been waiting for my husband for many years. When he finally decided to come visit us, he came with his other woman and two children, one of these kids was just a few months old” narrated Lovisa.

Lovisa said “I was busy attending a sewing course by that time, but I decided to drop out of the training, so that I could take care of my kids and my husband’s kids because they were too young. Years flew by and the bond between my partner and I faded each day. When my husband retired, he came home, and the situation worsened. He started abusing alcohol and when he returned home from the cuca-shops he would start insulting me and try to get violent when I retaliated. On most nights, our children always stopped us from fighting. One of our children quit her job to be at home fulltime because of the situation at home.”

“My husband started bringing his mistresses home and he stopped communicating with me. I would cook for him, but he would throw my food away in my presence. By then, he chased me out of our room, and I had to make myself a shack in our yard. He told me not to go at his part of the house and not to enter our bedroom. This made me feel so sad because I was already feeling lonely before he retired from work and now when he is living at home, it feels as though we are siblings with a rivalry and so much hate. When I was feeling overwhelmed, I would find refuge in my bible, sing spiritual songs, praying and talking to our pastor about my situation” recalls Lovisa.

I sought help from Regain Trust, where I received counselling. The Social Worker counselled not just me, but my husband too. She assisted us peacefully and helped me accept and own my story. The situation in the house is gradually getting better because my husband does not insult or fight with me anymore and he eats my food now. However, we still do not sleep in the same room. I am encouraging other people that are having the same or similar problems or those who will find themselves in the same situation to tell someone about their problems. It is important for us to confide in trusted family members, trusted friends, and social workers or counsellors. Through talking we learn that we are never alone” concluded Lovisa.

Today's weather looks so promising as we approach the season spring. The cold of winter is slowly disappearing, and trees are slowly regaining their colourful leaves after shedding off. The unfavourable weather has been making people spend much of their time indoors. Not forgetting the COVID-19 dilemma which is currently on the increase worldwide; activities have slowed down in this city and you can hardly see people moving although it is still morning time. Its 10am and I am waiting for Sarafina. We met last year after she heard about Regain Trust. As I was contemplating how to start my session for today, I suddenly heard Sarafina's voice. You can hear her voice pitching a mile away when she engages with others. Her voice fills the room with energy. I immediately called her to join me from the other side of the office.

Born in a family of five and being the eldest, Sarafina worked hard throughout her entire life. Her parents and siblings were looking forward to seeing her succeed in everything she does. She grew up knowing that its only hard work that pays. On the other hand, Sarafina was born in a family that was seriously uprooted in its culture. So serious that when she decided to get married, she chose a man who was also deeply rooted in traditional ways of dealing with issues. As she struggled to balance what she calls her way of living, she eventually became a victim derived from the expectation to be the perfect one.

"I have been working very hard to raise my three children. Since I got married, I never rested or got any help from my husband. I always thought that it is the duty of a woman to do everything for her children whilst the husband spends his money on something else" said Sarafina. Financial abuse coupled with psychological and emotional abuse has been tormenting Sarafina for years. "My husband is educated and has a better paying job. Unfortunately, I do not know what he does with his money". One day Sarafina woke up without a job and she started struggling to put food on the table. The situation became worse and as she tried to reach out to family members. She was dumb founded when she learned that her husband decided to marry another woman, a second wife.

"His relatives were agreeing with it and I could not keep arguing about it" said Sarafina. Sometimes it is not easy to make your own decisions, regardless of the situation that you are in. It takes time to trust yourself in making sound decisions. Most of the time you think your relatives are right, you can trust them and hope for change" narrated Sarafina. I could not figure out why both our relatives were not encouraging him to take care of his family. I spend sleepless nights crying myself to sleep. I was losing a lot of weight and appetite as well" narrated Sarafina.

The journey was rough for Sarafina and all she wanted was to start a new life. She eventually decided to divorce her husband after twenty years of marriage. "I could not let my husband continue abusing me. He was just there as a human being but not modelling to my children how a real father should behave. I decided, enough is enough and was determined to let go. I let all that I worked for twenty years being destroyed. But today, I can tell you, I am a happy person. I know I must work for my children without being judged or abused by anyone. I sleep well and enjoy my environment and being a mother at the same time. narrated Sarafina. After getting empowered through counselling, Sarafina is now able to make sound decisions for herself and her children. She is taking one day at a time as she strives for the best.

It is late in the afternoon. The four ladies who are sitting here today have not seen each other for quite some time. Everyone is amazed at how fast time has gone by. It's been two years since Regain Trust had the first contact with Theresa. The lady who survived the gruesome fire that took her sister could not hide how grateful she was to be alive.

Theresa was born and raised in the northern parts of Namibia in a family of four sisters. The two sisters moved to Windhoek to look for employment. There was a special bond between them that was till that fateful night. It was like a dream when Theresa woke up in a room full of smoke. The neighbours frantically tried to help save the sisters. Unfortunately, one sister lost her life. Losing a sister and living with severe burns was not easy for Theresa, especially considering the fact she strongly believed that it was her boyfriend who had caused the fire.

She developed feelings of anger that made it impossible to forgive the perpetrator. "I could not take it lightly. It was like carrying a heavy stone every day. Some people who get frightened by just looking at me. Some would run out of words and others are interested to know what happened to me" she explains.

Theresa started to receive medical attention and counselling sessions after surviving the fire. She knew she had to do something to pull back her life. I used to go out with my friend and assist my son with his homework. A lot has changed" narrated Theresa. Theresa has gone through surgery to replace the skin that was damaged. "After the surgery, the pain is so severe. I am still going to have more surgeries" said Theresa.

Theresa has learnt to appreciate the small things that she used to take for granted. "My mother and my sisters spend a lot of time with me. They cook and feed me. I can do the rest but unfortunately, I cannot feed myself" said Theresa. Many people reacted to the problem that Theresa have encountered. "I have learnt much about the spirit of giving and caring. If it were not for the doctors, nurses, and social workers I do not think I could have seen this day. I received help from different people. I have learnt to forgive but it is not easy. It takes time and energy. If you ask me today how I feel, I tell you, I am doing well" narrated Theresa.

Domestic violence in Namibia has become a scourge for mostly women and children. According to studies conducted by the Legal Assistance Centre in 2008, 41 per cent of females reported physical and sexual violence from their intimate partners during the previous seven or eight years. Jealousy, revenge, or refusal on the part of the abuser to accept the end of the intimate relationship results in murder cases.

iStories

Economic Violence

iStory | Family struggles with medical costs for raped boy

One year after his 10-year-old son was brutally gang-raped and assaulted, a father is still grappling with the financial strain the incident has caused his family and cannot access the urgent medical attention his child needs to begin the healing process.

“MY SON is not healed yet, he is still bleeding,” says Lazarus, the father of Carlos, a 10-year-old boy who was brutally raped by several men in 2015. It happened on a Saturday evening in May last year when Carlos went to watch a basketball game. On his way back, not more than 200 metres from the field, Carlos met his perpetrators. One of them was familiar to him – it was the elder brother of his class teacher. “They convinced my boy that I had sent someone to take him home. This is how they took him. And then, they went with him to a nearby forest and raped him.” According to Carlos, the gang leader wanted him dead afterwards. “He wanted to execute him. He said it would be better to kill him because my boy knew who he was.” After raping and beating the 10-year-old boy almost to death, they dropped Carlos next to a road leading to Otjiwarongo. A car picked him up and brought him back to the village, where he received medical treatment at a nearby hospital.

One year after the incident, the boy still has serious wounds, and the family is desperate. They cannot afford medical treatment anymore. “The costs at the hospital are too high,” the father of five says. A couple of months ago, Lazarus took his son to Zambia for traditional healing. “This was the only medication we could afford,” the father stated further. Lazarus was a medical assistant for a United Nations project that closed down last year. “I could join emergency practitioner training. But I do not have a sponsor. There is no one who is willing to help me,” he said, adding that without any income, this is very hard. “It is a very stressful situation,” he added, “especially since my wife, who teaches English at Osire, has not been paid for more than four months now.” His wife Bettina says the Osire school principal spoke to education permanent secretary Sanet Steenkamp about the situation of the non-payment of about 40 teachers since the beginning of this year. “We moved to Katutura in January this year. Here in the city, we have to pay for accommodation and food. There is no money left for medical assistance for my boy,” the father lamented. One year after the rape, Carlos is still bleeding, has blood in his stool and cannot sit for long. He urgently needs medical assistance. The only hope for Lazarus is that his son can go back to school as soon as possible. Before the little boy was raped, he was an above-average pupil, but without attending classes for almost one year now, he has missed a lot. “I want him to go to a private school now. After my boy got raped, other learners started to bully him because he developed an infection, which caused a distinctive smell. The teachers did not sensitise his classmates, neither did they stop the bullying,” said the father with disbelief.

He also said one of the perpetrators was the boy’s teacher’s brother. The teacher Carlos is forced to see every day after the rape. “So, my son got further traumatised and refused to go to school completely. I don’t want this to happen again.” To make Carlos forget, his father contacted the best schools in Windhoek, but unfortunately, he has not received any positive response yet. It is again the financial situation of the family which makes Carlos’ recovery difficult. “I am convinced that my son can go back to school next term,” Lazarus said, with a sparkle of hope in his eyes. “One day, my son will fulfil his dream of becoming an engineer.”

"I TRY my best, but sometimes my children go to school without food," says Ester with tears in her eyes the mother of three children lives in Katutura. She has a part-time job, but her salary, she says, is not enough to meet her needs: "The rent is too high, the food too expensive. Sometimes I cannot even buy food for my children." Ester has never been married. As a single mother, she is alone when it comes to the well-being of her children. Although both parents have a legal and moral responsibility to contribute to the costs of raising their children in Namibia, many fathers are still failing to pay maintenance for their children. This is exactly what Ester is suffering from: the father of her first-born girl passed away, the father of the thirdborn does not pay at all. "The father of my second born is the only one who gives me financial support," Ester explains. But he did not support her voluntarily, she had to put pressure on him. "I told him that I will report him if he did not assist me. Then he finally started paying for his own child, but still, it is not enough." Not having enough money for raising children due to absentee fathers is a countrywide problem that has already been addressed by former President Sam Nujoma in 2004: "The Maintenance Act was specifically passed to provide a legal basis of monitoring and ascertaining that parents, especially fathers, take full responsibility for all their children," he said back then. Sergeant Apollus from the police added that "poverty, next to lack of education, is the greatest source of gender-based violence in Namibia." But according to a study by the Legal Assistance Centre, the Namibia Maintenance Act reveals serious gaps when it comes to enforcing the law. The results of the study show that, every thirty minutes a maintenance complaint is made in Namibia, resulting in a total of 4 000 to 5 000 complaints that reach the maintenance courts each year. However, only approximately two-thirds of complaints ever result in an order being made, a fact that discourages women to submit a report when absentee fathers fail to pay. Although Ester's children understand how hard it is for her to support them, the situation is hard on the 43-year-old woman. When the relationship with her own mother worsened, she had to get external help. "My mother decided to bring her lastborn twins to my home in Katutura without even informing me. I should take care of them," she told me. The husband of Ester's mother promised to send money for accommodation and food, but no money was ever paid. "If you are working, a lot of people are expecting something from you, even if you only have a part-time job", Ester says, "I suffered severely because of this tough situation. I was stressed out and could not handle my life. But now I am not overwhelmed with the situation anymore, instead, I accept it and deal with it."

For Ester, it is important to be strong for her children. "It is all about my children," the single mother says. "I want to have a good life – for them." Before Ester became a mother, she obtained a diploma at the Namibian College of Open Learning. With her diploma, she hopes to find a better job soon. "If I get a job, I could provide a good education for my children. This is the most important thing for me. If you get a good education, you can live the life you want." Ester hopes that, in the future, more women who have financial problems will have the courage to seek help. "If you get counselling, you will be healed physically, mentally and emotionally. Otherwise, you are more likely to become depressed or addicted to alcohol," she says.

MANY scenes of violence in homes go unreported and have prompted women to seek shelter where they can feel safe. Women shelters are temporary homes where they are accommodated for a short period – a maximum of three weeks. Women accommodated at these shelters are mostly referred there by the police's gender-based violence investigation unit. This is done to avoid misuse of the resources that are scarce in most shelters. However, if there is a need for help, the doors are open without following the procedures. Shelters offer other services like counselling, workshops and awareness campaigns as well as producing educational materials. However, there are challenges being faced by these shelters on how to offer their services. Shelters do not charge the women and children for their stay and empowerment activities that they receive. Funding is a major challenge. Most shelters have to fend for themselves. They require government sponsors or donations to run smoothly. Their motto is “work with the little you have or do without”. Even government shelters have to deliver services with the small budget allocations they get. This makes the whole process of delivering services difficult to implement. As the staff witness the emotional events of women who are trying to overcome their difficult situations, they are burdened too. However, women are assured that help is always there to start their new journey. One such place of safety in Namibia is run by Rosa Namises from Women's Solidarity Namibia (WSN). The organisation offers a 24-hour stay with services that range from counselling, lobbying, advocating and awareness campaigns. They have other support groups in the regions for women who suffer domestic violence, mostly pregnant teenage girls. During their stay they talk to young mothers to find out the way forward. The mothers might be rape victims or were abandoned by the father of their child. Mediation between the teenage mothers and the parents or the guardian helps the young mothers to start afresh. The gender-based violence investigation unit assist teenagers with further assessment if they need counselling or visits to their homes. The Legal Assistance Centre assists with legal advice and awareness materials that are written in different languages and if the need arises the mother is referred to Friendly Haven for a longer stay. Churches play a big role as well. There are also men who are being abused and the organisation is slowly opening up to them. According to Namises, women who come out to speak about their ordeal are strong and they should be treated as emergency. “The Namibian Constitution does not allow harmful cultural practices and it is time to rectify what is happening in order to help your child and the future of the new generation of women,” she says. The contributions of the communities to teenage pregnancies and fear of girls to come out increases the incidence of baby dumping.

Namises wants all women to know that it is not their fault that they have been abused.

It is just before noon, and a beautiful day. Since the first time Paulina visited us, she has been doing a lot of talking. She has something to share that has been affecting her for years. She had been abused emotionally and financially by people she calls close family. Paulina was born nearly 60 years ago in the southern part of Namibia. She grew up in the South before migrating to Windhoek to find a job as a domestic worker. She is now looking forward to turning 60 and to becoming a pensioner. She raised all her six children alone. Her husband whom she married 40 years ago has never worked in order to help his wife to take care of his family. She can't recall a single day when her husband has done anything to help the family. "Ever since I got married my husband has never been at work. He is always drinking," said Paulina.

Paulina had the burden of taking care of the children on her own. Their family home consisted of all her husband's sisters and their children as well as her own family. It became a place of misery. She worked hard in her 40 years of marriage. "Everyone wanted to be looked after; no one in the house wanted to work. I had to bring the food on the table for everyone. Every day I struggle to think about the food to put on the table. Emotionally and financially, I was abused by my husband and his relatives," narrated Paulina. The house which Paulina and her husband were living in was left to him by his grandparents. Every family member claimed to own the same house. However, they were not contributing anything in order to reduce the rates that were escalating. Paulina started to feel the pain of doing everything.

The debts grew and the house was at risk of being sold. Paulina had to borrow money in order to save their home. She is still struggling to pay back the debt. Her children have all grown up and most of them do not work. One of her children has a chronic disease. "All he does is drink beer and waits for me to bring food and pay rates. I cannot afford to look after my children as well. I am tired of working and my salary is not enough to take care of everybody," narrated Paulina. Her husband's relatives were fighting with her to get the house. The house's deed of sale, which could help Paulina and her family's claim, were missing. "They refused to move out of the house because they claimed it is theirs as well. I became emotionally and financially drained. I ended up not talking to anyone in the house. I felt like it was entirely my fault for being part of the family" said Paulina.

"From the time I visited REGAIN Trust, I have learnt to speak out. I was very quiet and struggling with emotions, but I can see it is better now. People should learn to work hard in their lifetime. Husbands should work for their families. They become too dependent whilst they are still young, and that can ruin lives. If we can work together, we can build a better future for everyone," Paulina says.

Paulina is not a statistical outlier. Forty-one percent of Namibian households are female-headed, and these households tend to have a significantly lower income than those headed by their male counterparts. According to UNICEF, female-headed households in Namibia only earn 29% of total income. Alcohol abuse frequently plays a role in perpetuating domestic abuse cycles. The World Health Organisation found that there are numerous ways in which high levels of alcohol consumption affect intimate relationships, from aggression and physical abuse to exacerbating financial difficulties and creating dependence.

iStories | Teenage Pregnancy

“My stepmother waited just two months after I gave birth before she kicked us out” Boois narrates her experience with Social Worker. She further shared “I thought pregnancy was tough, until I gave birth and things got even harder for me” “My dad would often help by buying toiletries for my baby and myself. However, my immediate family never assisted me” a sobbing Boois explained. Things got a little bit better for Boois when her uncle and his wife gave her a place to stay. “I could not afford nappies so I would do my uncle and his wife’s laundry to earn money. We agreed on a fixed amount of N\$300 a month, but when month end came, they would have so many excuses and tell me that they were feeding me and my child and end up paying me N\$130” Boois narrates.

These circumstances forced Boois to go look for a job so she could be able to support herself and her new-born baby. Boois managed to secure a casual job at Shoprite in town. “I took my child to Day Care during the day while I was at work, securing this job gave me so much hope. I would earn N\$500 weekly and save this money until month end” Boois shares with a smile. Boois decided to buy washable nappies as this was more affordable and reusable. “My daughter made me so strong; looking at her everyday was such a motivation to keep going” Boois shares.

Boois could not stay with her uncle too long as his wife would demand alcohol money from her and when she would refuse, she would not give her food to eat for weeks at a time. “At least I had an income and could afford to buy myself food to eat at work” Boois had an aunty that lived in the capital city, who paid transport for Boois and her baby to travel and live with her for a few years.

Boois now had a good support system that encouraged her to go back to school to complete her studies. After 2 years Boois returned to Walvis Bay to seek employment. The father of Boois daughter denied the pregnancy and was not willing to provide any type of support to her or the child.

Boois shared “Never give up on yourself, motherhood during your teen years is very challenging but it’s possible. For those who can avoid pregnancy, please do as this is not easy. Please enjoy your Youth” What’s Worse?

Telling him you are late or telling him to wait? Sex has Consequences.

iStory | A Support System is vital through Learner Pregnancy

Over a year ago Tega walked into the Regain Trust office with her mother after discovering she was two months pregnant. Tega was born and raised in the Omusati region and she was just 16 years when she fell pregnant. She felt demoralised about her life and the thought of going back to school was not so appealing to her. This year Tega came by the Regain Trust office, she looked happy and had a glow to her, she shared the news that she had given birth to a baby girl last December. “I was fortunate enough to have a mother, sister, partner, teacher, and friends who supported me emotionally and financially through my pregnancy. I was really scared that my relationship with my mother was going to be different because she was extremely disappointed when she found out that I was with child. However, I learnt that I just had to be patient, pass my examinations and believe that she will support me through it all” narrated Tega. Tega was in the 11th grade when she fell pregnant last year, and she entertained the thought of dropping out of school because of the fear of being teased by her school mates. “I felt ashamed and disappointed in myself and believed it was wiser if I stayed home instead of going back to school” recounts Tega.

“My big sister was the one that encouraged our mother and I to see a social worker and the session was rewarding because it made me develop a mindset that encouraged me to go back to school and look forward to a great future regardless of my pregnancy” expressed Tega. She further stated “I went back to school the day after I went for counselling. My mother accompanied me, to inform my teacher and hostel matron about my state. I was really motivated and passed that term with great points. But, towards the end of the year I had to be booked off, which meant I could not write my final examinations. I was disappointed by that because I wanted to challenge myself academically, but in the end, I was grateful that I had given birth to a healthy baby girl.”

“The Social worker motivated not just me, but my mother too. I encourage every pregnant learner to seek psychosocial services because getting pregnant as a teenager is not an easy thing to go through. One always feels better when they air out all their worries and state the kind of support they need from their relatives and friends. I was also really fortunate to have a big sister who informed me about nutrition and hygiene during my pregnancy, I needed to eat more, and she sent money for me to buy more fruit, vegetables, and dairy products” explained Tega.

Tega’s mother is currently taking care of her baby and she lives with her grandmother. “Right now, I am just helping out at home and trying to stay updated with my school-work through e-learning. My goal is to be a lab-technician one day. I need to work hard so I can provide for my child one day and not solely rely on my mother.

I am still in a relationship with my partner, and I chose to abstain from sexual activities and focus on my education, because I need and want to be an empowered woman one day. I do not want to give up on school and bettering myself. I do not want to repeat the same mistake, instead I chose to learn from it.

I urge everyone to have empathy for pregnant learners, help lift their spirit instead of laughing and mocking them, because learner pregnancy can be such a lonely and depressing journey” said Tega.

WINDHOEK - Maria was born in Windhoek 19 years ago and has been staying with her mother and siblings ever since. When I first met Maria three years ago, she was six months pregnant and seriously affected by the new developments. Today I paid a visit to Maria's homestead. I wanted to find out how she was coping with her baby after giving birth three years ago. The beautiful bouncing baby immediately caught my attention and quickly I asked the mother if I could hold her. She smiled and helped me put the child on my lap.

As I started playing around with the little one, my mind quickly trickled with the past events of Maria. I was eager to know how her road to recovery was. Taking the clock some years back, still young and looking forward to a brighter future, Maria discovered that she was pregnant before she could finish her Grade 12. Unexpectedly and shocked she suddenly lost her self-esteem and her boyfriend immediately disappeared after hearing the news. "My boyfriend left me after I got pregnant. That week when I told him, he switched off the phone. He was nowhere to be found. I never saw him until today. After I gave birth, I thought he would come to see the baby and give support. But now I guess he is afraid to take the responsibilities of being a father," narrated Maria. The embarrassment Maria went through from both her family and friends at school somehow discouraged her to keep the child. "Abortion was the first thing I had decided to do. I started having thoughts of getting rid of the child. I wanted to give up on school as well. It is very hard to be a single teenage mom. I used to have sleepless nights. I struggle to get milk for the baby. I faced some challenges here and there, but I work my way through it with or without my support system (family)," said Maria. The stigma of being pregnant left Maria stressed and unable to speak to her friends. "I have lost most of my friends. The decision to keep the baby was not welcomed by everyone. After my visit to Regain Trust I thought about it and decided to keep my baby. I just felt that it was an innocent child that did not ask to be here, and I should take responsibility for my life. Today I found more joy again. My son is my motivation and even on my weak days he keeps me on my toes. In whatever I do, I try to do it to the best of my ability because I know I have someone looking up to me," said Maria. Maria managed to give birth and kept her child. The only fear her mother had was that Maria would drop out of school since she did not finish Grade 12. "I finished my Grade 12 now and my mother encouraged and motivated me so much, now I am studying to become a paramedic," she said.

In 2015, the department of statistics and population studies at the University of Namibia reported that the risk of adolescent pregnancy is increasing among the new generation compared with the older generation. Primary school girls as well as secondary school girls show a high increase of adolescent pregnancy but a reduction among their counterparts who are well educated and come from less poverty-stricken families. The education Sector Policy for the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy states that if a pregnancy does occur, the focus is on supporting the learner mother to complete her education whilst ensuring that the infant's health, safety and wellness are protected. On the other hand, the learner father is also encouraged to provide a fair share of financial support and to have direct and regular involvement with the infant.

SARAH, a young lady in her early 20s, walks into our office at REGAIN Trust on a chilly Wednesday morning. She grew up in the southern part of Namibia and has one sister and two brothers who are all younger than her. Currently, Sarah studies medicine at Unam. She decided to visit our office to get help from a traumatic event which happened to her recently. It all began two years ago. She was dating a man named Dan and was incredibly in love. According to Sarah, he was the biggest love of her life. Both were extremely happy for around a year, planning to get married soon. However, all of a sudden, her boyfriend started to behave strangely. He would not answer her phone calls, and he would pretend that he is busy at work or suddenly had to go to the north to help out his family. As fate would have it, Sarah noticed that her period had stopped. She feared the worst. A pregnancy test and a visit to the doctor confirmed her biggest concerns: she had fallen pregnant. After digesting the news, she confessed to her boyfriend, who took the information emotionless. “He was absent, he did not say a word; he left me there alone; crying in his room. I was speechless and confused. I did not know how to take his behaviour. I mean, a baby is made by two.”

Sarah did not know which conclusions she should draw from his behaviour. During the next days, Dan had withdrawn even more. He rejected all her phone calls, ignored her messages, and cancelled all plans they both had made prior. She confessed her worries and fears to her best friend, who gave her the horrible news. Apparently, Dan had a child with another woman recently. “I could not believe the news. We were dating for one year now. How could he do this to me?” Confronted with the news, Dan stated briefly that he became a father, and that he will be there for the child. “That’s it. There were no words to me that he was sorry, that he apologised for cheating, maybe even infecting me with HIV. Nothing. No word about our future, nothing about our baby I was carrying. He just asked me to accept the news,” said Sarah. I could not imagine myself to have such a man as the father of my baby. Which values would he teach my children? I did not want to find myself in a situation where my potential future husband assumes that it is totally fine to cheat on me”. “This was the day when I decided I want to do an abortion. My pregnancy was in a very early stage. I went to one of “those” clinics in Katutura. “The place was dirty, very unhygienic, and the staff members were horribly unfriendly. I was so scared about what would happen to me if I would survive. The procedure was extremely painful and I nearly fainted. Just the single thought in my mind that I didn’t want to be a toy of this man kept me breathing.” After three weeks, my period started to come normally again. I was not pregnant anymore. I am a strong believer and regular churchgoer, and before this happened to me, I condemned all my friends who spoke in favour of abortions. I am still against it, although I did it myself. But at the same time, I am also proud of myself that I cut the ties forever with my so-called “boyfriend”. I feel strong and empowered that I have taken this decision. I feel relieved that my future children will have the potential to grow up with another father, who will hopefully be more loving and caring to his future wife and children.” I spoke up, because people should not judge other people’s behaviour, like I used to do before. They are not living in the body of others; they do not feel their pain. The only one who can judge us at the end will be God, and God is merciful.”

CYNTHIA looked tired this afternoon, and she needed someone to talk to. She is still young, a teenager, needing a sounding board to help her make sense of her life. Born and educated in Windhoek, but unable to finish her Grade 12, Cynthia will sadly soon join the scores of young mothers who are struggling to raise their children. She is sitting in our office and taking her time to talk about her ordeal. She needs someone to listen to her, without passing judgement on her. Cynthia fell in love. Sadly, it was short-lived. She did not realise the realities and consequences of having boyfriends and sleeping with them, while so young, and without protection.

Her parents' high hopes were that their daughter would be a high school graduate. However, she has not been able to finish Grade 12. At the age of 17, she thought her love relationship would last forever. But after a short relationship, her significantly older boyfriend disappeared, leaving her to deal with the consequences. "I had a relationship without knowing who that person really was," Cynthia relates. "I did not think what I was doing was wrong. I was happy to have a man by my side." However, she adds, sadly: "He was just there for me when we were enjoying it, and now he has disappeared. I was in love, and unfortunately it did not last." Anger is mounting in Cynthia. She cannot understand how people you love can suddenly turn away from you, no longer talking or offering comfort in difficult times. When Cynthia discovered that she was pregnant, she withdrew from the company of her friends and family. She felt self-conscious and isolated. "I am now shy to move around," she says. "Everyone looks at me and sees that I am pregnant. I am growing bigger every day. I do not have friends anymore. My mother is also shocked and angry over everything that happened. My boyfriend is now dating other girls and does not see me anymore." Although Namibia has a policy that girls who fall pregnant in school can return to continue with their education after delivery, Cynthia just decided to drop out. She finds it hard to be around friends who are still attending school.

Despite the progressive policy, pregnancy remains a common factor causing girls to drop out of school. Today, Cynthia is angry with herself for not using protection. When she looks in retrospect, she wishes she can undo the mistake she made. According to the Global Student Health Survey (GSHS) 2013, 46,2% of boys and 36,7% of girls have sexual intercourse between the ages of 13 and 17. Of the pupils who engaged in sexual intercourse, 48,6% of boys and 34,1% of girls had sexual intercourse for the first time before age 14. "I am talking so that I can help other girls to fight peer pressure, poverty and other ills that can lead to teenage pregnancy," Cynthia says. "Girls should work hard in school and concentrate on their studies. Yes, you can go back to school after giving birth, but it is not easy because of stigmatisation. Young people should seek help so that they can finish school without being mothers." Despite regrets, Cynthia is trying to mend her family relationships and speak openly about her situation. "After coming to REGAIN, I have learnt to talk to my mother again. I will continue asking for her forgiveness. Slowly, I am gaining confidence to talk about my mistakes," she noted.

iStory | The fear and loneliness of teen pregnancy

A BEAUTIFUL young teenager entered our office with a smile and sat on a chair looking across the room. As of yesterday, she was calling herself a teenager, but now she will be a mother for the first time and trying to understand how her life has changed overnight. This is Anna* (not her real name), who was born and raised by a single parent in Windhoek. A Grade 12 pupil at a school in the capital, Anna comes from a family of five.

Anna tried to get everything right in her life, but now it seems it is too late. After she fell pregnant, her boyfriend changed. He stopped the regular visits and communication. This affected Anna emotionally. She thought the love they had at the beginning would last forever.

Now, she is alone, wondering how she will take care of the baby. “I feel stressed. I developed a low self-esteem. Sometimes, I feel sad. I cry a lot. I feel like I am being neglected by someone who used to say he is in love with me. I am glad that I have supportive friends and a supportive mother,” Anna said.

“Before I fell pregnant, everything was going smoothly, but now he barely talks to me. He does not phone, but he told me if there is anything, I need I should call him” she said sadly. The relationship between Anna and the other siblings has been affected too. Before she became pregnant, she used to be very sociable, but now she has become reserved.

“After going through different emotions, I decided to seek help. I was afraid of how I could continue with the way I am now. After counselling sessions, I know I can make proper decisions about my future and for my baby. My mother still holds high hopes for my future, regardless of what happened,” she said. After composing herself, she explained: “I am telling other teenage girls that they should concentrate on their schoolwork, even when they fall pregnant. There is still a future after being a mother at a young age. “Teenagers should understand their feelings in order to work on them. Reach out for help from those you are close to. You should not be afraid of sharing your problems.”

Anna is still going to school and would like to finish her studies and to look after her child. She is getting all the support from her friends and her mother. When she is at school, her friends make the environment very welcoming. “I have a good relationship with my mother and my friends,” she said. Anna went through intense therapy with the help of REGAIN Trust and is now able to share her feelings with those whom she is close to.

STEPHANIE is a 19-year-old mother of two, who was born and educated in Windhoek. She grew up under the care of her mother and grandmother. Her children – two and one-year old – are currently being kept at an orphanage. Since failing Grade 10, she never found a job to sustain herself and the children. Stephanie fell pregnant while she was in Grade 10. Her family blamed her for the predicament. Even at school, it was not easy for her to be with friends and classmates. As time went by, other schoolchildren noticed the changes happening to Stephanie. “They started bullying me, – psycho bullying me by writing on walls. I lost friends as they turned away from me,” she said with tears welling up in her eyes.

Clinical psychologist Ute Sinkala explained that children who suffer from depression often feel worthless and hopeless. So did Stephanie. “I used to cry a lot because of insecurity and deep loneliness.” With no help from her family and everyone else running away from her, she ended up in an abusive relationship with the father of her children. She started feeling helpless since she wanted to be loved. “At the beginning, the father of my children was very close to me, but later on he changed his behaviour. He started blaming me for taking the children to the orphanage. He did not give any support, and even the family did not give any help to take care of the children,” she stated. Further emotional stress for Stephanie was to see her children living in an orphanage. “I came to a point where I did not want to see my children because it was too emotional to see and leave them again. I have lived in orphanages myself, so I know how rough life is there. But I know I do not have any way to keep my children until I have finished school and can find a stable job,” she explained. One positive thing kept her going. She got help from her teachers, who encouraged her to continue with her studies. “The teachers at school were very supportive. They helped me with books, and clothing for my child. “It was really difficult for me since most of my schoolmates mocked me.”

“Schools should do more in terms of counselling. I think it really helps when you talk to someone and you can express your feelings too. I also suggest that follow-up counselling is necessary to support young learners appropriately because in only one counselling session, you cannot grasp fully what that person is going through,” said Stephanie.

“After all that happened, I am now determined to move forward”, she said. She also started a computer course to upgrade her knowledge and is always volunteering for charity organisations. Like any other teenager, she wants to finish her studies and become somebody in life. “My long-term goals are to study youth development and education, to get my children back and to stay with them. We should be strong and positive as we were advised by the REGAIN psychologists,” Stephanie noted. She regrets what happened in her life and encourages girls to continue their education and also advised women not to depend on others to be happy and never to feel sorry for yourself. Stephanie also dreams of becoming a counsellor one day. “I am very passionate about helping people who are struggling with life. REGAIN Trust has helped me a lot. After the psychological therapy, I am now able to express my feelings and work hard to get my children back. I am encouraging people to seek help as well.”

“At 17 I became a mother; I recall writing my grade 10 final year exams during that time” Mariam narrates her story with a shy smile. My baby is the most rewarding thing about my story, he is growing so fast, naughty and smiles with everyone, Mariam shares proudly. She shares her experience with teenage pregnancy with Erongo Social Worker, while she recalls the experience as scary and lonely.

Mariam shares how disappointed she was in herself when she learned about her pregnancy and how an illegal abortion was the first thing that came to mind.

“My parents were so disappointed in me because I was so young, Mariam Narrates.” “My dad was very abusive; I remember the times he would beat us up and let my mom and I sleep outside” Mariam states. “He chased me out of the house and told me to never come back. He emphasized how stupid I was and that I do not exist to him anymore.

This broke my heart and made me feel so alone” Mariam sighs deeply. Mariam shares how grateful she is to have a mom that supported her and made her strong throughout her pregnancy.

“The Father of my child has been a great support system for me as well. And not all learner parents can say the same, I am grateful”. Mariam shares how the father of her child made sure she lacked nothing, milk, diapers, and clothes were always on time, she further shares how he would play his part as a parent by helping with diaper changes and felt so proud to be a father.

Mariam encourages learner parents to be strong and be there for their babies, “There is always someone who cares, even if the timing is not the best, your baby is a blessing regardless” Mariam Narrates.

Mariam stresses the importance of being part of support groups at school for both girls and boys, “Abstain from sex or make sure you receive accurate Sexual Reproductive Health Education by being part of the support groups offered at the Secondary Schools” Mariam shares.

Three years later, Mariam is using her story to help learner parents overcome the fears and struggles of being a young first-time mom. Teenage pregnancy is never easy, especially when you have no support from your partner or family.

Mariam encourages youth not to be shy and talk about their problems as no one will know or understand the problems you are facing if you do not talk about it.

Amanda was one of the young teen mothers the Regain Trust team met when conducting sessions on Sexual Reproductive Health. Full of life and eager to help other young mothers, she shared her story of how difficult it is to be a mother at a tender age. Born in the capital city with lots of opportunities, Amanda was able to attend her primary and part of her secondary school in Windhoek. Unlike other children whose parents struggle to make ends meet, Amanda was living a 'normal' life before she got pregnant. Her parents were working hard to send her and the other siblings to school.

Since schools reopened, Amanda refused to step foot where she used to study. This is the place she used to play with her friends and spend most of her time. A young girl who was enjoying her life. She could not understand why she should go back to school after becoming a mother. She was now relating her world with the struggles of being a single mother. After falling pregnant she could hardly leave the house but only when she needed to be at the maternal clinic.

Amanda was a cheerful young girl who was excelling well in her schoolwork. She would not miss any classes, nor would she bunk the lessons. She was in her twelfth grade looking forward to attend university the following year. "By then, I did not know that I was pregnant. I broke up with my boyfriend. When I noticed that I am pregnant. I was a month and 2 weeks pregnant. I tried all my best to text and call the guy, but he was ignoring me. I started stressing myself and did not eat. One day I stood up and went to his house, to find him with another girl in bed. I ran out of his room heartbroken. At that moment I felt lost, I wanted to kill myself and end my life and I did not want the unborn baby" narrated Amanda.

Amanda could not understand that someone who was so much in love can have other girlfriends. After a few months struggling to come to terms with her boyfriend's behaviour, she then received a message. "I received a text from him asking me what I wanted. I told him that I was pregnant, he called, and we talked for a very long time. The next day he came with his parents to my house to talk to my parents about my pregnancy. By then I was five months pregnant. After our parents talked, communication ended between us. Amanda received another text message. "I got a text from him asking who knows if he is the real father. I was so angry, and I started crying my heart out until I thought for myself that I can be strong on my own. I started selling ice-cream, chips, cooldrink, and sweets so I can get something out for me and my baby. When I was 8 months pregnant, he came and begged me to forgive him, and I cried so badly that I told him to leave me and my unborn baby. Ever since then we never had anything to do with each other. I gave birth to a healthy baby boy and I am trying to do everything I can to support him.

My message to teenage mothers is to never give up. You can be someone your child can look up to one day. Be strong and have courage.

Popyeni is a 16-year-old girl, short, dark in complexion and has striking dimples when she smiles. She was born in the Omusati region. She grew up with her mother and grandmother, while her father has been absent. She was feeling very bad when she initially walked into the Regain Trust office because she has just become a mom and felt frustrated by the insults from her school mates.

“In 2008, I was proposed by a boy through a letter. I read the letter in private, and I replied in a positive way. I suggested the place we met. I fall in love for the first time. The boy told me that he would give me everything I want because I was the only girl in his life, and I was so happy to hear that because I have never met a person telling me such nice words in my life” narrated Popyeni. She continued to say “He used to give me presents. I can remember the first time he gave me 50 Namibian dollars. I was very happy because it was my first time to receive such an amount of money. The second time around he gave me a smart phone, and I wrote him a letter to express my feelings. In the letter I stated that I loved him so much and he was the only one I wanted in my life and I wanted to be with him for the rest of my life and I did not want him to disappoint me.” Popyeni stated “A few months later, we went to a party and after some time we ended up in his room. He was drunk and we had unprotected sex. I told him to use a condom, but he refused. That made me feel very angry, but I decided to let him do what he wanted because I did not want him to leave me. After a few weeks, I missed my period. I was confused so I decided to take a pregnancy test to confirm whether I was pregnant. The result came out positive. I was scared and I asked myself a lot of questions. I was thinking of how I was going to tell my parents. Eventually my uncle noticed that I was pregnant, and I told him the truth”.

“I knew it was a wrong thing to fall pregnant while I am in school and I had been thinking about what my school mates and people in the community would say. I was in Grade 10 and dropped out of school. My parents were not happy about it at all. I stayed home waiting to give birth and my parents, friends and my boyfriend supported me until I gave birth. We have been in a good relationship but now we are no longer together” recounts Popyeni. “I went back to school in 2020, and I do not want to be in relationship anymore. I want to study and pass my grade 10 this year. I want to focus on my education and work hard. I made a mistake, and I must correct my mistake by focusing on my education and achieve my goals. I want to become a teacher in the future, so I can help my child and parents who were supporting me during my difficult circumstances” Popyeni told the Social Worker.

Teenage pregnancy remains a crisis in Namibia, most learner pregnancies are results of statutory rape, which is having sexual intercourse with an individual below the legal age of consent. Teenage pregnancy mostly impacts female learners than male learners because male learners are rare to be identified. Pregnant learners are required to be in school until three weeks prior to giving birth if there are no pregnancy implications and can return to school when she is ready. It is important to keep teen mothers in school because if they complete their higher education it leads to a greater chance of finding employment and proper housing. It also decreases the chance of being in poverty and leads to reduction of fertility, infant and mortality rates.

iStory | Unexpected changes of a teen mother

Maria observed her body changing. Very confused and puzzled, she went to the clinic for a pregnancy test, which yielded positive results, despite her and her boyfriend using protection. “To my surprise I was informed that I could be 5 months pregnant. I panicked when I got the news and told my friends. I feared how to break the news to my mother who was a single mother of 4 and a domestic worker. I was still in school, in grade 11 and my world came to a standstill because I realized how disappointed my mother would be.” narrated Maria.

Maria and her friends were weighing option to get rid of the pregnancy, before her tummy would be big enough for her mother to figure out what is happening. One of Maria’s friends pointed to someone who does backdoor abortions and confirmed the price. In the meantime, Maria informed her boyfriend that she was pregnant and that she wanted to get rid of the pregnancy and needed him to pay for the abortion. The boyfriend immediately shot down the idea of Maria having an abortion and refused to give her the money. “We broke up shortly afterwards. My friends and I decided to make another plan to pay for the abortion as time was running out.

I remember going to school, with my tummy showing and how some kids at school would look at me in a funny manner and gossip about my growing tummy. It was the most uncomfortable experience, I would not say I was embarrassed of being pregnant, I just did not like the attention that I was attracting, because I was a very reserved & shy girl” narrated Maria. Until one day, after assembly, the Head of Department instructed all the grade 10 to 12 girls to stay behind. At that time there were quite a significant number of girls who were pregnant at school. “When it was my turn to be searched, I refused to be touched. The female teachers then started body searching, to see who was pregnant. The principal threatened to call my mother and inform her that I was pregnant. That is the day I dropped out of school because I feared my mother finding out. The embarrassment & disappointment started kicking in” narrated Maria.

Soon thereafter it was school holidays and Maria’s mother left her alone at home and she travelled out of town for a few days. Maria then used that opportunity to do the backdoor abortion with the person her friend referred her to. By then she was 6 months pregnant. The abortion attempt failed, and she ended up going into labour. Maria was rushed to the hospital and gave birth to a premature baby girl who weighed 800g. “I was not allowed to hold the baby because the doctor feared that the baby would not make it, since she was not fully developed yet. At this point I'm in complete shock, of having given birth and I was so confused and did not know what to do” narrated Maria. The next day Maria was discharged from the hospital and informed that the baby was premature and had to stay in the incubator until her full term of 9 months. “I was advised to do daily visits for the 3 months to follow while my baby was in the hospital. But after I was discharged, I left the hospital and decided not to go back” narrated Maria.

Maria's mother suspected that something was off about her when she returned from her trip, but she denied the pregnancy rumours. "I kept my baby a secret for 3 months, nobody knew, except my friend. At the hospital I did not leave my correct details, so the hospital could not reach me. Those 3 months while my baby was in hospital, I tried to live a normal life, but deep down I was tormented by what I did" narrated Maria.

Maria's secret was safe, until she and her friend had an argument about why she was keeping her baby a secret. Her friend decided to tell her mother who then confronted her daughter. Maria told her mother the truth upon which they went to the hospital to get the baby. By the time they reached the hospital, an adoption process was underway, and the baby was promised to a family who wanted to take care of her. The hospital tried to reach Maria but to no avail, for nearly 4 months. "When we entered the baby ward and were taken to the room where my baby was sleeping, I immediately recognized my baby without anyone pointing her out to me. That was my first-time laying eyes on her. She had the cutest chubby cheeks and I instantly fell in love with her. On our way home from hospital reality hit me that I actually became a whole mother and that was the moment my life took a totally different and unexpected change and I experienced radical transformation. Mentally, emotionally, and psychologically I had a shift, and my life has never been the same" narrated Maria.

WALVIS BAY - Very often the burden of teenage pregnancy rests on the girl/child with little or no involvement from the person who impregnated her.

Too often teenage mothers who are brave enough are forced to leave school to look after their babies especially if no support system is available at home.

For some this does not end well as they are forced by circumstance to either risk their lives by undergoing backstreet abortions, baby dumping or even infanticide once the baby is born. Three brave teenage mothers shared their journey about becoming mothers while at school and at the same time advised others not to make the same mistake but to focus on their education.

Stephanie Otto (18), mother of a one-year-old baby says she not only became suicidal but considered abortion when she found out about her pregnancy.

“My son’s father denied him, causing me to go in depression and even considered an abortion. I felt confused and alone,” she said. Otto says being a single teenage mom with no employment nor education is hard and that is why she returned to school afterwards. She added her baby’s father is still not involved despite her reaching out to him on several occasions. “Some boys are not responsible enough to step up and be a father. That is why we as girls should avoid falling pregnant while at school and just focus on getting our education because babies are not for the fainthearted,” she said. Otto is currently in Grade 10.

Esperanza Thomas fell pregnant at the age of 16 while in Grade 10. Her baby is almost two months old now. She says she was shocked when she found out about her pregnancy. “My parents were very disappointed in me as a result I ran away from home and live with my aunt in Swakopmund,” she says. According to her, her mom found out about her pregnancy before she could tell them. She says being pregnant was one of the hardest things she had to go through at her tender age. “My friends talked bad about me at school and eventually abandoned me. I became depressed and a disappointment for my parents who had high hopes for me,” she said.

Thomas says being pregnant at a tender age is not something she would have considered, but it happened to her. “I would not advise anyone to fall pregnant while at school as a baby is not reversible,” she said. Thomas has returned to school thanks to her parents who eventually accepted her pregnancy and is assisting her to raise her baby.

Ironically, statistics provided by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture indicates that 137 girls fell pregnant during 2017 in Erongo. Also, about 9 girls were already pregnant during the first trimester of 2018. Results of the second trimester were not available.



Regain Trust empowers survivors of Gender Based Violence through psychological and therapeutic sessions which takes the form of one on one and/or group counselling sessions.

The intervention process helps and empowers survivors to open up and speak out about their experiences and violent encounters.

Awareness campaigns are offered through public dialogues, media campaigns and capacity building.

The organization advocates for a holistic approach to address GBV.

About Gender based Violence and Learner Pregnancy in Namibia.

Gender based Violence (GBV) has long been identified as a key factor that is obstructing Namibia's progress towards achieving gender equality. Both the State and Civil Society Organisations (CSO's) recognise the need for holistic, coordinated, and multi-faceted approaches which would lead to the successful implementation of effective and efficient laws, policies, plans and programs to prevent, mitigate and address GBV.

Namibia experiences alarmingly high rates of GBV. According to the latest National Demographic Health Survey (NDHS) 32% of all women aged 15-49 surveyed had experienced physical violence since the age of 15 and according to the Ministry of Safety and Security (MSS) GBV Investigation Unit (GBVIU) between 2013-2015, Namibia had experienced over 2000 cases of Domestic Violence, over 3000 cases of rape and 157 murders.

Learner Pregnancy much like GBV can be regarded as a contributing factor which hinders efforts to empower women and girls to achieve gender equality. According to the Ministry of Education (MoE) Sector Policy for the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy, in 2007, 1465 children had dropped out of school because of pregnancy. The Education Management Information System shows that learner pregnancies had increased from 1843 pregnancies in 2015 to 2233 in 2016. Furthermore, the NDHS shows that younger women (15-24) are more likely than older women to report having experienced violence during pregnancy.

Namibian Statistics indicate **3 625** Teenage Pregnancies in **2020**. Regional Teenage Pregnancy Statistics identify 562 in Omusati, 522 in Kavango West, 520 in Kavango East, 514 in Zambezi, 443 in Ohangwena, 277 in Oshikoto, 144 in Otjozondjupa, 139 in Khomas, 116 in Kunene, 113 in Oshana, 99 in Erongo, 89 in Hardap, 75 in Omaheke and 16 in Karas.

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This is a project funded by the European Union. This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Regain Trust and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.