

One Man Can brings hope into prisons

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The One Man Can campaign has a mission - to change the culture in South Africa's prisons by providing education, support and care, and changing the attitudes of warders and prisoners.



Simphiwe Peter (left) and Welcome Wittbooi, two ex-inmates who have joined the training staff of Sonke. (Images: Sonke Gender Justice)

The flagship campaign of the Sonke Gender Justice Network, One Man Can has been running since 2006, training prisoners and officers in the Western Cape to become peer educators and providing information on nutrition and HIV/Aids, TB, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, and gender equality.

"It is one of Sonke's first projects, and is recognised as a flagship HIV prevention programme in Western Cape prisons," says Emily Keehn, Sonke Gender Justice manager.

NGO Sonke was established with the vision of creating "a world in which men, women and children can enjoy equitable, healthy and happy relationships that contribute to the development of just and democratic societies".

The organisation works across Africa, "strengthening government, civil society and citizen capacity to support men and boys in taking action to promote gender equality, prevent domestic and sexual violence, and reduce the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS," indicates the website.

Encouraging discussion

South African prisons are notorious for high HIV rates, violence, gangs, and rape. With some 30% awaiting trial and spending up to two years in prison - 30% of this proportion are young people - the rate of recidivism is high. It is for these reasons that Sonke decided to begin the project, which now works with male prisoners in 12 prisons.

Around 300 peer educators are trained every year across the Western Cape, in seven areas in the province. Each is then tasked with doing outreach with 15 of their peers, says Keehn. As it also holds events on Youth Day, Women's Day and World Aids Day as well as during HIV Prevention Month and the 16 Days of Activism period, the programme reaches thousands of inmates, prison officials, and community members involved in prisons each year, she adds.

One Man Can provides a space for prisoners to reflect on their experiences and encourages discussion on how gender inequality affects the HIV pandemic and gender-based violence in the country. Prisoners receive valuable information to protect themselves from the virus.

This is complemented by work with warders and correctional officials, providing them with information on HIV and a forum to discuss sexual abuse among prisoners. They are given channels to prevent, detect and respond to such incidents.

"Working with officials is crucial, and it is an exercise that often leaves Sonke staff feeling optimistic that, with committed individuals in place, it is possible to stop rape and the spread of HIV in prisons," states the website.

"Officials often reflect that they feel empowered with the knowledge they receive, and that they experience a shift in their attitude towards inmates. Many express that they want to help and provide responsive services, and to protect those in their custody."

The success of the programme is seen in the fact that officials have requested more information and resources after the sessions, asking Sonke and its partners to return to their prisons. The challenge is to get the Department of Correctional Services to promote a supportive environment to help prevent abuse and HIV. A draft policy framework to this end was drafted in 2010, but it still has to be adopted.

"Indeed, the National Strategic Plan for HIV, STIs and TB 2012-2016 recognises that to stop the spread of HIV in prisons, we have to stop prisoner rape and enforce sexual offences laws and policies," says Keehn. "Thus, we seek to workshop, sensitise, and train prisons officials at the local, provincial, and national level to address sexual violence in prisons."

The organisation is to start a master training system for prison officials, kicking off in Gauteng.

It will also soon conduct training in more distant rural prisons in the Western Cape, with follow-up support given through site visits.

One Man Can Beyond the Bars

In 2012 Sonke extended its reach to ex-inmates by launching a community action team, called One Man Can Beyond the Bars. Ex-inmates complete a six-month, bi-weekly training schedule and then get involved in the community outreach and mobilisation activities. Future plans will allow them to extend their activities to community corrections offices.

Sonke involves ex-inmates in advocacy work. "Our goal is to start bringing them with us when we speak to Parliament about improving services in prisons," explains Keehn.

Outreach is also conducted through the print media and national and community radio, with the goal of changing public perceptions about inmates and the challenges they face while in prison. Sonke is partnering with 12 community radio stations in six provinces, providing staff with training on gender and HIV, to create weekly radio shows that promote male involvement in gender equality and HIV.

Sonke recognises that its work will only be successfully implemented by working with a range of organisations, from women's rights organisations, trade unions and government departments to sports and faith-based organisations, universities and human rights advocates.

Minority groups, like lesbian and gay communities, people living with HIV and Aids, and refugees and migrants, are

included. These groups are all represented on Sonke's governance structures.

"Our goal is to increase public empathy for inmates, and to reduce the stigma and discrimination that they face. Overwhelmingly, the response from communities is a positive one."

The One Man Can campaign is sponsored by the FNB Fund, The Tides Foundation's MAC Aids Fund, the Open Society Foundation for South Africa, and the Western Cape Department of Health. The FNB Fund, which has been involved since 2007, has provided some R1-million for the campaign in the past year.

"The One Man Can prisons project is a model project for Sonke. It incorporates not only vital training and outreach to inmates and ex-inmates - it's holistic in its approach and thus also engages prisons officials, media outreach, and advocacy with policymakers," concludes Keehn.

"As a flagship HIV prevention programme, we provide vital life-saving information to inmates and ex-inmates. However we also engage our participants to learn about and practise gender equality in their lives. One peer educator told me that he quit his involvement in a gang once he went through One Man Can. He wanted to be a peer educator, and realised that the change and positive living had to start with him. This peer educator is now on our staff - a testament to the success of our programme."

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