

# Unite to end gender-based violence

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As the world focuses on the UN Women led '16 Days of Activism for No Violence against Women and Children' campaign, we take a look at how organisations such as Partners in Sexual Health (PSH), are making a positive impact in the lives of South African women.



Without PSH and other NGOs doing similar work, many more women and children – especially in smaller, impoverished communities – would not have the courage to seek help and be given the support to leave abusive situations. PSH, under the umbrella of Common Good, is part funded by the Social Employment Fund (SEF), through the Presidential Employment Stimulus.

This year's '16 Days of Activism' campaign' theme is 'Unite' and people around the world are being encouraged to speak out and say no to any form of violence. Particularly gender-based violence (GBV) against women and children.

Research indicates that more than five women or girls are killed every hour by a member of their family. One in three women has been subjected to violence at least once in their lifetime. This has to end. It's time to Unite, to take a stand, to support the victims of GBV and encourage perpetrators to seek help and rehabilitation.

"Violence against women and children is a pandemic that cuts across cultures and socio-economic statuses. Therefore we urge citizens to become activists in their communities and act to end all forms of violence against women and children," says Patsy De Lora, founder and CEO of Partners in Sexual Health.

## The courage to move on

Sandra Kotze\* (25), of Beaufort West, suffered years of physical hurt and harm by someone close to her.

"It was a very difficult and painful experience, but I eventually realised that I deserved better," she says, "and I found the strength to speak up and share my story by seeking professional help from Partners in Sexual Health (PSH).

"As I shared my story, I realised that I was not alone and took comfort in that. I discovered people like PSH's team cared and were willing to assist me. After I attended a session with them, I decided to take action and report the abuse to the authorities, seeking legal protection and justice."

With the support of all the professionals involved, Sandra began her journey of healing. She attended therapy sessions to address the emotional scars and learned about 'coping strength'. "I connected with support groups to share my experience and gained strength from others who had gone through similar situations," she explains. "Over time, I began to rebuild my life. I found new interests and hobbies that brought me joy. And, as time went by and weeks turned into months, the pain of

the past, slowly started to fade and I realised that I am not defined by my past but through my resilience and courage."

Sandra's story is an uplifting one, moving from a life of abuse and pain to one of strength, healing and hope. "Thanks to PSH I gained the power to overcome my past and create a better future for myself, filled with love, happiness and the possibility of a brighter tomorrow."

### **Support when it was needed**

Maryke Louw\* (22) of Murraysburg was in an abusive relationship for more than three years. Her partner beat her regularly, in front of their own child and another child from his previous relationship. He would forcefully have sex with her, without consent. She would open criminal cases against him but, due to emotional and physical abuse and, like many abused women, she always withdrew these charges.

Besides the constant beatings, she was often kicked out of the house at night and later she realised that he was raping his child.

"A chance meeting of one of the PSH Health Promoters while at the shops changed my life," says Maryke. "They told me PSH would be in our town and were inviting everyone who was directly and indirectly affected by crime and GBV to interact with them.

"I attended the Victim Empowerment Programme where they talked about different types of abuse and the services they offer. During the session it finally dawned on me that I was a victim of GBV and abuse, and this was a safe place and where I could get help. After the programme, I talked to PSH's Social Auxiliary Worker and explained my situation.

"That is where my journey of healing started," she says. "PSH referred me to the Department of Social Development, the correct people to intervene and seek help for the child he was raping, to start her journey of healing."

Maryke went through therapy and was given all the support and encouragement needed to open a case against her perpetrator and get a protection order. "I gained the strength to move out of the house, to get a job and become financially independent. I cannot begin to thank PSH for helping me get my life back on track, I still turn to them when I need support or someone to talk to."

"PSH works 365 days a year to prevent all forms of violence against women and children, and also provide support services to victims of violence. We are committed to improve the wellbeing of all community members where we have a footprint," says De Lora.

Both Sandra and Maryke are considered the 'lucky' ones. They were fortunate enough to break the cycle of abuse thanks to the interventions, guidance and assistance of PSH. Far too many women continue to live in fear and face abuse – emotionally and physically – on a daily basis.

It's time for South Africa to Unite and put a stop to GBV.

*\*Names have been changed to protect the identity of the women and children.*

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