

Global Network of Women's Shelters – Africa Region Development Concept Paper

Background

Around the world, at least one out of every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime, usually by someone known to her. In conflict zones such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, violence against women often increases dramatically and too often rape is used as a weapon of war. Violence against women is a major obstacle to women attaining equality, development and peace, and prevents women from enjoying their human rights and fundamental freedoms and a life of dignity, free from oppression. It is perhaps one of the most pervasive violations of human rights known today.

Many women want to escape the violence and find refuge and safety because their homes or communities are unsafe. They seek safety and peace by going to safe spaces, such as shelters, refuges, women's centers, or transition homes, to seek peace and safety. In these spaces, women and their children who have had violence perpetrated upon them find refuge, compassion, resources, and assistance. Women can make decisions about their own lives and heal and be safe from violence. Women's centers and safe spaces also raise awareness about women's rights and their right to be free from violence.

Throughout Africa, women's centers and safe spaces provide life saving services to women fleeing violence, often working in dangerous places with minimal support and resources. Cultural barriers often inhibit these centers from operating openly and these social norms mean that victims often face a lifetime of discrimination, stigmatization, poverty, and increased risk of further victimization.

The Global Network of Women's Shelters

In September 2008 over 800 shelter and safe spaces workers from 51 countries gathered together in Alberta, Canada for the 1st World Conference of Women's Shelters. Building on the connections made at the conference, 23 shelter representatives from 15 countries met in Ottawa in April 2009 to create the Global Network of Women's Shelters (GNWS) and create its framework, vision, and mission. GNWS was founded to unite and strengthen the women's shelter movement globally to make change to end violence against women and their children. GNWS is an active global network, united by a shared vision for an equal world where women and their children live free from violence. GNWS works to ensure global awareness of violence against women and their children; support and strengthen the women's shelter movement; promote effective policies and their implementation in order to prevent violence and protect and empower women and their children; and to promote social change that ends violence and oppression against women and their children.

GNWS works to be a supportive force for shelters facing political challenges, natural disasters, and other challenging situations. GNWS members receive access to information and data,

including the annual Global Shelter Data Count, GNWS Membership email listserv, and announcements about coordinated efforts and news alerts.

2nd World Conference of Women's Shelters

In 2012, the U.S. National Network to End Domestic Violence, as a member of GNWS' governing board, will host the 2nd World Conference of Women's Shelters. The 2nd World Conference of Women's Shelters will bring together shelter advocates and grassroots activists working to end violence against women to discuss how they can support and learn from each other. Unlike many other conferences, this is a peer-to-peer conference, specifically for women and men who work directly with and provide services to victims of violence.

The 2nd World Conference aims to create an environment where advocates can share promising and proven practices, successes and challenges in providing safe spaces for victims and efforts toward ending violence against women. The conference will continue to expand international communities of advocates, share promising and proven practices, and help to support the establishment of local, national, and regional networks that can learn from and support each other.

Goals and Objectives

Developing a Regional Network

Currently, many women's centers and safe spaces in Africa operate without formal connections to other safe spaces, and no regional network exists in Africa to connect the organizations. A regional network will strengthen the movement to end violence against women in Africa by:

- Facilitating resource sharing, collaboration, training, and capacity building between the women's centers;
- Speaking with a unified voice for the women's centers and the women and children they serve to raise awareness about violence against women; and
- Advocating for policies to protect women and children at the regional and national levels.

One of the first steps in creating a regional network is to identify the local and national organizations currently operating in the region. While some networks do exist, there is not a comprehensive listing of all the women's centers and safe spaces, and a comprehensive mapping exercise will need to be conducted to identify all of the programs. Once the programs are identified, strategic outreach will be conducted to encourage the programs to join together to build a regional network, organize a regional conference to develop a plan and goals for coordinated African participation at the 2nd World Conference of Women's Shelters in 2012. To further facilitate continued networking, time and space will be made available for regional meetings at the 2nd World Conference to strengthen connections between advocates in the region and to develop regional networks.

Increasing Global Connections

The challenges faced by women's centers and safe spaces in Africa are not unique to the region; tragically violence against women is prevalent across the globe, as are social, cultural, and political barriers to ending the violence. Through participation in the Global Network of Women's Shelters and attendance at the 2nd World Conference of Women's Shelters, the advocates working across Africa will be connected to the global community of advocates. Through this connection advocates in Africa will:

- Learn of promising and emerging practices from other advocates facing similar challenges;
- Share their expertise and innovative methods for working with victims; and
- Join with a global community to promote policies and social change to end violence against women worldwide.

Progress towards peace and development will be achieved when women can live free of violence. When this occurs, women will build stronger families, stronger communities, and a stronger world. Helping women find safety and resources is critical to this goal.

Role of the *Gender is My Agenda* Campaign

At the 1st World Conference of Women's Shelters, there were very few participants from Africa due to the financial costs associated with attending. This is despite the fact that violence against women in Africa is a serious concern across the region, affecting large numbers of women in every country. The participation of African shelter and safe spaces workers at the 2nd World Conference of Women's Shelters is critical since this conference is an important venue for these workers to come together and learn from each other and advocates from across the globe. The conference will also provide support for women's empowerment work, tools for working with victims of violence, and strategies for changing societal attitudes that accept and condone violence, all of which are necessary for achieving gender equality in Africa.

The *Gender is My Agenda* platform is a voice for the African women who are in dire need. In African shelters or centers, the thematic themes of the *Gender is My Agenda* campaign are so grounded in the work we do at the grassroots level where speaking about violence against women is taboo. The *Gender is My Agenda* campaign is already addressing issues of governance; peace and security; human rights; health; education; and economic empowerment, all of which must be addressed to effectively end violence against women. It is our hope the campaign will continue to focus on these issues and the intersections with violence against women. We hope that the *Gender is My Agenda* campaign will incorporate the struggle to end violence against women into each of its thematic focal points and coordinate efforts on this issue. We are also hopeful that the campaign will support shelter and safe spaces workers aspiring to attend the 2nd World Conference of Women's Shelters.