

16 years on the international conscience – Change is here
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How does one evaluate a campaign that is as old as one's self? How do I do this without sounding like this is all about me and not a whole international campaign involving millions of women? How do I even "the truth" as some people would want to ask, without bragging about something that has meant so much to me personally and my own growth? These are the questions that confronted me as I set out to do this piece commemorating the 16th year of the 16 days of activism campaign.

My journey as a feminist is bound up with that of the 16 days campaign. In 1991, I was a green young thing, just starting to find my feet, when I was accepted to participate in the first Women's Leadership Institute organised by the Center for Women's Global leadership at Rutgers University. These were early days of ICT, so I had not heard of Charlotte Bunch or some of the women that I was going to meet. The word Leadership was not in such common usage as it is now – with all manner of pretenders to the throne called women in leadership. I did not see myself as a leader or potential one either. I had no idea what energy, passion and creativity the two week institute was going to inspire. 16 years later, I happily look back and think – We did it! We actually changed the world in so many different ways, in so many countries it is almost impossible to count. And I have grown up.

When we launched the first 16 days event in Zimbabwe in 1992, I called it 16 days on the national conscience. And that is precise what the campaign has become – but on an international level. From the small group that thought of the campaign in their own countries, 16 days are observed in dozens of countries across the globe. In some countries governments have started claiming that they started the campaign – its ok we forgive them. Others have now re-branded the campaign calling it campaign "against woman abuse", (very weird language), or, "against gender violence", (so that we accommodate men and the abuse against them?). And yet others, have re-branded it to add "children". I love children dearly – I should know I have five, but this was never about children. If someone wants a campaign on violence against the little 'uns' then they should go ahead and launch something else. Why do we always have to be bunched up with kids like we cant on our own?

An even more disconcerting attempt at re-branding was calling it the 16 days of peace? Peace? As in absence of armed conflict or what? Are we there yet?

I suppose everyone wants to be associated with a good thing, so we should forgive the re-branding attempts and those who have tried to interpret the campaign in their own ways. But we can not let the core of what the campaign is about be hijacked – by well meaning governments, other NGOs or movements. The 16 days is about gender based violence – which largely means male violence against women. As they say in South Africa *finish and klaar*. The campaign was never about nicey nicey jingles on tv and radio saying lets all hold hands and be nice human beings. Neither was it about giving corporates and governments opportunities to score cheap points and revive their flagging public fortunes. Sadly, in some contexts the campaign has given some of these groups a clutch, a space to claim that they are the most willing and capable to change women's lives. Some have used up huge amounts of "air time", to essentially sell their own brand of change, which is not necessarily what some of us had in mind 16 years ago. But I digress.

The 16 days of activism are about reminding everyone, that the world will not know peace, development, and justice if women are violated in the many ways that over the 16 years we have articulated. And articulate we have. In 1993, the Southern African network of Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF), which embarked on a project to document cases of what we called FEMIICIDE. That is the deliberate killing of woman because they are female and are expected to play certain gender roles or behave in certain ways. When we set out on this project we had no idea what we would unearth and the scale of it. We did not think we would find that many cases. In Zimbabwe alone we managed to fill up 3 quilts with women and young girls' names. They had been killed by husbands, fathers, brothers and other relatives for "crimes" ranging from; late diner, badly cooked diner, coming home late from the well or school, talking back, and alleged sexual misbehaviour. What was even more staggering were the pronouncements by judges and magistrates as they passed one lenient sentence or acquittal after another.

We mounted the quilts along First Street, the major shopping/pedestrian walkway in Harare. Several men were visibly angry. One took out his cigarette lighter to burn down the quilts. Another shook me so violently a security guard had to step in to save me. The following year, the Musasa project launched its now famous tv programme Women/Madzimai. This was a hard hitting 30 minute expose of cases of violence against women. My friend Rudo Kwaramba became the most hated woman in the country-accused of speaking the unspeakable, touching the untouchable.

Each year the campaign grew from strength to strength and people got more angry. And yet at the same time, it became a significant item on everyone's calendar. A year ago someone asked me on public transport, "We don't see you anymore during the 16 days, where are you hiding?" Sadly in my country public gatherings and civic organising has become severely curtailed and any activism of this nature is bound to attract heavy handed responses from the regime – especially if we ever criticize them for not doing enough to promote women's rights.

In many countries across the African continent, the 16 days and follow up campaigns have resulted in women becoming aware of their rights and how to claim them. I have marvelled at semi literate women going to the courts to file cases and winning them all on their own. I have been excited to hear about young women standing up against sexual harassment – a problem which many of us didn't have a name for, barely 10 years ago when we faced it in schools, or on the bus. I am heartened by older women who now give advice to younger ones getting married – Don't do what we did, let our lives go by. You don't have to suffer in silence, it is not a sign of a good woman. They counsel. I have been excited to be part of movements educating women on sexual violence and its link with HIV and AIDS. Today some of these movements have been the most enduring, still educating and mobilising women, young and old to fight the two epidemics – violence and HIV.

For me personally it has been an exciting voyage of discovery and learning. When I went to Rutgers in 1991 I had never heard of emotional abuse? Economic violence? Where did these strange women come from I asked myself? I half dismissed some of their crazy notions and analysis because I was not ready to deal with my own background, baggage, and lack of consciousness. But I am a fast learner! As I went

back to my work and met women with all manner of problems, suddenly I had a language in which to explain and talk about what the women were saying. I began to question what I had all along not seen right under my nose; the uncle whose wife was not allowed to have a paid job because she would become a whore. The brother whose wife always had bags under her eyes, the sister whose arm got broken "playing netball", and then the ear perforated by an "unknown infection". Suddenly the world made sense. Well if you can call understanding violence as making sense?

The 16 days gave me a space to meet lots more women who not only had experienced violence but wanted to talk about it and see it end. Together we fought for change. But the fight was more bruising than I had imagined. The Ugandan government Minister who told us at the Vienna world Conference on Human rights, (no less a venue), that surely he could not be taken to court for "simply slapping one of my 13 wives?"

I was not prepared for the Zimbabwean Minister of Health who equally bluntly told us that he could not provide free female condoms because, "Can you imagine Priscilla (my friend from Women and AIDS Support Network), these prostitutes will keep using the same female condoms and we (men), will keep getting in there and getting infected. No I can't do that!" And of course one had to occasionally laugh at such revelations- now we knew the Minister's sex life – contrary to the pious Catholic pretences.

I also learnt how hard it was to change women's perceptions of what violence is, why it is perpetrated. Some of the stories I came across were too ghastly I almost had nervous breakdowns. I will just recount one. Sarah, not her real name told me about how her husband brought a different woman home every Friday night. Because they lived in one room, he would beat Sarah off the one little bed they shared, and she would sleep on the floor. He would loudly have sex with the new woman and afterward urinate on top of her. This went on for four years and Sarah became my personal friend, just coming in for a chat every fortnight. I don't know what happened to her. She just stopped coming to my office. I am still looking for Sarah from Highfield township. I want a happy ending. But there were many more happy endings. Thanks to the 16 years.

As I enjoy this new phase of my life – post 40, post reproductive age, and into another 16 years, I am thankful for the ways in which the 16 days of activism have made me grow. I am grateful to the millions of feminists who have taught me so much through their activism. I have learnt a lot of what I know today about working with women and organising campaigns through involvement in the 16 days campaign in my country and on the continent. I cherish the sisterhood and solidarity that we have built through a campaign that has grown legs, horns and wings every year. Wherever I go in the world I know I will find a 16 days network, and I will hang out with feminist sisters that I know.

There is still a lot of work to be done, and lots of new challenges that we face in this 21st century. But I am happy knowing that there are whole movements who will stay on the international conscience, not just for 16 days each year, but for another 16 years.

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