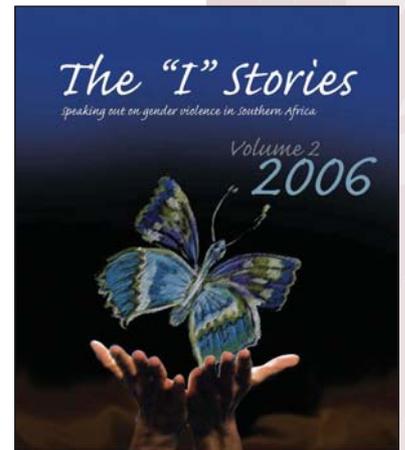


I stories

There is no better person to tell you about an experience than the one who has actually lived through it. When survivors of gender violence shared their stories during the 2006 Sixteen Days of Activism of no violence against women campaign, one could not help but walk the journey with them to that dark spot in their lives and get a better understanding of the broader issues at stake.

You get to understand whether or not the justice system is indeed delivering on its mandate and whether response and support mechanisms for survivors are as effective and efficient as we would like them to be among other issues.

Building on past successes, GL put out a call for first hand accounts of surviving gender violence in South Africa during the 2006 16 Days campaign. Working in partnership with the Gender and Media Network of Southern Africa (GEMSA) and People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA), two workshops dubbed “Tell us your story workshops” were held with a group of 10 women and one counselor who had in some way been affected by gender violence.



The process involved training participants to write their stories, editing and getting consent to publish them, with the assistance of the counselor. A third session was devoted to radio recording of each of these experiences while a fourth to giving feedback to the 11 participants on how their stories had been used by the media and GL website, as well as evaluate the whole process.

Similar but not identical processes took place in four other countries: Lesotho, Mauritius, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Twenty stories comprising an assortment of experiences and life stories were compiled and published as the second series of the ‘I’ stories, *Speaking out on gender violence in Southern Africa, Volume Two 2006*. In addition they were disseminated both in written and audio formats to mainstream media in South Africa and Southern Africa and through the GL website as part of GL’s Opinion and Commentary Service 16 days special series.

The ‘I’ stories publication was launched during a *Take Back the Night* march held in Johannesburg. Linked to this the survivors spoke out at six other events organised by GL, GEMSA and other partners: 16 Days National Launch in Polokwane, media debate, Take Back the Night, SALGA 365 Day conference, Taking Stock, video conference, gender violence in schools cyber dialogue. The publication was distributed at these events.

Photo: Colleen Lowe-Morna



Is this me?

All involved took a moment to reflect on the process and its outcomes. The survivors opened up and gave testimonies of how writing their own stories had helped them deal with issues they had not dealt with internally. Most did not even know they could put pen to paper and actually have the stories published in mainstream media.

Participants included a family representing three generations. Rose Thamae thanked GL for inviting her daughter who for the first time opened up and showed interest in activism against gender violence. The process has also opened doors for her 13 year old grandchild Kgomotso who has since become an activist following the discovery of her grandmother, Rose’s HIV positive status.

Marco said the project made her realise that “she is not alone” and that there are others who have experienced gender based violence and are also struggling to deal with the issues. Meanwhile Nono admits that while she still harbours a level of anger for what happened to her after writing her experience, including things she had not told anyone she “feels better”.

Lindie was pleased that the forum enabled her to share her experiences of hate crime leveled against her because she is lesbian. She said “Our stories, we only tell them amongst fellow lesbians but this was an opportunity to share with heterosexual women who accepted us for who we are”.

“Oh! Is that me? I didn’t know that one day I could actually come out of a newspaper... Ahh!” exclaimed Prudia on seeing her story and large photo in the Sunday Independent. She felt a sense of overcoming.

The counselors also felt uplifted by the whole project. Johanna said “this is one avenue that has helped me understand our clients better. They opened up more and mentioned issues they had not even told us before”.