



Gender Links Sunrise Campaign

How female support and empowerment let us grow

Children in well-worn school uniforms play on the dirt road that runs past the small, red-brick structure on the corner of an unnamed street in Orange Farm, about 45km south of Johannesburg in South Africa's Gauteng province. Established in 1988, Orange Farm is one of South Africa's youngest township, with the original inhabitants consisting predominantly of laid-off farm workers from the surrounding area. Later, as the township became more established, people migrated from Soweto to take up residence in Orange Farm. Many of the people who settled here were unemployed or marginalised in some manner.

This is the context from which Gender Links' partner organisation Let Us Grow operates the Sunrise Campaign, a community-run empowerment programme for women in the area. Let Us Grow provides support and networking, training and activities for women who have experienced domestic abuse, sexual violence or stigma due to their status as HIV-positive. Many women have experienced all three.

The organisation began as a support group for women living with HIV, but has since expanded to include a large network of female entrepreneurs, home-based care workers and survivors of violence and abuse. Each one is set on changing her world into a place of equality, safety and autonomy, free of fear, abuse and discrimination.

At the heart of Let Us Grow is 71-year-old Rose Thamae, who started the organisation in 1996 at a time when women's issues were not on the table - services or support for people living with HIV was non-existent. The organisation has since evolved into a community of support, empowerment and hope for the women of the area.

"Welcome, welcome," she smiles as she leads the way past the house and a rusty, dusty car on bricks, to a shipping container at the back of the yard. This is the office of Let Us Grow.

Mam Rose, as she is affectionately known, was born in Soweto in 1948 and first experienced sexual violence at the age of nine, when she was raped by a friend of her father.

At age 19 she was accosted by a group of men on her way home from school with friends - the other girls managed to escape. Rose smiles wryly: "I didn't run as fast as my friends did." She was gang raped.

At the age of 39, on the way home from the late night cinema, Rose and her then-boyfriend were attacked by a group of men with pangas. It is still not easy for her to speak about. "If he didn't run, I know they would have killed him. They would have killed him and raped me anyway." Her boyfriend escaped and ran to the police station for help. While he was berated and belittled by the officers he approached for help, Rose was brutally assaulted with knives and pangas and raped repeatedly by the seven attackers.



“It was not an easy rape, this one,” she says, and her hand shoots up to touch the scars along her hairline. The deep gashes from three decades ago are highlighted on her hands. “If I can get out of my clothes you will see. The scars you can see here are nothing, but down here...” She gestures to her lower body. “Down here there are many, because I had to fight. And I said I don’t care at that time if they kill me, but I have to fight. There were seven of them - plenty of them, and to this day I am having so much anger inside me.”

Her passion, she believes, is partly fuelled by this anger. “If only more people would get angry...” she sighs.

When she finally crawled into the police station, bleeding, the officers were still taunting her boyfriend for not being a real man, for not staying to fight and for seeking help instead. It was after this last rape that Rose was diagnosed with HIV.

Her diagnosis came in 1989 - stigma was high and women in townships were killed for disclosing their status. There was no treatment and a diagnosis of HIV was considered a death sentence. Due to the stigma, hate and discrimination experienced in Soweto, she left the comfort of her brick-and-mortar home and moved to an informal structure in Orange Farm, a common practice for ostracised women at the time.

Having attended a HIV-support group in Soweto, she set about finding one near her new home. When she realised there was nothing, she started Orange Farm’s first support group for women with HIV.

Despite the ‘peace’ she found in Orange Farm, her life was not without stigma. Many women who were not HIV-positive also sought help and support from the group, predominantly because of domestic abuse or sexual violence. “But I knew I had to speak out, and I could not keep hiding in a corner.” She drops her gaze and smiles sadly. “People tried that, they tried hiding - but people were dying, and nobody deserves to live a life of lies.”

Soon though, the group burst from its formal seams, becoming a network of support for women, regardless of the circumstances they faced. “Women are a mirror of our society and of our world,” she explains.

“And we need to remind women that they are responsible for the world. And we need to remind men too. Without women, men would not be here, because every man is here because of a woman, was birthed by a woman. But that is where the respect stops.”

Her fingers trace the scars that crisscross her hands - reminders of her last attack. Her body is mapped with these scars - although she says the physical wounds were the ones that healed the fastest. “The men that raped me, that hurt me, they didn’t think that I was a person - that I was a woman or that I was a mother. I was not their mother, but they must have mothers somewhere.”

Rose acknowledges that women’s issues are intersectional, “but this I learned the hard way, because it is not something they will teach you in school.” She talks about ‘The Triplets’ - HIV, poverty and abuse, and says they are rarely birthed in solidarity. Through more than 20 years working to support survivors, she learned that these social ills are linked, and the only way to address one was to address all three.

Rose soon realised the need for home-based care within the community, and the intrinsic link between poverty and violence against women, especially domestic violence. She started training women who had been abused as home-based carers, empowering them financially, restoring their confidence and assisting Orange Farm residents who needed care due to ill-health.

The home-based carer system grew to be more inclusive of others who needed assistance because of illness or injury. Soon Rose sat with another challenge - as terminally ill patients died, the number of child-headed households grew. Unable to turn her back on these children left behind, Rose expanded Let Us Grow to include a Vulnerable and Orphaned Children (VOC) unit.



Many of the children supported by the organisation and the women who have passed through its doors for assistance have since started work in the field of victim empowerment, social services and home-based caring themselves.

Rose started Let Us Grow with five women. Today there are 75 beneficiaries who have, through partnerships with organisations like Gender Links, received entrepreneurial training, start-up capital, life skills, skills-based training and emotional and psychosocial support. In addition to the programme's direct beneficiaries, on-site counselling and safe spaces are also offered to women in need. In cases of sexual or domestic violence, Mam Rose supports women through the reporting process, the medical exams and post-care.

She says femicide rates are high, and there is rarely a day that goes by without a woman approaching her after having been raped or beaten. "Before, I could say maybe it was every six months or every three months, but now..."

She shakes her head and her voice becomes sombre. "Now it's my daily bread. It feels like there is always a woman being raped, a woman being beaten, a child being..."

The Sunrise Campaign has become not only an empowerment programme but also a support system for a group of diverse Orange Farm residents. All have one thing in common – they have been abused or violated in some way, and are fighting to regain their lives.

The women in the group still face stigma because of their association with Mam Rose, who is outspoken about the sexual violence against her and the consequences on her health. In a deeply patriarchal society, she is often met with hostility and resentment when she stands her ground in the face of conflict with a man. "From a young age we are taught by our parents and our society and our culture and religion, that this is who we must be and how we must act, and men are taught the same." She says both men and women find it difficult to step away from these expectations, regardless of how much they want to be free.

The women associated with the organisation say community members often assume they are all HIV-positive, and still stigmatise the victims of sexual violence more than they do the perpetrators. Despite this, the women say they have found a protector, a mentor and a home in Mam Rose, in Let Us Grow and in the Sunrise Campaign. They say they know that they are stronger when they stand together.

After attending the Sunrise Campaign entrepreneurial training, six of the women pooled their capital resources - around R200 (US\$14) per woman - to start a small enterprise selling bunny chows. Through their business successes, they now also sell raw and boiled eggs, tomatoes, onions and various snacks and cakes at a roadside stall. They hope to further expand their business in the future, as more women join them on the path to economic and social emancipation.



Twenty-six year old Thabile** is one of these women. "I was abused. I was abused in every way, but after coming here, I learned how to stand up for myself and for other women," she says with a smile. The best thing to come from this, she says, is that she can now show her daughter how women ought to be treated. "It taught me that to be strong for my daughter, I must also be strong for myself, because she is watching me. If I am strong and confident, she has a role model." Her eyes well up. "She told me she wants to be like me, and she says she is proud to be my daughter."

Zintle** is 24-years old and has known Rose her entire life. She joined Let Us Grow through the Gender Links Sunrise Campaign, but soon realised that the organisation meant much more to her than just an internship. "All the things that happened to me, I tried to put them out of my head. But when I worked here, I started to heal. "The first rape was... I was 19, but I can't remember the year, only the day. It was the 25th of October."

She was sexually assaulted again in 2018. At the start of 2019 she was gang raped when a group of men robbed her of her belongings. She reported the first two assaults, but has since lost faith in law enforcement and the justice system. "I'm angry. Mam Rose always says we must learn to let go, but if it means forgiving them then I'd rather not be blessed like that. I'm angry at those men, and I'm angry at the other people who were supposed to help me but never did." The only faith she has left is in Rose and the network of women who have supported her through these difficult months.

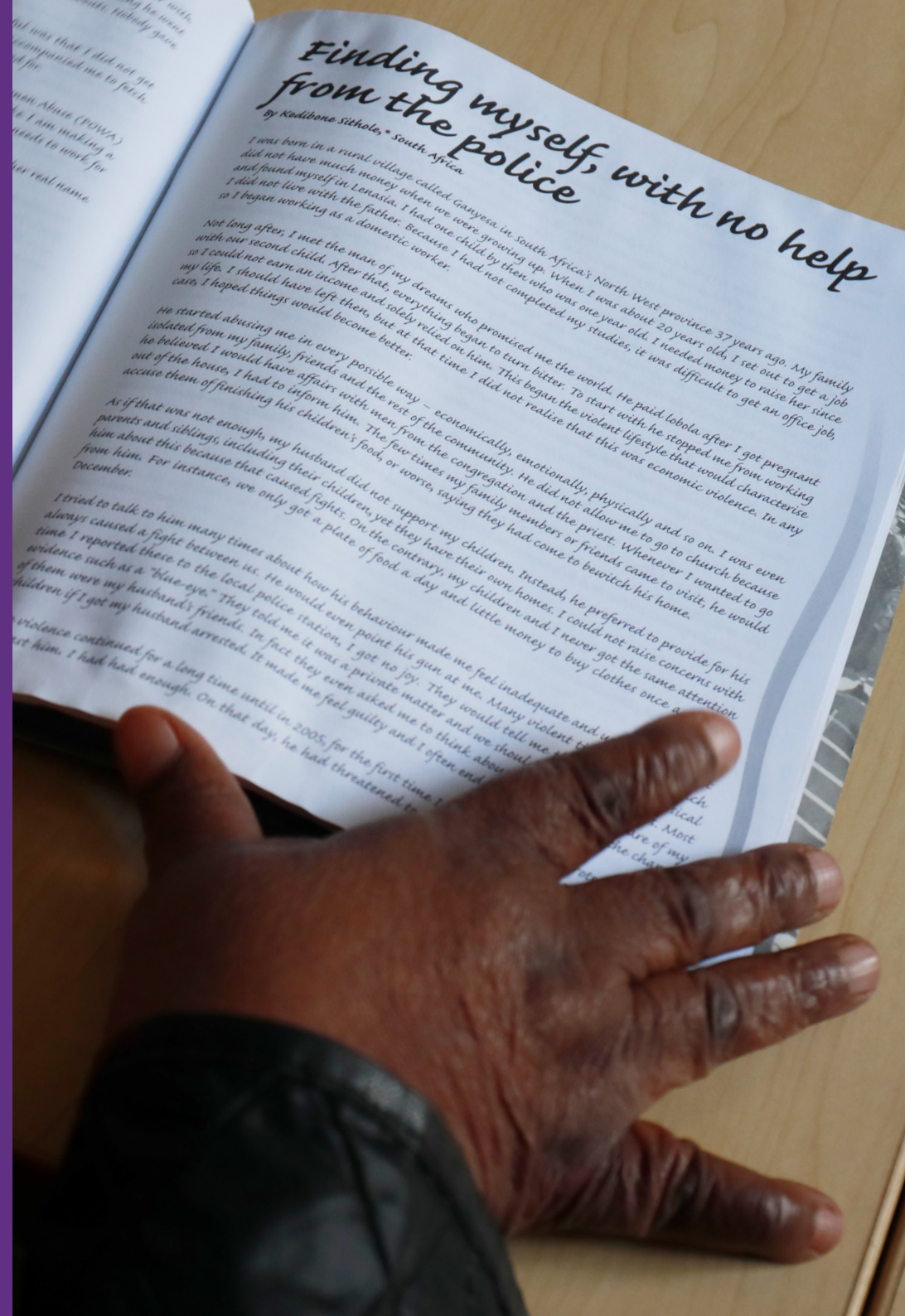
More than just offer support, Let Us Grow now actively assists women in overcoming the social ills that make them vulnerable to abuse. Through the organisation, these women find belonging, solace and strength in a violent, patriarchal environment. They hope to change by sharing their skills and stories, and the knowledge that these collective narrative bring.

After the various workshops, women are encouraged to write what is known as an 'I-Story'. After they share their experiences verbally, they write a first-person narrative of their defining experiences. With the women's permission, these are printed and bound into a volume of stories that can be used to connect and educate other women. "It helps to strengthen others, so that we know we are not alone," she explains.

There are currently thirteen volumes of 'I-Stories' available, each containing a number of stories filled with suffering and pain, but also hope and renewal.

The 'Let Us Grow' organisation has, over the years, lived up to its name and grown the community of Orange Farm, and the women who call Orange Farm home. Most of the organisation's staff and volunteers are former clients of the organisation who continue to journey with the organisation to facilitate their own growth, and their desire to continue the growth of the community.

Widespread media attention around issues of women's health and women's rights in South Africa has also played a part in helping fight stigma. Rose says this has unfortunately not done much to lower the number or the intensity of attacks on women. This means, by her account, that while more women are suffering abuse, there is less stigma attached to it than there was in previous years.



Community members also say that women now have a greater understanding about their rights, and about the fact that HIV is a condition that can be controlled through lifestyle changes and medication. It no longer means a death sentence.

Even women who are not HIV-positive have developed a greater understanding and compassion for those who have been diagnosed, although the men in the community seem to still perpetuate the stigma and demonise those women who are infected. “I look at the support groups and the programmes and its women, but I always say HIV is not something that happens to one person. Where are the men? Because these women... they are not infecting themselves.”

While Rose is the matriarch of the Orange Farm community, she no longer carries that burden alone. More than 100 women are now involved in home-based caring, women empowerment, feminist entrepreneurial endeavours and education through the organisation and the work it does.

But she says this is not enough. It will never be enough as long as women are still suffering, purely because they are women. “We are doing a lot, but we are not doing enough. We are losing this fight, this war. If we don’t get more help, from more people, then women will keep dying. But even if it feels like we are losing, we must keep fighting.”

