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The 16 Days of Activism campaign must include Refugees

By Roger-Claude Liwanga

The 16 Days of Activism: No Violence Against Women is an international campaign of the United Nations that takes place annually between the 25 November (International Day of No Violence Against Women) to 10 December (International Human Rights Day).

Since 1999, the South African Government has ensured that the campaign is extended to also include issues relating to violence against children.

Violence against women and children is recognized as a serious distress around the world and, particularly in South Africa. *Irin Africa* reports that a woman is killed by her intimate partner every six hours in South Africa and 52, 733 rapes and attempted rapes were reported to the South African police into twelve months.

The intention of the South African government is that the campaign should focus primarily on generating an increased awareness of the negative impact of violence on women and children and society as a whole.

Given this background, one wonders therefore about the meaning of the 16 Days of Activism for refugee women and children. As a reminder, a refugee is a person who fled from persecution, human rights violations or armed conflict in their home country. Statistics list 80% of the world refugees composed of women and children. In South Africa, among the 35 000 recognized refugees and 131 000 asylum seekers; most are women and children from African countries.

In their "new country", refugee women and children are also victims of violence. As published in *The Daily News* "South African soldiers and police officers rape Zimbabwean asylum seekers and, female immigrants are routinely expected to give sexual favors in return for not being deported."

At a local level, the majority of refugee women interviewed allege that the 16 Days of Activism Against Women and Child Abuse constitute a "great opportunity" through which, women may challenge the violence faced by them in society. For instance, Jackie (from DRC) felt the campaign a perfect opportunity to make people aware of the violence that women and children face daily. She and her children had made an appointment with the Department of Home Affairs on that day for her documents. Unfortunately, no personnel at the office received them and they were forced to stand outside the office in the rain. "This is another form of violence which women and children are facing and must be spoken about during this campaign," she said. Likewise, Ifa (from Zimbabwe) said that the

campaign is an important occasion for women to stand up against the violence perpetrated by men and also the abuse that refugee women and children face by Home Affairs officials.

Furthermore, besides facing administrative violence, refugee women also face domestic violence from their partners. This domestic violence sometimes is founded on gender-stereotypes developed from their respective cultures, in terms of which women are considered as inferior, and are forced to perform what their men demand. As published by *National Association of Social Workers* "in some refugee communities, there is a cultural pressure not to reveal domestic violence. Women who do speak out may be seen as deviant..." Consequently, these women may unfortunately choose not to disclose their abusive relationships in order not to soil their reputation in the community. In addition, women who may not have the necessary documents as well as who lack the language skills are afraid to report domestic violence to the authorities for fear of repercussions.

All refugee women unanimously salute the Campaign but agree that 16 days are not enough. Since women and children face violence on a daily basis, the campaign must be extended to combat it on a daily basis. Yes, that is, 365 days a year.

Of course it means mobilizing all sectors of society... administrative and men included.