

Writing from the Inside



Stories of Hope and Change

Writers



Bongzi Zondi
Caroline Mashale
Celeste Fortuin
Dieketseng Mosinki



Elizabeth Mabitle
Elna Lindoor
Fazila Gany
Grace Ngema



Jabulile Mogane
Millicent Phillips
Nina Benjamin
Nobelunga Khumalo
Nodumo Sigosa



Nomsa Ndlovu
Nosipho Twala
Patricia Dyata
Roseline Prescence



Sabelo Sibiya
Sara Claasen
Seipati Sekabate
Thandi Mtimkulu



Thoko Chili
Thulile Motsamai
Victoria Dlamini
Riana

Writing from the Inside

Stories of Hope and Change

Participating Organisations

Gender at Work	www.genderatwork.org
Justice and Women	jaw@futurenet.co.za
South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union	www.saccawu.org.za
Treatment Action Campaign	www.tac.org.za
Women on Farms Project	www.wfp.org.za
Sikhula Sonke	www.sikhulasonke.org.za
Remmoho Women's Forum	remmoho@gmail.com
Vukani Tsohang Africa	tsohangvukani@gmail.com
Kganya Women's Consortium	kganyawakeup.itsoseng@yahoo.com



Editing, Design and Photographs	<i>Shamim Meer</i>
Copy Editing and Photographs	<i>Maia Marie</i>
Design and Layout	<i>Naarchie and Naartjie Media Agency</i>
Compilation of Organisational Profiles	<i>Michel Friedman</i>

Support to the Gender Action Learning Programme: *CORDAID, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and Oxfam Novib*
Support to the Writing Process: *CORDAID and Oxfam Canada*



A Gender at Work publication
December 2010



Writing Stories of Hope and Change





Contents

Introduction by <i>Michel Friedman</i>	6
Justice and Women (JAW)	9
Re-coming back to live by <i>Bongi Zondi</i>	10
Stepping over stones, to a gently flowing stream by <i>Grace Ngema</i>	11
Together we can change by <i>Victoria Dlamini</i>	13
Sabelo's Story by <i>Sabelo Sibiya</i>	15
South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU)	18
Happy moments of gaining my life back by <i>Nomsa Ndlovu</i>	20
We can make the best of what we get by <i>Thulile Motsamai</i>	20
Treatment Action Campaign (TAC)	22
Where is the Future? by <i>Nodumo Sigosa</i>	24
Women on Farms Project (WFP)	26
The Strength of a Woman by <i>Roseline Prescence</i>	28
Black Recognition and A Woman's Journey by <i>Elna Lindoor</i>	71
Vukani Tsohang Afrika	30
Raising concerns about my rights with confidence by <i>Elizabeth Mabitle</i>	32
Endurance bears fruits by <i>Thandi Mtimkulu</i>	33
Personal Change by <i>Thoko Chili</i>	35
Changing my life by <i>Seipati Sekabate</i>	36
Kganya Women's Consortium	38
Learning from my mistakes by <i>Nobelunga Khumalo</i>	40
Women who change the world by <i>Caroline Mashale</i>	42
Remmoho Women's Forum	44
A river changing its form by <i>Nosipho Twala</i>	46
Abuse in my marriage by <i>Millicent Phillips</i>	48
Being Equal by <i>Dieketseng Mosinki</i>	50
My life as an activist by <i>Jabulile Mogane</i>	52
Sikhula Sonke	53
My HIV Status by <i>Riana</i>	55
Teardrops of perseverance by <i>Sara Claasen</i>	57
Throwing away the beating stick by <i>Patricia Dyata</i>	60
Reflections by Gender at Work Facilitators	62
Knocking from the inside by <i>Fazila Gany</i>	63
The question of power or the power of question by <i>Nina Benjamin</i>	66
Reflections on the WFP Feminist Training by <i>Celeste Fortuin</i>	68



INTRODUCTION

By Michel Friedman

Writing is a powerful tool for reflection and analysis. Through writing the writer develops strong arguments and clear thinking. Yet urgent priorities of organizing leave little time for activists to write or document experiences. Gender at Work tried to address this challenge by including a writing workshop in its Civil Society Organization (CSO) Strengthening Program with eight organizations in South Africa in May 2010.

These organizations had participated in an action learning program during the previous 18 to 24 months. The three day writing workshop aimed at assisting participants to find a voice and language to describe and express their experiences of change during the action learning program¹. The powerful stories in this book are the result. Written by participants and facilitators these are stories of personal experiences of change during the program. Given the choice of language in which to express themselves, most chose to write in English, two wrote in Zulu, and one in Afrikaans. The Zulu and Afrikaans stories appear alongside translations in English.

What is most striking about all the stories is the authors' resilience and sense of wholeness despite sometimes excruciating histories. The context is often painful and difficult – yet all the authors refer to moments of transformation and hope. Since there is such a scarcity of writings by grassroots activists, these stories contribute towards a sharing of experience that can inspire hope, innovation, resilience and the capacity to overcome what may appear as impossible constraints.

The Gender at Work CSO Strengthening Program

The Gender at Work CSO strengthening program was initiated to advance women's rights, gender equality and social justice. Operating since 2004, the program addresses multiple levels – the personal, organizational and societal/community. It is holistic – recognizing that deep change can only come about through working with the head (rational thought), the heart (attitudes, values, feelings and emotions) and the hands/feet (actions and behaviours).

In 2004 Gender at Work started a Gender Action Learning (GAL) process with six organizations in South Africa. Three of these organizations wrote about their organizational change stories in "Change is a Slow Dance"². From 2008 to February 2010, Gender at Work undertook a "deepening" process with four of these six organizations (JAW, SACCAWU, TAC, WFP) and started a new process with four community-based organizations (Kganya Consortium, REMMOHO, Vukani, Sikhula Sonke). The authors of the current stories were participants in these two processes.

The CSO Program lasted between 18-24 months. It started with a series of meetings between Gender at Work and the potential partner organizations, where Gender at Work invited the organizations to be a part of the program. Each participating organisation then set up a three to four

¹ In the second phase of this writing program we hope to support five organizations to write more detailed case studies describing their organizational changes.

² Michel Friedman and Shamim Meer, (eds.) 2007: *Change is a slow dance*. <http://www.genderatwork.org/article/change-is-a-slow-dance>

member change team. In a two-day meeting the team reflected on the history, culture, and programs of the organization; on how women and men live in their community and in their organization; and developed an Organizational Strengthening Project to improve gender relations either inside their organization or in the community. In addition, the team was introduced to body-mind-spirit practices³, and to the use of creative forms of expression to free up energy so as to achieve new understandings and actions. The Organization Strengthening Program that followed, included three action-learning workshops, support from a facilitator between Action Learning meetings, and a writing workshop.

The First Action Learning Workshop: The first Action Learning workshop brought together the change teams from the participating organizations (12-16 individuals). Participants were introduced to an analytical and action planning tool, and were supported in developing their plans for change projects. Following the workshop, participants worked for six to eight months on their change plan, supported by Gender at Work facilitators.⁴

The Second Action Learning Workshop: During the second Action Learning workshop facilitators introduced concepts and processes for working with personal and organizational power, helped deepen peer-learning, and supported teams to assess and replan their change initiatives. Over the next six to eight months, change teams worked on their revised change projects supported by Gender at Work facilitators.

The Third Action Learning Workshop: During the third Action Learning workshop participants reflected on the factors responsible for the personal and organisational changes and the Gender at Work team assisted in deepening participants' insights.

The Writing Workshop: Through all the Action Learning meetings Gender at Work facilitators made use of writing to aid reflection and learning. Creating opportunities for participants to write about their experiences in their own words was a crucially important part of the program, and built a personal sense of power. The writing workshop held in May 2010 was inspired by Louise Dunlap's work and drew on her book *Undoing the Silence: Six Tools for Social Change Writing*, New Village Press 2007. The workshop⁵ provided support and space for participants to write the stories that make up this book.

The place of writing in social change

We believe that encouraging writing supports change agents and gender activists to value their own role in seeing, naming and communicating their contribution to advancing human rights and women's equality within organizations and society. Writing is a powerful means of undoing the silence built up from years of class, race and gender exclusion. Creating space for participants to write and find their own voices contributes towards creating new social norms – where women 'undo' silence, represent themselves strongly, and as knowledge producers start to play a more powerful role in their communities. The stories that follow illustrate how the CSO program supports individuals in their personal and organizational struggles and the part writing plays in this. ■

³ www.capacitar.org and Michel Friedman (2010). *Becoming the change you wish to see in the world*. <http://www.genderatwork.org/article/becoming-the-change-you-wish-to-see-in-the-world-sep-2010>.

⁴ These were Michel Friedman, Fazila Gany, Nina Benjamin and Celeste Fortuin

⁵ The workshop was designed and facilitated by Michel Friedman, Shamim Meer and Maia Marie





JUSTICE AND WOMEN (JAW)

JAW, based in Pietermaritzburg, was founded in 1998 by and for women who experienced problems with accessing the Justice System within South Africa. JAW's initial purpose was to help urban based women address their legal rights around domestic violence and child support. After the first round with Gender at Work⁴, JAW re-thought its approach and shifted its focus to support the most vulnerable women in outlying rural areas to access their rights (including sexual and reproductive rights) in part by working with traditional leaders. JAW now seeks to empower communities to challenge and transform policies, practices and procedures which impede women's ability to access resources and constitutional rights. Their vision is communities where power is shared equitably.

JAW's Urban Program operates within the Msunduzi and Umgungundhlovu Districts of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This includes urban, peri-urban, and rural areas and has a population of 500,000. JAW Rural Outreach Program is located in the Uthungulu Mthonjaneni District Municipality DC28 of Kwa Zulu Natal in 2006. Mthonjaneni is a rural, mountainous area with a population of 50,383. There is a severe lack of infrastructure, and most people live in traditional homesteads and are reliant on rivers or community standpipes for water and fire as their primary energy source. In the rural program, JAW works with traditional leaders and community members around the interface between Zulu custom and constitutional law, with specific emphasis on the impact customary practice has on increasing women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. The rural project also provides legal support to women and families to access family law rights, and trains community members on rape, domestic violence, inheritance, and maintenance. JAW has also established a support group in the community for people who are HIV positive.

In the second round with Gender at Work, the JAW change project developed an organizational culture that enables greater power sharing, taking of initiative and shared management responsibility between founders and new staff members. JAW has begun to raise debate and stimulate action around creating new norms in the villages where they work and has successfully developed and mentored locally based staff to critically engage and to become managers of their own programs.

The four JAW stories reflect on personal changes in the context of questioning oppressive social norms and holding spaces for creating new norms. All the stories are testimonies to the success of JAW in creating safe spaces, which support staff coming from marginalized backgrounds to claim their voices, their power and their initiative. By having more empowered staff JAW is able to stimulate controversial and dynamic dialogue within the communities where it works. ■

⁴ See Jaw Case study p53 in "*Change Is a Slow Dance*". <http://www.genderatwork.org/article/change-is-a-slow-dance>.

Re-coming back to live

By Bongzi Zondi

Everything was well when I was at school. The problems started after I matriculated. I wanted to further my studies but unfortunately my father was already a pensioner, so I had no choice but to look for a job. But I couldn't get a job for years. Then people started to share testimonies on how sangomas helped them to get good jobs and even marriages. And so, through desperation I also started to consult sangomas with the hope that they would come with solutions. But unfortunately they deepened my hopelessness by telling me that I won't succeed in life due to the witchcraft which was done against me. After that everything got worse in every area of my life and that's where bitterness, anger, hatred and frustration began, and I didn't value anything about myself and other people.

In 2000, while I was in that pit, I started to dream about my twin brother who passed away in 1995. In the dream he told me about one of the charismatic churches in my area, and insisted that I will get help there. I tried to ignore this because I still had the belief that God helped those who try to help themselves.

In 2001 I came to the turning point where I told myself "enough is enough". I fully gave my life to God and trusted in Him alone, which means I responded to my brother's directions. In the church I spoke to the pastors about my problems and they advised me to attend a chain of prayers, and this helped me a lot because I started to experience peace, courage, and hope.

In 2002 I looked for a job and I got a position as a volunteer at the Mental Health Society which was also challenging because I needed a paying job. I worked there for a year. In 2004 I continued to look for another job and I got a position as a bead-worker. This also was difficult because I had no basic salary. I was earning on commission and if we didn't have orders I stayed at home without any income.

In 2007 while I was still working there I heard about the development course at the University of KwaZulu Natal and that they offered a bursary. I was supposed to pay half of the money which was hard for me but I still went for the course. The university paid for me and I passed my first year and I also negotiated with them to allow me to register for my second year, which was my last year and they agreed.

In 2008 September we were supposed to start with our development in practice and Grace introduced me to Jenny at Justice and Women, and after my practicals Jenny offered me a part time position. The organization also helped me with an outstanding balance. On top of that the organization offered to pay for my Social Work course and I am doing my second year of Social Work now.

Internal change or inner peace is a long process. I thought I overcame fear, anger, and frustration but recently Mr. Devil tried to bring it back where everyone and everything was against me. That's the reason why my theme says "Re-coming back to live".

In January 2010 Michel came to our organization to facilitate on Gender at Work, whilst I was in that deep pit. And it was amazing because though I knew the meaning of reflection I didn't think

that it will be relevant to my situation. Her facilitation was based on reflection where she asked us to use different sculptures to demonstrate our past and present experiences. My theme also changed to: REFLECTION VS EMPOWERMENT WHICH LEADS TO TRANSFORMATION and after that I acknowledged that the thief was there again trying to re-steal my peace and stability. Consequently I started to focus on good things and achievements concerning my life and also things that the organization helped me to achieve which resulted in a total transformation of my life.

To conclude my story I want to emphasize the power and the importance of taking the right decisions from the heart. But it doesn't mean that situations change overnight. It's a long process which demands your commitment and preparation to face different challenges. It's not easy but it's worthy! ■

Stepping over stones, to a gentle flowing stream

By Grace Ngema

Five years ago, I was looking for the right stone to step on. I was nervous and I wasn't sure or confident that I was stepping on the right stone and I didn't feel that I had found the right stone. I was employed in the organization called Justice and Women (JAW). I was the rural woman, with low self esteem, with no qualification and coming from an abusive relationship.

I was shy and couldn't start any conversation which made it very difficult to take initiative. My manager kept on saying: "you have the potential but the only thing you have to do is to trust your gut feeling and reconnect with your inner power." I wondered, "how can I ever reconnect with my inner power?" because I was powerless. I did not believe in myself because of the history of my relationship and because I didn't have any qualification except for my matriculation. I enjoyed to be at work because I found people very nice and caring and there was time to talk about the issues a person was concerned about. I found this very helpful to my everyday struggles and difficulties. I was trying very hard to do my work properly because I didn't want to lose my job. To me it was like home, the management was like my mother and I wanted to get to that motherly touch which was consoling the past of my lovely mother. But still I was not sure if I had found the right stepping stone.

Slowly, I started to think of myself in a different way because of the encouragement and experience I received from work. I was then offered the opportunity to be the coordinator of the rural projects. I didn't believe that I deserved that position but kept on thinking maybe I have found the right stone to step on and move on with my life as I wanted before. At work I learned about different kinds of power which was power over, power to, power with and power within. Learning about power in that way made me realize that I've been experiencing "power over" which damaged me and my inner power. Slowly, trying very hard, I started believing that change is going to happen. I was offered the opportunity to study for the Community Development Diploma at university. I was excited and I did it very well with the support I received from the management team at work. After doing that course, I started slowly to regain my self esteem and my confidence because I was proud of myself and I thought that my parents would also be proud of me if they were still alive.

After my studies, I felt like I was able to feel what management was and I felt the change in myself in terms of making my own decisions at work and even at home. Instead of saying "can I please do it this way" I started to say "I want to do it this way". It was not easy to get to that point but the safe space that was created at work for talking about the things that were difficult for me, and the courage I got, made me reach that point. I felt the power within myself and I knew what to do with that power. I started talking about the things that I didn't talk about, not even with my family. I didn't think I would be able to confront and oppose people to make clear what I want to do, and how I want to do it – although it was not easy, and I was still asking myself if it was the right stone to step on, or to jump over. I learned through that process that taking initiative and responsibility over one's own power and believing in one's own self is important and it can bring possible changes in one's own life.

Coming into my position as a member of management team. It was not easy. I used to think "how can I manage people? How can I manage the office?" At first it was too much, but with the support from the management team and through the Gender at Work process, I realized that I was lacking a sense of self and a belief in self. I found it hard to manage staff at first as they also didn't take responsibility for their work/ projects. We started at work to create new norms and changed the strategies we were using with the help of Gender at Work. People were asked to identify their passions and the organization helped them to pursue these and take responsibility and ownership of them. By so doing we were trying to move out of a triangle we believed we were locked in, which was "the victim, rescuer, and perpetrator triangle", whereby if people were not doing their work, other members seemed to "rescue" them. We realized that it was not healthy working like that, so we needed to change.

However now I have changed the way I manage people and I hold them accountable for their work. Whereas before if someone asked me to do his/her work, I would "rescue" that person by doing the work. Now it is different, if a person asks me to do his/her work I give him/her "tough love" and make that person do his/her own work. In following up with this story, the other day I heard one of the staff saying to the other "tough! Do your own typing". And I said "yes!" to myself because to me that was a powerful moment to see another person showing the importance of taking responsibility and that what I was trying to show to people was starting to be seen, which made me happy. I feel I have learned to delegate and that the staff likes this, as they have had to learn to stand up for themselves.

By taking initiative and responsibility for myself and my work, I feel empowered and connected to my own power. I understand how power works and I am able also to choose the power I want to use and to be used to me. I don't feel like a victim anymore although sometimes I do experience uncertainty and do get overwhelmed but I feel strong because of the support from other people. As a result I am doing a Social Work Degree through UNISA and I hope I will make it because I do believe in myself.

All the change I see in myself didn't happen overnight. I worked on it bit by bit and through thinking carefully of any step to take because of the lack of trust in myself. The safe space that was created at work was safer than ever and it's where I found the warmth and the comfort that I needed. The encouragement and acknowledgement I got from work I will never forget in my whole life and I wish to pass it to other people who might be experiencing what I have experienced in the past. I

think and I believe that the stone I chose to step on was the right stone because of all the experience I've got from stepping on it. Although I am aware that there are still stones I need to jump over and move on with my life. So I say taking initiative, responsibility and ownership is important in changing people's lives into what they want to be but change is a long way to go and it means stepping, jumping, stumbling over stones and one needs to be able to test if the stone is a right stone to step on or if it needs to be jumped over. ■

Together we can change

By Victoria Dlamini

When I first joined Justice and Women (JAW), I wondered if I would be able to meet what was required of me. I did not quite understand what was expected of me. I asked myself if I had what it takes to stand in front people and facilitate. The reason for that is because I am shy, and I couldn't speak in front of people. I would cry and felt intimidated, and not strong enough to contribute. I did not have self-esteem and confidence in myself. Deep down in me I knew I could change, God gave me the strength, the power. I am capable of doing anything I set my mind on.

Thanks to Gender at Work which helped to encourage and motivate me, and teach me how to facilitate in front of people. They helped me through workshops and communicating with others. It was a long process, but slowly I was more relaxed in front of people and feeling good about myself. I gained my confidence back.

I realized that I am capable of doing anything. Sometimes when there is a change in your life you fear, because you don't know how it will turn out. I needed people to believe in me, so that I could shine like a sunrise. The community, because they see me facilitate them, feel that they can trust me. They come with questions and want me to advise them. I can now speak about sex with people, something that I never expected. I remember in the older days when someone speaks about sex in the radio the gogos would say "turn that radio off its talking rubbish." I did not understand the importance of talking about sex until now.

In Zulu culture we were not allowed to talk about sex. We were told that the word sex is a bad word, that it is disgusting and you should be ashamed of yourself. We were not allowed to discuss sex. They say sex is a secret thing. Even the wives were not allowed to discuss with their husband about sex. The husband will shout at you and say that you have lots of boyfriends that is why you discuss sex with me. Some husbands will even throw you out of the house and call you names. The husband will come to the wife's bed if he wants to have sex only. If he does not want to have sex they will sleep in separate beds. The husband will just say to the wife "take off your panties." After the wife took off the panties, the husband will go on top of the wife without even romancing. After he is finished he goes back to his bed. Wives were not free to talk about sex because they don't even discuss with their husband. He won't even ask her "are you okay? can we do it?" In the old days a wife was not allowed to say anything. She had to listen and just say yebo baba it didn't matter if she agrees or not. How much more difficult for young people to talk about sex in front of old people.

The older people if they caught you talking about sex, the whole community will call you names like "you are a slut" "you don't respect." All the bad names that you could think of. The community will be all against you. Therefore it is difficult for me to talk about sex to old people.

There is a woman called Bev. Every year she gives a party for the gogos. She spoils them for the day and she gives them gifts, foods and cakes. All the gogos are happy for the day. Bev at the same time wants them to have knowledge about sex and human trafficking.

Bev invited me to set the record straight about sex and that is not wrong to talk about sex. I went to the party. The venue was a hall in a rural area. For me to be invited to the party was a privilege and the response I got there was amazing. Imagine my situation I am black, a woman, and young. How would older people react towards me? If I say the word sex, and the gogos were raised to believe that your husband is your king and don't try to be above him, and wives are less than a man. As I stood in front of more than two hundred gogos, I had confidence in myself, and the gogos they all listened, their concentration on me.

I talk about sex with the gogos, like how to report a rape, and we should talk with our grandchildren how to say no when you don't want a person to touch you, that we must report rape whether it is our father or uncle or anyone else for that matter, that there is no excuse to rape.

I ask the gogos do they talk with their partners about sex? They said no. I ask why? They said we are not allowed. I said we could change that, by communicating with our partners it does not mean you have lots of boyfriends. They all understand and they said I have good points, I was not wrong, communication is important. They all valued me. They said thank you, they all clapped hands. They said they will try and talk with their grandchildren, that it is important, that is why our children get pregnant at an early age and made so many mistakes – it is because we don't sit down with our grandchildren and discuss about life, and sex.

I was so happy to talk with gogos. The gogos could have said we don't want to listen to you, go away, what do you know anyway, because you were born yesterday, you know nothing at all. Together we can change. It is not too late to change. If two hundred gogos listened to me it just shows me that change is possible to anyone. ■

Sabelo's story

By Sabelo Sibiya

My story is about being hurt in my soul for knowing who I am and where I come from and where I belong. It was in 1994 October, during examinations. I was stopped by a man by the gate of the school and he gave me some sweets and walked with me. When we were on the way he asked if I know him. Unfortunately I didn't know him. I was nervous, because we were on a footpath with no houses close by.

Hearing that I don't know him and seeing that I looked frightened, he told me that he was my real father and that the father my mother is married to and whom I stay with, is not my real father. I didn't take what he was saying seriously because I knew my father, and I knew that my mother had one child outside her marriage who is my brother and older than me. To me this man was a stranger, telling me untruthful things.

He continued telling me that my mother was forced by her family to leave him and to marry the father that I know because he didn't have cows to pay lobola and the father that I know had cows to pay lobola. My grandfather wanted lobola because it is our culture that a girl must get married and bring home cows as lobola so that the father will be respected in the community. He said by that time when that happened, my mother was pregnant and I was that baby. He said when I go home I must ask my mother about that and tell her that Mr. Ndlanzi, my real father, told me this story and ask her if she knew him.

When I came home I told my mother what happened and she ignored me. Time passed on and this thing was eating me up, I asked her again and she sent me to my grandmother to ask her. I noticed my grandmother waiting for me to ask because it seemed like my mother had already told her the story. When I asked her about that man, she didn't respond nicely and told me that I am listening to all people with lies and I am hurting my mother's soul.

As time passed my mother and my father separated and my mother went back to her home. She was forced to leave home because she had left her marriage and because in Zulu culture if a woman failed to stay in her marriage she is not allowed to come back home and stay. I was left with my father who then married another woman and they had a girl child, now 15 years old, and then he died.

By the time my father died he was working on a mine in Johannesburg. When it came to looking at his documents for inheritance, it was found that he didn't put my name, but everything was put under his young girl child although her mother was not yet married to him. Then it became clear to me that my father knew something because if he was my real father he was going to give me some of his belongings or some of his money.

After that event my mind started to get confused and I was in great pain. I saw myself as abandoned and I felt that no one was bothered about me. I failed to accept the situation as it was but I took what was happening as my fault. I started to be unhappy for everything that was happening to me, bad or good; I saw nothing as important to me. Working for Justice and Women (JAW) and the Gender at Work process helped me. I felt safe enough to be open and share my problems and

my difficulties. I sat down with Grace and she listened to me and advised me not to put problems on top of me but try to be on top of problems. I met Michel Friedman in Pietermaritzburg and she explained that it is not good to keep quiet when we are experiencing problems, that we must speak about them to people that we trust. That has helped me to listen to other people's problems and try to help them if I can and refer them to other people that I know will help them if I cannot help them.

I am sad because there are many people who are in the same situation as I am, but I don't know how they are going to get help. Some of them commit suicide. In my area there are many people who have killed themselves. Some have gone to places where there is no one who can find them because of these problems. People who cannot afford to pay lobola but who are in love with other people are forced to leave them and as a result they end up keeping secrets and hide their children for people who can pay lobola. At the end hidden children are given to people with cows which is affecting children and their future. ■

ISTORY SIKA SABELO

I story sami simayelana nokuhlukumezeka kwami emoyeni ngenxa yokungazazi imvelaphi yami. Kwakungu 1994 October ngesikhathi sokubhalwa kwezivivinyo zika Disemba. Ngamiswa lowesilisa esangweni lesikole wanginika uswidi wahambisana nami, sisendleleni waqala wangibuza ukuthi ngiyamazi yini? Ngeshwa ngangingakaze ngimbone ngaphambilini. Ngaqala ukwesabaengakachazi ukuthi ungubani, ngoba lento yenzeka endaweni yakwa Yanguye lapho imizi inganhlanye sihamba ehlane uma sesiya emakhaya, kuhanjwa ngezindlela zesizulu awukho umgwaqo.

Uthe ukuzwa ukuthi kangimazi nokubona ukuthi sengesabela ukuthi angaze angenzakalise, wazichaza wathi ungubaba wami wangempela lobaba engihlala naye oshade nomama akusiyena ubaba wami wangempela. Lokho ngakuthathisa okwembudane ngabona ukuthi naye lomuntu akazazi ukuthi uthini ngoba mina ngangimazi ubaba wami, ngangazi futhi ukuthi umama unomfowethu oyedwa omdala owamthola ngaphandle komshado futhi weyemdala kimi.

Waqhubeka wachaza ukuthi umama bamphoqa abakubo ukuthi ahlukane naye ashade nobaba wami engimaziyo ngoba yena wayengenazo izinkomo zokumlobola ngoba umkhulu wami wayefuna izinkomo, okungumkhuba wesizulu ukuthi intombazane izalelwe ukuthi igane ibuyise izinkomo ukuze ubaba wayo ahlonipheke. Wathi ngaleso sikhathi kwenzeka lokho mina ngase ngisiswini kumama, wathi angombuza umama ngalokhu. Wathi angomtshela ukuthi ubaba wakwa Ndlanzi ukhulume kanje kimi uyamazi yini.

Nebala ngambuza umama wangiziba wabamba lokhu nalokhuya. Kwaqhubeka isikhathi lento ingidla ngase ngibuzisisa okuyilapho angithumela ukuba ngiyobuza ugogo. Engakuphawula kugogo ukuthi wayengumuntu owayevele esengilindele ngoba wayesemtshelile umama ngalokhu engangikubuza. Wavele wangibhekisa lena uma ngibuza ngaba umuntu onamanga ohlukumeza umama.

Kuhambe kwahamba umama wahlukana nobaba wami wabuyela kubo. Kwamphoqa ukuba angahlali ekhaya kubo kodwa ayohlala emaplazini afune umsebenzi ngoba ngomthetho wesizulu uma umuntu ehlulekile emshadweni akavunyelwe ukuhlala kubo, ufana noselahliwe. Mina ngasala

nobaba, owabe esethatha omunye umama bathola ingane yentombazane eneminyaka ewu 15 njengamanje wase eseyashona.

Ubaba washona ngenkathi esebenza ezimayini e Goli. Okwathi uma sekwabiwa izimali zakhe kwatholakala ukuthi elami igama lalingabhaliwe emafeni khe kodwa izinto zazibhalwe ngengane yakhe yentombazane yize noma umama wayo wayengakasashadi ngokusemthethweni nobaba. Ilapho ke okwangucacela khona ukuthi kukhona nobaba owayekwazi ngami okwenza ukuthi angangabeli lutho emafeni akhe ekubeni kuthiwa ubaba wami ongizalayo.

Ilapho ke umqondo wami uqale wahlukumezeka khona. Ngazibona ngiyinto elahliwe emhlabeni engekho onendaba nami. Nami ngahluleka ukwamukela isimo konke lokhu ngikuthatha sengathi icala lami sengathi yimi engenza lokhu. Yonke into enhle engehlelayo empilweni ngaqala ukungayithokozeli ngayithathisa okwento engabalulekile. Okungisizile ukuba ngaphansi kuka Justice And Women no Gender at Work. Ngithole ithuba lokuvuleleka ngikhulume ngezinkinga zami. Siye sahlala phansi no Grace wangilalela wangeluleka wangitshela ukuthi inkinga ayisikuba ngaphezu kwami kodwa yimina okumele ngibe ngaphezulu kwezinkinga. No Michel e Pietermaritzburg wasichazela ukuthi umuntu akumele athule nezinkinga kodwa kumele akhulume. Lokho sekusize kwamina uqobo ngakwazi ukulalela izinkinga zabantu ngibasize ngendlela abasuke bedinga ngayo usizo uma nginalo noma ngimlayele abazomsiza uma mina ngingeke ngikwazi ukumsiza.

Okubuhlungu ukuthi baningi abantu abakulesisimo sami abangazi ukuthi bazosizakala kanjani, abanye bavele bazibulale. Sekukaningi emakhaya bezibulala abanye bavele babhunguke bengaziwa ukuthi bashonaphi kuthi uma kulandelelwa kutholakale ukuthi yizo lezi zinkinga. Kodwa umthelela omkhulu kulokhu "YILOBOLO" ngoba umuntu uyamthanda umuntu engenazo izinkomo aphoqeke ukumyeka ngoba kufuneka ilobolo egcine esehlala nezimfihlo ngoba vele basuke bethandana. Kugcine sekuvela izingane ezifihliweyo bese ziphiwa abantu abanezinkomo. ■





SOUTH AFRICAN COMMERCIAL CATERING AND ALLIED WORKERS UNION (SACCAWU)

SACCAWU is the main retail-sector trade union in South Africa. It serves a number of sectors including wholesale and retail, hospitality, tourism and finance. Its membership includes casual/temporary workers, a group typically not recognized or organised by other unions.

Despite the fact that women make up the majority of its membership, SACCAWU operates within a male-dominated leadership and organisational culture. Nonetheless, during its thirty-year history, SACCAWU has been a trendsetter in challenging gender inequalities in the trade unions⁵.

During its first process with Gender at Work, the SACCAWU change team was looking for fresh and innovative ways to deepen their work in developing women leaders from among its membership. The change team innovated a new way of organising within traditional trade unions, through building mall committees – that is committees based in shopping malls.

The Mall Committees have strengthened women's leadership, increased the numbers of women leaders, as well as created more space for young women and for non-union officials to gain greater benefit from union resources and activities.

More women are present at union congresses and more women are standing up to men and challenging them for positions. Women are taking up responsibility and top positions, and not only in the gender structures. There are now women at the regional, national and even at local level Executive Committees (ECs). Both men and women are being conscientised about issues like sexual harassment, parental rights and putting childcare issues on the table. In the mall-committees men are conscientising other men. In cognisance that wages are themselves gendered, efforts are being made to include female negotiators at national level. Mall Committees are now part of the national union structures.

In the second, deepening round with Gender at Work the SACCAWU change team wanted to strengthen their capacity to develop an alternative form of building leadership. Their aim was to continue to build leadership from the grassroot level, which in turn would be able to make changes in the organisational culture in terms of how the organisation's leadership conducts itself. They were seeking not only to have more women leaders, but leaders who could hold their own within male-dominated structures and not be intimidated when challenged or when their ideas were put down. They wanted to nurture women's leadership locally by creating a supportive environment for women to lead.

The SACCAWU stories reflect on how participating in Gender at Work inspired processes and supported the authors to re-claim their own strength and power in the face of extremely challenging life circumstances and an intimidating union culture. ■

⁵ See SACCAWU profile – <http://www.genderatwork.org/saccawu> – for more on SACCAWU history and their experience in the first round with Gender at Work.

Happy moments of gaining my life back

By Nomsa Ndlovu

In the early 60's my mother was married to a very strong and powerful man and suddenly things did not go well. My life started suffering because of their divorce and there was no more stable home for me and my younger brother. When my mother married again things got worse.

Later I got married thinking that I will have peace from the feeling I was feeling. Now things got worse than ever before. At some stage I got sick and I had to go for an operation for breast cancer. Then my life reversed again because after the operation I lost my memory and I was in a coma for about six weeks. Then when I woke up I thought I lost the battle. Suddenly I developed fear and panic attacks.

Then one day I was elected as a delegate to attend Gender at Work at Cape Town – at the time I told myself this is the time to face my fears because I will be representing my organisation. Nomsa are you ready for this trip Pat asked? Yes, I am ready more than ever before. Then the following week we went to Cape Town. Having that confidence. During the meeting I tried to participate but I was blocked. Then fear started, started growing very fast as my heart was pounding followed by a panic attack. I was so frustrated then anger started to come out. In our last day I felt that in order to ease my mind, was to announce that I want to be part of the next meetings and started to feel comfort, that this will pass because it is a sickness.

Next day early in the morning I was preparing to go to work and suddenly there was a knock at my door. I opened the door – there was this man in a black suit, black tie and a silk powder blue shirt standing at my door. Oh whoa – oh whoa, the man standing by the door was my biological father of which I haven't seen him for ages. Oh, is this my long lost daughter the man said. Then everything started to open up and my heart pounding. When I recovered from the shock I said – yes father how did you find me. That doesn't matter anymore I am here father said.

The following week Pat and I went to Cape Town for the next Gender at Work meeting. Surprisingly during the participation I felt no fear, no panic attack. Then I told Pat. Oh, Nomsa is back. I won't let anything or anyone come on my way anymore.

Something triggered my life. Was it my father? Was it Gender at Work? Was it Pat? Lastly with Gender at Work I became a strong confident woman again. Especially with the change project. ■

We can make the best of what we get

By Thulile Motsamai

The name is Thulile Motsamai – a young 34yr old woman born in the Eastern Cape. It was one of the normal days in May 2007 in Germiston ante-natal clinic. It was a bit cold and windy early in the morning round about 08h00 – it was my second visitation to the clinic as I was six months pregnant. I was looking very pretty as I was wearing my blue jeans and my white

maternity shirt. I had a scarf on my shoulder and a hood on my head and carried a cream white hand bag.

As we were sitting one of the nurses started talking to us about HIV Aids test that should be done and the importance of doing it and why we should know our status. For a moment I was very scared and sure that I'm not going to do the test as I knew very well the possibility that I might be positive because of my cheating husband who made another woman pregnant a year before I was pregnant. But guess what – I didn't have any choice but to do the test as it was compulsory.

So the test was done after counselling was given to me, and the result came back positive. I was told what to do to protect the baby and just after that I went to the toilet and cried, washed my face and went out pretending that everything was ok and I went home and didn't tell anyone. I just did what I was told to do for the baby's sake. So on the 11th August the same year I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. Six months later she was tested and she tested negative.

By that sixth month I went back to work and I was elected as a shop steward and I was introduced to the gender committee at SACCAWU so through our meeting the HIV Aids policy was introduced to us. After that meeting which was in Johannesburg SACCAWU head office, I was confronted by my husband whom I was with that morning. Everything was fine and all of a sudden he was asking me about my status. I was surprised and wanted to know where all that comes from. Eventually I found out that the other woman in his life has told him about her status and he was blaming me.

A month after the incident we forwarded a proposal to the company about the HIV Aids policy. At that time it was November 2008 and I was even involved in Decision for Life⁶, which is a campaign for young women in the services sector.

This exposed me more to gender issues so that when I decided to do the test again and it was confirmed that I'm HIV positive, I asked the nurse what to do next. She told me that I will have to do a CD4 count, Pap smear and eat a healthy diet. When I tested the results came back showing a count of 1078 and they could not find anything from the Pap smear. Nothing was prescribed except for vitamins and to regularly exercise, hope you know the rest.

I went back home and called my husband's family to come the next weekend and they came. His two brothers and their wives came and I prepared lunch for them. After dinner I told them the reason for my invite, starting from the day I was confronted by my husband up to the point where I disclosed my status and I told my husband that, that is my status and not his. I asked him to do a test and not to use my results as his. I told him that we cannot blame anyone as blame will not change or take the virus away.

Our union signed the agreement with the company and launched the policy on 1st December 2009. It is implemented and monitored and there are staff trainings each month and we are even running the campaign of knowing your status. I am a peer educator but still in training.

I am a very happy woman now that my husband respects me and treats me with dignity and knows that I've got the right and I will put my foot down for anything that I believe in. ■

⁶ Gender at Work methods and concepts influenced this campaign through the participation of a Gender at Work facilitator and program officer in the campaign HIV/AIDS.





TREATMENT ACTION CAMPAIGN (TAC)

TAC was founded in December 1998 by activists who aimed to improve people's knowledge, their access to treatment options and access to health care services and to address stigma and discrimination. The TAC founders came from a history of activism both within the ANC and the gay and lesbian social movements. Their primary aim was to help members realise their rights through social action. They believed that intense mobilisation of communities, would bring about the needed changes. The core group of founders did not prioritise any discussion of women's rights, although women were the majority among its membership.

When TAC joined the Gender at Work process in 2005⁷ they had about 15000 volunteer members and functioned in 6 provinces. Members were organized into branches, districts, provincial committees and a National Executive Committee (NEC). TAC had five programs – Treatment Literacy, Campaigns, Communication and Research, a Youth Project and Administration and Finance⁸. TAC members were starting to look at other issues such as community development issues of housing and water that are linked to basic needs guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. Men held the majority of leadership positions and there were no specific programs for the vast majority (80% to 90%) of women members.

Between 2005 and 2008, when TAC joined the second round of the Gender at Work process, TAC women were more visible in the organization and playing a more significant public role. The TAC website and newsletter started new foci on women and girls, a TAC booklet documented women's stories and a Women's Rights Campaign and various women's health programmes were initiated. Significantly, there were also more male treatment literacy coordinators than before – challenging the stereotype that this was a feminine arena. And there were more men involved as coordinators, facilitating and teaching women's rights.

In mid 2008, TAC was in the midst of a large scale restructuring and downsizing process, and experiencing incredible turbulence. The TAC change team participating in the Gender at Work programme came from the district office of remote rural Lusikisiki, where they faced extremely challenging conditions. Their change project intended to build women's leadership and to create a more conducive environment for implementing effective programming for women at the local level. Despite difficult internal organisational conditions, the team transformed its way of working among staff and with volunteers. In fact, team members and organisational staff note that they are achieving much more now than ever before. Most striking is their success in getting the House of Traditional Leaders to support a campaign that challenges girl child abduction, a practice that is very common in the area.

The TAC story talks movingly about this child abduction campaign. ■

⁷ See TAC Profile for more on TAC's initial experience with Gender at Work <http://www.genderatwork.org/tac-0>

⁸ By 2007 these Programmes were named Treatment Literacy; Campaigns and Organising; Treatment Project and Policy, Research and Communication. From 2007 two new programmes were initiated, namely - Women Rights Agenda, and People Living with HIV/AIDS.

Where is the future?

By Nodumo Sigosa

In Lusikisiki there is a village called kwaNcele. This village is estimated to have a population of 10 000 people. It is in a deep rural area where boys from the age of 18 go to work in the mines or in the sugar cane fields in Durban. They work in order to be able to pay lobola so that they can have wives and build their own houses.

Girls in this village leave school at the age of 15 to get married and bear children. In February 2009 girls from this village were forced to marry older men – what I really mean is: the girls were dragged and lifted up onto the shoulders of five strong men to where they want to take them. These girls were 15 - 17 years old and the men they were being forced to marry were from 29 - 45 yrs old, some were sick with TB, others were getting married for the second time because their wives had passed away.

One afternoon when this girl who was 14 yrs old was at home, her aunt asked her to accompany her to the shop. On the way to the shop auntie told the girl that today you are getting married. The girl was shocked to hear this from her aunt. The grandmother who was staying with the girl was aware of this situation – this girl was an orphan.

By that time five strong men were there waiting for them to come so that they can drag her to her new home. The girl was shouting, refusing to go but that could not help because no-one came to her rescue – people say if you are a woman your grave is your in-laws. The husband who was unknown to the girl was waiting, he was a 45 year old man whose wife escaped from him because he was sick with TB and not working but depending on a disability grant. The girl had to stay because she had nowhere to go. She stayed for three years.

During the first year she fell pregnant and gave birth to a boy. It was painful because she was forced to have sex with this old man and he would beat her if she did not sleep with him. When the child was growing up the man did not want to give the girl money to raise the child and that made life more difficult. Her mother in-law would give her R10 if she wanted to go to clinic and buy soap to wash the baby and clothe the baby.

One day it was announced that all the girls who were forced to marry must go to police station. The reason for this announcement was that a 15 year old girl escaped when she was forced into marriage by three men. The girl ran straight to police station. The police told her that there is nothing they can do to help and she must go home.

On the way home she was nearly hit by a car. This was the car of the Mayor's daughter. She was driving around the village that day. The car stopped and the Mayor's daughter asked the girl what was happening. The girl was crying and shivering and the Mayor's daughter told her to get inside the car and tell her the whole story. Then they went to the mayor's house and they narrated the story to the mayor who then went to police station to tell the police to call all the girls who were in forced marriages.

Eight girls came back and were taken to Palmerton child care centre where they were advised to go back to school. That girl who has a baby boy came with the baby. The baby is in the place of

safety in Umtata and the case was opened by government. That became a big problem because some of their parents do not want to see them anymore saying that they brought shame to their culture. In-laws want government to bring back the cows they paid for lobola but regardless of this situation the girls are schooling.

Here at TAC we have a Women's rights program which fights Gender Based Violence and deals with other women's issues. We supported girls by giving information about HIV and TB, STI's, Cervical cancer, children's rights and counselling to carry on with life because if they are educated they can be able to stand for themselves.

We are still doing awareness campaigns at Kwa-Ncele. We attend community imbizo to promote education and stop the abuse of children. We want to see change because if this carries on there is no future for our sisters who are being abused by the same people who were suppose to protect them.

PANTSI NGOKU ABUZWA KWABANTWANA NABAFAZI! ■





WOMEN ON FARMS PROJECT (WFP)

Women on Farms Project (WFP) is an NGO working with women in commercial agriculture, mainly in the Western Cape Province. The organisation has its roots in Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR), which initiated a project in 1992 to work with farmwomen. The initial focus was on life skills, on releasing the power of women to change their lives. In 1996 WFP became an independent organisation and began training farmwomen on labour rights. This early work led to a network of Vroue Regte Groepe (VRG) or women's rights groups on farms.

WFP realized there was a limit to the empowerment they could effect as an NGO, and they saw the need for farm workers to take the lead in setting up a membership organisation. In 2004 WFP supported the setting up of a legally registered trade union – Sikhula Sonke (meaning we grow together). WFP continues to strengthen the capacity of women who live and work on farms to claim their rights and fulfill their needs. They do this through advocacy and lobbying and support for the building of social movements for farmwomen.

When WFP participated in their first round with Gender at Work in 2005 they were still grappling with the shift in their relationship to the union and were looking for models on how an NGO can support a membership organisation, over which it has no control. At that time five Sikhula Sonke staff members were on the WFP staff structure and the union shared offices with WFP. All WFP's programmes were still oriented towards supporting and building the union. WFP was also beginning to grapple with changing racial demographics of the workforce – the Western Cape under apartheid had been a coloured labour preference area, the farmworkers were coloured, and WFP was historically a coloured organization. However there were now growing numbers of African farmworkers, and a strategic priority was to make the organization more reflective of the racial demography of the labour force.

When WFP joined the second round with Gender at Work, Sikhula Sonke, had become independent with its own funding and programs. WFP was in the process of redefining its mission, programs, structure and the way it works as an NGO based on lessons learned from its engagement with Sikhula Sonke. WFP wanted to see farm level transformation with farm workers self-sustaining and able to take their issues forward themselves without being dependent on the WFP. In addition WFP was systematically looking at how to define and understand what it means to be a feminist organisation, operating according to feminist values. They were also looking at issues of internal organisational culture and how to nurture staff who deal with secondary trauma.

The WFP change project was to strengthen farm women's ownership and leadership within the organisation. Through the change project Women on Farms changed their approach and style of working with farm workers. Their internal organisational culture was transformed and this in turn has had a significant impact on the work with farm workers. Women on Farms' current motto is – "anything a farm woman can do for herself, we don't do". The WFP stories demonstrate the increased sense of confidence and self articulation of two staff members who reflect on their own histories of growing up on farms and who now service other farmwomen. ■

The strength of a woman

By Roseline Prescence

As I grew up on a farm, and looking at the women in my life, I ask myself – What happened? What has changed for her? My grandmother grew up on a farm with 5 sisters and a brother. Schooling for them on a farm wasn't a priority; all they could think about was surviving the odds and staying alive. At a tender age of 15 she met this handsome guy, but because her mother felt that she needs to concentrate on working for the house, boys were not a consideration, but eventually that feeling of love, a family and security took over. She married my grandfather at the age of 18 and had 3 daughters and 2 boys.

My grandfather was a driver and supervisor on the farm, and that position held a sense of power. My grandmother had to struggle with keeping her position as a wife and keeping the family together. She had to fight the powers of other influences that could have a bad impact on her marriage. A husband beating you wasn't even mentioned in their home. The noises and furniture moving could pay evidence to that. The children in the home began to distance themselves from society. The image of a happy home was shattered, but my grandmother made it her duty as a house wife to keep the family happy.

After the death of my mother things changed dramatically. My mother was the eldest of the daughters. The twin sisters died in a fire when they were still young, it devastated her as much as the death of my mother, the only daughter she had left. She didn't eat or talk for weeks. It had a huge impact on her marriage, blame and guilt feelings were swung all around. My mother used to provide for the family and now the support was gone. My granny went back to working on a farm to keep me and my sister in school. She believed that we would build this family again to its full glory.

As I grew older, my grandmother grew harder on me. I thought if I leave home that whatever is out there is going to give me something to build on or would even give me a sense of belonging. The mother that I confided in suddenly turned into this hard person. My grandfather became my comfort. "I love you mommy" these were the words stuck in my head, but I could never say it. I wondered where granny is. What happened to my soft spoken mommy, life pushed her but she was always in control. She was always objective, and could show affection, but I see a different person. It is like I lived both sides of the mirror, when I reflected on how much she has changed. It was like life had its way with her, but now suddenly the transformation was hard to succumb to. It made me stop and ask the same question over again "what makes you change?"

My grandfather wasn't so tough anymore; he wouldn't even dare question her authority. Everything she says now is law and I could sense fear from my grandfather. She became powerful and dominant, controlling the household with an iron hand; saying things without thinking how it would make you feel. People in the community adored her. Each day I discovered a new character unfold inside my granny. Each word she uttered to me made me feel useless and less powerful. You are a bad girl, you are never going to be good enough, was like a poem that I read over and over again. I always went to bed wondering how I will end up. To me each day felt like a torture, my sister was the perfect angel, who didn't have a child at the age of 21. I felt like a disgrace to my

family. I was the weakest link, busy tumbling down the empire that my grandmother in her mind was building for us. I began to doubt my abilities at work as a program officer for Women on Farms Project.

I met Aunty Jakoba in 2004. A very shy and sweet woman. Somehow I saw my grandmother within her, but then I thought no you are wrong. She is too sweet and shy to be my grandmother. The two of them won't match, but thinking of how my grandmother's life was Aunty Jakoba had some characteristics of my grandmother. I felt close to her in a way that behind the sweetness I could see how dramatically my grandmother's life had changed; from a sweet and soft aunty to this hard, no nonsense woman. As I began to work with the women things became a bit clearer. Somehow I began to identify myself with their life experiences. Each person chose how they want their life to turn out. I can't teach women to change if the change hasn't taken place within me. My grandmother didn't scream or say bad words to make me feel bad. It was her way of saying don't ever go through what I went through; but how can you prevent your circumstances? The question still remains with me, what makes women change in such a way that you take on a new way of behaving. Where was the turning point for my grandmother?

As I began working with the Rawsonville women and hearing about their life stories, I began to deal with my inner feelings. I could feel that safe space and I could feel the closeness, because you realise that nobody chose to get raped or beaten. If I could have created a better life for me, I would have been a doctor by now, healing the scars of every tormented soul. You are so stuck in your ways and environment that the impossible seems so far. My grandmother has found her inner strength, a way to say to us, look I have found my power. Somebody asked me why do you want to do this work? And I said: "It is because I love working with women and I want to help them" and she asked me "Isn't it because you want to heal something within yourself that you want to help others?" I began to explore that statement, and I realise that the piece of cloth that was used to cover the scars left in my heart, has began to get torn and rotten. I have to clean the wound before I can cover it every day with clean bandages.

As my work continued with the women I wondered within myself if I am really making an impact in their development while I am stuck dealing with my own demons. It is grown women that have gone through so many life experiences than I have. In the women's circles they began to grapple with concepts such as gender and patriarchy, understanding a woman's role in society. They began sharing on how poor and powerless they feel. To challenge a system that puts you down as a woman was like moving out of your comfort zone. With every monthly session women became open and shared how they are dealing with challenges. They talked about their husbands who are encouraging them to go to trainings, all because they share what they are learning with their family. My grandmother didn't have that training and support, how come she became such a powerful force? One woman from Ceres responded that she always had everything in life: food, clothes and money, but she still felt poor. She said that when she joined the group she had found her wealth and power, she could now speak out. I found that for me, I lived my whole life based on negative thoughts; it dragged me down to a space where I felt depressed and scared to speak or even share.

Being part of the organisation's learning opportunities around feminism, has broadened my understanding of a woman's space and the environment she finds herself in. You grapple with so many issues in you. ■





VUKANI TSOHANG AFRICA

Vukani Tsohang Africa⁹ is a community based organisation formed in 2003, and operating from a church venue in Evaton, Gauteng. The organisation focuses on skills training in dressmaking, beading and tapestry for unemployed women and youth, and facilitates awareness raising focusing on human rights, HIV and AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. An important component is an integration programme that brings together mentally challenged youth and women in the skills training programme. Vukani assists women with accessing social grants and draws on the expertise of organisations and groups dealing with HIV and AIDS, child welfare and violence against women.

Fourteen volunteers – 11 women and 3 men – form the core group organising and facilitating skills training and awareness-raising. Three of these are mentally challenged members who have been with the organisation since its formation.

When they first joined the Gender at Work process, Vukani operated with a very small material resource base struggled to pay their rent and had no finances to pay stipends to volunteers. Their change project was to become organisationally and financially sustainable so that they could continue to use their training work as a vehicle for consciousness-raising and broader community development work.

Through the action learning process Vukani succeeded in transforming its leadership model from a traditional hierarchy into a shared leadership model.

Their change project enabled them to develop and innovate brilliant ways to simultaneously share hard skills that help people earn an income while also addressing social issues. They have weekly dialogues and seminars open to all community members, including trainees and the broader community. Topics include human rights, HIV/AIDS, sexuality and gender-based violence, as well as service delivery and government department accountability. During the process, Vukani succeeded in raising some funds and accessing a computer, but still struggles with long-term sustainability.

The four Vukani stories reflect on personal changes, growing commitment to social and collective action and most significantly the internal leadership changes and community seminars. ■

⁹ This organisational description relies heavily on program documentation prepared by Nancy Castro, 2008.

Raising concerns about my rights with confidence

By Elizabeth Mabitle

In 2007 I decide to do beadwork and I started working at Vukani as a volunteer. I was not interested in knowing more about my workplace. I did not even have the spirit of team work. In 2008 I was asked to attend the Gender at Work workshop. It was during this eighteen month process that I reflected on myself and knew that I had to be committed in my work and be able to work with others as a team and have a goal in my life.

During the gender at work workshops we learnt about strategic planning and its importance. All this education has brought a lot of impact on us as a team. As part of life skills our organisation provides skills transfer in tapestry, dressmaking, and beadwork. We have seminars once a week. Seeing women having challenges in their lives, women who are abused or having maintenance problems conquer their problems gives me peace. We have also come up with poverty alleviation programmes to help women.

We invited the ANC to do voter education before the last elections. They spoke about the value of having women voting, as their vote is their voice. We also invited the councillor to speak about service delivery issues as most women had problems with service delivery.

After the elections I decided to start going to local meetings and ask about our roads which had been badly damaged by last summer rains. It was terrible and not accessible at all. They were very happy that I came and they claimed that they were not aware.

I also told them that I have already lodged a complaint to the public protector and the matter was under investigation and the public protector has already met with Emfuleni Management. The report I then got was that the local council had already found a tender that was going to work on the road before the end of the year.

The councillor and his committee told us in the meeting that West Road was very expensive and they do not have money for it. The people in the meeting started to question him. No one would have questioned him if I was not there as a resident. I am now very assertive and I'm not afraid to speak in public. I asked him if West Road did not form part of South African roads, if yes, then why don't they budget for it. This was a right time for me to speak about the letter I wrote to the public protector.

After the meeting I organised all residents in my area and we decided to reopen the issue and wrote a petition and everyone signed and the letter was then posted to the public protector's office. We still attend meetings and are waiting for feedback and we always remind our councillor of his promises.

Our initiative as Vukani has also led to the building of a fire station in Evaton. ■

Endurance bears fruits

By Thandi Mtimkulu

It is a very cold Tuesday and I'm sitting in a warm kitchen. I'm drinking a hot cup of rooibos tea and vegetable soup is boiling on the stove. I can smell the nice aroma of fresh vegetables and the steam makes the room cosy and warm.

We are a family of nine – my mother, father and six siblings (six girls and one boy). I am the eldest child in my family. My home was always peaceful with us children playing games during the day and sitting around the fire as a family in the evening.

Our house was very small and cosy. It was a three room house and we were able to fit into the structure of the house those days as the government saw fit. My parents extended the house by erecting a shack adjacent to our kitchen which became our sitting room. We had a bedroom, kitchen, dining room and the extended sitting room. The kitchen was a bedroom at night and all the children slept under the table. We did not have much but could afford a few things as my father was self employed. He was selling tripe and most families lived on this as it was affordable.

My mother was a nursing sister in the local clinic. We were a Christian family and were taught to worship, pray and to be at peace with each other from an early age. We would walk to school together and enjoyed playing games.

My father's health deteriorated and he was admitted to Baragwanath Hospital. His absence made it difficult to make ends meet. It got even worse because my mother was pregnant with his seventh child, Nomsa. When Nomsa was three months old my father died. This was the first time that we came face to face with hardship as my mother had to pay rent, buy groceries, clothes and school uniforms. Life was hard as four of us were at school, the twins were at the day care centre and the youngest had to have a child minder.

My mother encouraged us to study and be determined to win irrespective of the circumstances. My mother would do everything in her power to make sure that we receive education. After attaining my junior certificate I had to leave school and go to nursing college so as to help my mother in educating the younger ones in the family as she was really struggling.

Going to the college would earn me a stipend and I would have been able to help my mother. I knew that I was not good enough to be in the medical field as I had no love for it. But then I had no will power to disappoint my mum. I submitted my application early hoping that I will get my response by the end of that year. I thought that I will not be put on the waiting list as my application would be in the first few.

I wrote and passed my JC but alas, I was not called in. I had to stay at home and wait. Out of luck I met one of my former teachers who got angry when I told him that I was at home. He used his connections to get me a bursary and I was enrolled at the teachers college.

I passed my primary teachers certificate in two years. It was a blessing as God came through for me; I managed to redirect my destiny. I was passionate about my work. I then started to help my mother educate my siblings. I studied part time and obtained my matric certificate in order to proceed with my studies. After this I obtained my secondary teachers diploma.

After two years I gave birth to my daughter Nosipho. Lobola was paid but her father died when she was six months old. After three months I got married to Abel Mbhele in Vanderbijlpark. I had to relocate from Soweto and go and live in the Vaal.

My marriage did not last and I divorced. I enjoyed teaching and my results were very good. I was very good with slow learners and learners with special needs. I also enjoyed sports and art and craft. I was introduced to a special school of learners with special needs by a social worker who was a neighbour. The nurses at Boipatong clinic had started a training centre for children with disabilities who could not cope with mainline schooling, and they needed someone to start the school.

This was my new breakthrough. The department was pleased with my progress, and I was employed by Thabo-Vuyo on the 1st July 1983. I had to research and come up with a methodology for these children who were not educable but trainable. This new challenge encouraged me to register for a diploma in special education. I enjoyed teaching here and I became an acting principal and educator for three years.

After three years a new principal was appointed, and this broke my heart. Little did I know that God had great plans for me. I continued teaching in the school for seventeen years without a door opening for promotion. A deputy and head of department post were advertised but I did not get any of the posts but I continued to stay in the school.

One year we got a communiqué from the department that all over aged learners should be discharged from school in order to make room for young learners. In the Vaal there were only three special schools at that time and ours was the biggest. I then decided to resign and start a protective workshop for these learners as I did not want them to loiter in the street.

This is how Vukani was started. All my life I had to struggle to get where I wanted to go. I know that one day I will succeed.

Today what keeps me going and what makes me focused, content, gentle and sensitive is what I learnt in the Gender at Work Peer learning. This process made me learn to listen to others and know that I need to respect and work with others in a kind and affirming manner. I learnt from other organisations about how they run their organisations. I have also learnt that the collective is much more important than an individual.

Transparency and team work make the work easier and the load lighter as it rests equally upon all of us. I have also learnt to heal and listen to my body. Tai Chi has given me a new life and I have started dreaming and making plans for the future.

Thank you to all the organisations that took time to listen to our problems and guide us, thank you to our facilitators and a big thank you to all participants who had the love and the spirit to allow all of us to learn from each other and reshape our organisations. Lastly thank you to all Vukani staff for their love and patience with me. ■

Personal change

By Thoko Chili

It all started four years ago when I was doing my house chores and listening to the radio. While listening I heard this wonderful lady on the radio inviting women and youth who are unemployed to come to a free skills training. Training was offered in dressmaking, beadwork and tapestry. That woman was Mama Thandi of Vukani-Tsohang Africa which means wake up Africa. At first I thought this was just a marketing strategy, she maybe wants us to come and when we get there, there will be a fee that we will have to pay. As we all know, in modern days it is not simple for someone to offer specialised training for free. Unless the project is fully funded by the government.

For me staying at home and doing nothing was a problem so I decided to go and register with them. My aim was just to get a certificate as I was already experienced in dressmaking. I was discouraged on the first day when I arrived at Vukani to see the facilitators being so young. I thought they were taking advantage of us. I wanted to go back home but my late sister encouraged me to give it a try. That was the best decision I had ever taken. It was the beginning of many great things to come.

After completing the course, Mama Thandi, who saw potential in me, asked me if I would like to volunteer to give lessons to new students. This was a difficult request because I knew I was not going to earn anything. At least at home I knew I had customers who paid me for sewing for them. I decided to do it as I also got a certificate for free.

Vukani was not only helping unemployed people but it was also a project for people with disability. Coming to think that I had never worked with people with disability I thought it was going to be difficult for me to work with them but as time went by I got close to them and enjoyed working with them and they also loved me. One day Mama Thandi's daughter invited us to a workshop in Johannesburg with Remmoho, an organisation that stands against all forms of abuse. Their workshops made me see things in a different way. I started to be interested in matters that concern our community. We practiced what we learnt there in our project. We organized seminars and educated the community about their rights, HIV and Aids and everything they need to know. We partnered with people from different government departments to help us with some seminars. Again Nosipho introduced us to the Gender at Work process and helped us to transform our project.

When we first came to the workshops we could hardly say a word. We just listened to what they said and never participated. I was very shy and did not want to speak English because I felt stupid. I had a low self-esteem and underestimated myself. I used to envy other people when they communicated in English and they were fluent. My answer would always be yes or no without giving reasons.

Fazila picked up that all facilitators at Vukani had a problem of participating in the workshops. She became interested in me because she used to sleep at my place. As we were talking she asked me how far I had gone with my studies. I told her that I had done grade eleven. She encouraged me to further my studies. I told her that I was too old to learn. She told me I was talking rubbish and I

must give it a try. I was terrified because I had been out of school for twenty years. But I decided to give it a try just to shut her up.

Early last year my neighbor Mirriam Radebe told me about ABET. She insisted that we go and attend. They told me that I have to start with level four so that I can refresh my mind. I then spoke to Mama Thandi and my fellow facilitators and they all supported me. After writing my final exams when my results come I found out that I passed with flying colours. I got two A's, two B's, two C's and one D. The work was too much but fortunately I made it. It was very difficult because I am not married and do not have children of my own. Sometimes I would not have money for transport or food. I would go to bed at twelve doing some sewing so that I can have money for food. Sometimes I felt like letting go but I held on because God is good all the time and he promised not to leave nor forsake us, he saw me through and people helped me. Amongst them was Mama Thandi and my sisters daughter Mandu.

The results were so good and the principal was impressed by our performance, me and Mirriam. This gave me courage to continue and do my grade twelve. I realised that I alone have the power to transform my thoughts into physical reality and I alone can dream and make my dreams come true.

If it was not for the Gender at Work facilitators I do not think I would have gone so far. Today I am a brave woman. Presently I'm writing my grade twelve final exams. I have taken three subjects and I know that through determination I'm going to pass them. Even though I'm only two months in grade twelve I can tell anyone who wants to listen to me. No matter how crowded the sky is with stars, I will one day find a way of finding myself amongst them if I do not give up on life.

Our lives change the minute we make new and congruent and committed decisions. I have made the commitment that my life must change completely. All thanks to Gender at Work, those who introduced me to it and those who supported me on this decision. Especially my sister's daughter Mandu who opened her heart and home for me. I love you guys – THANK YOU. ■

Changing my life

By Seipati Sekabate

First my name is Seipati and I am a married woman with no children. I live with my husband Thabo. We live in Sebokeng zone 14. We are living together peacefully except for few problems here and there. I am an ambitious woman who knows what she wants. I am a go-getter and like to see things happening.

I was living like any woman in the community. I would wake up in the morning and clean my house. After cleaning I would sleep and wake up at 16h30 in the afternoon, cook supper then watch television and go to bed. This was my daily routine until I joined Vukani. Can you imagine the state I was in?

One day I took a decision that I don't want this life anymore, I want to be like other woman and make the difference in my life. I thought long enough that I must change the life style that I'm living. I said to myself; this house is doing nothing to me nor does it pay me after I've cleaned, cooked and washed. I am still poor and am a woman that is dependent on the spouse for income. I want to have

my own money so that I can put food on the table. I said I want to join other women and find out how they generate income. I joined Vukani and I was trained to do tapestry and increased my knowledge on sewing. I was determined to acquire all the skills and was not prepared to go back home, sit and do nothing anymore.

I enjoyed being at Vukani as we did not only do craft but also discussed and shared as women while we are working. I met a lot of people and enjoyed being out of the house. I became strong and was motivated by other women's victories. This gave me courage to start challenging certain things in my life. I then concluded in my mind that I'm not going anywhere and decided to volunteer as a facilitator and knew that one day they will give me a job. I stayed on, until one day in January, I don't remember the date, and they asked me to join the team and work with them. I love my job even though there is no money. This discouraged me and I thought of sitting at home until there were funds to pay us.

Surprisingly Gender at Work came and it was introduced to us. In the first peer learning, things were hard to me. I was afraid to talk and was very shy. After participating in the process I am no longer shy, I know my rights and my organisation in and out. I know how to speak out and know my role in the organisation and as a tapestry facilitator. Thanks to Gender at Work there is now transparency, passion and teamwork in my organisation.

We give skills to women and youth and every Thursday we have dialogues with the group. We have created a safe space for women and youth. People feel free to talk about everything in their lives. One day one woman came to us for training because she wanted to be able to put food on the table for her children. She did not have an identity document and could not get a grant for her children. We wrote her a letter to home affairs, it took us a long time but she eventually got an identity document. She even got a birth certificate for her daughter. We were proud as an organisation for this breakthrough.

I think when I was sitting at home doing nothing, who will help the women get identity documents so that they can live their lives to the fullest. I'm proud to tell other women that when you come to Vukani you won't only acquire skills but empower and educate women on human rights. We all need to live in dignity and enjoy the benefits of the freedom we fought for.

There are women, who make things better, simply by showing up,

There are women, who make things happen,

There are women, who make their way,

There are women, who make a difference,

And women who make us smile,

There are women, who make their way,

There are women, who make a difference,

There are women of wit and wisdom,

Who through strength and courage make it through,

There are women, who change the world every day.....

Women like you. (Ashley Rice) ■





KGANYA WOMEN'S CONSORTIUM

Kganya Women's Consortium¹⁰ (KWC) was formed in 2001 in Orange Farm, an informal settlement about an hour and a half outside of central Johannesburg. The Consortium is a network of community based organisations that came together to develop a collective approach to overcoming the problems of widespread unemployment and poverty in one of the most disadvantaged areas in Gauteng.

Of the initial 17 groups, 12 remained functional at the time KWC made first contact with Gender at Work. At the time even though the KWC brought together women's projects there was no clear gender perspective. Although KWC was working with women's immediate needs it was not concerned to challenge power relations that women face in the society (strategic needs). The network had also recently suffered a very devastating experience with service provider NGO's and had lost a considerable funding resource.

In the Gender at Work action learning process KWC wanted to develop a collective approach to overcoming widespread socio-economic challenges pervasive in the region, while empowering women, the majority of their membership. Their specific change project was to create a formal structure to strengthen the organisation so that it could support member collaboration, and grow in scope and size. As a stronger, more collaborative organisation, the Consortium aimed to be better equipped, to reduce the incidence of domestic abuse and to promote women's rights.

During the process, the KWC managed to rebuild itself and rise like a phoenix from the ashes by recruiting new members and creating new life for itself. Activists from its member organisations support each other through joint training and fundraising, and through social awareness programmes which they plan, organise and carry out collectively. Notably, among the new recruits were youth who came together in various youth organisations.

The two Kganya stories are from members of these newly formed youth organisations. ■

¹⁰ This organisational description relies heavily on program documentation prepared by Nancy Castro, 2008.

Learning from my mistakes

By Nobelunga Khumalo

Dusty roads and people living in shacks with no electricity and running water in a place called Umondo. The area is an area of people with a high rate of poverty but all the people have ubuntu (humanity). You can go to the neighbour ask for sugar, you get it, the next time the neighbour comes and tells you he/she hasn't eaten the whole day of course you give the neighbour food. It's a situation of izandla ziyagezana (we help each other), well nothing seems to be wrong.

This is where I was born and bred and I enjoy the life. I am still in primary school, always on top five in class and enjoy playing. Well I do not have all the fancy things that my classmates have because my mom is a single mom and she is not working but I didn't seem to care because my mom showered me with love and she was always there for me all the time. She never judged me and always believed in me.

She was my inspiration. She was also a friend, she told me whatever I needed to talk about, I can always come to her. Whenever we would sleep with empty stomachs she would say "I never wanted this life for my kids but I'll keep on trying to give you the best I can". As her kids we understood because she was warm and loving all the time. Then I finished my primary school and it was time to go to secondary school. This is where the pressure was high and it was hard to be an outcast. I had to find means and ways on how to be like my friends. My friends were those kind of people who lived in nice big houses and living with both parents, both working and they get to have everything they wanted.

One day this man came to my house and said he saw what kind of a person I was, that I am a person of high integrity, self respect, dignity, very beautiful and intelligent. He wanted me to be his second wife. Wow this guy was very loaded with money and I think he was twice my age. Damn I thought to myself and I said if this guy is going to give me all the money in the world, why not become his girlfriend because he was busy proposing to me. He was coming regularly now to see how I was doing. He bought me some stuff and I took it. Then as time went by I decided to be his girlfriend. I'm telling you after that I had all kinds of clothes I wanted, any hairstyle and good food. I could go anywhere anytime now. I was living the kind of life I wanted and liked but what was the price that I had to pay?

I had to do whatever the man wanted me to do. Sometimes he would just call me in the middle of the day and tell me to wear a skirt because I want you today. Then I had to wear it and have sex with him inside the car, wherever he decided to park the car. Remember we could not go to his house because he had a wife.

When his wife was not there he would take me to his house and he would want to have unprotected sex in his wife's bed. What can I say, if I refuse, I am never going to get the money again. He would climb on top of me and I would feel like I'm burning in hell. He would want to kiss me and I would refuse, I just heard myself saying: "just do whatever you have to do and get off me". After that I would go to the toilet and vomit, I would feel dirty as if someone has just raped me, I would go home and wash myself for hours just to get his smell off me.

However I continued that way for a long time because it was hard to leave the money and go back to being poor. Sometimes I would say "you know what, don't come at all or call me ever again". But he would call. But after sometimes seeing that now it's been time since I went to bed without food, I would call him again and pretend as if I didn't mean any of the things I said. Of course he would come back and continue as if nothing happened. But the reality is that I was putting my life and health in danger because he had the power and control over me.

Then I didn't know that good things come to those who wait. I made a choice which was not a very good decision to make. Well I have to say this "If you are poor accept it but don't get too comfortable with it".

Always make the right choice don't ever choose short cuts. Now I know that short cuts don't work. Working hard and determination to change your life is the key. Never want people to feel your shame. But always reach out to positive people, people who will help you succeed in life. The support from family and friends might be there but if it's not, never give up. Continue to try to always conquer your dreams. Never take your eyes off your dreams. If you try and fail, that is good because failure shows that you tried to do something and now you know what went wrong for the next time so you never repeat the same mistake again. Always put important things first, never be ashamed of who you are but make something good out of it. Don't ever portray an image you are not because of peer pressure, saying no does not mean you are rude but it simply means you won't be misled by your role models. Also learn from other people's mistakes never to be a fool to do it yourself to see how much it hurts.

Always balance your lifestyle, if you cannot further your studies go and volunteer in some places which are close to your passion. I know volunteering does not put food on the table but it will certainly give you experience which might help you in future, remember the past is always going to be a part of you but it doesn't determine who you will become. ■

Women who change the world

By Caroline Mashale

*There are women, who make things better, simply by showing up,
There are women, who make things happen,
There are women, who make their way,
There are women, who make a difference,
And women who make us smile,
There are women, who make their way,
There are women, who make a difference,
There are women of wit and wisdom,
Who through strength and courage make it through,
There are women, who change the world every day.....
Women like you. (Ashley Rice)*

In the past years women were seen as objects to man. If you are a woman your place of work was to be in a school being a teacher, domestic worker or employed as a nurse. But for some African women they had to get married at an early age because it was prescribed by culture and society. Some of the women who got married were forced by their families to get married.

In 1987 a woman gave birth to a baby girl. She named her Khombomuni, a Venda name meaning what the bad luck is for. The reason why she gave her baby this name was because of her experience as a victim of domestic violence. Also because during her pregnancy she was very unhappy. She thought that Khombomuni is a bad luck in her life.

When Khombomuni was nine years old she was raped and she kept it a secret because she did not have knowledge about abuse. When this incident happened she was staying with her grandmother in Soweto. In 1997 Khombomuni moved to Orange Farm where she stayed with her parents and four siblings. During that year her mother and father were involved in a car accident. The mother survived as she sustained minor injuries and her father was admitted in the ICU and was certified dead. When his family went to identify him, they found him breathing. He was then admitted to another hospital in Cape Town. He was then admitted to the ICU for few weeks and he passed away because the ICU affected his bones.

His wife was blamed by her in-laws because of what happened to their son. They made it like she is the one who killed her husband. Khombomuni's mother was not working and she had to look after her five children. She started selling some sweets at the local primary school. Sometimes she would come back home without selling even one sweet.

She bought a packet of steel wool so that she can sell it in the community and she found a vacant corner at the local garage where she started selling tomatoes, potatoes and onions. The reason why she did all this is because she wanted all the best for her kids. She gave her kids the best education and a loving home.

Khombomuni was the youngest girl by that time, so every day when she came back from school she had to help her mother in the corner or sometimes do the house chores. Khombomuni did not

spend most of her time playing in the street because she had some responsibilities and she grew up as a young strong woman. When Khombomuni was in grade five she was raped again by a stranger. This was kept as a secret and she never told anyone about it. In 2003 she started getting sick and she didn't know what was eating her. She once fell at the school assembly and was taken to the local clinic. She was told that everything is fine and she was not sick. She told her mother and her mother was very happy that she was not sick as the sister confirmed.

As a young woman, growing up in a poor community is a lifetime experience and there are lots of challenges. Khombomuni saw other young women in the community suffering. Some girls in the community became pregnant at an early age and this made her realise that helping her mother in the stall helped her stay away from the trouble in the street and the community.

There is a high rate of unemployment in Orange Farm. Most of the people are unskilled and they earn very low wages and too little to meet the needs for themselves and their dependents. Single parents in Orange Farm often see to the well being of extended family members with their wages, while men spend on things for their own interest. For some, government grants are the only source of money. And some people don't have their own houses. You may find twenty-five people sharing a typical house. There is no privacy in these dwellings. Most of the community is infected with HIV.

In 2006 Khombomuni passed her matric and went to the college to do computer studies and in 2009 she registered at the University of South Africa where she was studying development studies. She realised that being a young black woman in South Africa you experience problems every day. Khombomuni found that things are not fair for girls in the community because most girls have little say in their reproductive health and men are determined when intercourse shall take place and many are refusing to use condoms due to traditional or superstitious beliefs.

Thanks to young women in leadership in our communities and that women can come together and address issues affecting them and work toward a change. They also provide them the opportunity to network and address their problems in cooperation with human rights service providers. In the past a woman in leadership was not accepted. Men wanted to be in control. They did not want to be led by a woman. But these days things are different, woman are seen as the best leaders in the community.

When Khombomuni was working with the community, she realised that this is what she wants to do and she loved working with people. And being a community leader made her grow stronger. In rural or poor communities most women are community leaders because of different reasons:

- They are women without their own kids.
- Their fathers, husbands or some male in their family was a community leader, so they want to continue with leadership.
- Their kids are grown up, so they need to spend time working and helping in their communities.
- Some because of education qualification.

But for Khombomuni it was different. She did not get involved in working with the people just because she wanted to keep herself busy. She was touched by the things that are happening around her community. She wanted to empower her community members. Young people are doing bad things and destroying their future – most young people are dropping out of school and there are a lot of single mothers in the area of Orange Farm and some of the kids are drug addicts. Khombomuni was really affected by this thing which was happening to young people in her community. ■





REMMOHO WOMEN'S FORUM

(All of us together)

In the second half of 2006 a group of women activists from the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) got together to discuss what it means to be a woman in the APF, and what it means to organise women into the APF. They decided to form Remmoho Women's Forum¹¹ to address some of the key issues they were concerned about – such as women in the APF being empowered to become more central to the internal and external work of the APF, women being more visible in leadership, and women's concerns being better reflected in the strategies, tactics and campaigns of the APF and other social movements.

The group did not want Remmoho to take the form of a new APF subcommittee where the issues could be ghettoised into "women's issues in a women's subcommittee". So Remmoho was set up as a separate organisation.

Remmoho created space for women to support each other and to build their confidence. Remmoho members are active in various social movements and community-based organisations in Gauteng. They developed an awareness of the roles and function of different social movements and community based organisations, their impact on women as well as strategies to deal with them.

Remmoho wanted to change the nature of the space of the social movements to one that was women friendly. The changes they wanted to see included sensitivity to taking up issues from a women's point of view; encouragement of women's participation and women's leadership; recruitment of more women into the struggle for social justice; establishment of open spaces for women in the movements and for women interested in joining the movements; changes to the traditional concept of childcare and development of progressive educational activities for the children of Remmoho members.

At the time we met them, Remmoho activities included:

- Awareness raising workshops to develop a gender perspective in APF related issues such as access to water, land, housing, energy/electricity.
- Internal Strategising Sessions to develop a strategy for organisation building.
- Campaign Action Forums to respond to public instances of violence against women and the daily violence women experience in community-based organisations and social movements.

Remmoho's change project with Gender at Work was to build women's activism and their participation in the social movements; to strengthen their organisational identity; and to improve their relationship to the mainly male leadership of the APF.

In the course of the action learning programmes Remmoho developed its independent identity as an organisation and strengthened its leadership. Remmoho members learned to tackle significant and problematic dynamics of women abuse and to 'confront with respect'. The Remmoho authors reflect in their stories on how they had to work to change their internalised repetition of APF culture to create a new norm. The stories talk about different aspects of this 'changed culture'. ■

¹¹ This organisational description relies heavily on program documentation prepared by Nancy Castro, 2008.

A river changing its form

By Nosipho Twala

As a young girl, growing up in Sebokeng, in a small four roomed house, that my mother owns, I could notice all the imbalances, inequalities and discrimination in our society. Our house was not respected like other houses in the neighbourhood because it was headed by a divorced woman.

Men in my area would go to the extent of beating their wives because they were friends with my mother. In my community in the 1980's there were very few female headed households except for a few exceptions where men were working in other provinces as migrant workers. Marriage in this community was seen as the have all of life.

Women who were not married were labelled spinsters and failures. My mother was seen as a failure as she had failed to keep her marriage and husband. She was seen as a threat to married women as she might steal their husbands.

All women introduced themselves as Mrs. so and so, and bragged about how happy they were in their marriages. My mother introduced herself as Mama Thandi as that was the only status she had or maybe because she could see that she was a misfit, perhaps she wanted to be everyone's sister and mother. I've never really asked her why she was affectionately known as Mama Thandi. All the children in my area are friends with my mother and love her as a mother. Most could not understand why their mothers could not leave their abusive relationships and be like my mother. This made men very angry as she was seen as a bad influence.

When women fought with their partners at night, they would run to our house and hide there. They rarely ran to other neighbours because they would be forced to reconcile and would have to go back home with the abuser. Police were not even an option as they had no jurisdiction to intervene in family matters. Women had to endure the suffering as their families would not even allow them to come back because of the lobola they received. Always when this happened my mother would tell me not to sacrifice my freedom and dignity because of a man who does not respect me. She told me that marriage is not the have all and end all of life.

I was always reprimanded by my neighbours for calling my mother by name. I always called her Thandi and she did not mind this. I was taught by all women in my area to call her mama or sisThandi. I did not understand why because her name was Thandi and she was my mother. But because I was bombarded with morality lectures I ended up conforming and started calling her mama.

Everyone in the community took it as their responsibility to teach me respect as I was seen as not grounded in respect because I did not have a father figure in my life. I was taught to greet adults respectfully as I did not bend my left knee and bow my head when I greet elders. I also annoyed most people as I said "Hallo sis Gladys" Greeting in this manner was seen as too English, casual and extremely disrespectful and showed no respect, it was also wrong and unheard of as I did not have a sister their age.

I used to become very uneasy when neighbours visited my home because they would teach me to

knock before entering my mother's bedroom. I did not understand why because I knew my mother was alone in her room and did not have any problem with this.

My mother's advice to other women always got us into trouble. She would advise women in abusive relationships to leave their husbands as they deserved to be treated with respect. After reconciling with their husbands they would tell them and some husbands would come back and shout at her. She would tell them to go away before calling the police to charge them with trespassing.

Growing up I joined the women's movement and became a feminist. I always felt that feminism chose me and that I did not get a chance to choose it. As all my life I was surrounded by contradictions, even as a child growing up.

When I was introduced to feminism I was very angry and abrupt. I would not spare any man who disrespected women or acted in a chauvinist manner.

My participation in the Gender at Work peer learning made me realise that anger is not always a good and appropriate approach. The "aha" moment happened when we were asked what our assumptions for change were, are we building a war or something else.

After this peer learning I was invited to be a panellist in a feminist workshop. I shared my view about approaching patriarchy with respect. To my surprise this message was not well received by my feminist's sisters. The first question I was asked was "please give an example or scenario of approaching patriarchy with respect".

The argument was that patriarchy in itself is very brutal and unleashes itself in a very violent manner. This was the truth and I immediately felt like I was in a toxic space. I also realised that no answer would be good enough for this audience.

In my organisation, I have seen how approaching things with love and respect brought change and made us improve our relationship as women. Before the peer learning there were fights and there was no trust. None of us were prepared to listen to each other and relations were very sour. We would go to meetings with the intention of naming and shaming and things would really get out of hand. This behaviour almost destroyed the organisation as we were all defensive and acted out of self interest.

Gender at Work taught us to be patient, transparent and to constantly communicate with each other respectfully. Now when I go to a meeting, I go there with an intention of becoming a part of a solution not a problem. This attitude has helped grow the membership. It has allowed even quiet woman to get their voice because power is shared. We no longer have feuds but are working together as an organisation to empower others.

This process has helped me to listen. I am now able to listen empathetically with an intention to understand not to answer like before. I embrace and understand diversity and also appreciate the different flavour that each of us brings to the organisation. I think we all make a good fruit salad and add a particular flavour and sweet aroma to the salad.

I take from this process not only knowledge but life skills that have improved my life and health. Tai Chi helped me focus and keeps me grounded at all times. Capacitar also helps me as an individual and empowers practitioners with skills to help women going through trauma.

I have learnt that giving respect earns you respect back, it makes the work lighter and the results are endless. Looking at others with eyes of kindness makes people open up to you. ■

Abuse in my marriage

By Millicent Phillips

I remember the day I met this handsome young man from a Zulu clan (Amabele). His name was Thuli Highland Mbhele. We met at Pretoria Street, Hillbrow, Johannesburg. He pursued me romantically and did so tenderly, comparing my beauty to the sun's rays – in trying to explain how I had caught his eyes and how he wants to make me his wife. I was taken up, I listened attentively and he wanted to know then and there, what I was thinking about his proposal. I then told him that I understand and will think through the decisions as matters of the heart are often not easy. I needed to find myself and do a thorough introspection because that meant that I would potentially be someone's wife. He allowed me the time I'd asked for and pleaded with me not to let him down as he was serious about me and wanted to have a relationship with me.

After three months of dating this guy I told my sister about this man that is interested in me and wants to marry me. She advised me to accept the proposal as dynamite comes in small packages. She told me that all she can do is wish me well and hope that I would be happy in my marriage. She said to me "Ntombi, the ball is in your court" you are the only person who can decide. All I can do is advise.

I accepted Thuli's proposal. Wedding bells rang, a wedding feast was organized, the wedding was solemnised traditionally and everything was a success. I looked nice, I was happy and did all that was expected of me as a wife. I gave birth to my first born named Nomgqibelo, followed by Lindiwe and last but not least my son Bheki Mbhele. This is where all things fell apart. I wondered whether the beauty he saw in me before, he saw no more.

He started beating me up all of a sudden. I wondered what I did wrong and tried my best to be strong but in the long run developed a lot of anger and resentment towards the male species. I started beating him up each time I laid my eyes on him, whether or not he'd said or done something. I'd land him up in hospital; he'd come back and get me arrested. In no time he'd be out, come back and I would beat him up all over again.

I asked him several times to go to the family court, where we got married to get our marriage annulled, so that we could live separate and happy lives. What I wanted to make clear to him is the fact that the children and I would not be leaving the house, he had to leave and leave us alone. I would not be caught moving up and down the street with my children. He adhered and we were left in the house.

That is when Gender at Work found me. I had to pick up the pieces of my life. I went to Remmoho Women's Forum meeting, still having the anger and resentment of being abused inside of me. It so happened that in my first meeting with them at Booyens Hotel, I opened up about the abuse I had endured in my marriage. I also told them I've been living with cancer for a number of years.

They welcomed me warmly, gave me love and encouraged me. I felt life inside of me. I'd like to thank Fazila, Nina and Michel. Thank you for teaching me to defend myself through Tai Chi. It has really made a difference in my life. I feel free and I am indeed delivered.

I would like to make an appeal to all women. Let's stand together and build love and continue to

care for each other truthfully. I write about my life story knowing very well that there are still women out there who are abused by their partners and are too scared to come out and talk about it. It is up to us to use the skills and development that we got from Gender at Work effectively in our communities.

As women, let us be good and set a good example to a few good men that are out there. Maybe our lives and principles would touch them and they will come to us for information on how best to keep their families together, as well as develop the skills to talk to their children about the issues that concern them and the times they live in. It's our responsibility too as parents. We need not burden the teachers at school with unnecessary baggage.

I'm in a different space, my soul is at peace. I'm a great help in my community. I now look after the sick, cook and wash for the elderly as well as chit chat with them and have fun.

Forward with Gender at Work forward. ■

UKUHLUKUMEZEKA EMSHADWENI WAMI

Ngikhumbula usuku engahlangana nensizwa yaseMabeleni egama layo lingu Thuli Highland Mbhele, sahlanguana endaweni yase Hillbrow e Pretorius street e Johannesburg. Yawabeka amagama ayenemfudumalo, nothando ecaza ngendlela angithanda ngayo engifanisa nemisebe yelanga, esho nendlela esizo kwacha ngayo umuzi wakubo. Ngathula ngalalela angibanga nayo impendulo ngalesosikhathi. Ngamcela uxolo ngathi kuye, ngiphe isikhathi ngiyo cabanga kahle ngijule ngenqondo ngoba akulula ukuthatha isinqumo sothando. Kufanele ngizifune kahle, kuthi uma uthatha isinqumo wazi ukuthi usuzimisele; usuyoba umama wekhaya noma kanjani.

Wangivumela wathi ungangiphoxi ngoba mina ngizimisele ngawe, ngemva kwezinyanga ezintathu ngatshela udade wethu omdala kimi ngesesheli sami, wathi udade; "mtakamama inhlanhla iza kanye empilweni yomuntu kukuwe ukuthi ukhetha ukwenza njani". Ngaphendula ngathi, "kulungile dade, ngizwile ngiyabonga ngezuleko zakho". Ngaqoma, lahlonywa iduku kwenziwa zonke izimfanelo zesintu, ngashada kwaba kuhle ngahlala nganethezeka ngenza konke okufanele njengomama wekhaya.

Ngathola ingane yami yokuqala egama layo linguNomqhibelo, ngalandelisa ngoLindiwe owokugcina kwaba umfana ogama lakhe kwaba wuBeki Mbhele. Kulapho kwesuka ushikishi angazi noma lobobuhle ayebubonile sebuphelile na? Ngashaywa ngathukwa ngingazi ukuthi kwenze njani ngazama ukuqiniseka kodwa ngehluleka yaqala inzondo nentukuthelo ngaba ngumuntu onenzondo nonya kubantu besilisa. Ngase ngimshaya noma engakhulumanga lutho kimi, ngimlimaze, aye esibhedlela abuye aye emaphoyiseni, ngiboshwe ngiphume, ngibuye ngimshaye futhi, ngimtshela ngithi "ngicela uhambe uye kwamuhle lapho sashada khona uyokwehlukana khona sizophila impilo emnandi uma sesihlukene, kodwa okufanele ukwazi ukuthi mina nezingane ngeke siphume endlini. Umuntu ozophuma nguwe. Indlu eyezingane angeke ngehle ngenyuka emgwaqweni nezingane". Kwagcina kwenzekile sehlokana ngasala endlini nezingane.

Kulapho iGender at Work yangithola khona ngingazi ukuthi ngizoqala kuphi? Ngangisenhlanganwenini yomama I Remmoho Women's Forum ngisenalentukuthelo yenhlukumezo ngaphakathi kwami. Kwathi okokuqala ngahlangana nabo eBooyens Hotel ngavula isifuba sami ngempilo yami yokuhlukumezeka emshadweni wami ngaze ngabacazela nesifo esingiphethe somdlavuzwa wenso iminyaka eminingi ngiphila naso. Bangemukela banginika

imfudumalo, uthando nenkuthazo, ngezwa ngiphilile ngaphakathi kwami. Ngiphinde ngibonge kumafacilitators we Gender at Work uFazila, Nina noMichel ngokungifundisa ukuzivocavoca ngeTai Chi eyangisiza kahulu empilweni yami.

Bomama ngicela sakhane sithande ngokweqiniso. Ngibhala ngempilo yami base khona abanye omama abasahlukumezwayo abalingani babo kodwa bayesaba ukuphumela obala ngoba banamahloni. Kufanele lokhu esikuthola kwiGender at Work sikusebenzise emiphakathini esihlala kuyo sifundisane sakhane siwomama sibe isibonelo esihle kobaba abaqhotho. Abanye babo baneza kithi bathole ulwazi lokweseka imindeni yabo kanye nezingane zabo, baze bakwazi nokuhlala nezingane phansi baxoxe ngezinto ezenzekayo kulesikhathi esiphila kuso kuze singanikezi othisha umthwalo onzima Nathi bazali kufuneka sibalekelele ngezinto esizibonayo uma besekhaya.

Ngibhala lendaba ngoba sengikhululekile emoyeni, ngiwisizo olukhulu emphakathini engihlala kuwo ngilekelela abagulayo, ogogo ngibaphekele ngibawashele bese ngihlala nabo phansi kubemnandi. Phambili nge Gender at Work!! Yimi N.M. Phillips. ■

Being equal

By Dieketseng Mosinki

What does it mean, being equal? It means that there are no differences between young and old, men and women, black and white, rich and poor, educated and illiterate or able and disable. How do I know that being equal there would be differences between people?

Have you ever been in a room filled with different people from different places? Some you know and most you do not know, and even the few you know, you do not know them that well. But the fact is, when you were in that room you did not feel like a stranger or an outcast but you felt love, warmth, safety, protected, respected and admired for who you are, without being classified or put on any category of social classes.

I found this room when I attended the 'reference group' workshops. The group consisted of women only, and again I found it, (even though it was not the same room but the atmosphere was similar) when the 'reference group' members came together with other women, and formed a women's forum called Remmoho. Lastly, the best room of them all was when I attended the Gender at Work peer learning process workshops.

How did this 'one room' of the Gender at Work peer learning process workshops differ from other rooms that I have been in? It differed because even if the atmospheres were similar everything had been multiplied and some elements had been added – the love, warmth, respect and everything that makes us happy and safe. The vibes of the room were so powerful and positive that it was felt by everyone and we wished we could take it back home, to our organisations and into our own lives.

The wonder and beauty of this room touched many hearts and souls because everyone could let go and become whoever they wanted to be. There was no one who stopped you or belittled you. Here we only got what we lacked in our daily lives. We lacked support, courage, love, respect, appreciation, wisdom, strength, confidence, self-esteem and a sense of belonging. The room or the space was so healthy that we left all the things that were toxic and depressing us behind.

We only treated each other equally because at home, in the society, in the community, at work and everywhere outside this room we are not equal to people who are around us. In this room, no one was above another person. We understood each other perfectly. Even though we came from different places with different backgrounds we connected and clicked just like that!

What was common about us is that we wanted change. We wanted to know who we were, what we are doing or what we wanted to do, what do we need and want to achieve, what governs us, what works for us and what doesn't, what is our purpose, how do we grow, how do we deal or confront with issues, when, why, where and for who did we want this change?

These were the questions we wanted answered and out of these answers we took the initiative to bring change in our lives. A change that balanced our lives socially, spiritually, financially and everything. Something amazing happened, we found everything that we wanted and lacked in our lives. We found it in the room that we were in. The room did it for us, we were not even excluded. We were all there as one, young and old, men and women, black and white, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, able and disable and when I say everyone I mean every kind of people you could think of was there, with the same vision.

You see, when we are not being equal is when we start discriminating, excluding, neglecting and ignoring others. When we judge them about their situations and status and treat them unfairly. When we oppress them, shut them out, make them feel unwanted and that they are not important or special we are being abusive towards them without seeing it.

Being equal and free means that you are accepted by everyone, you are included in discussions at home, at work and in organisations. Your partner sees you as his/her equal by taking decisions together and sharing work, duties, responsibilities and solving problems together. Your parents respect your privacy and treat you with love and respect. Being equal means that you are able to fit in with all people. Being able to talk with your elders can teach us young people and it would prevent teenage pregnancies, the spread of HIV/AIDS, the use of drugs and many things that youth come across.

If we could see each other as equal then there would be no boundaries that separate us. For me, I think if we could be equal more bad and negative things could be prevented. Things like deadly diseases and all forms of abuse because we could express ourselves and address issues without fear of speaking to your elders, talking to your parents and partner or your boss. We could have more courage, we would be brave, there would be no low self-esteem and we would be a better country with respect and love from children, youth, women, men and old people.

For me, the only place, room, space or atmosphere that I could actually feel that I am equal to anybody is at the Gender at Work workshops, because people there do have the qualities that most of us are looking for. We get fair and equal chances and opportunities to express our views, thoughts, and everything. In this room we are wanted, accepted, respected, loved, supported and appreciated. Why is this possible? Because we see each other as equal.

Thanks to Gender at Work for giving me this wonderful experience. If it was not for them then maybe my life could not have changed because I would not be able to understand clearly what it means to be equal and now that I have all these positive qualities, I am implementing them in my family, community and my organisations. I hope other people could experience what I have experienced. ■

My life as an activist

By Jabulile Mogane

In the dusty street of Katlehong, a small section which was called Moheheki, where the first bond houses of Katlehong were built, that's where I lived as a young woman. People here were struggling around eviction and it was the beginning of life as an activist. I decided to join the Kathorus concerned residents which was the structure that organized people around the bond issues. Our organisation is affiliated to Anti-Privatization forum (APF). As an APF office bearer I and other women decided to form Remmoho Women's Forum because of the challenges that we saw in the APF and in other social movements. We had the vision of how we wanted Remmoho to be and what it should represent. One of the key principles was that we wanted it to be a safe and different space for women.

Dilemma and Issues

Now the organisation is up and running and even managed to secure some funding. People were joining in and everything was right like any other organisation. People started to come up with different ways of what they believe would take Remmoho forward. People felt that we should formalise Remmoho and even elect a committee. I think this formalisation of the structure created problems because we would have meetings where we would criticise each other and came with the APF culture of attacking each other.

I started to be worried because I could see that women were not getting what they needed from Remmoho, which for me was problematic. This meant that the space was not stress free and safe. It was frustrating to watch us attacking each other. I talked to my inner being to try and understand if this was right or was I just overreacting. Am I serving the purpose and do I still need to be here? Was fighting other people in order to make them take your point right? This made me feel so stressed because I could see that valuable people were leaving and that women were not finding the space to be safe.

Action

I decided to leave but I also felt that would not work because I think it's good to leave when everything is right and I tried to align myself with one of the sides instead of avoiding all this. I felt more stress than before. Then I joined the Gender at Work process which for me has taught me many things. The process taught me to confront with respect, to think before you answer and lastly that, when you are trying to resolve a problem have love and respect for other people.

Resolution

I then tried to put different things that I have learnt in the Gender at Work process, that is love and respect in my life as a woman and an activist. I have managed to influence Remmoho committee to use Gender at Work facilitation methodology in most of our meetings and workshops. I have also learnt not to judge or internalise the organisation and things. If wishes were horses I would wish us to be trained to become facilitators and be trained by Gender at Work. ■



SIKHULA SONKE

Sikhula Sonke is an independent, women-led, social movement trade union, in the Western Cape. It was formed as a result of educational and organising work initiated by an NGO, Women on Farms, which highlighted the need for a farmworker union led by women to negotiate with farmers on labour and other issues of concern to women farmworkers.

Sikhula Sonke was registered in 2004. The current membership, drawn from more than 120 farms, numbers about 5 000, with the majority being women. Sikhula Sonke advocates for decent work and decent living conditions for its members. It raises awareness on social rights, fair-trade, domestic abuse, alcohol addiction and health-and-food-safety issues.

Sikhula Sonke is being developed as a vehicle for women's voices to be heard, a school that educates its members and a home for all workers on the farms – seasonal, temporary, migrant as well as the unemployed.

Sikhula Sonke is actively working to create new relationship norms among its members and with the broader society where all are treated as full human beings with dignity. They challenge farm owners to change their ways, and they challenge members – especially in relation to historically constructed dynamics of alcoholism, violence against women and deeply entrenched attitudes of paternalism and victimhood.

Sikhula Sonke is the country's front-runner in creating new working and living cultures for workers that are gender sensitive and deeply challenging of patriarchal authority norms.

The Sikhula Sonke change project with Gender at Work was to build collective leadership in which members are active in decision-making, able to hold organisers to account, and not disempowered in relation to the National Executive Committee.

The Sikhula Sonke team worked hard to create and nurture a second tier of leaders at farm/branch level. This new layer of leadership is learning to hold the national leadership to account as well as manage local level (farm level) issues so that organisers are free to recruit in new areas.

The Sikhula Sonke stories are poignant, demonstrating not only the pain of the authors' lives, but also their courage, resilience and capacity to transform themselves with the right support. ■



My HIV status

By Riana

I am a young lady living on a show farm. Three years ago in February 2008 I decided to have an HIV test. As a young woman it was important for me to know my status. I was tested at the local clinic and discovered that I was HIV positive. This was a shock for me as I did not expect anything like this to happen to me. I started asking myself, why me, what did I do to have something like this happen to me.

At that moment I was so scared that I did not know what to do. This was not something that I could easily accept. It hit me like a big rock. I received counselling before and after the test. The local clinic then referred me to the IDC clinic. The local clinic sister gave me a letter with all my particulars.

My first referral was to the counsellor at the clinic. She made me feel comfortable and asked me if I knew why I was there. The first thing she told me is that I must accept my status even if it is difficult. She also explained that I could have as normal a life as any other person who is negative.

This gave me hope as by that time I already had a great deal of experience of HIV and AIDS. She also told me that if my CD4 count goes lower than 200 I would need to go on ARVs. She also made me feel more relaxed. After 6 months I was tested again and this time my CD4 count had dropped. At that moment it was 199. I had to visit the counsellor again and she told me that I would need to go on ARVs. She also told me that before I can use the medication I would need to get an "ARV...friend". I went back to think about who I could trust. I had a lot of doubts about who I could trust and how I would fit into the community.

It took me a long time to see everything in a clear light and to soberly think about who I could trust. I decided to tell a good friend about my status. She already knew as I had told her after my first visit.

Before I could go on the medication I needed to first get my "ARV...friend". I then asked this friend who I had told about my status to be my "ARV friend". We both went to see the counsellor. She explained to my friend that my CD4 count had dropped and that I needed to go on ARVs.

After the counsellor I needed to see the doctor so that she could explain to me what kind of medication I would be using. She explained that with the medication there could be negative effects. She also asked me who else besides my friend I had told. I had told my 15 year old daughter about my status. At a later stage the doctor spoke to my daughter and explained my status to her and what HIV actually is. She also put her mind at rest by explaining that I could live a healthy life if I looked after myself properly.

In April 2010 I started with the ARVs. My "ingesteldheid" and positive attitude to my illness has changed my life. I am still not sure if I can tell my mother and family. I do not know how they will accept me. My body is much better and is accepting the medication. I am now on the ARVs for 2 months. It is sometimes difficult to go into your community and to wonder how people will accept you as a HIV positive person.

People sometimes label you if they hear that you are HIV positive. They throw stones and do not

want to accept you as part of their lives. That is why I decided to tell my story to these wonderful, special people who do not really know me but who accept me as I am. Nobody threw stones or stayed away, everyone listened and was very supportive.

It is not always easy for us as women to say our say or to say how we feel or what we are thinking. If you are HIV positive you are not easily accepted into the society. The emotions I go through are sometimes very difficult.

Through participating in the Gender at Work workshops, I once again realised that there are people who care and who are in the same situation as me. That has given me courage to carry on with my life and to make a better person of myself.

These wonderful women at Gender at Work encouraged me and I feel good to have participated in these workshops. It has not only made a better person of me but also a better mother.

MY MIV STATUS

Ek is 'n jong dame woonagtig op 'n spog plaas. Drie jaar gelede in Februarie 2008 het ek besluit om my te laat toets vir MIV-Vigs. Dit was vir my as a 'n jongvrou baie belangrik om my status te ken. Ek is getoets by die plaaslike kliniek en het uitgevind dat ek MIV-positief was. Dit was 'n skok vir my want ek het nooit geweet so iets sou met my gebeur. Ek het myself probeer afvra hoekom ek, wat het ek gedoen om so iets oor te kom.

Ek was so angsbevang op daardie oomblik en het nie geweet wat om te doen. Dit was nie iets wat ek maklik kon aanvaar nie. Dit het my gestraf soos a groot rots. Na en voor die toetsing het ek beraading ontvang. Ek is toe deur ons plaaslike kliniek verwys na die IDC Kliniek. Die plaaslike kliniek suster het aan my 'n brief gegee waarin sy al my besonderhede deurgegaan het.

My eerste verwysing was na die beraader by die kliniek. Sy het my eerstens op my gemak laat voel en my gevra of ek weet waarom ek hier was. Sy het aan my gese die eerste is dat ek my status moet aanvaar al is dit moeilik. Sy het ook aan my verduidelik dat ek net so 'n normale lewe kan lei soos ander mense wat negatief is.

Dit het my bietjie hoop gegee omdat ek al toe reeds baie ondervinding gehad oor MIV-VIGs. Sy het ook aan my gese as my CD4 telling onder 200 is moet ek op ARVs gaan. Sy het my ook baie goed gerus gestel. Na ses maande is ek weer getoets en my CD4 telling het toe aansienlik gedaal. Dit was toe 199 op daardie oomblik. Ek moes toe weer die beraader sien en sy het aan my gese dat ek nou op ARVs moes gaan. Sy het ook aan my gese voor ek die medikasie kan gebruik, ek eers 'n pille-maatjie moes kry. Ek het terug gekom om aan iemand te dink wie ek kon vertrou. Ek het baie getwyfel want wie sou my aanvaar en waar sou ek in the gemeenskap pas?

Dit het my 'n langtyd geneem om alles in ope lig to sien en nugter dink wie ek kan vertrou. Ek het besluit om aan 'n goeie vriendin van my, my status te vertel. Sy was reeds bewus omdat ek aan haar van my eerste toetsing vertel. Voordat ek op die medikasie sou kan gaan moes ek eers my pille-maatjie kry. Ek het toe die vriendin aan wie ek my status bekend gemaak het, gevra om my pille-maatjie te wees. Ons het toe altwee saam die beraader gaan sien. Sy het aan haar verduidelik dat my CD4 telling gedaal het en ek op ARVs moes gaan.

Na die berader moes ek die dokter sien, sodat sy my kon verduidelik op watter tipe medikasie hulle my sou plaas. Sy het aan my gese as ek op die medikasie gaan daar miskien negatiewe effekte wees. Sy het ook aan my gevra aan wie anders as die vriendin het ek vertel. Ek het my vyftien jarige

dogter vertel van my status. Op 'n later stadium het die dokter met haar gaan praat en haar verduidelik dat ek MIV-positief is en wat MIV werklik is. Sy het haar ook gerus gestel dat ek 'n gesonde lewe kan lei en normal sal leef as ek mooi na myself kyk.

In April 2010 het ek begin met die gebruik van my ARVs. My ingesteldheid en positiewe houding oor my siekte het my lewe verander. Ek is vandag nog nie seker of ek dit aan my ma en familie kan vertel nie. Ek weet nie hoe hulle my sou aanvaar nie. My liggaam is heelwat beter en aanvaar die medikasie. Ek is nou reeds al twee-maande op die ARVs. Dis somtyds moeilik of in jou gemeenskap te gaan en te wonder hoe mense jou as 'n MIV-positiewe persoon sou aanvaar.

Mense etiketeer gou as hul hoor van mense wat MIV-positief is. Hulle gooi klippe en wil jou nie aanvaar as deel van hulle lewens nie. Dis hoekom ek besluit het om my storie aan hierdie wonderlike besondere mense te vertel wat my nie regtig ken nie maar tog my aanvaar soos ek is. Niemand het klippe gegooi of weggehou, almal het gesluister en was baie ondersteune.

Dis nie maklik vir ons as vroue om ons se te se of hoe ons voel en wat ons denke is nie. As jy MIV-positief is word jy nie maklik in die samelewing aanvaar nie. Die emosie wat ek soms deurgaen is soms baie moeilik.

Deur die Gender at Work werkswinkels by te woon het ek weereens besef daar is ander mense wat omgee en wat in dieselfde situasie is as ek. Dit het my weer moed gegee om voort te lewe en 'n beter mens van myself te maak. Hierdie wonderlike vroue by Gender at Work het my aangemoedig en ek is bly en voel goed omdat ek hierdie werkswinkels kon bywoon. Dit het nie net van my 'n sterk mens gemaak nie, maar 'n beter Ma vir my dogter. ■

Teardrops of perseverance

By Sara Claasen

I am Sara Claasen. The reason I write this story is to tell others, that no matter what the circumstances are, you – and only you – can make a difference in your life. I was born on a farm called Madeba, a small wine farm in Robertson, in the Western Cape. I come from a huge family of thirteen children. Today, we are six sisters and four brothers. We have a wonderful relationship.

I was growing up during the tot system, where my father earned R7.50 per week, in the seventies. We grew up very poor because we were many children and my parents couldn't give us what we wanted. During the tot system, farm workers got wine when they start work in the morning, again at four o'clock and again after work, plus a bottle of wine while they go home. Those days were not nice for me as a child because both my parents drank. My mother was not a drinker but because of the wine my father got from the farmer, my mother also started to drink.

There were many times when I as a farm kid wished that there must not be weekends because it was worse. My mother was a good cook and made the most beautiful dresses for me and my sisters. She taught me how to knead bread, clean tripe and also make homemade beer when I was about 10 or 11 years. As kids, we were forced to do things and be responsible for the household from an early age. But by that time I did not see it as child abuse.

When it was the weekend my mother used to punish us for all the wrong doings of the week. I had

to chase and catch my brother, while my mother was behind me, chasing us to stab him with a knife. It was difficult for me because I had to protect him and myself but show her that I chase him but never tried to catch him. By that time I had power to save my brother and protect both of us but I couldn't tell her that it was wrong.

Because of the tot system, domestic violence took place in my home and life. My father became violent with my mother and we as kids had to stop them fighting because we loved our mother and didn't want them to kill each other. By that time I hated the tot system and wine. I hated the farmer because with the tot system, when workers were drunk during working hours they were beaten up by the farmer for not doing a proper job.

I hated the tot system because a lot of my freedom was taken away from me as a child. I couldn't get what I wanted. The tot system was just a way to push farm workers and oppress them. For farmers, farm workers were their slaves and a pair of hands to do their work. As a child I was never aware when there were problems between my parents because they were very secretive. They never argued nor swore in Afrikaans in front of us. They always spoke Xhosa when they fought, and when they spoke Xhosa I knew there were problems.

I was at that stage the eldest at home. The rest of my elder siblings had spread their wings and were no longer living at home with us. My mother was illiterate. She instructed me to write letters to my two elder sisters who used to do domestic work in Cape Town. She told me what to write and what to ask and then respond back when they wrote back home. It was nice for me because in that way I helped my mother because she was illiterate. I also helped to improve and change our living conditions because my mother was unemployed and we were poor.

There was no school uniform or shoes and we had to go to school bare feet. We had to walk and pass a grass field with all the cold and icy ripe in the winter. My brother had to carry us on his back, one by one across a river on our way to school because we had to walk for a distance to school and there were no buses.

When I met my husband I was fourteen, and he grew up with his grandparents. His grandma also asked me to write letters to her other grandson who was in prison and also other elders. I also read the kids' school results.

I became a young woman and married when I was twenty four years. It was good at first, but later my life was cloudy. My husband used to beat me up. Domestic violence continued in my life. I became a victim of abuse. My husband abused me physically, verbally, emotionally, economically and sexually. He used to beat me when he was drunk and he had a lot of women in his life. He came home late or the next morning and forced me to have sex against my will. I knew it was wrong. I had the power to defend myself by fighting back and to protect my children because they were young and I loved them very much. At that time, we had a son and a daughter.

When my daughter was four years old, she used to help me fight her father but my eldest son would just pull me away from his father and beg me not to fight him. One Saturday during lunch, my husband threw a plate of food in my face, and I had bruises and bled a lot.

I wanted to run out but he forced me to the bathroom, pushed my head in the basin, opened running water to clean my face and head, then he locked the door and took the key with him, and he went to play soccer. I felt broken, sad and angry but I loved him. I thought I will not have a stepfather for my kids. I was led in this direction by the beliefs I grew up with – only God can

separate a man and a woman. Parts of me said go to the police and divorce him, but I lived in that relationship and believed that financially I couldn't live without him.

The circle of domestic violence continued but I learned to fight my own battles, defend myself, move back to my sister but never complain to my family, and when the sun shines, I went back to my marriage. I gave my heart to God and had so many hopes.

Things became better, but again worse. There came a child in the marriage from an outside relationship and what a shame to my kids.

I got a protection order in 1994 and again in 2007. He used to spoil my daughter's birthdays when she was a kid and I decided to have a braai for her. One evening when he came back from his visits, he pulled down the table while I was barbequing the meat. He did it twice and fight with me, and she was asking, why he always did that, and he said, "Ask your mother".

There was a time before we went to work that we had a fight and he was sober, swearing bad at me and he tried to spit the food he ate in my face. I was so calm, by then because God is good all the time. I looked in his face and said "ok spit on my face", and I was telling myself that God had been spat upon in his face, so who am I and I gave him one look and said, "if you do it, I will show you something today" but he turned back.

Today I have three children. I'm a trade unionist and know my rights. I stopped the abuse but there is still jealousy and possessiveness from his side, and now and then there is swearing. But I laugh because he knows I won't allow him to beat me up again. With all my struggles and painful experiences, I teach my two sons not to abuse women and not to cheat on them.

I remember when I suffered and sometimes enjoyed a beer far from him. I used to sing "I want to break free" and it's the only time that I can enjoy myself. I once said, when I was abused that "when I got married, I said for better and for worse", but when I look back, I ask "is my life for better or for worse?".

People always laugh but they never knew what I experienced or felt my pain, till I stopped the abuse. He used to beat me up for two Christmas days, while everybody was having fun and he wanted to spoil happiness for me.

One Christmas I had a black eye and was so ashamed to see my friends. I went to the social worker to divorce him but they tried to have sessions with us, to reconcile us, but he was not interested. That Christmas while I was looking in the mirror, and saw my face, I decided enough is enough. A voice told me to go to the Sangoma (witch doctor) so that I can beat up my husband and be the winner and have a peaceful marriage. But another voice spoke to me and said, "No, divorce him or give your problems to God". But in church people don't talk about divorce or domestic violence. People in church want partners to reconcile and stay in their marriage.

For me as a leader, going out to talk to others, about domestic violence, I could not be a victim of abuse, I said to myself, "I can't be a leader and live in fear and sadness, I have to stop this abuse". I don't want my kids to see me like that and I realised I have to set an example, so my turning point was to get a protection order to stop the violence and overcome my fears.

Today I have tears of joy. I stand up for my rights and protect myself and know that I'm beautiful, and I always say "I am beautiful even when I cry, I'm beautiful". My encouragement to all the women out there is to join hands together, break the chain of oppression and let men take the back seat and free ourselves. ■

Throwing away the beating stick

By Patricia Dyata

If I could turn back the clock and knew then what I know now... I believe that I would have saved myself, my kids, my Mom and my family a lot of pain. Yes the pain that was caused by an abusive partner. A pain called oppression that led to guilt, anger, fear and the control that my ex partner had over me. I am a 36 year old woman with two beautiful children. This journey took me back to a time where I almost lost hope in life and everything that was good and precious within and around me.

I met my partner in the beginning of the year 2000. At that time I had been single for two years, and coming out of a relationship of eight years. After that break up I told myself to hell with men, I am going to take care of my son who was 5 years old at that stage. I remained single for two years and I decided to move from the farm and went to live with my father and my twin brother. This was when I met this handsome guy. He awakens something in me that I thought was gone. We dated and entered into a relationship... my head was spinning and it felt like as I was walking in the air. A year later I moved in with him and he was still good for the next two years.

I was working at that time and after that I quit my job and became the perfect housemaid. He bought me everything I wanted, but I could sense some things were not the same as they used to be. All of a sudden he told me how to dress and with whom to talk and with whom not. And for me having been raised in a house where you must be outspoken when you are not agreeing with things, it became very hard for me not to respond and express my feelings about it. I started to see a side of my partner that I had never seen and I became very worried.

The guy was telling me how to run my life and even limited my visits to my family on the farm. We would argue and it did not end there... he started hitting me. I thought he loved me and that he wanted me for himself and that is why he was doing what he did, because despite all this, he took good care of me. As time passed the relationship that once was so beautiful got worse. I was drinking at that time and we used to hang out together in the shebeens. We had fun together, but when we were back at our place the wrestling started all over again.

I could not understand where this was coming from because I was a faithful partner. He did not only beat me, but the things he said to me... it was so painful and he made me believe that I was useless and that I would not find a better man than him, who will take care of me. So I stayed in the relationship, praying to God that he would change and that our relationship would get better. In fact it did not get better – it got worse and I could feel my feelings towards him changing into anger. Although I was angry, I feared the thought of being alone and a laughing stock to the community. So I remained in the relationship. When we were intimate I did not feel the joy and the passion that used to be there, in fact I felt disgusted and my heart was aching. I realised that I was sleeping with him because I had to and not because I wanted, but just to fulfil his need and to prevent the fighting, because I was so tired of fighting and I wanted to live a normal life.

I managed to walk out of the relationship... just to find out that I was pregnant. I was very angry with myself and thought how could this happen to me? I decided against all odds that I'm not

keeping this child and went for an abortion. Abortion was against my beliefs but that was the only ultimatum to free myself from this terrible nightmare. I did the abortion procedure but that little thing growing inside of me, was not planning on going anywhere. I was broken and felt that I had betrayed myself and everything that I believed in. I used to be steady in prayer but at that time I felt so guilty, that I could not pray to God. This was my secret and nobody knew about it except God. I prayed for forgiveness and I believed God has forgiven me and that abortion not working was also God's way of telling me something.

A few months later the pregnancy started to show and I was back at the same place that I had begun to see as an animal cage. This time I told myself that everything was going to be ok and he is going to change... in fact I believed at that stage that he had changed. He adored his precious daughter whom I named Angel before she was even born.

A few months later the nightmare replays itself but only this time it was worse. I used to leave my kid behind and run to the police station. The police would bring me back and give him a verbal warning, just to leave me in the cage with the beast. That's where I saw the need to protect myself and my baby. It became so violent that I hit him at one time nonstop with my cell phone. I hit him until his face was covered with blood. Looking back at what happened I could not believe that it was my doing... he had a cracked scalp and his eyes were bleeding. This was when I realised that it was time for me to move on, because staying in this relationship... one of us was going to get killed. I was becoming someone that I did not know... this abusive relationship was turning me into a monster. I got an interdict (protection order) and I left him. He was locked up a few times, but that did not stop him from coming after me.

I started participating in the Gender at Work process and the facilitators could spot the anger in me, while I was still in denial about it. Going through the process made me open up and be honest with myself and made me find different ways to manage my anger, because my anger caused me to do a lot of bad stuff that I'm not proud of. Stuff like abusing alcohol that led to neglecting myself, my children, my family and my mother. At Gender at Work I met women who were experiencing far worse things than I, but who managed to stand up strong and move on. I found my inner self and connected with my God, because I believe He is my shield and my foundation. I prayed to God to take away my fear which He did. I locked my ex up for several months, and after finding the ingredients at the Gender at Work workshops, in myself and other strong women ... I had the courage to go back and let him out of jail. I broke away from the fear and I stood in front of him – while he was up to his old tricks – and I told him, while looking him straight in his eyes..."I'm not scared of you anymore and there is nothing you can say or do that will change the way I feel."

He approaches me with anger and I don't respond to that, but I manage to remain calm, although it's still very challenging at times. I don't feel guilty, angry anymore because I have fully taken control over myself and he doesn't have that control over me anymore. I have taken the stick that I was beating myself with and I have thrown it away. Yes the stick of...guilt, anger, fear and the control of someone else over me. I will keep on raising my voice around these inhumane issues until I die... I believe it doesn't end here, it is an ongoing journey.

To all the vulnerable and strong women out there, let's unite and make this world a better place for our generation. To the men that don't contribute to this vicious cycle of abuse... keep on with what you are doing. It is time that we speak out and break the silence together. ■

FACILITATORS REFLECT

REFLECTIONS BY GENDER AT WORK FACILITATORS

Three of the Gender at Work facilitators who worked on the CSO strengthening program over the 18 to 24 month period, have written on some of their reflections. Fazilla Gany worked closely with Remmoho and Vukani, Nina Benjamin with SACCAWU, Kganya Consortium and Sikhula Sonke, and Celestse Fortuin with Women on Farms.

Each of these three facilitators reflects on their experience in mentoring and supporting processes of change with these organizations.



Knocking from the inside

By Fazila Gany

I have been living on the lips of insanity

Knocking on a door, wanting to know the reasons

Trying to get in. The door opens.

I have been knocking from the inside (Rumi)

Facilitating the action learning program with two community based organization (CBOs) was more than a learning curve for me – it was the commencement of a voyage of discovery both for Remmoho, Vukani and myself as a facilitator.

Remmoho is multi-complexed, an organization that houses a "feminist activist", and has struggled to gain an identity amongst their comrades from the Anti Privatisation Forum (APF), an organization dominated by the voice of men although it boasts a majority female presence. The birth of Remmoho leadership was a "twin birthing" of many issues. Remmoho was conceived when a group of women from the APF felt they were being suppressed and not being heard as members of APF. The suppression of their voices coupled with an emerging need to express and discuss domestic violence (which the APF did not see as part of their agenda) was catalyst for the birth of Remmoho now a group of 60 women, all with a variety of needs.

The catapult of conflicts and the organization's responses, attitude and behaviour made the journey for me the facilitator one of enthrallment and simultaneously concern. More so in a world where women were envisaging themselves as part of a feminist/social movement. They resuscitated Freire's concept of internalized oppression as they emulated their male counterparts from the APF in their behaviour. Their battle to unlearn decades of patriarchal behavior made the field more challenging. The breakthrough as well when they confessed and admitted to behaving like the APF, was a phenomenal milestone which marked yet another step closer to transformation.

Vukani the other CBO was more the feminine counterpart, the yin in the journey of facilitation as they gently played the sacrificial lamb. Their intentions paved with only good as well as great work within the community, leaves them clutching still to their empty purse strings. Vukani, a CBO that reminds me of a newborn calf, straggling, falling, legs weak as it sought months of protection and comfort inside its mother, oblivious of the world. A calf requires the strength and resilience to attempt to walk. This is the only way it can survive. Vukani too, like the calf, has to gain independence by raising funds to continue to provide the skills and space to the thousands of women and in so doing also provide an income for themselves. The question for me is that whilst the calf had grown accustomed to the comfort of the womb of the mother, what is and has been Vukani's comfort? What has been their womb?

The burning questions

Their reality of pain, the violence of rape, traces of poverty on a daily basis. Their seduction by culture, by learned behaviour. If they surpass their male counterparts in their family, they

successfully manage to imbibe the behaviour of their male comrades from the APF. Power that was molded into molten lava and violently passed from one hand to the other.

What has been women's comfort, why has the birth of women's leadership simultaneously given birth to a plethora of issues? In my journey alongside these two CBOs, not only have I faced challenges in multi-dimensions but I was allowed to travel in-depth into the lives of women and gain a microscopic view into the complexities of their lives. This is their observatory. Look through their lens and you are brought closer to their reality.

Visions so beautiful, intentions so pure, and yet you continuously divorce yourself from getting your needs met. Giving skills to the unskilled, a trickle of money for them the students and you the teachers, stand penniless in front of your students playing the martyr until the whole field reeks of martyrdom. I asked myself why?

The feminist activist who seeks emancipation but refuses to hold the molten lava, whose every breath sings the song of freedom but continues to imprison herself. When she settles in the comfort of her cage she proceeds to trap and cage other women. Trust, honesty, openness and confrontation become a rarity. The playing field is a masquerade, nakedness dressed up. Women who have been exposed to violence, further embalmed themselves in useless misery.

I entered their world and felt like a silhouette.

*A silhouette that glides
amongst, touches briefly the journey
of the women.
Casting shadow brightly or
Sometimes dancing the shadow
Of others*

*Like a butterfly perched for a
Moment and sometimes longer,
I linger and hear the pain of women.
Trance-like I watch
As emotions unfold,
Stories told
Voice at last.*

*In the periphery I stand,
Feeling the vortex as it attempts
to draw me in, I cling to the
sides, allow the Turbulence to
subside*

*Voice at last
Sobered from pain*

*Sobered from violence
Arising slowly.....slowly
Bits and pieces cling yet to
Them, they shake off.....,
Journey further,
Deeper to the core,
The vault that hold all,
They unleash.....meet with
Themselves at last*

*A silhouette no more
I glide still though,
Allowing them to touch me
their bodies lighter now
that expulsion has made
burden less.*

*My voice, my role
To find vaults
To find voice
Theirs to open and meet
themselves.
The journey has just began*

I think the prose that precedes this embodies much of the feelings that I experienced as a Gender At Work facilitator, whilst touching the lives of women from both Vukani and Remohho. Two community-based organizations (CBOs), one may call fledging but I see them as two phenomenal organizations with gigantic potential.

The knocking

As I pace the room, the air is filled with uncertainty, the uncertainty of expectations the uncertainty of intentions, of acceptance. I feel I need something magical to clear the air. I do a full sweep of the room as my eye waltzes around the room. It feels right at that time to ask the group to form a large circle and then with deep breaths of exercise they slowly settle in, and even though this is new to most, the deep slow breaths almost seem to allow them to gulp me into their system and a process of trust begins. Thus begins the relationship. Thereafter I use Tai chi the tool, the subtle seducer of participants that allows them to give in and to overcome their fears but also helps with the knocking from the inside thus opening up a gateway of expression and dialogue. It has helped me as a facilitator but also helped participants to settle and to build a the foundation of confidence. For me this somehow portrays the element of care but it is unspoken. The step of un-communicated words, or wordless knowledge that allows the women to settle to become participants. Knowledge in content and its substance is not always what helps the connection to participant – it is the wordless knowledge that allows both the participant and the facilitator to connect and make space for their individual experience.

Having read Martha Caberera's article "Living and Surviving In a Multiply Wounded Country" I am continuously mindful of the trauma that all these women have been through. It is not spoken but it's there. It is about the observer, the observation and that which is being observed, the wholesome moment of that connection is the sum total of the spiritual essence of workshops which allow people to be open, to be present and to want to act in terms of their own transformation. I realised in retrospect that some things are done intuitively, not with the mind.

When I have entered these spaces with Remmoho and Vukani I never felt like the teacher – I felt like a student. It is as if I am wearing some sort of invisible spiritual robe to help or rather to guide participants to their own awakening. I generally feel that if I just help them knock inside of themselves a bit there will be a movement that may lead to their transformation. Rumi in the verse above explained it beautifully. He illustrates reason coupled with the trying to get in. For me the climax is when I see change that arises from the participants themselves opening doors, their own doors to their minds and soul. This can result from my assisting with faint tapping, faint knocking on their inside. What is this 'knocking from the inside' that I refer to? Even though this may sound vague, in this work vagueness becomes part of the reality. In fact every encounter is a reality and I realise it is not about fixing but about space. Any space that informs or allows voice, or expression of emotions to be heard is a whole space, a sacred space.

Working with both Remmoho and Vukani has made me experience many of these moments, and even I have to admit that the journey has not been easy, nor has it ended. In fact it has just begun. I recall standing amidst Vukani staff, who clearly were grappling with understanding concepts, who lived these concepts daily but never found a way of framing it. I looked around me and realized how starved women are of space where they could just speak. Culturally women's voices are always low

key but this space allowed them to express pent up anger. Why was this important in a gender action learning workshop or why is this important in any workshop?

When we walk amongst other people and have the task of facilitating, we walk the path of sacred ground. We may not realize this but we hold their emotion and thoughts and experiences like a glass ball in our hands. One wonders why workshops fail or people come away saying what a waste. I ponder on that sacred space being held in a sacrilegious way. Why do we fear to say things as they are. If it is so closely linked to the lives of people, why does academia scoff at feedback that comes laced with honesty and emotion.

I feel that we hold the glass ball and then we give it safely back to participants. We never shatter it before handing over. We work amongst women who have either been effected or affected by a multitude of things – and violence stands out like a cobra's head waiting to spit its venom in ways that we may not even see or comprehend. Or it may be submerged and this could be the very reason why the desired results are not achieved in workshops. When the knocking starts slowly ... slowly they emerge. ■

The question of power or the power of the question

By Nina Benjamin

I came into the Gender at Work process both with many years of facilitation experience and with questions about my practice. Workshops I facilitated with community activists had begun to seem dead and repetitive. I was beginning to feel like I knew the answers to all my own questions. As a popular educator I understood that part of my job was to create "participatory" spaces, spaces where the "right questions" would be asked. The right question I believed was the tool to getting the "right answer". My "participatory" spaces were spaces that I held, controlled and where I defined what the participants left with. I believed that I was their guide and it was incumbent on me to raise their critical consciousness and provide them with the power to act towards goals I was identifying.

Serious internal conflict in the organization I was working in at the time became a key catalyst to my questioning my practice. Through these internal conflicts I was left with the question "how could an organization that professed to be providing its constituency with the power to act, so fundamentally disempower its own staff". This disempowerment centered on an organisational leadership that had all the "right answers" to how, what and who can bring about change in society and somehow the thoughts, views and needs of different individuals did not matter. The staff was encouraged to give their opinions but the "questions" asked never really felt like questions – more like a stick pointing you in the right direction.

Under the guise of raising critical consciousness and creating participatory spaces, I too was complicit in using this stick. As part of the management of the organization I had power over those I worked with. A power that was partly rooted in my race and class position but more importantly in my ability to give the "right answer" in an organisational culture that privileged those who could articulate Marxist theory and were able to convince others of this theory.

What started as organisational funding difficulties soon escalated into internal tension and then open conflict on how the views and needs of staff should be respected and taken into account. Through this conflict I began to question my role in the organization. By the time I resigned I had recognised serious contradictions between my role as an activist trying to change the world and my own practice in both my public and personal lives. I left with one question – what kind of world was I trying to create, if my power was dependent on the manipulation and at times disempowerment of others.

When I joined the Gender at Work team I believed I had already come to the realisation that "you need to be the change you want to see". My first experience of assisting in the design of a peer learning workshop left me excited but a little unsettled. The design of the workshop seemed to have no ultimate conclusion – or clear outcome, but was rather an organised but very fluid process assisting participants to develop ideas and strategies that they owned. Asking key questions was a central aspect of the design. At that stage the questions did not look very different to the kind of questions I was familiar with – and with my new sense of self awareness about my power as facilitator – I felt fairly confident about the role I could play even though I was not sure of what the outcome would be.

It was only at a CBO Peer Learning event in May 2009 that I realized how difficult it is to ask questions that are honestly enquiring, that are relevant to the particular people or group at that particular moment, that assists the participant to analyse, to draw lessons and most importantly to own the answers they discover.

Asking truly powerful questions

I was assisting the Kgenya Consortium change-team organize a report on their change project. The report was to be presented to the bigger group. We were a bit stuck and Michel assisted by asking the group to discuss the gender composition of the groups they were working with. In the discussion it seemed that the reports were privileging groups where men or young boys played a significant role. My brain clicked into action. "This is it" I thought – this is the missing gender analysis link. The Change Team was not placing the same value on the work being done by women in the groups. Now I was ready and raring to go. My questions came thick and fast. Questions I knew would get them to see the answer. At first there was a little confusion on the part of the group. The confusion grew into irritation, then withdrawal and by the end of the session a total shutdown. As we left for tea I felt empty, flat. For the rest of the day I could not shrug off this empty feeling. By the end of the workshop my spirits had lifted but I could not get that session out of my mind.

In the days that followed I went over the questions in my mind. I kept thinking, I know what closed questions are, those were not closed questions. What went wrong? What did I do to cause this shut-down. At that stage I was pretty sure that I had shrugged off what I saw as my previous patriarchal behaviours and was able to truly assist participants with having the power to act – and not focus on my own power over them. So I had no real explanation for why the Kgenya change team had responded to my questions in this fashion.

It was only in another context at my present workplace that I began to understand how difficult it is to ask truly powerful questions, questions that were not about getting to "my answers".

It was when responding to a colleague's request for feedback on a workshop report that once again

the penny dropped. I started my email response with all the right things, acknowledging all the good things, and instead of just going ahead and giving my view, I carefully crafted a set of what I thought were really sensitive questions. I sat back on my chair, reread the email and my first thought was how dishonest. I am hiding behind those questions when actually I think I have a much better idea and I am simply manipulating him into seeing how clever I am. I sat for a while allowing all of this to sink in and then deleted the email. I decided not to respond until all of this was clearer.

As we started the free writing in this (writing) workshop I began to make more sense of what it means to be the "change you want to see." It is a process of total self awareness of your every action and how this action impacts on the relations of power you have with others. For me part of this realization has been about how as a facilitator I use the power of the question as a tool for empowerment or as a tool for manipulation. Questioning your intention behind the question you are asking can be a very useful way of uncovering your own relationship to power. ■

Reflections on the WFP feminist training

By Celeste Fortuin

Tonight I was standing outside, watching the sky. Thoughts came into my mind. I remembered seeing Wendy last night, and her telling me that the first meeting between them and Women on Farms Project (WFP) went very well. She looked at ease, and sounded positive that a way forward could be found. Something else came to my mind: I wondered if, in any way possible, the training I had with WFP assisted them in some way to think about how we as feminists relate to each other – the values and principles that guide our relationships?

Placing the workshop in perspective:

WFP wanted a workshop on feminism for all staff; they framed the workshop as a necessary step in their goal of creating a feminist organization. This was not to be the first workshop on this topic, and I was wondering why the organization felt the need to revisit this topic. Now, in retrospect, I realize that as an organization, WFP have a specific understanding of structural inequalities at a public/political level. The organization deals with specific gender, race and class inequalities as these manifest, not just on a farm, but in the broader land and agricultural sector of our country. But what kept disrupting this public and political goal at an organizational level, were the personal relationships between the women in the organization, at these very levels: gender, race and class.

And so we realized during the workshop, that indeed, the personal is political; that there is no divide between the private and the public; and that as we work towards the political/public goal of equality for farmwomen, we need to be aware, and reflect regularly, on pursuing this goal also for ourselves.

A lot more can be said about how gender, race and class intersect and impact on the relationships between the women in the organization, but what is more important, right now, is the awareness created and stimulated through ongoing dialogue around the question: What does feminism mean to me? It is indeed a path that these women have embarked on, and hopefully will continue walking;

and even though the contradictions abound, the first step is to create awareness, and skill to surface and analyze the contradictions in relation to our experiences, our principles, and our goals as feminists.

And so, here are some of the personal insights I remember from the workshop:

I remembered how, on the first day of the Feminist Workshop, one participant (I choose to protect privacy and so won't identify names) shared how she is trying to understand the negativity and hurt women can cause each other, specifically from a public platform where the person vilified had no opportunity to defend herself. The question was asked: as feminists, how do we relate to each other? Is this type of behavior useful for our struggle to end women's oppression? This question was opened up to the group for discussion. Although the answer is not an easy one, participants agreed that this is not the manner they would like to relate to each other within the organization; that when a fellow sister feels hurt, or sad, or down, that there should be acknowledgement of these feelings; that even though we cannot "fix" the problem, what we can do is to be there for each other in a supportive manner.

But there are also contradictions, one participant pointed out. For example, how can I be working towards women's rights, but in my own home I am being abused? What do I do when I know my colleague is confronting this problem, but chooses not to talk about it with others? Contradictions are everywhere, we agreed, but instead of approaching it as "wrong", we can use this as an indicator that more needs to be done to change gender and power relations. How do we deal with the contradictions? We surface them, and most importantly, we try to take the lesson, the insight from it. Also, we talk about it, rather than hide it.

And so, in terms of "practicing" and living our feminism, we agreed that we need to continuously talk about our experiences, both personal and political, both private and public; we need to create space for dialogue, where we can share what works, what doesn't work. For example, one participant asked how she can change relations in her home – how can she explain to her husband that it is not her, or her daughters' job to make sure that the kitchen is cleaned at night, that supper is cooked every night?

On the second morning of the training, participants shared their thoughts and reflections on feminism. What was apparent is that participants reflected. One participant shared how she spoke to her grandmother about the workshop, and when her grandmother asked her about "feminism", and as she explained her understanding to her grandmother, she realized, and indeed told her grandmother, that many of the things her grandmother did in her lifetime, and which she taught her and other women in her family, was indeed feminist. For her, feminism came closer to her, and she closer to it – it wasn't something she had to change herself into, but rather, something she can help build by reflecting on her life experiences in a particular way.

Participants realized the importance of talking about their beliefs, values and principles as feminists with others in their lives. Many participants went through a process of first being angered at the inequality they now could identify in their personal lives – "Ek gaan nie meer elke aand kook nie!" (I will no longer cook every night), as an example of the anger. Then they discussed how it might be more helpful to educate the men in their lives about how they as women experience the relationships. And then, from anger into strategy: "We can choose to alienate them (male partners), or we can enroll them – And if they still resist, well perhaps then we need to ask ourselves if this

relationship is good for me...". "We can create safe spaces where colleagues feel free to talk about their experiences at home – without judging, but to break the silence".

And many more conversations like this. We moved from the personal to the organisational in fluid ways. One participant realised how her relationship with her husband and children at home, has shaped the way she related with colleagues at work. She realized that she often made the coffee, made sure that the lunch was organized. She had become resentful at work, feeling that she "always has to do this, whilst everyone else got on with their work". She felt tired, unacknowledged, and fed-up. On the last day of the workshop, she got an insight: Nobody at work asked her to do these things – she felt that she had to do it. And staff got used to this, because it made life easier for them. She realized that she was treating other colleagues like men, and she had taken on the role of the serving woman. She realized that she can say no – that she doesn't have to take this "duty" on. She can put her own work first – she can put herself first. After this insight, she was amazed: "So dis wat die feminisme oor gaan! (So this is what feminism means). Ok, now I get it. It is for me, not against me. But also, I must also be for myself".

What is patriarchy, I was asked. What is the idea of patriarchy, I was asked? That women are inferior, that men are superior. Where does this idea come from? Where do we see this idea being reinforced? Why is this idea so pervasive? If someone tells me that something is poisonous, and that to drink it will kill me, will I drink it? I asked. Patriarchy is poison, but why do we as women drink the poison?! Because we think we cannot live without a man in our life, said one participant. Others said No, that's not true. But then again, we might not like to hear this, but this is more often than not the case. And so we realized that as women we have consented to this idea, for too long, in too many ways. This idea can only be destroyed if we withdraw our consent. If we stop drinking the poison...

I realized during the workshop, that WFP staff didn't need a training on feminism per se, but rather, they needed to give shape to an ongoing process of talking to each other about feminism, about their experiences, about their differences, about what they have in common. Feminism isn't in a book, or contained in a training, it is an ongoing process of talking, reflecting, sharing, challenging, building about how we as women experience life – about our dreams for ourselves and each other, and how we can create a society where women enjoy equality, freedom from sexism, life...

And we cautioned each other to take care of the self. One participant felt that she isn't doing enough, for there are so many women out there who still suffer. Stop, we said – You are doing enough! Affirm yourself; acknowledge yourself. Take care of yourself.

At the end of the workshop, one participant's reflection on the workshop stuck in my mind. She said only one line, but that was enough.. "Mna, (me), ek gaan nie meer die gif drink nie..." (Me, I am no longer going to drink poison...). ■

Black Recognition and A Woman's Journey

By Elna Lindoor

Black Recognition

*I was raised to be someone I not always know
Not always recognise, not having a presence
Confused and weak, Seeking belonging.
Knowing that I was raised to be a girl, daughter, a sister, a woman and a mother
The word Black appeared very, very strong
And I felt the discomfort deep down in my soul
Disabled can't move and don't know which way
I step up rise look and face my reality
Because I was raised to be a girl, daughter, a sister, a women and a mother
My perceptions becomes my reality
Finding a balance in what I do and who I am
Using my body to move my mind and feel myself
Black suddenly having a lot of meaning for me
I embrace myself as a person that shared my skills and knowledge with others;
Providing opportunities for all to develop an understanding of belonging
Today I can see it because I believe in change
I know I will leave a legacy of inclusivity and equality
I'm a black woman and I'm an African.*

A Woman's Journey

*The journey is a healing process, inside versus the outside.
A true leader has to be honest at all times.
Through accepting yourself completely you do justice to the word authentic.*

*If you want change you have to be the change.
If you not accountable to yourself how will you be accountable to others.
Step up and seek your own balance and create your own happiness.
Seeing the bigger picture however – remaining conscious of the detail.
Being conscious of your inner strength and challenges and being open to accept and allowing
yourself to see the unseen and to be ready to change.*

*Through choice comes change which is a delicate process that unfolds at its own pace.
Transformation takes the form of a rhythm which defines who you are and thus give you courage to
listen to your rhythm.*

Woman celebrate your womanhood, it's time to claim your position.



Gender at Work

Justice and Women

South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union

Treatment Action Campaign

Women on Farms Project

Sikhula Sonke

Remmoho Women's Forum

Vukani Tsohang Africa

Kganya Women's Consortium