

South African (SA) Men's Forum

BACKGROUND

The SA Men's Forum was launched by Dr Bongani Khumalo, the then Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Transnet because he believed that:

South African men have turned their backs on women after both have been in the trenches fighting apartheid.

OBJECTIVES

The SA Men's Forum was established to:

- Encourage men to focus on themselves as men;
- Intervene to stop violence against women;
- Encourage men to become involved in advocacy so they can move among men and challenge the mindset of masculinity centred on male power and privilege (GETNET Man and Masculinities Conference Report, 2003:7).

PROGRAMME OF ACTION

The SA Men's Forum focuses mainly on awareness raising and advocacy. Its awareness-raising campaign focuses on:

- Talking to schoolchildren about fatherhood;
- Promoting 'best gender practice' among men through a photographic exhibition that will be taken to schools – a joint project with the Human Sciences Research Council;
- Talking to men in shebeens and sports stadiums about issues of sex and gender.

Through its advocacy initiatives the SA Men's Forum actively seeks to generate a gender discourse so that other men and the media's awareness can be raised about men's passion for gender justice. Activists need to influence the media to think about how issues of gender violence are portrayed and encourage them to show alternatives to violence.

From his perspective as a CEO, Dr. Khumalo observes that:

CEOs are largely male. I believe that CEOs must be challenged to engage in gender campaigns in their companies and that they should take gender-based violence (GBV) seriously. Survivors of GBV are not productive workers. In this way, I wish to raise awareness about the fact that companies can increase their productivity by contributing to the struggle to end gender-based violence.

The SA Men's Forum believes that activists must influence significant stakeholders in society such as trade unions to commit themselves to making gender a focus of their programmes – especially in relation to the issue of men as fathers.



CHALLENGES

Dr. Khumalo notes that:

In South Africa men often feel isolated because it is a lonely road for men who do not conform to 'what men are supposed to do'. Men who advocate change face strong resistance.

Men accuse him of implementing white culture or serving his own interests. In some cases women too defend existing patriarchal institutions and practices.

Culture is thus used as a defence. In the South African context such an accusation is very powerful, and traditional culture has often been used to defend patriarchy, given that traditional culture derives its power partly from patriarchy. Culture is used to reclaim a sense of an idealised pre-Apartheid existence, but it is often re-constructed without even the limited checks and balances that existed historically to protect and respect the role of women in traditional societies. Culture is often seen as static, ignoring the fact that even within white culture, gender equality is not a historical reality, but is something that has to be fought for.

SUMMARY

The SA Men's Forum with a key focus on ending violence against women was set up to challenge traditional masculinities and to engage men in developing alternatives.

The use of advocacy campaigns, particularly through identification of the media as a key element in 're-programming' men and masculinity is a useful tool for gender activism, given the increasingly cross-cultural emphasis placed on media imagery.

The strategy of involving men in positions of power in gender education is a very useful one, given the profile of the larger private sector corporations within civil society and the size of their staff complements.