

## Hot Issue

On Valentine's Day 2013, women across the world stood together to highlight the One Billion Rising (OBR) campaign – a global initiative by Eve Ensler, founder of V-Day – and a rallying call to raise awareness about violence against women, which OBR ambassador and movie star **Thandie Newton** describes as “pandemic”. Despite resentment, in Africa, the message was loud and clear – it's time to stop the scourge now! **Belinda Otas** spoke to some of the formidable and fearless women who coordinated OBR in Africa.

# One billion arose and still rising



### Naomi Mwaura – Coordinator KENYA

In Kenya, one in six women between 15 and 70 years of age has experienced physical or sexual violence. Violence against women is on the rise despite the Sexual Offences Act being in operation. When you look at these figures, one cannot help but do something. I became actively involved with V-Day in 2012, when I organised the *Vagina Monologues* at four Kenyan universities.

OBR came in the nick of time in Kenya, leading up to the recent general elections because the 2007/08 post-election violence saw women assaulted, raped and killed. OBR created a platform that fostered a discussion around “*Use the Ballot Not My Body*” campaign. I honestly don't remember anyone who was unmoved by the fact that one billion women will be raped or beaten in their lifetime. To drive the point home – that might mean that one out of every three women you know has/will be raped or beaten.

From Mombasa to Nairobi to Narok,

there were various OBR events in Kenya. It was a call for women and those that love them and we encouraged both men and women to RISE UP and DANCE! The Coalition on Violence against Women (COVAW) sponsored the event. The staff from local organisations such as NO MEANS NO also gave their time and resources to make it a success. We have fostered good working relationships with the local NGOs.

### Gillian Schutte – Coordinator JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

When the idea for One Billion Rising came about they contacted feminists around the world to coordinate efforts in their countries. I'm a feminist, social justice activist, social commentator and filmmaker and this is how I became involved in OBR-SA. For me, it was about placing the issues that affect the women of South Africa at

the centre of it. I lobbied and networked with organisations that already do the work of ending violence against women. We had over 40 organisations sign on in solidarity.

Though there was some resistance to the idea that it could be another vacuous dance “thingy” started by western women and imposed on other countries. I think the fact that it was coordinated by activists who could explain the revolutionary aspect of reclaiming our bodies, OBR-SA was huge and instant.

There were at least 50 “Risings” all over South Africa – both large and small. In one precinct alone in Johannesburg, it's estimated that perhaps 5,000 people were rising. I'd put it in the region of about 30,000 people rising on the same day – schools, universities, organisations.

We will continue to work in solidarity with organisations doing the work – to lobby for change, begin a programme to empower young girls and work with smaller grassroots NGOs in a support capacity.



### Amy Oyekunle – Coordinator NIGERIA

Violence against women in Nigeria is becoming endemic with impunity. According to a recent gender report on Nigeria, “Up to a third of women in Nigeria report that they have been subjected to some form of violence, including battering and verbal abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, marital rape, sexual exploitation, or harassment within the home.” What’s probably most disturbing is that forms of violence are considered acceptable, particularly in relation to domestic roles. Rape and other forms of sexual violence go under-reported and, as such, data (if available) are quite unreliable. I got involved with OBR because I believe in V-Day’s and Eve Ensler’s vision in bringing global attention to the issue of violence against women. The Kudirat Initiative for Democracy (KIND) has worked extensively on violence against women and girls.

Many people understand and relate

**“All kinds of craziness saw protestors singing, dancing, shouting, and demanding an end to gender-based violence!”**

to a seminar or workshop on violence against women. However, one of the challenges of communicating OBR to others is the idea of coming out to “dance”. It’s easy to dance in church, mosque and at parties – it’s not so easy to come out and dance to end violence against women. The turnout, which was mostly women and a few men, was average – probably about 50-to-60 persons. But as the group walked/danced down a busy street on Allen Avenue in Lagos – the commercial capital – we drew a lot of attention to the campaign. We distributed flyers, bookmarks and T-shirts and more importantly were able to educate many, particularly men, in the market areas. For instance, during the precession I met two men who said, “Women sometimes deserve to be raped because of the way they dress or carry themselves”. You can imagine someone saying that. Realistically, I think the impact of OBR in Nigeria cannot be ascertained now. What it succeeded in doing was raise awareness of the global war on violence against women.

### Zubeida Shaik – Coordinator CAPE TOWN, SA

Violence against women and children has reached pandemic proportions, not only in South Africa but globally. Due to my interest and participation on issues of gender based violence, I was invited by Gillian Schutte, coordinator for OBR-SA, to join her in mobilising people, organisations, and organise events that would strengthen the global campaign and culminate in a massive “Rising” on 14 February 2013.

At first, we were met with scepticism because so many “campaigns” have come and gone and left no lasting impact. As more awareness about the nature and scope of the campaign began to spread globally, more individuals and organisations began to demonstrate an interest and offered skills and resources to make

the “Rising” in the Western Cape a success. Throughout the Western Cape, we made our presence known – from southern suburbs to the northern suburbs, and painted little towns along the coastline, the Boland region and rural communities in and around the Cape Wine Lands “pink” with posters, banners, T-shirts and all kinds of colourful instruments to show solidarity to the global campaign. All kinds of craziness saw protestors singing, dancing, shouting, and demanding an end to gender-based violence! Sonke Gender Justice started the day with a “Rising” at Table Mountain, followed by several other loud, “in your face” efforts by various groups. The key to making campaigns of this nature a success lies in the ownership and shared responsibility of individuals and organisations, resulting in collectively taking a stand and speaking out against these evil acts performed by ordinary people that is destroying our society.

### Abdul Karim Hakib – Coordinator, GHANA

I got involved with OBR because I believe the story must be told, the action must be for all and the solution lies in the hands of everybody and not only women. The atrocities must stop and that is my motivation for getting involved. Violence against women in Ghana is alarming and frightening but the dangerous aspect is that people don’t talk about it. They think it’s a taboo and women are made to think that saying it amounts to a taboo that they might never recover from. Leading up to 14 February, we had challenges getting people to understand and value the premise on which we were working. People think it’s a foreign idea and since they consider Eve Ensler, author of the *Vagina Monologues*, as vulgar, they are reluctant to support or get involved. Local NGOs like Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit supported us. On the day, the turnout was poor but a lot of people called us to wish us well and gradually, people are warming up to the idea. Our aim is to ensure the fire never dies down and to continue with our work. Our resilience is beginning to pay off and we are going to start a gender based violence campaign in selected villages around Ghana and this is largely because of One Billion Rising.