

Amplifying women's voices in South Africa



Despite recent progress in women's political leadership in South Africa, the rate of violence against women is high and rising. The impact of HIV and AIDS and poverty on women is also disproportionately heavy. Combining grassroots awareness-raising and activism with lobbying and advocacy at national and Pan-African level, Raising Her Voice is helping to change attitudes and behaviours, and holding the government to account on its commitment to domesticate and implement the African Women's Rights Protocol.



Background

Tremendous progress has been made over the last 15 years with regard to the role of women in South African society, particularly in political leadership and economic opportunities. However, South Africa remains a largely patriarchal society in which violence and discrimination against women is increasing. More than 50,000 rapes are reported each year, and this is estimated to be only one-ninth of the actual total. The criminal justice system is overburdened and is consistently failing survivors of rape and other abuse. Despite positive legislation, the reality for the majority of women is one of weak property rights, limited decision-making powers and a lack of access to basic necessities. More than 50 per cent of black women in South Africa are unemployed.

"Now that I have been involved [in Raising Her Voice] I have found a way of helping women understand the issues they are facing and how to tackle them. I have been empowered with each and every [piece of information] I get from the project."

Nontyatyambo Makhaphela, activist, openly living with HIV

Objectives

Raising Her Voice is being implemented by Oxfam's partner, People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA). The project aims to strengthen national legislation relating to women's rights, ensure adequate budgeting, and bring about the domestication and effective implementation of the African Women's Rights Protocol. This will be achieved by:

- Building alliances with poor women activists to ensure that their voices are brought into the mainstream discourse.
- National lobbying and advocacy work to hold Parliament and government to account in ensuring domestication and implementation of the Protocol.
- Mobilising and strengthening civil society, especially women's organisations and networks, to lobby and advocate for their rights.

Achievements

Empowering poor women activists

Thirty women activists, each of them members of strategic HIV and AIDS, gender-based violence (GBV) and anti-poverty organisations, and active in their communities, were brought together for intensive training. Sessions focused on strengthening understanding and critical analysis of the linkages between HIV, GBV and poverty. The women - including POWA project staff - underwent deeply transformative journeys, and have gained personal strength, understanding, skills and support structures to better represent their community, and better integrate different approaches into the work of their organisations.

Women's lived experiences reflected and their voices amplified

Women activists contributed their personal experiences to develop POWA's 'Conceptual Framework' to highlight the multiple oppressions they face. This demonstrated the reality of women's lives; gave women ownership of the project and helped them make sense of their experiences; and it put women in contact with organisations which can help them claim their rights. The project – and POWA's work in general – is rooted in the understanding that women are not a homogenous group, and that certain groups of women face particular and multiple forms of oppression. Consequently, within the Conceptual Framework, advocacy materials and policy reports, the voices of women on the margins have been prioritised and amplified.

A shift in attitudes and behaviour

As a result of capacity- and confidence-building work with women and local groups, there is evidence of changing attitudes and behaviour. This includes the first white woman using a refuge for victims of violence against women. In another case, a man summoned the police when confronted by a local activist after he had beaten his wife. He assumed that the police would arrest the activist; in fact, they arrested him. Local groups started a campaign, 'One Man Can', to raise young men's awareness of violence against women.

A positive relationship with government

For the most part, POWA's criticism of the State's shortcomings and its efforts to hold government to account, have been well received. POWA is viewed as an important and credible partner, as shown by the government's willingness to consult it. For example, POWA worked with other community organisations to develop a shadow report on the government's implementation of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women). This report highlighted the gaps between policy and practice in South Africa, and was noted by the CEDAW committee. The government later asked POWA for support to address the gaps identified.

High-profile campaigning

During the '16 Days of Activism against Violence against Women', POWA engaged in public events and media work to raise the profile of violence against women. POWA is one of the few organisations that contests the government's use of this event as a PR platform, and uses the period to highlight the State's accountability, commitments and obligations to end violence against women.

"The project teaches [women] that they have the power to stand up for themselves and make decisions for themselves, because most of the time people make decisions for us as women."

Khensani Mabasa, activist

One woman's story: putting training into action

Khensani Mabasa is an activist with the Treatment Action Campaign and attended a Raising Her Voice training session. She realised the training's relevance to her life when her daughter was raped: "I learned so many things about empowerment, the power within, and how I could address some of the things affecting me and my family... when my daughter was raped, I could use information about the Protocol to challenge some things in my daughter's case and make sure the case proceeded well... Due to the training I got I made sure all these things happened [the case was handled according to procedure], and the perpetrator was imprisoned for life."

Lessons

- National advocacy work is stronger when it is linked to existing regional and international human rights platforms. However, work at international and regional level must be contextualised to give meaning and sense to what is happening locally.
- It is essential that women themselves guide and direct the project, in order to truly reflect and articulate their experiences.

South Africa is one of seven countries under the Raising Her Voice Pan-African Programme promoting the acceleration of the African Women's Rights Protocol.

Raising Her Voice is a five-year programme which promotes the rights and capacity of poor women to engage effectively in governance at all levels. This is to be achieved through enabling their voices to be heard and increasing their influence, and by making institutions more accountable to women.

Working through local partners in 17 countries, Raising Her Voice has significant funding from DFID and is co-ordinated by Oxfam GB.

