

Cross-Sectoral Approaches to Ending Gender-Based Violence: Art, Activism, Research

January 28, 2021

part of a series on “Innovations for Advancing Women’s Rights: Beijing+25 and Beyond”

The Human Rights Institute and the Mailman School of Public Health's Global Health Justice and Governance Program host an interdisciplinary conversation between researchers, artists, and activists about approaches to ending gender-based violence (GBV), and the increase in GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moderated by Professor Terry McGovern, a panel of four experts, including Yolanda Dyantyi (South Africa-based activist/ artist), Dr. Nicoletta Mabhena (medical doctor and population-based epidemiologist), Anna MacDonald (international campaigner and advocate), and Etaf Reum (author, *A Woman Is No Man*), discuss art, research, and activism as tools to bring to light and advocate for ending gender-based violence.

Terry McGovern, moderator, human rights lawyer, Columbia [School of Public Health](#), worked with women w HIV/AIDS in South Africa. In Namibia, women who were being sterilized w/o their consent started singing, and that brought researchers.



A **link between art and research** – in attracting attention to an issue and making change. Her mother was killed in 9/11.¹ She wrote a play afterwards. The polarized discussions that go on leave out so much of what is happening and what will change people’s hearts. The arts can represent the complex predicaments we experience as humans. The panelists talk about the courage and resilience in how people survive the unimaginable.

Nicky Mabhena, South Africa

2016 Rhodes protest

2018 shutdown movement

When pandemic came, no guidance regarding GBV. No national disaster management plan for pandemics. Big NGOs come in, but at the end of the day, the community-based organizations

¹ “Terry McGovern finds herself consumed by perhaps the ultimate unknown of Sept. 11: exactly how and where most of the victims died.” [GROUND ZERO: SURVIVORS; For Relatives of 9/11 Dead, Anguish Is in the Details - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)

are on the frontlines, but they were incapacitated. But in a spirit of ubuntu, we put differences aside, and people put in place innovative strategies to protect women. **The President announced publicly that GBV including femicide was a national emergency and required resources.** We did not need PPE corruption...

Research can bring out nuances/issues/norms/silence. Norms and injustices have to be unearthed and research is a way for that to happen. And can help lead to policy change. Routine data does not capture everything, b/c women do not report. So we have to do the research. Quantitative for numbers and to show hotspots. Qualitative brings the voices, the sociocultural context of what women experience in their homes.

Art helps to contextualize strategies to work with communities.

We need to merge research and art – to reach communities.

Roping in youth is important also. We do need men/boys, all genders, to understand GBV. Yes, we need to use innovative ways to understand. **We need contextualized approaches.**

Research can help find innovative ways to address GBV.

We do need to get narratives heard – what is going on with men? Not just women.

Nicky runs a research organization and tries to push the research agenda on GBV, understand the issues, grow clinical services, etc.

Yolanda Dyantyi, 23-yr-old, lives in South Africa, started an organization

Started as activist after falling victim to the system at Rhodes University, she tries to **use her story and stories of others to keep systems accountable. Archive our stories** – stories of survivors. How do art and activism help with issues in South Africa?

My journey as a survivor determines how I advocate against GBV.

I was involved in a movement against rape culture (2016) that erupted on campus when I was a 2nd year student. Rape had become so normal. The violence was pervasive. We had known who the perpetrators were. A list of 11 of them fell – and started the movement. I spoke up and out.² So me being a survivor and involved in the movement exposed me to feminist approaches. One of the modes of protest we use was a **naked protest** on 17 April 2016; we used our bodies as a site of power, protest and freedom. We used art like singing and posters. There was an int'l uproar after the protest.

Storytelling and sharing of experiences as mechanisms for protest and change.

Etaf Rum, in Brooklyn, 2019 debut novel, *A Woman Is No Man*, about gender-based violence, Arab American women, stories that were not being told, focuses on intergenerational trauma among Palestinian women. Etaf teaches in North Carolina and lives there with two children.

Fiction can be one of the best ways to tell certain truths (beyond facts/research). **Fiction allows for complexity.** Fiction can allow people to let their guards down. GBV is talked about w

² “Hundreds of students took part in the protest that lasted a week. The students demanded that the University amend its rape policy, and suspend and investigate the students accused of sexual assault. Numerous other protests against gender-based violence took place at Rhodes, making similar demands. It was, however, only after the #RURferenceList protest that Rhodes University eventually took steps to address the students’ concerns. The University established a Sexual Violence Task Team.” [\[PRESS STATEMENT\] Rhodes University continues to deny Yolanda Dyantyi a fair disciplinary hearing \(4 September 2020\). \(seri-sa.org\)](#)

a sense of shame. “Minority” communities do not want to reinforce stereotypes, so they hesitate to show off a novel about GBV. Yet women saw themselves in the stories, and the sense of shame and taboo-ness lessened. The novel opened up space for conversations in the community.

Art can contextualize what we learn through research to reach people in different communities: poetry, music, reading literature, and discussion. This teaches people to communicate and **not suppress emotions or trauma. Normalizing violence gets stored in the body and passed down through generations.** So, yes, **art and conversation are important parts of healing.** Understanding white violence for example through art.

Teaching resilience and survival – through the arts. Read a novel, gain insight, **gain the power to shift narratives.** Will a woman pass down trauma or think about the narrative and hopefully change things up?

I draw on activism and research to inspire the stories I share as an artist. I too try to understand the traumas that men have suffered that lead to disfunction. **I tell the stories of survivors and non-survivors as part of being the change.**

Let’s all read more. Let’s read things we might not normally read.

Go out of our way to educate ourselves about communities other than ones we already know.

Can we change the narrative if need be in our own families?

Research, activism, and art go hand-in-hand in changing the way we see GBV.

Anna Macdonald (was at Oxfam)

Worked w int’l campaigners on **arms treaty** that regulates everything from fighter jets, guns, and bullets. **The increase of weapons increases GBV, so clauses about GBV are in the treaty.**

There was skepticism in 2010 but it went into the treaty in 2013. **Governments now have to consider the risks of violence against women before they authorize a transfer/sale of weapons.** First time the link between arms proliferation and GBV was explicitly made in an int’l treaty.

I was on a panel at the UN. A male diplomat in the audience said our issues had no place in int’l disarmament – which was a male-dominated issue/space for so many years. There has been a shift in attitudes, from confrontation and being laughed out the room to now (after a decade) it being unacceptable to not have a policy on GBV.

Ways of overcoming silence

How did we break thru? Civil society + smaller governments (like Iceland – the only country w a feminist foreign policy at the time). Then slowly reached out to other gov’ts and finally had 100 countries (more than 50% of UN members) supporting such language in the treaty.

We shifted gender from being marginal to being central w regard to arms.

Yes, we have to work w men and boys. It can be frustrating speaking about gender issues in mainly women audiences. But men are becoming more involved in these conversations and issues. **Masculinities and masculine identities need attention.** He for She is an example of organizations reaching out to men and boys. We need to engage with all genders.

Working together with others is critical! You cannot assert yourself all alone, no matter how sound the ideas. We worked in a collation a women’s organizations from around the world.

Arts and stories are part of how we frame our identities.

There can be toxic understandings of strength, i.e. determined by weaponry.

Arts are important for reframing patriarchal norms about “strength” and “security.”

The arts and stories can help promote engagement, dialogue, sustainable peacebuilding efforts.

Resolution 1325 is about rooting women centrally in peacebuilding.

I encourage people to get involved in campaigns. Work together and continually challenge violent toxic masculinity around GBV to change mindsets and policies.

Yes, **stories have the power of transformation**, sometimes more than a factual report.

Go see plays and art exhibitions that are engaging.

Get involved.