

Gains and challenges of the Domestic Violence Act as experienced by the Saartjie Baartman Centre

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The Saartjie Baartman Centre (SBC) was established in 1999 as the first multi-agency ('one-stop') centre for abused women and children in the country. The centre is situated in Manenberg on the Cape Flats in Cape Town, an area with extremely high rates of crime, gangsterism, child abuse, unemployment, substance abuse and domestic violence. Presently, there are twelve on-site organisations that provide services for effective management, treatment, intervention and prevention of violence against women and children.

Services offered at the Centre include short to medium-term shelter, childcare centre, counselling and legal services, job-skills development, specialised services for children and youth, and community outreach work. The one-stop centre model provides an opportunity for government departments, non-governmental organisations and the business sector to work in partnership as an integrated, holistic approach.

The Saartjie Baartman Centre's Legal Project was established in 2004. The project, which is run by two paralegal workers, offers legal advice and assistance to women needing protection orders, maintenance orders and divorce proceedings. The legal project assists approximately 1056 women per year.

Although there are some gains that were made with the introduction of the Domestic Violence Act (DVA), SBC staff encounters many challenges while trying to assist the women. Some of these challenges include: lack of empathy and non-compliance with implementing the DVA; loss of dockets; inadequate training on the DVA by police officials, clerks and magistrates of the court as well as other role players.

This presentation therefore aims to expand on our experiences pertaining to shortcomings of DVA and its implementation. In addition, it maps the way forward with recommendations in terms of establishing a specialized unit within SAPS made up of professionals dealing specifically with cases of domestic violence. The presenters will also inform the audience of research that will be conducted in the Western Cape. The focus of the research would be on establishing why current training courses on domestic violence and the DVA do not ensure compliance with the Act. The University of the Western Cape's Community Law Centre in partnership with the Saartjie Baartman Centre's Legal Project will undertake the research as a joint initiative.