

Living in terror and constant abuse, domestic violence victims are on their own

Daughter watches as mom dies at the hands of abuser

Domestic abuse remains unheard as victims are kept silent by an uncaring justice system, writes Shain Germaner

LUCILLE Schaper still lives in the room where she watched her mother burn after being set alight. A few marks created by the flames can still be seen on the wall, but the new paint job and rearrangement of the room's few sticks of furniture has masked most of the damage. Schaper and her sister, Cecilia, had been living in the Newlands home for almost a decade with Cecilia's husband, Roeland Bosman, their five children and invalid mother, Brenda Hedges. But it was never a happy time. Schaper recalls the time when Bosman beat Cecilia with a metal pipe, the time he put a gun in her face, and the numerous times he threatened "to burn the house down with everyone in it". Schaper's court statement against Bosman speaks volumes of the kind of abuse she and her sister endured. She alleged that beyond simple fist strikes, she had been attacked with a shovel, a broomstick and a butcher's knife. The years of emotional and physical abuse culminated in the sisters approaching advocate Cathy Welsh, at a divorce workshop she was running for legal NGO, ProBono. Schaper and her mother had already applied for protection orders against Bosman, who had emotionally and physically abused them more times than she could remember. As Bosman became increasingly violent, Cecilia was forced to pursue her own protection order – and divorce proceedings – against him. Schaper remembers the build-up to her mother's death, an incident that left her with a



DAMAGED: Lucille Schaper shows the two knife holes on the door she used to block an oncoming attack by her brother-in-law, Roeland Bosman, inset.

bloody hand just a few weeks prior. Schaper had arrived home to her despondent sister who refused to talk. Later that night, Bosman had returned to the house, and Schaper had a gut feeling something bad was going to happen. Bosman was convinced that because of her sister's despondency, Schaper had contacted the police to have him arrested. With an accusatory tone, Bosman shouted at Schaper about why she had called the police. Her young niece, Nicole, saw her father from inside the house, noticed a knife in his hands and screamed: "He's going to stab you!" Schaper immediately ran from the rapidly approaching man, and tried slamming the door of her cottage to prevent him from coming in. Using the door as a shield, she managed to force it shut, but not before the butcher's knife stabbed through the thin door, inches away from her hand – twice. She screamed for her niece to call the police, which seemed to scare off her attacker, who ran from the property and down the street. The two knife holes are still visible on the door.

Police officers eventually arrived but, according to Schaper, didn't leave their car to look at the evidence. She told the officers that Bosman was hiding somewhere down the street, as usual, but she was told she had to open a case at the nearby station. When she went to Sophiatown police station to report the attack and open a case of attempted murder, she was laughed off by investigators. It was only after repeated visits to the station that police eventually opened a new case, not of attempted murder but of malicious damage to property, despite being informed of the protection orders and Bosman's history of abuse. On November 8, just three days before the event that would change their lives for ever, Cecilia served the divorce papers on her estranged husband. At first, Bosman tried to reconcile, but when she rejected these attempts, the threats came stronger and faster than ever before. Bosman would break into the home at all hours of the night, sometimes standing over Cecilia's bed, sometimes to see his children.

The sisters approached Sophiatown police station over and over again during the serving of the divorce papers and on the day of their mother's death – citing their protection orders against Bosman – but were told by a senior officer they could "not open a case". As the family's pro-bono lawyer, Welsh tried on November 8 to have Bosman arrested immediately, following a series of vicious threats. Welsh told police investigators that when she contacted Bosman, he said he was going to "burn and kill them all". But Schaper's affidavit says it all: "The accused was not arrested." On Sunday, November 10, after yet another attempt at the station, the sisters returned home. Schaper told her sister to be careful; to lock the doors in case Bosman tried to break in. "I don't want to be a prisoner in my own house!" she shouted back in frustration. Schaper, no longer willing to argue, went back to her room. But at about midday, screams erupted from inside the house. "No, no, help me!" she heard her mother shouting in

Afrikaans. Schaper ran to the window of her mother's room, the fumes of petrol wafting outside. Inside, she saw Bosman, trying to light a match while her mother's wails became louder and louder. Next to the arsonist was Cecilia's oldest son, Christopher, just 11 at the time, looking on. Schaper screamed for the man to stop, but he continued his work. She watched as her mother struggled in vain to move, as severe rheumatoid arthritis had left her bedridden. The 74-year-old tried to lift her body from the mattress, but there was just no time. Bosman had stopped trying to light a single match, and had already taken out three more to create a trio of sparks. Seconds later, Hedges was engulfed in flames, but no longer screaming. She had leaned forward, almost vibrating as she tried to rock back and forth. Whether she had given up and accepted her fate, or had already entered a state of shock, is a mystery that still haunts Schaper. Bosman ran from the room, and Schaper ran after him. She

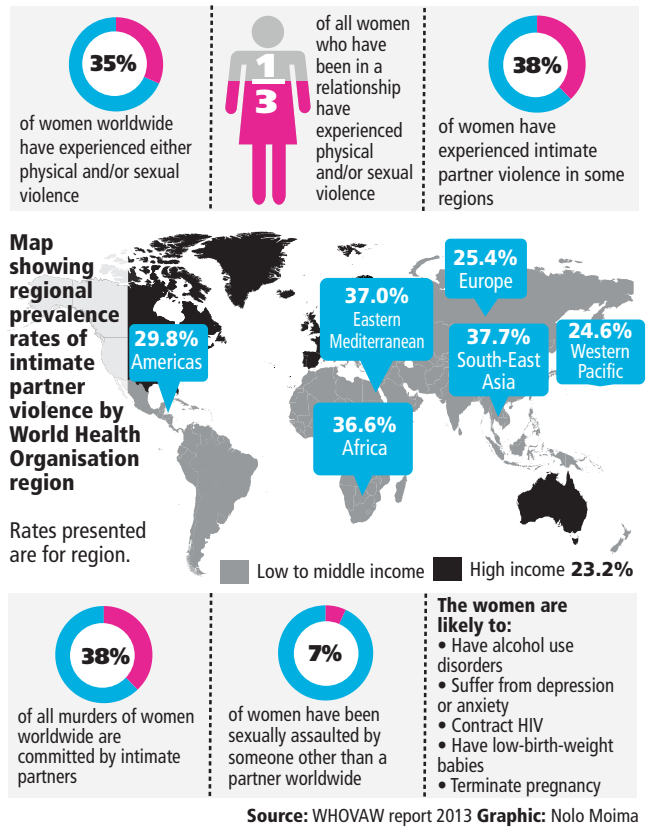
No real protection

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FOR BATTERED, abused women across the country, a protection order is barely worth the paper it's printed on. Brenda Hedges's tragic death is but one of many caused by the ineffective nature of these orders, according to political analyst and senior researcher at Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, Lisa Vetten. "A protection order is only worthwhile if you have a police service to enforce it," said Vetten. But the issue of non-compliance around the Domestic Violence Act is not a new one, according to the researcher. She said it's been part of parliamentary questioning since the early 2000s. In her extensive research into the topic, Vetten noted how the problem often came down to a police station level. She said the general attitude among officers dealing with abuse complaints is to ask the victim: "Are you sure you really want to lay a complaint (against your spouse or partner)? Go away, think about it and come back." Vetten alleges that most officers don't want to deal with the admin of registering such a complaint or following protection orders, and believe that women take advantage of the legislation. But what's propagating

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these attitudes is the lack of punishment for officers and station commanders, because the mechanisms to complain about police non-compliance are so limited. She says the Civilian Secretariat for Police simply does not have the teeth to punish officials. "Make it about non-performance," said Vetten, who believes that if a station does not comply, raises and bonuses should be withheld. Posters detailing women's rights hung visibly in police stations could help victims know they have the right to open up a case.

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