

Twenty years of the Sixteen Days of Activism campaign

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This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the Sixteen Days of Activism Against Gender Violence Campaign. In South Africa, the campaign has gained momentum over the last decade; driven initially by NGOs, with increasing ownership by government. This is itself an indicator of the extent to which gender violence is now on the political agenda. The challenge, however, remains advancing from information, to knowledge, to wisdom, to the all-important behavior change necessary to curb this shocking abuse of human

rights.

Though often branded as a UN campaign, the sixteen days are actually just the days between two UN dates - International Day of No Violence Against Women on 25 November, and Human Rights Day on 10 December (Human Rights Day). There are several other key dates for women's rights in the intervening days. These are: 1 December: World Aids Day; 3 December: International Day for the Disabled; 6 December: Anniversary of the Montreal Massacre, when a man gunned down 14 women engineering students for allegedly being feminist.

Each year since the advent of democracy in 1994 the government, spurred on by NGO efforts, has increasingly taken ownership of the campaign. As an organisation rooted in gender and communications, GL has been centrally involved in promoting the campaign in Southern Africa because a sixteen-day campaign provides the ideal platform for running a sustained campaign on a complex issue.

In 2004, the government enthusiastically took up the idea of the peace pledge mooted by Gender Links, with organisations like the South African Revenue Service (SARS) distributing this far and wide. In subsequent years, the Office of the President charged the Deputy Minister of Justice (later Correctional services) and after she left government the Deputy Minister of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG) to become the political patron of the campaign. With the creation of a women's ministry, responsibility for coordination has shifted to this body.

Symbols and messages



The government symbol for the campaign is the beating of drums with the strap line "Act Against Abuse." In 2007, government added to this the "don't look away" concept illustrated in the graphic. Government refers to the campaign as the "Sixteen Days of Activism Against Women and Child Abuse" and promotes use of the white ribbon, internationally the symbol of protest against gender violence.



NGOs have come up with their own variants to the theme and messaging. In 2004, NGOs chose to call the campaign "Sixteen Days of Peace" with the strap line "Imagine a world free of gender violence, HIV and AIDS." In 2005, some chose the slogan, "peace begins at home" arguing that this is a simple and positive message that easy to translate into many languages.

A point of departure has been in the promotion of the red and white as opposed to just the white ribbon. The red ribbon is the symbol for HIV and AIDS. Nisaa Institute for Women and Development pioneered the red and white ribbon campaign in South Africa as a way of raising awareness on the link between gender violence, HIV and AIDS. In efforts to keep the campaign alive and current, Gender Links has each year tried to link the campaign to major topical events. In 2010, the year that the Soccer World Cup came to the region, GL ran the "score a goal for gender equality campaign." This year, GL has linked the campaign to the UN Climate Change Conference with the slogan: "Peace begins@home: Gender and Climate

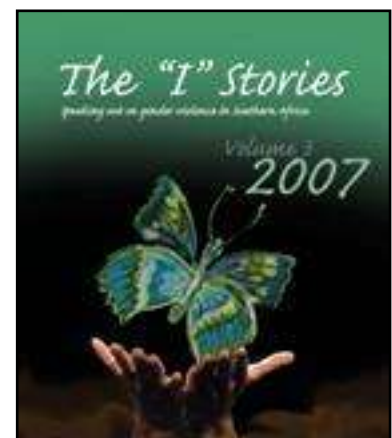
Justice by 2015"- the target date for the achievement of the 28 targets of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development.

Themes and activities

The Centre for Global Women's Leadership at Rutgers University usually announces a global theme for Sixteen Days which is then locally adapted. For example, the 2011 GL theme on gender and climate justice springs off of the international theme: "*From peace in the home to peace in the world, lets challenge militarism and end violence against women.*"

NGOs have often coordinated their work and campaigns to have a specific theme for each day of the Sixteen Days covering the role of the media; sexual Orientation; trafficking; local government; HIV and AIDS, Empowerment of women and children; Child support and maintenance; Gender Violence and the Workplace; Role of Men and Boys. The 'Take Back the Night' campaign is now typically run in partnership with local government.

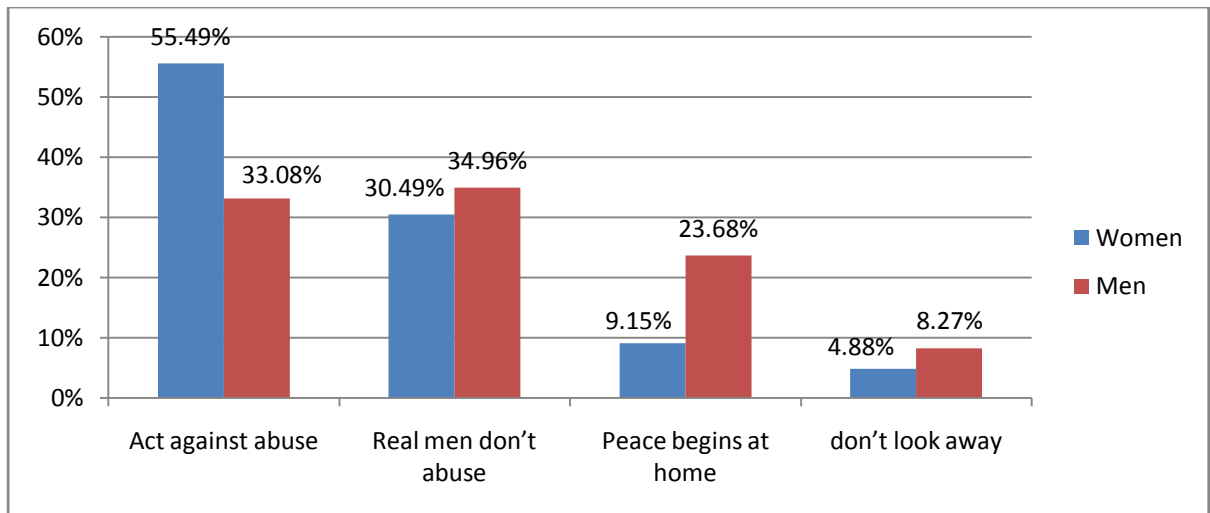
An important dimension of the Sixteen Days of Activism campaign is the space it has provided for survivors of gender violence to speak out in three volumes of "I" stories published in booklet format; also distributed through the GL Opinion and Commentary Service. Writers of the stories frequently give radio and TV interviews. They speak on panels and events during the Sixteen Days, including opening and closing events. The "I" stories demonstrate the importance and value of those most affected being at the forefront of any GBV campaign. They receive media pick up; generate discussion and debate; and empower the women concerned.



Another innovation is the cyber dialogues run across the region, in different languages, using the GL online chat facility. Between 2004 and 2010, GL facilitated 105 cyber dialogues in 15 countries, in nine different languages. A further 730 people have been trained in using ICTs for advocacy. There have been a total of 12 068 participants in GL's cyber dialogues: 38% male, 62% female. These have debated and discussed controversial topics such as the gendered dimension of taxi violence, xenophobia, gender-based violence and sexual orientation. Some people who have been affected by gender violence have reached out in these forums for help and been provided with assistance.

Outreach and impact

According to the GBV indicator research conducted in 2010 by Gender Links and the Medical Research Council, a high proportion of women (78%) and men (82%) are aware of the Sixteen days campaign.



The graph shows that women were most familiar with the slogan “Act against abuse” while most men (35%) knew the slogan “Real man don’t abuse”, followed by “peace begins at home.” Very few women or men knew the slogan “don’t look away.” The Gauteng research showed that most of the women (87%) who have been abused have not spoken about the abuse. But the majority of women that spoke out felt empowered. Speaking out was also seen as helping other women.

Healing through writing

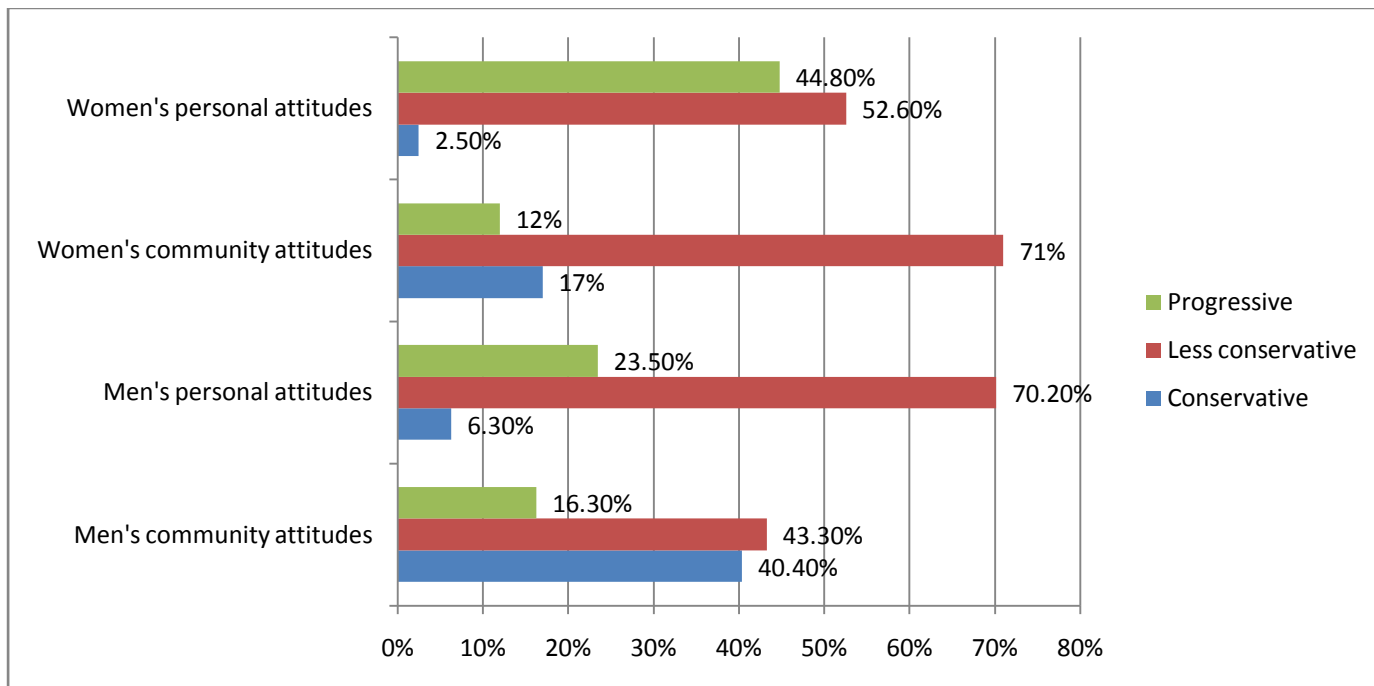
Follow up qualitative research on those who have participated in the “I” stories and related processes shows that speaking out is deeply empowering and can be the turning point from victim to survivor. Maleshoane Dabile’s, a 2006 *I Story* participant, now works as a councillor at POWA. After the publication of her *I Story*, Dabile gave a radio-interview, after which listeners could phone in and ask questions.



Martha Seloane, a 2004 participant, says she is “no longer a victim but a survivor”. At the time she was in an abusive relationship she was not working and fully dependent on her husband. Now she is divorced and works as a senior personal officer at the Department of Justice. After Seloane’s *I Story* was published during the 16 Days of Activism, she appeared on radio and two television shows.

When friends and colleagues told her they had seen her on TV, she would initially joke, saying, “that wasn’t me, but my sister.” Soon women from her community would come to her house for help. Seloane recalls, “They explained about their abusive relationships, and that they didn’t know where to go for help. They also wanted to leave and tell their story on radio or television, but didn’t know how to approach this. I would refer them to Gender Links or Nisaa. Therefore I believe the *I Stories* are powerful, because they open up the eyes of women, who before not always realised they were in an abusive relationship or did not know where to get help.”

Sexist attitudes die hard



But sexist attitudes in our society die hard. Findings on attitudes from the Gauteng GBV indicators research are summarised in the graph that sums up results of all the questions responded to categorised as progressive; less conservative and conservative. The graph also sums up the perceptions of women and men about how their communities view these issues.

It shows that women (44.8%) hold progressive views with only 2.5% having conservative views (and about half in between). This is a strong indicator that women are increasingly aware of their rights. On the other hand they perceive 78% of their communities to hold either conservative or less conservative views (this explains the "trap" that women often find themselves in with regard to taking up cases of gender violence). The bulk of men (70.2%) fall in the less conservative attitudes category, with 23.5% in the progressive category.

While the latter figure is considerably lower than that for women, it does indicate that messages about equality are starting to get through to men. On the other hand men perceive other men in the community (40.4%) as far more conservative than women (17%). This contrast is interesting and prompts the question whether men are increasingly espousing more progressive views, but hiding behind the perceived beliefs of their communities to justify their behaviour (bearing in mind that 78.3% of men in the study admitted to perpetrating some form of violence over their lifetime).

Stretching the Sixteen Days to 365

What has become increasingly apparent is that the Sixteen Days of Activism is not a sixteen day miracle: it is a campaign and messaging that need to be sustained the whole year through. In 2005, Gender Links conducted an audit of demands made during the cyber dialogues and led a campaign for the Sixteen Days to be stretched to a year long 365 Day campaign. In March 2007 South Africa adopted the 365 Day National Action Plan to End Gender Violence. Nine countries in the SADC region have adopted similar multi sector action plans.

These efforts now have the muscle of the 2008 SADC Protocol on Gender and Development that aims to halve gender violence by 2015. This in turn has spurred a new campaign for wide reaching GBV indicators, such as those in the Gauteng study, in order to benchmark progress in an area in which statistics are remarkably unreliable.

Combining a prevalence and attitude surveys as happened the Gauteng research – “The War at Home” - helps to make the link between what people think and how they act. This is the ultimate test of the success of the Sixteen Days. Twenty years later, we are still a long way from being able to say that greater awareness has led to behavior change. This should also help us realise why – as in the fight against HIV and AIDS – we need to put prevention at the heart of all GBV strategies.

