

Sizani Ngubane

FOUNDER OF THE RURAL WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Since 1984, Sizani Ngubane, 66, has had to flee her home six times due to threats she's received while fighting for women's rights. Most recently, she was forced to abandon her home in Pietermaritzburg after she was robbed, defamed and threatened by a man she stood up to after he exploited a group of women in eMbulu, the poor rural community where Sizani grew up. Still, this freedom fighter refuses to give up her cause.



WHERE THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S A WAY

Growing up in eMbulu, Sizani recalls she often heard screams from a neighbour who was beaten by her husband. 'This broke my heart,' she says. 'I also saw women being forcibly evicted from their homes after their spouses passed on. I am the eldest of five children who were deserted by our migrant-worker father - I was forced to leave school at 15 to pay for the schooling of my siblings. That was when I vowed that I would be part of the solution to bring about gender equality.'

FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT

Through her tireless work with the Rural Women's Movement, Sizani lobbies and advocates for women and girls' independent rights to land and other natural resources, as well as property and inheritance rights. 'To this day, women and girls are not allocated land in their own right. We are expected to be represented by our male relatives. Traditional leaders, who are responsible for allocating communal land in the rural areas, will often register the land under the name of a male relative.'

BUILDING AWARENESS

'In July 2010 I received a phone call from one of the leaders of uThukela district who was worried about

schoolgirls who are abducted, raped and forced into marriages.' Together the two women taught these girls about their rights, and they eventually started speaking out about their experiences. 'We started documenting their stories and used them to sensitise the community about the negative impact of these abductions,' says Sizani, explaining that some women were still celebrating the practice 'because it was part of our culture'. Slowly, Sizani's work is changing this perception with many women now sending their 12-year-old daughters away from home to protect them. Sizani, however, feels her work is never done: 'I don't feel like we can celebrate - I always feel like we could do better.'

'To this day, women are not allocated land in their own right'



The right FIGHT

AS WE CELEBRATE FREEDOM DAY ON 27 APRIL, ANNEMARIE LUCK SPEAKS TO FOUR WOMEN WHO HAVE DEDICATED THEIR LIVES TO FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHTS, SAFETY AND DIGNITY OF OTHER WOMEN

Laura Haude

ATTORNEY, VICE CHAIR OF THE BUSINESSWOMEN'S ASSOCIATION (BWA), WHICH LAUNCHED THE DIGNITY PROJECT



OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Laura says the biggest issue the Dignity Project has faced is that 'many people, especially men, are squeamish when discussing the topic of menstruation and sanitary wear, and so we have found it difficult to gather funding'. However, with nearly R200 000 already raised, the project is gathering momentum. 'Eventually, we want to manufacture sanitary wear in each province. We believe the fact that a girl is a girl should never be an obstacle to her education.'

ON THE JOB

'As the BWA vice chair, an attorney, a wife and a mother, having only 24 hours in a day is a personal challenge!' says Laura.

'These girls could be SA's future businesswomen. We want to help improve their education'



'There is no feeling that can rival the sense of having truly made a difference,' says Laura Haude. And there's no doubt this 30-year-old is doing just that. As part of the BWA, she helps to support and connect women and their businesses. The company also recently launched the Dignity Project, which assists girls living in poverty-stricken conditions with no access to sanitary wear or even underwear.

DIGNITY AND BEYOND

When leaders of the BWA read about girls whose lack of access to sanitary wear meant they were missing at least a week of school every month, they felt they had to help. 'This absenteeism is devastating for the girls, for their families and for the economy. These girls could be SA's future businesswomen. We want to help improve their education.'

THE VOICE OF WOMEN IN BUSINESS

The BWA provides opportunities for networking through social events, mentorship programmes and workshops. 'We've had wonderful results through initiatives such as the Regional Business Achiever Awards. I've seen women grow their confidence and take their businesses to the next level. I've also seen a distinct shift towards a pay-it-forward ethos, as our members have been quick to contribute to the Dignity Project.'

Several issues led Petrina Roberts, 56, to become a development specialist in the field of organic food production: food laden with chemicals that further impact health, HIV/Aids-infected people who cannot afford a nutritious diet and inspiration drawn from the fact that, with simple training and a door-sized piece of land, you can grow enough organic food to feed a family. Since founding MENNGOS in 1995, Petrina has focused a large percentage of her business on helping women to become self-sufficient.

GROWING CONFIDENCE

'The villages we work in have many female-headed households,' says Petrina. 'Many of our beneficiaries



Sheila Flynn

FOUNDER OF THE KOPANANG COMMUNITY TRUST



Sheila Flynn, 60, calls herself a catalyst. 'I believe in the power of women and have made it my mission to help them find their own source of power within themselves.' So in April 2001, Sheila founded the Kopanang Community Trust in Gauteng's Tsakane and Geluksdal townships, bringing together two historically divided communities. She was responding to a call from grandmothers to help women in need of community support from the impact of HIV/Aids, and to provide a sustainable income by creating quilted and screen-printed products, embroidery and beaded jewellery. Kopanang supports 76 women and their dependents.

THE 'AHA' MOMENT

As a Dominican Sister, Sheila always sought to be in places where she could help those most in need. But she had never anticipated that such a stance would challenge her in the way it did one rainy day in 2001. 'I was driving from KwaZulu-Natal to Gauteng and I stopped to offer a lift to two women. When I realised they were sex workers, I asked them if they knew the risks they were taking. In reply, one asked if I knew what it was like to hear your child cry of hunger at night. This was an abrupt wake-up call!' Although Sheila could not help those two women, she was determined to help others.

EVERYDAY HEROINES

'I have witnessed amazing changes in the lives of women,' says Sheila. 'They come through our doors very unsure of themselves, but slowly they become women of confidence. They are strengthened by new skills and their ability to provide financially for their families, open bank accounts and broaden their education. For some, being able to sign their name on public documents instead of just a cross is a huge accomplishment.' She says she feels privileged to walk alongside the Kopanang 'heroines', and that these women have taught her what life is truly about and what is worth fighting for.

Petrina Roberts

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF MICRO ENTERPRISE NETWORK NEEDED FOR GROWTH OF SUSTAINABILITY (MENNGOS)

had no prior access to agricultural consumables or support that could help them grow and sell food for profit. But since we've been training them, I've seen many women provide food for their families, sell their surplus and save money for replanting in the future.'

PROGRESS REPORT

Petrina explains how, in one particular village in the Eastern Cape, lack of water has hampered the growth of gardens. But it has a happy ending: 'We recently laid seven kilometres of new water pipes from the dam to the village!'

SHARING THE VISION

'I feel blessed to be able to initiate change in people's lives,' Petrina

says. 'It's not always easy - we've had to overcome lack of financial support and understanding of how demeaned people feel when they are poor. It's my dream to see the people we work with become fulfilled through their own efforts and vision for their future.' ■

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