

Reply to Matjila

IN your first issue for 1989, Mr Matjila is reported as having indignantly repudiated, on behalf of the nation, an ECOSOC Commission finding that the situation of Namibian women needs urgent attention. More specifically, he declares himself satisfied with the manner in which violence against women is handled by law enforcement agencies and the courts.

The Minister is entitled to his personal opinion on what measures are 'strict' and what punishments 'appropriate'. But the reality is not so reassuring. Attentive readers of the English language weeklies - especially reports of criminal and divorce proceedings - will have noticed that violence against women is escalating at an alarming rate, and that there has been no noticeable stiffening of the penalties for rape in order to arrest the trend.

The reality is this: rape is a capital offence, and all reported incidents must therefore be tried by the Supreme Court. In 1986 160 cases were reported, of which 94 were brought to trial. In 1987 the figures were 201 reported and 114 tried, in 1988 266 and 67 respectively. It must be borne in mind that the shadow figures for sexual assault are always higher than the numbers of cases reported to the police. In Namibia it has also been a general rule that only cases of rape which are aggravated by breaking and entering, theft, grievous bodily harm or murder are prosecuted at all.

Of the 637 cases of rape reported in the past three years, 204 resulted in convictions. The average sentence does not exceed three years. Suspended sentences, or

parts of sentences can be expected. There has been one death sentence. There is no change over the three years in the general leniency towards offenders against women. An apt comment on the situation was offered by Justice Hendler in June last year when he sentenced a young man to 9 years for murder and 7 for raping the battered body, observing that there appeared to be "an open season on women"

Complacency won't reverse the trend. We need a new awareness and mutual respect. Whereas the community of world cultures has committed itself to earnestly re-examine power relationships, economic relationships and relationships of force (ie oppression) between the sexes, and aims to discover new laws of living which will ensure equal dignity and self-esteem for all human beings without exception, Namibia appears to be sinking ever more deeply into callousness. Let Mr Matjila and all who like him trivialise the brutality which stains our culture, consider if they please the admonition of Jeremiah: "They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, peace, peace; where there is no peace", (6:14, King James version) and welcome instead of denouncing all initiatives by more enlightened agencies which aim to advance Namibian women to equal human dignity.

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