



COMBATING VIOLENCE

Taking on violence against women in Africa

International norms and local activism start to alter laws, attitudes

 By Mary Kimani

Kenya's current law against wife-beating was prompted some years ago by a particularly dramatic incident of a common problem—one that is not unusual across Africa. In December 1998 a Kenyan police officer, Felix Nthiwa Munayo, got home late and demanded


meat for his dinner. There was none in the house. Enraged, he beat his wife, Betty Kavata. Paralyzed and brain-damaged, Ms. Kavata died five months later, on her 28th birthday.

But unlike many such cases, Ms. Kavata's death did not pass in silence. The Kenyan media covered the story extensively. Images of the fatally injured woman and news of her death generated nationwide debate on domestic violence. There followed five years of protests, demonstrations and lobbying by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as by outraged men and parliamentarians. Finally, the government passed a family protection bill criminalizing wife-beating and other forms of domestic violence.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), domestic violence is a global problem affecting millions of women. In a 2005 study on women's health and domestic violence, the WHO found that 56 per cent of women in Tanzania and 71 per cent of women in Ethiopia's rural areas reported beatings or other forms of violence by husbands or other intimate partners.

Violence against women goes beyond beatings. It includes forced marriage, dowry-related violence, marital rape, sexual harassment, intimidation at work and in educational institutions,

Slogan on a wall in Kibera, a slum in Nairobi: Kenya has a law against domestic violence, but implementation is difficult.

 Reuters / Zohra Bensemra

